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**TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION AND RELATED TRENDS IN LOCAL AUDIOVISUAL
STORYTELLING.**

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SUMMARY - ENGLISH

Since the beginning of the 21st century a range of evolutions have begun to alter the image, dominant in the West, of Africa as a poor, economically hopeless, war-torn and disease-ridden place. A yearly collective GDP growth revolving around 5%, an abundance of natural resources, a growing and youthful population, increasing political stability, ongoing urbanization, and steadily growing private investments, are a few of the indicators leading observers today to turn to another extreme, now referring to Africa as “the next frontier” for business opportunity. Technology plays a central role in this new and optimistic perception of Africa.

Similarly, technology is at the base of remarkable evolutions in media production and distribution in Africa. The South-Nigerian video film industry commonly known as Nollywood emerged when celluloid was overtaken by cheaper and more user-friendly home cameras and video players, later to be replaced by digital equipment and optical disc technology. It has demonstrated how the high-volume production of low-budget, African-targeted films can be turned into a self-sustaining business with global reach. However, Nollywood – and by extension local circuits of popular cinema across the continent – is not the only genre or format of African cinema affected by technological progress. This study concentrates on two countries in East Africa, the audiovisual industries of which have traditionally not received the scholarly interest they merit: Kenya and Tanzania.

This PhD project sits on the crossroads between current technological trends in Africa, with a focus on Kenya and Tanzania, and related evolutions in local audiovisual production and distribution. It revolves around the question **if and how the production and distribution of film and video are affected by technological innovation, and how this plays out socially and economically in different local contexts**. This question is broken down into three hypotheses to be critically interrogated: (1) the statement that technological progress has had **democratizing** effects on production and on distribution in Kenya and Tanzania; (2) the statement that it is associated with a **diversification** of local production and distribution; and (3) the statement that it results in more **locally-relevant** stories and distribution processes.

These questions are dealt with in six stand-alone articles departing from different research questions. A seventh and final chapter revisits and critically assesses the three hypotheses. The data assembled provide partial support for the hypotheses. Technological innovation in Kenya and Tanzania is instrumental in processes of democratization, diversification, and a growing local relevance of the production and distribution of audiovisual stories, but it is always shaped and limited by a range of contextual factors.

SUMMARY - DUTCH

Begin deze eeuw kwam er een kentering in hoe het Westen Afrika zag. Waar het continent lange tijd als een homogeen blok werd beschouwd, geplaagd door economische rampspoed, oorlog, ziekte en hopeloze armoede, hebben een gestage groei van Afrika's gemiddelde BNP, de aanwezigheid van natuurlijke rijkdommen, een jonge en aangroeiende bevolking, een toegenomen politieke stabiliteit, voortschrijdende verstedelijking en groeiende privé-investeringen bijgedragen tot een bijgesteld beeld van het continent; in zoverre zelfs dat sommigen Afrika nu omschrijven als *the next frontier* voor *business opportunity*. Technologie speelt een centrale rol in die nieuwe en – evengoed overdreven - optimistische perceptie van Afrika.

Technologie ligt ook aan de basis van opmerkelijke evoluties in de lokale productie en distributie van Afrikaanse media. De Zuid-Nigeriaanse videofilm-industrie bekend als "Nollywood" ontstond op het moment dat pellicule gaandeweg baan ruimde voor goedkopere en meer gebruiksvriendelijke camera's (eerst video, daarna digitaal) en videorecorders. Nollywood toonde hoe de productie op grote schaal van lokale films, gemaakt op micro-budgetten en gericht tot Afrikaanse massapublieken, in staat is uit te groeien tot een zelfbedruipende industrie met wereldwijde vertakkingen. Toch is Nollywood – en bij uitbreiding de vele andere lokale videocircuits op het continent – lang niet het enige genre of type van Afrikaanse cinema dat onder invloed staat van (onder meer) technologische vernieuwing. Dit onderzoeksproject focust op twee Oost-Afrikaanse landen, Kenia en Tanzania, die verschillende audiovisuele productiecircuits herbergen waar tot nog toe maar weinig academische aandacht naartoe is gegaan.

Dit doctoraat bevindt zich op het snijvlak tussen huidige technologische trends in Afrika, met een focus op Kenia en Tanzania, en eraan gerelateerde trends in lokale circuits van audiovisuele productie en distributie. Het stelt zich de vraag **of en hoe de productie en distributie van film en video beïnvloed worden door technologische vernieuwing, en welke daarvan de concrete gevolgen zijn in verschillende contexten**. Deze brede onderzoeksvraag wordt geconcretiseerd in drie – nog steeds brede – hypothesen die kritisch bevestigd worden aan de hand van nieuw empirisch materiaal: (1) de stelling dat technologische vernieuwing **democratizerende** effecten heeft op productie en distributie in Kenia en Tanzania; (2) de stelling dat het gerelateerd is aan een **diversifiëring** in lokale productie en distributie; en (3) de stelling dat het leidt tot verhalen en distributiesystemen met een grotere **lokale relevantie** dan voorheen.

Deze vragen worden behandeld doorheen zes verschillende artikels, afzonderlijke hoofdstukken die vertrekken van uiteenlopende onderzoeksvragen. De opgeleverde inzichten worden samengebracht en verder aangevuld in een zevende en laatste hoofdstuk, waarin de centrale hypothesen kritisch worden getoetst op hun precieze betekenis, relevantie en juistheid. De stellingen worden gedeeltelijk maar niet volledig ondersteund. Technologische innovatie in Kenia en Tanzania heeft potentieel democratizerende en diversifiërende effecten, maar die zijn beperkt en contextgebonden, en kunnen net zo goed tot tegenovergestelde resultaten leiden: een geslonken diversiteit, monopolievorming en een beperktere toegang van het brede publiek tot lokale producties. De plaatselijke relevantie van lokaal gemaakte en verspreide producties is groot, maar het concept van lokale relevantie heeft in een context van voortschrijdende globalisering en steeds hybrider wordende media, sterk aan waarde en relevantie ingeboet.

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0. INTRODUCTION TO THIS VOLUME

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century a range of evolutions have begun to alter the image, dominant in the West, of Africa as a poor, economically hopeless, war-torn and disease-ridden place. A yearly collective GDP growth revolving around 5%, an abundance of natural resources, a growing and youthful population, increasing political stability, ongoing urbanization, and steadily growing private investments, are a few of the indicators leading observers today to refer to Africa as “the next frontier” for business opportunity (Rigoglioso 2011; *International Business Times* August 31, 2013; *McKinsey* 2010; *Deloitte* 2013).¹

This new “grand narrative”, in turn, has not gone unchallenged. It has been criticized for being as reductionist as the previous, miserabilist one, as Africa is far too large and complex to fit just one “story”. The celebratory discourse on Africa’s “bright future” has also spurred debate about who exactly stands to benefit from the newly emerging opportunities, and how its growing riches are to be redistributed. Economic growth may be evident, but poverty at the grassroots has not decreased, nor has social inequality (*African Development Bank Group* 2012; *The World Bank* 2013).

Technology plays a central role in this new and optimistic perception of Africa. Several major technological shifts have taken place in recent years. Broadband internet is now available in most major cities. Africa has grown to be the largest mobile market in the world after Asia (Van Zyl 2013). Multinational ICT-companies like Facebook, Microsoft, Samsung, IBM, and Google/YouTube, have invested substantially in their presence and future expansion on the continent (*The Economist* 2013). Meanwhile growing communities of creative youth meet at technology hubs everywhere (Hersman 2012), exchanging ideas and using their skills to create new applications and turn them into profitable business propositions and/or societally advantageous web-based instruments.

Similarly, technology is at the basis of remarkable evolutions in media production and distribution in Africa. The South-Nigerian video film industry commonly known as Nollywood emerged when celluloid was overtaken by cheaper and more user-friendly home cameras and video players, later to be replaced by digital equipment and optical disc technology. Nollywood has demonstrated how the high-volume production of low-budget, African-targeted films can be turned into a self-sustaining business with global reach. Without ties to foreign and/or public funding, the “Nollywood model” has inspired local film circuits in regions and countries throughout Africa to strive for self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, Nollywood had had its own problems and crises, and is just as difficult to fit into one “grand narrative” as Africa itself (Haynes 2011: 72; Jedlowski 2010 and 2012; Jedlowski in Krings and Okome 2013: 25-45).

¹ This gradual “perception switch” of Africa is perhaps most aptly symbolized by two different issues of *The Economist*: on the cover of the May 2000 issue Africa is presented as “The Hopeless Continent”, while an edition published in the end of 2011 is entitled *Africa Rising*. The “Africa Rising” slogan was replicated one year later by *Time Magazine*, in an issue that calls Africa “the world’s next economic powerhouse” (2012).

On the higher end of film production, falling costs of equipment have led to falling production budgets (Chuchu, 2013; Matere, 2012), resulting in a (slowly) diminishing dependence of local producers on foreign support, and – at least in Kenya – encouraging filmmakers and producers to pursue alternative funding strategies: sponsorship, crowdfunding, et cetera.

This PhD project sits on the crossroads between current technological trends in Africa (with a focus on East Africa) and related evolutions in local audiovisual production and distribution. It revolves around the question **how the production and distribution of film and video is affected by technological innovation, and how this plays out socially and economically in different local contexts**. The chapters of this dissertation, conceived as separate stand-alone articles rather than building blocks of a monographic work, approach this topic from varying theoretical perspectives: African popular cinema, cultural and media studies, globalization theory, critical political economy, and innovation theory. Some chapters approach the topic head-on, while other chapters depart from a different research question, in the process presenting data which help to inform the general subject.

In the final chapter I use empirical elements and theoretical insights from the six articles compiled here, to formulate answers to the over-arching research question. I do this by breaking the latter down into **three “statements” - hypotheses to be critically interrogated: (1) the statement that technological progress has had *democratizing* effects on production and on distribution in East Africa; (2) the statement that it is associated with a *diversification* of local production and distribution; and (3) the statement that it results in more *locally-relevant* stories and distribution processes**.

Keen to avoid generalizing claims or “grand narratives” about Africa, I have chosen to focus on two countries within one region: Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa. Three chapters of this volume concentrate on Kenya, while one focuses exclusively on Tanzania. This scope is widened when necessary for the sake of relevant benchmarking (as with chapter 6, on different African web-streaming platforms), or when Africa-wide theoretical concepts are reviewed (such as the concept of African popular culture in chapter 5).

East African filmmaking is young² (Dresch 2013; Mukora 1999: 24) and under-researched in comparison with industries in other African regions. West Africa, particularly Francophone West Africa, has a long tradition of European-funded cinema, while South Africa and countries in the Maghreb region have established policy traditions, industry infrastructures, and research streams of their own.

Within East Africa my primary interest for this project is in Kenya. By most accounts Kenya’s capital Nairobi is the nexus of technological innovation in the region. Historically, it was also the centre of the region’s filmmaking and distribution infrastructure (Banfield 1964: 18). Its Riverwood circuit – a grassroots and video-based local film industry, comparable to Nollywood but much smaller in scale –

² By “East African” filmmaking I mean cinema produced *by* East Africans, as opposed to *in* East Africa, which was introduced during colonization. The Bantu Educational Cinema Experiment (short 16mm film to educate colonial subjects), was started as early as 1935 (Mukora 1999: 29; Banfield 1964: 18). Kenyan- and Tanzanian-produced cinema on the other hand is young. The first Kenyan-made feature film, *Kolormask* by Sao Gamba, was produced in 1986.

has hardly been researched or documented³. Its higher-end field of film production, after the early pioneers' work in the 1980s and 1990s (see Mukora 1999: 40-49), has started to grow and develop further in the course of the 2000s, with directors like Wanuri Kahiu, Bob Nyanja, Tosh Gitonga, Hawa Essuman, Cajetan Boy, and Judy Kibinge, among many others.

Neighboring Tanzania is at the same time a useful comparative benchmark – in the same region, with the same *lingua franca*, though with considerable differences in historical, political and economic background - and an interesting “case country” in itself. The country's Bongo industry is younger and smaller than Nollywood, but shares a number of features with the latter (considerable domestic market numbers, transnational appeal, et cetera), which have helped it to grow much bigger than Kenya's Riverwood. It has received more scholarly attention than Riverwood (for instance, Krings in Saul and Austen 2010; Mhando and Kipeja 2010; Böhme in Krings and Okome 2013), but is still under-researched compared to Nollywood.

2. Methodology and project planning

The research carried out for this dissertation is of an exploratory and qualitative nature. While the data for each chapter were gathered in similar ways (see below), there are important differences in how they were subsequently embedded in existing literature and theory. Each chapter being conceived as a stand-alone article, the differences in theoretical processing of new data are to be attributed to different research questions, different relevant disciplines, and more importantly, differences in how much research had already been done on a particular topic. Where sufficient literature existed, new results could be embedded in, juxtaposed to, or confronted with it. Some topics, however (such as Riverwood, video-on-demand platforms in Africa, or emerging new types of audiovisual production and distribution propelled by technological innovation in Kenya), had hardly been documented or explored, and thus required a looser theoretical framework, flexible enough to accommodate and structure substantial quantities of new and qualitative data.

In this chapter on methodology I will first explain the principles adhered to for ensuring the academic validity and reliability of my research results, to then describe the different phases of this four-year project. After this I will elaborate on my main methods for data gathering and processing.

a. Validity and reliability: Yin's methodology adapted by Díaz Andrade for research of an interpretive nature

This dissertation presents six articles, all of them related to an over-arching topic. A seventh and final chapter draws on elements from these articles and additional data to critically interrogate three hypotheses. As a consequence, the separate chapters are not part of an over-arching research design, leading stepwise to the answering of a central question. They are separate essays, nevertheless just as bound by criteria of validity and reliability as any other academic work.

³ There are precious few academic publications on Riverwood filmmaking, though McNamara's MA thesis *Towards a 'Radical Prosaics'. Investigations into Contemporary Film Production in Kenya* (2010) is valuable and insightful.

Robert K. Yin (1984: 40-46) has developed specific methods for meeting the four validity criteria for scientific research in the context of qualitative case studies: construct validity (i.e. developing the right operational measures for the concepts under study), internal validity (i.e. developing an optimal research design to ascertain that research results can be considered as true), external validity (i.e. the replicability of the study to different contexts or subjects with similar results), and reliability (whereby another researcher following the same procedure would obtain the same or similar results). For questions of an exploratory nature, internal validity is not a strict requirement, as the goal is to structure, explain and contextualize data, rather than to establish causal links between variables (Yin 1984: 40).

Yin's methods, although widely accepted for most case study research, have positivist origins and in their original form are less suitable for a more interpretative, exploratory research approach. Subtle modifications, effectively combining the strengths of the original criteria with the specificities of more interpretive research, have been proposed by Antonio Díaz Andrade (2009).

For instance, for the criterion of construct validity, Yin advises the use of multiple sources of evidence and triangulation, the establishment of a chain of evidence, and the review of draft reports by key informants (Yin 1984: 40-41). While maintaining the principle that the factual account of raw data and the way they are processed should be documented, Díaz Andrade prefers corroboration of data to triangulation. He defines this as "strengthening [an argument] by additional evidence supporting the argument" (Hayward and Sparkes 1975, cited in Díaz Andrade 2009: 48). In the case of interview-based research, which has been central for my data gathering, this comes down to making certain that a statement is repeated or confirmed by sufficient different spokespeople before considering it as "true". The argument or statement that thus emerges may still be false (because statements may be opinions), but corroboration helps to confirm that, as a minimum, it is an accurate reflection of what respondents believe. This implicitly includes their agreement that the researcher has properly defined and "measured" what he or she claims to be measuring.

A similar argument is made when considering the criterion of external validity. Yin (1984: 53) closely follows the logic of replication (i.e. testing hypotheses across different case studies), however researchers are not always out to test theory. When the aim is to build theory – or I might add, to explore, structure and make sense of new data - theoretical generalization, based on theoretical sufficiency (in turn based on corroboration) is more useful than analytic generalizations (Díaz Andrade 2009: 49).

As for the criterion of reliability (obtained by using repeatable processing methods, which should invariably lead to the same results; Yin 1984: 41), I follow Díaz Andrade in his suggestion to carefully keep the factual account (the transcribed interviews and audio recordings, a bibliography of works consulted, a list of people interviewed) available for review, acknowledging that another researcher might, or might not, come to similar conclusions when analyzing them, or might look at them from a different angle, thus offering new insights (Díaz Andrade 2009: 48, 50). A list of recorded interviewees is added in the annex.

b. The different steps of this project

This project was planned over a period of four years. During the first year my main objective was to learn as much as possible about the general topic as efficiently as possible, while building a network

of informants and peers. I read as much relevant academic and non-academic literature as I could find, and volunteered at a number of key events allowing me to be introduced to industry experts: international film festivals such as the Zanzibar International Film Festival (which I visited as a volunteer worker in 2011, and again as a contributing scholar in 2013), the Durban International Film Festival (2011) and the African Film Festival of Tarifa (2011; the festival has now relocated to Córdoba), the Esodoc⁴ workshop in Nairobi (2012), and FESPACO⁵ in Ouagadougou (2011). Simultaneously in the first year I started reaching out to academic peers (by visiting conferences, seminars, and academic workshops; a list is included in the annex). This provided me with valuable feedback on methodological approach, preliminary assumptions, the reasoning behind the interpretation of data, and theoretical perspectives.

After this initial phase, as advised by Díaz Andrade (2009: 47) and Glaser (1992: 27), I had developed a more than average “theoretical sensitivity” towards my topic, and probably also a range of implicit expectations, some of which later evolved into hypotheses for this dissertation. This heightened theoretical sensitivity guided me in drafting the topic clusters I wanted to discuss with my informants, while also bringing me more “at par” with them (an important requirement in the case of expert interviews, which were central to my work - cfr infra).

The second and third year of my project were spent doing similar data gathering trips (twice in 2012 and once in 2013 to Nairobi; once in 2011 and once in 2013 to Tanzania [Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam]), and drafting research papers to present at relevant academic events. The schedules of these fieldtrips were tight, with an average of two (and sometimes three) expert interviews per day, save during weekends. On average, such a trip lasted between thirty and forty days.

During the second and third year I additionally focused on reworking conference papers into articles ready for publication. Throughout the whole process I did voluntary work for the research agency Balancing Act, in exchange for input and feedback on research reports, while in 2013 I helped in fundraising for the EU-supported pan-African online film platform Mokolo (mokolo.net), all of which continuously helped to grow my network. On one occasion I acted as an advisor for the British Council for its policies concerning ICT-innovation and cultural industries on the continent. Additionally I was invited as a keynote speaker and panel moderator at the Aitec Africa Conference of 2012.

In summary, the second and third year of this project were spent extending my network of peers and informants further, intensifying the gathering of data, and writing most of the articles compiled here. In the fourth and final year I concentrated on presenting my articles to journals and preparing this dissertation.

c. Data gathering: snowball sampling, literature reviews, expert interviews, peer corroboration

The articles compiled here make use of data gathered in similar ways: snowball sampling, repeated rounds of literature review (academic and non-academic), semi-structured expert interviews, the

⁴ Esodoc (European Social Documentary, www.esodoc.eu) is a training initiative for documentary makers working with social topics on new financing, production and distribution strategies.

⁵ FESPACO (Festival panafricain du cinéma et de la télévision de Ouagadougou) is the largest film festival in Africa (and the largest African film festival in the world). It is a bi-annual event that takes place in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

corroboration of data and draft reports through feedback from peers and respondents, and a minimum of additional ethnographic observation. A list of all formal interviews (respondent name, place and date of interview) has been added to the annex. Transcriptions and audio recordings are available on request⁶.

My informants were identified by use of snowball sampling. At the key events visited in the first year convenience sampling was used to have informal preliminary conversations, widening my knowledge about and theoretical sensitivity to my research topic. Snowball sampling – the following of contact leads suggested by my first informants - quickly led to a useful list of respondents, to which I kept adding names throughout the project. I continued this process until in the fourth year, when I stopped doing interviews.

Apart from the routine of following relevant blogs and articles, one research tool – the expert interview – was central to my methodological approach. I had embarked on this project armed with hands-on experience in (cinema) industry analysis, though with little prior knowledge of the African or East African context. I combined my research with a part-time position as a policy worker in the Belgian (Flemish) audiovisual industry. A method was needed which could help me to gain fast access to a field which I was not overly familiar with, and about which little knowledge was readily available in existing literature. As mentioned, my field trips were short and I was compelled to strive for maximum efficiency. Less time-consuming and less costly than most other qualitative research methods, expert interviews are a good way to quickly gain insight into a fast-evolving and largely undocumented industry (Van Audenhove 2007: 5).

Expert interviews are a specific category of qualitative interviews, often used for policy and industry analyses. They depart from a subject list guiding the interviewer, but do not have a fixed questionnaire or specific order of topics to be addressed. The interviewee is allowed to elaborate on topics as he/she pleases, and the interviewer adapts his/her questions to the profile and interests of the respondent, nevertheless making sure to cover a checklist prepared in advance (Meuser and Nagel 2009: 30). Though my topic lists varied according to the specific research question of each article and the expertise background of informants, I always based individual question lists on a pre-fixed set of recurring questions and topics: for instance, the existing and emerging categories of audiovisual production and distribution in Kenya or Tanzania, the role of technology in these evolutions, existing relations and interdependences between stakeholders in a given field (film, ICT,...), the most pressing issues for the relevant industries in the country, the nature and characteristics of locally produced video in the country, et cetera.

According to Bogner and Menz (2009: 57) and to Meuser and Nagel, the “(...) dynamics of the situation in expert interviewing (...) is decisively determined by the mutual perceptions of the participants (...) factors like age, gender, and social status (...) [play a prominent role]. (...) the outcome of the interview is co-determined by whether the expert sees the interviewer as a competent interlocutor” (Meuser and Nagel 2009: 34). To be perceived as a “quasi-expert” is generally a beneficial starting point when conducting expert interviews (Pfadenhauer 2009 in Bogner, Littig, and Menz: 86). Ideally, high-profile respondents do not feel as though they are wasting time explaining matters that a (quasi-)expert in the field should be aware of. On the contrary, in the best

⁶ Two interviews could not be recorded: one due to a noisy environment (Kaigwa, 2012), another one because using a voice recorder did not benefit the context (Ndemo, 2012; not quoted in thesis).

of scenarios they feel they are getting something out of the conversation, exchanging information and views in a non-competitive setting. In addition to the heightened theoretical sensitivity needed before entering the field, this was another reason why I did not want to start interviewing experts before having spent sufficient time exploring my topic: I did not want to waste my respondents' time asking questions which were considered common knowledge. In addition to preliminary rounds of literature review, being employed as an audiovisual policy analyst during the period of this research possibly provided me extra credentials to be considered a "quasi-expert".

From a traditional perspective on scholarly research, expert interviews bear a heightened risk of a researcher influencing his/her interviewees by asking suggestive questions and/or interpreting data subjectively. However, as with grounded theory (Garcia and Quek 1997, cited in Díaz Andrade 2009: 43) the potential bias caused by the researcher's approach, and the fact that neither expert nor researcher can ever be fully objective, is acknowledged and becomes part of the analysis (Bogner and Menz 2009: 71). Moreover, the risk of influencing is believed to be smaller in the case of expert interviews, as respondents are generally well-motivated, not easily intimidated, and used to being "probed" (Van Audenhove 2007: 5).

This leaves us with the question who is to be considered an expert. Hitzler, Honer and Maeder consider anyone who may be assumed to possess an "institutionalized expertise and authority to construct reality" in a particular field, an expert (Hitzler, Honer and Maeder 1994, cited in Meuser and Nagel 2009: 19). This implies (1) that expert-status can be, but is not necessarily, determined by one's professional position, and (2) that expertise always has a social dimension: it is institutionalized, conferred onto someone by peers and other actors in the field (Bogner and Menz 2009: 50). This is an additional argument in favor of snowball sampling: whether in informal circuits at the grassroots or in formal corporate environments, my respondents were invariably asked who else might have interesting information and insights to share on the research topic. They usually referred me to practitioners who they felt were knowledgeable, did interesting work, and/or, judging from their professional backgrounds, would be valuable informants.

Respondents ranged from high-profile policy makers to film directors, producers, magazine editors, broadcasters, researchers, media professionals and exhibitors, as well as active participants in the broader field of audiovisual production and distribution. It was my attempt to combine an optimal plurality of voices with a wide range of types of knowledge and insights. Informal conversations with "well-informed citizens" (Meuser and Nagel 2009: 21) were not included as expert interviews, but added useful information of a more ethnographic kind. These were secondary data, providing me with context, and at times with supplementary corroboration. It would be too anecdotal to list all these additional sources.

d. Data processing: labeling, cross-referencing, embedding in existing literature from different theoretical streams

For the processing of my data I stayed close to the procedure as prescribed by Meuser and Nagel (2009: 36): all interviews were transcribed - though this is not required with expert interviews, as summaries of conversations are sufficient - and paragraphs were labeled thematically. They were then sorted according to their thematic labels, their place in the audiovisual value chain, and/or thematic categories for which I felt they were pertinent. This helped to lay bare divergent and concurring opinions on a theme-specific level, generating insight into what was "common expert

knowledge” (see also above: the principle of corroboration) and therefore could be considered “true”. Where opinions or attitudes differed, this too added to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the research topic. After such processes, a range of first theoretical generalizations usually surfaced, along with a number of “hunches”: propositions which later evolved into over-arching hypotheses presented in detail further below.

There are differences, however, in how the data were subsequently recombined and embedded in existing literature for each article. As the essays depart from different research questions and concentrate on different (sub-)topics, they are readily linked to different theoretical streams and disciplines. I believe this is warranted: to limit possible theoretical perspectives would have amounted to “closing doors” too soon for a field as yet largely unexplored.

For some chapters I have leaned heavily on new empirical data, structuring them according to the broad principles of critical political economy as outlined by Vincent Mosco (2009); this was the case, for instance, with chapters 2 and 4. Other essays depart from empirical data but were able to draw much more on existing theory (chapters 5 and 6) or location-specific literature (chapter 3). The first article in turn leans more closely to grounded theory: describing phenomena in a certain setting (*in casu* Nairobi) and drawing a theoretical conclusion (“technological innovation in Nairobi facilitates a process of diversification of production and distribution of local audiovisual media”) which evolved into one of the three hypotheses to be critically interrogated towards the end of this dissertation.

3. Introduction to the articles in this volume

The essays compiled here speak to **the broader topic of technological innovation in East Africa and related trends in the local production and distribution of audiovisual storytelling**. Before turning to my over-arching hypotheses, in this chapter I will introduce topics and theoretical backgrounds of each article. The first three articles focus on cases in Kenya, while the fourth concentrates on Tanzania’s Bongo industry. Articles five and six take a more Africa-wide perspective: the former interrogates Karin Barber’s concept of African popular culture (1987; 1997), asking whether “digital” is facilitating new types of contemporary popular cinema, while the latter critically analyzes and compares three African web and mobile streaming platforms.

The first essay in this volume, entitled *Technological innovation and the diversification of audiovisual storytelling circuits in Kenya*, demonstrates the increasing diversity in audiovisual production and distribution facilitated by evolving technology in Kenya. It elaborates on local production circuits (such as Riverwood), new formats (such as mobile-distributed animation clips), new genres in local film production at the grassroots and in established production companies, and new types of digitally enabled cinema houses. This selection of cases invites scholars to think inclusively about cinema, as “narratives on screen” rather than only feature films⁷. While I posit that diversification merits to be brought to the fore as a potential outcome of technological innovation, I situate my article in the debate on (and critique of) technological determinism. Kenya’s context – its societal heterogeneity,

⁷ Though it is not theorized as such in the chapter, this inclusive view on cinema is shared by other scholars. I elaborate on this further in this section (“Two clarifications, three hypotheses: but that’s not cinema!”). The same inclusive position towards cinema is taken in the fifth chapter, co-authored with Lizelle Bisschoff.

entrepreneurial climate, and innovation-oriented government policies – plays an important role in this process of diversification. The article is at the basis of a wider hypothesis about the diversification of local production and distribution in East Africa, and its relation with technological innovation (see below).

The second essay (*the Political Economy of Kenya's Riverwood Movie Circuit*) documents Kenya's Nairobi-based popular cinema circuit⁸. Like Nollywood and Bongo, Riverwood emerged in large part as a result of the availability of cheaper and more user-friendly technological equipment. This article describes and analyzes the circuit as it exists today from a critical political economy perspective (as theorized in Mosco 2009). Critical political economy is explicitly concerned with the local context in which a phenomenon under study is embedded, and particularly with the structures of power and resource allocation shaping it. It is therefore useful for the purposes of this article, with a strong focus on new data, mindful of issues of power and control, while also speaking to my larger research question: how do Kenya's local context and historical background co-determine the specificities of Riverwood? And what does this tell us about our hypotheses on technological innovation and audiovisual storytelling (cfr infra)?

The third article (*Targeting Urbanites: Nairobi-bred audiovisual narratives in Sheng*) zooms in even more closely on Nairobi's context, and on three cases embedded in it. Again, the cases are widely different and illustrate a process of growing diversification. However, the article focuses on different matters. Nairobi is the capital of a country in which policy-makers consider ICT and technology as pillars of a prosperous future. I posit that this strong belief in and celebration of technology has permeated many layers of society. Nairobi is also, as many cities in Africa today, a site of fast-moving urbanization, which carries with it optimism and hope for the future for some, and growing anxieties for others. Urbanness, with different "codes" such as lifestyle, Sheng language, and raw and "real" depictions of the city, seems to be increasingly present in audiovisual stories produced in Nairobi. Similarly, youthful populations across Africa are expanding, and with this we see new types of local production targeting young people. Young Nairobians with a strong interest in local stories and (codes of) technology and connectivity are not to be considered a homogenous group: they are widely different in terms of social-economic background, social mobility, and exposure to cultural content. I use elements of subcultural theory, cultural globalization theory, and existing literature on contemporary youth in Kenya, to contextualize some of these evolutions, while tracing how they are discernible in the narratives presented in the article.

Only one essay in this dissertation, *Forces for change: Creative innovation and its obstacles in Tanzania's Bongo industry*, deals exclusively with Tanzania. While initially I had planned to "mirror" all my articles on Kenya with neighboring Tanzania (in a logic of replication), the country proved too different. It is not at par technologically, while its popular cinema industry is more evolved than Kenya's. Bongo is also more researched and more documented than Riverwood, allowing for a more focused research question. The differences between the countries in terms of local environment will inform the basic hypotheses of this dissertation, which I come back to in chapter 7. This specific essay, on the other hand, concentrates on "forces for change" in the Bongo industry. It analyzes existing power balances and imbalances, showing how Dar es Salaam's local context helps and/or

⁸ It must be noted that some scholars use the name "Riverwood" also for Kenyan pop music (see for instance Mungai 2008). The same outlets along the River Road area that sell films usually also sell popular music. Kenyan pop music is much more successful locally than Kenyan movies.

inhibits attempts at innovation. Like the chapter on Riverwood this article departs from a critical political economy perspective, but it concentrates on individuals, initiatives and organizations that work to alter specific aspects of the industry. I theorize these “forces for change” as instances of “praxis” (with Mosco 2009).

Digital as the new popular in African cinema? Case studies from the continent, co-authored with Lizelle Bisschoff, presents different forms of contemporary digital filmmaking in Africa. As in chapters 1 and 3 of this volume, it considers cinema as inclusively as possible. The published version (Bisschoff and Overbergh 2012) presents case studies from Tanzania, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo (henceforth: DRC), demonstrating a growing diversity in production and distribution, and revisiting African popular culture as theorized by Karin Barber, through the lens of (digital) popular cinema. In this extended version I add cases from Kenya, retaining our original conclusion: digital technology is at the basis of a growing diversity of audiovisual stories, and facilitates a variety of new formats and genres, the effect of which is most visible in a widening field of popular cinema. “Popular”, however, is a fluid concept: popular culture can emanate from “the people”, be targeted at them, be affordable and accessible to them, and/or can feature topics that speak to them. In addition to the difficult task of grasping the field of “the people”, there are important differences in how “popular culture” is understood in the West (especially in American and British literature) and in Africa. As technological, media and cultural globalization leads to intensified processes of cultural hybridization, i.e. to a stronger blending of “Western” and “Africa-specific” traits in Africa-produced media, so too is the theoretical notion of “popular culture” at risk of becoming blurred or overstretched. Our cases underline the need for new and more refined theories of African popular culture, capable of accommodating these new-natured popular media types.

Finally, in *Digital distribution of creative audiovisual content in and from Africa: a comparative study of three cases* I compare web and mobile streaming initiatives from West Africa (iROKOTv in Nigeria), South Africa (Bozza), and East Africa (Buni.tv in Kenya). I compare these according to the types of content they disseminate, their business models and target audiences, but also the differences in the local environments in which they operate. Though it is too soon for predictions, the article looks for cues on the future of digital distribution in and from Africa as an economic and industrial practice. I do not suggest that research results for these cases are to be generalized continent-wide. In fact my cases were sampled in these specific countries because they are considered to provide the best economic and technological environments for digital distribution. It would not have been possible, for instance, to compare cases in Kenya and Tanzania, as no cases in Tanzania could be found. My cases are analyzed both from a management-related stance, theorizing them as different types of potentially disruptive innovation, and from a political economy-inspired viewpoint, reviewing critical literature on the effects of digital distribution as a disruptive innovation in the West. I caution that, while digital distribution is rightly anticipated as a major and important innovation in the field of distribution on the continent, it has not yet found a sustainability model, and it is unclear whether artists and producers are to be remunerated fairly, if or when such model takes shape. Moreover, if experiences from the West are an indication, digital distribution may primarily benefit stronger incumbents, to the disadvantage of smaller or more niche-oriented players. In other words, though my three cases are very different in terms of the offer they make available, on a mid term it is unclear which (types of) organizations will “survive”, and how this will affect the diversity in the future online offer of local audiovisual content.

4. Two clarifications, three hypotheses

The subject of this thesis is technological innovation in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania) and related trends in the local production and distribution of audiovisual stories. This topic ranges broadly, from cheap digital cameras and editing software permitting more film production to the emergence of new web and mobile formats, and from video huts to digitally enabled cinema houses and streaming platforms. It is treated in separate articles proposing different theoretical and analytic perspectives, and thus opening ground for further research in several directions or academic traditions. The challenge at hand now is to bring these articles closer together by bundling insights from each of them in order to assess three over-arching hypotheses related to the general topic.

Before turning to these hypotheses, I want to clarify two concepts which I noticed from interviews to be unclear, and which I believe need brief *ex ante* theoretical framing: first, the question what exactly is technological innovation; second, the question what are the boundaries of cinema, and related, how my widely diverse cases in the field of audiovisual storytelling are comparable or even remotely mutually relevant.

“But that’s nothing new!” What is technological innovation?

During my first field trip in Kenya one of my interviewees suggested that if I was looking for real innovation my research would not go far (Kaigwa, 2012). The reasoning was that the country had only turned out two real innovations in its history: the mobile commerce platform M-Pesa (developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT] but first commercialized in Kenya), and the open source disaster management platform Ushahidi. It was clear that I needed to formulate a more precise, and a sufficiently open, definition of innovation.

Joseph Schumpeter was one of the first scholars, and certainly the most influential author, to theorize in detail about innovation. Approaching it from an economics perspective, he defined it as “new combinations” of new and/or existing resources (Schumpeter 1934: 65). To be considered an innovation in the Schumpeterian sense such new combinations are subsequently put into (commercial) practice: they are usually introduced in a new region or marketplace by “entrepreneurs”. A web-streaming initiative targeting African audiences is, in that sense, an innovation, as is the emergence of African popular cinema circuits based on cheaper equipment, the advent of digital cinema exhibition, digital television broadcasting, or even new technological infrastructures (such as digital distribution networks, often constructed as a private-public partnership).

In his earlier writings Schumpeter viewed an entrepreneur’s motivations broadly, as “the desire to creatively bring about new products, new production processes, and new ways to provide material well-being to the members of society” (McDaniel 1995: 488). An entrepreneur could be active in economics, the arts or politics, and was driven not necessarily by profit but by an intrinsic desire to change and innovate (Becker, Knudsen, and Swedberg 2012: 925). Translated to the topic at hand, an innovator’s efforts may be targeted at social benefits (non-profit initiatives may strive to make audiovisual stories more widely available through new technology), they may be part of PR strategies (a company may incubate new, cutting-edge formats for the sake of sharpening its corporate profile),

or they may bring simple “well-being” (a filmmaker may create for the sake of self-expression, in the process experimenting with new equipment).

Secondly, innovation is relative to where it is introduced. With Rogers it is “(...) an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” (Rogers 2003: 12). This dissertation does not have African-made inventions as its topic, but rather the advent of new or significantly different technology to the continent, used in the context of audiovisual storytelling. These innovations need not be new to the world, but new to where they are introduced.

Thirdly, in terms of its effects on a given industry, innovation can be disruptive (replacing established practice or conquering an important part of an existing market) or continuous (easily integrated by established players, and thus strengthening them to the disadvantage of newcomers). Article 6 elaborates on these different types of disruptive innovation, but limits itself to theory directly relevant for the cases studied.⁹

Technological innovation for the purpose of this work is an innovation in the early Schumpeterian sense: new combinations of resources, put into practice by individuals or structures driven by either the desire for profit or other motivations. It is either an innovation *of* technology or a technology-*induced* innovation, such as the role of cheap digital equipment in the emergence of new production industries. It can be categorized further according to the type of industry or specialization in which it is introduced. Web, ICT, or mobile innovations, are simply technological innovations occurring in the realms of web, mobile, or ICT-related activities.

All articles in this volume deal with technological innovation directly or indirectly. They either discuss examples of production and distribution that make use of new technologies, or they document and analyze film production circuits which have emerged in large part because of the advent of affordable equipment. The fourth article, which analyzes Tanzania’s Bongo industry from a critical political economy perspective, considers forces for “creative innovation” within it. Not to be confused with the technological innovation at the basis of the emergence of Bongowood, creative innovation relates to a choice of stories, of style, of genres, and all other creative aspects of filmmaking – many of which, in turn, are related to technology as well.

“But that’s not cinema!” Moving images on screen and the notion of extended cinema

When visiting DIFF (Durban International Film Festival) in 2011 I was discussing the ideas for this research project with the director of one of Europe’s finest and best-known African film festivals. While she found the topic interesting she implored me to open my eyes to something she felt I failed to acknowledge: “African popular cinema – Nollywood, Bongowood, Riverwood – is an interesting phenomenon for sure, but it is not *cinema*”, she said. What she implied – correctly – was that these movies had much more in common with television and soap formats than with festival or theatre films. Compared with such films, they lacked the attention for cinematography, the care for narrative structure, image and sound quality, et cetera. Also, there was no implicit assumption that they were to be viewed in a silent black box, designed for immersion, and even less so in the case of web and/or mobile-targeted formats. What sense was there in trying to discuss cinema together with all these other, “non-cinematic” forms of audiovisual expression?

⁹ For excellent theory reviews on disruptive innovation, see Danneels 2004, Yu and Hang 2009, and Sandström 2010.

Similarly, when discussing my initial ideas with university colleagues, they felt that the “cinema” I was interested in – whether “relatively new” like the popular cinema industries, or “very new” like the emerging web and mobile formats – was not actually cinema: could I not limit myself to commercial movies, traded formally and in a transparent way? They were concerned about the operationalization of my topic: if not limited to commercial feature film, where does cinema start and where does it end?

The festival director’s and the university colleagues’ reasoning came from the same paradigm: that of cinema as an institution, and the cultural and economic practice as we have known it for nearly a century. However, cinema has many faces and is represented in different practices the world over. Historically, too, it has undergone several metamorphoses. Already at its origins it had to find its place and function among other media such as the magic lantern, photography, live stage entertainment, etc. (Gaudreault and Marion 2013: 169). Today, ongoing media convergences¹⁰ and the hybridization of viewing platforms are calling its identity into question once again: is cinema a type of technology for the capturing and processing of images and sound? Or is it rather an institution, with its own routines, structures, conventions and hierarchies? Gaudreault and Marion (2013) describe its emergence as a double birth, characterized by these two dimensions (technology and institutionalization).

More than forty years ago Gene Youngblood (1970) was one of the first scholars to push cinema’s boundaries, when he introduced the idea of “expanded cinema”, embracing new audiovisual forms made possible by evolving technology: video art, computer art, media installations... In the present era, ongoing convergence has led to an even greater discomfort with cinema’s singular identity as an institution. Drawing on Dubois, Monvoisin and Biserna’s (2010) idea of “extended cinema” (which in turn takes “expanded cinema” a step further), Gaudreault and Marion see the present age as characterized by an intermingling, a blurring of boundaries between audiovisual media. Increasingly, the essence of cinema seems to be moving away from its institutional dimension, and back to its original distinguishing feature – the moving image: “With cinema’s institutionally regulated identity blurred, with the erasure of the ‘distinguishing’ quality of a cinema shaken by the assault of digital hybridization and by the general porosity of media convergence, we return to cinema’s quality as animation, which the institution has so carefully declared outside its identity or, at most, a para-identity” (2013: 174).

My first academically published article (chapter 5 of this volume, written with Lizelle Bisschoff), explicitly refers to Bongowood and to web and mobile-based narratives as to “cinema”. In an era in which the most conspicuous innovation in audiovisual production in Africa is happening on other platforms than the traditional wide screen, in a context in which wide screen cinema had always been primarily an upper-class (minority) affair, and in view of the spectacular recent expansion and uptake of mobile technology on the continent, we believed this made perfect sense. However, I was aware that this view was not clear to, nor shared by everyone, and avoiding confusion about the exact topic of my research was paramount.

¹⁰ With Ariño and Llorens, convergence refers to “(...) the phenomenon, whereby the technological and market boundaries between previously distinct sectors, and by extension services and platforms used to deliver them, blur” (Ariño and Llorens 2008 in Ward: 125).

As a consequence my two subsequent articles, chapters 1 and 3 of this thesis, use the more neutral phrases “audiovisual storytelling” and “audiovisual narratives” for cases that are similar in kind to the ones discussed by Bisschoff and myself. In my articles on Riverwood and Bongo (2 and 4), commonly considered “popular cinema”, I was careful to either talk of movies, or to use the prefix “popular” when calling these industries “cinema”. In article 6, which discusses cases that disseminate video, music and poetry, I take a step back even further, referring to this offer as to “digital content”.

For the sake of clarity: my interest here is in locally-made “narrative moving image on screen” in whatever shape or format, excluding only commercial spots or corporate messages. To me, this is all cinema. And regardless of wording, I concur with Gaudreault and Marion on the medium’s changing nature. I therefore wish to point to what I feel is an urgent need for academia in the field of African Cinema to widen its gaze away from the dichotomy between “real” and “popular” cinema, and to include the increasing diversification of platforms and formats as part of the much wider trend of media hybridization. To me, the question whether or not all these forms should be called cinema or something else, seems philosophical or ideological at best, but semantic and quite pointless at worst.

Hypothesis 1: Democratization

A claim often heard about the relation between technological innovation and audiovisual production and distribution, is that it is characterized by a democratization process. Where production is concerned, it is usually meant that the falling prices and increasing user-friendliness of recording and editing equipment transform filmmaking from an elitist affair, especially in Africa, to an endeavor in reach of more and more people (Olivieri 2012; Mistry and Ellapen in Krings and Okome 2013: 58; McCall 2007: 93; Arewa 2012: 6-7, 19-20; Abah 2009: 734, quoting Tunde Kulani). Especially with the Nollywood phenomenon as an illustration, this process seems almost too obvious to deny or question. When it comes to distribution, we can point to the affordability of Nollywood movies (Jedlowski 2012: 438; Arewa 2012: 6-7), and to the proximity of sales or rental outlets to Nollywood’s core viewership. With similar but smaller-scale industries such as Bongowood or Riverwood, one may be tempted to assume **a similar trend in Kenya and Tanzania, by which technological innovation there too has democratizing effects on the local production and distribution of audiovisual stories.** This is my first over-arching hypothesis for this dissertation.

The question is worth asking for at least three reasons. Firstly, and most obviously, it is never prudent to jump to generalizations based on just one case. Secondly, this PhD deals with audiovisual narratives - with “extended cinema” as explained earlier. It is not only concerned with “small screen cinema” circuits (with Jedlowski 2012) such as Bongo and Riverwood, but also with higher-end cinema, television, and web- and mobile-disseminated content. The accessibility of such content is a function of factors such as, for instance, network infrastructure, internet-equipped telephones, spending power, and media literacy. Thirdly, the nature and outcome of this democratization may well differ according to locally-specific variables (rural or urban environments, Kenya and Tanzania) and according to people’s individual traits (age and gender, educational, social and economic background, etc.). It is very well possible, in other words, that technology is “more democratizing to some than to others”.

When looking for a theoretical definition of democratization, it is to be found mainly in the ambit of political sciences. Tilly (2000), for instance, defines it from a political process analysis, as a “movement toward broad citizenship, equal citizenship, binding consultation of citizens, and

protection of citizens from arbitrary state action.” Though far removed from our topic, this definition may not be entirely useless for the purpose at hand: we could understand the idea of broad and equal *citizenship* as broad and equal *access* to filmmaking and to audiovisual stories. We could go on to consider the binding consultation of citizens, and their protection from arbitrary state action as a metaphor for producers’ and traders’ policies: democratization would then refer to producers and traders having their audiences’ best interests at heart, and not unilaterally making decisions to their disadvantage, such as keeping prices unnecessarily high. Still, this insufficiently grasps the full idea of democratization in the context of the research topic at hand.

It may therefore be wiser, if not to look for a clear-cut theoretical definition, then at least to find a descriptor closer to the field of audiovisual storytelling. My concept of democratization will be crystallized around the idea of *access*: access to the tools for audiovisual storytelling, and access to the stories told; access in practical and financial terms, but also in terms of media literacy, education, and previous exposure to a diversity of work. Lynne Sachs, in a round table discussion on the effects of digitization on experimental filmmaking, seems to have a similar understanding of democratization. Referring to the advent of cheap digital cameras and the affordable editing software Final Cut Pro in the United States in the late 1990s, she says: “I think that was a revolution in access. Because of its accessibility, more people could enjoy the freedom of using the new media for creative thinking. People started to believe you could be a ‘filmmaker’ without being a ‘director’, and that making a film could be an autonomous act from start to finish (...). That was very radical, because before that, there was a hierarchy in filmmaking (...). I think there has been a very important shift in society’s understanding of filmmaking. People realize that the resources are there to do it individually. This ‘*democratization*’ [my italics] is not just a political shift; it’s a paradigmatic shift in that it allows filmmaking to be the product of a truly individual vision (...)” (*Massachusetts Institute of Technology* 2011).

Of course, other issues were at play in the West at the time. Sachs is referring to experimental filmmaking, which before the advent of digital had already undergone phases of democratization, in her sense of widened access, through the use of 8 and 16 millimeter film, and later analogue video. Artists such as Maya Deren, Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, and many more, had provided an artistic ground to build on, and communities of artists creating individual work independently had existed for decades. In Africa, and particularly in Nigeria and Ghana, the advent of video technology in the course of the 1980s had kick-started something else and entirely new: commercial circuits of popular cinema, emerged shortly before digital technology entered the market (Haynes 2011: 71-72). What I want to retain here is the idea of democratization understood as a decreasing hierarchy and widening access, in several senses, to the tools required to tell audiovisual stories.

The nature of democratization of local audiovisual production and distribution related to technological innovation in Kenya and Tanzania is asked implicitly, in different ways, in the essays compiled here. Articles 2 and 4 on Riverwood and Bongowood look beyond the mere emergence of these popular cinema industries as an outcome of, amongst other factors, technological change. From a critical political economy perspective, with due attention to questions of power balance and resource distribution, they document and describe these industries, in the process providing elements that help to interrogate this first hypothesis. Article 3 zooms in on the reality, easily overlooked, of the very unequally distributed opportunities for audiovisual creatives and their peers

and audiences in Nairobi. There are clearly faultlines to be traced here, which are different from inequalities in access in the Global North: the rural/urban divide, and the differences in social and economic backgrounds of people in Africa.

Article 5 considers digital cinema with its many faces today as “popular” in different senses. Some digital filmmaking emanates from “the people”, while other stories may pertain to highly educated artists but are subversive in kind, and more closely related to the radicalness described by Lynne Sachs. Article 6 considers web and mobile streaming platforms, generally assumed to be drastically widening access to content. It asks what audiences are targeted by these platforms, whether and how contributing artists are remunerated, what business and pricing models are emerging, and what this may tell us about this first hypothesis – albeit not from an East African perspective, but by comparing cases in East, West, and South Africa.

Hypothesis 2: Diversification

Contrary to the “narrative” about its democratizing agency (see hypothesis 1), little has been written about technology’s potentially diversifying effects on audiovisual storytelling, at least not in the African context. Still, when one traces new initiatives in Nairobi, emerged in part thanks to technological innovation, this diversification is difficult to overlook; a point made explicit in chapter 1 of this dissertation.

Strong academic consensus exists that we must be careful not to jump to generalizations based on assumptions of technological determinism (see, for instance, MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999). The question to be answered, in other words, is whether and to what extent this diversification is proper to Nairobi, or co-determined by locally-specific variables. **My second hypothesis posits that technological innovation has a potentially diversifying effect on the local production and distribution of audiovisual narratives in East Africa.** Implicitly it is expected that this effect will be influenced by other (not technology-related) factors in different contexts, *in casu* Kenya and Tanzania.

Diversification here is understood widely. By “diversification of *production*” I mean a diversification of the story types told, primarily but not exclusively in terms of format and/or genres¹¹. One might object that this is impossible to quantify: is each story not different from the next? I want to stress that, rather than variations between stories within an established genre (the Hollywood blockbuster, Bongo drama, Riverwood comedy,...) I am interested in a more conspicuous type of diversification: new (digital) formats and story types (shorter, longer, to be viewed only online or on mobile, etc.), new locally-produced work outside established production clusters, the mixing of live action with animation, viral user-generated videos, et cetera. When such “undebatable” diversification proved difficult to find (as was the case in Tanzania’s Bongo industry [see article 4]), I have looked for diversification *within* established genres or formats. Note that this is a slightly porous distinction: technological innovation in the format of television productions can be related, for instance, to a

¹¹ Tom Ryall defines genres as patterns/forms/styles/structures which transcend individual films, supervising their construction by the filmmaker and their reading by an audience (Ryall 1975: 28). For the purpose of this dissertation I consider African popular cinema as a genre, because of its recognizable forms, narrative structures and styles. However, popular cinema features comedy, horror, romantic films, martial arts films, and many other categories which in other contexts would be referred to as “genres”. For clarity I will refer to these types of categorizations as ‘subgenres’.

diversification of story types, such as reality tv, soaps, or cooking shows. In my view these are not variations of a genre, but reflect increasing diversity *within* an established format.

“Diversification of *distribution*” refers to the platforms, channels, and dissemination circuits through which audiovisual stories are delivered: analogue and digital television, networks of (semi- or informal) DVD-trade, the web and the mobile internet, cinema houses, video dens, et cetera.

Both types of diversification are related to, but not the same as, different notions of “hybridization” that exist in media literature. Media creation today – local and regional, national and global – takes place in a context of technological, cultural, and economic globalization (Nederveen Pieterse 1994: 45). Transnational and global flows of varying origins (Hollywood or Bollywood films, Latin American telenovelas – which are cultural hybrids of themselves) exist alongside local and regional productions, and their circulation accelerates mutual influencing and occasional blending into new cultural forms. This process has been referred to as cultural hybridization (Nederveen Pieterse 1994: 49). The notion of cultural hybridization, in turn, has been criticized for glossing over the unequal power relations between different producers of such cross-pollinating cultural forms and genres. According to Kraidy (2005: vii-viii), theories of cultural imperialism are “(...) giving way to a benign vision of global cultural diversity, local cultural resistance, and cross-cultural fusion. This cultural pluralism is (...) an inadequate vision for international communication and culture because it ignores power. (...) [The notion of hybridity] is one aspect of globalization that represents the whole as egalitarian exchange and positive change.” In other words, while ongoing and intensifying cultural globalization is indeed accompanied by more, and more diverse, fusions between cultural forms, an uncritical use of “cultural hybridization” runs the risk of mirroring the same schematic thinking as what “cultural imperialism” was denounced for (see also: Nederveen Pieterse 1994; Kraidy 2005: 3; Biltereyst and Meers 2000). I favor the word “diversification” over “hybridization” for my second hypothesis because it is broader and it takes a perspective closer to mine, which is that of local producers in Kenya and Tanzania, rather than the meeting of local and transnational flows circulating in a given space.

As for distribution circuits, diversification here is related to the processes of media hybridization and convergence as referred to earlier (cfr supra: “But that’s not cinema!”). Though much has been published on the changing media landscape resulting from digitization (Dewdney and Ride 2006; Darley 2005; Lessig 2008; Rombes 2009, to name but a few) it is only recently, with the progressive inward penetration of broadband on the continent, that scholars have started to trace how this is materializing in sub-Saharan Africa (for academic publications on new types of audiovisual works made possible by the web, see for instance Omanga [2013] and Ligaga [2012]). Through this second hypothesis, I want to make a contribution to this new stream of literature. However, to limit this to “new”, “online” or “mobile” media would be to ignore emerging systems of distribution which may be less cutting-edge but more relevant to local majorities. Diversification of distribution here is thus understood in a broader sense, including new popular cinema circuits, new types of venues for communal viewing facilitated by new technology, digital television, and any other means of delivering audiovisual stories to local viewers.

Hypothesis 3: Increasing local relevance

It would have been tempting to summarize my hypotheses about the relation between technology and audiovisual storytelling in East Africa in three concepts: “democratization, diversification, and

localization". Unfortunately, "localization" - the strategy by which global firms assume features making them more recognizable and appealing to local consumers (see for instance Wills, Samli, and Jacobs 1991) - does not cover what hypothesis 3 wants to address. Though the context of cultural globalization and hybridization (again with Nederveen Pieterse 1994) is the same, my focus is not on global or transnational media but on work that is produced and disseminated locally. My last hypothesis posits that **technological innovation in East Africa is instrumental in an increasing local relevance of audiovisual stories produced locally, and of the way they are disseminated**. This makes sense intuitively if, according to hypothesis 1, more people have access to the tools necessary for audiovisual storytelling, thus adding more locally-inspired stories to the offer available.

"Local relevance", especially in the context of African audiovisual storytelling, requires a precise definition and preferably clear-cut operationalization: firstly because it bears a heavy historical charge, and secondly because it runs the risk of reasoning along the simplistic lines of an assumed pristine "authenticity" of indigenous media (Murphy 2000). What is more, "local" can refer to varying "levels" of localness: from a city or community to a nation, region, or – in view of Africa's colonial history – a continent and its diasporas. To elaborate on these points (local relevance in a postcolonial era, the myth of local "authenticity", and the meaning[s] of "local") and come to an operationalization of "local relevance", requires a brief detour sketching the history of African cinema through the prism of colonialism, postcolonialism, and representations of African peoples and cultures.

African cinema emerged in the context of the postcolonial struggle for its own "Africanization". The practice of filmmaking had been brought to the continent by colonial authorities, but during colonization Africans had either not been allowed to make film (as was the case under French rule, cfr Haynes 2011: 69)¹², or were trained as assistants to European directors and producers (as was the case in Anglophone Africa; Mukora 1999: 32). The British produced short reels to be viewed by Africans, but exclusively with educational purposes or by means of propaganda. Many of these films promoted a British lifestyle and "proper European behavior", reinforcing the colonial view on culture and society to the detriment of African values and customs (Mukora 1999: 26). Cinema-going was organized along lines of racial segregation (Smyth 1979: 439)¹³, and international films to be screened in public were often censored so as not to affect the "impressionable" minds of the native people (Burns 2006: 66; Brennan 2005: 481, 488). Additionally, African countries (South Africa, Kenya, and to a lesser extent Tanzania) were, and still are, used as locations for films targeted at a white audience, and reproducing stereotypical perceptions of the continent and its peoples. For all these reasons it is fair to say that film in and/or about Africa for a long time was not representative of its places, cultures, or people.

The struggle for an "Africanization" of film produced in Africa started in the 1960s, during and after decolonization, and was ideologically and politically underpinned by the "Third Cinema"¹⁴ movement of the time (Haynes 2011: 70). Radical, militant and emancipatory, the work of pioneers like

¹² There were exceptions, though. Collaboration between African film students and directors and Jean Rouch, for instance, existed (Mukora 1999: 29).

¹³ The nature and organization of this segregation varied between colonized countries and evolved over time. There were significant differences in the organization of movie-going between South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, and Nigeria (Burns 2006).

¹⁴ Third Cinema as an emancipatory movement and a production wave opposed to all forms of (neo-)colonialism, cultural imperialism, and politics of oppression (Thackway cited in De Groof 2003: 39).

Ousmane Sembène, Med Hondo, and Souleymane Cissé, aimed at developing film languages and aesthetics, and building a corpus of films to articulate the African experience: not only in terms of languages¹⁵, characters and settings, but also in terms of perspectives (i.e. stories told from an African, non-foreign point of view) (Haynes 2011: 70). This first body of works shared a political-ideological background but did not therefore develop as a unitary genre or style. There were social-realist stories attacking neo-colonialism, stories of magical realism, experimental avant-garde, et cetera, all bound by the novel intent of telling stories from a local perspective.

Another binding characteristic of these films is that they enjoyed European (mostly French) funding, and therefore had to abide by a number of rules. Contrary to the British (Mukora 1999: 33), the French started funding African cinema immediately after colonization. Their support was partly a strategy to counter Hollywood's growing market dominance, and it came with economic and creative strings attached (Diawara 2010: 33-34, 85-89). French funding required working with French key creatives, resulting in productions which often answered to a French cinema aesthetic, and a European taste and conception of Africa. This is sometimes still the case. Manthia Diawara puts it, sharply but eloquently, as follows (2010: 34-35):

“While it is true that from Hollywood to Nollywood producers have their say in what goes into a film, nowhere are they as paternalistic and arrogant as in African cinema funded by France. The African director is forced into a schizophrenic situation where he/she, born and educated in the city, is told to represent an Africa that is only ‘real’ in the deepest fantasies of the European producer: an Africa outside of history, an atavistic Africa, full of exoticism. (...) When a European producer thinks of Africa, he/she only sees European audiences, the Cannes Film Festival, Berlin and Toronto.”

Meanwhile Anglophone Africa had not yet embarked on the same quest for “Africanization”. In Kenya immediately after independence the production of foreign movies produced locally shot up (Mukora 1999: 35). Indigenous film was deemed less a priority than other industries more immediately important for Kenya's economic development, and foreign support for African film was a private more than a public affair. Nevertheless, the relation between directors and financiers was also one of dependency. Mukora (1999: 33) writes: “The dependency relationship inevitably forged between African filmmakers and European financiers continues to haunt Kenyan filmmakers who must rely [on] Western countries for financial aid to initiate and complete film projects.” Kenya was positioned as a facilitator of and the ideal scenery for foreign stories set in Africa. Content and images of films produced in the country continued to represent imperial and colonial British ideologies (Mukora 1999: 46).

Dependency on foreign funding led Francophone directors in the course of the 1980s to focus less on “Africanization”, and increasingly to produce work that was aesthetically pleasing to Europeans, and which spoke to Western conceptions of a timeless and unspoilt Africa. They represented a cinematic “return to the sources”, sometimes referred to as “calabash cinema” (see for instance Haynes 2011:

¹⁵ Manthia Diawara (2010) gives a fascinating historic account of African cinema and its positions vis-à-vis Europe and foreign funders in different periods. Language is essential: Diawara tells the story of the Sembène feature *Mandabi* (1968), which has two versions: one in Wolof, and a copy dubbed in French. The producer of the film (French, as this was one of the requirements for French funding) insisted on a French-language film, something Sembène could not accept (Diawara 2010: 33-35).

70; De Groof 2010: 44; Diawara 2010: 96). In contrast, the 1980s also witnessed the first wave of Kenyan-made films, with practitioners like Sao Gamba, Anne Mungai, Jane Murago-Munene, Dommie Yambo Odotte, and Kenneth Olembo. For the first time they began narrating the postcolonial experience from a Kenyan perspective. Their work suffered from a lack of financing and technical support (Mukora 1999: 44) and in terms of production values was not at par with the “calabash cinema” of the time. Tanzania, despite its rich history of cinema-going, produced even less of its own films. The country’s best-known directors who became active in that period are Ron Mulvihill and Martin Mhando. Nigeria, on the other hand, experienced a golden age in filmmaking during the 1980s (Arewa 2012: 11).

In the course of the 1990s this tension between choosing an African perspective and “pleasing the West” became more relaxed. Directors such as Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Abderrahmane Sissako, Balufu Bakupa-Kanyinda, John Akomfrah, Djo Tunda Wa Munga, and Newton Aduaka are, each in their own way, concerned with different approaches to storytelling rather than with “Africanizing” their cinema (Haynes 2011: 70). In Kenya and Tanzania, too, filmmakers have started to explore different ways to tell African, sometimes very local stories: Wanuri Kahiu (*From a Whisper*, 2008; *Pumzi*, 2009) and Tosh Gitonga (*Nairobi Half Life*, 2012) from Kenya, Amil Shivji (*Shoeshine*, 2013) from Tanzania, Caroline Kamyia (*iMANi*, 2011) from Uganda, to name but a few. Manthia Diawara writes (2010: 97, 99):

“Today, the movement is toward a multiplicity of voices and cinematic styles (...) influenced and inflected by the filmmakers’ geographic locations in Africa, Europe or America; (...) although the filmmakers differ in their approaches to making films, what unites them (...) as a new African cinema wave is a continual conversation about the desire to hear multiple voices and to see different images of Africa on the screen. They all want to tell African stories in all their thematic complexities and richness; and they all use cinema, not so much as a tool for expressing an ideology, but as a medium for self-discovery, artistic invention and performance. (...) now we are concerned with cinematic form, new ways of framing African images, individualism, and how to bring a mythical and magical dimension to the African story on screen.”

The point of this detour has been to show that “local relevance” for a long time amounted to telling stories from a non-foreign point of view. This was something to be won over, and a practice to be actively developed. It was related to settings, characters, style and languages, but also to tempo, narrative structure, and the depiction, actions and concerns of African people in film. Because of the high cost of filmmaking and the heavy dependency on foreign funders, the result in creative terms was often a compromise. “Local relevance”, then, was negatively construed (in the sense of “not foreign”), eclectic from the start, and not to be confused with any characterizable “authenticity”.

No compromise to meet foreign tastes exists in the African circuits of popular straight-to-video cinema, which started during the late 1980s, and of which Lagos-based Nollywood¹⁶ is the best-

¹⁶ Nollywood is by no means Africa’s first “popular cinema”. Several successful and unsuccessful attempts at reaching wide local audiences through film existed in the course of the 1960s and 1970s (see Diawara 2010: 138-143). In this thesis, when referring to African popular cinema I am referring in the first place to the contemporary circuits of locally-produced, low-budget, straight-to-DVD stories, with close affinities to

known exponent. Pragmatic and commercial, Nollywood was never concerned with “pleasing the West”, nor with any active cause of “Africanization”. Ironically, instead of opposing to foreign hegemonic cultural forms it actively took and appropriated from them what it deemed useful, in effect turning out something considered much more (pan-)African than traditional cinema (Haynes 2011: 74; Diawara 2010: 180; McCall 2007: 93, 96). Nollywood has cannibalized and domesticated features of Hollywood (dress-style, materialism, the star system) and infused them with Nigerian/African content: stories and traditions, in addition to the issues and concerns typical of the postcolonial era. The result resonates strongly across the continent. Nollywood is a-political in intent, but political in its outcome: it ignores European aesthetic and stylistic rules, is unapologetic about the quality effects of its low budgets and cheap equipment (Diawara 2010: 184-185), and is widely embraced by African and diasporic audiences. Haynes writes (2011: 75-76): “The films are a proud example of (...) an unprecedented claiming of African screens for African images, of providing images of African culture that can travel and function as a source of identity –images both of rooted tradition and culture (...) and of an attractive African modernity.” McCall writes: “Nollywood has created a pan-African forum that makes speaking of a pan-African cinema and indeed pan-African culture possible for the first time” (2007: 96).

Nollywood has circumvented the theatrical distribution system and the festival circuit, in effect making itself accessible and affordable widely (through optical discs, informal trade circuits, television broadcasting, etc.) in and outside Nigeria. It is clearly locally relevant in terms of its stories and distribution methods. This would not have been possible without video technology giving storytellers-entrepreneurs autonomy from the creative meddling of funders. The question asked with my third hypothesis is whether technological innovation facilitates such increasing local relevance also in Kenya and Tanzania, and if so: how this materializes in different local contexts, and whether this happens (only) through their respective popular cinema circuits or also through other cases of (extended) cinema, such as feature films, television shows, or newer formats.

That being said, it is still undetermined how to define and theoretically frame the local relevance of East African audiovisual stories. I propose to use the notion of “cultural proximity” as introduced by Joseph Straubhaar (1991) in the field of television reception analysis¹⁷. Media studies have established that on a whole, audiences have a preference for locally produced work¹⁸ because it is “culturally proximate” to them: linguistically in the first place, but also in terms of dress, ethnicities portrayed, gestures and body language, humor, et cetera. Cultural proximity is what leads audiences to choose television programs that are “closest, most proximate or most directly *relevant* [my italics]

television formats. These circuits are not necessarily comparable in terms of style or stories told. Yoruba video film, for instance, is rooted in the tradition of Yoruba theatre and film, and is closer to filmed theatre than Nollywood (Diawara 2010: 169). Similarly, Nollywood is not synonymous with video filmmaking in Africa. Video started before the emergence of popular cinema, and is still used outside of its stylistic configurations (Diawara 2010: 168). In chapter 5 of this thesis the significance of “African popular cinema” in today’s era of digital technology and ongoing globalization is critically discussed.

¹⁷ Straubhaar (1991) introduced “cultural proximity” in the field of television studies, but the term was first used by Galtung and Ruge (1965) in the context of (news) content analysis.

¹⁸ Straubhaar’s work focused on television rather than films or other types of cinema. However cultural proximity has also been used for the theoretical framing of Nollywood (Osei-Hwere and Osei-Hwere 2008), which makes sense because as a format Nollywood resembles television. Since I intend to use cultural proximity here as an analytical rather than a predictive tool (i.e. as an operationalization of the relevance of locally-produced work to local audiences on different “levels” of cultural affinity, rather than a tool for predicting viewership), I believe it is equally useful for framing other types of (extended) cinema.

to them in cultural and linguistic terms.” It works primarily within national and cultural-linguistic boundaries (see below, and see La Pastina and Straubhaar 2005: 272). Conversely, media products that cross cultural boundaries are often faced with difficulties in appealing to local audiences, due to differences in style, values and beliefs, and of course language (this is referred to as the “cultural discount” effect; see Hoskins and Mirus 1988). However foreign imports can also be enormously popular, sometimes more than locally produced stories. This can be due to a greater accessibility, large differences in production quality (especially in the case of “spectacular” action movies), but also the sense of a shared historical background (experiences of migration, the struggle against colonization...), and cultural affinities or linguistic similarities between the content of the foreign media and its audiences. In other words, this cultural proximity effect is dynamic, relational, and variable. It can change over time as cultures evolve, and it can be affected by other trends in ways we can rarely foresee. Its effects can be moderated by many material and structural (production and distribution infrastructure, the rest of the offer available to audiences), as well as individual factors: for instance financial barriers, and the economic and cultural capital of viewers (La Pastina and Straubhaar 2005: 273).

If we keep these limiting factors in mind, I believe cultural proximity can be a good theoretical lens through which to assess local relevance on different levels. It offers a way to make sense of the huge popularity of Nollywood across the continent, but also of Bollywood in Northern Nigeria and along the coast of East Africa, or even the influence of American and Italian westerns on African popular culture. If understood in relative terms (relative to the rest of the offer available, and relative to different types of cultural spaces), it provides the openness to steer clear of essentialist thinking about “authentically African” stories when discussing local relevance. It can easily be operationalized by considering its different elements mentioned above: language in the first place, but also religion, music, dress, et cetera.

In 2008 Joseph Straubhaar, theorizing media globalization and the simultaneous flows of local, global, and hybrid media types, introduced a model outlining different layers of production and cultural affinity: from the local to the global, with different levels in between. The model was further refined in 2013. Straubhaar’s layers are neither static nor mutually exclusive: “(...) layers of meaning, culture, identity, and media use form, overlay and persist. New layers form over the top of all others as structural circumstances permit or even dictate” (Straubhaar 2013: 61). As a first group, he distinguishes a layer of global infrastructures and media models, a U.S. “empire” level, and other, non-American formats with global reach (telenovelas, anime, Bollywood,...). Another layer, certainly relevant in the context of African production, harbors spaces of transnational cultural-linguistic identification, for instance the strong bonds between former colonies and diasporic migrants (say, for instance, the Lusophone countries, or Anglophone Africa and India). These are very close to the idea of “geo-linguistic regions”, described by John Sinclair (in Wang, Servaes, and Goonasekera [eds] 2000: 19) in terms of “commonalities of language and culture, most characteristically (...) established by historical relationships of colonization.” Next, there are geo-cultural regional spaces (geographically linked, and with commonalities such as shared languages and/or relevant histories, such as the Swahili-speaking people of East Africa), and translocal spaces (media flows entering a country from a neighboring country or production). Finally, there is the national layer, the regional (subnational) one, often based on cultural-linguistic groups predating the nation-state, metropolitan production centers, and the local level. Cultural proximity can exist and “work” in different ways in all

these different layers, which provide apt theoretical handles for the different levels of “local” in “local relevance”.

Finally, the local relevance of distribution systems is easier to grasp. As with the notion of a democratization of distribution, I accord to it a financial and practical (in terms of ease of access, and pricing and delivery principles attuned to the local context) and a cultural (in terms of habits and lifestyle) dimension. Of course there is large overlap between the financial and practical dimensions of *democratization*, and a financial and practical *local relevance*. To avoid redundancy, when assessing the local relevance of distribution I will concentrate primarily on its cultural dimension: the question whether new or emerging delivery systems are attuned to local viewing contexts and habits.

Most of the articles presented here feature different cases of audiovisual storytelling and distribution in East Africa. In doing so they depart from different research propositions, not directly related to questions of local relevance. Still, the data collected are sufficient to comment on the local relevance of the cases to be studied, at least when framed in terms of their cultural proximity to different audience groups on varying layers of cultural affinity.

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**ESSAY 1: TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION AND THE
DIVERSIFICATION OF AUDIOVISUAL STORYTELLING IN
KENYA**

THROUGH A SELECTION OF CASE STUDIES THIS ARTICLE DEMONSTRATES HOW TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION IN KENYA IS INSTRUMENTAL IN AN EMERGING DIVERSIFICATION IN THE PRODUCTION AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF LOCAL AUDIOVISUAL NARRATIVES. THE ARTICLE THUS ADDS A NEW PERSPECTIVE TO THE LITERATURE ON TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION AND RELATED EVOLUTIONS IN AFRICAN FILM INDUSTRIES, WHICH SO FAR HAS FOCUSED LARGELY ON TECHNOLOGY'S DEMOCRATIZING EFFECTS, PARTICULARLY WITH THE EMERGENCE OF POPULAR CINEMA. I POSIT THAT, MORE THAN BEING PART OF A DEMOCRATIZING PROCESS IN MOVIE-MAKING, TECHNOLOGY MAKES A GREATER DIVERSITY IN AUDIOVISUAL STORIES AND NEW MEANS OF DISSEMINATION POSSIBLE. HOWEVER, OTHER FACTORS - ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, SOCIETAL, DEMOGRAPHIC - INFLUENCE THE OUTCOME AND THE MID-TO-LONG TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF NEW CIRCUITS OF AUDIOVISUAL STORYTELLING. IN OTHER WORDS, TECHNOLOGY CAN FACILITATE BUT CANNOT IN ITSELF "ESTABLISH" DIVERSIFICATION.

This article was published under the same title in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Vol. 26, nr. 2: 206-219. Several cases presented here return in other chapters of this dissertation. Jitu Films, showcased here as an effort towards improving the production quality of Riverwood movies through better equipment, returns briefly in chapter 2 as an example of "praxis" in Kenya's Riverwood circuit. Foxhole Entertainment, an underground circuit in Nairobi in which movies circulate on optical discs and online, is revisited and analyzed at length in chapter 3. Similarly, Kenya's Riverwood circuit is presented here briefly as one of the first instances of locally-produced popular cinema made possible by, amongst other factors, technological innovation. Riverwood is discussed in depth in chapter 2. For all case studies in each chapter I have tried to limit my analyses to elements directly pertinent to the research questions at hand, however a certain degree of overlap has been impossible to avoid, as some elements are relevant to multiple research questions treated across different chapters.

1. Introduction and theoretical background

With this article I posit that technological innovation is facilitating processes of diversification in the production and distribution of audiovisual narratives in Kenya. I will expand on a selection of case studies in the spheres of production and dissemination to illustrate that technology holds the potential for increasing diversity in production formats and methods for delivery. At the same time, technology is only one of many variables influencing whether or not new circuits¹⁹ of audiovisual storytelling become sustainable. Its agency is only as far-reaching as the range of circumstances in which it exists allows it to.

¹⁹ By "circuits of audiovisual culture" I mean circuits through which audiovisual artefacts travel. This includes their production and duplication, as well as the systems of distribution and eventual delivery to different audience groups. The phrase "circuits of audiovisual culture" does not refer to Paul Du Gay's "circuits of culture" (1997), as the latter focuses more on the use and consumption of culture, and the marketing around it, than I have done in my analyses.

I will analyse cases in the spheres of production as well as distribution of local content: Kenyan-made, Kenyan-produced and Kenyan-consumed. The cases have been sampled based on technology's central role in their emergence. Implementing new forms of technology and putting them into commercial practice, the cases can be considered innovations in the Schumpeterian sense: new combinations of new and/or existing assets: technology, skills, knowledge, markets, et cetera (Schumpeter 1934: 65). With Everett Rogers (2003: 12), innovation here is understood as relative to where it is introduced. Technological innovation in Kenya, then, can be the advent of new or improved network infrastructure, the introduction of new media devices (phones, tablets,...), better, more affordable, or more user-friendly hard- or software, et cetera (see also introduction: pp. 15-16).

Technology's effects on film production in sub-Saharan Africa during the last decade are well documented, with a large body of literature providing extensive and detailed accounts of the emergence of African popular cinema, particularly in Nigeria (Haynes 2010; Okome 2007; McCall 2007), but also increasingly in other countries (for instance: Krings in Saul and Austen 2010; Böhme in Krings and Okome 2013; Rasmussen 2010; Meyer 2011). Scholars have ascribed democratizing effects to cheap digital recording equipment and to media supports such as VHS and DVD/VCD (video compact disc). However, they have also put technology's agency in a nuanced perspective, highlighting the material circumstances which determine and limit it (for instance, Larkin 2008). In this sense the thinking about African popular cinema contributes to an older and much wider debate on technology's interrelation with society.

When looking at the interrelations between technology and societal phenomena we must be careful to avoid assumptions of technological determinism, i.e. we must have attention for the complex local contexts and countless influencing factors in which technology evolves (see, for instance, Mackenzie and Wajcman 1999). Moreover, more than merely an independent variable affecting its surroundings, technology is shaped by these surroundings: the qualities of existing technology it builds on, the presence or absence of knowledge networks (or professional communities; Mackenzie and Wajcman 1999: 33), the availability of private or public funding for research and development, market structures and economic power balances and imbalances, the material conditions in which technology is embedded, tradition and habits, et cetera.

With this article I will describe and analyze five cases which I consider to be "entrepreneurs" of innovation in the sense of Schumpeter (1965): they exploit market opportunity through introducing change (or innovation) in Kenya. Together, they are illustrative of a process of diversification taking place in the spheres of audiovisual production and distribution in the country. As is always the case with innovation, they are affected and constrained by the context in which they are embedded. Therefore, more than merely describing each case I will consider the circumstances shaping them, and particularly factors influencing their success and potential for economic and financial sustainability.

2. Context: technology and optimism

A lot can be said about the African context for innovation and the relation with audiovisual production and distribution circuits, but what sets Kenya apart from most East African countries is its

firm, loudly-voiced belief in technology as the key to economic growth and societal progress²⁰. It is useful to expand on this technology-related optimism both on policy- and on industry-levels, as it was evident in most interviews conducted and policy documents reviewed for this study. Kenya's government has identified ICT and innovation as strategic priorities for the future. A lot of progress has been made in bringing broadband internet infrastructure to Kenya, though the last miles providing rural areas with mobile internet are the most expensive, the least lucrative, and therefore the most difficult to attain (*Balancing Act* 2011). Key goals formulated in Kenya's *Vision 2030* (Government of Kenya, Ministry of Planning and National Development 2007) and in the ICT-board's *Connected Kenya Masterplan* (Government of Kenya, Ministry of Information and Communication 2013) include nationwide, faster and cheaper access to the Web, with a focus on mobile internet, the positioning of Kenya as Africa's ICT hub by 2017, and economic growth underpinned by a favorable policy framework for ICT investments. Kenya's ICT Board and the Kenya Film Commission, state corporations created in 2005 and 2006, aim for more locally-produced digital content (this can be software, mobile apps, games, animation, video, etc.), more capacity-building, and the nurturing of local talent (Ndemo, 2012; Kukubo, 2012; Kobia, 2013). The *Connected Kenya Masterplan* (2012: 12) explicitly mentions the "development of film and information content towards the creative economy" as a focal area of action.

Kenya's Ministry of Information and Communication plans an ambitious technology, science, commerce, education and creativity park in Konza, forty miles outside of Nairobi, dubbed "Silicon Savannah". Intended to provide supercomputing capacity and with a dedicated media center in place (Ndemo, 2012), it is expected to be valuable as a supporting infrastructure for, for instance, Kenyan animation artists. Konza's Technology City "hopes to attract increased foreign direct investment into ICT (...) keep Kenya at the technological edge and ensure it becomes the true hub of Africa" (*ICT Board* 2013: 4). However, the highly mediated and expensive project (850 billion Kenyan Shillings [KES], or about 9,7 billion American dollars [USD]²¹, according to *Africanseer* [2012]) has also met with skepticism. Erik Hersman, founding manager of Nairobi's iHub²², has stated that a challenge will be to keep it technology-focused. When real estate developers become involved, they might "start selling space to whoever will pay them" (Gabe 2012), turning Konza into (nothing more than) a lucrative real estate project. Another comment often heard is that the prestigious project "(...) will only serve a tiny elite, exacerbating an already deep divide between the haves and have-nots" (Kermeliotis 2013).

Nevertheless, most stakeholders I spoke with seem to share an ambitious, optimistic vision of the future. Developments in ICT and audiovisual industries are described as nascent but fast-growing. The presence of major global players such as Google/YouTube, Nokia, Hewlett-Packard and Samsung,

²⁰ See, for instance, Kenya's Open Data project (<https://opendata.go.ke/>) disclosing government data online for public scrutiny, its investment in pasha centres (government-encouraged centres for web access in disadvantaged and/or rural areas), and the Kenya Connected Masterplan for 2017 with the baseline "Inclusion. Innovation. Beyond Broadband. Working towards a Society built on Knowledge" (Government of Kenya, Ministry of Information and Communication 2013).

²¹ All currency conversions in this dissertation were calculated with the online convertor www.xe.com (August 2014).

²² The iHub (www.ihub.co.ke) is Kenya's best-known innovation hub and open space for the country's technology-oriented community.

as well as the recent emergence of technology incubators and labs (such as the iHub, 88mph²³, and Nailab²⁴) contribute to this sense of Nairobi as an ICT-hub. Film production, closely related because of its reliance on the development of recording and editing equipment and new distribution systems, is described as “(...) the Wild West, but ready to explode” (Essuman, 2012). This optimism, particularly in the more upmarket and/or publicly funded field of work, concerns creativity and quality in the local production of stories, as well as the local use that is being made of new technology. My interviewees expect increasing volumes of audiovisual production, and growing “quality” (defined as either sound and image quality, or as adequate scripting, acting, editing, and camera-work). Until now, most works perceived by them as being “of quality” have received little visibility, and have not been accessible widely to Kenyan audiences due to a faulty distribution network²⁵.

There seems to be a powerful collective gaze in the same direction. To paraphrase one of my interviewees: “A lot of it is about spin: Kenyans are being sold their future, and they embrace it, they are proud of it. In a way it is about self-fulfilling prophecy. That is also what brings foreign investment in. However, we will have to be able to deliver, not only in terms of technology and creativity, but also in terms of business-models. We will be competing globally” (Kaigwa, 2012). Someone else has stated: “People now know Kenya is a technology hub. And this vision is not really about government spending but about pointing the country towards one goal. That vision is so powerful, it changes things, we are passionate about it” (Okottah, 2012).

The optimism concerning the relation between technological progress, growing quality, and increasing volumes of local production, resonates a more general feeling of momentum in Kenya, related to enthusiasm about a new constitution, the country’s fiftieth anniversary in 2013, new-found self-confidence and defiance towards opinions in the West on Kenya’s politics (such as the contested election of Uhuru Kenyatta), the ambitious *Vision 2030* policy declaration, and an increasing number of diasporan Kenyans returning to the country. Most Kenyans I spoke to are hopeful and excited about the future, despite concern that the lower social strata will not benefit from Kenya’s progress, and even if such optimistic eras in the past, particularly in the country’s political history, have led to bitter disappointments (Ogola in Wasserman [2011]: 126; Wrong 2010; Branch 2011).

3. Popular Cinema in Kenya: the Riverwood Industry

When discussing the influence of changing technology on Africa’s audiovisual production, usually the first production field that comes to mind is that of African popular cinema. Having originated in Nigeria and Ghana after the advent of videotape and VCRs, it now has equivalents throughout sub-Saharan Africa. It is often considered the most conspicuous emanation of a radical democratization of Africa’s audiovisual industries (McCall 2007). More people can make movies, more people can afford to view the movies, and the movies are perceived as locally relevant to “the people”, described by Karin Barber as the majorities: heterogeneous groups with as a “negative” common

²³ 88mph (www.88mph.ac/nairobi/) is an investor in and accelerator for technology-based commercial initiatives, based in Nairobi.

²⁴ The Nailab (www.nailab.co.ke) is a start-up accelerator for creative, societal and commercial initiatives involving innovative technology. It is based in Nairobi.

²⁵ Chapter 2 expands on the nature of and issues with Kenyan networks of film distribution. Outside the Riverwood genre, Kenyan-made movies are difficult to find locally.

trait the fact that they do not pertain to any financial, economic, or political elites (Barber 1997: 4; see also chapter 5). The movies are usually viewed widely, either in video parlors or in the privacy of the home. The impressive strides that Nigeria's Nollywood and Tanzania's Bongowood have made during the last decade have led some to assume that locally relevant audiovisual stories produced by use of cheaper and more user-friendly equipment are akin to a recipe for success, perhaps overlooking other factors such as: the big market numbers of these countries; Nigerian national pride (and/or regional or ethnic groups' interest in their own cultural content, such as Igbo or Hausa stories); and Tanzania's strong sense of national unity and binding language, Swahili.

Kenya's popular cinema is called Riverwood²⁶ (Vourlias 2011; McNamara 2010; see also chapter 2), referring to Nairobi's downtown River Road area, where since the 1970s music has been sold through small outlets. As elsewhere, a distribution system was in place before local popular movies originated. Quite similarly to Nollywood, Riverwood movies emerged from a background of live theatre, particularly comedy: when videotape became available, Kikuyu stand-up comedians started filming their shows and distributing the tapes through the existing networks. They later shifted to optical discs. Now it is often the same people distributing the movies who produce them. In other cases, the movies are bought for a flat fee, and are then duplicated and sold through retail.

The films are typically made on shoestring budgets, by use of low-end cameras (mini-DV, DV, and increasingly also Sony PD cameras), small crews (typically the camera-man is also the producer and no finished script is available), very short production periods (a few weeks), and improvised acting. Most films are produced on small turnovers (between 50,000 and 150,000 copies). According to some of my interviewees, high-definition (HD) cameras are now increasingly used for all kinds of movie production in Kenya, slowly narrowing the technological gap between Riverwood and other genres: "As an innovation it [HD] has opened many things up. Super 16-like quality and more possibilities in post-production. But talent, skill, exposure, training are still needed" (Kaigwa, 2012).

Characteristic of Riverwood is that movies are mostly shot in vernacular languages, and produced and consumed along lines of language and, closely related, ethnicity. The films are mostly comedies, though martial arts and other fictional narratives also circulate. Originally Kikuyu, there are now movies that target other language groups, such as Luo or Kamba. Only a minority of films is made in what one interviewee described as "a funny-sounding Swahili" (Mahugu, 2012), or in English. Riverwood caters for upcountry audiences and for people who have migrated from rural areas to the city, often in search of jobs. Typically the people targeted by the movies are not the highest-educated societal groups, and are most comfortable in their own, vernacular tongue. Partly due to this linguistic heterogeneity, Riverwood cannot boast the same market numbers as, for instance, Nigeria (which admittedly not only produces English-language movies but also vernacular films, but has a much larger local market) and Tanzania, which predominantly produces in Swahili. The films are also relatively expensive, partly as a consequence of anti-piracy policy regulations (see also chapter 2). Kenya's government implicitly allows for illicit sales of foreign content while imposing financial penalties on shops selling pirated Kenyan films. As a result, the official retail price for Riverwood films is several times higher than that of foreign content. Apart from the outlets on and around River

²⁶ It must be noted that, contrary to Bongowood in Tanzania, Kenyan audiences shopping for movies do not often ask for "Riverwood", but rather for the genre they are looking for, for instance Kikuyu Comedy (which is the type of movies most produced in the Riverwood circuit), or the movies of a specific well-known comedian. Still, within the Kenyan film industry, "Riverwood" is an accepted and widely used name for this type of movies.

Road, the movies are sold by hawkers and promoted by use of cars with monitors playing clips from the movies (Kinyanjui, 2012). They are rarely screened in the video parlors that can be found in slums and rural areas, but bought in stores and viewed at home or sometimes on television. On a whole, they do not possess the nation-wide popularity as does, for instance, neighboring Tanzania's Bongowood, where most people randomly addressed on the street will identify the local popular cinema genre as their absolute favorite.

According to some, Riverwood would be much more successful if it had more screens available and better distribution, particularly amongst less privileged audiences: "If you ask, are local movies most popular amongst people with TVs and DStv subscriptions? Probably not. But as you start moving down the line from DStv to Zuku to free-to-air, you will get a different picture²⁷" (Ogunyemi, 2012). Others believe that the fact that Kenya is ethnically and linguistically fragmented is Riverwood's biggest difficulty. Indeed, whereas Bongo audiences seem to encompass all but the non-elite people in Tanzania, Riverwood adepts appear to be much more of a delineated group within a larger and more diversified society. Yet others are convinced that Kenya's policy concerning the movies should be revised, allowing them to be sold at more competitive prices. There are also those who believe there is too much international high-quality, easily accessible and affordable content on offer in Western-oriented Kenya for audiences to buy into the low-end Riverwood genre; something which Bongowood and Nollywood have been able to counter more easily due to language (in the case of Bongo), higher market numbers, better distribution, and overall higher production values.

What is clear is that, though technology has been key in allowing the Kenyan equivalent of African popular cinema to emerge and find efficient means of distribution, it has not had (nor could it have) much impact on its economic success. The fact that local movies, because of cheaper and more user-friendly technology, can more easily be made and diffused, does not necessarily imply they will be very successful, regardless of examples such as Nollywood and Bongowood. The Riverwood circuit has existed for a while and is still producing and distributing movies. It can therefore be considered self-sufficient but for several reasons is kept from reaching its full potential.

4. Jitu Films

Riverwood movies target upcountry audiences and immigrants to the city with rural backgrounds. According to many, their relatively low production volumes and sales numbers are a function of their low quality. Either because of low expected profitability, or because it is assumed that audiences do not care much for production value, investments in high-quality equipment (cameras, separate microphones), larger crews or longer production periods are uncommon.

Though quality is defined differently by different respondents, what if image, sound, acting or scripting quality were not an issue, while makers were careful to keep their movies locally relevant? Assuming that an established production house with high-end equipment will turn out relatively high quality, Jitu Films, which was part of Vivid Features, is an interesting case to look at.

Vivid Features is a high-end production company with offices in Nairobi and Lagos, working for clients such as Shell, Coca Cola, National Geographic, UNICEF, and UNESCO. It employs about thirty people. As an experiment, in 2007 Vivid Features started producing low-budget films under the new label of

²⁷ My interviewee is referring to different television broadcasters. DStv typically targets upper-class viewers, Zuku targets upper-middle classes.

Jitu Films. The idea was to produce Riverwood cinema – described by Nick Kangethe (2012) at Vivid Features as cheaply made movies that might appeal to wide audiences - but turning out better image and sound quality, and/or more creative, though still very accessible stories. Some of the movies were shot in English, some in Swahili, and others in Gikuyu. Narratives were similar to traditional Riverwood movies, at least in the case of the Gikuyu and Swahili films. Even if some of the movies were less generic than traditional Riverwood, the producers feel they were careful to appeal – at least potentially – to Riverwood audiences.

Twenty-four Jitu films were produced. A selection was screened as a preview to a test audience of industry professionals, for feedback on which stories might do best in the Riverwood market. The movies considered most viable were sold through supermarket outlets, at prices similar to the pirated international movies to be found along River Road. At the same time, Jitu tried – unsuccessfully - to forge partnerships with the salesmen downtown. According to Kangethe the low prices at the supermarkets made it impossible for the outlets along River Road to make a profit: “Distribution did not exist so we went to retail outlets ourselves, and to supermarkets. We never got to the core of the people in the *dukas*²⁸ and cars. Our pricing range made movies not pirateable, and not (or not sufficiently) profitable for them. They could not charge higher prices than the ones in supermarkets, where we sold at about 100 KES (1,14 USD)” (Kangethe, 2012).

Jitu Films folded in 2010; opinions on the causes differ. They were widely appreciated within the film industry as an original attempt at creating a transparent and legal circuit for the delivery of high-quality popular films. However, there seemed to be a tension between their target audiences’ habits and the way they tried to reach them. Riverwood audiences typically look for movies in familiar outlets, or in any case do not often visit the expensive supermarkets. The fact that Riverwood distributors were not willing to diffuse their films was a major setback. Though Jitu also produced crossover product, movies that might have appealed equally to audiences more likely to shop at supermarkets, no marketing was done to reach these audiences or make them aware of the movies. From the outset the idea had been to invest very little in marketing, and to opt for straight sales, as is common with Riverwood movies. Even if Jitu had been picked up by the River Road vendors, the question remains whether it would have been successful. One can assume it was a tricky balancing act between creativity and novelty on the one hand, and trying not to estrange local audiences on the other. One of our interviewees, a traditional filmmaker who ventured into Riverwood as an experiment, explained why movies that are insufficiently generic fail to appeal to Riverwood audiences: “The people look at the films and say: what is this about? It is not in Gikuyu, it is not by Machang’i or Kihoto (well-known comedians), what is it? And they lose interest” (Kinyanjui, 2012). Another respondent, a Riverwood director and actor who prefers to remain anonymous, has a harsher opinion: “Jitu Films? That was trash! What, you liked those films? Yes, they are funny for a European. But for a Kenyan they are an abomination, they are terrible. And that horror movie, all the blood in it, culturally that does not work” (2013). My interviewee is referring to Jitu’s horror picture *Otto – the Bloodbath* (Egregious Jitu, 2008), one of its first releases, distributed as a marketing stunt with the daily newspaper *The Star*. Kenyan audiences, familiar nor comfortable with horror movies, especially about ghosts and death set in their own local environment, may have simply disliked it, and therefore might have been less inclined to buy or view other Jitu Films (Matere, 2012; Kimani M.,

²⁸ “Duka” is Swahili for shop.

2013). *Otto – the Bloodbath* was eventually banned by Kenyan authorities for containing too much blood and dead bodies, ironically immediately boosting Jitu Films' international reputation.

When its first four releases failed to generate the revenues required to recoup initial investments, Jitu stopped putting out new productions. Some of its remaining films are now available on VOD platforms²⁹. Despite the fact that it was embedded in Vivid Features and had high-quality equipment and skilled personnel available, Jitu failed to tap into Riverwood audiences. It did not make the sales needed to become part of River Road's circuit, nor could it build its own. Whatever the reason for the failure, the case illustrates how technology can help to increase quality (as always, depending on how one defines it, and provided the necessary skills and contextual factors are there) and spur diversification, but this does not necessarily lead to a sustainable circuit of audiovisual culture.

5. Urban underground movies in Sheng³⁰

Kenyan popular cinema has a smaller and much lesser-known branch³¹ of movies shot in Sheng language, primarily targeting urban youth. Sheng is a mix of Swahili, English, and other languages spoken in Kenya, and is a living, constantly evolving "urban vernacular". It has been called an in-group code, mainly of the younger urban generation (Githiora 2002: 163, 174). According to my interviewees, ethnic differences are experienced as much less important by these younger groups than by their parents and grandparents. Often they do not speak their ethnic tongue anymore, but only English, Swahili, and Sheng (Akech, 2012; Mahugu, 2013; Boy, 2013).

Though comparable in the informality of their production processes and limited budgets, Foxhole movies are very different from Riverwood cinema. As opposed to the latter, they do not target ethnic, but rather age- and lifestyle-related audience groups. They feature topics that interest urban youth, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds: love, technology, jobs, friendship, focusing on youth from less privileged backgrounds. As with most forms of popular cinema, technology (albeit a more grassroots, lower-budget type of technology than with the previous case) has been crucial in allowing this underground branch of movies to emerge (Mahugu, 2013). Only a few producers are involved with it, music videos being much more popular, more lucrative, and easier to distribute. Movies are considered an extension, something to do when you have the studio in place for music videos.

Similar to Riverwood movies, the Foxhole stories do not have fixed scripts. According to Don Fox, more attention is given to image and sound quality in his films, as well as to camera angles and visual effects, such as dolly shots or shots from a crane. Actors are mostly volunteers. Movies are shot on HD, or sometimes on Canon 550D cameras, for those who can afford them. They are far from

²⁹ *Me, My Wife, and her Guru* (a co-production with Historia Films [of *In the Forest* and a range of other films, see also pp. 67-68 and 130-131]) is available online, on Buni.tv and on Riverflix (riverflix.com). Five other Jitu Films are available on Riverflix (Konstantaras, 2014).

³⁰ This section of chapter 1 is shorter than the article originally published in *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, as Foxhole Entertainment is revisited at length in chapter 3 of this dissertation. However, a few elements that are crucial to the argument I wish to make here (related to why Foxhole represents a diversification rather than a subgenre of Riverwood), and which also chapter 3 elaborates on, have not been removed. As a consequence there is a degree of overlap between both chapters, which I have tried nevertheless to keep at a minimum.

³¹ Admittedly, it is uncertain whether we can speak of "a branch" of movies, or if Foxhole is a rather lone example of Sheng movies. According to our interviewee Donald Akech there are only a handful other people producing such movies; other respondents are convinced there are many more (Mahugu, 2013), but they are exchanged and copied through private friendship networks and therefore difficult to find. Sheng is used widely in Kenyan music videos and pop culture in general, often mixed with English and Swahili.

technically perfect but Foxhole is eager to improve as production increases. Two examples of Foxhole movies are discussed in chapter 3 of this dissertation, pp. 83-87).

The Foxhole Entertainment movies hardly find any distribution and do not make money. They are subsidized by the production of music videos targeting largely similar audiences, albeit with different messages and images: where the movies tend to show life “as it is”, representing also the less pristine areas of downtown Nairobi, music videos are typically more materialistic, showing big houses, attractive women, big cars, et cetera. Any distribution the movies find is through personal networks and, to a lesser extent, street hawking. Technology alone is not enough to turn these audiovisual stories by young creatives into sustainable circuits; for now, they remain underground and wait for a breakthrough that according to Akech will certainly come.

In December 2013 Akech moved to China, in search of work and hoping to save up for new filming equipment to boost Foxhole’s activities. Though far removed from his more upmarket counterparts in terms of financial and social capital, he shares the technology-related optimism referred to earlier, convinced that technological progress will allow him to make better and more exciting films. In the meantime, he intends to perfect his craft by practicing it.

6. Distribution to mobile handhelds, and the case of *Kulahappy*

The mobile phone has been called Africa’s mass medium of the future, given the right applications at the right price (Brinkman, Nyamnjoh, and De Bruijn 2009; Mudhai in Wasserman 2011: 264). More and more web surfing in Africa is done on mobile handhelds. In Kenya, mobile internet subscriptions are showing consistent and strong growth, and make up the majority of web connections (Mutua 2011). The country has made it a priority for the future to extend web connectivity into its rural areas by use of 3G and LTE-technology (*Government of Kenya, Ministry of Information and Communication* 2013: 39). Mobile platforms for the diffusion of music and audiovisual content are emerging, targeting different user groups. South African broadcaster M-Net³² has introduced handheld television devices, decoders and apps (the Walka, the iDrifta, and the Drifta app) in Kenya, targeting middle to upper social strata in the urban areas. Google/Android and Huawei have introduced smartphones that are affordable to the middle classes (eg. the Ideos and the Huawei4Afrika, with prices averaging 50 to 100 USD). On the lower end of the market, South African Bozza (see also chapter 6) is aiming at township communities with a platform for the uploading and sharing of self-made content, and has started an African roll-out, prioritizing countries where mobile networks are sufficiently robust to support the platform, such as Nigeria and Kenya (Kaye, 2012). According to Bozza's CEO Emma Kaye, mobile technology might allow for several new distribution models, but the devices needed for streaming applications are currently out of reach for most township dwellers. These audiences have not (yet) fully migrated from older-type feature phones running on Java or Symbian to iPhones, Androids and IOS. Bozza has focused on the development of apps for older-type feature telephones before developing for high-end operating systems.

For rural audiences in Kenya the required network infrastructure for mobile video streaming is not in place, and according to Jessica Colaço, Research Manager of Nairobi's iHub, regardless of infrastructure it appeals much less to these audiences than to urban groups: “rural audiences have different needs, they need to make a living. They are not thinking about sharing videos. If you solve

³² M-Net (originally “Electronic Media Network”) is a South African television broadcaster operating in many sub-Saharan African countries, mainly through satellite and digital technology.

their basic needs, then you can have digital community stations, with bluetooth access, fibre, and training about the use of all that. Before something like that will take place, mobile entertainment platforms will be much more viable in urban areas” (Colaço, 2012). Nairobi-based Symbiotic Media is more optimistic, hoping to launch a mobile app disseminating audio and video content to rural audiences in Kenya by the end of 2014 (Njihia, 2014)³³. For the time being, any circuits of audiovisual culture diffusing local content appropriate for mobile handhelds will have clearly delineated - in the sense of urban - audience groups.

Especially younger people in the cities use mobile phones to access the internet, primarily driven by social media and sharp pricing. Josphat Keya, programme coordinator at Kibera-based Hot Sun Foundation³⁴: “right now these phones are fairly prized, so people are getting them because they have video, photos, it is fancy. They are all on Facebook and Twitter, also in the slums. The data are fairly cheap, depending on your subscriber. Though to watch video you might need a fancier phone than what they can afford. Streaming might be slower, or might not work at all. Hopefully in the future that will change” (Keya, 2012).

Video content optimized for mobile viewing has started to emerge in Kenya, and is expected to grow. Nathan Bronze Osare Asiago of the Kenya Film Commission believes that in the future much more attention will go to video specially made for small, mobile screens: “it is high time we started shooting for mobiles: shorter clips so people can watch while in a traffic jam, during a break... easy viewing, and the approach of shooting should facilitate that: more close-ups, perhaps also more series. It generates clientele, people hook up to short episodes” (Asiago, 2012).

Kulahappy is an early example of short video clips produced in Nairobi - live and animated - to be streamed on computers or mobile handhelds. In addition to hidden-camera gags, *Kulahappy* features different series of animated video, made in various Kenyan languages and with recurring characters: for instance, the vain professor Perminus Agripinus Paponiti (P.A.P.) who likes to make his students describe themselves as “an ignorant class of Form 2’s, who are yet to achieve what Professor Agripina [sic] had achieved by class six”, tells them off for being lazy, and comes up with funny stories; or Maluva, a poor retired railway worker in Ukambani who dislikes giving his wife money for household expenses, but has a rich neighbor interested in her charms; or – one of the most popular series – Baba Jackson, a Kangemi shopkeeper who likes to chat about life with his friend Mukhwani. In each story Baba Jackson enters the scene singing a popular song, but likes to make up his own words³⁵. There is also *Githingithia*, in which two elderly Kikuyu men in a village like to gossip about people they know³⁶.

The videos are ideal for mobile use: there is not much detail in the images, and characters do not move around much. Ethnic stereotypes are used for a comic effect, but always in a friendly, harmless

³³ Mbugua Njihia, who runs Symbiotic Media, is confident that the app can be launched by the end of 2014 (personal e-mail, 2014). However he also suggests that this will be contingent on the roll-out of a 4G network in the rural areas, which even in Nairobi has not been fully rolled-out. *Standard Media - Standard Digital News* (2014) writes that Kenya is to start building 4G in 2015.

³⁴ The Hot Sun Foundation, based in Kibera slum, is a non-profit film training initiative and production house.

³⁵ In this video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pydgiu1Bm7w> the story starts with Baba Jackson rendering his own version of *I Don't Wanna Dance* (1982, Eddy Grant).

³⁶ There more *Kulahappy* series than the ones described here. All series can be found on the YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-oHj72H-TjMplybDMyb3fQ> (last accessed August 2014).

way. Described as a viral hype in Kenya, *Kulahappy* has received more than three million views, mostly through mobile devices (Majani 2013; Macharia, 2013).

In the first episode of *Githingithia* a Kikuyu man tells his friend about Murigi, a married man in Nairobi with a secret mistress whom he wants to take on a short trip. Murigi tells his wife that his mother, who lives upcountry, has been bitten in the hand by her donkey, and needs to see her son as soon as possible. His wife then urges him to leave immediately. At the same time, Murigi's parents decide that it has been too long since they have seen the young couple, and the mother departs on a surprise visit to Nairobi. As Murigi enjoys a day off with his mistress, his mother travels to the city with foods from the village (sweet potatoes, arrow root, the sort of things parents like to bring as a present to their children). When she arrives, she finds that her son is away. Her daughter-in-law greets her with concern and inquires about her hand, which irritates the mother, who has no idea what the young woman is talking about. Meanwhile Murigi stops by a Nairobi market on his way back home. Foods from upcountry are sold there, and he gets some to offer to his wife as "presents from the village". As he approaches the house, his wife asks her mother-in-law to hide in the kitchen and listen to their conversation. Murigi tells his spouse that the donkey bite was nothing serious, and that his mother is always making up excuses to see him; however she sends her regards and is glad that they are fine. Fuming with anger, his mother then comes out and starts shouting at her son, who faints.

In the clip, we do not see Murigi's story unfolding, we only hear it narrated by two elderly men. The funny effect of the clip lies not only in the story but also in the characters: the men interrupt each other and finish each other's sentences. They talk in parables and proverbs instead of "saying it like it is, as Nairobi people do" (Kimani Ndungu, 2014).

Kulahappy's description of the gags about the vain professor reads as follows: "Prof. Perminus Agripinus Paponiti (P.A.P.) is the quintessential Luo man, a scholar, a poet, a philosopher all rolled into one. What he says is final, there is no contradicting him, his brain is perfectly formed and he continuously reminds us of that. Attend his classes and learn a thing or two." In episode 3 of the series, after his class greets him with the well-known formula about their ignorance and his intelligence, he asks them "*mambo*, how are you doing?" The student Wambua responds: "it is good that you ask, I am so tired, my capillaries and brain are overworked, haven't you noticed from my breathing?", upon which the Professor asks him to spell "capillaries", which the boy fails to do correctly (he spells it "k-a-b-i-ll-aries"). The professor goes on to tell the class stories about his encounters with Maasai people. Often to be found grazing their kettle along the road, the Maasai sometimes ask passing cars to stop, and according to professor P.A.P., not always for a good reason. One time the professor was urged by a Maasai man to pull over, only because the man needed his side mirror to remove a piece of meat from his teeth. Another time, the professor was driving around looking for a friend. He describes his friend to a Maasai man, who tells him he does not know this person. As he drives on to continue his search, after a while he sees the man in his rear view mirror, waving at him frantically from a distance. He turns his car and drives back to the man, who then tells him: "Remember what you asked me about your friend? Well, I asked my wife, and she does not know him either."

The *Kulahappy* clips have been made available on YouTube through a revenue-sharing agreement based on advertising income. During the height of the show's popularity Kenya's telecom giant

Safaricom promoted the clips because they generated substantial extra data traffic. So far, *Kulahappy* has not managed to generate the revenue required to become self-sustaining. The YouTube partnership program is known for being disadvantageous to content providers not generating very large amounts of traffic (Cunningham 2012: 421; Majani 2013; *Balancing Act* 2012), and experiments with paid premium content have been unsuccessful. This is probably why the production of *Kulahappy* videos has recently slowed down and its makers have concentrated on a spin-off based on *Wambua*, the mis-spelling student in the case described above. If no revenue model can be found – whether for *Kulahappy* or for *Wambua*, the series are not expected to run for much longer (Macharia, 2013).

Kulahappy shows how technological change can pave the way for new audiovisual formats, distributed through new circuits – in this case online and mobile distribution. It is an illustration of a technology-induced process of diversification of locally relevant content (relevant in language, narrative, topics, style, price, etc.) beyond the well-known African popular cinema genres. With a robust network in place, an entrepreneurial climate, and the successful M-Pesa app for mobile payment, Kenya provides a favorable context for mobile innovation. What exactly the net result of this process will look like is difficult to predict. In the case of *Kulahappy* this does not only depend on the quality or popularity of the stories distributed, but also on power relations in the media ecosystem (for instance, the modalities of a partnership with a powerful actor such as YouTube), market structure (diffusion of handhelds, cost of data transfer, etc.), audience demographics (their audiences are in the cities) and viewers' willingness to spend.

7. Cinemart

Cinemart is a Kenyan film exhibition company that has initiated a lower-end digital cinema project. It is part of 234 Media, which also manages the high-end Starflix cinemas in Kenya. As in many African countries, cinema theatres in Kenya are scarce and expensive. They either have a difficult time filling their halls, or they reach primarily upper-middle classes and expatriates. Cinemart's mission is to build digital (e-)cinemas in urban and peri-urban areas, screening mainly local content for people at the bottom of the pyramid. Cinemart's first one-screen site, with room for 120 people, was inaugurated in Kawangware in February 2013. Four additional screens are planned in the course of 2015, and on a longer term the plan is to build at least ten venues (Ogunyemi, personal e-mail, 2014). "Bottom-of-the-Pyramid" audiences are defined by my interviewee Dayo Ogunyemi (2012) as those excluded from traditional media. About 25% of Kenyan households own televisions³⁷. The 75% who have not invested in television sets are less likely to buy video-enabled mobile phones, except possibly the younger audiences in the cities. In rural areas the network infrastructure for video streaming is not firmly in place and, as mentioned, people tend to have other priorities. Especially away from city centers, many Kenyans have no access – either financial or physical – to audiovisual entertainment. Cinemart aims to address that gap with low-end venues screening Kenyan and African content: locally-produced movies ranging from Riverwood to higher-end local productions, television content, government messages, commercial messages of local businesses, animation, etc. The pilot site in Kawangware has shown a few international and local movies so far, but on a more

³⁷ This is a percentage quoted by several respondents, however estimates of African media access or ownership are rarely very accurate, and are difficult to come by. According to information from *Balancing Act* (2012) an estimate of 7,6% of Kenya's population owns a television set. This discrepancy is due at least in part to the difference between "having access to television", and "owning a television set".

regular basis it has focused mostly on football matches - a commercial offer made available by DStv. Cinemart intends to focus more on film programming in the future, when additional sites are up and running. This is a question of economics: more screens are needed to be able to afford the licensing of films. According to Ogunyemi turn-outs at the Kawangware cinema have been encouraging (2014, personal e-mail).

The planned sites can be stand-alone screening venues or multi-functional infrastructures (mini-malls) housing pharmacies, stores, internet access providers, a playground, et cetera. Ticket prices for shows are to be differentiated according to where a venue is situated, and according to seating preferences: different tiers for different budgets, with a minimum of about 30 KES (about 0,34 USD). Other income streams are to come from advertising or from leasing part of the infrastructure to third parties. As ticket prices are to be kept as low as possible, population density will be crucial in the choice of sites: the possibility of communal viewing of locally attractive content on a large screen, it is hoped, will attract sufficient audiences to make up for the low prices.

It is clear that technology is instrumental for Cinemart's e-cinema concept. It was first tested in Nigeria but moved to Kenya partly because of its more reliable electricity grid. Content is to be screened digitally, for instance from tablets - Apple TV or other technology - in an attempt to dissuade people from pirating them (as optical discs are easily copied), thus creating a theatrical window before movies are released on DVD/VCD. However, as with the previous cases, it is obvious that policy, economy, demographics, and market structure will be just as important for its future in the longer term. For instance, the new Kenyan constitution aims at decentralizing political decision-making away from Nairobi to the local constituencies. It is hoped that this will make it easier for Cinemart to rent or acquire land and secure the permits to erect sites outside the metropolitan area. Though it is too soon to predict whether the project will become sustainable, I decided to include it as a case for this chapter, because I consider it a promising example of technology allowing for the emergence of new systems of distribution in Kenya: reminiscent of the cultural centers in rural towns which in the 1970s and 1980s screened movies, and which have now been replaced by the more commercially-oriented video parlors.

8. Conclusion: diversification and a variety of local contents

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, people have ascribed a lot of agency to technology in relation to societal evolutions. Technology has indeed had a significant impact on many aspects of our societies, including on the production and diffusion of audiovisual stories. In sub-Saharan Africa, when discussing technology's impact on audiovisual storytelling, the most oft-cited example has been the remarkable success of popular cinema throughout the continent. Although contextual circumstances are crucial in materializing the potentially catalyzing effects of technology, the latter is still often considered key. Put differently: though theories of technological determinism have been abandoned since long, its assumptions remain, especially now that broadband and mobile connectivity have increased so dramatically on the continent. Nyamnjoh cautions: "Comprehending the overall development, usage and application of ICTs within African social spaces would take the fusion of keen observation and complex analysis to capture structural, gendered, class, generational, racial and spatial dimensions of the phenomenon. A dialectical interrogation of the processes involved promises a more accurate grasp of the linkages than would impressionistic, linear and prescriptive narratives of technological determinism" (in Wasserman [2011]: 30).

While debates on the influence of technology on audiovisual production in Africa have concentrated to a large extent on democratization, with this first chapter I have attempted to broaden the scope to allow for a growing diversity in production and distribution circuits to enter the fore. I have described a number of recent formats, genres, and diffusion systems for audiovisual storytelling in Kenya, in the emergence of which technology has been crucial, but for which many other factors are needed in order to reach sustainability. By circuits for audiovisual storytelling, I have referred to circuits through which audiovisual creations travel to reach their audiences: from conception to delivery. I have focused on local content, in the sense of Kenyan-made, Kenyan-produced and Kenyan-consumed. I have discussed three cases in the sphere of production, and two in the sphere of distribution. It must be noted, however, that production and distribution are in reality not this easily separated, as circuits and platforms are often specific to particular formats or genres. These different types of locally-produced content are diffused along different (albeit sometimes overlapping) circuits, targeting different (but at times overlapping) audience groups within Kenya's heterogeneous society. In my view this commands a shift of scholarly attention away from the idea of one specific type of "popular" cinema as opposed to a range of high-end "festival / arthouse cinema", to acknowledge the growing diversity in genres, topics, formats and diffusion systems dedicated to an increasing variety of local *contents*.

Riverwood, the Kenyan equivalent of African popular cinema, targets upcountry audiences and rural immigrants to the city, but contrary to Bongo or Nollywood is not the most popular genre in the country. Its audiences are but one group within Kenya's fast-changing society, and delineated along lines of social class, ethnicity, and generations. Technology has facilitated Riverwood's emergence, and as a circuit it has managed to sustain itself. But policy, market and distribution characteristics, and ethnic/linguistic heterogeneity, are but a few factors keeping the genre from reaching its full potential. Jitu Films has tried to circumvent the "quality issue" but has not managed to enter the existing River Road circuit or to create a circuit of its own. High-end technology, market research and a professional team were not sufficient to overcome hurdles of distribution. Possibly, Jitu also strayed too far from what Riverwood audiences expected. Apart from possible video-on-demand releases, it will refrain from taking any more commercial risks. The Sheng-language movies of Foxhole Entertainment originated because the small studios producing music videos had the necessary equipment available. Production processes are roughly comparable to that of Riverwood movies, but target audiences are different. Though in terms of topics they might appeal to urban youth, the movies make very little sales and are in direct competition for attention with the ubiquitous and more popular local music videos. Technology has had a hand in allowing the movies to emerge, but it seems doubtful that they will manage to enter into, or create their own, sustainable circuit.

The *Kulahappy* videos, distributed online and mostly viewed on mobile handhelds, are amongst the first examples of how Kenyan producers make content suitable for viewing online and on mobile handhelds. With more than three million views during their popularity peak, the videos can be considered successful in terms of audience numbers, yet they did not (yet) generate the necessary income for the series to become commercially sustainable. More projects involving the mobile distribution of local - whether Kenyan or African - video content are being prepared to launch in the future. The low-end digital cinema initiative of Cinemart, too, is a remarkable recent initiative, but it is too soon to assess its future sustainability. Taken together with the other cases, *Kulahappy* and

Cinemart are illustrative of a process of diversification in Kenya's audiovisual production and distribution circuits, induced in part – but not exclusively – by changing technology.

The cases analyzed here are a limited selection of a wider field of extended cinema currently emerging in Kenya: video art, new television formats, feature film, et cetera. For most other cases not discussed here, a similar point could have been made: technological progress in Kenya helps to pave the way for a greater diversity in locally produced audiovisual stories, targeting and reaching different - though primarily urban - audiences, and new circuits for their diffusion are taking shape. Which circuits will become sustainable, and what the emerging media and audiovisual eco-system in Kenya will look like in the coming decade, cannot easily be predicted on the basis of technological innovation alone, as technology's agency can only reach as far as local circumstances will allow it to.

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Essay 1: relevant elements regarding over-arching hypotheses

By linking technological innovation to a diversification of audiovisual stories produced in Kenya and their distribution, this article is at the basis of one of my over-arching hypotheses, to be re-visited in chapter 7 of this dissertation. Chapters 3 and 5 of this volume present cases equally illustrative of this process.

As was explained in the introduction, a diversification of production can refer to the format, genres, and/or style of stories, as well as to the languages in which they are produced. A diversification of distribution refers to the channels and platforms through which the stories are disseminated.

Like other popular cinema circuits, Riverwood and the Foxhole movies appear to signal a process of democratization in terms of increased access to local storytelling (hypothesis 1). The outcome of this democratization, for instance the movies' financial success and audience reach, is shaped by Kenya's context: its socially, ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous society, large social differences, and faulty distribution networks are factors preventing movies produced at the grassroots from reaching wider audiences, with the exception of a small circle of successful comedians who control their own sales.

Cases like Cinemart and the *Kulahappy* clips signal a push towards wider and more affordable access to local stories, but it is too early to tell how they will fare. *Kulahappy* has not yet managed to generate the revenues to reach sustainability, and Cinemart has only one prototype site up and running so far. What is clear is that Nairobi is a particularly good environment for such initiatives: its network infrastructure is in place and well-functioning, access is comparatively affordable, its power grid is reliable in comparison to other African countries, and its policies towards new initiatives quite open and liberal – albeit with occasional bureaucratic inefficiencies.

Regarding hypothesis 3, which refers to the local relevance of the stories, the idea of “local” in this chapter is defined in relation to the nation-state: local stories are Kenyan-produced and Kenyan-consumed. The growing cultural relevance of the stories produced is clear, but they appeal to different groups of Kenyan citizens. There are faultlines to be traced in terms of age, rural versus urban contexts, linguistic preferences, and the social background of audiences and storytellers.

To rephrase the stories' local relevance to Straubhaar's “cultural proximity”: they are produced in the languages of different local communities (Sheng, Swahili with English, and different vernaculars), and the topics and settings are resolutely Kenyan but very different at the same time (rural comedy, urban gangster stories, animated gags,...). While this may not seem extraordinary at first glance - are not nearly all audiovisual stories set in the place where they are produced? - it deserves to be highlighted. Historically most audiovisual work produced and disseminated in Kenya had put white characters central, had been propaganda or anthropological material, and/or had been of foreign origin: Hollywood, Bollywood, Nollywood, Kung Fu. Most Kenyan films produced for the wide screen still travel the international festival circuit more than being seen by local audiences. While the local character of the cases portrayed here was a sampling criterium rather than an argument, the stories' local relevance (hypothesis 3) is easily demonstrated through the different elements of cultural proximity to local audiences they reflect.

**ESSAY 2: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF KENYA'S
RIVERWOOD MOVIE CIRCUIT**

II. ESSAY 2: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF KENYA'S RIVERWOOD MOVIE CIRCUIT

IN THIS ARTICLE I ANALYZE THE ECONOMIC STRUCTURE, MARKET DYNAMICS, AND POWER RELATIONS WITHIN KENYA'S RIVERWOOD MOVIE CIRCUIT. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES WITH BETTER-KNOWN AFRICAN POPULAR CINEMA CIRCUITS ARE HIGHLIGHTED AND TENTATIVELY EXPLAINED. THE ANALYSIS IS STRUCTURED ALONG THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY PERSPECTIVE AS THEORIZED BY VINCENT MOSCO (2009): WITH ATTENTION FOR HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, CONTEXTUAL FACTORS, THE INFLUENCE OF "PRAXIS", QUESTIONS OF MORAL FAIRNESS, AND A CRITICAL CONCERN WITH (IM)BALANCES OF POWER. RIVERWOOD MAY AT FIRST GLANCE APPEAR TO BE "JUST ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE AFRICAN POPULAR CINEMA GENRE", BUT ON CLOSER INSPECTION SHOWS MORE DISSIMILARITIES THAN SIMILARITIES WITH, FOR INSTANCE, NOLLYWOOD AND BONGOWOOD.

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1. Introduction

The African popular video genres - a common denominator for a field more diverse than it tends to receive credit for - have been researched extensively in Nigeria (Haynes 2006, 2008, 2010; Adejunmobi 2004; Okome 2007; McCall 2007; Jedlowski 2012; Krings and Okome 2013), and increasingly also in other countries: for instance Ghana (Garritano 2013; Meyer 2011; De Witte and Meyer 2012), Tanzania (Krings in Saul and Austen 2010; Mhando and Kipeja 2010; Böhme 2013), and Uganda (Rasmussen 2010).

Jonathan Haynes³⁸ (2010: 106) has called for further research, beyond describing – which sometimes amounts to echoing - the shared characteristics of these circuits: low budgets, informal and semi-formal distribution, localized stories, soap-like formats, elements of magic and witchcraft, et cetera. This includes "informed studies (...) of the video industry in a wider context including contemporary cultural forms (...)" (Haynes 2010: 112).

Kenya's Riverwood has received little scholarly attention so far (McNamara 2010: 2, 6), perhaps because it lacks the wide popularity and visibility of South Nigeria's Nollywood and, on a different scale, Tanzania's Bongowood. The aim of this chapter is to shed light on the Riverwood circuit³⁹, with explicit attention for its historical context and embedded power structures. The paper will be structured along the main characteristics of the critical political economy perspective as outlined by Vincent Mosco (2009).

³⁸ This selection of authors is incomplete. For an excellent and more exhaustive literature review, see Haynes 2010.

³⁹ Most of my respondents refer to Riverwood as to an industry rather than a circuit. One interviewee, however, pleads strongly against calling Riverwood an industry (Barasa, 2013), as he feels it is too small and unstructured to be considered an industry. The confusion and different opinions around the scale and success of profitability of Riverwood will be discussed further in this article, and the question whether it should be called an industry is symptomatic of it.

With roots in 18th Century enlightenment and 19th Century Marxist thinking, political economy theory (henceforth: P.E.) has branched out over time into different, sometimes opposing perspectives (Wasko 2005). Nonetheless, the characteristics most commonly attributed to it remain relevant and useful for the purpose at hand. In the following I will give a brief and selective review of P.E. theory, zooming in on the traits attributed to it by Vincent Mosco (2009), one of the most prominent scholars of P.E.'s critical branch of thinking.

I will then clarify what exactly is meant here by "Riverwood", a notoriously fuzzy concept as it derives its name from a circuit of media dissemination but is also sometimes used as a container label for different types of Kenyan movie production.

Though I will pay attention to style and genres, I will not zoom in on separate movies. Instead, I will look at Riverwood as a media circuit, embedded in a particular historical, social and societal context. In that sense, despite being only a partial answer to Haynes' plea (2010) for more theory-building and less description, this analysis is a necessary first step. Indeed, also in the case of Riverwood, lack of basic data "needs to be repaired piece-meal" (Haynes 2010: 6). This must start, of necessity, with description, and with the structuring and presentation of new data, to the disadvantage of theory-building in the short run. As a counterweight I will elaborate on characteristics of Riverwood setting it apart from better-known industries such as Nollywood and Bongowood, while exploring possible explanations by looking at the wider context in which it is embedded. P.E. is a particularly apt lens to do this.

2. Political economy and critical political economy

Originally, the study of all economy-related questions was grounded in social theory, and was referred to as political economy. Adam Smith and David Ricardo viewed P.E. as the study of wealth and its redistribution, closely related to the welfare of individuals and of society (Wasko 2005). Nineteenth-Century Marxist thinking took this a step further, foregrounding issues of class and the unfair characteristics of the emerging capitalist economic system, thus explicitly linking dynamics of economy to social and political context. Although subsequently P.E. underwent several intellectual waves of change, branching out into different and sometimes opposing strands of thinking and interest fields (for instance, from neo-classical economics and public choice theory over institutional P.E. to P.E. of culture and critical P.E.), this primary concern with the allocation of resources, questions of ownership, power and control, has persisted (Wasko 2005).

When the affix "critical" is added to P.E., this is to distinguish it from liberal P.E. or mainstream economics, which is interested in the workings of market systems, with little regard for social context or moral questions. Critical P.E., in contrast, views producers' and consumers' choices as restricted by their position in a set of wider structures – for instance economic, spatial, and cultural - and is explicitly sensitive to distortions of and inequalities embedded in market systems (Hesmondhalgh in Bennett and Frow 2008: 552-269; Murdock and Golding 2005). In accordance with Mosco (2009)⁴⁰ it is this "critical" stream of political economy which I adhere to with this study. P.E. theory has been used extensively for film and media industry research, particularly for the analysis of media conglomerates' market behaviour and industry trends such as commodification, market concentration, and horizontal and vertical integration (Wasko 2005). In media research it is generally

⁴⁰ Though his own approach of P.E. thinking is clearly critical, Mosco (2009) does not explicitly refer to it as such. For the remainder of this thesis, when mention is made of "P.E.", unless otherwise stated this refers to Mosco's critical P.E. perspective.

assumed to be inscribed in the “critical” stream of thinking, even when it is not explicitly referred to as such (Boyd-Barret 1995: 86; Wasko 2005: 26). When studying cultural industries, critical P.E. is especially concerned with the impact of economic dynamics on the diversity of media products (hypothesis 2) and their availability to different social groups (hypothesis 1) (Murdock and Golding 2005: 62), making critical P.E. all the more relevant for this research project.

For the purpose of this chapter on Riverwood I will not trace P.E.’s historical and theoretical foundations, nor its different “faces”, as they have been described in detail by others: Janet Wasko (2005), Vincent Mosco (2009), Oliver Boyd-Barrett (1995), and Murdock and Golding (2005). I will structure my analysis of Riverwood along the four central characteristics of critical political economy as outlined by Mosco, drawing on earlier work by Murdock and Golding (2005). These central traits in my view not only capture the essence of the P.E. perspective within the broader field of media studies, but they also allow the space needed for the gathering and analytical structuring of substantial amounts of new data.

The first of these four traits is attention to social change and history, including short term change and long term evolutions. Africa’s popular cinema circuits are in large part shaped by national, regional and local history. Paying attention to differences in historical background and to particularly significant past events helps to highlight and tentatively explain differences between circuits that otherwise may seem “much of the same”. Attention to history as well as to potential future scenarios helps scholars to steer clear of the risk of a too structural or economically deterministic view - something which original Marxist thinking was vulnerable to (Mosco 2009: 35).

Secondly, and related to this, P.E. propagates a holistic approach, i.e. not isolating the subject of analysis from its - real, material, social - environment, but on the contrary attempting to grasp and explain it from different relevant angles. Especially for phenomena not yet documented or explained much, it makes sense to consider policy, social, economic, and cultural factors. While this makes wider generalizations difficult to impossible, it has the benefit of drawing a nuanced picture. As said, there is no shortage of generalizations about Africa’s popular cinema circuits, while there still is a lack of detailed knowledge about specific (national, regional, subnational or ethnic-linguistic) “variants”. A third characteristic of P.E. is that it allows for a moral position on the researcher’s part (called “moral philosophy” by Mosco 2009: 32-34), i.e. to not only describe “what is”, but also “what is, or would be “morally appropriate” in his/her view, and thus to address such wide-ranging issues as justice, equality, power, representation, et cetera. African popular cinema circuits vary along degrees of formality and legality. They have limited visibility and often remain unmonitored and “untouched” by law⁴¹. This may make actors in such circuits vulnerable to exploitation. Alternatively, once an industry grows in popularity and becomes lucrative, it may attract interest from governments, larger companies, or other entities interested in a piece of the cake. While it does not necessarily follow that this should lead to power imbalances or injustices, it seems appropriate at least to infuse into the research process a “moral alertness” on the scholar’s part.

In part, this is why I chose expert interviews as my preferred methodology (see also introduction, pp. 9-11). Expert interviews are a quick and efficient way to gain insight in a largely undocumented

⁴¹ Ramon Lobato (2009: 115-124) has developed a theoretical tool to situate distributive systems on a spectrum showing varying degrees of “formality” and “informality”. One of the criteria for distributive informality (called “Subcinema” by the author, who uses Nollywood as an illustrative example) is a degree of “invisibility” to official monitoring, which is also typical of most Riverwood production.

industry (Van Audenhove 2007: 5). Similar to a “normal” two-way exchange of views, they allow a researcher’s subjectivity and opinions to enter the fore as an explicit part of the analysis (Bogner and Menz 2009: 71).

Fourthly, “praxis” as characteristic of P.E. theory according to Mosco refers to “the free and creative activity by which people produce and change the world” (2009: 34) or – interpreted here slightly more narrowly – influence their working context. Praxis relates to individual and group agency, its limits, but also its possible effects of individual players’ actions on the topic of study.

I will start by sketching a picture of Riverwood, to then move to a more in-depth analysis, structured along the four central focal perspectives of P.E. according to Mosco.

3. Riverwood: basic facts and an inclusive definition

The name “Riverwood” is derived from the area around River Road in downtown Nairobi, where since the 1970s music recordings and electronics were traded through networks of vendors and outlets with varying degrees of formality. Towards the end of the 1990s some of the popular stand-up comedians in Kenya started shooting their performances and trading them along the same network, first on videotape and later on optical disc (Mututa, 2013). Today, most successful and lucrative within the circuit is the local comedy genre grown out of live performances, most of them Kikuyu. Some of them, such as Machang’i and Kihenjo, are still in the business and now own and control the value chain of their product, from creation to point of sale - an important nexus being Simba Centre on River Road. They are the archetypical Riverwood producers as the term is understood by most people⁴²: low-budget, DVD-based movies, mostly Kikuyu-language comedies, disseminated from the same network along River Road as is used for music distribution and the sales of American, Bollywood or Nigerian film fare. These comedians have moved from selling recordings of their stand-up performances to making low-budget films, largely based on funny dialogue in Kikuyu language. With turnovers of 50.000 to a maximum of 150.000 copies per production, the scale of their business is hardly comparable to what Nollywood achieves as a global industry⁴³, but they are the most successful entrepreneurs in the Kenyan circuit. Their work is bought throughout the country, mostly in regions where people of the Kikuyu community live.

Machang’i and Kihenjo may be the most successful and visible Riverwood producers, but they are by far not the only ones. Because of the high degree of informality there are no official estimations of the size of the industry. However, by most accounts there are “in the hundreds” Riverwood producers active in Nairobi (Mututa, 2013; Mageria, 2013; Kimani M., 2013; Karanja cited in Irura 2013): individuals and small production houses creating other genres, such as martial arts movies, narrative drama, and comedies that are more filmic than the sketches by the famous comedians. The majority work largely in the same way as has been described for other circuits of African popular video film: low-budget (20,000 to 30,000 KES, which is roughly between 227 and 341 USD), fast (one

⁴² Depending on what exactly is understood by Riverwood (whether it is associated narrowly with comedy film or whether it includes regular fiction), some people ascribe its origins to the work of Third Force Entertainment in the 2000s, a collective of filmmakers concentrated on and around River Road, whose work is not limited to comedy (Matere, 2012; McNamara 2010: 14).

⁴³ Average “official” (i.e. with the knowledge and consent of the producer) first instalments of Nollywood films are estimated between 15,000 and 20,000 copies. Many films, however, are at a certain point sold to marketers, who replicate them in volumes of hundreds of thousands, and sometimes more than a million copies (Jedlowski, personal e-mail, 2014).

or two days for comedy sketches, about two weeks for bigger productions), and largely improvised. As is common in most other popular cinema circuits expenses of cast and crew are covered but actors are often paid only if and when a profit is made. Riverwood being a small circuit, producers tend to pool resources and equipment, or will work on each other's movies for free until – hopefully – money is made. These majority producers work with much smaller turnovers (about 3,000-6,000 copies per production; Mututa, 2013; Mageria, 2013) and eek out smaller margins⁴⁴. Their work can be in Kikuyu, but also English-language, Luo⁴⁵, Luhya and Kamba-language movies exist. On a whole, they are not very well-known or hugely successful. Famous comedians aside, and contrary to Nollywood and Bongowood, there is no Riverwood star-system to speak of. Well-known actors, actresses, and “personalities” (or “socialites”, as they are often called in Kenya) tend to move in more upmarket film productions, popular television series, talk shows, et cetera.

In other words, in the field of non-cinematic Nairobi-based movie production we have different branches, and for the purpose of this paper I wish to discuss Riverwood inclusively. By Riverwood production I will refer to the Nairobi-based, low-cost production⁴⁶ of audiovisual narratives – more than comedy – traded, amongst other channels, along the DVD distribution network centered on and around River Road. Many production units, as well as auxiliary services, are clustered in this same area (Irura 2013). The movies are produced quickly, informally (in the sense of unregistered), without external funding, and are purely commercial, i.e. targeted at keeping costs low, recouping investments, and generating profit. The Riverwood circuit, then, is the value network in which Riverwood movies are produced and disseminated.

I have called Riverwood a fuzzy concept for several reasons: (1) contrary to, for instance, Bongowood in Tanzania, its name has not been adopted by its audience. Shoppers request “Kikuyu comedy” or “the new film by such and such” rather than “Riverwood”; the name is used mostly in professional circles; (2) Riverwood cannot be linked too exclusively to the distribution network that inspired its name, as this disseminates other media much more than it does Riverwood movies; again comparing to Bongowood in Dar Es Salaam, Riverwood is much less dominantly present than, say, local music or international film; (3) Riverwood movies are not exclusively traded from the River Road area. They can sometimes be seen on free-to-air local television and they circulate in other cities and in rural areas, most of them Kikuyu-dominated (McNamara 2010: 15-16). They are rarely screened in Nairobi's informal screening venues (video clubs)⁴⁷; (4) in defining Riverwood one could opt to refer

⁴⁴ The Third Force Collective members are an exception: they work on larger budgets and longer production cycles. They are discussed further in this paper as an example of “praxis” in the Riverwood circuit.

⁴⁵ Luo comedies tend to be concentrated in and around Kizumu, where many Luo people live. The numbers of films are said to be very small. Of late, also in the Southern port-town Mombasa a local movie industry has been emerging. I did not include it in this article, as Riverwood is clearly tied to Nairobi. No one I spoke with referred to the Mombasa industry as a part of Riverwood. Mombasa movies are said to be produced more on a basis of commissioning (Kimani K., 2013).

⁴⁶ By low-cost I mean lower than 500,000 KES (5,684 USD): this includes Third Force productions but excludes films for the big screen, most of which are international co-productions and/or enjoy public funding. As said, most Riverwodo flicks are produced on budgets that are much lower than 500,000 KES.

⁴⁷ The fact that video clubs in Nairobi do not screen Riverwood may seem surprising when one compares this with, for instance, Nigeria and Tanzania, where local movies are much more widely popular. The clubs in Nairobi have a preference for cheaper foreign fare: martial arts or Hollywood movies (Mageria, 2013; Odhiambo, 2012). They are also concentrated in slums such as Kibera, which does not have a large concentration of Kikuyu-speaking Kenyans (McNamara 2010: 15).

to its inferior technological standards in comparison with more upmarket film productions; however, today this technological gap is narrowing, as Riverwood filmmakers have started to use higher quality cameras (PD175, and even the same Canon 5 and Z7 models, as do their higher-end counterparts); (5) Riverwood is very often described as “low-quality”. However, as will be discussed below, a number of producers within the Third Force Entertainment collective based in the River Road area, are making efforts at increasing the (image, sound, scripting, and acting) quality⁴⁸ of Riverwood film, trying to bridge the divide with what is usually regarded as “real”, or as “professionally-made” cinema.

4. Riverwood explored through the lens of critical political economy

Now that we have a first picture, albeit a partial and superficial one, I will continue to look at Riverwood through the lens of critical P.E., notably the four characteristics put forward by Vincent Mosco (2009): history and social change, the totality of the circuit (understood here as the most relevant context factors shaping it apart from history), praxis, and issues of justice and power. I will look at features which may seem familiar to scholars of African popular cinema due to similarities with other “variants”, but I will also highlight and try to explain some of Riverwood’s more surprising sides: for instance the fact that it does not seem to be widely viewed and is not hugely profitable – at least not when compared with its Nigerian and Tanzanian sister industries (McNamara 2010: 8).

a. History and social change: what has shaped Riverwood?

It was explained how Riverwood originated within a specific community in Kenya. Not unlike the Igbo in Nigeria, towards the end of last century a number of Nairobi-based Kikuyu entrepreneurs spotted the commercial opportunity in reproductive technology and started experimenting with it, trading their fare along an established distribution network. At the time, Kikuyu-language productions stood the best chance of generating profits: Nairobi is in proximity to the Kikuyu-dominated Central Province of Kenya, and the Kikuyu community is the largest in Kenya⁴⁹, therefore representing the best potential market numbers. Though in theory Kenya’s official languages, English and Swahili, might have given the videos wider reach, these are not the languages that the majority of Kenyans were, or are, most comfortable in; at least not outside the cities, and especially not amongst the common people, the “wananchi⁵⁰” as they are called. Today still, and contrary to Tanzania, there are ethnic/linguistic delineations to be drawn in Riverwood cinema. As a consequence, though Kikuyu comedies have the widest reach, their audience potential remains limited compared to Swahili-language Bongowood, which finds appeal across Tanzania, and even throughout East Africa.

⁴⁸ The question of “quality” in discussions on African popular cinema is contentious. According to McNamara (2010: 10), to suggest that technological and economic limitations under which Riverwood production takes place affect the quality of Riverwood movies, is tantamount to implying that there exists an authoritative reference for what constitutes quality. I want to stress that the question of quality is raised here because many of my respondents refer to it: either as a way to describe Riverwood (for instance: it produces low *quality* [Desmond, 2012], technically speaking; some makers are working towards higher *quality* [Kimani M., 2013; Kahiu, 2013; Kaigwa, 2013]; Riverwood must attain higher *quality* standards if it is to survive [Mageria, 2013]).

⁴⁹ See the Minorities at Risk Assessment for Kikuyus in Kenya:

<http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/assessment.asp?groupId=50103>

⁵⁰ “Wananchi” officially means “citizen”, but it tends to refer to the average, non-elite, common Kenyan.

Additionally, Kenya's ongoing rural-urban migration plays a role. Riverwood comedy's most loyal urban audiences are said to be people who have moved to the city in search of employment and who are nostalgic for the life they have left "back home" (Akech, 2012; Kimani M., 2013). This life, it is reasoned, is best represented through the popular comedies: sketches are set in villages, the Kikuyu vernacular "feels like home", and though rural life is mocked, this is done in an affectionate way. This core Riverwood audience is further described as mostly "older" (35-plus), and as people who have not been exposed to the same variety of foreign content as have younger generations (Akech, 2012; Odhiambo, 2012). Filmmaker/actor Mburu Kimani comments: "You can bring the village to Nairobi but you cannot take the village out of it. These people might understand other films but will not relate to them. They want the 'village laughing' stories" (2013).

The distribution of these comedies – equally handled mostly by Kikuyu people – is vulnerable to external shocks. The 2007-2008 post-election violence, related to issues of ethnic tension, are a significant example. As a consequence of this painful and turbulent period, many Kikuyu traders were forced to relocate, and the Riverwood distribution network inland suffered tremendously (Mageria, 2013; Kimani M., 2013). At the same time pirate vendors continued to provide rural areas with foreign fare: first Nollywood and shortly after Bongowood, with the extra advantage of being in Swahili instead of English, and geographically and culturally closer. Nollywood and Bongo quickly regained the favor of the rural audiences who were such an important target for Riverwood productions.

After 2008, the Riverwood distribution network, not wildly profitable to begin with, needed time to recover from the setback. According to Mburu Kimani that partly explains why since then many talented filmmakers have moved to the safer and more predictable television business, only to return to movie-making for the Riverwood circuit once every so many years, "to keep their name alive" (paraphrasing Kimani M., 2013).

Several of my respondents feel that Kenya's political past is partly responsible for what they feel is a lack of cultural pride in the country, in stark contrast to Tanzania and Nigeria (Kaigwa, 2012; Odhiambo, 2012). According to them, foreign movies are often popular precisely *because* they are foreign – again with the exception of Kikuyu comedies amongst the "wananchi" (Konstantaras, 2013). In their view there is an implicit assumption amongst audiences that what is foreign will be better. They believe this is reminiscent of first the Colonial period, and later, failure to create a "Kenyan" cultural identity. Kenya gained independence from the British Empire in December 1963. Compared to neighboring Tanzania, which was first a German Colony and then a British Protectorate, after which it became a socialist state with a strong nation-building agenda (with Nyerere's Ujamaa), Kenya has remained Anglo-Saxon- and free market-oriented. Attempts at creating the sense of a unified nation have been largely unsuccessful, or at least ethnic loyalties and linguistic affinities have remained stronger (Hornsby 2013: 2-5, 8-11).

Still, it may be a leap too far to assume audiences will choose foreign movies for the sake of being foreign. While there is certainly a strong inclination towards international - mainly American and British - culture and lifestyle, at the same time Kenyan-produced soaps and comedy on television are doing very well (see also chapter 7). Many factors are at play simultaneously: different audience groups have different habits, preferences, and linguistic skills. I will explore this further in the next section, in which I will review context factors other than history and social change.

b. Totality and context: pieces of the puzzle

In the previous section aspects of Kenya's history were highlighted which have shaped Riverwood as it looks today. As we delve deeper into the specifics of the circuit, we become aware of its paradoxes and contradictions. Unmonitored and undocumented, Riverwood not only means different things to different people, but different people ascribe different traits to it: whether it is very big or very small, wildly profitable or rather unpopular, well-established or in its infancy. To some extent, the answers to these questions depend on how inclusively or narrowly one defines Riverwood. However, definitions do not explain everything. P.E. allows for such contradictions, as long as they are placed within a wider whole of context factors offering possible explanations. This is what I want to do in the next section: to look at Riverwood as embedded in a specific local context, affecting it and explaining some of its more surprising features. In the ambit of a single chapter this can only be done very selectively. Arguably two of the most defining context factors of a media industry are its audiences and its market dynamics. I will first consider Riverwood audiences as part of Kenya's wider demography, to then explore its commercial relations, dynamics of formality and informality, and policy measures governing the circuit.

b.1 Local stories, big success? Kenyan society and media audiences.

Kenya has a very heterogeneous society (Robinson 2009: 5, 13): ethnically and especially linguistically it is more fragmented than neighboring Tanzania, but it is divided as well along lines of rural versus urban living contexts, generations, and clearly also social lines. Nairobi, too, is a strongly compartmentalized city (Médard in Charton-Bigot and Rodriguez-Torres 2006). People refer to social classes by quoting a part of the city: "this is for Lavington, Runda or Karen people, not for Eastlands folk" (referring to areas housing, respectively, people of upper or lower social strata). One of my respondents in a coffee bar downtown put it as follows: "Kenya, as much as we have Kenyans, there is the haves and the have-nots (...). The culture here is completely different from (...) the educated and the exposed guys (...). You find people on the other side of town who would never, ever cross Moi Avenue. Two different worlds. I grew up on the upper side of town. When I came here, my whole world changed. I saw people doing things quickly, seizing opportunity. On the upper side we plan, think it through, consult a few people,... while here, it is 'do it do it do it'" (Mageria, 2013). Riverwood makers are described as being "mostly from the Eastlands". We know already that its core audiences are predominantly rural "wananchi", with interests that are different from those of the city-born Nairobian, the latter often younger, more fluent in Sheng and English, and more interested in urban pop culture (Akech, 2012; Mahugu, 2013). These younger urban generations keenly follow local music videos, but much less local movies.

This means that Riverwood appeals only to a fraction of Kenya's societies: a specific linguistic, social, and age group. Audience taste in, for instance, Tanzania, is more homogenous than in Kenya, and this may be related to the former's socially and linguistically less fragmented society (Robinson 2009: 5)⁵¹. It is therefore difficult to make generalizing statements about "Kenyan" film audiences, and it is certainly problematic to suggest that Kenyan audiences do not enjoy locally-produced content,

⁵¹ According to a survey published in 2009, 88% of Tanzanian respondents indicated that they saw themselves as Tanzanian rather than as part of a specific ethnic group, compared to an African average of 42%. Kenyan "nationalism" scored 41%. (Robinson 2009: 13).

despite Riverwood's limited audience success. Next to the ubiquitous Nollywood movies and telenovelas, broadcasters have focused increasingly on locally-produced soap series which have enjoyed high viewer ratings, and local television series have been very successful in recent years.

However contentious (see footnote 48), we must also consider the question of "quality" of content and stories, or at least of a good "fit" between what all these different audience groups seek and whether it is being delivered to them. As several parts of Nairobi are well connected to the Web at affordable rates, people are exposed to an increasing variety of media. Especially in the cities, young and media-aware people follow international shows as keenly as local popular culture: music videos, TV soaps, and comedy shows. Wider choice leads to more demanding audiences. What counts, then, might not just be whether something is local or not, but whether it is perceived as fun, interesting or exciting.

Quality, often described in terms of its effects ("what is quality is what keeps your eyes glued to the screen" [Keya, 2012; Odhiambo, 2012]) and/or translated to image and sound, credible acting and good scripting, is a delicate concept. Scholars have been called upon to move beyond common discourse about African popular cinema (which could perhaps be summarized as: "interesting and empowering, but a pity about the bad quality", see also Haynes 2010). Nonetheless, the issue of quality was raised by so many of my respondents that it merits a place in the discussion about Riverwood. Asked about traditional Riverwood, respondents referred to its audiences as (the only) people who care less about quality than about a good story which they can relate to. As technology progresses – again, first and foremost in the cities – one could expect these differences to become larger in the future. This might imply that traditional Riverwood will either, to put it bluntly, fade out with the audience group and generation it is presently serving, or that it will have to evolve out of economic necessity – something we can indeed start to see signs of (cfr infra, "Praxis: changing the deal").

Social status, cultural exposure, and ethnic-linguistic preferences aside, there is yet another reason why Kenyan viewers may prefer foreign product. Depending on what type of movie they want to see, this has to do with what could be called "moral ambiguity". Nollywood movies are often extravagant, morally liberal, and they display more materialism than Kenyan films. American studio-produced cinema is more sexually explicit, and often more graphic in its depiction of violence. In the Kenyan market sexual explicitness is considered acceptable, but not for Kenyan productions (Konstantaras, 2013). "Showing Kenyans kissing is a problem, showing a Nigerian kissing is ok (*laughs*), know what i mean? Yet Kenyans do porn... but the community should not know about it and we do not accept that kind of thing (...). Dresses in Nollywood are very short, also in Bongo by the way. Very modern, and Kenyans have a problem with that, at least when it comes to Kenyan-made content" (Mageria, 2013). Nigerian juju movies are funny to Kenyan audiences; the same is true for an American ghost or vampire movie. In contrast, Kenyan horror is much more problematic (Matere, 2012; see also the case study of Jitu Films as an example of praxis [chapter 1], and the commercial failure of their horror film *Otto – The Bloodbath* [Egregious Jitu, 2008]). In other words, some of the more thrilling things in cinema – horror, ghosts, depictions of sex – are preferably viewed from a safe cultural distance.

b.2 "Local movies are just too expensive!" and "Local movies are not even sold here!" Policy, pricing, and piracy.

African popular cinema is usually priced competitively. In Kenya though, local movies are between 100 and 200 KES (1,14 to 2,28 USD) while international product, almost always pirated, is sold at about 50 Shillings (0,7 USD). The Kenyan authorities take anti-piracy measures for local content seriously and have installed significant penalties for it (McNamara 2010: 13); these fines, however, are enforced selectively, and only for local products, while illicit sales of foreign movies are tolerated (Mututa, 2013; Kimani M., 2013). As a result, vendors can keep prices of American, Bongo or Nollywood movies artificially low while being compelled to sell local movies – at least officially - at a higher price, making them the less attractive choice for budget-conscious shoppers. For vendors in Nairobi's city center, another reason not to engage with piracy on local movies is that it is difficult to operate anonymously in the small Riverwood community (Kimani M., 2013). The elusive street hawkers aside, no one wants to risk angering a colleague. Producers and vendors usually have good business relations based on trust. Directors deliver a small number of copies – typically about one hundred – to bring a retailer more only when that stock is finished. Though the retailer could in theory duplicate extra copies, this is not described as common practice. Other producers own and control the entire value chain of their product, such as some of the well-known comedians and bigger retailers who invest in movie productions to sell alongside other media products (Simon Nduti of music store Nduti One-Stop Shop is probably the best-known example).

All this does not mean that piracy of Kenyan movies no longer exists, but rather that it is less common and visible than before. When it happens, it is usually done very cautiously. Says Mburu Kimani (2013): “Today when they pirate Kenyan movies they don't package them anymore. They burn them on DVD and use a felt pen to write on the disc. The big kind of piracy in the nineties was when they used to package movies, but penalties are higher now. They do it under the counter, so that when government checks no one can find the movies in the shop.” Exceptionally, when potential profits outbalance the risk, pirate vendors will take the chance of mass-distributing them openly. This was the case with *Nairobi Half Life* (2012, Gitonga), an enormous local success which failed – ironically because of fear of piracy – to be made accessible on DVD to mass audiences. It circulated widely before its official DVD-release (Kimani M., 2013).

This “largely legal” way of doing business in Riverwood is confined to the capital. If producers want their movies to travel outside Nairobi, they approach people whom they know to be pirates - i.e., who are recognized and dealt with as such - selling them a larger stock for a flat fee, thereby also selling all rights to the movie. The reasoning is simple: pirate vendors will only bother with a movie if they know from audience demand that it will be commercially interesting (Mageria, 2013). If a movie is commercially interesting and is not made available to audiences in time, it will be pirated. Pragmatically then, it makes sense for a producer to negotiate a deal with a pirate, thus assuring that he gets some income at least, and that the movie travels and builds a name for the director and actors. “You give him your master and he might buy 10,000 copies. He will tell you, come back in ten days and I will tell you how many I have sold. So even if he has sold the 10,000 plus another 10,000 for himself, he will tell you 15,000 and keep the rest as a profit. He does this at a price you could never achieve because you lack the distribution network he has” (Mageria, 2013). The pirate vendor will typically trade the movies on a wholesale basis on Muthurwa market in Nairobi, from which all sorts of commodities leave to various parts of the country. For producers who do not want to deal

with pirate vendors, another common strategy is to push sales volumes during the first week of release of a movie, maximizing revenue before illegitimate copying and dissemination can take over.

What this tells us is that the question whether River Road, like other African popular media circuits, is a site of “rampant piracy” does not have a clear-cut answer. Informal street hawkers are difficult to control and a formal distribution network outside the cities is lacking. Inside the city, most international movies and local music videos are pirated. Despite exceptions such as *Nairobi Half Life* however, piracy of local movies is contained, done very cautiously, or as part of a pragmatic agreement. Because of its image, both in terms of shady economic practices as in terms of River Road being considered a dangerous place, Riverwood remains virtually untouched by the higher-end filmmakers and upper-middle class audiences. They are reluctant to make their work available on DVD, let alone to circulate it in the River Road area. Kikuyu comedy is easy to find, other Riverwood productions are more difficult (with the exception of vendors selling their own productions), and movies by the – more upper-end - likes of Bob Nyanja, Wanuri Kihiu, or Judy Kibinge, are simply not available along River Road⁵².

c. Praxis: changing the deal

The focus on “praxis” as characteristic of critical P.E. refers to individual and group agency (Mosco 2009: 34-36). For the purpose of this analysis I interpret it as consciously “doing things differently” in order to differentiate oneself or to change a working context. As said, political economy has been accused of reasoning (too much) along lines of structuralism, ignoring the potential of agency and change (ibidem: 35). Attention to praxis helps in avoiding a static view of a phenomenon or an industry.

There are several illustrative cases to be found in the Riverwood circuit. One could argue that even its beginning, with live performers kick-starting a video production circuit, is an example. I will concentrate here on contemporary examples of praxis, and a drive towards change in the Riverwood circuit.

c.1 Riverwood Ensemble: shaping the Riverwood brand, and exploring distribution channels

Riverwood Ensemble is an association of close to 150 independent Riverwood producers, together releasing thirty to forty movies each month. The Ensemble was started and is lead by Mwaniki Mageria, who also runs the production company Balozi Productions. After releasing two movies targeted at what he calls “the upper market” Mageria felt the quality standards for that segment were too challenging to compete effectively, and started concentrating on Riverwood.

The goal of the Ensemble is to pool resources, share knowledge, and distribute under one flag. Because of his professional background Mageria claims to have an extensive network of people renting equipment and service providers, more than would the average Riverwood producer. His strategy is to convince people in his network to rent equipment to Ensemble members at strongly reduced prices, making up for this through the big number of potential clients. He also aggregates and sells the work of members of the Ensemble for distribution on a commission basis.

⁵² I would be tempted to point out that these films are not targeted at local audiences either, but some of my respondents oppose this view (Kihiu, 2013; Ogunyemi, 2013). The acclaimed Wanuri Kihiu, for instance, feels that her movies, if given the chance, would appeal to audiences of many different walks of life.

Interestingly, Mageria concentrates on DVD distribution less than on television broadcasting. It was explained previously that the assumed high profitability of Riverwood DVD distribution in reality only applies to a small number of successful comedians. Many producers now make it a priority to have their work aired on television. However, until recently broadcasters were not interested in Kenyan-produced content, as they could buy cheaper Nollywood product and telenovelas which were - and still are - widely followed. This changed dramatically when free-to-air channel Citizen TV in 2007 started airing locally-made series, leading to a sharp increase in viewer rates. Since then, broadcasters have become increasingly interested in local content for different market segments (Bekker, 2012). There are Dallas-like soaps, more or less targeted at upper-middle classes (*Mali, Lies that Bind*), as well as comedy and drama series for the “wananchi” (*Papa Shirandula, Mother in Law*) (see also chapter 7).

Riverwood productions, for now, are at a double disadvantage: they are not series and therefore cannot easily build viewership, and they do not fully reach the required quality criteria for television broadcasting. Kiss TV, one of the youngest broadcasters, as an experiment aired Riverwood movies for fifteen hours per week during one year in 2012. This included vernacular language-productions, which is exceptional on Kenyan television. The results were disappointing: audiences turned out to have different standards for television content than for Riverwood productions circulating downtown. People started referring to movies as “is this one of those bad Kiss TV movies?” (Mageria, 2013), and after a year the agreement ended. Most other broadcasters, both free-to-air and pay-television, are equally interested but demand higher production values before taking Riverwood on board.

During weekly meetings in Nairobi, Mageria urges his members to work towards higher production value. This involves (slightly) larger investments in time and budget, which is counter-intuitive for the highly cost-aware Riverwood business: “[question:] Machang’i’s distributor said that production takes about a week, is this the case for your members as well? [answer:] Yes, but now we insist on at least a week for editing because we want better quality. You can have good content, but if it is not edited properly it will turn out bad” (Mageria, 2013). The Ensemble also encourages members to present projects to each other, critique each other’s scripts, and discuss potential movie topics, as a sort of collective learning process.

Apart from DVD and television, Mageria is exploring the possibilities of web and mobile distribution: the video-on-demand platform Kenya Box Office (<http://www.kenyaboxoffice.com/>) is operational, another online platform (Riverwood TV) is in development, and there are discussions with Nairobi-based Symbiotic Media on building a mobile application for the distribution of audio and video content to rural audiences (see also chapter 1, p. 44).

c.2 Third Force Entertainment: local stories, higher quality

Riverwood Ensemble is a recent initiative, but Riverwood has had its own Third Force Entertainment collective since its beginnings in the early 2000s (Vourlias 2011; Matere, 2012). Some of the most successful makers in this collective are Robby Bresson, Simiyu Barasa, and Mburu Kimani. The Third Force group strive towards similar goals as the Riverwood Ensemble (increased quality) in a similar way (pooling resources), but since they have been in the business for longer they are more experienced, better networked, and on a whole produce higher-budget movies. Third Force are a group of about eighty-eight filmmakers and producers (Kimani M., 2103). They call themselves

Riverwood directors mainly because they are clustered and distribute along the River Road circuit, but they oppose to the implicit association with low quality. Mburu Kimani (2013): “in Riverwood you have those guys who take a camcorder and make a movie in one day, it is bad quality... but we also have very good quality makers. Most of us are trained, but we use their distribution network which guarantees distribution. We do not have a big distribution company in Kenya. (...) [Question: What is the difference? Do you mean quality in terms of technology, budget, stories,...?] It is everything. We use their network to distribute, but we do our thing professionally: screenplays, techniques, formats, all the way to packaging and distributing. And the audiences are the same. I grew up in the village, I like to tell local, common-man stories. These audiences are not very urbanized” (Kimani M., 2013).

As said, some of the Third Force members have shifted to television work, returning to Riverwood only once in a while (Irura 2013). According to some, it is debatable whether the group should be considered Riverwood, as they fall between the festival circuit and the low-end grassroots Kenyan productions (Mututa, 2013; Mageria, 2013). Others consider them to be the core of the circuit (Irura 2013; McNamara 2010: 14; Matere, 2012). Although Third Force movies are certainly not high-end cinema productions, they work with budgets varying between 100,000 and 500,000 KES (1,140 to 6,680 USD), which is considerably higher than what is done under the Riverwood Ensemble flag. Also in terms of sales and profitability they seem to fall between the popular Kikuyu comedies and the small-scale majority Riverwood flicks. Kimani’s most successful film *The Race* (a comedy set in a village and in Kikuyu) won the Kenyan Kalasha Award for best Riverwood film in 2009, and sold 10,000 copies one month after release: more than the average of 3,000-6,000, but far less than what the popular comedians achieve (Kimani M., 2013).

In my own view, and considering my inclusive definition of Riverwood, Third Force are indeed a collective of Riverwood makers, with a similar commercial and low-budget approach, distributing along the same networks, but working with slightly higher budgets and longer production times. Similarly to the younger Riverwood Ensemble, they are an example of “praxis” in the circuit: makers approach the business in their own way, making efforts to innovate and dynamise existing practice. As with the Ensemble, this is no longer restricted to DVD-distributed stories. Kenyan filmmaker Robby Bresson has produced two episodes of a three-episode Riverwood-style movie, and has made these available online and free of charge. Entitled *Simiyu Samurai* (2012), it concerns a romantic Kung Fu story through which the director experiments with audience interactivity and crowdfunding. Each part has an open ending, offering audiences a choice of options for what they would like to happen in the next episode, and inviting them to submit their choice online or through SMS⁵³ (see also chapter 5, pp. 131-132).

c.3 Jitu Films: a different business approach

Under the umbrella of production company Vivid Features, Jitu was a low-cost movie brand aimed at producing Riverwood stories with a fresh approach, higher production values, and circulating in upmarket supermarkets as well as in the River Road circuit (see also McNamara 2010: 11-12, and chapter 1, which discusses Jitu Films at length). Through Vivid Features, Jitu had access to high-end

⁵³ The crowdfunding aspect consists in asking audiences who want to submit their preferred option online to make a financial contribution for the production of the next episode. Bresson started experimenting with this after the second part of the story had been uploaded, but it has not been successful (only 625 viewers have made a contribution; Bresson, personal Facebook message, 2014).

filming equipment. Costs were kept as low as possible, and movies were produced in the same short periods as regular Riverwood flicks. Sales prices were also kept at a minimum, i.e. at a level which pirate vendors could not compete with. Of the twenty-four films produced, Jitu released only four, without making the sales needed to become self-sustainable. Different respondents cite different reasons for this, ranging from a lack of marketing efforts over counter-productive import policy measures, a boycott by River Road vendors, to a product that was downright culturally wrong for the Kenyan market.

Although commercially Jitu failed, it deserves mention as a case of “praxis” in the Riverwood circuit. Its efforts to “break the mould” of traditional Riverwood while avoiding piracy of their product (Kangethe, 2012) were welcomed and keenly monitored in the industry. Some of the people behind the label have since its demise remained involved in low-cost innovative audiovisual storytelling and in pushing the boundaries of what can be done with Kenyan film, albeit film that can no longer be considered Riverwood. For instance, Alexandros Konstataras of Historia Films, who worked as a creative consultant on Jitu films, has now made a soft-erotic comedy (*House of Lungula*, 2013, available on Buni.tv) and a tongue-in-cheek talkshow intended for online viewing (*In the Forest*, 2013, first episode available on YouTube; see also chapter 5).

From analyzing these cases I conclude that in the Riverwood circuit “praxis”, interpreted as efforts to change working contexts and business dynamics, has revolved primarily around two things. Firstly, there have been efforts to grow production value in order to compete in a media environment that has changed drastically in the last decade, which has led to an increased availability and diversity of local and international content, in turn setting the bar higher in terms of quality criteria. Of course producers still have the option to keep budgets and production time at a minimum, while continuing to make a profit by targeting the traditional, core Riverwood audience. However, for now the favor of this audience seems to be firmly in the hands of the few famous comedians who control their own distribution.

Secondly, new distribution avenues are being explored: there have been experiments with the analogue broadcaster Kiss TV, efforts are being made towards more deals with analogue and with pay-television broadcasters, and a number of first shy attempts have been made at online distribution. Some of these attempts focus on the online or mobile distribution of Riverwood film (for instance, Kenya Box Office and Riverwood TV), other efforts may have their roots in Riverwood production but are slowly changing its face altogether, in terms of style and narratives (for instance, the online stories by Robby Bresson, *Simiyu Samurai* and *African Djinn*; see pp. 131-133 and footnote 109).

d. Just and fair? Riverwood today and in the future

“Moral philosophy” as particularly characteristic of critical P.E. refers to an alertness to “what is fair”, “what is right” or “how it should be”; in other words, to infuse an analysis with a sense of justice or moral appropriateness.

Central to this idea is the concept of power, defined by Mosco (2009: 24) as “the ability to control other people, processes, and things, even in the face of resistance.” In Dar es Salaam, for instance, an

oligopoly of three⁵⁴ DVD distributors are said to control most of the Bongo distribution business. Despite complaints from producers these distributors have maintained their market power and, according to many, engage in illegitimate and exploitative practices: sales numbers are not transparently communicated to content owners, and production funding is kept too low. Comparing to the situation in Tanzania, Mageria (2013) comments on Riverwood: “Contrary to Dar [here in Kenya] there is not a small number of distributors controlling the market, everything is quite informal. We have a good relationship with vendors. You give them copies and you drop by every week to see how many they have sold. But Dar is an interesting model: one guy [the distributor, who is also the financial producer of Bongo movies] buys scripts, uses the same actors all the time, and just keeps rotating them.” It seems that relations between producers and vendors are friendlier in the Riverwood than in the Bongo circuit, perhaps because there is less at stake financially. Several of our interviewees in Riverwood feel that they can do business even with pirate vendors and get a fair deal out of that.

As opposed to the dominant Bongo distributors, it could be argued that the powerful players in the Riverwood circuit are, on the one hand, the famous and “self-contained” comedians, who have a loyal following and a firm hold on their distribution business, and on the other hand the television broadcasters. The latter, as discussed, were uninterested in local content for a long time; and when they were, they paid very low fees to air it. Since five years, they have become increasingly interested in Kenyan-made stories, with a focus on television series formats. Riverwood movies on the other hand have not managed to secure their spot firmly on television screens, mostly because the quality of the movies has been too variable in nature. Some are hopeful that this will change now that President Kenyatta has announced that the required quota for local content on television is to be increased from 40 to 60 %⁵⁵. If enforced, this law will require broadcasters to either upstep their in-house production or to source much more locally, potentially shifting power into the hands of Kenyan producers.

A question will be: even if the law is enforced, which producers stand to benefit from the 60 % quota? There are several established production companies active in Nairobi, and they are well-aware of the new law (Ghettuba, 2013). Many incumbents outside the Riverwood circuit are already working according to higher production value standards, dispose of larger budgets, and have built experience with the production of the more glossy and upmarket-targeted series. The failed experiment with Kiss TV indicates that Riverwood’s place in the spotlight will depend on more than airtime quota. As competition increases, Riverwood producers envisioning their future revenue coming from television broadcasts will need to evolve towards higher production value. This quality issue, contentious as it may be, is a collective one: if broadcasters are to take up the habit of screening a series of Riverwood movies instead of acquiring one season of a series, the quality of the movies will have to be consistent and will need to come in numbers.

⁵⁴ These three – Steps Entertainment, Pili Pili, and Papazii - are not equal in size. Steps Entertainment is the biggest Bongo distributor by far.

⁵⁵ This was announced in an address made by the President in April 2013. See <http://www.capitalfm.co.ke/eblog/2013/04/16/president-uhurus-speech-during-official-opening-of-11th-parliament/> (last accessed August 2014).

A situation of “moral fairness” also depends on the audience accessibility of media content: physically, financially, technically and culturally. Quality and airtime aside, it is questionable whether Riverwood will reach its target audiences through television in the future. It was explained that the core audience of Riverwood stories has a rural background, tends to be slightly older (than 35), and is not typically part of the affluent classes. Television sets are cheap and there is additional access through video halls, but ownership today stands at no more than roughly 25% households in the country (according to Ogunyemi, 2012). Coverage and quality of the analogue television signal is far from flawless everywhere. Television is an extra avenue, but is not a substitute for DVD/VCD-distribution, and access to it stands to disappear for many after the analogue switch-off and the move to digital broadcasting, planned in 2015⁵⁶.

Indeed, Kenyan producers have their hopes pinned in part on the future evolution of the television landscape: the transition to digital broadcasting. By June 2015 analogue broadcasting in Kenya is planned to be switched off in order to clear the remaining signal spectrum space for digital television (for an in-depth discussion of this migration process, see chapter 7). Amongst other things, this means that reception and quality of the television signal will be better than in an analogue context, and that technically there will be space for many more channels. Potentially, and in a best case scenario, this opens opportunities in terms of increased diversity of the audiovisual offer, perhaps even the representation of minority communities. Additionally it may open up space for Riverwood movies:

“Riverwood is giving birth to the future of the industry by establishing mechanisms which will yield thousands of hours of television content in readiness for the digital migration. Hundreds of TV stations are at the final stages of licensing and they will be spread all over the country, every county will have a minimum of one TV station and it will be Riverwood which will be expected to supply the content for broadcasting. (...) Riverwood has something for all the communities of this great republic, though it may look like the Kikuyu community dominate the direct to DVD market, other communities are also very much involved” (Karanja cited in Irura 2013).

What it also means, though, is that audiences will be required to either purchase a (very expensive) digital television set, or a digital decoder or set top box. Priced at more than 50 USD, these devices are affordable only to a small segment of the Kenyan public (Kimani K., 2012; Kiptinnes, 2013), notably the social groups that do not watch much traditional Riverwood film to begin with. Earlier rumours of a government-subsidized roll-out have been dismissed because of public budget restraints (Kiptinnes, 2013). Moreover, the network supporting digital television is not fully rolled out, and it has been left to private players to invest in it. Their focus has been on the urban areas, and within those areas, on the upper-middle class neighborhoods. In Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu digital television is said to be available for those who can afford it (Reinartz, 2013). There is even already a digital channel dedicated to Kikuyu content (Three Roses), which airs the popular Kihenjo

⁵⁶ June 2015 is a global deadline established by the ITU: see http://www.itu.int/newsroom/press_releases/2006/11.html and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-20984880>

comedy shows, albeit to a limited audience. However, there is no guarantee whatsoever that digital television will be available widely, whether before or after the proposed 2015 switch-off deadline.

For this last section I have considered questions of “moral philosophy” in the Riverwood business, translating them to questions of market power and of audience access. Contrary to Bongo, and though working circumstances and social mobility options are far from perfect, Riverwood does not appear to harbour major power imbalances or exploitative dynamics. As a circuit Riverwood exists in a fast-changing wider media environment. Its inherent commercial nature might guide it in finding new efficient ways of reaching its audiences in the future. It seems that for now hopes are set, at least partly, on the television landscape. However, it is not at all certain that Riverwood, especially in its traditional form, will find its spot on the television screen. Neither is it expected that in a mid-term future Kenyan majority audiences will have access to television.

I have no intention of predicting Riverwood’s future, but based on the information I was able to collect there seem to be only a few options. A part of Riverwood may evolve towards slightly higher budgets, longer production cycles, and higher production values. Something comparable has happened, albeit in a different way and on a very different scale, in the Nollywood industry (where targeting diasporic audiences and theatrical releases are seen by some as the way forward, see Jedlowski 2012: 12; Jedlowski in Krings and Okome 2013). Riverwood, however, is focused inward, on its local audiences. If investments in production are to grow, the challenge will be to appeal to enough and sufficiently large different audience groups – Kenyans being fragmented along lines of language, taste preferences, and consumption habits. If Riverwood succeeds in maintaining its appeal with sufficiently large DVD-buying audiences, if the DVD-dissemination network across the country does not deteriorate, and if at the same time Riverwood can achieve much-needed new income streams from television broadcasting, its future may be promising. Alternatively what could happen is that only the most talented - or the most educated or financially strong - producers take the leap to television, while traditional Riverwood either “fades out” or innovates at a parallel, slower pace, evolving with its core audiences.

5. Conclusion

I have described and analyzed the Riverwood movie circuit in Kenya from a critical political economy perspective. Despite obvious similarities with sister industries in other countries, there are many differences that merit highlighting and explaining.

For an analysis of Riverwood, one of the more underresearched African popular video industries, the lens of P.E. is useful as a means to structure and discuss data. It helps researchers to pay explicit attention to historical and contextual specificities, thus to paint a nuanced picture of a topic or phenomenon. It allows for attention to inherent dynamic forces towards change, and for a degree of subjective “moral evaluation” of whether and to what extent phenomena, structures and situations are just, or morally appropriate. At the same time it provides the space and flexibility needed for pulling new data together, perhaps at the expense of rigorous theoretical structure or systematism, thus also of generalizing statements.

Riverwood production and distribution are significantly different from, for instance, Nollywood and Bongowood, both in genres and stories and in market dynamics. Riverwood does not have a star

system of actors, apart from its most popular comedians. These comedians control their own distribution, producing and disseminating sketches mostly set in rural environments, in Kikuyu language. I have referred to them as “core” Riverwood producers, as they are the ones most often implied with the label. However, there are countless (literally: uncounted and uncountable, but estimated in the hundreds) small-time producers, telling both rural and urban audiovisual stories, albeit predominantly martial arts, comedy, and drama. Contrary to its Nigerian and Tanzanian counterparts, Riverwood movies are not widely viewed or hugely successful.

As with Nollywood and Bongo, pirate practices are part of the business. Surprisingly though, not everyone objects to them as much as may seem at first glance. For lack of efficient alternative distribution networks, some producers make pragmatic deals with pirate distributors, while others avoid River Road altogether (mostly higher-end filmmakers) or push sales immediately after release before pirate vendors catch up (such as the Third Force collective).

While market power in Tanzania appears to be concentrated in the hands of an oligopoly of DVD-distributors, in Kenya DVD-distribution is more of an informal business, in part based on trust. As DVD-distribution is not as profitable for everyone, much hope seems to be set on television broadcasting, now and in the digital future. Digital television holds the promise of more airtime and space for local content, backed by an announced new law requiring broadcasters to programme a minimum of 60 % locally sourced content. On the other hand, broadcasters have been reluctant to take Riverwood movies on board. Experiments have led to disappointing results as viewers have complained about the movies’ bad quality.

If the goal is to “find a spot” in the current and the future television landscape, Riverwood will have to increase its production values out of economic necessity: competition is strong and established upmarket television houses are just as interested in the extra spectrum space. Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, the core circuit can be expected to evolve at its own pace, following closely its core audience demand, as it has always done.

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Essay 2: relevant elements regarding over-arching hypotheses

This chapter focuses on Kenya's Riverwood, an underresearched circuit of African popular cinema. Popular cinema circuits are often considered an illustration of technology's democratizing agency (hypothesis 1), and – in the case of Nollywood – a truly (pan-)African media product (hypothesis 3). At the same time scholars have stressed the need to avoid hastened generalizations or statements about “African authenticity”, and have pointed to the popular movies' hybrid and evolving character. Riverwood too is a cultural blend, albeit that its core product – simple comedy sketches produced in vernacular tongues and set in rural environments – is less of a hybrid than the average Nollywood and Bongo film.

Riverwood rarely travels outside Kenya. Within Kenya it serves and represents a rather well-delineated audience: somewhat older, predominantly rural (or migrated to the city) and mainly Kikuyu. The work of some of the local stars – established comedians – is keenly followed by this demographic, but much less outside it. Referring to Straubhaar's layers of identification (2008 and 2013), Riverwood's strongest link is with Kikuyu communities as “cultural-linguistic groups predating the nation-state”. Specifically within this group, it caters for the less urbanized and less educated audiences. This is why, in contrast with Bongowood and Nollywood, it is not widely successful, and it has certainly not pushed foreign content out of the market.

Several of my respondents have suggested that Kikuyu comedy (as it is called by audiences rather than “Riverwood”) brings comfort to rural migrants confronted with the hardships and insecurity of moving to the capital in search of work. Pirate networks deliver the movies in determined areas outside Nairobi at affordable prices. In other words, Riverwood reflects strong cultural proximity to a particular audience group and locally-relevant informal methods for delivery to specific regions across the country (hypothesis 3).

Emerged with the advent of cheaper equipment put to use by entrepreneurial performers, Riverwood is reflective of a process of democratization of production and of distribution. This democratization is mediated by local factors: again, a heterogeneous society not conducive to the type of market numbers reached by Bongowood; anti-piracy regulations which drive up official retail prices in the city; and a strong affinity with Anglo-Saxon, and more specifically, American culture in the country (see also Louw in Wasserman 2011: 32-45⁵⁷), sometimes to the disadvantage of local product. Riverwood is a lucrative business for a minority of established stars, but much less for majority filmmakers. As was evident from our cases of “praxis”, some of the latter are exploring ways to stand out. Technological and narrative quality is often mentioned as a way to achieve this, as traditional Riverwood pays more attention to stories and jokes than to technical refinement.

New distribution channels are being explored and some are hopeful that the advent of digital television in 2015 will boost their business. However, not only Riverwood makers have their hopes pinned on digital broadcasting. More established, formal, better-connected and better-prepared production companies want their piece of the cake. In addition, it is unclear if digital television will be

⁵⁷ Louw, P. E. (2010). “Revisiting Cultural Imperialism.” In: Wasserman, H. (ed.) 2011. *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa. Internationalizing Media Studies*. London and New York: Routledge: 32-45.

accessible widely: for now it is being rolled out only in commercially interesting areas (urban and middle class), and set top boxes are financially out of reach for majority audiences.

In summary, while the process of democratization of filmmaking through technology is undeniable, it is also limited. Standing out as a Riverwood filmmaker is not a matter of access to tools alone; it is a question of time, budget, individual skills, and professional network, and these are not evenly dispersed. Riverwood represents a partial, locally-mediated democratization of production and of distribution, and is locally relevant (culturally proximate) only to a specific demographic.

**ESSAY 3: TARGETING URBANITES: NAIROBI-BRED
AUDIOVISUAL NARRATIVES IN SHENG**

WITH THIS CHAPTER I ANALYZE THREE CASES OF AUDIOVISUAL PRODUCTION IN NAIROBI TARGETING TEENAGE AND YOUNG ADULT AUDIENCES IN SHENG LANGUAGE. DESPITE LARGE DIFFERENCES IN TERMS OF SCALE, STYLE, FINANCIAL STRENGTH, AND AUDIENCE REACH, MY CASES HAVE A NUMBER OF CHARACTERISTICS IN COMMON. THESE CHARACTERISTICS ARE REFLECTIVE OF CURRENT TRENDS IN KENYA, INCLUDING URBANIZATION, A STRONG TECHNOLOGY-FOCUSED AND FUTURE-ORIENTED “NARRATIVE” IN THE COUNTRY, AND AN INCREASINGLY YOUNG AND EXPANDING CITY-BORN POPULATION. I THEORIZE THESE COMMON TRAITS BY USE OF ELEMENTS OF SUBCULTURAL THEORY. THE CASES ALSO SHOW HOW THE ROLE AND POSITION OF SHENG, AN URBAN VERNACULAR CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH YOUTH AND CITY-LIFE, IS CHANGING.

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1. Introduction

This essay analyzes three widely different examples of contemporary Kenyan audiovisual production: an informal media company producing low-budget movies set in Nairobi, a transmedia (comics, radio, online video) story revolving around a young DJ from the slums, and a music video showing a fictional superhero’s adventures in the Kenyan capital. All stories are, partly or entirely, in different variations of Sheng. A dynamic blend of Swahili, English, and vernaculars, Sheng is associated mostly with urban youth in Nairobi’s Eastlands (Githiora 2002: 160, Githinji 2008: 116). Different versions of it are now also spoken by young generations across Nairobi, and even outside the capital.

Though dissimilar in scale, style, financial background, and audience reach, my cases have more in common than Sheng language. Technology, for instance, plays a special role: either in the stories told, or through the importance of social media in creating a “buzz” around them. Another shared characteristic is urbanness: suggested or real, through depicting the city, in characters’ fashion and lifestyles, and with a range of possible connotations - crime and violence, hip hop, sex and street-smartness, and connectivity.

Though it is not uncommon for younger generations to be attracted to new consumer technology and to the excitement of the city, I suggest that these cases are also reflective of wider trends in the country. Kenya, and particularly Nairobi, is changing fast. Continuing rural-urban migration, the multi-faceted identities of city-born generations in a multi-lingual environment, and technological progress - including the vision that Kenya is now the ICT hub of East-Africa – all play a role in this transformation.

My cases illustrate how the role and position of Sheng in popular culture has changed during the past decade, and is continuously evolving from an “underground” hybrid associated with youth from the

estates⁵⁸ to a hip urban vernacular existing in different varieties in different types of production: from the grassroots level to larger-scale formal production companies.

2. Sheng, youth identities, and celebrating the city

Since the end of last century the growing convergence of, and sometimes tensions between, local and global cultural pressures, has had an increasing impact on young people in Africa. Youth groups in many countries and regions have been shaping new structures of group solidarity and redefining their social and cultural identities, often articulated through new codes and aesthetics (Diouf 2003: 2-3). Especially youth excluded from upward social mobility look for ways of positively differentiating themselves (ibidem: 5). Like with the youth slang Camfranglais in Cameroon, Dakar-Wolof in Senegal, or the Town Bemba creole in Zambia (Githinji 2008: 114), Sheng in Kenya plays an important role in this process.

Though today it is spoken mostly by Nairobi youth from lower social strata (Githiora 2002: 160; Bosire 2006 in Arasanyin and Pemberton: 186; Githinji 2008: 116, 121), Sheng's origins are believed to lie in the criminal underworld during colonial times, when people needed a coded language which no outsiders or colonial authorities could understand (Mazrui 1995: 168, 173)⁵⁹. The urban vernacular was later appropriated by youth from Nairobi's Eastlands, in part as an identity marker (Githiora 2002: 163, 174) to create a space unintruded by parental authority and traditional values (represented by vernacular tongues), the formal authority of the State, and the moral authority of the Church (both in English and Swahili), and mainstream media (also in English and Swahili) (Samper 2002; Mbugua wa Mungai 2003).

In this sense Sheng is an element in the self-fashioning of large groups of Kenyan youth. David Arthur Samper (2002: 2, 4) writes:

“Kenyan youth are not ‘mindless’ of the various and often conflicting voices (...) trying to shape their identity. These voices include ethnicity, tradition, urbanization, the government, and global popular culture. Kenyan young people are actively negotiating an identity that incorporates elements of all these divergent ideologies and the languages used to express them (...). For Kenya's youth, *Sheng* [italics in original] has become a badge of a new, dynamic, and cosmopolitan youth culture that looks to the West for inspiration.” [As a linguistic hybrid]⁶⁰, “[Sheng] reflect[s] an intentional re-voicing of cultural elements and a conscious re-fashioning and re-imagining of the self.”

Popular culture, too, is important in shaping or reinforcing one's identity (Dolby 2006: 32). Kenya as a nation-state rarely provides cultural activities that are exciting to young audiences (Frederiksen in Nyberg Sørensen and Fog Olwig 2010: 53). It is not surprising, then, that during the 1990s Sheng began to feature prominently in Kenyan popular music, primarily hip hop. Ever since then, local hip

⁵⁸ The word “estates” in Nairobi does not merely refer to a part of the city, but has a connotation of “low income, city council housing estates concentrated in the Eastlands (...) the ghetto” (Githiora 2002: 160)

⁵⁹ According to others Sheng originated shortly after Kenya obtained independence in 1963, imported by immigrants in Nairobi (Spyropoulos 1987).

⁶⁰ We can not refer to Sheng as to a pidgin or a creole tongue, as it has not evolved far enough from Swahili grammar, even though on the surface it seems like a different language (Githiora 2002: 176).

hop has not ceased to grow in popularity. The music distinctly celebrates the city and distances itself from traditional rural values. Urban, liberal, and uninformed with ethnic antagonisms⁶¹, the songs promote and reinforce roughly the same ideas and values that have become associated with Sheng. Evan Mwangi (2007: 321-323) writes:

“Whereas earlier music from the region [East Africa] by older musicians (...) used proverb-laden lyrics to lament the degeneracy of the city and tacitly endorsed the pastoral values of rural areas, songs of the 1990s and after seem to have fallen in love with the city despite its myriad problems. (...) The personae and characters presented in the music have loose rural roots, and, instead of lamenting alienation from traditional culture, they celebrate their unsure identities in the city in a grammar that seems impatient with notions of national purity and rural stability (...).”

Joice Wambui Nyairo (2004: 251) asserts:

“The use of Sheng in these songs is a statement about identity and especially about the validity of urban culture as a legitimate constituent of Kenyan culture (...). [It is] (...) an urban language whose key signifiers are defiance, freedom, unity, locality and identity. Indeed, the idea of a Kenyan modernity finds its clearest definition in the dynamics and energy of *jua kali*⁶² and Sheng with their emphasis on originality, innovation and informality.”

It is clear from existing literature that the use of Sheng is strongly associated with young Kenyans' desire to shape an identity proper to them, as well as with celebrating urbanness in its many senses. Creatively appropriated in daily interactions and cultural expression by Nairobi youth, it reflects a rough but positive, urban and modern lifestyle. It claims a space to engage with topics of interest to young generations while evading pressures of tradition and authority. Among lower-class youth especially, who speak it most actively and proficiently, it signifies informal solidarity and a form of “covert prestige” (Githinji 2008: 121; Githiora 2002: 174).

My cases in different ways reflect this mix of associations, as well as adding new elements: elements of technology, of local groundedness, and of aspiration. I will elaborate on this as I analyze each of them. I will call the youth groups targeted by my cases Urbanites. The preferred name of some of my interviewees for their city-born peers, the word “urbanites” reflects many of the identity aspects of urban youth discussed above. In the words of Bosire (in Arasanyin and Pemberton 2006: 192):

“(...) the colonial and postcolonial situation (...) included rapid urbanization and a bringing together of different ethnic communities and cultures with a concomitant exposure to different ways of being. The youth are caught up in this transition; they are children of two worlds and want a way to express this duality, this new ‘ethnicity’. Sheng is a way to break away and give them a global urban ethnicity, the

⁶¹ It is not suggested that ethnic affiliations among contemporary Kenyan youth, and/or through Sheng, are discarded altogether. As a hybrid, Sheng expresses “duality, a double-voiced identity” (Samper 2002: 4).

⁶² Literally Swahili for “hot sun”, *jua kali* refers to the informal economy in Kenya, primarily of small crafts. However, it also refers to an attitude of “making do” with what one has: make things yourself, spill nothing, do it fast and cheap, find a procedure that works and replicate it (Daniels 2010; Swigert 2011).

urbanite: sophisticated, street smart, new generation, tough of speaking and language.”

3. Subcultural theory: a brief review

Because of the slang’s initial underground aura, Sheng-speaking communities in the past have been referred to as subcultures in different senses (Githiora 2002: 169, referring to Spyropoulos 1987; Mbugua wa Mungai 2003: 18; Samper 2002: 9). The question is whether we can still link Sheng to subcultural identities today, and if so, whether such subcultural identities could be extended beyond Sheng to encompass the other traits shared by my cases as mentioned above. I will start by reviewing the most important elements of subcultural theory.

Dick Hebdige, who is cited most often as having laid the foundations of subcultural theory⁶³, defines subcultures as social groups seeking distinction from the dominant tastes and conventions in a given society (Hebdige 1979: 2-3; 114; 132). They do this through the creation and adoption of particular styles which can consist of objects, hairstyle, clothing, music, et cetera, but also language. According to Hebdige, the formation of subcultures happens as a form of opposition or rejection: of mainstream culture, and/or of dominant morals and ideologies. Examples include mods, punks, goths, or in Africa the Sapeurs from the DRC⁶⁴. With time, subcultural styles usually become incorporated into mainstream culture and media, thus changing status and becoming a legitimate “style” for people to choose.

In the course of the 1990s a new strand of scholarly thinking about subcultures emerged. The idea of resistance was gradually abandoned (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003: 4), and subcultures became viewed simply as “(...) groups of people that are represented – or who represent themselves – as distinct from normative social values or ‘mainstream’ culture through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do and where they do it” (2005). Subcultures also became less stable (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003: 7), as consumers in the post-modern age have a wider variety of quickly rotating styles and fashions to choose from. They construct more individual and less fixed cultural identities, picking and replacing stylistic elements without necessarily adhering to any specific subcultural group. Less than subversiveness and opposition to any “mainstream”, being attuned to trends and fashions in a given scene has become more important. This is what Sarah Thornton, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural capital (1986), has called “subcultural capital” (in Gelder 2005: 184-192): collected in an effort to construct social status, subcultural capital is obtained through gathering exclusive knowledge (being “in the know”) about what is “in” or “out” in a particular subcultural scene (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003: 9). Considered to be more attuned to the post-modern age than to Hebdige’s original subcultures, subcultural capital thus refers more to

⁶³ Readers interested in a deeper insight into the origins, developments and debates of subcultural studies are referred to the seminal works of Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (*Resistance through Rituals*, 1976), Dick Hebdige (*Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 1978), David Muggleton (*Inside Subculture: the post-modern Meaning of Style*, 2000), *The Subcultures Reader* (2005, edited by Ken Gelder), and *The Post-Subcultures Reader* (2003, edited by David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl), both excellent collections of seminal and contemporary publications on subcultures.

⁶⁴ These are men who dress according to classic Paris fashion, with distinguished suits, shoes and cigars. Though originally they had a particular motive (resistance to Mobutu rule), the Sapeurs are now no longer associated with opposition or rejection of any “mainstream” culture, however they have retained their specific vestimentary style, mimicking classic French fashion (Smart Monkey TV 2012).

“what you know” about a certain style or scene, than “what you oppose to”, or “how you oppose to it”. This knowledge is valuable only temporarily and by virtue of its exclusivity.

Throughout this essay I will look for ways to frame the shared traits of my cases by using elements of subcultural theory. This must be done with caution: emerged in the United Kingdom, and evolved within a long tradition of Western scholarly thinking, the theory has not been confronted with many areas outside the Anglo-Saxon world (Roberts in Gelder 2005: 576). Africa’s own context does not allow for a simple application of the theory. For instance, its strong emphasis on style in terms of clothing and objects is less relevant in Africa, where large majorities do not have the disposable budget to choose an outfit. It is not implied that clothing or objects do not matter: for instance, “mitumba” (the Swahili word for “bundle” which refers to second hand clothing) can be seen as typifying youth from a non-privileged background (Boy⁶⁵, 2013), and self-made or self-assembled objects showing creativity and technical ingenuity can serve as a means of self-affirmation. Nonetheless, for wide majorities wearing “mitumba” clothing and resorting to *bricolage* instead of buying what they want, is a matter of necessity as much as choice.

Sheng-speakers have changed over the years from a well-circumscribed lower-class group to a very diverse pool of teens and young adults inside and outside the city. They are geographically dispersed and have different social backgrounds (Githinji 2008: 132), rendering generalizations all the more difficult. Therefore I cannot describe my cases, or their audiences, as one subcultural group. This does not mean that we should discard the theory altogether. Developed around the articulation of youth identities through cultural expressions and lifestyle, specific elements of subcultural theory remain relevant for the topic at hand.

4. Foxhole Entertainment: low-budget Sheng-language movies from downtown Nairobi

Foxhole Entertainment is an unregistered one man-production company run by Donald Akech, who uses the artist name Don Fox. As many similar initiatives in Nairobi, Foxhole produces music video clips for a financial income. Clips referencing African-American fashion and the materialism typical of mainstream hip hop are the most popular, resonating elements of an imagined transnational “space of black youthfulness and affluence” as a widespread identitory reference for Kenyan youth (Frederiksen in Sørensen and Fog Olwig 2010: 54). Depending on a client’s wishes Don will look for sexy girls, big cars, posh houses or hotels, or he will do something more modest and less costly. For his own movie productions, though, he prefers to show real and unpolished downtown Nairobi life as he sees it. He creates movies whenever financially and practically possible, as an artistic venture. Eventually he would like to shoot one story per month, but there are many hurdles to take. He has produced three movies between 2000 and 2013, with a fourth one in preparation⁶⁶.

⁶⁵ This is what my interviewee said, literally: “Certainly, one of the things that has been claimed about youth is that they have (...) second hand designer jeans and Sheng, so no one can place where they are from. (...) It is easy to fit in. Despite older generations being resistant to it, it is the language spoken today. Also in advertising, even if that is not pure Sheng.”

⁶⁶ In December 2013, a few months after our last interview, Donald moved to China for an undecided period of time. Foxhole Entertainment still exists and Don wants to come back to Nairobi to start making movies again. For now, however, Foxhole is not actively producing (last update August 2014).

Distribution, or more specifically, income from sales, is a challenge: Don does not want to work with what he calls “middle men”, yet he cannot afford to employ a team to hawk DVDs or promote the movies with the video parlors spread across Nairobi’s estates and informal settlements. He trusts that visibility and sales will grow, and that copyright law will ensure profits for him in the future. *Nangos* (2009), his second movie, is on YouTube and has had more than 57,100 views so far. It has also been viewed widely in downtown Nairobi (Akech, 2012; Mahugu, 2013⁶⁷), though mainly through copying and sharing.

What Don says about Foxhole Entertainment, where it is today and his vision for its future, is puzzling, and at times overtly unrealistic, but engaging. He considers himself part of Nairobi’s tech-savvy city-born youth, 18 to 30 years old: agnostic of and uninterested in ethnic differences, which he considers a thing of “backward rural places” and older generations, and very attracted to all things technology-related. That is also where he believes the interests of his peers and target audiences – he calls them Urbanites⁶⁸ - lie: technology, downtown city-life, jobs, money, and day-to-day issues. Many of them no longer speak their mother tongue (the language of their ethnic group) but only Sheng, Swahili and English. They feel they are part of Nairobi, and Kenya, more than of any particular ethnic group⁶⁹. We recognize the oppositional element of Hebdige’s subcultural groups in general, and particularly a strong affirmation of an urban and Kenyan, as opposed to any strong ethnic, identity. We also find elements that resonate the idea of subcultural capital as described by Thornton (in Gelder 2005):

“My style is Sheng, a Nairobi slang... well it is spoken also outside Nairobi, but this is the capital and Sheng evolves fast here. You move out of the hood for a month, you come back and there will be new words. If you look around for movies in Sheng, there are not many. (...) And the movies you find often do not have very authentic Sheng... We come up with nice new words and we pronounce them right. (...) But it is (...) also an age thing. People aged 35 will be too old. These people don’t know about iPhones” (Akech, 2012).

Clearly, not any kind of Sheng is sufficient to understand Don’s movies, and once past a certain age, he feels there is little chance you will relate to their topics.

The production process and budget of Foxhole movies are similar to those of early Nollywood, Bongowood and Riverwood films: low-to-no-budget flicks, created in a few weeks’ time, with improvised acting and the occasional deficiencies in scripting and tempo. However, Don strongly opposes to being compared to these popular cinema genres, or associated with their audiences.

⁶⁷ Mwangi Mahugu, a music promotor in Nairobi not affiliated to Foxhole, confirmed Don’s claims that *Nangos* had been widely viewed.

⁶⁸ Donald used the term urbanites in reference to young Kenyans born and educated in Nairobi. The characteristics I have infused the Urbanites (upper case) with (i.e. Sheng-speaking, affinity with an urban-Kenyan, more than an ethnic identity, interest in technology, et cetera), were repeatedly mentioned by him and other interviewees alike (Mahugu, 2013; Boy, 2013)

⁶⁹ I am merely recounting one respondent’s opinions about his, and his peers’, identity references. I did not conduct a survey and can therefore not generalize, though the disinterest in issues of ethnic difference was clear throughout several interviews. Bodil Folke Frederiksen (in Sørensen and Fog Olwig 2010: 45, 46, 52-54, 57) has shown that the (pan-)African (mainly African-American) feeling of identity supercedes a national, Kenyan identity, at least among youth in the Pumwani neighborhood of Nairobi.

“Riverwood audiences, they don’t care about quality. A crane shot or a good soundtrack will not make a difference to them, what they are looking for in a movie is the message: a proverb, a lesson, preferably in their mother tongue. (...) Riverwood, they just shoot. A big percentage of Africa is rural, if you show them this urban stuff they will not click with it. (...) Riverwood to me is tribal. When you are born in Nairobi it’s different. We were born here, my family came here in 1996” (Akech, 2012).

Apart from different topics compared to Riverwood stories, Donald believes his movies display a higher image and sound quality. By sound quality he refers to soundtracks and scores, rather than the quality of the overall sound in the movies. The music is either created by peers, specifically for the movies, or Foxhole-produced music videos promoted inside the stories: a young rural immigrant to Nairobi plays a music video on his laptop to impress a girl, a Foxhole tune is played at a dance party, a tense or scary scene is accompanied by specially created sounds. The music is distinctly urban: sometimes festive, with a deep bass and vocal effects, sometimes with a dubby feel, or sometimes just a midi-created sequence of sounds.

As opposed to the “backward” and older rural immigrants to the city, the next generation of “born-city’s” is “always connected, always online” (Mahugu, 2013), and well-aware of what is on offer, both in terms of Kenyan productions and of trendy American movies and television series. It challenges Don to mimick the style of popular productions and aspire to a similar quality, with the limited means at this disposal. He does a lot of online research about film technology and scripting. Influences are both local and global: apart from “real life” in his neighborhood, the inspiration for characters and moods in his movies is drawn from American productions: tough figures like in *Iron Men* (2008, Favreau), *Tomb Raider* (the brand of a range of video games and movies), or the *Prison Break* series (2005-2009, Scheuring).

Don not only opposes to being compared to Riverwood but also to upmarket filmmakers, as they have many more resources at their disposal, though he feels they make no efficient use of them and is convinced budgets are consistently over-quoted. He believes he can do better than them, creating high quality while mixing fiction with a Nairobi setting and a technological focus:

“If someone gave me a real budget, say 1 million [Kenyan] Shillings, man you would see something! My characters would be jumping over buildings! I want to make a real big budget movie, something like *2012*, but set in Nairobi. It will be hackers in Nairobi saving the world, by breaking into the Pentagon’s computers. If you set such a story in Uganda, no one will believe it, it has to be Kenya, the technology-hub of East-Africa” (Akech, 2012).

Let us now take a look at the stories of two of Don’s movies: *Y2K* (the title refers to the anticipated “millennium bug” at the end of the twentieth century), and *Nangos*.

In *Y2K* (2008) Davie and Johnnie grow up in a rural village and dream of moving to the big city. Someone teaches them computer programming, and after high school they take their ICT-skills to Nairobi in search of a job. Unfortunately only Davie finds employment at a technology firm. Johnnie becomes an idler. But the two have great ambitions: they want to invent a piece of software which can turn any existing Pentium processor into a Pentium 5, the strongest processor available at the

time. Surely such software can help them make a lot of money fast, but first they need to build it. Davie works hard on the software, but Johnnie is lazier, and is more interested in his new girlfriend Katie. Together Johnnie and Katie watch (Foxhole Entertainment) music videos on his laptop and “hang out”. When the software, called Y2K, is finally ready, they steal it from Davie, planning to take a bus out of the neighborhood and sell the software themselves. The movie ends when they are caught in the act by Davie who takes them to the police.

The movie is shot entirely in downtown Nairobi, in a “no frills”-style and in deep Sheng. Houses and characters are realistic, simple and recognizable. Friendship and betrayal, software and money, and the question of social mobility, are key. Acting is largely improvised. Don’s actors are not professionals and do not like reading scripts, so he simply instructs them on what is to take place in each scene, and how it should end. The result looks surprisingly natural, though the tempo is slow, scenes are very lengthy, and the story is mostly based on conversation.

In *Nangos* (2009; “nangos” is Nairobi Sheng for “mobile phone”), a gang in Don’s “hood” pass their time playing a board game, a game that is illegal in Kenya because it involves gambling. One day a gang member reads an article on coltan, the mineral used for mobile telephones, extracted in the DRC. It appears that coltan is in great demand and the gang decides to make quick money through reverse engineering: stealing as many mobile phones as possible, and recovering the mineral. They bribe the police during one week to look the other way in the areas where they will be stealing mobile phones. They steal 2,600 devices in a week’s time. But one of the gang members has a double agenda. He works for someone else to make use of the extra hands of the gang, only to later turn them over to the police after the week of protection, and then split the profits with his other “boss”. The plan works, the police arrest the gang, the loot is split and a few phones are left with the police. There is also a quarrel between one of the gang members and his wife, who asks him to stop playing the board game as they have not paid rent for months, and reminding him of his promise to take her shopping.

Again, the movie paints a fictional but unpolished picture of downtown Nairobi-life. Don’s friends, and the actors in the movie, regularly play the featured board game. Most of the scenes are shot in the area where they live. The quarrels over money between a couple are nothing out of the ordinary.

Foxhole Entertainment as our first case is interesting for several reasons. It is the first, and so far the only, example I have come across of low-budget, informally made movies in Sheng⁷⁰. It illustrates how Sheng in local popular culture at the grassroots level is expanding to forms beyond hip-hop music.

Secondly, the case underscores the importance of Sheng for the identity construction of urban youth, while also bringing two new elements to the table: technology, and a mix of local groundedness and global cultural influences⁷¹. “Local groundedness” here refers to stories set in cities, or even neighborhoods where target audiences tend to live, and dealing with specific issues which speak to

⁷⁰ The Foxhole movies were made long before the internationally funded local blockbuster *Nairobi Half Life* (Gitonga, 2012) featured Sheng on the big screen, probably for the first time.

⁷¹ Openness to global cultural influences of course has always been characteristic of African popular culture (Barber 1987: 6). Still I want to foreground it here, as it is a recurring element of all cases discussed, even cases which would not usually be called “popular culture” in Barber’s sense (i.e. emanating from, and pertaining to, the people [Barber 1987: 9]).

them: the quest for money and jobs, love and friendship, et cetera. While treating those topics, Don mentions only high-end U.S. productions as a source of inspiration in terms of scripting and technicalities. The central presence of technology (mobile phones, computers) in Don's stories, and the pride he takes in his do-it-yourself, "jua kali"⁷² attitude, reflect how important technology-savviness is to him as an artist and - according to him - to his Urbanite audiences.

Thirdly, though Don clearly voices a rejection of traditional values and "older" cultural tastes (again, resonating Hebdige's subcultures), he seems to do this in the first place to contrast them with his own, more modern, Urbanite tastes. Even more interesting perhaps is the ambition in his words. The high technical quality he prides himself in, is aspirational more than real. Hoping to produce a big-budget blockbuster some day, he aims high. There is aspiration and identity-affirmation as well in Urbanites' strong interest in smartphones, technology and connectivity. In the words of filmmaker Cajetan Boy (2013): "The thing with technology is, it reflects how aspirational we are. No one wants to be left behind. If I know I need a gadget to read something, I am interested in it. If I know about smartphones to be in touch with friends... it is aspirational, even if (...) I am not economically strong, if I am technologically savvy it also lifts me up, it lifts me up there."

5. *Shujaaz (Heroes): a Sheng-language transmedia story about a DJ from the slums*

Well Told Story is a communications firm based in the residential former settler suburb of Karen in Nairobi. The company specializes in socially advantageous communications and production, targeted at Kenyan youth. It produces for a wide range of media: comic books, radio shows, and a lot of online content. It employs twenty-five people in total, more than half of them on a freelance basis. Its biggest and most successful production is a transmedia story revolving around a comic series called *Shujaaz.FM*. "Shujaaz" is Sheng for "heroes".

Shujaaz.FM is a monthly comic, launched in February 2010, and distributed with the Saturday Nation newspaper and a selection of Safaricom M-pesa (mobile money) kiosks in Kenya. It tells the story of DJ Boyie (or DJ B), a young Kenyan from the slums, and his friends. DJ Boyie has left school and like most of his peers has little prospects for the future. But he has a talent for electronics and has created his own radio station airing from his bedroom. He hacks Kenyan FM-waves to transmit his daily show *Shujaaz.FM* and reach young Kenyans as widely as he can, under the secret name of DJ B. The show, like the comic series, is in Sheng. *Shujaaz.FM* targets Kenyans aged 13 to 26. People are invited to engage and share good ideas through text messaging or social media. The radio show exists also in "real life", produced and transmitted by Well Told Story on at least 23 FM channels, and has a strong online presence: a website, animated episodes of DJ Boyie's adventures available on YouTube, and a character who is approachable and active on the social media. In each show, apart from exploring one of the stories in the comic edition of the month, DJ B shares useful and socially relevant information. He has more than 49,000 fans on Facebook. Young people comment on his shows, interact with him and share ideas. The three other principal characters in the show are fans regularly tuning in and posting comments.

DJ Boyie and his friends are positioned as heroes ("Shujaaz"), and constructed to be recognizable to a broad Kenyan youth audience, that can aspire to be like them. The show and stories aim to be as inclusive as possible, while still aiming to portray Kenyan life "as it is". Being inclusive also involves

⁷² See p. 81 and footnote 62.

helping audiences with the Sheng that is used. When I asked CEO Rob Burnet why he insists on using Sheng, even when it is difficult to understand for rural audiences, he replied:

“That may be true... It depends on how deep the Sheng is. This is accessible Sheng, it is not even 100% Sheng anyway, it’s a mix (...) The power of Sheng is, there is a competition: ‘how deep is your Sheng?’ So, people from upcountry may not understand people from Kibera. It’s a game to play. It changes all the time and we are careful not to go too deep with it. We do not want to leave people behind. (...) We also have a Sheng dictionary where we explain the new words, online and in the comic. It is extremely popular, that part of the project” (Burnet, 2012).

It is suggested that the use of Sheng makes *Shujaaz.FM* more appealing to young audiences throughout Kenya. Even if they are not proficient in the fast-changing Nairobi variant, it seems that many of them aspire to be, try to pick it up or feel attracted to it.

But as with Foxhole movies, tech-savviness and the suggestion of being “in the know” about ICT is important as well. Though the comics and the radio shows are the best way to reach people throughout Kenya with little access to television or internet, specific details giving the stories an aura of technological novelty are important. Only a part of the target audience can be reached online. Yet DJ Boyie’s online presence, and even his talent for technology, are ways of appealing to young people wanting to feel just as “connected” as their urban peers. Their attraction to *Shujaaz.FM*, again, is partly aspirational.

“(…) We are (...) making Youtube clips for that one percent of our audience who have access to it. (...) If you do stuff on Youtube, it’s the same as being called *Shujaaz.FM* instead of just *Shujaaz*. The FM extension refers to radio but it is also our website. We know that most of our audience haven’t got web access... but they want it. Our latest cover is a QR code for smartphones. You scan it and it takes you straight to our Facebook page. How many of our audience have got that kind of phone? One or a half percent? It does not matter. They would like a phone that does that. They want to feel as if they are part of the technological world. They were excited by that cover” (Burnet, 2012).

When topics require a bit more privacy and discretion, such as practicing safe sex or relationship issues, the messages are packaged in an even more urban, more underground fashion, and transmitted on late-night urban radio stations. A clear association is suggested between pirate radio, urbanness, Sheng language, and taboo topics: “We are going to talk about sex and naughty stuff, but not in the comic. We will take two characters from a particular episode from the comic and give them their own separate radio drama. It will be extremely fast and modern, hip hop, Sheng, violence, late night urban radio (...) With the comic all that we will do is promote the radio show, for instance say: it’s on at nine thirty” (Burnet, 2012).

More than 12 million *Shujaaz.FM*-comics have been produced and distributed in Kenya, and more than 8,000 radio programs have been aired. In terms of production volume, that is massive compared to the one man-initiative of Foxhole Entertainment. Although *Shujaaz.FM*’s Facebook page reads that “the writers, artists and actors are all young Kenyans who ensure that the content and design of the comics and radio shows have integrity, relevance and are cutting edge”, this is not a

story made “from within” the targeted audience group. DJ Boyie is a construction, created to help Well Told Story in pursuing its social mission, in partnership with corporate companies seeking to reach a wide audience base. In other words, *Shujaaz.FM* uses the language and codes of urban youth culture, in an effort to reach young Kenyans with social and educational messages.

The characters look more polished, and are definitely more constructed than what would normally appeal to the “connected” downtown Nairobi crowd – the Urbanites - that Don Fox was describing. But it plays with similar codes and also shows young people’s lives “as they are”: urban slums and rural reality are depicted, a rarity in Kenyan media. Sheng, technology, and “realness” are equally important ingredients as with Foxhole movies. And though the stories’ audiences are in rural areas as much as in the cities, they are definitely attracted to symbols of urbanness and technology. Through social media they increasingly follow music⁷³ that is trending in the capital:

“In the countryside, the older generation still looks out for River Road music. But their kids will look for what the youth in the city are listening to. Right now when we talk of urbanites, they are in town centres all over the country, that generation. [Question:] Also in villages? [Answer:] Yes, they have access to phones now. So the music people from the big city are consuming is the same music and content the youngsters from other towns are consuming (Mahugu, 2013).”

Finally, *Shujaaz.FM* promotes and celebrates the same ethnic “colorblindness” that Don ascribes to his Urbanite peers:

“None of our characters have a tribe. They clearly come from different parts of the country, but we do not explain their ethnicity (...). We deliberately remove ethnicity, and we talk about it in the stories. Charlie’s dad is a complete thug, all he can think about is the tribe of people around him. But Charlie is the new generation who does not think like that. (...) He moves freely between communities, while his dad bumps against his prejudices” (Burnet, 2012).

Well Told Story is very different from Foxhole Entertainment: a big, well-structured firm producing a story which aims to convey social-educational messages to youth around the country. Its use of Sheng is not a matter of pragmatism: many of the followers of the *Shujaaz.FM* stories are not proficient in it. Rather, Sheng is part of a mix of elements – along with technology and local groundedness - speaking to large groups of present-day Kenyan youth.

This second case complicates our thinking of Urbanites as a subcultural group. As with Don’s Urbanites, ethnicity is treated as a backward thing belonging to past generations. However, contrary to the first case discussed, Sheng is not an exclusionary in-group affair. In *Shujaaz.FM* it is intended to be inclusive. The story helps youth outside the city in their aspirations to be “in the know” of exclusive knowledge (in the sense of subcultural capital as theorized by Thornton in Gelder 2005: 184-192; see also p. 82 and 84) of new words and expressions. The aspect of urbanness is less pronounced, as the stories unfold in rural as much as, or perhaps more than, urban settings. Still, the focal concerns of Don’s Urbanites (Sheng language, a rejection of identity politics based on ethnic

⁷³ There is no mention of movies here; it is impossible to stream a feature length movie on a mobile phone in Kenya, at least when the device is not amongst the most expensive handhelds available. And even then, the network in rural places does not allow it.

affiliation, technology, the city, and “real life” as it is lived by audiences) are replicated as a means to appeal to youthful audiences.

Again, we see how Sheng is moving: in this case from downtown Nairobi and informal emanations of popular culture to being co-opted, in a more simplified and inclusive version, by bigger media entities. This process is ongoing in Kenya, but not as quickly as is sometimes believed. Though Githinji (2008: 116) mentions a “widespread use [of Sheng] in the mass media”, I am aware of only a few radio stations, two television shows (*Shuga* and *Machahari*), corporate marketing (Kenyan Poet 2011; Orido 2012), and one recent cinema blockbuster (*Nairobi Half Life*) featuring it. A visual artist based in Kibera comments: “Sheng will not make it into mainstream in our life time. It’s a coded language to subvert authority (parents, governments etc.) (...) Apart from Ghetto Radio and radio programs (...) that target the urban (!) working class and some community radios, I do not know of any. Also, it is a rapidly changing, and coded language which differs from neighborhood to neighborhood, and city to city” (Soudan, 2013 [direct Facebook message]).

6. Makmende, *Ha He*, and Just A Band: the first Kenyan music video gone viral

Like “Shujaaz”, “Makmende” also refers to heroes, or rather to one specific hero who is part of the collective contemporary Kenyan memory. However, contrary to DJ B and his friends, Makmende can hardly be said to be close or similar to any audiences. He is an imaginary superhero from the nineties in Kenya, brought back to life by Nairobi-based music collective Just A Band in the video clip for *Ha He*, a track off their second album 82. The slogan of the video is “Makmende Amerudi” (“Makmende is Back”). In the clip, a hilariously “angry” Makmende roams a fictional city with a clear resemblance to Nairobi, scaring or fighting off thugs, and saving carjacked women, all without spoiling his immaculately retro vestimentary style. The video can easily be found on YouTube.

The word “Makmende” entered Sheng vocabulary in Kenya towards the end of last century. It is believed that the word came from the (mis)pronunciation of a phrase spoken by Dirty Harry (Clint Eastwood) in the beginning of *Sudden Impact* (1983) (“Go ahead punk, *make my day*”, phonetically “mak me [n]de”) (Ligaga 2012: 6). The imaginary character’s style is not clearly defined: depending on when you were born he would represent a blend between late 1970s and early 1980s fashionwear (bell-bottoms, bandanas, sunglasses), or be more like Hollywood’s prototypical musclemen of the 1980s: Van Damme, Schwarzenegger, Stallone.

Style and image quality of the *Ha He* video are a reference to 1970s aesthetics, Kung Fu flicks (since long an essential element of movie culture in Kenya), and Blaxploitation movies. It is also an explicitly ironic collage of international styles and influences, reminiscent of movies like *Shaft* (Parks, 1971) or the Beastly Boys’ *Sabotage* video (1994). The music is clearly urban and festive, and has higher production quality and a more distinct style than the more serious Foxhole scores which Don is so proud of. As the characters in *Shujaaz.FM*, Makmende does not have a specific ethnic background, and his name is borrowed from Sheng (Ligaga 2012: 13). Though the video is far too ironic to show life in downtown Nairobi in a “real, unpolished” way, it features tongue-in-cheek humor and localized details which capital-dwellers easily relate to (Chuchu, 2013). At the same time it is media content which audiences across the continent as well as globally can “click” with, even when it is not clear to them who Makmende is. Jim Chuchu, ex-member of the band says: “Many things were very specific, names of people, insider jokes. When it crossed over and other people were talking about it,

interested in it without knowing what the words were about, that was cool, a mix of local and global, and interesting to both” (Chuchu, 2013).

Ha He has been a viral hype on Kenyan and international social media, and in spite of what their name suggests, Just A Band are more than merely a band. They have produced video installations (for instance the piece *Kudishnyao* [2011], shown in Nairobi and New York), they tour internationally with live acts, and have worked with, amongst others, the well-known Berlin-based DJ duo Modeselektor (for *Kichwateli* [2011] by Muchiri Njenga, a poetic science-fiction short film set in Nairobi). This demonstrates a far wider reach and a much more international fan and peer group than the Urbanite circles targeted by Don Fox. Just A Band fans can be found within Kenya as well as in the diaspora, and they follow the band’s trajectory on Twitter and other social media. *Ha He*’s success was built online, and fans and followers in Kenya are described as “the people who are online, the youngsters in any town, all the techies” (Mahugu, 2013), or, more exclusive and subcultural, as “the hipsters, the connected crowd” (Chuchu, 2013).

Though the members of Just A Band, like the people behind Foxhole Entertainment, were not trained in music mastering or video editing, through its humour and stylistic influences the informally-made video appeals to a (geographically) wider audience than my other cases. It has been seen by people throughout East Africa, in South Africa, and in the United States and the United Kingdom. As with Foxhole Entertainment we see strong local groundedness in combination with global cultural influences. However, contrary to Foxhole’s focus on contemporary mainstream American movies and television as a source of inspiration, *Ha He* shows a wider variety of cultural and stylistic references. The video can be called a cultural hybrid in the sense of Nederveen Pieterse (1994: 60): “cultural hybridization refers to the mixing of Asian, African, American, and European cultures (...) the making of global culture as a global *mélange*”, which is arguably one of the reasons for its universal appeal and popularity outside Kenya. Though technology does not play a role in the narrative of the video, the element of subcultural capital - in this case, of being connected, being part of the right online communities, being “in the know” of trending videos, or of being a “hipster” in the words of one of the ex-band members - is all the more important. Much less concerned with “the correct Sheng” or “the latest smartphone” than with awareness of different aesthetic influences, this is the sort of subcultural capital more likely to be possessed by youth with a more privileged background.

The case of *Ha He* is very different from, and perhaps more puzzling than, our two previous cases. More playful and more hybrid in style, it resonates more with the more contemporary, post-modern branch of subcultural theory discussed earlier. It is clearly less invested in a specific style or (sub-)cultural identity. It does not reject any “mainstream” culture or traditional values. It reflects tastes that are more temporary, stylistically fluid and loosely defined, in a “pastiche” (Muggleton 2000: 45) of cultural references. Sheng is an important element in this blend, but not an essential one. The strong attachment in previous cases to particular codes becomes relaxed with its post-modern Urbanite fans. They move in Nairobi’s growing middle classes more than in the estates, and it is likely that they have more in common with young generations of similar backgrounds elsewhere in the world. Subcultural “scenes” (again, with Thornton in Gelder 2005) in this way are increasingly dissociated from geographic locality. Nederveen Pieterse (1994: 60) calls this aspect of cultural hybridity “(...) transcultural class affinities in sensibilities vis à vis urban life and nature. In other words, the other side of cultural hybridity is transcultural convergence.”

Again, this case shows how Sheng has expanded from its “lower-class urban youth” origins to being recycled within new forms of Kenyan youth culture. It also suggests yet another type of Urbanite audiences. Before going viral, the *Ha He* video was picked up by Nairobi’s online “hipster” crowd. Though also city-born and interested in ICT, these are groups with a different background and lifestyle from the peers of Don Fox or the youth targeted by *Shujaaz.FM*. Overlooking these higher-end urban youth groups would be a mistake: they are small but growing in numbers, avid producers of digital (such as blogs⁷⁴) and creative (videos, visual art and short movies) content, keen consumers of local, global, and Afropolitan⁷⁵ culture, and they have an above-average awareness of and exposure to cultural trends from different parts of the world.

7. Urbanization, youth, economic growth, technology

Kenya’s total population stands at more than 40,5 million, a large majority of whom are younger than fifteen (Nyabuga and Booker 2013: 9, citing from the Kenya 2009 Population and Housing Census). Its urban demographic is expected to quadruple by 2045 (Fengler 2013: 72). This urbanization is indirectly related to many things discussed so far: the urban focus of stories told, the way growing groups of young people create urban slang, aesthetics and codes, and their exposure to and interaction with global as well as local cultural flows.

Depending on one’s social background, being young in the racially and economically segregated city of Nairobi (Frederiksen in Sørensen and Fog Olwig 2010: 48) is a very different experience. Different social groups, and I might add, different groups of young Urbanites “(...) live parallel lives, existing within minutes of each other and yet never touching” (Higgins 2013). Anxieties about increasing population pressure and economic insecurity for some exist parallel to optimism about a promising and middle class economic future for others, all of them related to urbanization. This difference can be found reflected implicitly, for instance, in the serious and “raw” depiction of Nairobi in Foxhole Entertainment’s movies, versus the irony and cosmopolitan blend of cultural influences in *Ha He*.

Similarly, technological progress in Kenya has been strong and, importantly, has received tremendous amounts of attention in formal and social media, as well as in countless weblogs. Fengler (2013: i, ii) states: “Technology and IT innovation have become trademarks of Kenya in recent years and they have the potential to transform the country going forward.” Kenyans are amongst the most active on the social media globally (Buty 2013). Kenya is also the cradle of mobile banking, with a staggering 29 million M-Pesa users in 2011 (Fengler 2011: 68). Technology as a crucial part of the country’s policy priorities has been affirmed and reiterated in, for instance, the policy papers *Connected Kenya* of the Kenya ICT Board and *Kenya Vision 2030* of the Ministry of Planning and National Development, policy statements which, judging from the mentions and comments they receive on the social media, appear to be well-known. This vision of Kenya at the forefront of ICT is a strong one, one that is voiced by many Kenyans today. It is a very positive and future-oriented “narrative” that seems to have permeated Nairobi’s different social layers rather deeply. I contend

⁷⁴ See, for instance, Kennedy Kachwanya, chair of the Bloggers Association of Kenya, interviewed in *Smart Monkey* (2013) on the size of Kenya’s blogosphere.

⁷⁵ “Afropolitanism” was first described by Taijye Tuakli-Wosornu (2005) as a generation of well-traveled Africans, people with a strong affinity with Africa but feeling home in many places. Achille Mbembe (2007) theorized it as “a new way of African modernity”, feeding on “multiple racial legacies”, but also as “(...) a culture of consumerism that partakes directly of the glows of globalization”. A mix of “African” and “cosmopolitan”, Afropolitan culture is associated with contemporary pop culture, fashion, and lifestyle.

that the idea of Kenya as a regional East African technology-hub is a source of pride and, again, aspiration for Kenyans of different walks of life. This positive and future-oriented “narrative” could well be part of the reason why technology is so prominent in the stories discussed in this article. For Urbanites aspiring to but excluded from upward social mobility, technology thus becomes a code: possessing it, knowing it, and being online, becomes a source of social capital (as we see reflected in the work of Foxhole Entertainment, and to some extent in the *Shujaaz* stories). For young Urbanites worrying less about social mobility, or for whom urbanization and technological progress hold nothing but promise, these codes are less important. Being connected is not an issue, and they have the means at their disposal to stay attuned to trends in local and global culture.

8. Conclusion and discussion

In the previous sections three cases of contemporary media production from Nairobi were discussed.

Foxhole Entertainment reaches a relatively small urban group of youth pertaining to middle-to-lower socioeconomic strata. Company leader Don Fox is convinced that this Urbanite target group is in reality a majority in Nairobi, and that past a few distribution-related hurdles he will reach much larger crowds. *Shujaaz.FM* uses various platforms to talk to rural and urban youth throughout Kenya, spreading social messages and useful information, while using Sheng and particular codes signifying urbanness and technological “connectedness” to appeal to them. In *Ha He* a fictional superhero keeps the streets of (an un-named) Nairobi safe. The video went viral on the social media in Kenya and internationally. A playful and creative collage of styles with references to seventies’ aesthetics and contemporary urban music, the *Ha He* video is a different breed from the more straightforward and serious Foxhole movies, or from *Shujaaz.FM* which aims for social goals rather than “just” fun or entertainment.

The way Don Fox of Foxhole Entertainment describes Nairobi’s Urbanites has a clear exclusionary twist: you have to be “in the know” about the latest Sheng, young enough to know about new mobile phones and computers, “real” enough to prefer images of downtown Nairobi to the sexy girls, big cars and posh houses shown in most music videos. Don also voiced, if not opposition to, then at least a rejection of older generations, rural people, and Riverwood audiences, who in his eyes are not well-informed and have “backward” ideas about ethnic differences between Kenyans. They are not rejected for any ideological reasons related to an assumed cultural dominance: they are simply viewed as ignorant, rural and tribal. They don’t know about good movies, about technology, et cetera. Referring to Gelder’s definition of subcultures, we could perhaps say that they are “just ordinary, mainstream Kenyans”.

Like the “game” Rob Burnet was referring to (p. 88), one’s proficiency in “the real Sheng” matters. In one of the comments on *Nangos* on Youtube someone writes: “My Sheng is so outdated. Please give us more of this.” In *Ha He*, too, Sheng was an important part in a mix of local references. Speaking deep Sheng could be seen as equivalent to possessing the right subcultural capital, as being street-smart, or rough (Githinji 2008: 131).

Don is proud of his studio, technological ingenuity and his do-it-yourself, low-budget approach of things. However, the high production quality he ascribes to his movies is a matter of aspiration rather than reality. Their quality is not as different from African popular cinema flicks as he likes to think. His knowledge of and interaction with technology is a far cry from the daily activities taking place at

Nairobi's trendy iHub, a well-known meeting place for Kenyan and international ICT experts. He lacks cultural and social capital. But the interest is there, as is the ambition. Could it be that this Urbanite group is characterized as much by aspiration as by subcultural exclusivity? This might make sense in a country where social mobility and chances to accomplish ambitions are unequally distributed. There is the aspiration of rural youth to be more like urban youth, the aspiration of urban techies "from the estates" to be more like urban techies from higher social strata, even the aspiration of middle class youth to stay attuned to real, street-smart, downtown Sheng (Githinji 2008: 130).

Shujaaz.FM speaks to both urban and rural youth. According to CEO Rob Burnet, the fact that the radio show also lives online, will hopefully be transmitted to mobile phones in the future, and features QR codes, makes it appealing to young people throughout Kenya. The graphics and the characters' outfits are urban. The Sheng dictionary, keeping audiences updated on new developments, is very popular. Why would this be useful, if not to feel connected to the lifestyles of Nairobi's Urbanites? Also note that DJ B has a talent for electronics, builds his own radio station, and hacks other Kenyan stations to talk to his peers. Though not central to *Shujaaz.FM's* narratives, technology is important. DJ B claims a platform for young voices and takes things in his own hands, "illegally" (although *Shujaaz.FM* is obviously fictional), which could be read as signifying technological cleverness but also subcultural resistance.

The case of *Ha He* with the return of Makmende is different: playful, ironic, stylistically eclectic, it is an example of contemporary cultural hybridization. Here, too, the idea of subcultural capital is relevant. It was surely good to be amongst the first people "in the know" about the return of Makmende, and to be part of the online communities – the "hipsters" – amongst whom the video first circulated. The great success of videos such as *Ha He*, highly inventive collages of various stylistic elements, signal the growth of a more post-modern (with Muggleton 2000) youth group, part of Kenya's expanding middle classes. In numbers, they are a minority compared to the Urbanites as described by Don. They are young people who are tuned into, "in the know" of their local arts scene, who go to the happening concerts and share the "must-see" videos. They live in the city, understand Sheng but may not speak it every day. They are well-informed of, and likely to own smartphones, and are very active on the social media. Possibly they have the disposable income to choose a clothing style, and probably the style will be urban as in any big city, but not necessarily part of any one clear stylistic group, as is the case with their taste in music.

I have discussed three cases of contemporary Kenyan media production in Sheng which, despite wide differences, have a number of traits and concerns in common. I have used elements of subcultural theory to frame these traits, while pointing out important differences. Though young generations in Nairobi have many things in common – where they live, the fact that they are growing in numbers, larger evolutions in the city and the country, and a strong presence of a "technology narrative" in the country – there are equally large differences between them. The socioeconomic disparities within the city and the differences between rural and urban youth are associated with different social backgrounds and financial means, differential access to information and media, and thus different types of cultural, and subcultural, capital. We cannot, therefore, refer to "the" Urbanites as to "one" homogenous group, but rather as a widely diverse pool of young people, reflective of the strong diversity of Kenyan society.

Existing theoretical schemata (subcultural, mainstream and popular, local and global, formal and informal) seem increasingly insufficient as tools to make sense of today's widely different emanations of youth-produced and/or youth-targeted audiovisual culture. Cultural codes are as important as ever for the self-styling and the construction of identities - real, imagined or aspirational - of today's Kenyan youth. These codes travel: they are upwardly mobile, co-opted by corporate marketing and (high-end) cultural industries, and constantly changed and adapted to stay "sharp" and exclusive. What is more, culture and media feed into and shape each other in a continuous loop of feedback, mixing local and global elements, and creating and promoting fashions that may become subcultures, popular culture forms, or that may vanish unnoticed. In Mazzarella's words (2004: 355) we need to "confront culture as (...) something continuously made and remade through constantly shifting relations, practices, and technologies of mediation." While this reduces, or at least complicates, the theoretical lenses at our disposal, it may help us to better grasp the complex and constantly changing cultural and social realities we study.

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Essay 3: relevant elements regarding over-arching hypotheses

The cases presented in chapter 3 are again demonstrative of a growing diversification of audiovisual production in Nairobi: ranging from underground tales produced at the grassroots over ironic videos by a “hipster” band to socially-targeted stories spread by a formal company (hypothesis 2).

The commonalities of these otherwise disparate stories are reflective of Nairobi’s local context: the use of Sheng which travels from music videos to movies and from underground narratives to high-end productions⁷⁶; the differences between age generations and the creation of new urban identities disregarding ethnic antagonisms; the pervasiveness of new technology in stories, delivery methods, and symbols; Kenya’s policy and economic environment conducive to technological innovation; and, again, its heterogeneity and social inequalities, determining whether and how increased access to filming equipment can materialize into sustainable storytelling circuits, which feeds into our hypothesis of democratization.

The stories are mostly targeted at young Kenyans, but their reach varies from the very local (Sheng-language stories set in Ngara Estate) over the national (*Shujaaz.FM*) to the transnational or even transcontinental level (*Ha He* is an example of contemporary African pop culture, elements of which are shared across the continent and in its diaspora).

This seems to add new layers to Straubhaar’s levels of cultural affinity (2008): all cases are locally relevant, but their relevance to viewers exists on different levels which interact and overlap. Additionally, new layers of identification are discernible. Foxhole, for instance, could be considered as “hyper-local”: targeted at delineated groups within a determined area of the city. Straubhaar recognizes these strong local attachments people tend to have (2008: 14), but does not mention the existence of media which speak to their hyper-local affinities – as does Foxhole. At the same time Foxhole is part and parcel of today’s globalizing media flows. Don Fox cites Hollywood blockbusters and American television series as his main inspiration, the stories of which he appropriates and translates to his own day-to-day environment.

Ha He “works” on different levels as well. Through insider jokes and Sheng language it is very Nairobi-focused, yet it refers to a wide variety of cultural influences, and has been shared across the continent and in its diaspora. As many other forms of digital pop culture today it bears resemblance to what has come to be known as “Afropolitan” culture (see also p. 92): trendy media production from or related to Africa, shared across African countries and followed by dedicated bloggers in the West.

“Afropolitans” are usually described as well-traveled⁷⁷, cosmopolitan Africans (Tuakli-Wosornu 2005) feeding on multiple racial legacies (Mbembe 2007). They have a strong interest in and commitment

⁷⁶ Though it had not been released when I was writing this article, *Nairobi Half Life* (Gitonga, 2012) is another example of a high-end production featuring Sheng as the language that its downtown characters would use. It was developed and produced by One Fine Day Productions in the context of a film workshop aimed at helping “African filmmakers tell their own stories” (www.onefinedayfilms.com).

⁷⁷ Interestingly, several of my Kenyan interviewees pointed out that they did not feel that “having traveled” was a necessary factor any longer of being “Afropolitan”. The internet, they feel, has given them all the

to the cultural production and heritage of Africa and its diaspora, rather than a specific country or place. Afropolitan culture, then, reflects this “African cosmopolitanism”. As an attitude, a lifestyle or an interest, Afropolitanism could be considered a mutual interest and affinity between Africa and its diaspora: rephrased to Straubhaar’s layers of cultural interest, Afropolitanism could be situated between the global appeal of Bollywood and Latin-American telenovelas (but more multi-faceted and less generic), and that of transnational cultural-linguistic spaces (which it transcends, as it is not confined to specific nation-states, but rather to an “all-African” interest in contemporary culture with links with the world of pop, fashion, video, et cetera).

At the same time, Afropolitanism has been denounced for being little more than a new African “single story” for the young and privileged: fashionable, commodity-oriented and celebratory, with no consideration for the large majorities on the continent who fall outside its upbeat future narrative⁷⁸. It has become tied in with the equally contentious and slippery idea of expanding middle classes⁷⁹. As a term it fails to grasp the entirety of African contemporary pop culture, as obviously not all of this culture travels as widely. I retain it here as an evocative term pointing to a growing and intensifying exchange of modern and/or avantgarde pop media between the African continent and its diaspora, but I want to stress that it is by no means representative of all contemporary African pop culture.

exposure they need. In that sense being “Afropolitan” is more a matter of interest or attitude, than of privilege, according to them (Chuchu, 2013; Macharia, 2013). They do not attach much interest to the word either: a piece of media is good, or it is not (Macharia, 2013).

⁷⁸ For further reading about the debate on Afropolitanism, see Bosch Santana (2013), who refers to Wainaina (2012); Dabiri (2014); Tveit (2013); and MS Afropolitan (2013).

⁷⁹ The African Development Bank defines African middle classes as spending between 2 and 20 USD per day, and estimates this group at about 30% of the African population. However more than half of this group is situated closely to the minimum of 2 USD, and is constantly at risk of falling out of this middle class group (Enaudeau 2013). The measure of “middle-classness” is considered arbitrary and far too optimistic to accurately reflect the social reality on the ground.

**ESSAY 4: FORCES FOR CHANGE: CREATIVE
INNOVATION AND ITS OBSTACLES IN TANZANIA'S
BONGO INDUSTRY**

IV. ESSAY 4: FORCES FOR CHANGE: CREATIVE INNOVATION AND ITS OBSTACLES IN TANZANIA'S BONGO INDUSTRY

IN THIS CHAPTER I ANALYZE A SELECTION OF "FORCES FOR CHANGE" IN TODAY'S BONGOWOOD: TANZANIA'S DAR ES SALAAM-BASED POPULAR CINEMA CIRCUIT. I FOCUS ON CASES EMBEDDED IN WHAT I WILL CALL "BONGO PROPER": THE PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF SWAHILI-LANGUAGE MOVIES, PRODUCED ON LOW BUDGETS, RELEASED ON DVD AND TARGETED AT LOCAL (TANZANIAN, AND BY EXTENSION SWAHILI-SPEAKING) AUDIENCES. "FORCES FOR CHANGE" CAN BE INDIVIDUALS, INITIATIVES OR ORGANIZATIONS, WORKING TO AFFECT AND ALTER ONE OR SEVERAL ASPECTS OF THE INDUSTRY. THE INNOVATION THEY AIM FOR CAN BE CREATIVE IN KIND, I.E. RELATED TO THE MOVIES PRODUCED, OR IT CAN BE RELATED TO BONGOWOOD'S VALUE CHAIN AND INHERENT POWER RELATIONS. THEY ARE THEORIZED AS DIFFERENT INSTANCES OF "PRAXIS" (WITH MOSCO 2009) FROM A CRITICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY PERSPECTIVE. THEY FACE SEVERAL OBSTACLES, MOST OF THEM RELATED TO CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INDUSTRY ITSELF: A QUASI-MONOPOLY PERPETUATING AN ESTABLISHED IMBALANCE OF POWER, PROTECTED AND REPRODUCED BY THE MOST POWERFUL PLAYERS IN IT.

This article is under review with the *Journal of African Cinemas*.

1. Forces for change in the Bongo industry

Bongowood, or Bongo⁸⁰, is often described as "the Tanzanian answer to Nollywood" (see for instance Krings in Saul and Austen, 2010: 75). Having emerged around the beginning of this century and grown widely popular from 2005 onwards (Krings in Krings and Okome, 2013: 323), indeed it bears many similarities to the South Nigerian film phenomenon. It produces movies targeted explicitly at local (in the sense of Tanzanian and/or Swahili-speaking) audiences, produced on low budgets and in short production cycles, and it reflects on questions which local viewers relate to. Topics include, but are not limited to, the negotiation between traditional customs and modern life and interests, rural versus urban realities, materialism versus the care for family and community, Christianity and miracles, local myths and spiritual traditions.

That African popular cinema circuits are similar in many ways shows how Nollywood as an economic model has inspired film practitioners, but it can also be seen as a reflection of shared legacies across the continent: ranging from experiences of colonialism and postcolonial challenges (Haynes 2011: 68-69; Larkin 2008: 169-170), to the cultural influence and commercial dominance of cheap American and Asian movies, sold in Africa at give-away prices (Haynes 2011: 71). At the same time there are important differences related to local context. Notwithstanding its linguistic and ethnic diversity, Nigeria has the advantage of an enormous interior and diaspora market. South-Nigerian Nollywood

⁸⁰ "Bongo" is a nickname for Dar es Salaam; it is derived from "ubongo", the Swahili word for "brain".

produces in English, which gives it international appeal and prestige. Nigeria's oil boom (Haynes 2011: 68) caused a fast uptake of home utensils (including VCRs), followed by a long crisis during which it was considered unsafe in many places to go out to visit cinemas (Jedlowski 2012: 438). All this has contributed to a strong habit of home watching in the country. Local specificities such as language of production, market demographic, and economic and historic context, result in different conditions and opportunities for success and growth. In East Africa, Bongowood is the biggest local video industry, in large part because of its domestic market, and because of the language in which it is made: Swahili is not only spoken in Tanzania, but is a *lingua franca* in different countries and regions in East Africa.

Different circuits of African cinema production should not be reduced to copies of the South Nigerian phenomenon. They merit study as entities of their own, for which Nollywood can serve, at most, as a comparative benchmark, and with due attention for local specificity and resulting power imbalances and economic opportunities. In the case of Bongo, valuable work has been done by Claudia Böhme (in Krings and Okome, 2013: 327-346), who has laid bare some of the influences – local myths from different eras and regions in Tanzania, Nollywood, but also Hollywood archetypes such as vampire figures – in a selection of Bongo horror movies. More focused on mediation and audience reception, Matthias Krings has written about the practice of video narration (live and taped translation and commentary) of foreign movies in Tanzania, while Mhando and Kipeja (2010) have traced its value chain dynamics. Tanganyika's and Zanzibar's media and cinema history have been documented by scholars such as Laura Fair (in Saul and Austen 2010: 108-130; 2013), James Brennan (2005), and Martin Sturmer (1998).

The aim of this article is to study contemporary Bongowood as an industry harboring forces for conservation and forces for change. By "forces for change" I mean individuals, organizations, and/or initiatives that undertake actions aimed directly or indirectly at modifying the state of the industry. These changes can be very small, or can be aimed at the business country-wide. They can be creative or artistic in nature (for instance through experimenting with style and stories of movies, or through the innovative use of technology), or they can be aimed at the industry's structure, its value chain, funding mechanisms, power dynamics, and/or distribution methods. These forces for innovation may be modest – few people I have spoken to consider Bongo as subversive – but they are there for whoever cares to look, and important to help us to steer clear of simplistic, conservative, or misguided statements about the Bongo industry.

Using the lens of political economy, these forces for change can be considered instances of "praxis": "the free and creative activity by which people produce and change the world" (Mosco 2009: 34; see also chapter 2). Explicit attention to such instances of praxis is particularly useful to avoid overly structuralistic or economically deterministic thinking when applying critical political economy. In media studies critical P.E. takes into account embedded power relations as well as relevant historical, social, economic and societal context factors. It is also explicitly attentive to questions of "moral philosophy", asking not only how power relations are organized, but also what the consequences are and whether or not this can be considered fair. It thus acknowledges and allows for a degree of subjectivity on the researcher's part.

Forces for innovation exist in a dialectic relation with forces for conservation in the industry, linked to the interests of incumbents benefiting from a given status quo. Film practitioners are limited by the

structure of, and power dynamics within, the industry itself. They operate with certain (limited) financial means, within technical, practical and technological constraints, and with an audience outreach determined by limited distribution options.

2. Instances of praxis in “Bongo proper”

Several interesting Tanzanian films were released in recent years, many of them embodying creative innovation. Not all of these productions, however, fully pertain to the core Bongo industry as I want to study it here, and which I will refer to as “Bongo proper”. The distinction is important because the aim is to study forces for innovation which face obstacles characteristic of the core Bongo industry. Some of the most acclaimed recent Tanzanian productions were made on larger budgets than the average Bongo movie, with public funding, and/or by directors who are not Tanzanian or who have been trained abroad. It can therefore be assumed to have been easier for these films to deviate from the beaten “Bongo-track”, both creatively and production-wise.

For instance *Chumo* (2011, Jordan Riber) is considered by many one of the best Bongo movies ever made. It is widely perceived as a Bongo product, partly because it was distributed by Steps Entertainment, Tanzania’s biggest distributor of Bongo film. However, *Chumo* was not a commercial project: aimed at spreading a message of malaria prevention, it enjoyed generous funding (about 100,000 USD), was made with the high-end equipment of Dar es Salaam-based Media for Development International (MFDI), and was not required to make profit. The short film *Shoeshine* (2013, Amil Shivji, inspired by Sembène’s *Borom Sarret* [1963]) was made with a 10,000 USD award: it was one of the winners of Haraka, a scripting contest organized by Canal France International, and its director was trained in Toronto. Two beautiful recent films, shot in Zanzibar, are the half-animated short film *Jonah* (2013, by British director Kibwe Tavares) and the erotic-poetic *Zamora* (2011, by Shams Banji), produced by the high-end Zanzibar-based production house ZG. Finally, there is the television series *Siri Ya Mtungi* (also by MFDI) that has met with critical acclaim⁸¹ and favorable viewer rates alike⁸². These are all high-quality Tanzanian productions which have pushed the boundaries of what is possible under the label of Bongo, but they do not pertain to “Bongo proper” as it will be understood here.

By “Bongo proper” I will refer to movies produced by individuals or small-scale companies in Dar es Salaam, in Swahili (with occasional code-switching to English), on relatively to very low budgets, made during short production cycles, and aimed at making a financial profit (or as a minimum at recouping investments). Like their Nigerian counterparts these movies are almost invariably produced and sold in two parts. Scripts are often improvised, and low-cost equipment is used, although of late this equipment has increased in quality (Dundas Nilsen-Moe, 2013; Shivji, 2013; Conrad, 2013). Professionals in this industry are often self-taught. The movies are not usually featured in the festival circuit, though there are exceptions: the Zanzibar International Film Festival, for instance, has a separate section dedicated to Bongo movies.

To identify my cases of praxis (with Mosco 2009) within “Bongo proper” I have used snowball sampling. During a first round of background interviews with key figures in the Tanzanian media

⁸¹ Not everyone was enamored with *Siri Ya Mtungi*: see for instance Attiah (2014).

⁸² Viewer rates fell after the analogue television signal in Tanzania was gradually switched off, but the series was also followed on MFDI’s Swahiliwood YouTube channel (Riber, 2013).

industry, I inquired who they regard as today's innovators of Bongo. From a resulting list I singled out the respondents available for an in-depth interview and, where relevant, whose movies I had access to. This has resulted in interviews with Timoth Conrad (director of photography and editor at Timamu Effects), Issa Mbura (lecturer at the Department of Fine and Performance Arts of Dar es Salaam University, and director of the movie *Crush*), and Richard Jorams of the Tanzanian Video Library Association. Additionally I spoke with Jairaj Damodaran, CEO of Steps Entertainment. As the biggest DVD-distributor and financial producer of Bongo movies, Steps is arguably the most powerful player in the field of Bongo. It is often mentioned as the industry player that most embodies and protects the status quo within the industry (Shivji, 2013; Conrad, 2013; Riber, 2013; Dundas Nilsen-Moe, 2013). At the same time, Steps is considered indispensable to keep the industry alive (Riber, 2013): it disposes of funding capital, has its own duplication plant, and controls the only formal distribution network across and even outside of Tanzania. It is important to hear its voice as a privileged and authoritative observer, and as the largest player in the Bongo circuit.

3. Steps Entertainment: vertical integration and star power

Roughly two or three large, and about fifteen smaller DVD-distributors are active in Bongowood today (Jorams, 2013). The biggest and most powerful by far, additionally active as a financial producer, is Steps Entertainment. Established in 2007, Steps releases more than six movies per month through an outlet network in different Tanzanian cities. Production budgets vary between 15 and 30 million Tanzanian Schillings (henceforth TZS; this equals roughly between 9,000 and 18,000 USD). Turnovers revolve around 22,000 copies per movie, although according to CEO Jairaj Damodaran a movie released by Steps needs 40,000 to 50,000 sold copies in order to break even, suggesting that Steps' average revenue from sales alone is insufficient. Damodaran believes that competitors' films are not required to produce similar turnovers, as they are usually made on narrower budgets, making it easier to break even.

When I spoke to him in the summer of 2011⁸³ Damodaran was concerned about the pirate⁸⁴ activities in Tanzania, which had affected his sales. In the meantime a number of anti-piracy measures have been taken, including the obligation for producers to pay for a validation sticker demonstrating the legitimacy of their copies – an additional burden for small producers already working on slim budgets. Steps have also decreased their retail price from an average of 3,000 TZS in 2011 to 2,000 in 2013⁸⁵ (or about 1,8 to 1,2 USD), in an effort to compete on price with pirate vendors. Though piracy has decreased since then, and despite what Damodaran perceives as a steady increase in Bongo viewership, the growth in sales of Steps movies has not followed at a similar pace. He ascribes this to a shift in viewer habits: from buying movies to renting them and/or watching them on television. Especially the many video libraries in Dar es Salaam (Claudia Böhme counted 6,000 in 2011 [Damodaran, 2011], and by now there are believed to be 10,000 [Jorams, 2013]) bother him: “Before, people were not used to renting. Now it is habitual and it is everywhere. Viewership has increased but libraries have taken over circulation.”

⁸³ Interview conducted together with Lizelle Bisschoff, Dar es Salaam (Kariakoo), July 2011.

⁸⁴ These are mainly “machingas” or street hawkers, copying movies on blank discs, improvising sleeves and selling them for 500 to 1,000 TZS (0,3 to 0,6 USD).

⁸⁵ Prices are per disc; a movie is usually produced in two parts, resulting in a retail price of 4,000 TZS (2,4 USD).

The owners of these video libraries buy copies of new releases at sales outlets, at the same price as regular customers. There is no shared revenue agreement with the films' distributors, which may seem odd at first glance. However, profit-sharing deals are as uncommon in Bongoood as in most other semi- to informal media industries (Lobato 2009: 119). Steps itself, arguing that it is impossible to monitor sales for each separate movie released, has only once entered a split revenue agreement, for the distribution of *Chumo* (2011, Jordan Riber). One step further down the value chain, the many video dens (small shacks screening DVDs for a modest entrance fee, often called videobandas) rent movies directly from the libraries, again at the regular customer price (1,000 TZS [0,6 USD] per movie) and make an income from screening them.

Damodaran does not mind the videobandas as much as the libraries, since the former create and sustain a taste for Bongo movies while reaching audiences that cannot afford to buy them. One could perhaps reason that the bandas, targeting social groups that would otherwise be lost as an audience segment, are not in direct competition with Steps' sales activities. Contrarily, Damodaran is convinced that the libraries have negatively affected people's film buying habit. At the same time, by complaining that they insufficiently absorb Steps' high output volume, he implicitly seems to view them as an important buying customer segment. Whatever the case, the changes occurring along the Bongo value chain, and the power shifts they are leading to, are a matter of debate in the industry. I will come back to this in the next section, when discussing the activities of the Tanzanian Video Libraries Association.

It is difficult for Steps to recoup investments through sales activities alone. An extra source of income (about 1,500 USD per film) comes from television broadcasting, specifically pay-TV (digital and satellite television). During the first half of 2013 the analogue television broadcasting signal in Tanzania was gradually switched off, leaving television viewers the two expensive options of satellite or digital TV. Ironically this shift also represents an opportunity for anyone in the business of selling, renting or screening DVDs. Especially players possessing a competitive edge (brand strength, star power, exclusive contracts) are expected to profit from this situation.

As the biggest Bongo brand in the country, and with close ties to all the movie stars, Steps possesses both brand and star power, giving it a considerable advantage over its competitors. Recently it has tightened existing relations with celebrities (Jacob Stephen ["JB"], Vincent Kigosi ["Ray"], Issa Mussa ["Cloud"], and others) even further, by entering into exclusive production arrangements with them. A small circle of famous actors, all of whom are also directors and/or producers, now receive funding to produce four movies per year exclusively for Steps. Budgets for these productions are higher, which according to Damodaran will lead to a higher-quality creative result. As a consequence the company has decided on a substantial decrease in its external acquisitions. Damodaran is intent on buying much less, and much more selectively, from third parties: "If they [filmmakers] do what everyone has always been doing, we will not be interested. But maybe we find something [interesting], we will buy it, put it in the market, and see the result by the next movie" (Damodaran, 2013).

This begs the question what should be considered quality, and what amounts to repetition (i.e., "doing what everyone has always been doing", as Damodaran phrases it). An important part of Steps' competitive advantage lies in the fame of a handful of recurring actors in its films. In a way, repetition is part and parcel of its business strategy based on star power. As a profit-seeking

enterprise in a commercial environment it makes sense for the company to give its audiences what they will pay for at the lowest cost possible, the assumption being that as long as customers buy the movies, their quality is sufficient. “Culture does not look for quality”, Damodaran says. “You might not like our culture but you like yours. An American might not like yours. Whatever quality, if it is your culture you will love it.” When asked what he himself sees as quality, Damodaran talks about scripting and tempo, movie topics, sound quality, and the evolution of genres. Action flicks and conversation-based comedy have recently improved and grown in popularity, and in his view the quality of his movies in general has increased: “Sound-wise they have improved a lot. (...) They [the filmmakers] are understanding movies now, [the tempo is] faster (...) I used to get bored when watching it (...) [Now] the flow has been very good, good themes,... but it all depends on budget, on what you pay them.” Coupled with the strategy to channel finances to an exclusive circle of producers, and given the monopolistic structure of the industry, the chances of entering the market have thus become slimmer for newcomers. They are left with the choice between, either, replicating the narrative and stylistic clichés which have proven to be a successful formula on a shoestring budget, or spending their own time, creative energy, and money on creative experiment without being assured that they will find distribution or make their money back.

Mosco (2009: 24) defines “power” as “the ability to control other people, processes, and things, even in the face of resistance.” Steps controls the largest distribution network in the country, giving it an extraordinary negotiation position vis-à-vis individual producers. It has recently taken measures to tie in the most famous actors in the industry, further consolidating its leading position. It is also one of the few players in the country with its own duplication facility. As a quasi-monopolist it can keep the price it pays for films as low as it sees fit. Strategically it can afford to be ambiguous about turnovers and sales figures. For lack of serious competition, and despite widespread complaints about how it treats individual filmmakers, the company can avoid all creative risk-taking for the time being. This may change in the future, as the first “force for change” I will discuss may bring changes to the current balance of market power.

4. The Tanzanian Library Association: validating the role of libraries and videobandas

The Tanzanian Library Association was founded in 2009 with the aim to bring the video libraries in the country together, to structure and validate them as part of the larger film value chain, and to represent them within the industry and with policy makers. It was created partly in response to claims by distributors that the libraries were killing their business (see also previous section).

The Association’s chairman Richard Jorams calls video libraries a crucial part of the value chain, as they offer access to movies where otherwise there would be none. Shops are not widely dispersed, requiring buying customers to travel to Dar es Salaam or to the nearest (larger) town. In contrast, there is an estimate of 10,000 video libraries active in Dar, and an additional 10,000 in Tanzania (Jorams, 2013). Together with the videobandas (about 3,000 in Dar and 10,000 in the country), Jorams believes that the libraries are “at the forefront” of Bongo-watching in the country, in close proximity to their clients.

Most Tanzanians, if given the choice, prefer not to buy but to rent movies (Jorams, 2013; Shivji, 2013). The movies are perishable commodities with a short life-cycle, and are not usually viewed more than once. Their economic value is determined in large part by their release date and cast. With approximately twenty weekly releases in today’s Bongo industry (Jorams, 2013), it is financially

and practically impossible for fans to make a big habit of buying them. Buying is expensive too for the average Bongo fan: 4,000 TZS⁸⁶ (about 2,4 USD), versus 1,000 TZS (0,6 USD) to rent, the latter price often shared between different members of a household. In part because distributors want to avoid giving pirate vendors or street hawkers the opportunity to fill an availability gap, there is no established windowing system: movies are for sale or rent throughout the country shortly after release. The libraries' choice in films is relatively wide, as they do not buy selectively. Depending on the size of its clientele a library will buy one or several copies per movie. On average the movies are available for rent for two or three months, after which they are considered old, or the discs have deteriorated to a point where they can no longer be watched. The supply of movies across Tanzania is meticulously planned: posters for new films are sent in advance to regional agents throughout the country, who in turn take and pass on orders from the libraries in their respective territories. All this is prepared and scheduled in detail in order to deliver copies in time, before pirate activity can take over.

The videobandas are as important as the libraries for providing access to Bongo films. Analogue television has been switched off, and electricity is difficult to come by in large parts of the country. For people who do not possess a DVD-player or television set, or who cannot afford to rent, video dens are the preferred option. Access fees vary between 100 and 200 TZS (as little as 0,06 to 0,12 USD), for the screening of one or two movies. Sometimes food and beverages are served, and screenings are considered communal activities, taking place at different times for different audience groups (youth, women, men) with a taste for different types of film, local as well as international.

In other words, the libraries and bandas in Tanzania have an important social function. But are they also detrimental to the DVD retail business? Libraries represent a 20,000-strong buying customer segment⁸⁷, which is significant considering the turnovers of 40,000-50,000 copies mentioned by Damodaran. They buy copies at the same price as regular customers. Asking them to agree to a revenue-sharing deal with DVD-distributors would also require transparency in investment and sales figures, which is something that not all distributors are prepared to give (Riber, 2013).

Formalizing and making visible the DVD rental business may have empowering effects on the many smaller distributors in Tanzania. If a small-scale distributor is informed about the number and whereabouts of libraries in different parts of the country, building experience in supplying these rental outlets might make it easier for him to estimate the number of copies to print, and thus to manage his finances in the risky Bongo business. As an extra service the Association centralizes the delivery of copies to its network, in effect creating the – for now hypothetical - option for independent producers to circumvent the powerful sales distributors altogether.

In December 2013 the Video Library Association was given the permission by the Copyright Society of Tanzania to formalize its activities, including the distribution downstream of Steps product (Jorams, 2013, personal e-mail). It is currently in the process of registering all video libraries and extending its membership base, thus also preparing ground to start analyzing and monitoring market numbers. Intuitively these efforts towards formalization may run counter to the, perhaps slightly romantic,

⁸⁶ Official retail prices are 2,000 TZS (about 1,2 USD) per disc. Most movies are produced in two, or even three parts, resulting in a retail price of 4,000 (2,4 USD) or 6,000 TZS (3,6 USD) per movie.

⁸⁷ This is an argument put forward by Richard Jorams and based on the estimated number of libraries in the country. In our interview in July 2013 Jairaj Damodaran implicitly agreed that they are important, stating that they cannot sufficiently absorb the high turnover of movies released by Steps Entertainment.

notion of Africa's video industries as characterized by an organically efficient, independent kind of informality. It is important to stress that Bongowood is only partly a site of organic, free market exchange between more or less equal players. Its structure above-the-line is different from the decentralized distributive efficiency of Nollywood as described by Lobato (2009, and 2010: 345-346), in which many small-scale distributors compete. In an environment in which capital and market power are in large part concentrated with one or a few players within a wider media industry populated by numerous small-scale retailers, rental outlets, producers and directors, shared knowledge can add to individual players' strategic options. The eventual outcome of this process of formalization may thus be a more even power equilibrium. It may also give these individual entrepreneurs a better sense of their own role and importance in the value chain, and of the scale of the industry.

Finally, pooled customer feedback about new stories, styles, techniques or genres makes creative experiment a more feasible option, encouraging makers to follow or abandon a particular path (Jorams, 2013). Bongowood has become popular based on its cultural proximity to local audiences: familiar settings, faces, and language. However, practitioners and Bongo fans alike seem to feel it needs to evolve. "We have a tendency of underestimating the DVD watcher (...) You get people complaining, saying 'OK we will watch it, we will buy the DVD, but it is not as if we like it' (...)" (Shivji, 2013). Richard Jorams adds that Bongo fans tell him: "if (...) I see an actor or actress I know already: that is the story, just by looking at the poster. [When they are asked if they like it this way, the reply is]: No we don't, but that is the stuff that is available to us, we have no choice. There is no change of stories" (Jorams, 2013). Many filmmakers, too, are no longer satisfied with the repetitive stories they are required to produce (Dundas Nilsen-Moe, 2013; Shivji, 2103).

It is in a double sense that I view the Tanzanian Library Association as a "force for change" in the industry of "Bongo proper". Firstly, by foregrounding and validating a large sub-sector downstream in the value chain, it works towards a disruption in current power dynamics. Secondly, indirectly this may lead to a more fertile ground for creative innovation. I thus consider its activities an instance of praxis in the sense of Mosco (2009), created with the aim to make changes to certain aspects of the current state of affairs in the industry. The main "obstacles" these initiatives meet are efforts to protect the interests of powerful DVD sales-distributors: the latter's negative spin about rental activities, and a reluctance on their part to participate in a process towards more collaboration and information-sharing (Hiluka, 2013).

5. Timamu Effects: specializing in genres and growing technical skills

Timamu Effects (or Timamu FX) is a film production company established in 2008 and run by Timoth Conrad (director of photography and editor) and Jackson Kabirigi (director and actor). It produces movies directed by Kabirigi and other filmmakers. Most of its movies are distributed by Steps Entertainment, although recently Steps has decided to decrease its external acquisitions. Next to "Bongo proper" stories, Timamu has produced one higher-budget, publicly funded movie in partnership with MFDI, entitled *Mdundiko* (Kabirigi, 2013).

Kabirigi and Conrad make different types of films, but their preferred genres are action and science-fiction. For these genres they like to boast their skills in special effects, fighting choreography, color grading, and fast-paced camerawork. They are self-taught and call the Internet their major learning tool. Exposure to film is important too, as for any filmmaker. Asked about the movies he watches for

inspiration Conrad replies: “Any movies. Drama. Most of them [are] Hollywood films. Horror. Action. African movies like *Viva Riva* [Wa Munga, 2011], I like it [very] much. (...) We go to the cinema, download from the internet, or buy [movies] in shops.” Kung Fu films, too, are a source of inspiration. Given the long-standing presence of cheap Asian martial arts films in many African countries, Kung Fu choreographies have been appropriated in several local cinema industries, including Bongowood. Kung Fu, or an adaptation of it, is regularly featured in Tanzanian police or detective flicks or tales of urban criminality (see, for instance, *Bongo Mafia* [Mbarikiwa/Kaseba], or the police movie *C.I.D.* [Kabirigi, 2012; cfr infra]).

It was Amil Shivji, director of the short film *Shoeshine* (2013), who mentioned Timamu Effects as a force for innovation. In response to a question about the use of visual effects in Bongowood he said (Shivji, 2013):

“It is done a lot, but (...) it is more experimentation. I enjoy the fact [that] they use special effects to try new things. Of course it is very disorienting and disadvantageous to the film, because it makes it look like a gimmick. A lot of special effects, lightning to make something disappear, (...). That is not really necessary, but people are trying new things and that is cool (...) There is a company, Timamu Effects (...) They know special effects, it is very interesting, they know what they are doing... [they] tend to let special effects run the film, [it] almost seems to be made to kind of boast the special effects (...) [for instance] they know how to have heads revolving all the way.”

When asked if and why he sees his company as an innovator in the “Bongo proper” industry, Conrad says: “[It is the] styles of the movies... and the action, a lot of action (...) After editing we do color corrections. (...) We like to shoot more shots at a time, so the difference is the shots. They [other Bongo directors] shoot basic shots: wide, medium, close-up. We try to take different angles.” Additionally, contrary to the habit of improvised acting prevalent in Bongo films, Timamu puts much time into scripting, which is a necessity when working with quick alternations between scenes.

In the detective/action movie *C.I.D.* (*Criminal Investigation Department*, Kabirigi, 2012) Timamu pushes a number of creative boundaries. The story is simple: when a young girl (Laura) arrives home from clubbing one night, she finds both her parents murdered in their home. The police set out to investigate the matter while the girl’s uncle and best friend Lolinda do their best to console her. After a long examination process it turns out that it was Lolinda, whom Laura met only a short while ago, who has killed her parents. A professional killer who grew up in Tanzania but was schooled in Kenya, Lolinda was hired by Laura’s uncle who is after their money. In a long final scene the uncle, who in a twist of events has captured Laura and threatens to kill her if the police do not let him go, explains the events that led him to devise his criminal plan. He is eventually overpowered from the back, and Laura is saved.

As suggested by Shivji, the story is driven more by action scenes and intelligent camera work than by the acting and lengthy dialogues and monologues in it. The movie makes interesting and innovative use of color; the most exciting scenes, a shoot-out during which Lolinda is hunted by the police but kills them off one by one, is colored by unnatural but spheric blue and yellow. The story and setting are resolutely urban and contemporary. Visual and sound effects are gimmicky (a recurring gurgling sound every time someone is shot, lingering fire sparks in every bullet hole,...) but contribute, if not

to the immersiveness of the story, then at least to the fun of watching it. Also interesting is the fact that some of the strongest characters in the film are women⁸⁸: Lolinda is a ruthless and cool-headed fighter, and the head of the police force, taking part in the shoot-out, is also a woman.

So far Conrad and Kabirigi have worked mostly with Steps for the distribution of their work, though they do not feel that the partnership has been to their advantage. In Conrad's view Steps is unwilling to pay the real cost of a movie of acceptable quality, especially when it involves a degree of commercial risk-taking. Neither does he see alternative options for the financing and distribution of his films: "That is really bad for us, so we do low budgets, we do not like it, we can get money for high budget films from donors etc. but after making it (...) you don't have anywhere to go, sell it and make a profit. So we have to make low budget films. Steps, they give us 10 million [TZS, which is about 6,000 USD] or 15 million [about 9,000 USD] maybe, it depends which actor you use in your film and how it is, they cannot pay more than 20 or 25 million [TZS, which is roughly between 12,000 and 15,000 USD]."

As a matter of comparison, *Mdundiko* (2013; cfr supra) was created with a budget of 60 million TZS, or 36,000 USD. Though Timamu does not avoid publicly funded projects, their real interest lies elsewhere:

"NGOs want to talk about malaria, HIV,... but if you have an idea that is unique... 'cause we have some stories (...) stunts, action, horror, we like it and we know we can make it but we do not know how to sell it. [To] go somewhere else than Steps there is no way (...). Steps says 'our viewers like comedy'... If you have an action script or movie... you go [there and] they say 'I don't like it, you have to make a comedy, maybe I will buy it'. You have to go and write some comedy movie which you do not like (...) This is bad, no one likes it but we have to do it because [there is] nowhere else to go (...) They do not know about quality, about the budgets, the cost of films, they don't know. They say every time 'we buy your film for 25' [million, but that is] not that much" (Conrad, 2013).

Negotiating a price in advance is not an alternative: "If you go there they will say, (...) we cannot trust that you will do this film properly. (...) Go and shoot it. You then come back with the film and they say there is no Kanumba, no Ray⁸⁹, we cannot sell it" (Conrad, 2103).

Currently Timamu has a script and video teaser ready for a new, more ambitious movie project which they say will require 45 million TZS (27,100 USD). *Red and Green. The beginning of the Battle* (teaser available on YouTube⁹⁰) is a phantasy/horror story about a feud between two antagonist groups: the (red-eyed) Reds and the (green-eyed) Greens. The teaser was made to convince Steps of the quality of the project, but to no avail: without the certainty that the film will sell well, the distributor will not finance it for more than 25 million TZS (15,000 USD). According to Conrad self-distribution is not an

⁸⁸ Many Bongo movies have strong female characters. Recent movies I have watched feature female heads of police (*C.I.D.*, Kabirigi, 2012), female judges (*Hatia* [Kikumba, 2012]), female Kung Fu fighters (Bongo Mafia [Mbarikiwa/Kaseba]), *C.I.D.*, female attorneys (*Hatia*), and women coming from a situation of domestic abuse, turning their life around and becoming spiritual gurus (*Nguvu Ya Imani* [*The Power of Faith*], Kabirigi).

⁸⁹ The late Steven Kanumba was an enormously well-known Bongo actor and director, and was also part of the Steps-stable. "Ray" is Vincent Kigosi, one of the actors/producers exclusively tied to Steps.

⁹⁰ See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OujH9M_Z6Rw (last accessed August 2014).

option unless you have deep pockets: “The way to distribute yourself is to have budget. Duplication... you have to wait, make money, money, and there is someone who will come and try to distribute another way [referring to piracy].”

Timamu Effects represents a force for creative innovation in today’s “Bongo proper” industry, not just because of its conspicuous work with visual effects and elaborate action scenes, but even more because of its dedicated post-production work and image quality in general. Rather than pursuing projects that guarantee profitability in the short term, Conrad and Kabirigi are interested in pushing boundaries. As most Bongo makers, they are limited by a lack of budget and a lack of interest in narrative innovation on the part of the few companies that could fund and disseminate their movies. The trailer for *Red and Green* was created in 2011, and it remains doubtful that the movie will eventually be made.

6. Issa Mbura’s *Crush*: (slightly) bending the rules of narrative structure

Issa Mbura is a Bongo director who teaches film at the University of Dar es Salaam. *Crush (Husuda)* is his first feature-length movie. The script was written for an assignment during his own film studies at the department where he now teaches. It was produced in 2011 and released in 2013.

Mbura is as critical as Conrad about the current state of the distribution business. According to him artistic, independent, or educational films hardly find distribution. In the best case they travel in the international festival circuit, which does not allow them to reach the widest possible audience, especially locally. In the commercial environment of “Bongo proper”, the movies rarely get a chance:

“(...) it is not the decision of the producer or the maker of the film to say how (...) he wants the film to be distributed. The industry is (...) monopolized by the distributors. It is them that say what money to give to makers (...) He [the distributor] is making sort of autonomous decisions, out of which he leaves the makers. (...) It is like the films that are produced have found their audiences and are now producing for them and cannot think of anything else (...) The thinking that these distributors have is very limiting (...) if they think of audiences they end up exploiting just very few strategies or mechanisms of distribution” (Mbura, 2013).

Contrary to Conrad, Mbura sees several alternative strategies for distribution, apart from DVD-sales. One option is to work with the videobandas in the country. Ideally he would like to work with a windowing system (letting his movies travel the video club circuit before making them commercially available on DVD) and a revenue-sharing agreement, though this is far from common practice in the Bongo circuit. Similarly he would be interested in partnering with the video libraries, but insists on sharing agreements. Web distribution for him is a hypothetical option mainly for cross-border marketing. Bongo movies have little opportunities for traveling internationally, unless they are picked up by pirate distributors or international broadcasters, or pushed by Steps.

Asked what makes his work different from the average Bongo product Mbura talks mainly about narrative structure. In *Crush*, for instance, two film students share a short-lived romance (a crush). In the period after their break-up they both submit a script for a screenwriting contest, each incidentally narrating their perspective of the love story that has just ended. The jury realizes that two candidates are telling the same story from different angles, and decides to award them both, on

the condition that they make a movie together, based on both their viewpoints of the same story. Initially they are too upset with one another to work together but eventually, as the story progresses, they seem to mature and a mutual sympathy, which hints at love, is restored. It is implicitly suggested that the end result of their collaboration is *Crush*, the movie being watched.

The production budget for *Crush* was as low as 2,5 million TZS (approximately 1,500 USD). As a film teacher, though, Mbura had access to recording equipment. After being rejected by two other distributors (Steps Entertainment and Papazii) the film was bought by Pili Pili Entertainment, one of the bigger players in the country, albeit at an amount so low that Mbura does not want to reveal it. One of the reasons that distributors were not interested in his movie is that it does not feature big stars⁹¹.

“To give you a picture of how horrible it is: I went there [to Pili Pili] and (...) they buy the film as it is, not just the rights for distribution but everything, you give the film away for good. They will show you up to 500,000 TZS [about 301 USD] for a deal [Mbura means that this is the lowest amount Pili Pili pays for a film]. Can you imagine? They will pay 3,5 million [2,100 USD] to some filmmakers there. You go to Steps and they will say, up to 5 million [TZS; about 3,000 USD] if you have stars, or if it belongs to a star then we give it up to 10 million [6,000 USD]. Steps, what they do is give you an investment of 5 million, and they say bring us a movie, pick the stars, write the story, make it and bring it in” (Mbura, 2013).

The production quality of *Crush* in terms of image, sound, and lighting is not impressive, but considering its low budget it is well-made. Its creative edge does not lie in technical skill or innovative camera work, but in the fact that a story is told from different viewpoints gradually blended into one. The suggestion that the movie being viewed is the end result of its own story is new. Similarly to the work of Timamu Effects, Mbura’s work is not innovative in a “spectacular” way. It is produced within the stringent practical and financial constraints typical of “Bongo proper”. When taking “Bongo proper” films as a benchmark, *Crush* can be considered an example of creative innovation: modest perhaps, but original and courageous.

Mbura does not feel that Bongo is a particularly innovative industry; or at least not yet, because it is young and evolving, as is the taste of its audiences.

“We are learning how to make films, that is what we are trying to do, we are not experimenting yet. (...) And if you try to do that [to do things differently] you sound so different that people may fail to understand what you are trying to do. (...) But there is a new wave, look at Amil [Shivji] (...) [But] the industry is monolithic and monopolized. (...) We think that more can be done, but we lack funds and access. The making of *Crush* is based on ‘can I borrow this and can you help with this’ (...) at the end of the day it is based on voluntarism” (Mbura, 2013).

⁹¹ *Crush* features actors of some renown, such as Mr Chilo and Richard Mshanga, but not the superstars who guarantee large viewership.

7. Conclusion and discussion: one step ahead?

This chapter set out to explore today's "Bongo proper" cinema industry from a critical political economy perspective, with a focus on forces for creative innovation and their obstacles. Political economy according to Vincent Mosco (2009: 36) studies "the social relations, and particularly the power relations, which constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of valuable resources". Such resources in the case of Bongo are, for instance, the movies produced, the distribution channels used to reach paying audiences, funding capital, production and duplication equipment, brand strength, persona power, et cetera. At the core of P.E.'s interests are "shifting forms of control along the circuit of production, distribution and consumption" (Mosco 2009). This is why I have focused on relations and tensions between different professional and interest groups: producers, directors, associations. My intention is not to downplay the many other obstacles that this young industry has to face: a general lack of investment capital, a lack of quality film education, the absence of a national film corpus to build on, let alone access to key works of African or World Cinema history (Shivji, 2013).

Today's "Bongo proper" industry is structured as a quasi-monopoly, with a power balance disproportionately skewed in the favor of a handful of DVD-distributors, *primus inter pares* amongst which is Steps Entertainment. These distributors use their strong negotiation positions to impose their terms in distribution agreements, in effect investing almost exclusively in stories which tend to follow tried-and-tested narrative blueprints⁹², often inspired by Nollywood (Krings in Saul and Austen 2010; Shivji, 2013; Dundas Nilsen-Moe, 2013) but preferably featuring local stars. They are considered by many an impediment to creative innovation in the circuit. At the same time they are indispensable to keep the industry going, as they hold most funding capital, produce large turnovers, and control retail networks that reach country-wide and sometimes even across national borders. They themselves feel that as Bongo evolves, it is gradually diversifying and innovating. They see new genres making headway, such as conversation-based comedy and action flicks (Damodaran, 2013).

In line with its promotional baseline, Steps Entertainment has always been "One Step Ahead" of its competitors, and it is taking all possible measures to stay ahead in the future. It capitalizes on exclusive star power by reserving funding for an inner circle of producers, and avoids taking much part in industry meetings or industry-spanning initiatives of information-sharing, policy shaping, et cetera. It was only by the end of 2013 that it formally agreed to video libraries renting out its movies (a practice that had been taking place for many years). Although Steps seems to symbolize and embody most malpractices that Bongo distributors are accused of, it is of course not the only distributing company benefiting from the industry's characteristics. One important aspect is the absence of shared information, going rates, standard contracts, et cetera. The distributor funding figures quoted by Mbura (500,000 up to a maximum of 10 million TZS) are very different from the amounts mentioned by Conrad (between 10 and 25 million TZS) or other respondents (varying between 8 and 12 million TZS). While this may suggest that distributors have a preference for the

⁹² For examples of such blueprints, see Krings in Saul and Austen 2010: 76. One still easily finds "rags to riches" and "innocent-family-man-falls-prey-to-evil-woman" stories (although rich women fall prey to men just as well, and variants feature upper-class romantic couples tested by extra-conjugal temptations), and there is still an important stream of movies set in upper-middle-class houses, next to magic and horror stories.

work of Timamu Effects – it is a possibility: their work in terms of image and post-production is superior – it also shows that small-time producers do not have “going rates” to fall back on.

Contrasting Nigeria’s video industry with the more artistic or intellectual publicly-funded African cinema, Jonathan Haynes has written that “Nollywood distributors have always been described as an obstacle to the evolution of the video film industry because of their narrow and closed ideas of what will sell. Nevertheless, this is an extraordinarily pure case of a market structured by the desires of the audience alone (...). The marketers, after all, are only trying to give the audience what it will pay to see” (Haynes 2011: 75). Ramon Lobato, too, has compared the responsiveness to audience demand in different types of informal networks (theorized as Subcinema networks) to the dynamics of pure, unregulated free market economies (2009: 208). In my view and in the context of Bongo, the question is about the chicken and the egg: are distributors optimally responsive to evolving audience needs, or do they dictate what is being produced, marketed and thus viewed? It is arguably the lower-end pirate *machingas* (street hawkers), the libraries and the videobandas that most resemble Lobato’s concept of Subcinema⁹³, often characterized by a situation which comes close to a “perfect” free market with optimal competition shaped by demand. The market dominance of established Bongo distributors is not seriously challenged, and it is well possible that this takes away from their drive to meet audience demand as flexibly as possible at the lowest possible price.

When Damodaran points out that the strength of Bongo movies lies in their close affinity with local audiences, he is right. Krings (in Saul and Austen 2010: 74-91) has described how Bongowood overtook Nollywood in Tanzania in terms of popularity in only a few years time. The industry has built its success on affordability, accessibility, and its cultural proximity (in the sense of Straubhaar 1991) to local audiences. However, the effects of this cultural proximity are always mediated by other factors, including the rest of the film offer, price, audience taste, audience perception of quality (no matter how elusive the term), and trends – which are linked to creative innovation. According to several of my respondents, audiences and directors alike are eager to see Bongowood stories evolve (Jorams, 2013; Dundas Nilsen-Moe, 2013; Shivji, 2013). This includes practitioners pertaining to the inner circle of Steps Entertainment.

In addition to studying Bongo’s industry structure I have foregrounded three “forces for change” active in it today, theorizing them as instances of “praxis”: the activities of the Tanzanian Video Library Association, and the creative work of two young and independent practitioners in the field of “Bongo proper”, which in my view embody forces for creative innovation.

The Tanzanian Video Library Association aims at legitimizing and validating the role of rental outlets, which respondents feel are as important within the value chain as DVD-sales (Jorams, 2013; Shivji, 2013; Mbura, 2013). The Association’s work potentially stands to dilute some of the market power concentrated in the hands of the distributors. By staying closely attuned to evolving consumer tastes, rental outlets are in a good position to pool audience feedback on new types of stories, in effect helping to facilitate creative innovation within the commercial framework of Bongo filmmaking.

⁹³ Though very useful to grasp and compare widely different media distribution networks characterized by different kinds of informality, there is no space to elaborate on Lobato’s Subcinema theoretical framework (2009) here. Bongowood, and particularly the large circuit below the distributor oligopoly, answers to most characteristics ascribed by Lobato to Subcinema networks.

Unsurprisingly, Issa Mbura and Timoth Conrad have both had disappointing experiences in negotiating contracts with established distributors. The former sees working with the video libraries and the bandas as a viable alternative, though this approach requires money upfront, financial risk, and hard work (Conrad, 2013; Shivji, 2013). Producers have to spend time negotiating with lots of individual players, and if they do not manage to bring their work to the marketplace fast enough they are at risk of being pirated. Very few makers have tried this approach. Self-organization and the establishment of a shared policy, it is hoped, will turn this form of distribution into a more realistic option (Hiluka, 2013; Jorams, 2013).

Martin Mhando (2000) has written that “(...) the ‘theory’ that one immediately identifies when studying the continued state of affairs in film distribution in Africa is that of (...) the continuing dependence of local cinema on its global construction and maintenance”. This dependence, in which is implied the power of a global system over local cinema markets, has been based in part on technological sophistication and distinction. Resonating the idea behind the first hypothesis of this dissertation (on democratization), the author suggests that different uses and appropriations of new technology can allow for new “patterns for the future”. He continues that “(...) one notes with glee the profusion of cheap short and feature-length video production activities in many African countries (...) with total disregard to notions of image quality”, implying a localized appropriation of technology and, with it, an emancipatory idea of what can be achieved locally, independently of the strategies of global players.

These are important, hopeful and celebratory words about Africa creating its own “epistemologies of knowledge” (Mhando 2000), of which Nollywood has been the most inspirational example. Unfortunately, the case of Bongowood illustrates that power imbalances and relations based on one-sided dependence relations persist also within indigenous African cinema circuits. But Bongowood is young and fast-evolving, and has many opportunities for further growth – not in the least its appeal throughout East Africa. Nigeria’s video industry has gone through several crises and transformations of its own, before evolving into its present-day shape (Jedlowski in Krings and Okome 2013: 25-45; Haynes 2011: 72). If given the time, and provided that some its “forces for innovation” are given enough chances, Bongo may have a long and promising future ahead.

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Essay 4: relevant elements regarding over-arching hypotheses

In this chapter the Bongo industry in Dar es Salaam was described from a critical political economy perspective. My focus was on “Bongo proper” – core Dar-based popular cinema – and in it, on forces towards change: creative innovation and changes on the value chain level.

This choice of topic was made for good reason: technological innovation in Tanzania, particularly web connectivity, has not evolved as rapidly and affordably as in Kenya. I have found very few films disseminated online⁹⁴, no mobile-targeted video, no lower-end digital cinema initiatives, and very few cases in general signaling diversification (hypothesis 2).

As I could not find a degree of diversification similar to Kenya’s, I decided to trace it *within* Bongo as the most important movie circuit. Diversification of production on this level was translated to creative innovation: new subgenres, techniques, visual effects, narrative experiments, et cetera. Diversification of distribution, too, was primarily traced *within* the Bongo value chain: from DVD-sales, rental and video dens, to television broadcasting (although the analogue signal has been switched off in anticipation of digital terrestrial television). I thus foreground individuals and initiatives striving for creative innovation and/or changes to existing distribution methods. Theorized as instances of “praxis” (Mosco 2009), their efforts are challenged by forces aiming to preserve the status quo: an oligopoly of distributors controlling most funding capital and sales outlets.

These power imbalances feed into hypothesis 1. As in Kenya, cheaper and more accessible equipment has placed filmmaking potentially in the hands of urban majorities. The fact that Tanzania’s society is less socially stratified than Kenya’s (Shivji, 2013; Riber, 2013)⁹⁵, in addition to its large domestic market unified by a single language, is to the benefit of new filmmakers. However, their agency is limited by the power imbalances described throughout chapter 4, a lack of film schools, and a lack of alternative sources of funding⁹⁶, amongst other factors. Again we see a clear, but at the same time a limited democratization process. As for the democratization of distribution, the dense network of video libraries and screening places in close proximity to majority audiences has indeed led to a dramatically increased access to local stories. Sales prices have decreased and the option of renting movies is widespread.

Bongo is culturally proximate (hypothesis 3) to Tanzanian audiences in many ways: language, style, settings, characters. Its popularity reaches nationwide but also cross-border, across Swahili-speaking Africa (with Straubhaar this would refer to - the Swahili-speaking parts of - the geo-cultural region of East Africa, or with Sinclair [in Wang, Servaes, and Goonasekera (eds) 2000: 19-30] to the Swahili-

⁹⁴ Tanzanian movies or serials disseminated online primarily come from well-funded producers and/or social initiatives : MDFI’s Swahiliwood channel on YouTube; *Jonah* (Kibwe Tavares, 2013, produced by ZG), and *Shoeshine* (Amil Shivji, 2013; with support from Canal France International)

⁹⁵ To be precise, my interviewees do not suggest that inequality is lower, but rather they describe a stronger feeling of “togetherness”, also between “the rich and the poor” (Shivji, 2013). An accepted measure of a country’s social inequality is the Gini coefficient, which for Tanzania was 37,6 in 2007, and which for Kenya was 42,5 in 2008, according to the World Factbook of the CIA. Gini estimates range from about 23 (in the case of Iceland) to about 63 (for Lesotho).

⁹⁶ Alternative funding exists, but mainly through NGOs commissioning movies with social or awareness-raising purposes.

speaking geo-linguistic region). In style and stories it is modeled in big part after Nollywood, and similarly to Nollywood it circulates in different layers of audience identification. Within Tanzania, it is this cultural proximity in the first place which sustains Bongo's success: people love to watch movies set in familiar environments.

However, Tanzanian audiences are more critical of the movies than is often assumed. Several of my respondents are convinced that Bongo fans would like to see the movies evolve, improve, and diversify further. For now, because of its industry structure and lack of an eco-system supportive of upcoming talent, Bongo is kept from evolving as much as practitioners and audiences might like it to; this is one of its most important challenges today.

**ESSAY 5: DIGITAL AS THE NEW POPULAR IN AFRICAN
CINEMA? CASE STUDIES FROM THE CONTINENT**

V. ESSAY 5: DIGITAL AS THE NEW POPULAR IN AFRICAN CINEMA? CASE STUDIES FROM THE CONTINENT

THIS CHAPTER DISCUSSES DIFFERENT FORMS OF CONTEMPORARY FILMMAKING ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT, TO SHOW HOW AFRICA HAS EMBRACED DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AS A FACTOR TOWARDS MORE, AND INCREASINGLY VARIED, FORMS OF POPULAR CINEMA. THE CASE STUDIES ARE CHOSEN TO SHOW A VARIETY OF PRODUCTION, EXHIBITION, AND DISTRIBUTION METHODS USING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY. THE FOCUS IS ON AFRICAN POPULAR CINEMA, UNDERSTOOD AS A FORM OF POPULAR CULTURE AS THEORIZED BY KARIN BARBER. WE REVIEW BARBER'S PIONEERING WORK AND SUBSEQUENT WORK BY HERSELF AND OTHER SCHOLARS, TO DETERMINE WHETHER AND HOW THE NEW FORMS OF DIGITAL CINEMA DISCUSSED HERE MAY BE CONSIDERED INSTANCES OF AFRICAN POPULAR CULTURE.

By Lizelle Bisschoff and Ann Overbergh

A shorter version of this essay was published in 2012: Bisschoff, L., and Overbergh, A. (2012). "Digital as the New Popular in African Cinema? Case Studies from the Continent." In: *Research in African Literatures*, 43.4: *Measuring Time: Karin Barber and the Study of Everyday Africa*, edited by Okome, O., and Newell, S.: 112-127.

1. Introduction

In this chapter we are reinterpreting Karin Barber's 1987 seminal article *Popular Arts in Africa*, and subsequent work by herself and others, on the essence and characteristics of African popular culture. We ask whether and how the notion of African popular culture can be extended to contemporary filmmaking in Africa, with digital technology as a key factor in making a wider variety in popular cinema possible. Our understanding of African cinema will be deliberately inclusive, in an attempt to embrace new technologies, screens, formats, and carriers. In line with Dubois, Monvoisin and Biserna's notion of "extended cinema" (2010: 174), by "cinema" we refer to any content involving moving image on screen, regardless of its carrier or medium. We review literature on African popular culture, African popular cinema, and the notion of "the people" in Africa, before turning to a range of case studies drawn from South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). As a common trait, we put forward that digital technology has played a crucial role in the emergence and/or development of these cases⁹⁷.

⁹⁷ In the case of African video-films, rather than digital equipment it was videotapes and VCR recorders that were originally at the basis of their origins. In most African countries the trade in local film on tape has now been replaced by optical discs.

2. Theoretical concepts: popular culture, popular cinema, and the people

a. popular culture and African popular culture

“Popular culture” as a theoretical notion was developed in the West in the course of the 1970s, but its roots are to be found in the earlier work of authors associated with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in the 1920s and 1930s (commonly referred to as the Frankfurt School). Already before “the popular” became associated with culture, it had carried largely negative connotations (Barber, 1997b: 3): it was associated with the vulgar, the lower-class, and the unrefined (Shiach 1989: 58-61). In politics, “the people” were the powerless and uneducated masses. This pessimist view of “the people” persisted in a different form during the Interbellum, as certain types of culture became increasingly reproducible and mass-marketable. For Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) the products made and distributed by cultural industries, such as pop music and cinema, were potentially as manipulative of “the masses” as politics. As post-war scholars began to view youth culture and subcultures as collective expressions of resistance to elite and/or mainstream culture (and later saw youth culture as divided in different [sub]cultural scenes; see also chapter 3), this negative connotation gradually gave way to a more neutral vision of “popular culture”. “The people” became consumers with agency, expressing themselves through stylistic and cultural choice, and with a say (through consumption preferences) in what was produced and marketed.

On the more optimist end of the spectrum, “popular culture” has evoked the positive and emancipatory aspects of the “popular”, by which “the people” are regarded as a community with shared interests, holding the potential for social transformation (Stam 2000: 308). “The people”, for instance, listen to and share anti-war songs, endorse critical street art, make and sustain community theatre, and so forth.

It is impossible to review the long history of popular culture theory with this chapter. For further reading we would like to refer to Storey 2013, and to the literature suggested in chapter 3 of this dissertation. What is clear is that “the popular” and “popular culture” bear heavy and sometimes opposing ideological connotations in Europe. In the African context one can see this mirrored partly in debates on the video-film genres: they are often conservative and socially role-confirming, and they display and endorse the pursuit of material wealth. At the same time, they reflect the concerns and interests of “the people”, and they are a resolutely non-elite form of culture (Barber 1997b: 2; Haynes 2006: 52; McCall 2007).

Like popular culture in the West (or at least popular cinema, see Dyer and Vincendeau 1992: 2-5), African popular culture is defined in reference to the “people”. In contrast, though, it is not merely consumed by them, nor does it only reflect their interests or fantasies. African popular culture often emanates from within “the people” (Barber 1987: 4, 9), and as a consequence differs in form from its Western counterpart, i.e. popular culture as conceived theoretically in the U.S. and the U.K. What would be considered user-generated rather than popular culture in the West - for instance truck art (drawings, slogans) or self-made billboards - in the African context is considered “popular culture” as much as more conventional formats such as music and film.

African popular culture, then, is not easily categorized in terms of genres, formats, or even audience uptake. More often it is described in terms of what it is not: it is the constantly evolving and elusive field of creativity outside the realms of elite art and traditional culture (Barber 1987: 11). Not

consecrated and not institutionalized, it is called “unofficial art” by Karin Barber (1987: 11, with reference to the work of Bakhtin 1984). This heterogeneous field of creativity nevertheless has characteristics in common: it is typically innovative, eclectic, dynamic, urban (or at least urban-targeted), and straightforward in its stories and messages. For Barber, its hybrid and constantly shifting character and forms, and its hospitability to foreign influence, are essential traits: “The hybridity of African popular culture can be seen (...) as the visible face of a deep and ancient disposition that shapes the social, political, and economic domains as well as the cultural” (Barber 1987: 6). Genres and forms continuously transmute and refer to each other, sometimes creating new genres, profoundly changing existing ones, or reinforcing or, at other times, undermining each other’s meaning. Globalizing media flows have further intensified these tendencies (Barber 1994).

b. “The people” in Africa

Discussions on popular culture in Africa are complicated further because class distinctions outside the absolute elite are difficult to draw (Barber 1987: 6). More than a social class, “the people” in Africa constitute a wide and diverse social field inhabited by “(...) unstable congeries of differentially defined groups, linguistically, ethnically, occupationally and religiously. They are only thinkable as a category in that they are excluded from the privileges of the political, business, and military elites” (Barber 1997b: 3-4, quoting Chabal 1986). The expanding but fuzzily defined middle-class groups in Africa mentioned earlier (see p. 101 and footnote 79), are just as widely diverse, and overlap with business elite groups as much as with the lower-level employees or small-time individual entrepreneurs commonly associated with “the people”. Furthermore, “the people” are tied in numerous ways – through kinship, ethnicity, language, community membership - to a precarious postcolonial elite, from which they cannot easily be dissociated (Barber 1997b: 3-4). Especially in urban centers, they share issues related to the economic and physical insecurities of living in a fast-changing society. And especially in the mid-to-lower social strata, slippage from so-called “middle-class” status to lower strata is a real threat, while significant upward social mobility is often regarded as a realistic option (Barber 1997b: 4; Okome 2007: 9).

As the globalization of media flows intensifies, so too do the ties of “the people”, real, virtual or imagined, with audiences elsewhere on the continent and in the diaspora. Over the last decades, scholarly attention has turned to new forms of citizenship, extending beyond the borders of a nation-state, and even of the continent. According to John McCall African video genres, and particularly Nollywood, play a catalyzing role in a “postcolonial pan-African consciousness (...) beginning to take shape” (McCall 2007: 94). Nadine Dolby has written about a nascent African cultural citizenship becoming visible through popular media, such as *Big Brother Africa*. Illustrative of the transformative potential of popular culture, an Anglo-Saxon format was turned into what was perceived widely as a genuinely African show by television viewers, and followers throughout the continent became involved to discuss the topics of social discussion raised in it (Dolby 2006: 43). *Big Brother Africa* reached 30 million viewers on average each night that it was broadcast (Jacobs 2007: 854).

To be fair, not everyone considered *Big Brother Africa* a genuinely African show (Adejunmobi 2011: 68). It had all the “slickness” proper to an international reality-television format, and it represented only privileged Africans (Jacobs 2007: 863-864). However it also provided a discussion platform for issues that resonated continent-wide, revolving around class, nationality, skin color, and gender (Dolby 2006: 43; Jacobs 2007: 852, 860).

It is clear, then, that when the notion of African popular culture becomes stretched to comprise informal and individual expressions of creativity (truck art, scrap art, live music, grassroots theatre – the creative fields studied most in anthropology), semi-formal video genres with a continental or global distribution span (such as Nollywood – traditionally [but not only] the field of African media studies), as well as international television formats broadcast Africa-wide (and with clear resemblance to “Western” youth culture), it is at risk of becoming overstretched. Barber’s original categorization of African popular culture, which distinguishes between popular culture produced and/or consumed by the people (1987: 24-28) takes us only so far in remedying this. The formidable differences in scale, scope and style between all these different forms call for a more refined articulation of the different potential meanings of the “popular” in African popular culture. In Barber’s words (1994): “The media have greatly intensified the migratory, shifting, intergeneric propensities of African popular culture. The result is a field of activities, practices, and resources where the binary oppositions conventionally used to describe and analyze African cultural forms – ‘oral’/‘written’, ‘traditional’/‘modern’, ‘indigenous’/‘foreign’, ‘official’/‘unofficial’ simply seem to dissolve.” The challenge at hand, it seems, is to reassess the whole theoretical idea of African popular culture. This can be done best by drawing on different strands of existing theory – Western, African, global – and carefully and critically filtering them for insights and elements relevant for the contemporary African context. While this task was not undertaken with this essay, several of the cases to be discussed here serve to demonstrate this growing need.

c. Popular cinema, African popular cinema

In line with Karin Barber’s conception of African popular culture (1987; 1997b), and despite the issues raised in the previous section, in determining whether a form of African cinema can be considered “popular”, we will consider whether it is made by producers or directors pertaining to “the people”, and whether it is targeted at them, through its content (topical relevance, cultural proximity) and/or because of an economic fit (appropriate pricing and delivery systems). It should be clear by now that this approach differs from how “popular cinema” as a type of popular culture is conceived in the West, where outside the realm of user-generated⁹⁸ video or grassroots-produced movies, popular cinema is never produced by “the people” (Dyer and Vincendeau 1992: 3).

3. The rise of the digital and the emergence of African popular cinema

Cinema’s development has always been intimately linked to technological progress. Technology has been particularly important for cinema in Africa, as a symbol of colonial authority, of modernity and progress, and as a catalyzing factor in transforming filmmaking from an expensive activity of cultural and educated elites, to an activity attainable by “the people” (Larkin 2008: 19; Haynes 2011: 68).

⁹⁸ By “user-generated video” I mean video content that is made and shared with the purpose of individual self-expression and/or self-promotion, or simply “for fun”, rather than lucrative purposes. Many cases and circuits of audiovisual creativity discussed here take place in semi-formal or informal spheres and on micro-budgets. While they may come across as a particular breed of user-generated culture, in most cases they are intended to be professional, commercial, and profit-seeking. In the context of this study, only the self-promotional video featured in Bozza (chapter 6) and the ironic remixes of existing video content made by individuals (this chapter, cfr infra) are considered as “user-generated content”.

Until video production started, African film industries were dominated by celluloid filmmaking, which required costly processing overseas. The films were often only seen in film festivals, French cultural centers, and sometimes European arthouse circuits. Today this situation has changed, spearheaded by the Nigerian and Ghanaian video-film industries that started two decades ago. Initially distributed on VHS tapes, video films are now produced with digital cameras and distributed mostly on DVD and VCD (video compact disc) formats. During the last decade, video-film industries have sprung up all over the continent. The popularity and wide accessibility of the films have inspired hope for self-sustainable, independent, and locally-rooted industries.

Congolese filmmaker Balufu Bakupa-Kanyinda has critically and actively engaged with the digital revolution in Africa through the production of his 2002 documentary *Afro@Digital*, which he describes as a “manifesto of the African digital mind” (Bakupa-Kanyinda 2002). As a conscientious and political filmmaker who has produced a range of innovative work, Bakupa-Kanyinda is concerned about the alienation of Africa, which he regards as being saturated with foreign images. He regards television and film as the best means of conveying memory and popular culture. He states that with digital technology, it becomes possible to boost creativity, to produce more without sacrificing quality, and to study and enrich African memory: “A new world opens up for cinema: capturing and re-mapping the image of Africa by reducing the high expense of analogue technology. But the African director still needs to know what he is doing and needs to have a story to tell in order not to suppress his song, his part of African history” (Bakupa-Kanyinda 2002).

A similar heedfulness towards digital technology in African cinema is evident in the writings of expat Ethiopian filmmaker and scholar Lucy Gebre-Egziabher, whose article “Digital Filmmaking: Panacea or Scourge for African Cinema” (2012) outlines some of the advantages and challenges of digital filmmaking in Africa. She states that the digital age has opened up opportunities for African filmmakers to use digital video, which captures high-quality images and sounds and makes postproduction more accessible. Directors can take advantage of the market niche created by the video-film industry through the financial accessibility to production and distribution that digital technology offers.

The specifically African way of digital filmmaking challenges not only conventional approaches to filmmaking techniques, but also to storytelling. Films are often made on location and with local people, which creates a completely new manner of storytelling. African film scholar and historian Mbye Cham has stated: “New directors are making films that are more entertaining, less political. There are moves to more cosmopolitan narratives, higher production values, a faster pace, MTV-type styles and language, less sexual prudishness, racial and cultural hybridity, and more stress on the individual rather than the community” (quoted in Dalby 2011).

Digital technology is used for video filmmaking but also, as this article will demonstrate, for more politically and socially conscious work, and for experimental and innovative audiovisual projects that push the boundaries of the contents and form of African cinema. In the following sections we will discuss a varied range of contemporary forms of filmmaking in Africa. We will focus on Bongowood in Tanzania as a lesser-researched form of the African video genre; digital stories made in Kenya; digital documentary films produced for television broadcast in South Africa; and films made on mobile phones (“cellphilmaking”) in different countries, intended to be viewed on mobile phones and on the internet.

4. Bongo: the Tanzanian video-film genre

The previous chapter of this dissertation has elaborated on the structure of and issues within today's Bongo production and distribution circuit. The industry is revisited here through the spectre of African popular culture in the sense of Barber (1987; 1997b).

Bongo cinema emerged in Dar es Salaam between 2003 and 2006. English-language Nollywood films had started to conquer the Tanzanian market around 2000 and quickly became popular because of their strong cultural proximity (in the sense of Straubhaar 1991) to local audiences in terms of style, context, and the problems faced by characters. As English is not widely spoken in Tanzania, the Nollywood imports needed translation and mediation: dubbing VHS tapes from English to Swahili, adapting films to photonovels, or live narration, a practice still prevalent in Tanzania and Uganda (Krings in Saul and Austen 2010: 74–91). Modeled largely after the Nigerian example, Bongo has the strong competitive advantage of being produced in Swahili, or a mix of it with English.

Bongo adopted the style and uptown-urban aura of Nollywood, but added to it a Tanzanian or East-African “flavor” (sometimes referred to as “Bongo flava”, mainly in the context of music): local settings and interiors, and a laid-back Swahili “mood”. At the same time it appropriated ingredients from Nollywood (for instance the display of material fortune, and references to the occult) and Asian martial arts films. It took the local industry just a few years to push Nollywood out of the market. Nigerian films are now sold mostly as pirated DVD collections with eight to ten movies per disc, and at much lower prices than Bongo films.

The video genres are widely regarded as the first forms of African popular cinema⁹⁹: made by “the people” because of dramatically lowered barriers to filmmaking, and targeted at “the people” in style, aesthetics, language, topics, and distribution. Consumed by majority audiences in Tanzania and with a viewership in the East African region, Bongo is a clear example. Films in Tanzania are seen in video parlors and in the privacy of the home, though television ownership is low and the analogue signal is switched off. Birgit Englert describes Bongo films as “largely accessible to a better-off, generally higher-educated audience who can buy and watch them at home” (Englert 2010: 40, 155). However, in recent years rental outlets have sprung up across the country, making the films more accessible to much larger crowds (see also chapter 4). As was said, class lines are difficult to draw, and “the people” may just as well be unable to afford a television set and watch Bongo in video clubs, as they may be running small businesses, own a house and satellite TV, and enjoy international broadcasting in addition to regular portions of the local genre. The people who run video outlets in Dar es Salaam identify Bongo as the best-selling genre, outperforming Nollywood and Hollywood product. Informal screenings in video parlors are cheap and low-barrier occasions, sometimes with food and beverages for sale. Often they are social rather than cultural events.

The distribution of Bongo films is controlled by a small number of companies who have their own subcontractors reaching far into the informal networks of libraries and street vendors. The largest distributor has exclusive contracts with a team of “star producers” who make a fixed number of movies on above-average budgets, though most Bongo producers are young entrepreneurs with little

⁹⁹ This “narrowing” of the term “African popular cinema” to include only today's video-based local films is now commonly accepted. However a number of African-produced stories have met in the past with large audience successes in their countries of production (Diawara 2010: 138-143).

financial security, and are undeniably part of “the people”. The social and economic circumstances in which they work are insecure, competition is high, and established distribution companies are risk-averse and reluctant in sharing profits. As with Nollywood, there exist allegations of distributors secretly producing more copies of the film than agreed in order to increase their own profits.

According to Krings the biggest Bongo genre is the romantic film, exploring universally recognizable love issues and gender relations (Krings in Saul and Austen 2010: 74–91). We have selected two examples for closer analysis: *She is my Sister* (2007, by Femi Ogedegbe) and *Wrong Decision* (2010, by William J. Mtitu and Adam J. Mwasa). *She is my Sister* is in English and *Wrong Decision* is in Swahili with English subtitles¹⁰⁰.

In *She is my Sister*, Rose, an upper-middle class girl, runs into Daniel (Dani), an old lover who is much less well-off. She takes him to her house in Dar es Salaam, they fall in love again, and start a business and a family together. Flora, a friend of Rose, who in the beginning made no effort to conceal her contempt for Dani, marvels at the transformation of this “thing” from the village into a smart-looking businessman. She seduces him, promising him more riches than Rose could ever give him. Dani is easy to convince and Flora is exceptionally cruel, rejoicing in the grief she causes Rose. Dani and Flora steal Rose’s car as well as important documents that she needs to settle the loans she took to invest in her house and business. Rose loses her job and eventually also the house, and becomes impoverished.

Rose’s sister Nancy, deeply touched by her grief, sets out to teach Dani a lesson. Disguised as a housemaid, she gets herself employed by Flora and Dani, only to seduce him and lure him into buying her a house and giving her a blank check. By the time Flora finds out about their affair, Nancy has taken back everything that was stolen from Rose and much more, leaving Flora penniless and Dani alone. He pleads with Rose for forgiveness but it is too late. Life had given him a golden chance but he has toyed with it and has lost everything. During the last scene, Dani walks by the seashore contemplating his mistakes. The film ends in a desperate scream, followed by a saying that appears in text: “All Glory to Almighty God.”

In *Wrong Decision*, Derrick and Rita, a happily married couple, after seven years still do not have children. It is implied that this must be caused by Rita’s infertility, and Derrick takes a second woman into his house, causing a polygamous situation. The second woman, Fiona, receives all his love and care while Rita suffers the couple’s contempt. When Fiona becomes pregnant, Derrick’s dedication to her is complete. But she is a treacherous woman, faking her pregnancy while she is clearly only after his money (which, as we find out towards the end, she wants for her and her real lover). After a fight, Fiona accuses Rita of having punched her; she pretends to have lost her baby as a result, and Rita is banned from Derrick’s house.

Rita is very sad but throughout the film receives support from Derrick’s father, a kind and very religious man, and from her pastor. They implore her to remain strong, pray, and never lose faith in God. One day, while preparing breakfast, Fiona receives a call from her secret lover and hides to speak to him. As Derrick checks on the food, he grunts after touching an egg, which seems to cause

¹⁰⁰ The story is by Mtitu G. Game, who is also the executive producer, and the script is by Steven Kanumba, the popular actor who recently passed away. Kanumba was also one of the main characters in the film and the assistant producer. It is common in the Bongo industry for people to take on several professional roles.

him severe pains. There is a flashback to a ceremony during which a spell is cast onto the egg; the sorcerer cautions Fiona to be careful with it. Derrick is immediately turned blind and Fiona, knowing the spell might kill him and keen to inherit his money, proposes marriage. As they have just lost a baby, Derrick prefers to wait. Fiona then introduces her secret lover to Derrick's household, as her new driver. Her lack of respect for Derrick is now clear as she continuously hugs, kisses, and sleeps with her lover in Derrick's house, knowing he cannot see any of this. But Derrick's boss and friend, Ndalo, finds out what Fiona is doing and informs his parents. Accompanied by the pastor, the family informs Derrick and everyone prays together. Derrick regains his eyesight and asks for his wife's forgiveness, which she readily gives him as she has never stopped loving him. Fiona and her lover are caught kissing in front of Derrick (they think he is still blind, he then reveals that he can see) and they are scorned by everyone.

Both movies belong to a similar "blueprint" narrative with the following stereotypical characters: a loving, suffering heroine; the object of her love, a good but naïve and easily seduced man; a wicked "other woman"; and a concerned friend revealing schemes of unfaithful spouses. These are figures and issues with universal appeal, and similar to characters in soap dramas. Money is very important and has an ambiguous presence. In both films it corrupts, but it is plainly pursued. Being good with money (Dani as a businessman and Nancy as the perfect housemaid) is presented as a virtue, but money is also shown to be unreliable: easily gained, easily lost. Religion is explicitly present in the second film, in which, like in many other Bongo films, the pastor saves the day in the end. The first film puts the idea of gratitude central, yet in the end also refers to God. Together with the materialism displayed (beautiful houses, big cars, extraordinary upward social mobility), these are traits shared with many Bongo movies.

Using Ghanaian popular literature as an example, Karin Barber describes how African popular culture audiences "(...) grasp essential features of characters and situations, and use them to interpret their own social experience (...). Stereotypes are (...) the point at which models of behavior (representation) become models for behavior (warnings, advice), making narrative available for practical application to the reader's own experience" (Barber 1997a: 357). Something similar often happens with Bongo movies, as is clear from the discussions which often take place after screenings. Girls and women are shown "good examples" of how to face the difficulties life presents to them. Men are warned against betraying loving wives for other women (depicted as treacherous and cruel), and servants of God help and advise people in distress.

As a Tanzanian "derivative" of Nollywood, Bongo films are a clear example of popular cinema in Barber's sense: made by, targeted at, and viewed by the Tanzanian "people". As in Nigeria, films were originally traded on video cassettes, but now exist almost exclusively on optical discs. In other words, digital technology was not an important factor at the origins of this type of cinema, but it has been instrumental in its growth and further development. In contrast, digital technology has been crucial in the emergence of the cases we will discuss in the remainder of this chapter.

5. Digital stories produced in Kenya

With Riverwood, Kenya has its own, smaller-scale circuit of popular cinema (see also chapters 1 and 2). Instead of elaborating on this circuit again, in the following we will discuss a selection of other and newer forms of popular audiovisual storytelling in the country.

In Nairobi in recent years web and digital technology have facilitated what appears to be an outburst of digital audiovisual creativity, often in the form of short clips to be viewed online or on mobile. Many of these clips are comedy series or funny remixes of popular audio and video content, some of which are made by individuals, others by production companies. Many of these videos engage in a form of social or political commentary on current affairs in Kenya through irony or satire. They sometimes grow into hypes, after which they are quickly replaced by the next viral video. An example of such viral hype, *Ha He* by Just A Band, was discussed in chapter 3.

It was posited in article 1 that digital stories emerging in Kenya are diversifying; a diversification reaching from the grassroots (hip hop videos, Foxhole films), over the business of social profit, to music videos watched as keenly in Kenya as in its diaspora. Some of these cases are examples of “popular culture” as understood by Barber, while others would require a stretching of the already diverse field of “the people” to include the low-budget work produced within the growing middle classes of Nairobi. Some cases emanate from within “the people” and are targeted at them¹⁰¹, others are created by formal companies but watched so widely, and featuring topics that are so locally-relevant, that they too may be considered “popular culture” in the sense of Barber (1987). Buni Media’s *The XYZ Show* is an example.

The XYZ Show is a weekly satirical news show featuring handcrafted latex puppets, modeled after well-known Kenyan personalities: mainly politicians and people from the entertainment industry. Conceived by political cartoonist Godfrey Mwampembwa (Gado), it was broadcast for the first time in 2009 on Citizen TV, Kenya’s largest television broadcaster. It is also available on the Buni.tv streaming platform (see chapter 6). Controversial from the start, *The XYZ Show* mocks Kenyan politicians in an unflattering way that would not be permissible in most other African countries¹⁰². This degree of media freedom is remarkable for a state that not long ago was a dictatorship (under Daniel arap Moi’s presidency). According to Marie Lora-Mungai from Buni Media the show reaches at least eight million viewers, and in March 2013 had been streamed about 22,000 times through Buni.tv (Lora-Mungai, 2013). More than 421,000 people currently follow its Facebook profile.

Despite these impressive viewer statistics, one may be tempted to think that viewers interested in a critical view on politics are not necessarily “the people”; that they must constitute a well-educated, upper-middle social group. From our stay in Nairobi, it was evident that this is not the case. One of our interviewees confirmed what several people had told us on informal occasions: that “Kenyans are obsessed with politics” (Bekker, 2012). *The XYZ Show* tends to take the side of “the people” by exposing and ridiculing the corruption and nepotism of the political elite. The show combines enormous local popularity with international awareness and recognition. It is produced in English and Swahili – the official languages of the country, but not the languages most people are comfortable in. Because of Kenya’s ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity it is impossible to reach audiences nationwide while producing in a vernacular tongue. Though the show is produced by a formal company it is widely viewed and it sides with “the people”. In that sense it is an instance of Kenyan popular cinema understood as a form of popular culture.

¹⁰¹ Note that because of the fuzziness of the term “the people”, extrapolating them as an audience group from one piece of media content to another becomes problematic. *Ha He* and Foxhole movies, case studies discussed in chapter 3, are both viewed and appreciated by “the people”, but not necessarily by the same groups.

¹⁰² Even its sister show in South Africa was banned from air (Warner 2013).

In the Forest (Historia Films) is an online talkshow hosted by Kenyan actor Gerald Langiri. During its first season it was available for free on YouTube; its rights have now been acquired by online distributor Udala¹⁰³, but the pilot episode has remained on YouTube (Konstantaras, 2014). The show is made on a shoestring budget and makes no effort of hiding that; on the contrary, this is deliberately reflected in its basic aesthetics and quirky humor (such as “products from sponsors” being thrown at the host to signal a commercial break). In it, Kenyan celebrities – actors and actresses, singers, “socialites” - are initially invited to a “brand new talkshow” in (or by) a forest. What they do not know, at least according to the show’s makers¹⁰⁴, is that the host will ask them embarrassing and insulting questions. Some of these questions are sensitive in Kenya, for instance when a man is asked if he is gay, or when a woman is implicitly called a prostitute. The result is funny: guests feel awkward, laugh at the situation, or become annoyed.

With viewership per episode ranging between 2,000 and 20,000, this first season of *In the Forest* has not been followed massively. Its viewership consisted of smaller circles, aware of its existence through word-of-mouth. Made entirely in English and with a very unconventional type of humor, it was not a classic example of “popular culture” in Barber’s sense. However it featured local stars, was freely accessible online throughout its first season, and it showed new possibilities of what can be done with digital technology on ultra-low budgets. It is just as difficult to call the show “popular”, as it would be to refer to it as elite or traditional – the three conventional categories of African arts and culture (Barber 1987: 9). It is an example of the different forms of low-cost storytelling spurred by the democratizing and diversifying effects of new technology. Rather than unambiguously attributable to African popular culture, these new forms have affinities with “pop culture” and with the subcultural “scenes” theorized in subcultural theory (see chapter 3). Local pop stars and actresses often add appeal to these new formats. As media and cultural globalization leads to more and increasingly intense hybridization, there seems to be a growing need for a more refined theory of African popular culture, capable of accommodating these new forms of extended cinema. It is unsure if *In the Forest* will return: its makers are now involved with new (feature film) projects, but are at the same time considering ideas for a possible spin-off (Konstantaras, 2014).

Another example of new digital storytelling in Kenya is the work of Robby Bresson, a director who has experimented several times with the creative possibilities of digital technology. In 2012 he directed *Simiyu Samurai*, a multiple-episode¹⁰⁵ Kung Fu story set in Kenya and viewable only online. In the first episode, Simiyu, a diplomats’ son, is trained in martial arts in Japan, where his parents are stationed. After a tsunami kills his parents (footage of the tsunami of Thailand in 2004 is used) he returns home to stay with his grandmother in her village, and falls in love with a local girl. Their living conditions are much more modest than what he is used to, but they are happy. One day, as they are going to sell produce at a local market, they are harassed by villains who try to extort them. In the events that follow, in which “Simiyu Samurai” tries to fight off the villains who are also extorting other people at the market, his grandmother and his girlfriend Zinzy¹⁰⁶ are captured, and Simiyu is told to surrender. Subsequently, the viewer is asked how he wants the character to proceed: four

¹⁰³ www.udala.com. The company has an online presence but its streaming activities are not operational yet.

¹⁰⁴ From the reactions of some of the guests on the show, it is hard to believe they were not aware of the concept; other guests seemed genuinely upset.

¹⁰⁵ Two episodes have been produced so far. They can be viewed online: www.simiyusamurai.com.

¹⁰⁶ Rather than his girlfriend, Zinzy is a very clear “love interest”. In the second episode she kisses Simiyu, to then run away, telling him that “it’s complicated”.

options are given, and the preferred choice is to be texted by SMS to a Kenyan number. Viewers in 2012 chose the option to have Simiyu save his grandmother¹⁰⁷, and this is where the second episode (*Clayton's Ghost*) kicks off.

In *Clayton's Ghost*, Simiyu's grandmother and girlfriend are saved by Simiyu, and the three escape. Meanwhile Clayton, the leader of the extorting gang, sustains a head injury caused by a panga (a type of machete) thrown at him by a woman in the crowd. His sister Sheila takes control of the gang and orders them to find Simiyu and his grandmother and girlfriend. The grandmother is kidnapped, and Simiyu steals a motorcycle and starts looking for her. Meanwhile Clayton is in hospital, plagued by nightmares in which a demon appears: an evil spirit who laughs at him and tells him that he owes his force only to him; without him, he is nobody. Terrified, Clayton starts seeing the ghost also when he is awake. Meanwhile, a beautiful girl is shown entering the office of a man who is clearly a well-connected figure of authority, and suggests she would do "anything" for him in return for a call to the Ministry of Tourism concerning a job she is interested in. She starts stripping for him and as he watches, he receives a call from Sheila, asking him to arrange the cash required for Clayton's hospital expenses. These are details told in passing, but they suggest important things: for instance, that well-connected people in the business and/or political elite have close ties with the criminal underworld, and that they are easily corrupted. This is a recurring trope in African popular cinema (see also the case of *Nangos*, discussed in chapter 3). *Clayton's Ghost* ends, like the first episode, in a tense scene in which Simiyu has to decide quickly what to do. He has Zinzy and his grandmother with him, and he has Sheila at gun-point. However, at the same time some of the gang members whom Simiyu has left unconscious are waking up, and Sheila informs him they are police officers who work for her; grandmother warns that being arrested would be a very big problem for them. Again, several options are offered for how the third episode is to start: Simiyu can escape and run, surrender, or shoot Sheila and "end it all"¹⁰⁸.

Not many people (about 17,000; Bresson, personal Facebook message, 2014) saw the *Simiyu Samurai* stories. Similarly to Jitu Films (chapter 1), it is likely that this is due to a lack of marketing efforts, in addition to the fact that traditional popular cinema audiences have not made a habit of watching online¹⁰⁹. The story itself had the potential to become very popular. Martial arts are keenly followed, the characters and story are simple and universally appealing, and the setting is very local. There are clear elements which in the popular video genre speak strongly to "the people": for instance, presenting people in power as corrupt, and showing villains as possessed by demons. In this sense the *Simiyu Samurai* stories are clearly an example of novel forms of "popular cinema", produced and disseminated by use of digital technology. As with Jitu Films, despite its low viewership we feel that this attempt at online storytelling is worth our attention. Resolutely local in style and humor, and freely accessible, it is one of many examples of present-day experimentation with the myriad possibilities that digital technology has to offer.

¹⁰⁷ The four options were: surrender; save grandmother; save Zinzy; follow your instincts.

¹⁰⁸ In contrast with the first episode, viewers can now indicate their preferred option online. There is now also a crowdfunding element: in order to submit their preferred option, people are invited to make a donation for the next episode.

¹⁰⁹ A similar fate – popular potential but low viewing rates – seems to have befallen Bresson's short comedy *African Djinn* (2013), a Kenya-based persiflage of Nollywood films. Kenyan actors talking and shouting with thick, exaggerated Nigerian accents, must save a woman on whom a spell has been cast (by a djinn hiding in a calabash) from committing suicide.

If Bresson's work so far has not been successful, the opposite is true for our two last cases of digital storytelling. We are borrowing them from a paper presented by Duncan Omanga at the 2013 Point Sud workshop in Ouagadougou (see annex). In both cases a clip from an event in Nairobi becomes a viral video on the social media, after which it is remixed or re-enacted in music videos that are shared even more widely.

The first video is based on events that took place in 2011. Kimani, a young man from Ngara Estate in Nairobi, witnessed a random killing during a routine police patrol. A street boy was urinating against a wall and ran away when he saw policemen approaching. He was shot dead on the spot, and a toy pistol, called "bonoko" in Sheng, was placed by his body to make the killing look legitimate¹¹⁰. As a key witness Kimani was interviewed by local media. Though his statements contradicted the official police reports, it was his version that was believed by the majority of Kenyans, as police killings are no extraordinary thing in Nairobi. The audio of his interview was posted on YouTube¹¹¹, with accompanying photographs depicting what Kimani was saying: a picture of a young man peeing, a picture of a toy gun, and a picture of meat, as Kimani tells us that the boy was a simple butcher who had done nothing wrong. The video was viewed more than 108,000 times. Someone remixed the interview into a hip hop song entitled *Bonoko*, but this time with a video in which the events were re-enacted – amateurishly and somewhat tongue-in-cheek, though clearly in support of Kimani's story. This video¹¹² was viewed more than 132,000 times, and extracts from the *Bonoko*-refrain became a popular ringtone for a while.

The second story is based on a press conference held in 2012 by Miguna Miguna, former adviser of Kenya's ex-president Raila Odinga, during the launch of his book *Peeling Back the Mask: A Quest for Justice in Kenya*. In it, he shares inside knowledge of Kenya's high-level politics, including cases of corruption and nepotism. Similarly to what happened with the *Bonoko*-story, Miguna's speech immediately went viral. He refers to several sensitive political issues (including the painful ethnic conflicts of 2007-8), suggesting that his book reveals a lot of information about the machinations behind these events. An additional reason why the video was viewed widely was the man's sense of drama, and the comic effect of his words. One extract goes as follows¹¹³: "All I can tell you is this: every single leader here I can take to The Hague. Mark my words, I have it right here. And I am saying *Come baby Come!* [Laughter] (...) And a stupid idiot is running around town saying that they can take me to court. *Come baby Come!*" (Omanga 2013: 12). Again similarly to the *Bonoko*-story, the video was remixed and the speech cut up and reassembled into a simple, recognizable and funny pop song,¹¹⁴ in which Miguna is staged as a dancing performer, through the manipulation of footage from his speech. The clip is full of local references which only people with a good knowledge of Kenyan politics can relate to.

Both clips are clear contemporary examples of "popular cinema" – "popular" in the sense of Barber (by "the people", targeted at them, relevant to them), and "cinema" in the extended sense of

¹¹⁰ For instance by intimating that the boy had pointed the toy gun at an officer, who had then shot him in self-defense.

¹¹¹ The video can be viewed here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZScwMubqxRI>

¹¹² The video can be viewed here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2WqXcUQKBk>

¹¹³ The video can be viewed here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZpamsiUArl> (from 0:44 min. onwards, and again at 1:42 min.)

¹¹⁴ The remix of the Miguna speech can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQT292eXgls>

Dubois, Monvoisin and Biserna (2010). As the “Makmende” figure from the *Ha He* video discussed in article 3, “Bonoko” and “Come baby come” became pervasive memes for a while, to then fade out.

6. Digital documentary filmmaking in South Africa: telling personal stories

Multiple examples exist on the continent of training and production in digital documentary filmmaking.⁸ Digital filmmaking not only offers economic advantages in terms of increased accessibility to local production and distribution, but also holds potential as a tool for social awareness-raising, education, and identity negotiation and construction. In South Africa, digital filmmaking has drastically increased over the past decade, with television broadcasters adopting digital technology as a way of enabling aspiring directors, in particular black South African filmmakers, who previously had very little access to the film industry. Digital filmmaking allows for previously repressed voices to be heard in innovative documentary storytelling projects. These projects typically focus on training people in producing documentaries that focus on “the people” and their testimonies. The importance of creating new configurations of “the people” in a country such as South Africa cannot be underestimated. South Africa’s history of apartheid, social and economic exclusion, and racial segregation created a situation where the vast majority of “the people” were severely marginalized and unable to participate as fully recognized citizens. In Barber’s definition, these kinds of films could be described as produced and consumed by “the people,” thus emphasizing their centrality as “popular cinema.”

A very successful example of digital documentary filmmaking is the *Project 10* series, which includes thirteen narrative documentary films produced in 2004, ten years after the end of apartheid. Commissioned by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and developed by SABC1, the National Film and Video Foundation in South Africa, and the Amsterdam-based Maurits Binger Film Institute, the films were broadcast on national television. The series includes a multitude of different voices, with filmmakers from different ethnic, socio-cultural, linguistic, and political backgrounds, their stories thus reflecting the diversity of South African society. As opposed to the tendency toward issue-based documentaries, or documentaries focusing on famous and important historical figures, these films encapsulate “micro-narratives” of ordinary people—“the people” in Barber’s sense—in the process of negotiating their identities in the “new” South Africa.

The *Project 10* series explores intimate and personal experiences of ten years of freedom, as told by South Africans. The project was devised as a developmental initiative designed to nurture a new generation of dynamic South African filmmakers with the aim of helping to cultivate “new voices.” Every film in the *Project 10* series was shot over a year and relates personal experiences within a country in transition. The films address issues of freedom and democracy in post-apartheid South Africa without being overtly political through relating previously unheard stories in a uniquely personal way.

As intimate and personal testimonies, these films are important documents of some of the diverse voices present in contemporary South African society and, as such, they all contribute to imagining the new multicultural post-apartheid nation. Although the films contain linear narratives that progress over the course of one year, the filmmaking style results in a certain type of aesthetic form

that is unscripted, immediate, and fragmented. Video-diary filmmaking is part of the larger field of digital storytelling that has emerged over the past few years in America in particular.

For the *Project 10* series, filmmakers were trained to use the camera non-invasively by working with a significantly reduced technical crew. In most cases there was a single camera- and sound-person with small digital equipment, and often a hand-held camera, allowing the film crew to be as unobtrusive as possible.

With initiatives such as *Project 10*, a new type of documentary style has emerged in South Africa, opening up a private space that was previously not part of the sphere of filmmaking. This style encompasses an aesthetic made up of the stylistic and formal choices of the filmmakers in expressing their personal stories in visual terms. It is not the intention of the films to make any grand or objective truth-claims through this process of documentation, but rather to capture personal (hi)stories. Because the personal narratives of the *Project 10* series fit within the heterogeneous social framework of the new South Africa, they aim to initiate action and reflection, or encompass what might be termed an “activist aesthetic.” This activist aesthetic is composed of personal stories with the purpose of making a connection to wider societal issues and intervening in public debate.

Karin Barber has stated that the activist dimension of popular arts in Africa has the merit of art being taken seriously. “It accords cultural activity its proper place as a social practice—which is effectual and which therefore has consequences... for the class or community to which it pertains. This means that what the arts say is of paramount importance. They are taken seriously as statements about society and as means to confront and work through intractable social experience” (Barber 1987: 9). The *Project 10* films could thus be seen as part of a broader project of cultural self-definition and expression, contributing to the creation of a diverse national South African cinema that incorporates the use of the digital.

Given that the films were broadcast on national South African television—rather than on a “pay channel”—they were widely seen and talked about. In a personal interview in January 2012 with Minky Schlesinger, one of the directors who took part in the project, she emphasized the wide public reaction the films created when they were broadcast on television. South African audiences have not before seen personal storytelling like this in a local context, and the themes addressed in the films (such as racial integration, female emancipation, youth culture, exile, and return) evoked compelling public discussion and debate. The films offer an example of how digital filmmaking can be used in a socially conscious way, relating to Barber’s description of the links between popular and social consciousness. Barber states that popular arts could serve to articulate and communicate consciousness and not just to reflect on one that is already constituted (Barber 1987: 4). In films such as those in the *Project 10* series, the popular should be read as implicated in a political attitude of “the people.” Art in this form takes an activist perspective where what is being said is more important than entertainment and economic gain. This activist perspective is much more explicit here than, for instance, in the implicit social comments (or role-modeling) of Bongo films, and more personal than the fun poked at Kenyan politicians in the *XYZ Show*.

7. Cellfilmmaking: lowering the barriers to audiovisual storytelling

Our final example of digital filmmaking in Africa is the innovative practice of filmmaking with mobile phones, dubbed “cellfilmmaking” (Dockney 2012). In South African cities and other African urban

centers where the network infrastructure is in place, cellphilmaking has become an extremely popular phenomenon. Short films and clips can be produced cheaply and quickly, and distributed widely as multimedia messages to other mobile phones or online. This is a remarkable development, indicative of Africa's partial but accelerated access to new forms of information and communication technology (ICT).

Cellphilmaking has many links with social networking and activism, citizenship and democracy, as imagery and footage can be captured and distributed with minimal technological access and cost¹¹⁵. Cellphilmaking could thus be seen as a democratizing filmmaking device in Africa and an empowering form of participatory filmmaking (Dockney 2012). Due to the convergence of technologies, the mobile phone has become a viable medium for both production and consumption. As Dockney states, this convergence of production and consumption could be termed a form of "prosumption." Cellphilms potentially offer various advantages to Africa, including opportunities for representation and encouraging citizen engagement. With its high accessibility, cellphilmaking also has the ability to present a critical alternative to mainstream media representations, which are often highly generalized and sensationalized. Cellphilms allow people to create and distribute their own representations.

But the mobile format does not lend itself to activism alone. Increasingly, television and film can be consumed anywhere, anytime, and in any way on mobile platforms. Often short mobile content is produced in bite-sized chunks intended for viewing, for example, when traveling from one place to another. This type of mobile content holds particular significance for African urban centers, many of which suffer from daily traffic jams due to insufficient road infrastructures. Mobile phone content thus presents a particular opportunity for African audio-visual producers, consumers, and "prosumers." Not limited to be viewed only on a handset, content can also be uploaded and made available online through social networking sites.¹¹⁶

For a number of filmmakers on the continent, cellphilmaking has enabled them to make films and allow them to film in ways that were previously impossible. Kiripi Katembo Siku, an art school student from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, made his first film using only a mobile phone (Woldt 2009). His film, *Voiture en Carton* (Cardboard Car, 2008), provides a rare glimpse of street-life in Kinshasa. To make the film, Siku attached a mobile phone to a toy car, set it to film, and gave it to a young girl to pull behind her on a piece of string as she walked through the streets of Kinshasa. With artists in the DRC subjected to heavy-handed government censorship and little freedom of speech, and Congolese filmmakers finding it virtually impossible to gain permits to shoot in the country, this was an ingenious way of capturing a clandestine view of the capital. Cellphilms, through engaging unheard voices, can establish a collaborative working relationship between ordinary citizens and those in power. Social partnerships can be established through the generation and maintenance of micro public spheres, where democratic attitudes can be fostered (Dockney 2012).

¹¹⁵ The democratic protest movements in North Africa and the Middle East, known as the Arab Spring, present a prime example of the power of social networking through the use of ICT; movements that have the power and potential to curb censorship, defy repression, and mobilize resistance.

¹¹⁶ The affordability and accessibility of mobile phone technology also presents new opportunities for aspiring filmmakers. In 2011, the Arterial Network and the DOEN Foundation announced a call for submissions of short films shot by Africans on mobile phones for its first Mobile Phone Film Competition. Public awareness and participation was increased by online voting and the competition was promoted as presenting a filmmaking opportunity to anyone and everyone.

Exploring and extending the creative and aesthetic potential of cellphilmaking, experimental South African director Aryan Kaganof produced the first feature-length film in Africa shot entirely on mobile phone cameras, *SMS Sugar Man*, in 2005¹¹⁷. A semi-pornographic and highly erotic and subversive film, with a political subtext, the film's content is as provocative as its form. The film's narrative is a subversion of the apartheid-years scenario of white men traveling in South Africa to sleep with black girls. In this film it is now black yuppies paying for sexual favors from beautiful white and Asian girls.

The title character, played by Kaganof himself, is a pimp—Sugar Man—who sells his “sugars” to his wealthy black clientele. The story delves into the underbelly of Johannesburg, where sex is a commodity and violence is common. As such, it represents a corrupt, exploitative, and destructive post-apartheid society, depicting characters searching for meaning and fulfillment through violence, sex, and drugs. The multiple sexual acts depicted in the film could be read as the manifestation of psychological longing and desire. Although the film's setting is firmly embedded in the South African socio-historical context, because of its subversive subject matter and unique visual style, it is a film that would not readily be associated with contemporary South African filmmaking.

The film's preoccupation with mobile phones is evident already from its title—SMS referring to a text message—and is also reflected in their use by the characters throughout. The aesthetic created by the use of mobile phone cameras is intimate, dream-like, and gritty. The vague and pixelated image quality resulting from the camerawork enhances the social context of the film: the seedy underworld of Johannesburg. The mobility of the phone camera allows for angles and movement that could not be readily achieved otherwise, so that the screen can seamlessly switch from one angle to the next. The characters are framed within intimate close-ups that create almost a voyeuristic relationship between them and the viewers that recalls reality television (Corrigall 2012).

Kaganof is a maverick artist and intellectual. He has an extensive blog with his musings on the arts, filmmaking, politics, and other contemporary issues, that attracts a lot of comments and participation from people interested in his work. The number of blog entries on *SMS Sugar Man* is indicative of the interest it has created.

SMS Sugar Man could hardly be called “popular art,” and would more suitably fit into categorizations of underground or experimental film. Again the typology of traditional, popular, and elite art as described (and deemed problematic) by Barber (1987: 9) does not accommodate this type of art form¹¹⁸. This is a younger form of storytelling, facilitated by the opportunities of new technology. As was the case with the Kenyan talkshow *In the Forest*, it indicates the need to broaden and/or refine the notion of African popular culture.

Although underground, experimental, and non-mainstream art is often considered and interpreted as “Western,” we would argue that these types of art forms also deserve a place in a discussion on contemporary and popular African art, as Africa is part and parcel of the modern, urban world. Non-

¹¹⁷ *SMS Sugar Man* was produced in 2005, but released only in 2008, after a period of conflict with its initial distributors.

¹¹⁸ This is not to suggest that irony and subversiveness do not exist in conventional African cinema. Even the earliest African-produced films (which would probably be classified as “elite art”), would challenge authority and neocolonialist situations or racism: nearly all of Sembène's work (*Borom Sarret*, 1963; *La Noire de...*, 1966, *Mandabi*, 1968; *Xala*, 1975), but also other films: Yaméogo's *Moi et mon blanc* (2003), Sissako's *Bamako* (2006), etc.

mainstream and experimental art forms are increasingly exploited by African artists too, such as street art, graffiti, and video installations. In fact, we would suggest that with new technological advancements, barriers are lowered as people no longer need to be among the most privileged to be able to create something new, innovative, and subversive, which can still appeal to “the people.”

8. Conclusion

Through a diverse range of case studies we have attempted to demonstrate how digital technology is a catalyzing factor in the emergence of more, and increasingly varied, forms of popular cinema on the African continent. By reinterpreting Karin Barber’s work on African popular arts and drawing on subsequent work by her and others, we have confronted it with contemporary African (extended) cinema. Our examples were chosen to show a variety of production, exhibition, and distribution methods utilizing digital technology. It is important to stress that the examples discussed were not “created” by technology: technology’s effects are always the result of a complex interplay with other factors. But the production, evolution, and/or distribution of these forms of popular cinema are clearly intimately linked with digitization.

The video genres, the most conspicuous example of African popular cinema, have the potential to evolve in several directions. Alessandro Jedlowski (in Krings and Okome, 2013) has described how the Nigerian video genre is increasingly targeting diasporic audiences through higher production values and theatrical releases. In Tanzania there seem to be only few signs of such evolutions (or of other types of creative innovation – see chapter 4).

In addition to Nollywood-like types of cinema, in Kenya the increased interest in digital storytelling paves the way for new films and different formats, some of them humorous, some of them commenting on current affairs, and some of them made for social or societal purposes. Lucy Gebre-Egziabher (2012) puts it as follows: “An indigenous cinema industry could arise with distribution channels, artistic and technical maturity, and financial solvency, to offer African audiences an array of films with content ranging from pure entertainment to (...) social awareness”.

With *SMS Sugar Man*, we have discussed an example of cellphilmaking distributed for free to computer and mobile screens. The film was not made by or targeted at “the people” as clearly as the other case studies. As with the example of Congolese cellphilmaking, several other mobile-targeted and/or mobile-made projects are being developed (see for instance the case of *Bozza*, article 6). These projects may depart from very different missions, however they follow comparable strategies: to bring filmmaking closer to “the people” and to make the sharing and viewing of the content easier and more affordable.

Though technological innovation can allow for more, and increasingly varied, audiovisual expressions by “the people,” technology’s potential effects depend on social, societal, economic, and security issues, as well as on governmental policy choices (Swart 2011: 33–35). Cellphilmaking, for instance, offers possibilities for political comment and critique, yet mobile technology can also allow governments to keep closer track of the actions of their citizens. When we asked a Ugandan video filmmaker how possible it would be to make a film criticizing government corruption, he simply said that he would never be able to work in the country again.

Our cases may be the promising first examples of significant future creativity to be unleashed on a continent that has long lacked the infrastructure to produce and locally share its own audiovisual creative expressions. At least in urban areas, expectations of what digital, web and mobile technology can offer are high. At the same time these forms call into question the notion of “African popular culture” as it is understood today, pointing to the need of a theoretical reassessment of the concept. This can be done firstly by critically and selectively engaging with existing theory developed in Africa and elsewhere, adapting any relevant insights to African realities; and secondly, through sustained empirical observation and careful, Africa-specific theory-building.

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Essay 5: relevant elements regarding over-arching hypotheses

In chapter 5, Lizelle Bisschoff and I review the work of Karin Barber and other scholars on African popular culture, reflecting on its use in today's era of globalization, particularly in the context of extended cinema. We demonstrate how digital technology is instrumental in a growing variety of contemporary forms of popular cinema (hypothesis 2). Examples are sourced from Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

It is argued that the African video-film genre is not the only format that fits the label of popular cinema. From digital documentaries to "cellphlms", and from popular television shows to viral videos, many other examples exist which, viewed through the spectre of African popular culture (in the sense of Barber 1987 and 1997b), can be called popular (extended) cinema.

Our cases indicate that theories of African popular culture are in need of refinement and/or new categorizations to accommodate the many instances of cultural hybridization in the field of media, spurred in large part by technological and cultural globalization. *SMS Sugar Man* cannot be called elite or traditional culture, yet it is difficult to refer to it as "popular" in Barber's sense. It is underground art, viewed by niche audiences and with more affinities with subcultural scenes than traditional notions of African popular cinema. The many digital comedy videos from Kenya are sometimes targeted at "the people", but at other times quite resolutely middle-class: exclusively in English and with an untypical, quirky type of humor. *Ha He*, the Just A Band video discussed in chapter 3, is in that sense equally ambiguous as a form of popular cinema. However unconventional some of these cases may be, they are often made on small budgets and easily accessible online, and in this sense reflective of a process of democratization (hypothesis 1). Our cases are, each in their own way, relevant to "the people" (and thus locally relevant; hypothesis 3): some cases have strong appeal through style, stories, and accessibility (such as Bongo movies), while other stories are more subversive and critical of political and business elites. They are not always produced by "the people" but they defend their interests: this is the case with *The XYZ Show*, the *Bonoko* video, the *Come baby come* video, and even the work of Robby Bresson.

The characteristics of African popular culture and cinema discussed in chapter 5 are relevant also for other cases presented in this dissertation. Many of these cases are cultural hybrids reflecting influences of the different media that circulate on the continent, and which producers draw inspiration from. Intensified hybridization leads to African-produced media with clear traits of what is usually regarded as pop(ular) culture in the West; the *Big Brother Africa* phenomenon is a case in point. This too puts pressure on existing theory, as it is not always clear whether cases are best approached from a Western or an Africa-specific theoretical perspective. The challenge at hand is to renew existing definitions and categorizations of African popular culture in today's day and age.

**ESSAY 6: DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION OF CREATIVE
AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT IN AND FROM AFRICA: A
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THREE CASES**

VI. ESSAY 6: DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION OF CREATIVE AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT IN AND FROM AFRICA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THREE CASES

THIS CHAPTER COMPARES THREE COMMERCIAL COMPANIES ACTIVE IN THE DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION OF AFRICAN-PRODUCED AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT. IT LOOKS FOR CUES AS TO HOW DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION, THEORIZED AS A POTENTIALLY DISRUPTIVE FORM OF INNOVATION, IS MATERIALIZING AS AN ECONOMIC AND INDUSTRIAL PRACTICE. I FOCUS ON DISTRIBUTION AS PART OF THE AUDIOVISUAL VALUE CHAIN BECAUSE (1) DISTRIBUTION HAS SINCE LONG BEEN IDENTIFIED AS A MAJOR CHALLENGE FOR AFRICA'S FILM AND MEDIA INDUSTRIES, AND (2) IT IS PRIMARILY THE DISTRIBUTION OF AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT WHICH IS AFFECTED BY RECENT TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS IN AFRICA. I COMPARE BUSINESS AND DELIVERY MODELS, TARGET AUDIENCES, PRICING STRATEGIES, RELEVANT CONTEXT, AND ARTIST REMUNERATION PRINCIPLES OF MY CASES. THE FINDINGS ARE EMBEDDED IN DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION LITERATURE AND RECENT RESEARCH ON DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION IN THE WEST. I CONCLUDE WITH A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CHANGES IN THE INCUMBENT VALUE CHAIN AND A CALL FOR FURTHER RESEARCH, PARTICULARLY INTO THE CHANGING POWER DYNAMICS BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND NEW PLAYERS IN THE NEWLY EMERGING ECOSYSTEM.

This essay is under review with the *Journal of African Media Studies*. The field under study is young and fast-moving, and some of the data presented here risk becoming obsolete soon. This work is intended as a first step towards more and longer-term empirical and comparative analysis, as well as a step towards a theoretical contextualization of digital distribution in the African context. My data are drawn from interviews conducted in March and April 2013, and representatives of the cases studied have reviewed, commented on, and updated this chapter in the course of July and August 2014.

1. Introduction

Through a comparative analysis of three case studies this essay asks how the digitization of audiovisual distribution in and from Africa is leading to new economic and industrial practices. By digitization I mean the shift of a step or process within the audiovisual value chain¹¹⁹ from being non-digital to being digital in nature. Examples include the transition from celluloid or videotape to digital carriers, from analogue to digital technologies for image capturing and processing, from 35 and 16 millimeter to digital screening projectors, or in the spheres of distribution: from celluloid copies to digital cinema packages, delivered via satellite or the web to screening venues, the transition to digital television broadcasting, or the shift from physical sales to the streaming of video directly to viewers. With this article I will concentrate on this last form of digitization: the delivery of video content directly to audiences through web technology.

¹¹⁹ Michael Porter (2001: 74) defines the value chain as “the set of activities through which a product or service is created and delivered to customers”. Originally used to assess value flow within companies, the concept is now used for industries too (De Vinck 2011: 181; Finney 2010: 2).

“Digital distribution” here refers to the online delivery of content, to be viewed on computers, mobile screens (smartphones, tablets), or in some cases, television screens (when they are equipped with an internal or external decoder). It does not include distribution from film producers or distributors to cinema theaters. African cinema theatres are scarce and rarely screen local movies (Dupré 2013)¹²⁰, making this form of distribution largely irrelevant for the purpose of this chapter. I could have opted for “online” instead of “digital” distribution (as do Stuart Cunningham et al. 2010), but this might suggest the exclusion of mobile delivery of content, which in Africa is crucial. “Video-on-demand” (or “VOD”) as a term is at the same time too broad (as it exists also in the context of digital television) and too narrow (as one of my cases would not usually be called an example of VOD, but rather a mobile-focused streaming platform). To avoid confusion I will consequently use either “digital distribution”, or “online” and/or “mobile” distribution.

As digital distribution is new in Africa, it has received almost no scholarly attention. In the context of film and media studies, a lot of Africa-focused research on innovation has looked at a first “wave”¹²¹ of digitization in filmmaking, with the uptake of digital recording and DVD/VCD-technology propelling Nollywood (the hugely successful South Nigerian popular cinema genre) and indigenous industries across Africa (Haynes 2000; Krings in Saul and Austen 2010: 74-91; Rasmussen 2010; Meyer 1999 and 2011; McCall 2004; Larkin 2008; Jedlowski 2010).

In contrast, hardly any academic research has focused on innovation in the spheres of video distribution in Africa¹²². I contend that after the first “wave” of digitization in African audiovisual production, a second “wave” is currently taking place, primarily in the spheres of distribution. This digitization is underpinned by dramatic changes in Africa’s network infrastructures. During the past five years, improved fiber capacity across the continent has resulted in wider connectivity, in turn facilitating web-based commercial initiatives of a radically new nature (*Smart Monkey* 2013a). These new market practices make African-produced creative content available to a substantial and growing number of viewers in Africa and in the diaspora. This is particularly interesting since the lack of distribution channels suitable for local content is commonly viewed as one of the major, if not the biggest, impediments to the development of a viable African film and media ecosystem (Mhando and Kipeja 2010; Diawara 2010; Dupré 2013).

I will analyze and compare three pioneering practices in digital distribution of African-produced content. These initiatives are celebrated in online media and weblogs, and showcased at industry

¹²⁰ There are exceptions, such as for instance Nigeria and South Africa; especially the latter has a higher number of venues and more local programming (Bisschoff, 2014, personal comment). The picture is less clear in Kenya, where between 2006 and 2012 several venues were opened, closed, and/or have changed hands (Ogunyemi, 2012), but where local movies are still at a disadvantage. Similarly, Tanzanian movies seldomly make it to the wide screen in Tanzania.

¹²¹ To be exact, Nollywood started with the introduction of videotape and VHS. In other words, this first “wave” of digitization started with tape, shortly after to shift to the digital recording and editing of movies, which are then printed on optical discs.

¹²² Ramon Lobato (2009) has introduced the concept of Subcinema distribution (commercial film cultures characterized by distributive informality), using Nollywood DVD/VCD distribution as an illustrative case. Subcinema is characterized by instantaneity and deterritoriality (making a product available as quickly as possible, without much consideration for legality, windowing systems, or distribution rights), invisibility to official estimations (because of its informal nature), “cockroach capitalism” (a site of strong commercial adaptability), handshake-deals and flat-fee sales, textual variability and distraction (Lobato 2009: 105-125). Though useful and relevant for DVD/VCD distribution in Africa, Subcinema is not useful as a theoretical framework for formal digital distribution.

gatherings¹²³ as technology-induced and business-savvy solutions to the long-standing problem of indigenous distribution. At the same time, as the incumbent media ecosystem has not yet adapted to the nature of these new practices, they raise questions regarding viability and profitability, access and affordability, artist remuneration, and the potential impact on the existing value network¹²⁴ at large. These are the kinds of questions I want to address. What shape is the emerging digital distribution of audiovisual content in and from Africa taking? What audiences are targeted, in social-economic terms and in terms of where they are? What type of content is distributed, what pricing and remuneration models are used, and why? How does all this relate back to incumbent distribution systems and networks, and to the social-economic context in which the practices are developed? What does it seem to suggest about the future of digital distribution of African-produced audiovisual content as part of a larger value network?

I have conducted expert interviews with the management staff of organisations active in online and/or mobile distribution of locally-produced content. In addition, I have pursued several rounds of literature review of secondary data (industry magazines, online media, industry research, and policy documents). The cases are based in different regions: Lagos (Nigeria, West Africa), Nairobi (Kenya, East Africa), and Cape Town (South Africa). While this increases data variety and thus suggests higher validity, these countries have more in common than might be expected. All three are regional economic powers, and they are all considered hubs for technological innovation on the continent (Swart 2011: 27; Grosskurth 2010: 161). It is therefore not surprising that the more advanced initiatives in digital distribution, most likely to provide relevant insights, are to be found there¹²⁵. Neither my methodology – purposeful sampling and semi-structured expert interviews – nor Africa’s reality as a diverse and socially/economically stratified continent, allow for continent-wide generalization. The goal is more modest: to identify trends and commonalities in emerging business models and remaining challenges, in the three sub-Saharan countries where innovation appears to move fastest. From this, tentative predictions may be attempted but are always preliminary.

2. Cases: short profiles

I will study three companies active in the digital distribution of African-produced audiovisual media. These cases are among the pioneers of Africa-based digital distribution, but it is not suggested that they are the absolute “first movers”. The first African VOD-platform is believed to be European-funded Africafilms.tv¹²⁶ (*Balancing Act* 2013b), though there may well have been earlier start-ups which have failed and have been forgotten.

Though African initiatives in the digital distribution of local content have been mushrooming in recent years, these cases stand out because they have managed to reach substantially higher

¹²³ Examples of international forums and industry gatherings where the cases have been featured include Discop Africa (varying locations), Aitec Africa (varying locations), AfricaCast (Cape Town), and Broadcast Film and Music Conference (Nairobi).

¹²⁴ Rosenbloom and Christensen (1994: 234) define the value network as “the context within which the firm identifies and responds to customers’ needs, procures inputs and reacts to competitors”. It is also described as “the internal and external context in which a firm operates: the network of suppliers, channels and ancillary providers supporting a common business model on an industry-level” (Christensen 1997: 296).

¹²⁵ Examples are: Spinlet and Afrinolly in Nigeria; Africori, Tavoom, Mdundo, Waabeh, and Eziki in Kenya; Wabonah, KasiMP3, and MyTVAfrica.com in South Africa.

¹²⁶ Africafilms.tv began its activities in 2011 and officially launched in 2012 (Enrico Chiesa, 2014, personal e-mail).

audience numbers than their competitors in a short time, and have obtained more than average visibility and media attention. However, perhaps tellingly of how nascent and unconsolidated the industry is, none of them have broken even (Southwood, 2013, personal e-mail; Oyeniyi 2013).

I will start with a short profile of each case, and will then compare them according to the research questions formulated earlier, before moving on to a theoretical assessment, conclusions and discussion. This build-up diverges from what is common practice in academic writing, in which theoretical reviews are usually followed by a presentation of data. I believe it to be the most pragmatic approach here: the idea is to present and structure new data, allowing readers to familiarize themselves with these new practices and business models, before embedding them in a selection of relevant innovation theory, and subsequently approaching them from a more critical, political economy-related perspective.

iROKOTv (www.irokotv.com, °2011), based in Lagos, New York, and Johannesburg, is an online and mobile streaming platform diffusing Nollywood movies and television shows to African (for now, mainly Nigerian) and diaspora audiences. It is part of iROKO Partners, which also distributes music on its platform iROKING. Since a few years iROKO Partners have also become active in the financing and production of new and exclusive work.

Though it is optimized for mobile viewing, iROKOTv is accessed most through computers, and is used predominantly by people of African and Caribbean descent in the West. Since the spring of 2014, it has started to extend its focus from its diasporic viewership towards proactively tapping into an Africa-based audience, with East Africa as one of its strategic priorities (Njoku 2014b; Coetzee 2014). In addition, since May 2014 it has started to move away from its traditional freemium-¹²⁷based business-model, in order to roll out a subscription-only offer (currently launched in 140 of the 170 countries in which iROKOTv is operational; Oluwafemi 2014).

iROKO Partners employs about 100 people, the majority of whom work for iROKOTv. It has a catalogue of approximately 5,000 movies (Campbell 2013b) and has attracted more than 155 million views on its YouTube channel NollywoodLove (last updated August 2014). Since its launch in 2010 it has reached more than six million unique users (www.irokopartners.com). The VOD platform iROKOTv counts about 1 million unique users, but this figure is likely to decrease strongly in the course of 2014, as it abandons its free offer (Hope, personal e-mail, 2014).

Nairobi-based **Buni.tv** (www.buni.tv, °2012), too, is an online and mobile streaming platform for African videos, though not for Nollywood movies, nor for the Kenyan variant, Riverwood. Buni.tv targets upper-middle class audiences within Africa or of African descent looking for “high-quality, professionally produced, modern” Africa-related content (Lora-Mungai, 2013). It is interested in altering Africa’s image as a producer of generic and low-quality media, and promoting its more dynamic and contemporary productions: films (long and short), music videos, comedy, documentaries, television shows, animation, and web series. The content has links with pop culture and fashion, and is sourced both from the diaspora and from within Africa. In Africa, where Buni.tv is accessed most, 43 % of its views as well as the majority of new visits happen through mobile devices (either Buni.tv’s mobile website or its “app”; Lora-Mungai, personal e-mail, 2014; Buni.tv executive summary 2012).

¹²⁷ “Freemium” refers to a free offer supplemented with a (paid) premium offer.

Buni.tv is a spin-off of multimedia production company Buni Media (°2009), which has a presence in Los Angeles and Nairobi, and which is active in production (it is best-known for its political satire television program *The XYZ Show* and its younger Nigerian variant *Ogas at the Top*), animation, and publishing activities. Buni Media has a team of 88 people, 8 of whom work exclusively for Buni.tv. Buni.tv has an alliance with VOD-platform Africafilms.tv, giving it access to about 1,000 more films. Since its launch it has reached 1 million unique visitors (Lora-Mungai, personal e-mail, 2014). In March 2014, in addition to its free offer – mainly film trailers, short films, and music videos - it launched a subscription offer at 5 USD per month. For now it does not communicate on paying subscriber numbers (Lora-Mungai, personal e-mail, 2014).

Bozza (<http://bozza.mobi>, founded in 2010; mobile app launched in 2012), from Cape Town, is a stand-alone start-up. It is a mobile-focused social platform for talent discovery and artist self-distribution. Targeted at giving African creatives (in music, video¹²⁸, and poetry) the opportunity to self-publish and self-distribute, it seeks to serve users and audiences in townships and urban areas interested in what is made within or about their communities. Bozza wants to service users across Africa with legacy feature phones (Kaye, 2012). It started in South Africa, has launched¹²⁹ in Kenya and Nigeria, and has a presence (in terms of where content contributors are based) in the DRC, Senegal, Ghana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Zambia (Kaye, personal e-mail, 2014). Though the focus is on developing for feature devices, CEO Emma Kaye is convinced that in the future more of her audiences will migrate to smartphones, and Bozza plans to migrate with them. Bozza's team consists of 10 people. Currently it has at least 2,000 contributors, and stands at about 250,000 downloads (Kaye, personal e-mail, 2014).

3. Cases: comparative analysis

The prolific South-Nigerian Nollywood industry reaches audiences continent-wide and far into diasporic communities through the distribution of DVD and VCD discs. It could be argued, therefore, that **iROKOTv** with its online offer of Nollywood movies has not introduced a new product, nor is it essentially opening new markets. It fills a comfort-related gap in an existing market: “We basically made something that was very popular easily accessible” (CEO Jason Njoku cited in Vourlias 2013). It acquires and aggregates exclusive distribution rights from producers, marketing their movies worldwide through its streaming platform as well as to third parties. With its “anywhere, anytime” character, the platform has made it easier and cheaper for a sub-segment of Nollywood adepts to watch movies. In order to watch, this sub-segment must possess the required devices, must live in environments with networks allowing for the streaming of feature-length film and for online or mobile payments, and must have the budget and willingness to pay for data and subscription costs. For now these viewers are based largely in the West: the U.S., the U.K., Canada and Germany are iROKOTv's major markets. The incumbent DVD/VCD distribution business in Nigeria, operating from

¹²⁸ This does not have to be narrative video. There have also been cooking shows, music videos, do-it-yourself tutorials, and short web series.

¹²⁹ The mobile app can be downloaded worldwide. By “launched” I mean that efforts have been made for promotion towards audiences and artists.

Lagos-based Alaba market as its best-known nexus, is firmly in place¹³⁰ for those unaware of iROKOtv, uninterested in it, or unable to access it.

iROKOtv has been one of the early movers in the online market of Nollywood content. It started as the NollywoodLove channel on YouTube in 2010, gradually building an audience large enough to raise the attention of venture capital investors. Through a number of large investments (8 million USD from investment firm Tiger Global and Kinnevik, spent mainly on hosting costs and content acquisition¹³¹) it created a stand-alone platform, and scaled and diversified into a comfortable quasi-monopolist position. Several start-ups have emerged in its wake. For instance, there now is the mobile app Afrinolly which, promoted and supported by Nigerian telecom giant MTN, links users free of charge to online Nollywood and Bollywood movies. The app has been downloaded about three million times (Mzekandaba 2013). There is also the VOD platform IbakaTv, with a freemium portfolio similar to iROKO's initial offer; and there are other popular apps and YouTube channels: "Real Nolly", "tv Nolly", and many more. So far these competitors have not come close to iROKOtv's viewer statistics, nor has any of them managed to differentiate itself from the generic concept of streaming Nollywood for free.

Many of these new channels operate within the framework of YouTube's Partnership program: an option for users who manage channels to monetize through advertizing, sharing revenues with YouTube. Server, bandwidth, and electricity costs, which increase proportionally to growing viewership (this is what Cunningham [2012] has called the diseconomies of scale of VOD), are also borne by YouTube. A similar deal permitted iROKOtv in the past to grow its user-base without incurring excessive costs. YouTube gives iROKOtv's channel NollywoodLove, with currently more than 357,000 subscribers (August 2014), high ranking when users search the platform for "Nollywood", as well as extra customizing options for its various iROKING-related channels, and more than average upload capacity.

iROKOtv buys exclusive distribution rights for a flat fee¹³² and for a fixed number of years. The company has a formal approach to IPR management but also has one foot in Nigeria's much more informal Nollywood industry, where producers prefer fixed amounts of money upfront to shared revenues. According to business development manager Adibeli Nduka-Agwu (2013), the volume of movies that iROKO aggregates and the ubiquity of fraudulent practices in the Nollywood marketplace, render simple and transparent accounting paramount (Nduka-Agwu, 2013). Nevertheless iROKOtv has been criticized by Nollywood producers for not having their best (financial) interests at heart (Oyeniya 2013; Kimani K. and Kimani G., 2013).

Diaspora viewers access iROKOtv through computers more than mobile phones, but in Africa the advent of LTE (the newest generation standard for mobile networks) infrastructure to several big cities is expected to boost opportunity for mobile distribution in the future. Until now, the poor broadband penetration in Nigeria has limited internet-based film viewing in the country (Oyeniya 2013; Jedlowski in Krings and Okome 2013). The second digitization wave referred to in the

¹³⁰ I am not suggesting that Nollywood as a local DVD/VCD market with transnational reach does not have crises of its own, rather that they are not caused by the disruption of VOD platforms, apart from pirate sites accessed in the diaspora (see also Jedlowski in Krings and Okome 2013).

¹³¹ This was only a first round of investments. The figure of capital invested by Tiger Global, Kinnevik, and RISE Capital now stands at about 25 million USD (Hope, personal e-mail, 2014).

¹³² According to CEO Jason Njoku this fee is between USD 10,000 and 25,000 (Oyeniya 2013; Oladipo 2014).

introduction of this chapter is an unfinished process, but little doubt remains that the digital distribution of Nollywood film in – parts of – Africa will eventually benefit from a better-adapted technological environment. Media analyst Russell Southwood writes: “Initially iROKO Partners was largely focused on diasporic Nigerian audiences but since it started (...) it has seen its home country Nigeria go from 12th by share of views to 6th position. With fast mobile broadband on its way through LTE (...) the 27% who are currently making mobile searches to it, will soon be using it” (*Smart Monkey* 2013b).

Apart from the search for an optimized revenue balance, remaining obstacles for iROKOtv’s growth in Africa revolve around affordability (devices, subscription costs, streaming rates), current network limitations, and device limitations (*Smart Monkey* 2013a). Rich content requires smartphones, whereas smartphone penetration in Africa stands at about 12% (Sahota 2014), though the fast recent uptake on the continent has lead analysts to make bold predictions about a faster spread in the years to come (Sato 2013; Evans 2013). Telephone manufacturers are successfully pushing the uptake of smartphones but their penetration to a critical mass of audiences, like the implementation of broadband, is an ongoing process. Contrary to Kenya’s M-Pesa, Nigeria does not have a widely accepted and trusted system for mobile payments in place (Ugwu, 2013). Nigerian audiences viewing video on handheld devices face high traffic costs, while telecom operators are infamous for overcharging platforms for revenue generated through their networks. “We are not charging within Nigeria but if we were, we would be forced to go through the mobile operators, who keep more than half (60 to 90%) of each payment. That makes no sense for us” (Nduka-Agwu, 2013)¹³³.

Since its launch in 2011 until May 2014 iROKOtv operated on a freemium-based revenue model, with 95% of its offer available free of charge in addition to an advertisement-free premium space - iROKOtv Plus - charging 5 USD per month. Its new subscription-only offer is priced at 8 USD per month¹³⁴. While the bulk of traditional iROKOtv viewers so far have watched free of charge, the revenue they generated according to CEO Njoku is below the expected income from future monthly subscriptions. The number of viewers subscribed to iROKOtv Plus stood at 20,000 in 2013 (Robson 2013b); the platform claims the number is now higher but refrains from disclosing specific figures (Hope, personal e-mail, 2014). In view of the wide reach of its free offer (10 million views per month, and 500,000 registered users; *Smallstarter* 2014; *BusinessDaily* 2014) the company has presumably made an estimate of the proportion of viewers likely to stay on board even if it means paying a fee. The revenues from this limited base are expected to be larger than that of iROKOtv’s current advertising income (estimated by Njoku at “several millions” in a year [Njoku 2014a]). This seems like a considerable risk in a market with an array of contenders offering free access to a similar product and with the “(...) entrenched perception (...) that online media content should be free” (*Techloy*

¹³³ At the time of our interview (April 2013) iROKOtv’s business-model was freemium-based, and iROKOtv Plus was not in use in Nigeria. Nigeria was described as a bad environment for online or mobile payments. In the meantime several start-ups for mobile commerce have been launched, the most noteworthy example being Paga (<https://www.mypaga.com/>). Mobile commerce remains a bigger challenge in Nigeria than in Kenya, partly because mobile telephone operators are not allowed to be directly involved (Southwood, personal e-mail, 2014). What is clear is that iROKOtv’s move into East Africa is related to the region’s overall better-developed environment for mobile and electronic commerce (Njoku 2014b).

¹³⁴ In a number of online articles discussing the shift from iROKOtv’s freemium to subscription-only model authors refer to iROKOtv’s (original) monthly fee as priced at 8 USD (Oladipo 2014; Oluwafemi 2014). The monthly fee still advertised in iROKOtv’s frequently asked questions-section, is 5 USD (last accessed August 2014).

2012). However, at the same time iROKO Partners has gradually and increasingly become focused on producing and/or financing exclusive content. Through analyzing online viewer feedback – “likes”, comments, rates, queries – it has built knowledge on audience preferences, which it now wants to put to use through the financing and production of – the glossier side of - Nollywood film and television. This content is featured exclusively on its VOD platform and licensed to third parties such as airline companies and television broadcasters (*Smart Monkey* 2014, video interview with Jason Njoku), and potentially represents a significant new revenue stream. An early example of iROKO’s self-produced television work is *Festac Town*, a soap series based in Festac, an estate in Lagos.

To conclude and summarize: iROKOTv has grown into its leading position amongst online African video platforms as a consequence of early efforts in acquiring intellectual property rights and daring investments. It has had time to build followers on its YouTube channel during a period in which there were no contenders, while avoiding costly server space and processing costs, which were borne by YouTube. Subsequently, it has had time to monitor and analyze its viewers’ behavior and preferences over the past years. Still, it has not broken even. According to CEO Njoku, this is part of a long-term plan to invest and grow bigger (Oyeniya 2013; Njoku 2013e): moving into a subscription-only space, investing in an East African presence, and expanding its production efforts, are presumably all part of this plan. The company has built a brand, unequivocally associated with Nollywood. Its viewers for now are based primarily in the West, but it intends to grow an income on African grounds as the local context – both in terms of technological environment as in terms of commercial ecosystem and affordability – improves. iROKOTv is clearly still in the process of developing an ideal business model, and it is too early to tell whether the pay-only proposition will be consolidated in its current form. For iROKOTv as for VOD in Africa in general, the technological context might become accommodating sooner than a robust and sustainable revenue model is found.

Buni.tv’s mission speaks directly to my research question: “to revolutionize the way African film and other video content is distributed and consumed on the continent by leveraging Africa’s mobile boom, including Kenya’s mobile payment ecosystem” (Buni.tv executive summary 2012). Like iROKOTv, Buni.tv is a streaming platform for African creative content, incubated within a larger company: multimedia producer Buni Media. Contrary to iROKOTv, from its inception it has served Africa-based – for now, mainly Kenyan – audiences in the first place (*Balancing Act* 2013a), in addition to viewers in the diaspora. Within Africa, it focuses on upper-middle class audiences who possess smartphones – about 7% of all mobile phones in Kenya in 2012, but growing fast (Buni.tv executive summary 2012). According to Gicheru (2014), 67% of the mobile phones currently sold in Kenya are smartphones. Buni.tv’s focus on Africa goes hand in hand with a focus on mobile distribution: in March 2014 it released a dedicated app on the Samsung market, with add-ons such as the possibility of creating personal playlists, leaving comments, and sharing videos on the social media. In addition to distributing through its own platform, Buni.tv considers offering its services in the future as a distributor to third-party platforms such as Hulu or Netflix (Lora-Mungai, 2013).

Buni.tv does not target mass audiences. Its editorial policy is selective, its content not easy to label. The platform wants to build itself as a curatorial brand: pan-African with a global outlook, holding African video to the same standards as Western content. It wants to purvey the “modern African

experience” which today’s growing middle classes¹³⁵ can relate to (Lora-Mungai, 2013; Robson 2013b). Its content is easily associated with cosmopolitanism, fashion and style, and an interest in all things modern and Africa-related. In that sense it has been described as Afropolitan (Lora-Mungai, 2013), although it does not reflect the commodity-oriented or exclusionary inclinations which Afropolitan pop culture is sometimes accused of (see also p. 101 and footnote 78). Buni.tv features trendy videos, content of high aesthetic standards, as well as cultural, political, and/or otherwise challenging films. It does not shy away from taking position in political, ideological, or societal questions. For instance, it streamed Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s *Le Président* (2013) for free during one week in October 2013: an experimental “mockumentary”¹³⁶ which is highly critical of the Cameroonian political system, and which was banned there. Perhaps social-political outspokenness could be called characteristic of the Buni group. Its enormously popular but politically delicate, satirical *XYZ Show* (see also chapter 5) has not found official sponsors despite wide viewership (Campbell 2013a). Since Buni Media launched its Nigerian variant *Ogas at the Top* in March 2014, Nigeria has become Buni.tv’s second source of traffic after Kenya (Lora-Mungai, personal e-mail, 2014).

Buni.tv’s selective content policy coupled with the fact that it cannot pay large fees to producers for now is limiting the potential volume of its offer. Contrary to iROKO, it does not pay flat fees but a minimum guarantee and a share revolving around 50% on revenues generated through videos. According to Lora-Mungai (2013), VOD being in its infancy in Africa, shared risks and revenues are a fairer option than flat sums to rights holders: “No one knows the potential value of an African film on VOD yet, we are just building the ecosystem. There is no history to go and say ‘that film made 200, 2,000, or 20,000 USD’. If we were to opt for flat fees, we would not know how to price the films as we do not know their potential yet.”

In its first years most of Buni.tv’s offer was free and/or embedded from external sites, while the company was working to build its catalogue in feature film, in the process building viewership (Robson 2013a). Attempts at signing satisfactory advertising agreements were unsuccessful¹³⁷, and the company is no longer actively pursuing this option (Lora-Mungai, personal e-mail, 2014). In March 2014 Buni+ was launched, a premium offer for unlimited viewing similar to iROKOTv Plus. The platform’s offer in feature films and documentaries is now all but entirely subscription-based, while some of the other formats –music videos, short fiction, television shows - have remained free.

¹³⁵ Lora-Mungai refers to a World Bank estimate of 350 million Africans pertaining to the middle class. The AFDB defines African middle class groups as those spending between 2 and 20USD per day. Approximately 30% of the African population is assumed to pertain to this group. However, about 60% of them spends close to the 2USD minimum. They are constantly at risk of slipping back below that minimum, and into poverty (Enaudeau, 2013). The estimates of growing middle classes in Africa, as its definition, are highly contentious (see also footnote 79).

¹³⁶ A combination of the words “mocking” and “documentary”, a mockumentary is a piece of audiovisual fiction presented as a documentary.

¹³⁷ To be precise: Marie Lora-Mungai never literally mentioned that Buni.tv was looking for advertisers. In our last e-mail-conversation (July 2014) she writes: “we never actually sold ads and don’t have any plans to do so.” My statement on “attempts at satisfactory deals” is a deduction from the frequently-asked-questions section on Buni.tv’s website, where the company explains its revenue scheme (based on advertising), its revenue sharing scheme (50% of advertising income goes to rights holders), and directions for companies interested in advertising (<http://buni.tv/page/faq/>, last accessed August 2104). There were clearly plans to work with advertising, but ads were never sold.

As said, Buni.tv also features content produced in-house. In addition to *The XYZ Show* (10 million viewers across different platforms) and *Ogas at the Top*, Buni Media has also produced the *Buni.tv Comedy* series: short sketches with little visual detail, to be viewed exclusively on Buni.tv. Ideally fit for small screens, short, and with locally-appealing humor, this is one of the first cases where the Africa-specific habitus for video-browsing is feeding back into production choice: a strong preference for mobile internet, interest in an African offer, and expanding middle-class audience groups exposed to – the production quality of – a global offer which they seek in local productions as well.

Buni.tv's focus on mobile distribution as opposed to iROKOTv's initial "wait and see"¹³⁸ position vis-à-vis mobile suggests that Kenya's environment for mobile commerce (network infrastructure, data rates) is more accommodating than Nigeria's. "Kenya is better, definitely. The country basically said, this is what we want to be, the number one IT people in Africa, and they are getting there. (...)" Interestingly, in South Africa you have the poorest connection [in comparison to Kenya and Nigeria], a sad contrast with the other advantages the country has" (Nduka-Agwu, 2013). Marie Lora-Mungai (in Campbell 2013a) says: "About two years ago [2011], the technology suddenly became robust enough to allow for videos on mobile. Also, the mobile market was experiencing a solid and rapid growth, and people were starting to switch to smartphones." To add to this, Kenya is the cradle¹³⁹ of M-Pesa, the world's first mobile payment system, and has traditionally been very focused on ICT and mobile innovation. For the past years, the Kenyan government has regarded ICT-innovation as one of its top strategic future priorities (see, for instance, *Government of Kenya, Ministry of Information and Communication* 2013). Though Nigeria is equally known as one of the better places in Africa for ICT, Kenya provides a better technical and commercial environment for mobile streaming and VOD activities.

While iROKO's main – and crucial – partner has been YouTube, Buni.tv has many different partnerships: with Safaricom (Kenya's biggest mobile operator) for organizing payment through the M-Pesa platform and for promotion through text-marketing, with Samsung for the promotion of its app, with Afrinolly for mutual promotion and content sharing (Buni.tv showcases contributions to Afrinolly's short film contest), and with Dakar-based Africafilms.tv in the form of a joint-acquisition agreement. It has also associated itself with the Africa in Motion film festival in Edinburgh.

To conclude: despite deploying similar activities – the online and mobile streaming of African and Africa-related video, iROKOTv and Buni.tv are very different. The former targets mass audiences in Africa (primarily Nigeria, with an expansion into East Africa announced in April 2014) and the diaspora with a large catalogue of Nollywood movies, while Buni.tv positions itself as a curator of upmarket content for an upper-middle class audience demographic, primarily in Kenya but also in the diaspora. iROKOTv acquires movies through flat fee arrangements and has been accused of exploitative practices (Oyeniya 2013). Buni.tv works with a shared revenue principle, and appears to be appreciated by makers for giving exposure, more than criticized for not generating much income (Shivji, 2013). Partly because of Kenya's favorable context for mobile commerce, and partly because of Buni.tv's wealthier user demographic, it aims for accessibility on all possible high-end platforms, not in the least mobile devices. Conversely, iROKOTv has traditionally been accessed through

¹³⁸ By "wait and see" it is not meant that iROKOTv is not accessible through mobile devices: it has a mobile-responsive website and a mobile application. However it is not actively positioning itself as a mobile platform.

¹³⁹ To be exact, the system was developed at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, U.S.) but commercialized by Kenya's Safaricom.

computers more than mobile handhelds. Both initiatives are part of a bigger company, affording them the much-needed incubation time to work towards profitability. This is not the case for my third and last case study, which we now turn to.

Bozza is a platform for self-distribution and talent discovery. It is accessed primarily through mobile phones (for now, mostly feature phones) but also has an online and social media presence. Featuring video, music, and poetry, its mobile application was launched in March 2012.

Bozza has made it a priority to design and develop for the handhelds used most by its target audience: older-type feature telephones with small screens (Kaye, 2012). Before content is uploaded, it is compressed in a way to keep data charges – the only costs incurred by users – at a minimum. According to CEO Emma Kaye, this is done without compromising on viewing or audio experience. Designed in the first place for legacy phones, quality-wise Bozza works best on those phones. It is available on an array of operating systems: Java, Android, Blackberry, and Nokia Express.

Contrary to the previous cases, which are easily compared to VOD platforms such as Hulu and Netflix, Bozza is difficult to link to any existing digital distribution initiative. A mobile-focused social platform dedicated exclusively to African user-generated content, and a mix between users' self-promotion and steered curatorship¹⁴⁰, it bears some resemblance to the, infinitely bigger, YouTube platform. YouTube, however, is only concerned with artist self-promotion as part of its larger concept as a video-based social platform. Its search features are different from Bozza's, the latter focusing on country of origin, discipline and genre of the content. Bozza could be called similar to self-promotion services in the spheres of music, such as Bandcamp, but is unique in its focus on low-end mobile phones and African audiences. In the words of Georgina Born, as a self-identified social entrepreneur, Bozza offers an "(...) idealist vision of profit-sharing co-production: a future in which creator or producer and intermediaries collaborate to achieve mutually beneficial cultural, social and economic ends" (Born 2013).

Being new in kind, and not embedded in a larger structure with a diversified revenue model, reaching sustainability is an even greater challenge for Bozza than for our previous cases. Shortly after a successful proof of concept demonstrating user interest, it obtained the necessary investments¹⁴¹ for its first development. According to Kaye, artists in South Africa are now approaching Bozza much more than during its start-up period, when it actively had to search for contributors. Launching in new markets has been a time-intensive venture because of the company's bottom-up approach. Local talent is not always showcased in local media or weblogs. To find a foothold in new areas talent scouts or community leaders had to be involved. When asked about Bozza's presence in his country, a Kenyan media expert asks: "Have they launched yet? I don't think so. I saw a test of the app, but do not know the plan, have not seen anything. There is a tab for Kenya in the app but not much content. They need to set up office here. Also, a start-up is all about sustaining yourself. You have to have revenue coming in" (Macharia, 2013).

Similar to Buni.tv, Bozza works with a shared revenue model revolving around a 50/50 revenue split with content providers. Its overall revenue model is in development, and CEO Kaye does not believe

¹⁴⁰ Bozza screens content for quality but its longer-term vision is to let visibility depend on views and user comments.

¹⁴¹ Venture Capital investment has come from Omidyar, Hasso Plattner Ventures Africa, and a wealthy individual investor.

she can fully rely on advertising or subscriptions: “If you depend on mobile payment, you need high volumes and that is unlikely to happen with unknown artists (...). Mobile advertising is quite challenging and banner ads are not yet successful” (*Balancing Act* 2013c). Therefore, the company is exploring new avenues on top of looking for sponsorship, advertising, and syndicating content to third parties such as telephone operators and manufacturers. One way is by providing extra services to contributing artists: offering them opportunities for live shows, attending contributing writers to copywriting opportunities, in short: an additional offer which bears resemblance to LinkedIn’s premium service (*idem*).

Like Buni.tv’s Marie-Lora Mungai and iROKOTv’s Adibeli Nduka-Agwu, Emma Kaye believes that locally-relevant video is a large commercial opportunity in Africa. Contrary to iROKOTv with Nollywood and Buni.tv with its upmarket content, it has focused on yet another type: the creations of people who may be well-known locally, but have no visibility outside their communities, let alone internationally. While Buni.tv draws its offer from a variety of sources (festivals, blogs, producers), Bozza works bottom-up, addressing a gap in the market for what it calls “hyper-local, premium, user-generated content” (Kaye, 2012). And while iROKOTv’s and Buni.tv’s audiences within Africa are upper-middle class, Bozza targets the lower-income strata with a free offer designed to keep data costs as low as possible. None of these cases have received public support, though all have obtained different measures of start-up funding from private sources, while two are part of a larger company. All of them have secured partnerships, most of which are new in kind to the African video and media value network: commercial agreements with telecom operators and phone manufacturers, mutual promotion agreements with festivals and talent contests, et cetera.

When we compare these cases, we see three young players with clear commonalities and differences. They share a focus on locally-produced content, despite important differences in the type of content featured. All three anticipate a growing importance of mobile technology for digital distribution in Africa, but they approach this in different ways: from initially targeting diaspora audiences while waiting for an African mobile ecosystem to grow (iROKOTv), over a mixed model (Buni.tv), to a mobile and urban Africa-targeted stance (Bozza). Viewing content on Bozza is free, while both iROKOTv and Buni.tv have shifted from a freemium to a subscription-focused model.

The activities of these cases are developed in an environment of strong convergence (in the sense of Ariño and Llorens in Ward 2008)¹⁴². Previously separate players (telecom, festivals, film distributors) are forging new types of partnerships. Roles are shifting: audiences become potential producers as with Bozza, online platforms brand themselves as trusted guides such as Buni.tv, or assume a more traditional distributor’s role, selling rights to third parties. Value networks are transforming and increasingly overlapping: television sets become internet-equipped (such as Samsung TV) or are connected to online platforms through set top boxes (such as Apple TV or Roku). Digital distributors increasingly deliver through different screen types – telephone, tablet, television – and are themselves regrouped under an oligopoly of online “markets” for applications: Google Play, the Samsung Market, the Apple Store, Nokia’s OVI store, et cetera (see also McChesney and Hind 2013 on the monopolization of today’s network economics). In the African context, the grey zone between formal and informal distribution leads to a “blurring of brands”: Afrinolly hyperlinks to IbakaTV, Bozza

¹⁴² The concept of “convergence” has been used in different ways, but here it refers, with Ariño and Llorens, to “(...) the phenomenon, whereby the technological and market boundaries between previously distinct sectors, and by extension services and platforms used to deliver them, blur” (Ariño and Llorens 2008 in Ward: 125).

in the past has featured content which was clearly licensed to iROKOTv, and many VOD platforms other than the ones featured here link back to content on YouTube.

There are also national and regional specificities, presenting each case with opportunities (falling prices for increasingly powerful handhelds, growing middle classes, an increasing demand for local content), and challenges (lack of a commercial ecosystem, piracy, faulty network infrastructure, a weak advertising market). When Lora-Mungai (2013) contends that “the African VOD space is (...) bound to explode thanks to the inevitable rise in high-speed internet access on the continent, the falling costs of bandwidth and data, and the sustained demand for local content”, she speaks from the Kenyan context. She adds, however, that “(...) we are developing an ecosystem from scratch. (...) For mobile video distribution to really explode, bandwidth and data costs still have to drop further, and more people need to switch to smartphones or tablets. But it will get there” (in Campbell 2013a). Nduka-Agwu and Kaye in Cape Town see similar hurdles. Nduka-Agwu (2013) says: “I see much potential in online distribution in Africa. We have now seen the very tip and we can feel what is possible, but the infrastructure is not quite there”. Nigeria, on the other hand, has the advantage of being very populous: 150 million people, and many more across the diaspora, constituting an enormous core market for Nollywood, while Kenya is much smaller but has formulated the clearest innovation-related policy targets of the three countries. Bozza promotes a new product altogether, for which market-build-up has only just started.

4. Disruptive innovation, new market innovation, business model innovation

In the following section I will argue why my cases represent different forms of potentially disruptive innovation. I use the word “potentially” because firstly the degree of “disruption” to be incurred by different types of incumbents varies a great deal, and secondly, the point in time at which disruption occurs is a debated question in academia (Danneels 2004: 247) and is not my core interest. While our cases are clearly strong innovators, it is still unclear how sustainable they are in the long run, and to what extent and in what way they might disrupt current power structures within the contemporary African and global media industries.

For a selective review of innovation theory a logical starting point is the work of Joseph Schumpeter (see also the introduction, pp. 15-16). Schumpeter drew in part on Karl Marx’ ideas about process innovation – new and more efficient machinery leading to increased competitive advantage – but broadened the concept to include, for instance, product, organizational, and technological innovation (Fagerberg s.d.: 21). Defining innovation as “new combinations” of new and/or existing knowledge, resources, markets, or equipment (Schumpeter 1934: 65), he also ascribed to it a social or economic application. For Schumpeter, to be distinguished from mere invention or novelty, an innovation has to be put in commercial practice (1964: 59-62). It is related to business activities and market dynamics: actions of individual entrepreneurs, new organizational or market forms, new consumer segments, the introduction of new technology into the marketplace, or into manufacturing or delivery systems.

The insight that innovation is not a question of isolated instances of “novelty” but of new combinations of assets leading to new economic practice, is crucial. Innovation is a relative phenomenon. If we are to analyze the digital dissemination of African-produced or related content to audiences based in Africa and in the diaspora, we are essentially discussing new combinations of recent but not entirely new technologies, with the entrepreneurial activity of delivering existing and

new content, in new ways, to established as well as new markets. It logically follows that digital distribution in an African context is an innovation in the Schumpeterian sense.

Academia situates technological innovation roughly in two categories. One houses the more “revolutionary, discontinuous, radical (...)” forms of technological change, while another groups the more “incremental, sustaining, or evolutionary” kind (Yu and Hang 2010). However intuitively clear and similar these classifications may seem, they do not refer to the same dimensions of innovation, especially when it is viewed as an economic, as opposed to merely a technological phenomenon. For instance, the first wave of digitization referred to previously led to the emergence of African popular cinema circuits. The technology itself could be considered an “evolution” of recording and media technology: from analogue to digital cameras, from celluloid to VHS to DVD and VCD. Put in commercial practice, though, and developed in the context of (first Ghana and then) Nigeria, it unleashed a massive new film industry with its own, locally-appropriate, system logics and value networks. Whether this first wave of innovation should be considered “disruptive”, then, depends on what precisely is meant by the term. I will trace some of the distinctions scholars have made between innovations of a more radical or discontinuous nature, and the more sustaining kind. My review will be limited to what is directly relevant for the topic of this article¹⁴³.

Before turning to theory, however, we need to ask: disruptive to whom? Our cases’ potential competitors vary as widely as formal and informal Africa-based DVD distributors and retail vendors, local, regional and global television broadcasters, legal and illegal streaming platforms, and even trending channels¹⁴⁴ on social media platforms competing for online audiences’ attention. Jason Njoku (2013d) of iROKO Partners has identified pay-TV in Africa (DStv’s Africa Magic, and perhaps Wananchi’s Zuku in East Africa¹⁴⁵) as his only true competition, dismissing the perceived threat of other online platforms (2014a).

Different types of incumbents possess different types of resources, making it easier or more challenging to react strategically to innovation. Tushman and Anderson (1986) have distinguished between competency-enhancing and competency-destroying innovation, referring to whether or not incumbents possess the resources¹⁴⁶ required to incorporate and use a new technology to their advantage. Competency-enhancing innovation builds on incumbents’ assets, whereas competency-destroying innovation stimulates new organizational forms and practices that can easily acquire them (Leonard-Barton 1992). As a consequence, competency-destroying innovations have more disruptive effects on an industry, while competency-enhancing discontinuities tend to consolidate it.

From studying our cases, we can identify some of the essential resources for making advantageous use of digital distribution in and from Africa. One is financial muscle: for content acquisition and processing, investments in technology and maintenance, and the development of interfaces for

¹⁴³ Disruptive Innovation Theory is very comprehensively reviewed in Danneels 2004, Yu and Hang 2009, and Sandström 2010.

¹⁴⁴ For instance the channel *That Igbo Chick*, a series of makeup tutorials, was one of the most popular Nigerian YouTube channels in 2013.

¹⁴⁵ DStv is the largest satellite distributor of Nigerian movies with Multichoice Africa. Zuku is a relatively new digital broadcaster based in Nairobi and targeting the East African market. It is also active in the triple-play space (combining voice services, broadband, and television broadcasting).

¹⁴⁶ Attentive readers will notice that I am extending Tushman and Anderson’s argument to include “resources” as opposed to only “competencies”. For the topic at hand their reasoning applies to assets such as social network, experience and financial power as much as to specific skills or “competencies”.

different operating systems, while – crucially – sustaining long periods without returns. The fact that our cases have all benefited from generous funding, and that two of them are embedded in larger structures with a diversified revenue model, illustrates this. Even for the largest and most established Alaba-based DVD marketer such investments are far out of reach. The story is clearly different for multinational broadcasters operating in a television landscape which will, regardless of upcoming VOD platforms, soon be forced to switch to digital broadcasting¹⁴⁷ (see also chapter 7). Established large-scale broadcasters also have ties with advertisers: an advantage in the world of online streaming, where advertising is a considerable challenge. Other incumbent players, such as YouTube-hosted channels and mobile apps hyperlinking to freely accessible online content, often avoid paying for intellectual property and avoid the costs related to hosting it. Some might not have large financial reserves but keep their costs low, perhaps while waiting for a stronger partner to help them grow.

A second required resource is access to content to build and grow audiences: in sufficient volumes, regularly updated, and of acceptable quality (i.e. fitting the market concept, whether it is Nollywood, upmarket and curated, or user-generated video). Buni.tv started building content by sourcing and embedding it as an online curator, meanwhile steadily growing its licensed catalogue. iROKOTv has moved faster, offering flat sums to a large pool of producers and distributors, thus quickly expanding its catalogue on an exclusive basis. It is also increasingly differentiating itself from other platforms by aiming for a more upmarket “new wave”¹⁴⁸ of Nollywood (Njoku 2013c). Bozza works to get as many content contributors as possible on board. Others either link to external sites (such as Afrinolly and, for non-feature film, Buni.tv) or face the difficult task of convincing content owners to sign license deals with them, which is not an easy feat. Nairobi-based Eziki TV, for instance, launched as a promising VOD platform for local content on a shared revenue basis (Okottah, 2012), struggled to establish agreements with content owners. Less than two years later the site is no longer regularly updated and its profile seems unclear: trailers of U.S. blockbusters, an online video channel with wedding reports, and a flagship show (*Shuga*) which is also featured on Buni.tv and on iROKOTv.

Related to this, another important resource in the multi-faceted and fast-transforming audiovisual ecosystem, is social capital (credibility), particularly a professional network of potential partners covering the many different skills required, and a proactive understanding of the direction in which the industry is moving. Related to this is the asset of transformational experience (experience with new market entry; see Yu and Hang 2010: 6), the ability to identify and reach new market groups, and the skill of recognizing and addressing latent needs of existing user groups (Danneels 2004: 254). Incumbents already active in the spheres of digital or mobile commerce (telecoms, web players, digital broadcasters) are at an advantage compared to companies with an experience and network embedded more in traditional film and television business.

Following Tushman and Anderson (1986), digital distribution can be understood as a competency-enhancing innovation for players who possess the competencies and resources listed above. This

¹⁴⁷ The worldwide television industry is going through a transformation process from analogue to digital terrestrial broadcasting. 2015 is an ITU-established global deadline for this transition. For more information, see http://www.itu.int/newsroom/press_releases/2006/11.html and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-20984880>

¹⁴⁸ For a reflective elaboration of this new wave, see Jedlowski in Krings and Okome (eds) 2013: 25-45. Part of contemporary Nollywood production is characterized by higher budgets, better production values, international settings and transnational co-productions. This new wave of Nollywood increasingly aims for theatrical distribution alongside traditional smaller-screen avenues.

seems to suggest that in the world of distribution it is mainly DVD retail which stands to be “disrupted”, and possibly replaced, by digital newcomers in and from Africa. As it stands, this is far from the case. Physical retail of popular film has not been affected much, and it seems unlikely it will be eviscerated any time soon. The crux is local context: the quality of local web infrastructure, the availability or absence of a mobile ecosystem, the affordability of mobile devices, streaming rates, and the characteristics of the incumbent retail system itself - highly commercial, adaptive and responsive to market evolutions (Lobato 2009: 177). Digital distribution, despite sometimes impressive viewing statistics of our cases, is serving a niche market. For a more refined theoretical assessment of our cases, we need to account for local context and for different audience groups. Helpful as a starting point are Clayton M. Christensen’s (1997) insights on disruptive technologies.

For Christensen, disruptive technologies facilitate the creation of new products with characteristics which are different from the offer of established players. They thus add new product dimensions to the mix of characteristics which buyers balance to choose what and how to purchase. For our three cases, such new dimensions are, for instance, greater accessibility (strongly dependent on local context and product development for lower-end devices), affordability (content and data usage), and a degree of pre-selection on the part of the digital distributor (who, as is assumed, previews and approves content before uploading it). According to Christensen, such new products or services¹⁴⁹ initially underperform on dimensions valued by majority audiences. Digital distribution in Africa indeed comes with disadvantages compared to the more common practice of buying or renting DVDs, visiting video dens, or watching television. In addition to cost, an entirely new habit of film viewing needs to be introduced. Viewing experience is not optimal, especially outside large cities, and screens are small. Product or service performance on the dimensions valued by mainstream customers over time improves to the point where it meets or even exceeds the minimum level required (Danneels 2004: 249). Theoretically this would amount to, for instance, better and/or bigger screens, and lower usage costs. Following this reasoning disruption occurs if and when majority audiences switch to the new product or service, which now combines sufficient performance on traditional dimensions and superior performance on new characteristics. After disruption, incumbents are replaced by the innovators.

In 2003, Christensen and Raynor made two important adjustments to the original theory. Firstly, disruption does not necessarily start in low-end market segments (Yu and Hang 2010: 3). Govindarajan and Kopalle (2006: 15) subsequently reformulated the concept of disruptive innovation to accommodate innovations introduced and grown in non-niche markets. Innovation can start in a high-end segment, or can introduce entirely new value networks by servicing previously unaddressed populations. In such cases, called new-market disruptions, there are no incumbents to compete with, only new customers to convince with a new type of product or service (Danneels 2004: 250). Africa-focused, mobile-focused, and dedicated to bottom-up user-generated content, Bozza is the clearest example of such type of innovation. iROKOTv, as was argued, services a higher-end part of an established market of Nollywood fans, while Buni.tv addresses an audience segment sufficiently connected to access a variety of competing online content, in essence offering it a branded selection of video and film to fit its tastes.

¹⁴⁹ In 2003, Christensen and Raynor adapted the concept of disruptive technology to include products and services (Sandström 2010: 13).

Secondly, Christensen and Raynor (2003) broadened disruption theory to encompass not only technology but innovation in general, including service and business model innovations. In turn, Markides (2006) argued that this broadening amounted to an over-stretching of the theory. Different kinds of disruptive innovation possess fundamentally different characteristics and cannot all fit into one theory. Markides illustrates his point by foregrounding and comparing two types of disruptive innovation, one of which – the business model innovation – is of particular interest here.

Business model innovation (Markides 2006: 20-21) refers to the discovery of a new business model within an existing market. No different products are created, but they are delivered to consumers in significantly different ways. Markides gives the example of Amazon as an online retailer and Barnes & Noble: both are in the book industry, but their business models are different. The same could be argued for iROKOTv, albeit that the offer here shifts from one-off purchases and/or freemium-based views to a monthly subscription fee, and that the product sold is no longer an optical disc but a choice in online viewing experiences.

Contrary to Christensen's initial theory, Markides' business model innovations do not necessarily replace existing models (Markides 2006). They invade markets and operate within different, though sometimes overlapping, value chains, simply growing their own share of that market. The odds are indeed small that digital distribution will fully replace DVD/VCD retail in Africa in the short-term future, but when the industry enters its growth phase it may be expected to accomplish a more significant viewer share.

In conclusion: in addition to being an innovation in the Schumpeterian sense, my cases are also potentially disruptive innovations as theorized by Christensen. By "potentially" it is meant that disruptive effects on the relevant value network as a whole are contingent on contextual factors as well as on the ongoing search for a sustainable business model, and that disruptive effects may be stronger on some types of incumbents, while others have the resources required to adopt or adapt to the innovations introduced. iROKOTv is an example of a business model innovation and Bozza could be called a new market innovation, while Buni.tv serves an existing audience segment that had not yet been a direct target of any VOD platform, presenting it with a product innovation in the form of a new, curated online offer.

5. IT innovation, social network markets

Two important things remain unaccounted for theoretically: the fact that our cases' revenue models so far have been based on advertisements and (in the case of Buni.tv and iROKOTv) subscriptions rather than one-off consumer purchases¹⁵⁰; and the fact that their activities are developed in a

¹⁵⁰ During their first years of existence Buni.tv and iROKOTv offered a free, and later a freemium, selection of video. Both recently moved to a subscription-only (iROKOTv) and subscription-mostly (Buni.tv) model, while Bozza is still in the process of developing a balanced revenue scheme. Considering the important changes made over the course of one year (spring 2013 to spring 2014) these business-models cannot readily be considered representative for my cases' business approach in the long run. Especially the shift from freemium to subscription represents a big change, and in the case of iROKOTv, a risk. While predictions are impossible, it is not unthinkable that in time discrete advertising messages be introduced in paid-for content, or that payment models be refined further according to users' habits and wishes (Lora-Mungai, 2013). While the theory of IT innovation models discussed here is based primarily on the cheap-or-free offer of content combined with revenue generated from external sources, monthly subscription fees are not very far from the same general idea: a dissociation from the "product" being bought and the payment made. Customers pay for unlimited

context of strong convergence. These characteristics - hybrid business models and ongoing convergence - are more industry-specific than they are related to innovation as an economic phenomenon. I therefore want to borrow two concepts from contemporary literature on digital distribution as a disruptive innovation in the (Western) film industry: social network markets¹⁵¹, and IT innovation (Cunningham et al. 2010; Cunningham 2012).

The concept of IT innovation challenges the traditional mass media model in which premium content is offered at premium prices to mass audiences (Cunningham et al. 2010). Under the IT innovation model, content is sold at very low prices, and the loss of profit is compensated by, for instance, hardware sales. The best-known example is Apple selling music or video cheaply through iTunes while accessing this content requires expensive Apple devices. More relevant for my cases, profit loss can also be compensated by indirect revenues based on wide online audience reach, or in view of the recent shift to subscription offers, the relatively stable revenues generated through low monthly fees, or a mix of both. IT innovation is introduced and developed by players from outside the traditional film, media, or broadcasting industry: hardware and electronics (Apple, Samsung, Sony,...), telecom (Safaricom, and again Samsung), software (Google/YouTube, Netflix, online and mobile app markets venturing into music and movie distribution), online retail (Amazon's VOD activities and its Kindle), and social media (for instance, YouTube's user-managed channels and its film rentals). IT players have challenged the dominance of traditional players in the West and, despite different industry structure and dynamics, my cases show that something similar is happening in Africa (see also Born 2013).

The concept of a social network market (Cunningham 2012) is particularly helpful to theorize my third case. Despite also being a platform for content delivery, Bozza comes across as a different breed from the two previous cases. It is not embedded in a larger company and it works with user-generated content, positioning itself as a blend of a mobile-focused social media platform and a promoter/distributor. Cunningham describes how "innovations in market practice are arising from the increasingly rapid co-evolution of the market and household/non-market sectors", in which "formal market-based activity and informal social or household activity is [sic] converging as a distinctive feature of the contemporary, especially digitally enabled, economy" (Cunningham 2012: 418). In a social media environment, viewing (clicking) choice is strongly informed by online peers. In a social network market, then, firms tap into the peer popularity of user-generated content by monetizing it, usually through a type of shared revenue agreement. Cunningham elaborates on the YouTube Partnership Program referred to previously in the context of Nollywood distribution. Bozza, in its own way and despite enormous differences in scale and scope, is another example of this emerging social network market.

access while streaming platforms obtain more or less predictable revenue streams, unrelated to exact clicks and views, and potentially complemented by advertisements. Bozza, with its add-on services to contributing artists, has also dissociated its offer (which has remained free) from revenue streams generated elsewhere.

¹⁵¹ Cunningham was not alone in introducing this concept. It was Potts, Cunningham, and Hartley (2008) who introduced it as an analytical tool and descriptor for the creative industries, in which word of mouth, taste, and popularity are amongst the main criteria informing people's consumption choices. In 2012, Cunningham goes on to use the concept in analyzing innovations in the online marketplace. He credits J. Banks for co-developing the concept with him (Cunningham 2012: 418, referring to Potts et al. 2008; and Banks and Potts 2010).

Cunningham raises a number of ethical questions related to social network markets, which I will come back to in the concluding discussion to this article. For now, I want to summarize the main lessons to be learnt from the recent history of VOD in the West. Archetypical models have been free and ad-supported (with Hulu and its subscription option Hulu Plus as the best-known example) or sales-based, either through micro-charges (Apple iTunes), through variations of monthly subscriptions (Netflix), or even through customized pricing (as is done by Amazon). In a search for the best revenue balance my cases have been replicating and experimenting with these principles. They have tested variations of freemium pricing systems, and two of them have now moved to subscription-only or subscription-mostly offers. For all of them, building a critical user mass based on free views has been crucial. As has happened in the West, it is also clear that this type of innovation is pushed by, or as a minimum happens in partnership with, players who are new to the traditional film and broadcasting value chain: mobile players, online platforms, and telecoms.

Though he does not go to great lengths to theoretically underpin his point that VOD in the West is a disruptive innovation, Cunningham bases his argument on the nature of new business models, and the changes in power relations they have led to. At the same time, he cautions that this disruption has been partial and limited. Digital distribution has been successfully adopted by major Hollywood incumbents, albeit that they too struggle to determine the perfect business model for it. This has been the case much less for players active in the distribution of non-mainstream product: "(...) the formidable difference in scale and investment between mainstream online distribution and those seeking to service independent and ROW [rest-of-the-world] cinema reminds us of the bounded nature of this current disruption to Hollywood's established practices" (Cunningham 2010: 129). I retain from this that product popularity, brand strength, and all the required resources mentioned earlier to benefit from digital distribution, greatly affect the outcome of the transformation the African movie and media ecosystem is going through.

6. Conclusion and discussion

Through comparing three African companies active in the online and/or mobile distribution of local creative content, I have looked for cues on the direction in which digital distribution in Africa is evolving. Digital distribution, with mobile as the preferred mode of Web-surfing on the continent, is increasingly providing an extra medium of access to movies traditionally diffused along physical retail networks (or to content which was not accessible at all). It is not suggested that digital distribution will replace the physical networks any time soon, especially not outside urban areas; both circuits can be expected to co-exist for a considerable amount of time to come. In addition to movies, digital distribution has also broadened the offer of Africa-targeted video, for instance with Buni.tv's editorial selections and with Bozza's user-generated creative content, all of which for me fall under the broader label of "extended cinema" (with Dubois, Monvoisin and Biserna [2010]).

All three cases have a well-circumscribed market proposition and have met with success in their start-up phase. It is too soon to tell, though, how well they will fare in the future, as all three are still developing an optimal business proposition. Nevertheless, according to my respondents the industry of digital distribution has started to consolidate. This means (with McGahan et al. 2004) that a shakeout of the pioneering players is taking place to allow for market growth, strategic alliances, and company acquisitions, while industry-structures start to take a clearer shape. Before consolidation, though, there are hurdles to take. Some are similar to the ones faced a decennium ago by digital

distribution pioneers in the U.S.: the search for appropriate business models, a lack of quality viewing due to network and data speed issues, narrow catalogues, bad screens (translated to the topic at hand: small screens and the high costs of fully optimal smartphones for regular video viewing), and the ubiquity of informal trade and peer-to-peer sharing of content (Cunningham 2010: 125). Other remaining issues may vary from country to country but are invariably related to technology, policy (improving infrastructure, encouraging entrepreneurship, stimulating innovation), and the specificities of the industry itself (the challenge of building a new ecosystem, permitting digital distribution initiatives to find financial sustainability).

I have concentrated on distribution, but changes in one part of the value chain inevitably affect other parts. Access to high-quality licensed video being a challenge, streaming platforms have started to produce their own content, both in Africa (such as Buni's comedy series and iROKO's *Festac Town*) and in the West (Netflix' *House of Cards* being the best-known example). Some of the new productions from Africa are particularly well-fit for the small screens of handheld telephones. Buni's comedy series, again, is a case in point, while Bozza's business model is almost entirely built around it. Many believe that producers should consider making video which is mobile-specific, as this makes it easier to reach large audience groups in Africa (Mzekandaba 2013; Asiago, 2012).

Such mobile-specific content is not expected to replace regular films or television programs, rather it adds to the mix of viewing options. At the same time, screens are continuously converging (tablets have joined smartphones as a growth market in Africa [*Cellular News* 2013; *The Punch* 2013], internet-equipped television sets and decoder boxes have been introduced, and smartphone screens are becoming bigger and better). These evolutions in turn lead to new skills becoming more important within the value network: optimizing content for bandwidth-responsivity, developing for different operating systems, developing user-friendly interfaces, et cetera. In an environment of IT innovation (with Cunningham 2010), the engines of innovation are not the traditional actors of the relevant industry, but IT players. This is not to suggest that all new skills required are IT-related; for instance, scripting for short stories becomes more important in an environment of mobile distribution. But the importance of IT-related skills and assets in the emerging value network seems clear.

This brings us to the question of new players in the incumbent media ecosystem. In the context of IT innovation, market power and value chain control shift away from producers and traditional distributors to a new type of distributors, in a process of re-intermediation (Bustamante 2004: 808). This is a complex process, involving more than simply new streaming platforms facilitating the flow of content from producer to consumer. Clearly, mobile operators have become more important, allowing not only for distribution but also for marketing and, at least in Kenya, monetization. For much-needed brand-building, accessibility and visibility, distribution apps need to be regrouped under the umbrella of global mobile app markets of the likes of Google Play or the Samsung market, with whom revenues are to be shared. Such players are new gatekeepers, which "concentrate and orientate the mass traffic, but also assume new functions of packaging and commercialization." (Bustamante 2004: 808; see also McChesney and Hind 2013). For platforms which cannot present globally (or continentally) competitive viewer rates these types of global players may well be the ones deciding industry rules in the future. Nduka-Agwu's remark that Nigerian telecom companies for now have retained the power to withhold the bulk of revenues from mobile streaming, also comes to mind. Mobile distribution being central to Africa, there is little doubt about the importance

of both local (for instance Safaricom's Yolo) and global (Huawei, Nokia, Samsung) mobile manufacturers.

I want to conclude by taking a step back from our digital distributors' interests, and considering those of two other important groups: audiences and artists/content owners. The latter may be at risk of not, or not sufficiently, being compensated for their creative and intellectual work. The former stand to benefit from increased diversity in the audiovisual offer available to them, provided they can afford the necessary devices and pay for data traffic, and provided the content, or the platforms disseminating it, are visible, retrievable, and easily accessible. Speaking from the Western context, Bustamante writes (2004: 809, 814):

“We might note the generalized strategy on the part of multimedia groups as well as that of new actors (telecommunications groups, informatics and financial interests etc.) towards seeking systematic integration between networks and content and services. This raises a new threat of discrimination and opacity in the market and runs counter to pluralism in terms of what is on offer. (...) What we can see is certainly not a tendency towards increased competition and pluralism but rather the constitution of enormous and powerful gatekeepers for the distribution networks (portals, ISPs, pay-TV platforms).”

While it is perhaps too soon to make similar claims about the state of the industry in Africa, it is clear that trends towards monopolization, which we can see happening with players such as M-Net and iROKOTv, but also large telecom players as Safaricom, may well affect cultural diversity in the online offer on the continent.

Obviously the move from a freemium to a subscription-focused model has made Buni.tv's and iROKOTv's offer much less accessible to film fans from a financial point of view. In the free and ad-supported distribution space generally preferred by start-ups, advertisers “buy” the attention of online audiences, the latter becoming a sort of traded commodity, characterized through ratings and market shares (Biltreyst and Meers in Wasko et al. 2011: 423-424, referring to Smythe 2001). Audiences in this context implicitly “buy” free content by consenting to advertising messages. What is more, they provide valuable information about their consuming habits and preferences, thus building the value of this “audience commodity” (Bustamante 2004: 810), something which iROKO is now putting to use in its production activities.

It was mentioned that iROKOTv has been accused of exploitative practices, such as paying insufficient fees for exclusive distribution rights (Kimani K. and Kimani G., 2013). The worldwide debate on artist remuneration in the context of digital distribution, whether of music or video, is far from concluded. Cunningham has expressed concern about the emerging social network markets for user-generated content described earlier. He fears that, more than – or in the best of cases, in addition to – empowering creative individuals and democratizing production, such social network markets “generate an entrepreneurial desire” amongst content contributors, a competition for attention which is “aligned with the commercial interests of the company”, in a system in which “amateur content is endogenously professionalized and further popularized through a shared remuneration scheme” (Cunningham 2010: 419). This shared remuneration, he suggests, is at the risk of being skewed in the favor of the platform, or in any case may lack in transparency. He takes YouTube's Partnership Program as an example, with allegedly unclear criteria for admission of content,

uncertainty about the content's IP status, and a lack of legal recourse in the case of disagreement between the platform and an individual contributor. Pointing out that an arbitrary exercise of power by large corporates over the creative individual is not a new phenomenon, his words warn against digital distributors maximizing profits at the expense of the artists they are assumably promoting.

Georgina Born (2013), talking about Kenya's Safaricom's monopolistic ventures into music distribution and mobile commerce, has said: "In an astonishing development, what we see in Kenya is the replacement of the transnational music industry by a new digital content industry in which the most powerful player is a telecom giant". The changes taking place at first glance seem to promise a democratization of access: producers' access to distribution channels, and audience access to an increased and diversified offer. However, Born (2013) warns that:

"(...) there remains – as so often in the digital world – a morally and economically ambiguous residue in these middle-class African entrepreneurial adventures. As we know, a new politics has opened up: it is unclear how the content producers – musicians, film-makers, poets – are to be recompensed by mobile and online entrepreneurs, or how well they are being recompensed, or whether they are being accurately informed about the sales and streaming of their content. Licensing deals are brokered but their status is uncertain. Copyright and licensing laws may be incipient, and they strain (or collapse) under the pressure of new modes of circulation. This is a politics (...) of re-intermediation, of the promissory, of copyrights and their distribution. (...) There are multiple politics also to this new situation: a politics of new transnational monopolistic tendencies. A politics of circulation and of the new intermediaries. An aesthetic politics to do with the welcome expansion of the diversity of voice, speech and image. And a politics of authorship, ownership and authorial benefit."

While we can easily summarize the answers to the research questions formulated in the beginning of this article by elaborating on the different platforms used (online in the West, mainly mobile in Africa), the business models explored (freemium in the start-up phase, subscription-only or subscription-mostly in the case of more established players), and the audience groups served (they are both within and outside of Africa, they consist of many different taste and behavior segments, and they are served with an increasingly diversified African and Africa-related online offer), we are left with important questions meriting further research. Firstly, as Cunningham (2010) rightly points out, we are studying processes, and any conclusion cannot be more than provisional. Secondly, beyond questions of management and commercial strategy, important questions remain about power relations in this newly emerging industry dynamic: power relations between different types of digital distribution platforms in a context of convergence and monopolization; power relations between African platforms and global search engines regrouping and disclosing these platforms; power relations between newly emerging gatekeepers and audiences seeking a culturally diverse offer; and power relations between distribution platforms and the creatives entrusting them with the fruits of their labor.

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Essay 6: relevant elements regarding over-arching hypotheses

Like the previous one, this chapter departs from an African rather than an East African perspective. While I am interested primarily in technological innovation in Kenya and Tanzania, for the sake of relevant benchmarking this scope is broadened here to encompass cases from Lagos (Nigeria) and Cape Town (South Africa). Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa are amongst the continent's best environments for streaming and mobile distribution, while digital distribution in Tanzania is virtually non-existent¹⁵².

It is easily assumed that by making content available through additional channels, digital distribution has democratizing effects on the access to culture and media (an assumption at the basis of hypothesis 1). This is not always the case. Powerful distribution platforms can acquire exclusive rights to popular films or serials, in effect preventing or drastically postponing their availability on cable or pay-television¹⁵³. They often have the power to impose unfavorable conditions on filmmakers and producers interested in contributing their work. Conversely, content owners may be wary of making their work available online: they fear the risk of it being pirated or they believe it will have better exposure or generate more revenues elsewhere. Local factors of economy and technology influence the accessibility and potential uptake of an online offer, and of course pricing is a factor too: originally developed as a freemium-based offer in film, iROKOtv is now a (paid) subscription-only platform; the majority of its subscribers are in the diaspora. Similarly, Buni.tv's offer in movies can only be accessed through paying a monthly fee. As the habit of paying online subscriptions in Africa is not well-developed even amongst the privileged social strata, this suggests that audience access to – the online viewing of - movies for now remains limited, and in the short term stands to decrease significantly.

The diversification of stories posited with hypothesis 2 is demonstrated – on an African rather than an East African level – through the very different types of local content my cases work with. It ranges from user-generated work made in South African townships, over Nollywood movies, to “Afropolitan” media (a term used inclusively by our interviewee of Buni.tv, referring to African content with a global outlook). Again with Straubhaar this reflects cultural proximity (hypothesis 3) in various layers of identification: “hyper-local” in the case of Bozza; global in the case of iROKOtv; and in the transnational cultural and linguistic space of Kenya, Nigeria, and the Kenyan diaspora in the case of Buni.tv. On the other hand, if smaller pioneers like Buni.tv and Bozza cannot find sustainable business models, the market space for digital distribution runs the risk of becoming dominated by one or two players,¹⁵⁴ typically focusing on an offer broad enough to meet the “mainstream” tastes of African majorities; Nollywood would be a good example. This is speculation for now, however such a situation may lead to a process of homogenization, rather than to a diversification of the online offer (hypothesis 2).

¹⁵² See footnote 94 (p. 119) for exceptions.

¹⁵³ Netflix is often cited as an example; see for instance Fritz and Flint 2012 in *LA Times Online* and *Huffington Post* 2013. Sources: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/20/netflix-weinstein_n_3784924.html <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/04/business/la-fi-ct-disney-netflix-20121205> (last accessed August 2014).

¹⁵⁴ Such a quasi-monopoly need not necessarily be dominated by iROKOtv. As large as iROKO Partners are, they have not reached sustainability either. A large broadcaster such as M-Net might just as well diversify into the digital space and become its dominant player.

All my respondents identify mobile distribution as the most Africa-relevant form of streaming (hypothesis 3), but local context remains essential: the technological and economic environment must accommodate mobile commerce, viewers must be able to afford the devices, data traffic, and the fees.

Through focusing on mobile in Nairobi – a city well-known for its mobile-friendly environment - Buni.tv's approach to media distribution is both locally relevant and a good "fit" with urban middle-class users. In this sense, it also contributes to a democratization of access to locally-produced media (hypothesis 1), albeit only for a specific social-economic group. Aiming at a wider and more drastic democratization would require a different business approach altogether. iROKOTv has focused so far on streaming to diaspora audiences in anticipation of a better commercial and technological environment in Lagos, while Bozza's strategy is to work bottom-up – in intention working towards a radical democratization of the production and distribution of stories, but in effect faced with hurdles of a technical, practical and financial nature.

No sustainable business eco-system has been developed for digital distribution in and from Africa. Artist remuneration is low, the policies around it sometimes intransparent, and negotiation power unevenly distributed – or this is suggested at least in the case of iROKOTv. Buni.tv, conversely, has had a difficult time convincing content owners to come on board; a situation which can be expected to change as it starts generating substantial revenue to share with them.

In summary, the data analyzed in chapter 6 leave us with rather ambiguous answers concerning our hypotheses. Digital distribution represents an extra avenue for film and video viewing (hypothesis 1), but within Africa this offer remains accessible only to minorities. In their search for sustainability and profitability, important players such as iROKOTv and Buni.tv have started to abandon their free offer, with obvious consequences for their accessibility.

Taken together, the cases represent an undeniable process of diversification of African content on offer locally. Yet it remains to be seen if the media ecosystem taking shape will allow for a diversity of players and content (hypothesis 2), or rather will evolve into an industry dominated by one or a few major companies. With sufficient attention for Africans' mobile preference, and given the right technological environment, digital distribution indeed represents a locally-relevant means of video consumption to the (minority) communities presently served (hypothesis 3). This relevance is limited to people in the city, people possessing the required knowledge of online and mobile platforms, and people with disposable budgets and willingness to pay.

**VII. DEMOCRATIZATION, DIVERSIFICATION, AND A
GROWING LOCAL RELEVANCE?**

1. Introduction

Through a series of articles this PhD study has explored technological innovation in Kenya, Tanzania, and where relevant other countries in Africa, and related trends in the local production and distribution of audiovisual storytelling. Its gaze was cast through a wide lens: much more than festival/theatre movies and popular cinema, I have considered an increasing variety of forms and formats involving moving image on screen. In contemporary East Africa a slow but steady growth of locally produced feature film is accompanied by a more spectacular emergence of different forms of media in addition to popular cinema circuits. To consider only one type of “cinema” would not have done justice to the media landscape evolving today. My topic is “extended cinema” in the sense of Dubois, Monvoisin and Biserna (2010), and ranges from grassroots storytelling to mobile and web formats, and from television, informal video dens and DVD trade to new digital screening venues.

Similarly, “technological innovation” was approached inclusively. Innovations are new combinations of new and existing resources, put into commercial and/or practical use. Unlike “inventions”, innovations need not be new to the world but are relative to where they are introduced. Technological innovations, then, are *technology-induced*, or are innovations *of* technology. Hence my topic included, for instance, the gradual upgrading of recording, editing, streaming and screening equipment, the installation and commercial use of network and digital broadcasting infrastructures, and the local circulation of increasingly powerful mobile handhelds.

A topic as wide as this has limits and advantages. First of all, it requires a gradual build-up of data, little of which had been the subject of academic publications. For lack of a clear theoretical context from the outset, my data’s structuring and theoretical underpinnings were a matter of ongoing effort. Consequentially then, my subject required an interdisciplinary approach. In my theoretical toolkit I have assembled media and globalization studies, innovation theory, African popular culture and African popular cinema studies, in addition to the general concerns of critical political economy. Through writing separate essays I could contribute piece-meal to a growing current demand for East Africa-targeted media research, while at the same time taking gradual “steps” in the direction of assessing my research hypotheses. Thirdly, combining a conceptually inclusive approach with attention for local specificities precludes generalization – whether it is Africa-wide, East African, or theory-related. I am convinced that stronger insight in under-researched (extended) cinema circuits is more important for now than neat theory based on scant data.

Being selective inevitably means neglecting things. In the case of this dissertation, my focus on new formats has resulted in little attention for contemporary widescreen cinema from East Africa. Nearly as nascent as the other forms of digital media in the region, but sometimes considered less “local” due to the presence of foreign support (something I will come back to), East African cinematographic work can be just as instructive for our hypotheses as other types of media. Neither have I elaborated much on the switch-over process from analogue to digital broadcasting which both countries are

grappling with, and which I refer to in article 2. As I revisit my three over-arching hypotheses I will make up for these imbalances by foregrounding high-end cinema from, and evolutions in the television industries of, Kenya and Tanzania.

To be sure, I would not have made these choices had they not also come with advantages. Firstly, my approach attempts a conceptual contribution by bridging gaps between the academic “silos” of African cinema studies, African popular cinema studies, media studies in general, and the current frenzy in business and entertainment media around ICT-related developments on the continent. My approach may be undeveloped and rough around the edges, but considering how “extended cinema” is developing in a myriad of directions, I believe it is valid. Secondly, as mentioned, the field of East African cinema and media studies is not crowded. Any research concentrating on new data and localized insights is a welcome contribution in my view.

In the introduction to this volume I have presented the articles compiled in it. I have also introduced and defended my over-arching research hypotheses. I will now turn to a critical assessment of each of them, armed with the data assembled in my articles and additional insights from my interviews. Unsurprisingly, the answers to these statements (on democratization, diversification, and increasing local relevance) are all of a “yes, but...” nature. It is well-established that assumptions of technological determinism, though attractive in their simplicity, are usually ill-founded (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999). The clearest and most obvious outcome of this study, then, is that local context and individual traits strongly determine the concrete shape of each of the processes addressed with my hypotheses.

2. Hypothesis 1: Democratization

My first hypothesis posits that technological innovation in Kenya and Tanzania is related to an ongoing **democratization of the local production and distribution of audiovisual storytelling**. Is this indeed the case? Are there differences between both countries as to how such democratization materializes? What context-related factors positively or negatively affect it? And what additional observations can be made if we broaden the core concept of democratization – focused here on the idea of different forms of access – to include wider concerns about fairness and the distribution of power and resources?

My hypothesis is of course inspired by the spectacular story of the Nollywood industry based in Lagos: a sudden explosion of cheap and locally-made movies, traded locally at the sharpest prices possible. However, Nollywood emerged in a specific historical, economic and demographic context (Haynes 2011)¹⁵⁵ and cannot readily be assumed to “replicate” itself in other places. Moreover, it

¹⁵⁵ Haynes (2011: 68, 70-72) lists the specific conditions in which Nollywood emerged: an oil boom followed by an oil crisis in Nigeria during the 1970s and 1980s, which had led many households to acquire VCRs (bought during the upward economic movement) while leaving the house at night for a cinema visit was dangerous. Nigeria also had a lot of well-trained personnel in broadcasting (Haynes 2011: 72), which was important for the airing of and publicity around movies and upcoming local stars. In addition, Nigeria had and still has the biggest population of sub-Saharan Africa (and thus an enormous potential market to tap into). Nollywood’s use of English, rather than being a stumbling block (as would have been the case in Tanzania), gave it an aura of prestige and modernity. Finally, pre-existing pirate networks of media trade (distributing video cassettes of foreign movies) were already in place and operational, so the businessmen who started the trade in local movies did not have to concern themselves with the difficult task of organization distribution “from scratch”.

originated almost two decades ago. It is possible, and even likely, that contemporary examples of democratization can be linked to different and newer types of technological innovation.

I want to stress that democratization is understood here as a limited and unfinished process of increasing access, not a radical “new order” of things. I do not mean to turn a blind eye to Africans in poverty, people in remote areas, or people for whom for whatever reason the world of cameras, smartphones and filmmaking is far removed from their daily lives and interests. In the words of McCall on Nollywood, I do not intend to “gush naively about the ‘democratizing character’ of new media technologies” (2007: 96)¹⁵⁶; but neither should we let this keep us from acknowledging processes of democratization where they occur.

a. Access to production

In the spheres of production, the first type of access to consider is self-evident: it concerns the practical and financial accessibility of audiovisual storytelling tools as a consequence of their gradual innovation. Judging from my respondents’ accounts this type of access has indeed strongly increased, as prices of cameras have dropped continuously and systematically. In Nairobi and Dar es Salaam the production of a grassroots popular movie has become an endeavor attainable to many. In Kenya most filming equipment – from simple digital video (DV) cameras to more upmarket tools - can be found locally at reasonable to low prices. High definition (HD) equipment ranges between 3,000 and 25,000 USD, and a tax waiver has been installed to make the importation of filming equipment more attractive. In Tanzania this equipment is not as readily available, but it can be imported from Kenya (or brought from Asia or the U.S.). Despite remaining price differences depending on a machine’s quality, growing groups of local directors now make use of varying types of HD cameras. New upmarket models – the Red Camera, Alexa, Black Magic, Canon 5D¹⁵⁷, Sony 7S - continue to be introduced and their prices tend to drop dramatically as soon as yet another model enters the market (Shivji, 2013). What is more, from the high end to Bongo and Riverwood, and to more underground initiatives, practitioners share a culture of well-understood solidarity (Boy, 2013; Kimani M., 2013; Mbura, 2013; Akesh, 2012): they lend out their equipment and/or exchange favors, which is beneficial to local filmmaking in general.

Training initiatives based in the slums of Kibera (Hot Sun Foundation) and Mathare (Slum TV) can now afford the equipment for young residents to acquire basic skills in the production of film, shorts, and news reports. The NGO Transparency International has experimented with exposing corruption in Kibera by providing residents with small flip cameras (Rombouts, 2012). On a more user-generated level we have seen how videos of current affairs are ironically remixed and shared, and we have considered new types of “hipster” digital culture – all of them low-to-no-budget, exclusively online, and free. In all these senses technological innovation has contributed to an increased access, in general, to the production of audiovisual stories.

¹⁵⁶ In his article, McCall approaches “democratization” slightly differently. For him Nollywood is the first genuinely pan-African cinema, and a forum to discuss concerns shared continent-wide. In this sense his “democratization” is more closely related to my third hypothesis about “local relevance”. The general idea though, of acknowledging but not over-estimating the democratizing effects of new media, is the same.

¹⁵⁷ Canon 5D cameras have become very common in Kenya and Tanzania. Initially built as photo cameras with a limited filming option, their popularity has led Canon to introduce new models with longer filming time. The Canon 5D is used by high-end filmmakers and by, for instance, Don Fox of Foxhole Entertainment alike.

However, depending on a storyteller's interests, access to cameras is only the start. It does not imply that he/she is well-informed of a machine's potential and use. For long features sometimes expensive add-ons are required, such as special lenses for a particular look. Ideally there is additional access to color-grading tools, good recording equipment, lighting, et cetera. The size of a production budget influences the time that can be spent working on a story, scripting it, rehearsing it, scouting for locations, and so forth. While Nollywood, Bongo and Riverwood filmmaking have certainly been disruptive to traditional cinema, they are also often a matter of "making do" with the limited means at hand, rather than a creative choice. A person's financial margin, then, strongly affects what type of stories he/she is able or likely to produce. Longer-format audiovisual storytelling (and certainly the more formalized, upmarket type of filmmaking) remains an investment, and a risk which increases in proportion to the budget invested. In the words of Don Fox (2012): "Things like poverty are real. (...) Only the people who have money can afford to make a film. (...) You need a lot of time, remember you are also teaching yourself. [The majorities switch to] television or commercial spots: you get money immediately." Especially through the production of music videos, popular in Kenya and Tanzania alike, aspiring urban directors now have the means to boast their talents more easily. It allows them to work towards building a career while generating a revenue to sustain themselves (Mushala, 2013; Mahugu, 2013). Mark Kaigwa says (2012): "People say, now that I have the skills, how will I pay my rent? They go and do TV. Only one social-economic level up will they go and do film. They take pay in work, you can create in your spare time but the challenge is to get paid: TV commercials, NGO-work¹⁵⁸, et cetera."

It is at this point that the idea of a democratization of production becomes more nuanced: firstly because of the impact of one's overall financial comfort, regardless of whether they can afford a recording camera; secondly because a person's social background influences his/her awareness of useful resources, training initiatives, sources of funding, cultural capital and social network. The differences are not clear-cut though, and it would be neither possible nor productive to make generalizing claims about the social backgrounds of "this or the other type of filmmaker". Most practitioners make ends meet by combining jobs and assuming different roles in the production of their stories. What is clear is that individual factors, ranging from one's talent and dedication to his/her social and economic background, are as important as simple access to equipment.

Though the term is contentious, most feature filmmakers in Kenya and Tanzania outside the grassroots circuits can be considered middle-class. They pertain to social groups that differ strongly, but all of which have means well above subsistence-level. Atieno Odenyo (2012) says: "Early Kenyan film production was probably for the elite. And even for those people now, you could say they often come from privileged backgrounds, but there are more people who can make movies now, so even on that level it has democratized to some extent."

Access to audiovisual storytelling has a cultural dimension too: exposure to a variety of stories, access to training, and sufficient free time (i.e. time not spent worrying about how to pay for rent or food) to explore and study. Before popular cinema emerged and internet access became widespread, aspiring directors sought training – the most fortunate of them enrolling at schools abroad – or experience through internships. Today, most people are self-taught. They look for online tutorials

¹⁵⁸ A large number of NGOs are active in Tanzania and especially Kenya. Many of them commission documentaries with a social message or videos to present their work and projects to potential donors. This commissioned work is an important source of revenue for local filmmakers.

(Don Fox), consult forums about the use and potential of equipment (Amil Shivji), participate in alternative training initiatives (like the Hot Sun Foundation in Kibera, the Maisha Film Lab in Uganda, or Real2Reel in Tanzania), seek access to international workshops (such as Tom Tykwer's One Fine Day Film Workshop), and/or download the films they want to see for inspiration. Mark Kaigwa (2012) says: "Rich kids? It has more to do with exposure, skill and training. You move up by showing your talent through the short films you produce. But you have to want it badly enough." While "exposure" only a few years ago was linked with the possibility to travel, it is now just as strongly associated with a good internet connection and a keen interest and ambition (Macharia, 2013; Kaigwa, 2013; Chuchu, 2013). The internet as a technological innovation has thus contributed to a widened local access to audiovisual storytelling in different ways: by making information much more readily available, through the possibility of viewing film (legally or not) that is not otherwise available, and through free, open source editing modules.

It was shown throughout this dissertation that the local environment of technological innovation – market structure, demographics, policy, economy - affects its net outcome. In the context of our hypothesis on democratization of audiovisual production this is perhaps best illustrated by considering Kenya's Riverwood and neighboring Tanzania's Bongo industry. Both emerged – as did Nollywood – as a result of cheaper and more user-friendly equipment, yet with different results. Bongo is a big industry with a transnational appeal largely based on its use of Swahili. Riverwood is limited to Kenya, and within Kenya not widely successful for several reasons: the selective application of anti-piracy regulations, audiences' preference for foreign movies (and consequentially, less interest on the part of vendors in Riverwood product), and the ethnic-linguistic lines along which the movies are made and disseminated. What is of specific interest here is how both circuits reflect different outcomes of a technology-induced democratization of production and distribution. If we consider democratization as a form of access, it has been impossible to deny in both countries: tools have become more accessible and more affordable; a specific (low budget, no frills) approach to production and style has minimized the additional costs described earlier (related to special lenses, special lighting and sound equipment, cranes, et cetera); and also the benefits associated with a privileged social background (such as formal education, exposure to a diversity of stories, awareness of resources and funds) are less of a requirement or advantage for these circuits than for traditional cinema.

If, however, we include industry structure and the distribution of power and resources in our analysis, the emerging picture is not as readily associated with democratization, or at least not with equal redistribution. In Kenya's grassroots circuits a small number of successful comedians have built a lucrative business based on DVD-sales of their sketches (see chapter 2). As DVD-distribution turns out less profitable for majority Riverwood filmmakers, many of them try their chances with television. Broadcasters, however, despite demonstrated audience interest in Kenyan television series and comedy shows, have little interest in Riverwood. The movies are considered low in quality, with the additional disadvantage of not being series (which can build followership) and being produced in vernaculars. The outcome is a relatively small and fragmented field of individual producers looking for a better business model or trying to transition to (higher-quality) television work. A similar but larger field of struggling producers exists in Dar es Salaam, albeit that market power there is concentrated with a small group of DVD distributors allegedly dictating production budgets and sales prices. The video-on-demand initiatives that have mushroomed across the continent generate wider access to local work, but it is unclear if and how they can contribute to an

eco-system supportive of local filmmaking. Their industry model is still in development even worldwide (see chapter 6).

The evaluation of my hypothesis on democratization of production, then, changes according to our idea of what it is. Financial and practical access to cameras has increased (while smartphones continue to be priced more and more competitively), although the total cost of production - depending on the type of story one wants to tell - can remain prohibitive. Especially shorter production formats such as music videos have grown exponentially, in addition to Bongo in Tanzania but contrary to Riverwood in Kenya. Whereas a few years ago audiovisual production was confined to a small number of large and formal companies, cheaper equipment in both countries now allows more people to earn an income through commissioned work, television, or commercial spots. “Cultural” access, too, has increased: the internet allows for individual self-training, while cheaper equipment allows for the existence of social training initiatives. These different types of democratization processes occur in different ways and on different social “levels” of society: they are partial and limited, but impossible to overlook.

If we understand “democratization” more broadly, as an increasingly balanced redistribution of resources, the picture changes according to the production format considered. Grassroots film industries attract many aspiring directors but are structured as oligopolies. Money and resources appear more equally distributed in the spheres of music video production, which is popular and lucrative in Kenya and Tanzania alike. Upmarket cinema production is characterized by falling costs and lowering barriers but is still an activity of (middle class) minorities.

b. Access to local stories

Turning now to the hypothesized increased access¹⁵⁹ to local stories, three circuits of delivery are so interlinked with evolving technology that they call for special attention: DVD/VCD sales and rentals; web and mobile distribution; and television - more specifically the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting. Additionally, new initiatives for communal viewing have emerged, making local stories more accessible through digital technology (for instance Cinemart, see chapter 1).

Films on DVD in Nairobi circulate mostly in the River Road area, a part of town generally avoided by uptown residents, whose taste in movies rarely includes Riverwood. Even along River Road, Kenyan movies are not as easy to come by as Bongo in Dar es Salaam. Kikuyu comedy flicks can be found in a few stores owned by their producers, in specific retail places such as the well-known Nduti One Stop Shop, or otherwise under the counter¹⁶⁰ in some of the other outlets. Riverwood is (officially) priced considerably higher than foreign films. Retailers tend to concentrate on Hollywood, Asian and Bongo fare, while also the informal video clubs dotting the lower-class parts of town focus on what sells: martial arts, football matches, et cetera. Higher-end cinema such as the work of Wanuri Kahiu, Judy Kibinge or Bob Nyanja is not on sale here and usually has to be purchased by contacting rights

¹⁵⁹ Contrary to “access to production” (which I have understood as having a practical, a financial, and a cultural dimension) I will understand “access to local stories” here in terms of practical and financial access. A more “culture-”, or lifestyle-related access to stories, will be considered as part of the local relevance of distribution systems (see hypothesis 3).

¹⁶⁰ By “under the counter” I mean that vendors will tell an interested buyer to wait, will send someone to fetch Riverwood movies elsewhere, and then sell them. The movies are rarely (visibly) in store.

holders directly¹⁶¹. Outside Nairobi all movies – local and foreign alike – are sold through informal networks, provided that their popularity is demonstrated.

Bongo in Dar es Salaam on the other hand is accessible and affordable, albeit that sales prices are determined by a minority of distributors, and are still quite high for majority Tanzanians. Sales are complemented by a far-reaching network of rental libraries and video dens, well-developed and better attuned to local needs. Contrary to Riverwood, Bongo is also shown on television (mainly pay-TV, such as the Swahili channel of East African broadcaster Zuku).

In conclusion then, optical discs as a technological innovation have led to increasing local access to movies in general, but policy measures coupled with economic realities in Kenya have kept the availability of Kenyan film relatively low. Especially stories outside the grassroots genres are rarely found in stores. In contrast, Bongo is readily available in Kenya – mainly through piracy networks – and in Tanzania, where it is widely popular, with the exception of an upper-middle class minority of Tanzanians.

Mobile and online access to audiovisual media currently is reserved to urban areas, and is much wider in (urban) Kenya than in (urban) Tanzania. Broadband internet in Nairobi makes it easier to upload and watch video online and through handhelds, at least for those who can afford the devices and data traffic. According to Josphat Keya of the Kibera-based Hot Sun Foundation, even in slum areas many people now possess smartphones; these tend to be the lower end of the range, useful to access Facebook and Twitter rather than streaming video. 3G internet has become standard in Nairobi, and there is anticipation of a LTE roll-out in the near future (Njihia, 2013 [personal e-mail]; Reinartz, 2013; Kobia, 2013)¹⁶². Connectivity outside cities is much more challenging: if and when there is mobile internet, it operates on 2G (voice and basic data) networks¹⁶³. The rhetoric of a “connected Kenya” has partial truth but is also exclusionary, and has a tendency of glossing over the ones likely to be left out¹⁶⁴.

Data prices in Kenya are low though, and are expected to drop further as Kenyan telecom firms gradually recoup their investments in the submarine cables which brought broadband to the region

¹⁶¹ There are exceptions: I found a Bob Nyanja movie (*Malooned*, 2007) in a store in the Prestige Plaza mall. I could find none of his movies along River Road.

¹⁶² Safaricom is rolling out a fibre network in urban areas, “a pipe as wide as possible” in anticipation of an application with an uptake as wide as M-Pesa, Facebook or Twitter; i.e. the company anticipates on a “killer app” which will drive audience demand for high-volume data traffic (Wamola, 2013).

¹⁶³ There are conflicting accounts of mobile connectivity in Kenya’s rural areas. While some respondents assure me there is a 3G network country-wide (Kobia, 2013), according to others outside cities there is only 2G connectivity (which allows for voice and basic data applications; Wamola, 2013; Reinartz, 2013). During a trip outside Nairobi to the Magadi area my mobile phone lost connection entirely, suggesting that mobile connectivity, and certainly 3G, is only partially available.

¹⁶⁴ To be fair, the vision behind the *Connected Kenya* idea as originally voiced by former Permanent Secretary of Information and Communication Dr. Bitange Ndemo, was resolutely inclusive. Ndemo is considered a visionary by many, in attempting to “connect” even the most remote areas of Kenya. He was the driving force behind the country’s investments in submarine cables as well as the NOFBI (National Optic Fibre Backbone Infrastructure) network, rolled out throughout the country but never properly exploited, and now considered unreliable by private players (Wamola, 2013; Reinartz, 2013).

in the first place.¹⁶⁵ Respondents based in Dar es Salaam draw a different picture. Data costs to view videos on mobiles are considered prohibitive by many people. Though it is possible in principle to download films (through wireless internet, as does filmmaker Timoth Conrad, see chapter 2), bandwidth allowing for a fast movie download is affordable only to upper-middle classes (Dundas Nilsen-Moe, 2013). Even Dar-based residents have regular difficulties with tasks as simple as accessing their mailbox.

For all these reasons it makes sense to expect locally-produced web and mobile formats to emerge primarily in Kenya. We have indeed seen a number of first trials: *Kulahappy* (see article 1), the comedy series produced by Buni Media (see chapter 6), and new types of web formats such as *In the Forest* (see chapter 5). Safaricom and the transnational broadcaster DStv have partnered since 2009 in making television available on mobile devices, albeit only in cities. Buni.tv, as one of the first and certainly the most visible Kenyan video-on-demand platform, offers a paid selection of films in addition to a free offer of documentaries, shorts, and other “Afropolitan” media. Several short films from Tanzania and Kenya are also available on YouTube and/or Vimeo. And especially local music videos are keenly followed online and shared through social media in both countries. Almost all of this content is freely accessible, and requires no more than a screening device (a computer, a tablet, a smartphone) and bandwidth, in support of my hypothesis of a – limited and partial – democratization of access to audiovisual stories. This is not to suggest a sudden (East) Africa-wide online access to video however. Kenya is a far-advanced exception within the region, and even on the continent. Within Kenya, remaining faultlines - between rural and urban environments, social groups, age groups - remain wide. To put things in perspective: according to the international mobile operators’ association GSMA (2012: 3-4), 76% Kenyans and 74% Tanzanians live outside urban areas, and 84% of Kenyan households have no formal access to the electricity grid.

Another major shift is taking place in the (East) African television landscape. In accordance with the Geneva 2006 Agreement of the ITU¹⁶⁶ Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the Islamic Republic of Iran have committed to switching from analogue to digital broadcasting by the deadline of June 17th 2015. This agreement allows for a “simulcasting” (analogue and digital) period until 2020 (Mwiti 2013), but other than that is not flexible. The five members of the East African Community, including Kenya and Tanzania, had initially agreed on an earlier deadline (December 2012), but this deadline has only been met by Tanzania (*The East African* 2013; Mwiti 2013). The switch from analogue to digital broadcasting is a complex problem involving technology infrastructure, the manufacturing or importation of decoder devices, the tendering of signal distribution license fees, the development of new broadcasting business models, and ideally government-steered monitoring ensuring the widest possible accessibility of television programming. It has been managed differently in Kenya and Tanzania, but in both countries has been less than a smooth process.

Digital broadcasting is an “umbrella” notion referring to digital cable, digital terrestrial, and digital satellite technology. Majority viewers in East Africa access television through analogue technology: free-to-air (FTA) signals transmitted by broadcasters are received by traditional (fishbone) aerials,

¹⁶⁵ Submarine cables installed over the last decade, involving large investments of international consortia of governments and private partners alike, include TEAMs, ESSAy, and Seacom. For more information and hyperlinks to the websites of these consortia, see: <http://manypossibilities.net/african-undersea-cables/>.

¹⁶⁶ The International Telecommunications Union is a United Nations agency which oversees the allocation of signal spectrum and satellite orbits.

while a minority watches cable television. About 3,7 million Kenyans, or some 25% Kenyan households, possess television sets (Ogunyemi, 2012; Vourlias 2014), compared to about 20% Tanzanian citizens (Kolumbia 2013)¹⁶⁷. Other than that, people access television through communal viewing, or not at all; radio remains the most widely accessed medium. In addition to free-to-air, a minority of upper-middle class groups can afford pay-TV, either through satellite or fibre. Pay-TV already involves digital technology, requiring a decoder (a set-top box or STB) which converts incoming signals into code, thus translating them for screening devices.

The largest challenge within the migration process is in making signal delivery possible through airwaves which are currently received through analogue broadcasting. Usually this requires a new antenna in addition to a set top box similar to the ones used for satellite television viewing. Free-to-air channels can then continue to be watched free of charge, and additional digital subscriptions become available¹⁶⁸. Viewers who cannot afford a set top box, however, are left without access to television.

Digital broadcasting has a few important advantages over analogue transmission. Firstly, a digital signal requires less airspace or spectrum. In a capital such as Nairobi all airspace is occupied; no new channels can be launched unless by acquiring an existing broadcaster, which is very expensive. In a digital environment one channel requires up to ten times less spectrum space than in an analogue system: the freed airspace is commonly referred to as a “digital dividend”, and can be used for extra channels or for LTE (fourth generation mobile telephony) spectrum (Mwiti 2013). In Kenya, in combination with the *2013 Kenya Information and Communications (Amendment) Bill* by which broadcasters must dedicate 60% of their programming to local content, this opens opportunities for a much widened and diversified offer in local audiovisual stories; something I will come back to in the next section.

Secondly, digital broadcasting promises to deliver a clearer image on screen. Images transmitted through traditional technology are susceptible to interferences and their signal rarely reaches country-wide. In a digital environment there is no such thing: provided all equipment works (the signal distribution and connection, the aerial, and the set top box) the image received is either spotless, or there is no signal at all.

On the down-side, digital signals cannot travel the same distances as their analogue counterparts. According to Mbuvi (2013) 80% of Kenya’s population can be covered digitally, but people in very remote areas stand to lose access to television programming after the analogue switch-off. And as said, those who cannot afford the required gadgetry lose access too. A digitally equipped television set in Kenya is estimated at about 750 USD, which is far out of reach for the majorities (Kiptinnes, 2013). A set top box costs about 3,000 KES (34 USD), while the country’s gross national income is

¹⁶⁷ Statistics on television ownership and on access to television are rarely fully reliable, and often contradictory. According to a case study on the Tanzanian migration to digital broadcasting, 24% of the population has access to terrestrial broadcasting, and 6.4 million television sets are in use for about 10,3 million households; a distribution which is sharply divided between urban regions (with most television owners) and rural areas (Schumann 2013). Another article cites 3 million television sets owned by Tanzanian households (*The East African* 2013).

¹⁶⁸ Monthly entry-level fees in Kenya range from 6 to 10 USD for subscriptions (Vourlias 2014a).

little more than twice that amount (Mbuvi 2013). Similarly, a set top box in Tanzania ranges between 25 and 65 USD (while the annual GDP per capita in Tanzania is 500 USD; Schumann 2013). The price of digital antennas can vary between 24 and 93 USD, depending on one's location in the country (The East African 2013).

Tanzania was the first African country to kick-start a phased analogue switch-off in December 2012 (Hawkes 2013). By February 2014 digital television had become available in seven of the mainland's twenty-seven regions, but an estimated half of Tanzania's TV owners (Kolumbia 2013, citing the Media Owners Association of Tanzania or MOAT) and about 20% urban residents as a result lost access to television (*Communications Africa* 2013). Despite protests by NGOs and analogue broadcasters (through the MOAT), Tanzania has not reverted or postponed its plans (Schumann 2013). According to Mwiti (2013) "the phased switch-off has (...) been nothing short of tempestuous, with up to half of the country's television set owners confronted by blank blue or black screens." From a different perspective Tanzania is praised for its forward-looking, steadfast policy-making. "Of particular note (...) is Tanzania's clear success: it has managed to switch off its analogue signal in most regions more than two years ahead of the ITU-agreed deadline (...) The country has also avoided the cost of extended dual illumination" (Schumann 2013).

Hannelie Bekker (2013) of Zuku comments: "The digital migration in Kenya, Tanzania, and the rest of East Africa so far is a mess. It is rhetoric more than action. In Tanzania they switched off the analogue signal, I don't know what they were thinking because now [as good as] no one has television. There was something in the papers today (...) that only 25% of Nairobians would stay switched on if they switched off the [analogue] signal. You can imagine what it looks like in the rest of the country! (...) In the UK there was a ten-twelve year roadmap, it was handled as a national project. On the continent there have been endless and unbelievable struggles (...) and the result: there is no plan."

Ironically Tanzania's challenges are considered small in comparison with other countries, because television penetration in the country is low. In Kenya the use of television is more widespread, moreover the country's broadcasting industry is more relevant for my hypothesis on local storytelling: the growing popularity of local content which in Tanzania is so clear with Bongo movies, in Kenya is visible primarily through television viewer rates (see article 2). Kenya's approach to the digital migration is different from Tanzania's, but is no less a cause for concern. Here too majority viewers are at risk of being excluded as soon as the analogue signal is permanently off (Mbote 2014), the cost of the extra equipment being as much a burden for common Kenyans as it is for Tanzanians.

Contrary to Tanzania¹⁶⁹, the Kenyan government (through its regulator CCK – Communications Commission of Kenya) has issued licenses for the distribution of the digital signal only to two parties. The first party is Signet, which has the public broadcaster - Kenya Broadcasting Corporation - as a major shareholder, in addition to South African DStv (Mbuvi 2013). The second party is PANG or Pan African Group, part of a Chinese consortium with presence across Africa, and owner of Chinese pay-TV broadcaster StarTimes. Despite earlier promises on the part of CCK, a third private consortium of incumbent broadcasters was denied a license. This has been perceived as problematic for several reasons.

¹⁶⁹ In Tanzania, five licenses were awarded: to Star Media Tanzania, Agape Media and Basic Transmissions. Star Media is a joint venture between StarTimes and the Tanzanian Broadcasting Corporation (Schumann 2013).

Firstly, PANG and Signet are intimately linked with existing individual broadcasters in the country (DStv's GO tv and GO tv Plus, and Chinese-run StarTimes). As a result, in a digital environment Kenyan media houses are suddenly dependent on a small number of direct competitors for the distribution of their programming. PANG has been known to increase charges for its competitors in Tanzania (Meso and Kamau 2013), and it is not unlikely to do the same in Kenya.

Secondly, as a largely government-controlled entity, Signet's control over television distribution opens doors for media censorship: any programs critical of Kenyan authorities could in theory be kept from going on air. The idea is not as far-fetched as it may seem: recent amendments to the Kenya Information and Communication Bill (2013) mentioned earlier have dealt a blow to Kenya's freedom of media and expression. Called "outwardly unconstitutional" (*Standard Media* 2013) and considered the most repressive in the country's history (Verjee 2014), the law sets high penalties for journalists engaging in propaganda and hate speech. It offers ambiguous definitions, especially of "journalists"¹⁷⁰, who can now be anyone active on the social media or running a blog. A government-appointed board is to serve as a monitoring tribunal. In recent years several bloggers critical of Kenya's government have been known to be intimidated or fined, showing the precariousness of freedom of expression in the country. Kenya may be a more liberal place than two decades ago, but censorship and government intimidation have not entirely disappeared (Ngugi 2008: 276-280).

Thirdly, Signet and PANG are responsible for the roll-out of the required network for digital broadcasting. It makes sense for them to focus in the first place on areas likely to allow them to recoup their investments: the cities of Nairobi, Kisumu and Mombasa have already been covered (Reinartz, 2013), and within the cities, the focus is on the wealthy areas¹⁷¹. In turn, broadcasters are required to rent spectrum from these signal distributors, specifying which regions of the country they wish to target. Logically, preference will go to urban areas, wealthy regions, and/or places with a high population density; especially for new players who have not yet built capital and are largely dependent on advertising revenue. A public Universal Access Fund, with the aim to invest additional means for the "connection" of underserved areas, has been in place for a while, but its priorities and strategies are unclear (Kobia, 2013; Wamola, 2013; Reinartz, 2013). The universal "connection" aimed for can refer to digital television, internet access, mobile telephony, or even banking or postal services (Kiptinnes, 2013). Little hope exists that the Fund will effectively be used for "connecting remote regions", whether this refers to the internet or to digital television.

¹⁷⁰ According to the new law a journalist is a "person who engages in the practice of journalism". "Journalism" is "the collecting, writing, editing and presenting of news or news articles in newspapers and magazines, radio and television broadcasts, in the internet or any other manner as may be prescribed." A "publication" is "the dissemination to the public of any written, audio or video material, and includes materials disseminated through the internet." Note the difference with the 2007 *Media Act* which defines a "journalist" as a person "who holds a diploma or a degree in mass communication from a recognized institution of higher learning and is recognized as such by the Council, or any other person who was practicing as a journalist immediately before the commencement by the Council, and earns a living from the practice of journalism, or any person who habitually engages in the practice of journalism and is recognized as such by the Council" (Verjee, 2014). These concerns are not to be taken lightly. In recent years bloggers critical of Kenya's government have been known to be intimidated or fined. One example is Roy Ogolla who was arrested for his vocal criticism of exaggerated per diem claims by members of the Kenya Film Commission (Niaje 2012). Another example is the controversial blogger Robert Alai, who was arrested for allegations of government intimidation (*Global Voices Online* 2012).

¹⁷¹ In the case of Nairobi this includes Runda, Lavington, and Karen. Slum areas adjacent to these parts of town may eventually be given access to digital broadcasting because the investment to divert the signal is not as big as it would be to deliver it to areas farther away (Kiptinnes, 2013).

Several lawsuits have been filed to slow down and to change the approach to Kenya's digital migration. The Kenyan Consumer Federation (COFEK) and the Kenyan Media Owners Association have joined forces against what they see as a hastened process dealt with in an unconstitutional manner (Mbuvi 2013; Ogemba 2014). In a recent ruling Kenya's Court of Appeal pushed back the switch-off deadline until September 30th 2014. In addition, in a rather spectacular series of verdicts the Court nullified the licenses granted to PANG and Signet, disbanded the CCK as unconstitutional (because insufficiently independent from government), ordered a new tendering process for signal distribution licenses, and requested for the consortium of private broadcasters (Nation Media Group, the Standard Group, and Royal Media) to be given a license without having to submit a tendering bid (Ogemba 2014). In turn the government has been given time to formulate an appeal, which means that the issue is far from resolved. Unsurprisingly, *The XYZ Show* has picked up on the fraudulent tendering process with a sketch showing a man handing the person in charge a suitcase filled with money¹⁷².

Though it is unclear how Kenya's migration from analogue to digital broadcasting will unfold further, this brief summary shows how it touches on more than "access to stories". Firstly, like radio and the internet, television is an important source of information. Depriving Kenyans and Tanzanians of news reports and messages of public interest runs counter to their constitutionally granted right to information (Kolumbia 2013; Mwiti 2013). In the worst case, rather than leading to wider access, new technology can serve politically dangerous purposes. Secondly, again we see the same "access faultlines" emerging, in which primarily the urban and the better-off benefit from technological progress. Despite its strong "democratizing" potential, technology's real agency once again is shown to be shaped by context factors: policy-making, economy, demography, and so forth.

A last type of access to audiovisual stories is communal viewing, ranging from commercial theatres to video clubs, and from mobile cinema to slum-based screening initiatives in cities. Some such initiatives have existed for a long time (such as itinerant screening projects and cinemas), while others have emerged largely as a result of digital technology (such as video clubs and new types of slum-based screenings).

Digital technology¹⁷³ has not changed the commercial or pricing strategies of cinemas in Kenya and Tanzania. They have remained targeted at upper-middles classes and expatriates, and do not usually screen local movies (Buddhdev Patel, 2013). Rare exceptions are made for films which attract a sufficiently large local and middle-class viewership, such as blockbuster hit¹⁷⁴ *Nairobi Half Life* (Gitonga, 2012), or *Viva Riva* (Tunda Wa Munga, 2011, set in Kinshasa). High-end (widescreen) cinema produced locally is usually not shown in theatres (perhaps with the exception of institutions such as the Goethe Institute or the Alliance Française) but travels the international festival circuit.

¹⁷² The sketch can be viewed online: <http://buni.tv/video/digitalization-process-awaiting-scandal-xyz-s9-e8/> (last accessed August 2014).

¹⁷³ Digital technology here refers to cinema technology: the digital packaging and screening of films by use of DCP (digital cinema packages) and encrypted codes to prevent piracy.

¹⁷⁴ The term "blockbuster hit" is relative. As Kenya's biggest locally-made box office success, *Nairobi Half Life* made about 20,000 USD in Kenyan theaters (Vourlias 2014b); at least according to local production company Ginger Ink (which facilitated the work of German One Fine Day productions for the shooting). The movie's production budget was several times higher than that amount.

The video clubs in Kenya and Tanzania provide local access to films, but only in Tanzania do they offer local stories. Initiatives such as Cinemart have started to create a “layer” of communal viewing situated between the rather elitist theatres and the grassroots video clubs. Though it is too soon to make claims about its democratizing effects (Cinemart has only one pilot site up and operational), its intention is to lower financial and practical barriers to cinema-going, while ensuring retributions for rights holders and producers. Cinemart’s focus will be on local content understood widely: football matches, government messages, and local film. I have not found similar initiatives in Tanzania, perhaps because of the proximity of the screening clubs and libraries, and possibly also because of the country’s more challenging technological environment (Kenya has a more reliable electricity supply).

Mobile screening in Kenya and Tanzania has existed since colonial times (Banfield 1964), and has remained important in providing access to audiovisual stories, especially in remote areas. Human rights activist Maina Kiai’s NGO “Inform. Action” tours Kenya with stories of political and social relevance, the screenings of which are followed by community discussions. The Lola Kenya children’s festival works with Slum TV to screen in Kibera, Mathare, and other townships. Also during the Zanzibar International Film Festival mobile screenings tour the island. In contrast, Skyfire East Africa works from a commercial impetus, organizing advertiser-supported screenings across East Africa. Commercial spots are followed by a Hollywood, martial arts or popular local film, offering advertisers access to wide audiences, which otherwise can be difficult to reach (*Balancing Act* 2007). Mobile screening initiatives are an important factor in the accessibility of local stories, and their work has certainly been made lighter through technological innovation. In addition entirely new types of digital screening projects have emerged in Nairobi, targeted at slum residents: the Slum Film Festival, Slum TV and Kibera TV; I will come back to their work when revisiting my hypothesis on local relevance.

Taken together, all these examples drawn from the wide fields of production and distribution of audiovisual storytelling lead to a general conclusion: technological innovation has very strong democratizing *potential* in terms of access to production and to locally-produced stories. This access can be understood in different ways – financial, practical, cultural - making an assessment of technology’s influence over it a complex affair. Democratization can also be understood more widely as an equal distribution of power and resources in a given value network, again turning out different and more complicated answers to our central research question. What has been made clear throughout this thesis is that technology’s agency can be strong, but it is also strongly influenced by individual and context-related factors. We have seen with the shift from analogue to digital broadcasting that a local context can even have reverse effects, decreasing access to local stories *despite* the democratizing potential of technological innovation. In conclusion, technological innovation has strong democratizing potential, but is only one of many factors determining whether or not this potential materializes, and in what shape.

3. Hypothesis 2: Diversification

My second over-arching hypothesis states that **technological innovation in Kenya and Tanzania facilitates a growing diversification of audiovisual stories produced locally, and a diversification of the circuits in which they are spread.** Cases presented in chapters 1, 3, and 5, serve to illustrate this in the case of Kenya. The hypothesis is made explicit in chapter 1.

I have understood diversification of audiovisual stories as a growing variety in story types and formats - feature films, short films, animation, web series,... – rather than a growing variety *within* a certain circuit or genre.¹⁷⁵ I have made this definition more inclusive in a small number of cases, either because no clear diversification of story types could otherwise be found (as in Tanzania, in which Bongo is the biggest, and most *internally* diverse production format), or because the diversification within a certain format in relation to technological innovation was impossible to ignore (such as television in Kenya, which is currently producing a growing variety in story types and online spin-offs). By a diversification of distribution I have referred to new and/or more diverse systems of delivery, platforms, channels, and dissemination circuits.

a. Diversification of production and distribution: differences between Kenya and Tanzania

I have not found the same diversification (whether of production or distribution platforms) attributable to new technology in Tanzania as was so readily evident in Kenya. Two factors may be important in explaining this. Firstly, Kenya's society is more fragmented than Tanzania's: ethnic-linguistic differences between communities have remained more important (Robinson 2009: 13), the gap between the rich and the poor is wider, and the distance between social groups is felt more. A very large group of expatriates adds an extra layer to this heterogeneity. The differences in attitude and lifestyle between different age groups, too, are more salient (see for instance chapter 3, which associates Sheng language with a specific age group and an affinity with technology). Politically, nation-building in Kenya has not been a project of priority as much as in Tanzania: "(...) a superseding national identity is more salient in Tanzania than in Kenya" (Robinson 2009: 5).

While these claims cannot easily be backed by statistics, they were repeated by several of my respondents: "Tanzania is more homogenous, they have melted better" (Essuman, 2012); "Bongowood is a lot bigger than Riverwood, yes; in Dar they do not have that kind of diversity" (Okottah, 2012); or, in the words of Shivji (2013):

"There is a big difference (...) Kenya took on capitalism the day after independence. Tanzania had a socialist mentality. But (...) with the nineties' multiparty and restructuring programs, [this] messed up the country, now there is more of a capitalist approach, society is getting more fragmented (...) In Nairobi especially, when I go there, it is very different, you feel almost poor (...) and unfortunately there is a lot of tribalism. (...) Class, tribalism, religion. You don't feel comfortable coming from Dar, in Tanzania it is very communal. (...) And also the language is a unifying factor. Nyerere made Swahili a unifying factor (...) After independence Tanzania was much more unified (...) and it still has that communal sense despite a strong class structure. Kenya is very different, very fragmented as a society (...) In Tanzania even with that class structure, you can still sit in the barazani¹⁷⁶ and drink coffee together, you still have that. (...) Though we are losing it."

¹⁷⁵ I want to refer again to Tom Ryall's definition of genres as "patterns/forms/styles/structures which transcend individual films, supervising their construction by the filmmaker and their reading by an audience" (Ryall 1975: 28). As noted in the introduction I have considered African popular cinema as a genre with many subgenres.

¹⁷⁶ A barazani is an informal café where Tanzanians of all walks of life meet to chat, play board games, and have drinks together.

Secondly, Kenya is very advanced technologically, not only in comparison to Tanzania but continent-wide. Technology, innovation and ICT are firmly inscribed in Kenya's strategic policy plans; and while some of its projects have met with criticism (such as the Konza project [see essay 1], the digital migration shift [cfr supra], or the digital pasha centers [e-government centers in rural areas kick-started with government loans but largely unsuccessful; Wanjiku 2013]), the country's robust network infrastructure and general context conducive to entrepreneurship are difficult to deny. As the commercial capital of East Africa, Nairobi is host to a variety of technology hubs, incubators and accelerators, and to the African headquarters of Google, Intel, Samsung, Nokia, Hewlett-Packard and IBM (Rawlence 2014).

If Kenya is both more fragmented and more technologically advanced than its neighbor, in line with hypothesis 1 this suggests potentially lower barriers to production and access to stories for more different groups of people. Earlier this was identified as one of the reasons for Riverwood's lack of country-wide success: the circuit appeals only to a well-delineated linguistic, social, and age group. The flip of the coin is that there can potentially be more types of stories for more different groups of people.

b. Internal diversification: Bongo and contemporary Kenyan film production

Kenya boasts more different formats and story types than Tanzania. However if we zoom in on both countries' "cousins" of Nollywood, we see a Bongo industry that is larger and reflects more internal diversity than Riverwood. Despite the cases of praxis discussed in article 2 "core Riverwood" consists in large part of comedy sketches, while "Bongo proper", similarly to Nollywood, boasts genres as different as horror, romantic stories, inspirational (religious) films, comedy, and martial arts. Some feel that Bongo's internal diversity is still growing (Jairaj Damodharan of Steps Entertainment sees more comedy and action flicks being made), however chapter 4 shows how factors of political economy keep it from reaching its full potential in terms of creative innovation (which, as has been assumed, leads to more internal diversity).

In Kenya on the other hand, it is *between* different circuits rather than *within* a particular production or distribution field, that technology is causing diversification. In addition to the different formats and distribution platforms described in article 1, increased access to equipment is also at the basis of an emerging "mid-layer" of feature film productions (Southwood, 2013; Essuman, 2012). This mid-layer is situated between the "no frills-low budget" approach of Riverwood, and traditional higher-budget, high-quality, upmarket filmmaking. This convergence seems to occur in two directions: Riverwood has started to produce stories of higher "quality" in terms of image, sound and scripting (Kahiu, 2013; see for instance Third Force Entertainment and Jitu Films in chapters 1 and 2), while films targeted at the festival circuit are becoming cheaper and easier to produce. In addition to lower costs, post-production can increasingly be done inside the country¹⁷⁷. Films produced within this mid-layer are still widely different in terms of production values and budget, (between 10,000 and 100,000 USD (Essuman, 2012; Kaigwa, 2012). Their funding comes from different sources and is usually a more "commercial" matter than in Francophone West Africa, i.e. there is more sponsoring

¹⁷⁷ I do not want to exaggerate the availability of specialized film treatment services in Kenya. Wanuri Kahiu (2013) points out that most post-production and mastering are still outsourced to other countries. Kenya has specialized directors of photography, people specialized in calibrating and sound post-production, but they are few in numbers and rarely available.

and commercial co-production than public funding (Kahiu, 2013; Colombo, 2011). In addition, makers sometimes benefit from very small grants awarded by the Kenya Film Commission (eg. Bob Nyanja's *Captain of Nakara*, Robby Bresson's *Simiyu Samurai*), and the films are increasingly picked up by forward-looking festivals, who have noticed the emergence of a new East African cinema (Colombo, 2011; see, for instance, Africa in Motion in Edinburgh, Film Africa in London).

In conclusion: from the perspective of this second hypothesis Tanzania is more societally homogenous and less technologically advanced than Kenya, which translates into a less diverse field of audiovisual production and distribution, with one format type – Bongo – enjoying country-wide popularity. In addition we find higher-end cinema, music videos, television¹⁷⁸, and some animation (cfr infra, hypothesis 3). Apart from DVD-sales and rental, a small number of cinema theatres and a large number of video dens, television and mobile cinema, the YouTube channel Swahiliwood offers MFDI (Media for Development International)-produced films and television programs free of charge, and some of the more artistic Tanzanian productions can be found online¹⁷⁹. In Kenya, largely the same traditional distribution systems (DVD, television, cinema theatres) exist next to an ambitious video-on-demand company (Buni.tv), a low-end digital screening initiative (Cinemart), and several mobile-targeted formats and delivery systems,¹⁸⁰ benefiting from the widespread use of M-Pesa. A convergence is taking place between Riverwood filmmaking and widescreen cinema, and a strong diversification in general of story types is very clear. This tells us that, as was the case with my hypothesis on democratization, technology has a strong potential to facilitate diversification of production and distribution, but its outcome is determined by context factors such as policy, economy, and demography.

c. Digital distribution and digital broadcasting: forces for diversification, forces for homogenization

Finally I want to zoom in on two types of distribution systems readily associated with easy access to a diversifying offer in stories: video-on-demand (VOD; whether through television or online), and digital broadcasting. In the case of VOD, much depends on a specific project's mission and editorial policies. The web as a technological platform lends itself to the showcasing of myriad types of audiovisual stories. In that sense a platform such as Buni.tv is certainly beneficial to a diversifying offer in audiovisual stories: it spreads and promotes music videos, short films, animation, and feature films, both from Kenya and Africa. In turn, iROKOTv and Bozza are more targeted at specific formats: the former is firmly embedded in the Nollywood industry while the latter promotes a new type of self-promotion for grassroots artists, thus stimulating the production of content that would otherwise perhaps not be made or shared. Considering in addition other VOD platforms such as Africafilms.tv, Reel African, Afrinolly, and many more web 2.0-based initiatives, as a technology online distribution clearly contributes to a diversification of the audiovisual offer. The local accessibility of this offer "on the ground" depends on factors such as pricing models, the cost of streaming devices, and local network technology.

Importantly, there is a difference between online accessibility and visibility. In spite of being globally accessible, VOD platforms aiming at continent-wide viewership require deep pockets for server costs,

¹⁷⁸ Television arrived late in Tanzania (Schumann 2013) and is less widespread than in Kenya. Local production is growing, but at a slower pace than in Kenya.

¹⁷⁹ For instance *Jonah* (Tavares, 2013) and *Shoeshine* (Shivji, 2103).

¹⁸⁰ Bozza has launched but not gained a strong foothold in Kenya. In addition there is Mdundo (mdundo.com) which focuses on mobile music delivery through a scratch-card system, *Kulahappy*, et cetera.

marketing and promotion. Considering also the “lessons from the West” (see Cunningham 2010 and 2012, referred to in chapter 6) it is impossible to predict what the African VOD space, once consolidated, will look like. No sustainable industry model has been developed, and the most successful initiatives are incubated in larger structures. The economic playing field of commercial digital distribution is resolutely global, and therefore highly competitive. It is well possible that this space in Africa will be dominated by one or two players, which might just as well lead to a homogenization of the - visible and well-promoted - online offer in audiovisual stories. Alternatively a VOD-platform with continental reach could exist next to a locally-focused counterpart – say, iROKOTv and Buni.tv, provided both types of players can survive and find stability. Though it is tempting to link video-on-demand to a strong diversification of the audiovisual offer, here again technology’s potential is affected by, *inter alia*, economic evolutions, costs and capital. And while it is clear to most that video-on-demand will be crucial in Africa’s future landscape of audiovisual storytelling, exactly how this will materialize, and what it will mean for a diversity in the – visible, accessible – local audiovisual offer, remains to be seen. Murdock and Golding (2005: 68) state it as follows:

“We are entering the era of convergence. The potentials are impressive. Cultural products flow between and across media in an increasingly fluid way. (...) Enthusiasts present these possibilities as ushering in the transfer of power from owners to audiences. (...) The fact that consumers will have access to a wider range of cultural goods [*hypothesis 2*], provided they can pay [*hypothesis 1*] (...), does nothing to abolish the control exercised by media moguls. In the emerging environment, power will lie with those who own the key building blocks of new communication systems, the rights to the key pieces of technology and, (...) the right to the cultural materials (...) that will be used to put together the new services.”

Judging from my interviews, even bigger hopes for a more diverse audiovisual offer in Kenya and Tanzania are pinned on digital television. In an analogue broadcasting context the programming of free-to-air channels in both countries has been largely undifferentiated. A typical television evening in Kenya, for instance, starts with the news in English¹⁸¹, followed by a local soap, in turn followed by the Swahili-language news, and finally a telenovela (Bekker, 2012; Kimani K. and Kimani G., 2013). Apart from minor scheduling differences and the dominance of Swahili, this is similar in Tanzania. Since Citizen TV in Kenya started reaping benefit from its focus on locally-produced shows, competitors have followed suit - mainly with comedy and soap operas. Of late, a diversification in television production has started slowly but surely: Tanzania now has the comic fiction series *Siri Ya Mtungi* (TV 1), the soccer drama *The Team* (EATV and ITV), and the talkshow *Daladala* (TBC; now aborted); Kenya has the cooking/talkshow *Dads Can Cook* (Kiss TV), Zuku’s internationally successful travel/cooking show *Tales from the Bush Larder* (co-produced with Fox), the ladies’ talkshow *Ladies 1st* (Zuku), the *West-Wing*-inspired drama *State House* (Zuku), and of course the *XYZ Show* (Kiss TV). In a digital broadcasting context this diversification is expected to grow even more dramatically.

The spectrum gained through digital television (cfr supra) allows for a multiplication by eight to ten of the present number of channels, opening space for a wider diversity in programming for each

¹⁸¹ Citizen TV, strongly focused on local content since 2006-7, schedules a local soap at 19.30, before the news (Campbell, 2012).

broadcaster. Combined with lower barriers to entry for aspiring newcomers (Mbuvi 2013)¹⁸², there is much anticipation of dedicated channels: sports (Ghettuba, 2013; Southwood, 2013), news and politics (Bekker, 2012; Kimani K., 2012), ethnic-culturally specific channels (such as the recently launched Three Stones channel, focused on the culture and history of the Kikuyus; Kimotho, 2013), documentary (Kimani K., 2012), children's channels, music channels (Ghettuba, 2013), et cetera. Lower entry barriers are expected to stimulate competition, thus forcing broadcasters to develop more specific profiles; according to some, the threat this represents for Kenyan incumbents is an additional reason why the latter have resorted to court appeals, allegedly trying to slow down the migration process (Kiptinnes, 2013; Kimotho, 2013).

However, digital broadcasting also brings with it a radically different market situation. New business models need to be developed to balance niche programming and revenues based on subscriptions and/or advertising. Russell Southwood (2013) gives a hypothetical example: "Kenyans love golf, you could try a golfing channel, 100,000 might watch, and make a business model out of that: a niche. Whether that happens will be a function of how much advertising you find, how much market there is, et cetera. But that will certainly be the way it will begin to go." Hannelie Bekker of Zuku adds: "For free-to-air operators who have been used to operating one channel, it is not as easy as you would imagine (...) all of a sudden you have ten channels (...) you need deep pockets, even a very modest channel, if your business model is advertising you need to build a brand, you need eyeballs" (Bekker, 2013).

A critical mass of viewership is not easy to reach in small television markets like Tanzania and Kenya, unless one aims for regional (East African) reach. One respondent comments:

"If you go to India where they have more than 500 channels, (...) it is cheap to get an extra channel so people say, 'let's try our luck'... but when you have a platform with 600 channels, people tend to watch four or five, no one will watch six hundred. Getting an extra channel is an extra lane on the highway, but can you buy a car? Can you set up a studio, make or buy the content? Will people watch your channel? (...) Specific niches (...) is also what happens in India, you do only one thing but do it extremely well. But India is big, so you can monetize. Can you be East African, like Zuku? (...) In India a small channel might reach 10 million people, that is still more than enough. That is our challenge. There is excitement, more channels available, but I cannot imagine eighty broadcasters here at the moment" (Macharia, 2012).

In addition to the challenge of finding new business models, the combination of an exponential increase in airspace and – in Kenya - the 60 % airtime quota¹⁸³ for local content could strongly boost the demand for locally produced television shows. This may create a healthier balance in bargaining power between East African producers and broadcasters, as the latter traditionally have rarely paid more than 300 USD for a movie or episode (Campbell, 2012; Bekker, 2012; Macharia, 2012), or have

¹⁸² While barriers may indeed be lowered (Mbuvi [2013] estimates the monthly amount needed to run a TV station between 200,000 and 500,000 KES [between 2,274 and 5,684 USD]) local television stations can also be expected to face tougher international competition (Kolumbia 2013).

¹⁸³ The enforcement of this 60% quota leaves much to be desired, but respondents also point to a current lack of local content of broadcasting quality, making the quota difficult to meet. The principle remains that there is a growing need for local shows of a certain quality, capable of reaching sufficient viewing rates.

even charged for airtime. Note also that until less than a decade ago local programming other than news journals was rare. Today still, foreign soaps and Nollywood films take up much of the space on East African screens.

If the growth in local content production, as is expected, cannot follow the pace of the increased demand for it, strong producers – the ones with a systematic output of sufficient quality – stand to improve their bargaining position (Macharia, 2012; Ghettuba, 2013). Alternatively broadcasters can opt to produce shows themselves, but for many this entails activities and work flows that are very different from their core businesses. They can also commission work, in which case fees are much higher (about 2,000 USD per episode, according to Hannelie Bekker, 2013)¹⁸⁴ and potentially out of reach for traditional free-to-air broadcasters.

Though such reflections on digital television are partly speculative, there are preliminary conclusions to be drawn about technology's diversifying potential in the context of digital television. Firstly, the broadcasting eco-system is about to change in the coming decade. There is anticipation of more channels, more specialization, and more bargaining power in the hands of local producers. Secondly however, only after a first shake-out and market consolidation will it become clear how far these effects will have carried: how many broadcasters and producers will succeed in building sustainable businesses on a successful offer (and thus, how diverse the resulting offer will be) remains to be seen. Once again this illustrates how technology's effects are shaped by economic processes and market strength. Economic actors with brand power, financial margin and maximum efficiency have an advantage over smaller players, while technological innovation affects them all alike. The net result, an anticipation of a more diverse local television offer, remains.

Less speculative and more worrying are the concerns in Kenya about the possible oligopoly (Signet and PANG, see previous section) of control over the digital signal distribution. Not only can these players potentially keep unwanted competition off the air (or charge excessive fees), but as one of them is directly linked to the national authority there may be a political dimension to their control over the television signal. Not only would political censorship negatively affect the diversity on Kenyan screens, but it would also be a push-back for the freedom of its media.

A final remark to make in this context is the effect on the representation of minorities that such targeted television channels may have, especially in a country as fragmented as Kenya. The digital channel Three Stones has already launched, focusing on the history and culture of the Kikuyu community. Is it realistic to hope for similar channels for, say, the Abagisii in the West, or the Somali in the North-East? Commercially speaking the odds are small that a channel targeting these communities can sustain itself (Kimocho, 2013); technologically, however, it becomes possible. Alternatively, does a fragmentation of television come with the danger of vernacular channels engaging in hate speech, as we have seen with radio broadcasting during the 2007-2008 ethnic clashes (IRIN News 2008)? The question is too far off-topic to engage with here, but from a societal perspective it is pertinent: what is the "local" in local content, whom does it address and how, to whom is it relevant, and why? In the following section I address some of these questions through the prism of my third and final over-arching hypothesis.

¹⁸⁴ According to television producer Dorothy Ghettuba fees are higher, with costs for the production of an average show ranging between 2,500 and 4,000 USD (Vourlias 2014a).

4. Hypothesis 3: Local relevance

In the introduction to this dissertation, and specifically in the context of the **local relevance of locally-produced audiovisual stories and of how they are distributed**, I have pointed to a number of assumptions to be avoided, and complexities to be acknowledged. First of all, “local” is an elastic concept. It can refer to different things, depending on which “non-local” level or domain it distinguishes itself from. A story’s “local” character¹⁸⁵ can refer to a neighborhood, a country, a region or community, or even the African continent – for instance when it is opposed or compared to Hollywood, Bollywood, or Western cinema.

“Local relevance” should not be reduced to the idea, impossible to operationalize, of “authenticity” (see also Murphy 2000). Contemporary African (extended) cinema has many faces. It produces urban stories, romance and detective stories, science-fiction and horror, mythological tales and comedy, soap series, animation, video art, games, and much more. The idea of “authenticity” resonates a reductionist, outdated and myopic view of Africa. A complaint often heard in the formal and informal conversations conducted for this project, was that filmmakers are asked to make their work “more African” – yet no one articulates what this “Africanness” is. NGOs commission films portraying an African (or a Tanzanian, Kenyan,...) “problem” which they purport to help in solving. The “calabash” stream of filmmaking, referred to in the introduction of this thesis, has turned out work that is aesthetically attractive, that informs viewers on the cultural traditions, stories and customs of particular communities, but that also speaks to a notion of Africa as an exotic and mysterious place, “pure”, timeless, and in a sense disconnected from the world.

“There is a huge conversation going on, saying (...) that is not African enough or that is not Kenyan. You don’t even know what that is! (...) It is not just about where you were born, it is about collective experiences. (...) You are born somewhere, your parents are from somewhere particular so you have particular ancestry, but you are raised somewhere else so your perspective is slightly different. And then you move and live somewhere else. (...) I am Luo but in my history line I had a Swahili parent, an Asian great-grandparent, (...) there is all of that and it will all inform you at some point. (...) So to say that it is supposed to look a particular way, really? (...) To say that African cinema should be a specific thing, like what, really? Drums beating?” (Essuman, 2012).

Less problematic than “Africanness” or “authenticity”, the concept of “local relevance” is relational: relevance implies the role of viewers to whom it may or may not apply, which also allows for differences between these viewers – i.e. it acknowledges that African audiences are no monolithic entity. To further grasp the essence of “relevance” I have proposed to use cultural proximity (with Straubhaar 1991) as a “proxy”.

Broken down in elements such as language, characters, topics, style, etc., cultural proximity can serve as a useful estimate of “relevance”. It is multi-faceted, flexible as a prism to look at a wide variety of

¹⁸⁵ We must be careful here to avoid confusion between what is often referred to as “local content” (by which is usually meant content that is produced locally – “local” usually implying the nation-state), and the “local character” of content under discussion here, by which I mean its relevance to local viewers, which can exist on different levels, ranging from the micro-level to pan-African affinities.

stories, and useful in avoiding the essentialist idea of a singular “authenticity”. The layers of identification proposed by Straubhaar (2008; see also introduction) permit not only the imagining of different “levels” of local relevance, but they also accommodate the increasing complexity of transnational cultural influences, and the multi-layered identities exemplified by Hawa Essuman in the quote above. These layers – from the global and the “Empire”, to cultural and linguistic affinities, geo-cultural markets, translocal spaces, to the regional, national and subnational levels – are neither mutually exclusive, nor are they “in each other’s way”. One can feel African, have a familiarity with American media caused by a life-long exposure to it, be as proudly Kenyan as Kikuyu, and identify as a Nairobiian as much as a resident of Ngara Estate. One can also have different affinities on the same horizontal “level”. Hawa Essuman is from Ghana as well as Kenya; her ancestors are Luo, Swahili and Asian. Chiaka Desmond has Nigerian roots but has spent a lot of time in Nairobi; she regularly moves back and forth between Nairobi and Abuja. Dayo Ogunyemi of Cinemart is Nigerian but has taken up residence in Nairobi. Africa is home to well-connected and mobile Afropolitans (in the sense of Mbembe [2007]: with multiple legacies, partaking of globalization) traveling across Africa and between continents, as well as to majorities for whom mobility is largely impossible, remains invisible, or is ignored (such as many nomadic communities). Straubhaar’s cultural proximity and multilevel model of identification cannot therefore be considered as predictive of viewer preferences, at least not on a complex or granular level. I want to use it here in an analytical way, to help us in situating examples of audiovisual stories on the different “levels of local relevance” covered with this third hypothesis.

As a final note on the use of cultural proximity: it does not claim to consider *all* dimensions of viewer preferences and their affinities with a particular type or piece of media. Straubhaar (2008) recognizes the role of other factors, such as social class for instance. Don Fox in article 3 discusses the importance of age and the role of Sheng as an additional identity marker. Surely in the African context also the difference between urban and rural living contexts affects viewers’ interests, and certainly there exist interest groups, gender-related preferences, subcultures, and so forth. It would lead too far to consider all possible aspects of “relevance” in this concluding chapter. I have tried to give them due mention, when applicable, throughout the articles compiled here.

As with my previous hypotheses, it seems easier to operationalize the local relevance of distribution systems than that of the stories produced. Similarly to my hypothesis on democratization I accord to the local relevance of distribution a practical, a financial, and a cultural dimension. Logically then, there exists overlap with the idea of a democratization – in financial and practical terms – of access to local stories (hypothesis 1). Wider accessibility and higher affordability are clearly part of an increased relevance to local viewers; put more simply, it suggests a good financial and/or practical “fit” between audiences and viewing methods. For these financial and practical aspects of relevance I want to refer back to the first section of this concluding chapter. Here on the other hand I will concentrate on a more cultural - in the sense of lifestyle-related - dimension: the habits of different groups of viewers, and the question whether there is now an improved “fit” with newly emerged distribution systems, facilitated by technological innovation. Put differently, I want to zoom in on viewing “contexts” more than viewing “methods” (as the latter in my view have more to do with financial and practical accessibility). By lifestyle and habits I mean, for instance, the question whether viewers like to buy their movies at informal markets in town centers or rather at supermarkets; whether they feel comfortable in movie theatres, in video clubs, or rather in front of the television in

the privacy of their homes; or more related to technological innovation: whether their handhelds or computers are convenient for the mobile dissemination of video, and whether mobile viewing fits in with their daily habits.

In the following I will describe different forms of present-day audiovisual storytelling in Kenya and Tanzania, in terms of their cultural proximity to audiences on different layers of cultural identification as described by Straubhaar. I will focus on types and formats considered less in the preceding chapters - television, high-end cinema, animation – rather than on formats such as Bongo and Riverwood, which have been described extensively. I will conclude by addressing the question of a growing local relevance (in cultural and habit-related terms) of the distribution methods by which these stories are disseminated.

a. Production: the local relevance, on different levels, of locally-produced audiovisual stories.

To expect a growing local relevance of locally-produced stories in a context of technological innovation is a matter of logical deduction: if technology is instrumental in lowering the barriers to audiovisual storytelling, and if the stories produced become more accessible (hypothesis 1), it makes sense to expect more stories reflecting the interests of local producers and audiences. However, as I will try to demonstrate, technology is not only an intermediary variable (by which it would only “work” in the context of hypothesis 1, which would then lead to hypothesis 3). Though the interrelations between my three hypotheses are clear, as I discuss cases on each “layer” (with Straubhaar) I will also try to make explicit where and how technological innovation introduces possibilities more directly for a greater local relevance of production and/or distribution.

a.1. Global, cultural-linguistic, and geo-cultural layers of identification

A first layer is that of infrastructures, technology, and media models with truly **global** reach (Hollywood, CNN, HBO,...) structuring more specific layers below them. Straubhaar distinguishes a specific **U.S. “Empire”**, next to a layer of “**other**” exporters with (quasi-)global appeal: Latin-American telenovelas, Japanese anime, Bollywood, martial arts films from Hong Kong, et cetera. In the academic debates on technological and media globalization, characterized by concerns over cultural homogenization (cultural imperialism) on one hand, and expectations of growing media pluralism on the other, most of the non-American genres in this layer are considered “counterflows”: from former colonies to their erstwhile masters and to viewers in the diaspora (Sinclair in Wang, Servaes, and Goonasekera [eds] 2000: 19), and/or in the sense of economically “smaller nations exporting media content back to the nations typically associated with the international exportation of media, such as the U.S.” (Cunningham et al. 1998: 189). South Nigerian, English-language Nollywood can be situated on this last layer. Nollywood’s ubiquity in Africa is well-known (Osei-Hwere and Osei-Hwere 2008: 4), and despite not being Kenyan- or Tanzanian-produced, it is certainly relevant to viewers there. Nollywood has been the first audiovisual cultural product to reach continent-wide and across diasporas. It is also the first type of African audiovisual storytelling that, through its cultural proximity to local audiences - African faces in African settings on African screens - overtook the offer of dumped foreign films in terms of popularity. While discussing Nollywood’s cultural proximity across Africa Osei-Hwere and Osei-Hwere write (2008: 1): “These video films (...) are popular in other African countries because they tend to focus on themes *relevant* [my italics: note that authors link relevance to cultural proximity] to other Africans on the continent and Africans living in the

diaspora". Like Hollywood, Nollywood's presence and appeal is seen by some as a type of hegemonic cultural imperialism (Osei-Hwere and Osei-Hwere 2008: 10), and by others as an inspiring economic model - this has certainly been the case with Bongo filmmaking. While Riverwood is not as clearly modeled after Nollywood, the presence and popularity of Nigerian films is felt in Kenya just as well. Chiaka Desmond of Filmbiz Africa says (2012): "You have seen Nigerian films. Here in Kenya if you see the effect it is having on many Kenyans, they have this funny Nigerian accent, lifestyle, everything." This is a telling remark, since only a few generations ago to be the object of mimicry was an exclusively non-African "privilege" (see, for instance, Charles Ambler [2002: 126-127] on young men in North Rhodesia or cinema-goers in African cities adopting mannerisms from American Westerns), the popular Makmende figure engraved in Kenyan collective memory is based on a Clint Eastwood movie (chapter 3), and Kung Fu flicks in African popular cinema have almost become a subgenre of their own. An isolated example of a reality television format that has resonated across the – sub-Saharan part of the – continent as well as in the diaspora is *Big Brother Africa*, discussed in chapter 6. The show is still running, and a new edition is to kick off in September 2014. No Kenyan or Tanzanian production formats or genres exist on this layer of global reach, though a few isolated exceptions, such as for instance the Kenyan-produced (but U.S.- and U.K.-funded; Nyong'o, 2013) animation series *Tinga Tinga Tales*, based on Tanzanian graphic art and broadcast in countries worldwide, deserves mention.

One step "downward", Straubhaar distinguishes layers of **transnational cultural-linguistic** affinity between former dominions and colonies, and/or between countries and their diaspora. On this transnational level it is easy to find Kenyan- and Tanzanian-produced stories with appeal and uptake outside the continent, though on a much smaller scale than is the case with Nollywood. According to Attiah (2014) Bongo movies find growing viewership among Tanzanian emigrants. The Kenyan *Ha He* video discussed in article 3 created waves online in the U.S., and the political-satirical *XYZ Show* is doubtlessly followed – online or by satellite - in Kenyan communities abroad. These are all recent pieces of work, the production and wide distribution of which has been made possible by new technology: web dissemination, optical discs, affordable digital equipment, and so forth. Their cultural proximity to Kenyans and Tanzanians – or in the case of *Tinga Tinga* African viewers – in the diaspora is clear: Bongo delivers relatable stories set in Tanzania and produced in Swahili; the *XYZ Show* mocks well-known Kenyans; *Tinga Tinga* is based on colorful and recognizable Tanzanian graphics; and *Ha He*, through its hybridity, can find appeal amongst viewers familiar with Nairobi as much as with other crowds interested in African pop culture. The same can be said more in general about a growing body of audiovisual digital culture from (East) Africa and the diaspora, commanding increasing international awareness and interest: for instance, *Kichwateli* by Just A Band, *His to Keep* and *Fluorescent Sin* by Amirah Tajdin, and the audiovisual artistic work of Wachegi Mutu. Artistically cutting-edge and international in its appeal, this diverse production field could be described as "Afropolitan", however without the connotations of consumerism and commodification of African aesthetics (see also chapters 3 and 6).

Cultural-linguistic affinities exist also on the **sub-national** level, where they are often tied more strongly to ethnicity and language. Especially in Kenya the case of Riverwood shows how language, in addition to age and social background, can determine viewer preferences. The Kikuyu-targeted Three Stones digital broadcaster wants to specialize in serving this ethnic-linguistic community as soon as the shift from analogue to digital television is completed. I have not found similar circuits of

storytelling targeted at other communities, a small number of stand-alone Luo and Kamba productions aside.

Further down from the transnational layer of cultural-linguistic affinity, Straubhaar distinguishes a layer of **geo-cultural** regional spaces: geographically linked and with historic and linguistic commonalities. East Africa as a region is an example, and particularly the Lake Victoria countries: Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda¹⁸⁶. They are the three core members of the East African Community, and share Swahili as a lingua franca – albeit, as was explained at length, not one that is spoken as widely or proficiently by everyone. They also share a similar colonial past: the British Commonwealth has had a presence in all three countries¹⁸⁷, though the nature of this presence varied. It is not suggested that the borders of these nation-states are accurate demarcations of an East African geo-cultural space as understood by Straubhaar; cultural-linguistic commonalities are fluid by nature. Nonetheless, for large groups of people within these countries there is certainly an East African “awareness”. This was also clear throughout my interviews, in which Tanzanian and Kenyan respondents referred to each other often and naturally. In view then of this East African affinity, may we expect technological innovation to facilitate audiovisual stories that reach cross-border and across the region? And if so, is this based only on the use of Swahili, or do the stories share characteristics – elements of cultural proximity - that run deeper on an East African level? Not many Kenyan- or Tanzanian-produced formats circulate across the East African geo-cultural space. Despite the growing local – in the sense of national - popularity of local stories, Kenyan and Tanzanian screens share more foreign than East African product: Nollywood, Asian films, telenovelas (Bekker, 2013). Two important exceptions exist: Bongo movies and locally-made music videos. Kenyan audiences are keen to keep up with trends in Bongo “flava” (the common name for Tanzanian pop music), while Tanzanians are just as interested in Kenyan music videos, which they often find technically superior (Mushala, 2013; Mahugu, 2013). The videos are exchanged online, sold internationally on optical discs, played on public transport, and screened on television. They are a very visible example of technology’s effect on local audiovisual formats: high in production value, easy to circulate, and very popular among youthful audiences. Bongo is available in several East African cities, and is usually subtitled for extra audience reach. Estimates about its uptake are difficult because of the informality of cross-border sales systems, though turnover statistics give an indication: Bongo produces at least 10 films per week, and about 500 per year (Attiah 2014; see also chapter 4). Bongo’s “relevance” in East Africa resides in its language, the relatable topics treated in its stories, and – according to my respondents – its laid-back, leisurely, Tanzanian “mood” (Boy, 2012; Bekker, 2013) – while the music videos (in Swahili, Sheng, or English) are simply firmly embedded in the vibrant East African¹⁸⁸ youth and pop culture. This Tanzanian “mood” in Bongo films is seen as different from Kenya, but seems to make them all the more attractive. Bongo’s cultural proximity on this level, then, is related as much to Kenyans’ familiarity with their neighboring country, as it is with similarity.

¹⁸⁶ Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda have a long history of co-operation and regional integration. In 2007 Rwanda and Burundi joined the East African Community (of which Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda were core members), established in its present form in Arusha, 1999.

¹⁸⁷ Kenya and Uganda were both British colonies; Tanganyika (mainland Tanzania) was first a German colony but became British after World War I.

¹⁸⁸ This is not to suggest these videos travel exclusively in East Africa. Some of the higher-end pop musicians (such as the ex-collective Camp Mulla, or such as Victoria Kimani) find audiences continent-wide.

In addition there is the “Swahiliwood” project, launched in 2013 by Media For Development International as a film education program. The Swahiliwood YouTube channel makes MFDI-produced films and serials available, with flagship products such as *Chumo* (a love story with a message on malaria prevention) and the TV series *Siri Ya Mtungi* (a humorous soap series with serious elements, for instance on HIV; both productions were directed by Jordan Riber). Swahiliwood is explicitly conceived as East African, and MFDI considers the use of Swahili as the key to unlocking wider viewership. How successful this strategy will be remains to be seen, though language is not the only dimension of local relevance. According to some, MFDI’s work is to be situated in the wider “basket” of NGO-produced stories, and is “boring” at best but amounts to “humanitarian Tarzanism” at worst (Attiah 2014, referring to Claudia Böhme). Critics feel that MFDI – and by extension most NGO-funded work – disregards local aesthetic and stylistic preferences and cultural sensibilities (which are just as well elements of cultural proximity), resulting in professionally-made and technically sound stories, nevertheless perceived as “inauthentic” (Attiah 2014)¹⁸⁹. Adding to the complexity of the debate on foreign presence in local filmmaking, the shows were not produced or directed by Tanzanian practitioners, but positioned as good “learning ground” for local people; something which is common practice also in Kenya¹⁹⁰.

Regarding the cultural proximity of local audiovisual stories in the East African geo-cultural space, two conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, we find two formats – music videos and Bongo – which emerged organically in the cities and with cross-border viewership, and could not have grown as dramatically as they have without the technological progress of recent years. Their popularity stems from a cultural proximity residing in the use of Swahili, a Tanzanian “mellowness” (in the case of Bongo), the East African settings in general, and in the case of the videos, their embeddedness in transnational East African pop culture. In addition we find the Swahiliwood initiative, aiming for East African viewership in a more strategic manner, the success of which remains to be seen. MFDI did not “need” the recent wave of technological innovation to start producing stories. It has had its own stock of equipment for a long time, and though it is experimenting with the possibilities opened up through digital distribution technology, the effects are not (yet) as dramatic as with Bongo films and music videos. Secondly, Swahili as a lingua franca is important in this East African space, but is not the only factor of affinity between Kenya and Tanzania. Music videos travel as easily in Sheng or English as they do in Swahili, and Bongo films aired in Kenya usually require subtitling. NGO-stories considered “boring” or out of touch with target audiences cannot be sure to remedy this with high production values and the right language alone. I will come back to these “subtleties” of cultural proximity (and its limits) further down in this section, when discussing recent evolutions in the Kenyan broadcasting industry.

In the field of higher-end cinema, local movies rarely circulate in the East African region; they hardly even reach audiences in their own countries of production. More than a signal of lacking East African affinities, this is a question of unavailability: faulty distribution, and cinema theatres uninterested in

¹⁸⁹ My own guest family in Dar es Salaam on the other hand genuinely enjoyed watching *Chumo*, while *Siri Ya Mtungi* – also available on DStv’s AfricaMagic Swahili – seems well-received in Tanzania. *Siri Ya Mtungi*’s first episode has online viewer rates ranging from 30,000 to over 80,000. A reader’s comment on the online article of Attiah (2014) mentions the high local – in the sense of Tanzanian – popularity of the show.

¹⁹⁰ This is similar to the movie *Togetherness Supreme* (2012), directed by US-born Nathan Collett with Kenyan crews, but strongly perceived as Kenyan.

local films. People in charge of the higher-end cinema programming tend to look at the issue from an opposite angle: they have tried several times to “give a local movie a chance”, but the movies flop at the box office too often to continue supporting them (Buddhdev Patel, 2013). This unavailability makes it difficult to assess the East African “relevance” of Kenyan and Tanzanian widescreen cinema. One remarkable exception (*Nairobi Half Life* [2012, Gitonga]) will be discussed further in this section, when I turn to the national dimension of local relevance.

Though hypothetical, the question of “East African relevance” of East African film is worth asking for several reasons. First of all, this is a new branch of cinema, small but growing. I have not given it much attention with this dissertation because my research question was focused on locally distributed stories; nonetheless it is part and parcel of the East African audiovisual landscape. Secondly, and more on-topic, this branch enjoys less funding than, say, (Francophone) West Africa. While it is as dependent as any widescreen cinema on external funding (small local grants, international awards and related support measures, commercial sponsoring, co-productions), technological innovation has lowered the financial threshold to create work, to “do something” (Essuman, 2012). Less public and more commercial funding in smaller proportions may well affect films’ aesthetic/stylistic choices and story matter, including a less exoticized view of Africa, which is highly relevant in view of African cinema’s history of foreign funding “with strings attached”. Without wanting to over-generalize, the following traits were repeatedly cited by respondents as characteristic of East African cinema today: it is less ideological and more entertainment-oriented, more focused on urban than on rural or traditional stories, well-made but less refined aesthetically, and it produces more genre movies.

“East-Africa is waking up, getting better and better (...) They are very open. In the East you can have a Kenyan film but directed by an Englishman, produced by a Tanzanian, an Indian (...). In the end for them it is still always a Kenyan film. In the West [my interviewee is referring to West Africa] it has to be done by an African. (...) Here people tell their own stories and they are more open, they have less financing maybe from abroad. (...) Directors say OK we want to tell our stories, we no longer want to follow the path of NGOs, we no longer want to speak about AIDS or cultural things, [we want] modern stories like everyone else. We want to entertain. And I think this freedom [exists] more on this side of the continent (...) There is a new generation, internet-based, they watch TV by satellite so they are already informed and they are interested. (...) They are fed up with old stereotypes. (...) In the West they are still (...) telling the same story, few people dare to do something new. Then you have the poets, like [Mahamat Saleh] Haroun, people who just have their own style. (...) Maybe in the East this kind of poets still needs to come, these masters. Here they have another ground: ‘I want to make a film to sell.’ (...) In the West, Haroun maybe has 5 million Euro from Europe (...). Here (...) you make a film and you have to sell it, you have to find distribution” (Colombo, 2011).

“Remember: we do not have much cinematic history. Much shorter (...) and also because of the kind of English colony, at some point there was a different kind of expression of how film [was conceived as a] medium. We had a lot of documentary shot on film, but not a huge emphasis of the British to use cinema as a tool of

communication or creative impression, [it had] more [to do with] information. (...) Of course depending on where you get your funding you will want (...) to please your investors. So a lot of funding from the West comes from France... so of course there is a bit of, I (...) can't say it was the majority but there was French influence definitely on some of the work. But we have not had a cinematic history in the same way, so it is hard to compare. But yes, with digital cameras coming in, people have been able to express themselves a lot more. (...) The type of quality and our storytelling is different from Nigeria, from (...) South African films (...) I think it is more, I don't know how to quantify it but (...) South African films are good stories, technically perfect but more polished. Kenya has more an amount of rawness, or East African [film; interviewee is referring to Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda]. It looks beautiful but is rawer in stories and aesthetic style. (...) But it also has to do more with the city than rural life. West African cinema is more a tradition of country versus modernity. We have been dealing a lot more with city-related issues (...) less rural films" (Kahiu, 2013).

"Nollywood as a popular genre has taken its piece. Then, what little cinema theatres you have, screen the international films (...), then below that you have subgenres like Riverwood, Bongo,... and then sort of in parallel, you have arthouse cinema, which is essentially international, or in any case made with international cultural funding (...). But there is a strange middle ground that Dayo [Ogunyemi of Cinemart] represents, Steven Markovitz [producer of Wanuri Kahiu films] (...) [there is room for more] genre films that are a bit like (...) *Viva Riva*, kind of popular, kind of intelligently made, African stories but in a slightly different way, relating more to the urban than the rural context" (Southwood, 2013; respondent is discussing contemporary African cinema in general, but his examples are Kenyan and Congolese).

A more urban and less traditional approach to storytelling (*From a Whisper* [Kahiu, 2008, Kenya], *Shoeshine* [Shivji, 2013, Tanzania], *Soul Boy* [Essuman, 2010, Kenya], *iMANi* [Kamya, 2010, Uganda...]); a growing corpus of genre films (*Nairobi Half Life* [Gitonga, 2012, Kenya], *Viva Riva* [Tunda Wa Munga, 2011, Congo], *House of Lungula* [Konstantaras, 2013, Kenya], *The Captain of Nakara* [Nyanja, 2012, Kenya], *Pumzi* [Kahiu, 2010, Kenya], *Zamora* [Bhanji, 2011, Tanzania], to add to the more established socially-inspired stories (*Ni Sisi* [S.A.F.E., 2013, Kenya], *Something Necessary* [Kibinge, 2013, Kenya], *Togetherness Supreme* [Collett, 2010, Kenya], and the work of NGO-targeted production companies in Kenya and Tanzania); and aesthetic choices determined by budgetary restraints as much as they are helped by better, more affordable equipment: these are evolutions cited in the field of East African cinema today. For each of these trends there are certainly exceptions to be found, and I do not mean to generalize on a field of production that turns out some 5 or 6 features per year¹⁹¹. Though it is not possible to "test" the local popularity of the films (as they are rarely available) these evolutions deserve mention. They reflect a growing diversity in local film (hypothesis 2), lower barriers (hypothesis 1), and they speak of less, or different, conditions attached

¹⁹¹ This is a rough estimate of the number of cinema films are produced in Kenya and Tanzania every year. It does not include NGO-commissioned work. It is based on an estimate of 3 to 4 films per year in Kenya (Kahiu, 2013) in addition to a smaller number in Tanzania.

to the funding of (East) African cinema. They are thus likely to “add” to the local and regional relevance of stories, many of which in addition are likely to become available on platforms such as Buni.tv, or screened in new-type, low-end venues such as Cinemart.

a.2. Cultural affinities on a national level

If these trends are shared across East Africa, they may also be expected to occur in each separate country, i.e. to be associated with an increased cultural proximity on the **national** “layer” of identification. Audiences on this level are all the more likely to recognize settings, characters, dialects, humor, and other such specificities. Before discussing examples, however, a number of preliminary remarks are due.

There is a difference between a national sense of self and the nation-wide appeal of a particular (type of) story. The geo-cultural and cultural-linguistic spaces described by Straubhaar predate the modern nation-state (Straubhaar 2008: 15), and affinities on both “layers” can compete with or exist alongside each other. This is certainly the case with African nation-states, the frontiers of which in many cases have been super-imposed on pre-existing communities. Current national frontiers in the East African region either follow natural limits or are the result of periods of diplomatic negotiation, albeit combined with efforts to provide for the needs of errant communities and allow for the shared use of natural resources between nation-states (Khadiagala 2010: 269). There are communities – such as the nomadic Somali in Northern Kenya – to whom their official nationality means little – and, I might add, who are rarely represented in the audiovisual stories produced within their countries. On the other hand, though most present-day East African stories are set in urban environments, it would be an over-simplification to treat them as relevant only to residents of the cities in which they are produced (which might be suggested if they were to be situated on Straubhaar’s level of the “metropolitan” producer¹⁹²). Many Kenyans and Tanzanians are familiar with their capital – whether from traveling or through media images. Stories from the capital may well feel just as familiar with rural audiences as rural stories from a lesser-known part of the country. I will not distinguish between stories produced (or set) in cities and other stories, since I assume they all speak to a “national” sense of cultural identity.

A last remark concerns the difference between cases of extended cinema with national appeal to be portrayed here, and the idea of a Kenyan or Tanzanian “national cinema”. The notion of “national cinema” is accorded different meanings, but is usually phrased in terms of a set of shared traits of a country’s movie production and/or industry characteristics (Higson 1989: 36-37; 42). Often it is understood as an act of national self-assertion through cinema, explicitly or implicitly in opposition to a hegemonic presence: usually Hollywood (Higson 1989: 37; Crofts in Williams: 26), though in the cases of Kenya and Tanzania this could be extended to Indian or even Nigerian films. When “national cinema” is not interpreted in opposition to another nation’s cinema, it is usually understood as stylistic, aesthetic, and/or narrative characteristics ascribed to films from a particular country, often

¹⁹² Straubhaar (2008: 13) defines the metropolitan producer/market/audience in terms of global cities (in the sense of Sassen 1991) or media capitals (in the sense of Curtin 2003), linked to global networks, and producing for themselves, regions, nations or transnational spaces. While the transnational reach of, for instance, Bongo, can be situated on a transnational layer of affinity, to consider Dar es Salaam a global city or a media capital would be far-fetched. Nairobi according to some should receive global city status (Swigert 2011: xv), but it produces no audiovisual format or genre with a transnational reach comparable to that of Kung Fu movies, Bollywood, telenovelas, or Nollywood.

as a part of international marketing strategies (Higson 1989: 38)¹⁹³. None of these understandings of “national cinema” are applicable to the topic at hand. They are limited to widescreen movies rather than cinema in its extended nature as considered here (Crofts in Williams: 26; Higson 1989). What is more, not enough has been produced in Kenya and Tanzania to be able to discuss in earnest any clearly shared traits (see also what Wanuri Kahiu has to say about this, pp. 201-202). Lastly, while “national cinema” suggests a degree of homogeneity (and therefore also a degree of exclusivity) most East African cinema tends to be culturally hybrid in kind, negotiating and processing rather than opposing foreign cultural influence (Khatib 2012: Introduction to Volume 1). While the topics of stories produced in Kenya and Tanzania are sometimes political in nature¹⁹⁴, and while African popular cinema can certainly be considered political in its outcome (because of its audience success obtained on low budgets and without state support), rarely is it intended as subversive, nor should it be seen as a conscious counter-tactic to the presence of foreign cinema¹⁹⁵. We could speak of Kenyan or of Tanzanian “national cinema” in the sense of “cinema produced in” Kenya or Tanzania, but this is not the topic I want to deal with here.

Rather than “national cinema”, in the following I will discuss a number of instances of extended cinema which appeal primarily to a national sense of self in Kenya and Tanzania. Generally speaking this national sense of self is stronger in Tanzania than in Kenya, a phenomenon reflected in the nation-wide popularity of Bongo films more than in television¹⁹⁶. Bongo represents the lion share of film production in Tanzania; exceptions are listed in the introduction of chapter 4. In Kenya, audience interest in local stories is evident from television viewer rates rather than Riverwood sales (see also chapter 2), though one remarkable exception shows that strong cultural proximity can reside in local movies just as well. So many observers and respondents consider *Nairobi Half Life* (2012) a milestone in terms of locally relevant Kenyan cinema, that it merits our close attention (Chuchu, 2013; Konstantaras, 2013; Nyong’o, 2013; Kahiu, 2013; *The Africa Channel* 2014). Therefore, rather than revisiting Bongo’s local relevance again, in the following I will address the hypothesized growing local relevance of East African audiovisual stories on a national level through other cases: firstly, by discussing the remarkable case of *Nairobi Half Life*; secondly, by addressing and interrogating the local relevance of contemporary television in Kenya, which seems to reflect Bongo’s success through Kenyan television formats; and thirdly, by considering the emerging field of animation art in both countries – a production field that has received scant attention throughout this dissertation, but which underscores the thesis of a growing local relevance underpinned by evolving technology.

a.2.1. Nairobi Half Life

¹⁹³ “National cinema” can also be understood simply as the corpus of films produced (majoritarily) in a particular country, or it can be defined in terms of exhibition and/or consumption, i.e. what is being screened and what is being viewed (Higson 1989: 36-37).

¹⁹⁴ For instance: *Something Necessary* (Kibing, 2013), *Togetherness Supreme* (Collet, 2010), *Pumzi* (Kahiu, 2010), *From a Whisper* (Kahiu, 2008), and *The Greedy Lords of the Jungle* (RECON-Digital, 2010 [see p. 209]). A Tanzanian example of a socially critical film is Amil Shivji’s *Shoeshine* (2013).

¹⁹⁵ These remarks apply to cinema produced in East Africa today, and are not meant to ignore or downplay political and/or activist cinema produced in Africa, whether now or in the past, and whether in Africa or in its diaspora (see also introduction, pp. 22-24).

¹⁹⁶ Though I have been able to gather less data on television production in Tanzania than in Kenya, respondents describe Tanzanian television as low in quality in general (Shivji, 2013) but point to a number of recent productions of markedly higher production value (Shivji, 2013; Riber, 2013), and anticipate a gradual make-over of the television production field as digital broadcasting progresses (Riber, 2013).

Directed by Tosh Gitonga with coaching by Tom Tykwer (director of *Lola rennt/Run Lola Run*, 1998), *Nairobi Half Life* was developed in the context of a German-Kenyan workshop (One Fine Day Films), and its production facilitated locally by the well-established company Ginger Ink. Shot largely in Sheng language, it is described by my respondents as the first film that succeeds in grasping Nairobi's "reality" as Kenyan audiences see it.

The film tells the story of George Mwangi (Mwas), a young aspiring actor who moves from his village to Nairobi in search of a career. Things go wrong from the moment he arrives: he is robbed of his possessions, randomly arrested, and soon becomes part of a criminal gang to sustain himself. A part-time delinquent, he spends his other time pursuing his dream of an acting career. On the opening night of a play he is working on, Mwas escapes from a violent scene in which all members of his gang are killed by police forces in need of "bodies of evidence" for unsolved crimes. He then makes it just in time for the play and, still shaken, delivers an emotional monologue about the "double life" he leads in Nairobi, and the blind eye that middle class Kenyans turn to all the misery in their city. Sides of Nairobi are shown that rarely make it to film: police corruption, organized criminality, the wide gap between different social layers. There have been concerns about the stereotyping of particular groups ("I wonder how the people portrayed as gangsters, the slum people, what they think of it. The ones I spoke to are more or less uptown"; Boy, 2013) and some debate on whether Nairobi should not be shown in a more flattering light¹⁹⁷. However, most commenters are enthusiastic for reasons directly pertinent to my hypothesis on local relevance: "*Nairobi Half Life* is really realistic. River Road is River Road. Downtown is downtown, they did not try to hide anything. That is what people liked, to see the real thing" (Kimani K., 2013). "One thing that opened up in the last year was cinema [screenings] for Kenyan movies, I think *Nairobi Half Life* did that: open up the cinemas to Kenyan movies, and bring Kenyans to the cinema. (...) In the past it was zero. (...) What captivates people is not production value. *Nairobi Half Life* showed elements of Kenya that people did not usually show: police and violence, and how corrupt they are. Some articles say it is saying bad things about Kenya, but these things are happening! It is real. That was the highlight of the movie" (Konstantaras, 2013). "Definitely it was the first time that people saw a real kind of, that is Nairobi and not a section of it. Not false, it felt good, obviously it is going to be popular. The first time we saw it was half emotional (...) *Nairobi Half Life* is going to remain a milestone in terms of (...) what these filmmakers have been talking about all these years, that it is it! The first time that we saw a Kenyan movie that we actually like, that we did not have to support because of being Kenyan, (...) and that is why it is still being shown. A feeling of 'Yes! We can support this'" (Chuchu, 2013).

Nairobi Half Life should not be taken as representative for Kenyan cinema. It had an exceptionally large production budget available (sources quote budgets ranging from 50 to 80 million KES [568,440 to 990,500 USD]; Boy, 2013; Ghettuba, 2013), which has reflected on production value, promotion and visibility. In addition it enjoyed technical and logistic support from Germany, and the coaching of an internationally acclaimed director. In its topic matter and grimy portrayal of the city, it is comparable to Congolese *Viva Riva* and to (what is suggested by the trailer of) *The Boda Boda Thieves* (Mugisha, currently in development), a story set in Kampala (Uganda). Although different in style and narrative quality, it shares with *Viva Riva* a fair degree of international creative influence. While this does not set these movies apart from other African cinema involving larger-than-grassroots budgets, the fact that they are both considered emanations of a new and more "African"

¹⁹⁷ The same debate exists around *Viva Riva* which portrays Kinshasa as an urban site of criminality, sexuality, danger and alcohol: exciting, but immoral and dangerous.

African cinema makes them all the more vulnerable to critiques of foreign cultural meddling. *Viva Riva* is more Belgian than African for some (Konstantaras, 2013), and many Congolese viewers have been scandalized by the explicit sexuality and violence in the film. Though *Nairobi Half Life* has been less controversial and has been perceived more as Kenyan, it has also met with concerns related to foreign cultural influences. Middle class Kenyans in the film are portrayed as naive side characters, whose main “role” it is to be robbed. The play prepared in the movie is the story of German-Austrian *The Edukators (Die Fetten Jahren Sind Vorbei, 2004, Weingartner)*, in which activists break into wealthy people’s houses, leaving messages that remind them of the existence of poor majorities, warning them that “things are about to change”. The parallel with the social duality in Nairobi could not be clearer, however according to one of my respondents the director was not entirely aware of these subtexts, which seems to suggest subtle creative manipulation (Chuchu, 2013)¹⁹⁸.

All this adds to the multi-layeredness of (and the ideology behind) the idea of “local relevance”: all the best-received films from Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, have enjoyed a degree of foreign support. The nature of (and conditions for) this support may have differed from what is common with West African cinema (cfr supra), but to view the relation between a director and his funders as purely “commercial” would be a mistake. On the other hand, no ambitious film project can avoid taking into account the wishes of its various funders. The filmmakers I have spoken with are grateful for the chances given to them through grants, international workshops, and talent competitions¹⁹⁹; chances that otherwise would have remained out of reach.

The case of *Nairobi Half Life* – highly relevant to Kenyan audiences though made with German coaching – shows the complexity of “local relevance” in the context of high-end African cinema. Rather than adding arguments to the debate on foreign funding and possible concerns over cultural neocolonialism, for this thesis the local relevance of stories is assessed by considering them as the *outcomes* of production processes, rather than the processes themselves. In terms then of its outcome – Sheng language, accurate depictions of the city, topics that speak to local audiences, and characters deemed credible and realistic – *Nairobi Half Life* has strong cultural proximity to Kenyan viewers.

a.2.2. The local relevance of television production in Kenya

As said, in Kenya the effects of cultural proximity on viewer interests in local audiovisual storytelling are evident in the space of television more than filmmaking²⁰⁰. In large part this is a function of the Kenyan habit of watching television instead of buying optical discs. It was not until technology allowed for the production of affordable local shows of acceptable quality, however, that these raised broadcasters’ interest. In 2008 free-to-air channel Citizen TV made the strategic choice of focusing on Kenyan shows. It began producing, commissioning and acquiring local soaps and comedy series, the pioneers of which (*Papa Shirandula* and *Inspekta Mwala*) became successful rapidly. This allowed Citizen TV to grow from one of the smallest, to the (markedly) biggest broadcaster in the country (Bekker, 2012; Campbell, 2012; Ghattuba, 2013).

¹⁹⁸ *The Edukators* is not the only film referred to in *Nairobi Half Life*: attentive viewers will recognize the “Spartans, what is your profession” scene from *300* (Snyder, 2007), ironically replayed by Mwas and an improvised audience at the beginning of the film.

¹⁹⁹ Also here there are exceptions: the Kenyan comedy *The Captain of Nakara* (directed by Bob Nyanja, script by Cajetan Boy) ended in conflict, allegedly over a director’s cut not granted to Nyanja (Boy, 2013).

²⁰⁰ Though television is discussed here under the umbrella of the national “layer” of identification, Kenyan shows regularly reach beyond the country’s borders.

In turn, this sparked a competitive race for exclusive Kenyan content between incumbent competitors, all of which now have their own choice in local content: soaps, reality television, talk shows, cooking shows, and comedy. Intensified competition and improved equipment have led to an increase in the volume and production value of local shows on Kenyan screens (Ghettuba, 2013). Combined with the anticipated digital transition and an expected fragmentation of channels, broadcasters and producers have now started to turn their attention from merely “having” an offer in local content towards creating unique profiles, concepts and formats (Kimani K., 2012; see also the previous section on diversification).

As was the case with *Nairobi Half Life*, the cultural proximity of this growing field of television is not as clear-cut as may appear at first glance. Kenyan viewer interest in local programs may have grown steadily over the past years²⁰¹, but Nollywood and telenovelas have remained more popular (Kimani K. and Kimani G., 2013; Kaigwa, 2012). This could be a function of economics – as foreign shows are cheaper and therefore omnipresent on Kenyan screens (something similar has happened in the past with cheap telenovelas in Eastern Europe; Biltereyst and Meers 2000); it could be because most new Kenyan shows are in English, potentially taking away from their competitive advantage over foreign shows; it could also be “a matter of time”, say, until a popular telenovela ends and viewers switch to a Kenyan variant; or it could be a consequence of the universal appeal of soap series, a format mastered by Latin-American producers (see also Singhal Peer, Svenkerud, and Rahoi-Gilchrest in Melkote, Shields, and Agrawal [eds] 1998, on the universal appeal of melodrama). Studies have shown in the past that telenovelas are capable of “striking a chord” in regions where this is not expected, for instance because they deal with topics of significant emotional importance to viewers (such as a Brazilian telenovela reflecting histories of emigration that was popular in South Italy for a while [La Pastina and Straubhaar 2005: 272-273]). It is well possible that the characters in telenovelas and the problems they face speak to majority viewers in Kenya more strongly than local soaps. Two of the best-known Kenyan examples, *Mali* and *Lies that Bind*, are local variations of the *Dallas* narrative blueprint: they show very wealthy families and their feuds over money and power. In comparison, a Mexican telenovela in which “a poor man who works on a farm and has to struggle for his love for a beautiful girl” may well be more relatable for majority Kenyans than family woes over large fortunes (Kimani K. and Kimani G., 2013)²⁰². Dorothy Ghettuba, producer of *Lies that Bind*, positions her show as a truly African story, however the following quote on her company’s website reflects a certain tension between local formats and telenovelas: “Is it just me, or do all Mexican soaps revolve around tears? Even the men cry, for Pete’s sake! On *Lies that Bind*, there’s no such thing. There will definitely be a few tears shed, but just from the ladies, I promise! Cue huge relief!”²⁰³

Kenyan shows feature Kenyan faces in Kenyan settings; this alone would be expected to make them more culturally proximate to Kenyan audiences than foreign formats. However, not all audiences necessarily relate to the newly emerging television production in the same way. Helped by

²⁰¹ Statistics on viewer rates are expensive and – according to two of my respondents – unreliable, making it difficult to back claims on viewer preferences with statistics (Kimani K. and Kimani G., 2013; Southwood, 2013, personal e-mail).

²⁰² I am not sure which telenovela my respondent is referring to, though it could be *Cuando seas mía* (*When You are Mine*), the Mexican version of a Colombian story about love on a coffee farm. Also *Abismo de Pasión* (*Abyss of Passion*) is broadcast in Kenya: a story of love and passion set in a small village, albeit not on a farm.

²⁰³ Source: <http://www.spielworksmedia.com/7-reasons-to-watch-lies-that-bind/> (last accessed June 14, 2014).

technological innovation, the local relevance of Kenyan television production is undeniably growing, but at the same time remains partial and limited. Technology cannot remedy this, as more than anything else this is a function of Kenya's highly diverse social and demographic landscape.

a.2.3. Animation art

Another growing field of production that deserves closer attention in the context of my third hypothesis is that of animation, both in Kenya and Tanzania. Less than a decade old²⁰⁴ and still small in scale, animation in East Africa exists primarily as a commercial activity (advertisements, public service announcements, animated billboards) and therefore was not given much attention throughout this thesis. It reflects largely the same - partial and limited - democratization and diversification as was described in the context of live action. Cheaper computers, accessible software, and online distribution have made it easier for little-known creatives to make and present work; online tutorials and forums have allowed young people to acquire skills without enrolling in expensive schools; and the growing interest in African digital art has created an environment that motivates individual makers to "come out" with their work. The body of work it turns out ranges from educational series to political allegories, and from traditional folktales to short gags or comedy series. Also similarly to live action, significant economic barriers remain: longer formats or more refined work require longer periods of time not spent working for an income, which presupposes a minimum of financial comfort. There are important differences between short and/or simple 2D stories and the much more complex 3D work, the latter requiring more expensive machines, powerful rendering, and longer work periods (Muriuki, 2013; Nyong'o, 2013).

As with film production, it could be considered "obvious" that locally-made animation should have high local relevance. However, the same tensions between foreign productions *about* Africa and African-made stories as described in the context of live action exist in the world of animation as well²⁰⁵, making the question of local relevance pertinent from a historical point of view. Until recently, animated stories set in Africa were limited to high-end foreign productions, such as for instance *The Lion King* (Allers and Minkoff for Disney, 1994). After the generously funded and highly successful *Tinga Tinga Tales* (first aired in 2010) no new high-profile projects were commissioned in East Africa, and the sector returned to commercial jobs and independent creative work (Achitsa 2012). The videos turned out by artists in Kenya and Tanzania may not be viable commercially, but they add to the growing local relevance of a wider field of audiovisual storytelling. While the bulk of this work happens in technologically-advanced Kenya, interesting cases exist in Tanzania as well, all of them producing work that is locally grounded in different ways.

MediaOne Productions in Dar es Salaam develops short educational clips to supplement the didactic material of Tanzanian primary schools: a little boy learns to count by planting trees, understands angles and corners by looking at Tanzanian mudhouses, and learns the difference between even and

²⁰⁴ Animation in East Africa received its first boost between 2004-2006, with *Africa Animated*, a UNESCO-coordinated training initiative in Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa (Nyong'o, 2013).

²⁰⁵ For my selection of cases of animation in East Africa I have given preference to stories that were entirely locally-made. There exists a beautifully animated Tanzanian love story (*Mahaba*, available on Vimeo: <http://vimeo.com/3749771>), which was a creative collaboration between Tanzanian music students and a Dutch animator. As no Tanzanian creatives were involved with the graphics or animation, the story is not part of my selection of locally-relevant animation art from Tanzania.

uneven numbers by counting the members in his extended family (Kihunrwa, 2011). The work of Ubongo Kids is similar: a series of cartoons in which simple math problems are solved through short stories set in Tanzania. Ubongo Kids is aired on national television in Tanzania and allows for interactivity through SMS messages. On a mid-term it hopes to expand its reach across East Africa (*Smart Monkey* 2014).

Boniface Mhella is the creative hand behind Tanzania's first 3D-animated film *Manzese*, an inspirational tale about joining forces in local communities, shown at the Zanzibar International Film Festival in 2011. The film tells the story of Kindunde, an inhabitant of the Manzese slum in Dar es Salaam. Tired of the poor living conditions in his township, Kindunde wants to re-invent and build a new and better Manzese, but the government has plans to evacuate the slum and build a nuclear plant. Kindunde faces the task of motivating the community of Manzese to join forces for a better future (Chemhere 2011).

The Kenyan 3D-animated short film *Wageuzi*²⁰⁶ (Kaggia, 2011) was made in the run-up to the 2013 national elections (originally announced for 2012). Clearly inspired by the action movie *Transformers* (Bay, 2007), it depicts the presidential candidates as race cars that transform into fighting robots. A caption in the beginning reads: "As the year 2012 approaches, politicians emerge from the shadows. Some betray... others change sides. Chameleons... Transformers..." There is a lot of irony in the film: the cars of Kenyatta Uhuru and William Ruto are racing at high speed when they are suddenly forced to stop in front of a brick construction forming the words "(The) Hague". A pink car is labeled "The Iron Lady", the nickname for Kenyan politician Martha Karua. There are several unexpected turns and "attacks from the back". The video was intended to make viewers more aware of the upcoming elections (Kermeliotis 2013), but has served just as much as a showcase for the work of director Andrew Kaggia. The same explicit references to international blockbusters recycled into a story that is essentially local can be seen in *Makmende II begins* (AntoDezigns)²⁰⁷: here, elements of the stories of Batman and Superman are mixed in with a science-fiction tale about the son of the Makmende character that was introduced in article 3.

The Greedy Lords of the Jungle (Gatumia, 2009) is an allegory of greed and injustice. The animals of the jungle have conspired against an innocent man, repeatedly chasing him from his property while legitimizing their actions through improvised and biased tribunals. According to production company RECON-digital, the story is based on a "well-known Kenyan tale"²⁰⁸, however it can easily be read as a metaphor for colonialism in Africa, or any present-day schemes of political corruption. RECON-digital regularly produces short videos, amongst which the comedy series (*Domestic Disturbances*) about a middle class family in Kenya.

Finally, *The Legend of Ngong Hills* (Nyong'o, 2011) retells an old Masai folktale about an ogre that terrorizes a community of warriors, and that is later tricked, defeated, and turned into the Ngong Hills outside Nairobi. The film has won the African Movie Academy Award for best animation in 2012 and the "Best Animation" Kenyan Kalasha award of 2011, and has been screened at several festivals.

²⁰⁶ *Wageuzi* is Swahili for "changemakers" as well as "transformers" – a 'wink' at the "Transformers" movie.

²⁰⁷ The video is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikQIQMfJH2M> (last accessed August 2014).

²⁰⁸ This is according to the copywrite text on RECON-Digital's YouTube channel, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ID0q1Ex4Mb8> (last accessed August 2014).

East African animation is too young and small to allow for general statements on its trends or characteristics. Taken together though, my selected cases contribute to evidence of a growing local relevance of local audiovisual stories in Kenya and Tanzania; this was no less the case with the popular *Kulahappy* series discussed in chapter 1. Most stories are recognizably set in a particular country (as opposed to “Africa” or the East African region), and each in their own way the videos show elements of cultural proximity on a national level: characters, settings, traditional stories, politics, and in the case of Tanzanian work, the use of Swahili.

a.3. Instances of hyperlocal cultural identification

Isolated examples of local audiovisual storytelling exist on what I would call a **hyperlocal** “layer of affinity”. Straubhaar acknowledges the importance of the immediately local in cultural identification (2008: 14), but seems to link this to personal networks and local arts scenes rather than media specifically targeted at “hyperlocal” communities²⁰⁹. Especially slum-based initiatives in Nairobi (the Slum Film Festival, the Hot Sun Film School, the Mwelu Foundation, Slum TV, and the African Slum Journal) make new and more affordable technology available to slum-dwellers eager to tell stories through film and video. Basic projection technology is used to screen stories and newsreels directly relevant to people in townships: news items on Nairobi’s different slums, short films and documentaries about shantytowns in different parts of the world, showcases of audiovisual work made by slum-residents. The (hyper-)local relevance of these stories is undebatable. This is not to suggest that only this type of stories would be relevant to, or “suitable for” people in townships. Nairobi’s slums are dotted with video dens screening Asian and American films at low income prices, and many people have access to (communal) television. The screenings are specifically aimed at creating an awareness of a wider community of people living in comparable conditions, which viewers find interesting, and which inspires solidarity. Slum TV intends to be an outlet “for young people in Mathare [a Nairobi slum] to talk about what they [feel is] important, rather than perpetuate the ‘NGO aesthetic’” (www.africalia.be/slum-tv). Kennedy Odhiambo (from African Slum Journal, 2012) comments:

“we get a screen and do a community screening. We block a street, put [out] a projector, play [it] for them, and they love it. Because they see themselves. It is really working, it is really strong. (...) A very good example, [there is] another slum just here, Sinai. There was a fire, a petrol fire burnt the whole slum. So we did (...) a music video about this, a story about the fire. But in another way, a three months follow-up of victims who were burnt. We had footage from the first time and footage from after. We also made a music video, an artist made a very nice song about this Sinai fire. We blocked a street in Sinai, played the song, oh everybody was yelling, the Sinai fire! (...) And (...) apart from that we also get movies from these other slums and show them, so they also learn, oh, ok in this slum they do it this way (...).”

²⁰⁹ Straubhaar makes mention of the growing importance of local television: “Everyone has experience of his or her city or locality, which is increasingly addressed directly by local television production in many large cities of provinces” (2013: 66).

On this same hyperlocal level, Foxhole Entertainment (chapters 1 and 3) targets Sheng-speaking youth in Nairobi's Estates with stories set in their immediate environments. Contrary to the slum-based initiatives though, this is a function of limited economic means rather than a choice. If given the budget, Don Fox would like to produce an ambitious Nairobi-based action movie. Similarly to some of the animation videos discussed earlier his inspiration comes from international blockbusters - *Prison Break*, Angelina Jolie movies, 2012 – as much as his local surroundings. American action movies are easily available in Nairobi and cheaper than Kenyan-made films; to large groups of urban youth in Kenya and Tanzania they may be as familiar and relatable as Bongo; perhaps even more.

From an entirely different business perspective again, Bozza (article 6) aims specifically at the hyperlocal level of affinity between artists and their fans. Artists who are well-known in their immediate environments but have no hopes of being picked up by national or international distributors are given the chance to self-distribute their work through a mobile-based platform. Bozza has not yet found traction in Kenya but deserves mention because of its explicitly (hyper-)local focus. Says CEO Emma Kaye (2012):

“[people visiting Bozza] (...) want to see what they're familiar with. They want to see their local poets, local musicians (...), that's the first thing. (...) When you are on a mobile phone, you want something more from your phone. You want to be able to talk to your friends, chat, share. So there is interactivity, that is a fundamental requirement (...). So that proximity has a local twist to it, which is interesting because it is not just about 'let me watch a song that I know in Sheng'. It is 'what do my friends think of it? And what else is happening in the community? Is it making any local superstars? Are people talking about it? What is happening in the local taverns? Are they coming to local taverns?’”

b. Technological innovation and the local relevance of distribution systems

For the purpose of this last section on distribution, a growing “local relevance” will not refer to a financial or practical accessibility of stories. Though important, this type of accessibility was discussed in the context of my first hypothesis on democratization. Here I want to turn to a more cultural – in the sense of lifestyle and habit-related - dimension of local relevance. The question asked here is whether technological innovation in Kenya and Tanzania has led to an improved cultural “fit” between local audiences and the way local audiovisual work is made available to them.

My research time has not allowed me to trace the habits of all the many social, ethnic, and age groups in these countries. I trust that questions of inequality, fragmentation, and rural/urban *differences* have been sufficiently addressed throughout this thesis. Rather than on differences, my focus here will be on habits and inclinations *shared* by majority audiences in East Africa - and most probably in Africa at large. While some of these habits cut across social class (for instance accessing the web through mobile phones), others are related to financial comfort (such as a preference for free access to, or at least very careful spending on, media products).

One of the most important events affecting how audiovisual content is accessed in (East) Africa has been the advent of the Internet, and more specifically the mobile web, the preferred means of web

access for majority audiences. Mobile viewing is not only a matter of leapfrogging computers. Small in size and battery-powered, there are situations in which mobile phones are more practical than, say, television, DVD technology, or desktop PCs. Watching films on DVD requires buying, renting or borrowing a disc, access to a DVD player and electricity supply, in addition to making time to watch. Mobile phones are less dependent on power supply, and can be used anytime and anywhere. According to Anaëli Kihunrwa of MediaOne, this is why the biggest peak in mobile use is early in the morning and around 7 in the evening, when people are in traffic jams. “You can imagine someone stuck in traffic will be bored and will want to watch stuff on his mobile” (Kihunrwa, 2011).

Mobile phones, and increasingly smartphones ranging from the low to the higher end, have become affordable in Kenyan and Tanzanian markets alike. Differences between both countries remain in terms of connectivity, data costs, and the content that is viewed. In Kenya we see the emergence of media specifically optimized for mobile viewing: the *Buni Comedy Series*, the *Kulahappy* series, the *Domestic Disturbances* animation series. They are short, simple gags with little visual detail. In addition, the first Kenya-specific mobile apps for gaming have been introduced: educational games (Haki 1 and 2), matatu²¹⁰ racing games (Ma3 Racer), and even an Mpigs²¹¹ shooter game, in which players shoot members of the Kenyan parliament (Obiajulu 2013). The gaming apps have met with only moderate success; surprisingly, some of them have been downloaded more in Asia than in Africa. This too is related to different habits. We know already that majority users in East Africa tend to limit their mobile use to social networks, and are sensitive to data costs. Game developer Nathan Masyuko contends (2013): “India, Indonesia,... they have a culture of downloading apps (...). They are on their phones, killing time... their communities have that culture. Not in Kenya. (...) And Asia has more [Wifi] hotspots²¹² (...) here it is more 3G.” Note that downloading media content to “kill time” is not considered a Kenyan habit here, while my respondent from Tanzania considers it a good way to avoid being bored, for instance in a traffic jam. Many would be tempted to explain this by pointing to stereotypical differences between Kenya (ambitious, capitalist, hard-working) and Tanzania (laid-back, friendly, slow-paced), however my respondents are essentially saying the same thing: being stuck in traffic is a waste of time as it is, and finding entertainment makes good use of this wasted time.

At first glance a mobile preference does not “sit well” with video streaming – at least not the traditional feature format: screens are too small to appreciate cinematography, buffering times are long, data costs are high, and it is hard to concentrate on a small screen for more than twenty minutes. The history of cinema in East Africa however, in which cinema is young, may allow for a more open disposition towards new forms of (extended) cinema. Feature-length, upmarket films do

²¹⁰ A matatu is a mini-bus used as – largely informal but well-organized – public transport for the Kenyan majorities. Matatus are considered symbols of Kenyan urbanness: they carry slogans or popular sayings and graffiti art, play loud popular music, are not very concerned with traffic rules, and are very cheap compared to taxis.

²¹¹ The name “Mpigs” is a portmanteau of “MP” (Member of Parliament) and “pigs” that became in use when after the 2013 elections the new parliament members asked for a salary raise without having started their work. Kenyan politicians are notorious for financial “self-serving” in different ways, but this particular demand caused a lot of uproar. Kenya is a country of high social inequality, and the salaries of Kenyan MPs are among the highest in the world (BBC 2013).

²¹² My respondent’s claim about internet access in Asia happening more through Wi-Fi is corroborated in Lawson 2014).

not represent the bulk of audiovisual storytelling, but rather popular flicks similar to soaps, music videos, short films, and television series, in addition to the new types of digital stories described earlier. Kenyan-Greek filmmaker Alexandros Konstantaras, who is behind some of the newer-type digital stories in present-day Kenya, makes a comment that may sound derogatory (a matter of language much rather than disdain; Konstantaras is married to a Kenyan actress and very active in the Kenyan filmmaking circuit), but that suggests the same thing: “Film culture in Kenya is not developed when it comes to their own thing, they cannot separate in their head what is a television series and what is a movie (...) [That is a] bit blurry in their minds. Fast internet came here, Kenyans now have it cheaply on their phones, and you realize more things are possible” (Konstantaras, 2013).

As said, African consumers are very budget-conscious. They have a strong preference for spending small amounts several times rather than paying a premium for a better or longer-lasting product. This is called the “kadogo” economy: you spend according to “the money in your pocket” (Kaigwa, 2012; “kidogo” is Swahili for “a little bit”). While the term is associated with Kenya, the same piecemeal spending behavior is prevalent in Tanzania.

“In about two years mobile phones will be fast enough to stream very basic content. And I think because of Chinese phones, they have kind of like, we don't have to wait anymore because we can get them very cheaply now, with all the features: Bluetooth, 3G, (...) The phone of course lasts three months, but then they get a better phone. People are ready to buy phones on a regular basis, as long as they are cheap. Also people who are not so affluent, they will buy the smartphone and get all the features. They will do it because 30.000 [TZS; about 18 USD], after three months I will find a way to get it. But I don't have 500.000 now [300 USD], what am I going to eat? [They get] cheap imitations of iPhone, HTC, Blackberry... with touchscreen etc.” (Kihunrwa, commenting on the mobile phone market in Tanzania, 2011).

This budget-consciousness also translates to a preference for mobile micropayments: the smallest amounts of airtime sell much more than larger chunks of credit, let alone monthly subscriptions (Kihunrwa, 2011). Skiza, the ringbacktone²¹³ offered by Safaricom, was initially launched for 20 KES, (0,23 USD) per month, but remained unsuccessful until it was reintroduced at 5 KES per week (which, when paid each week, is more than 20 KES monthly). As soon as it became available and payable on a weekly basis, Skiza became a widely popular service in Kenya (Kaigwa, 2012).

When consumers are this aware of device and data costs, they cannot readily be assumed to pay additionally for access to online content, except in the higher social strata. Those prepared to pay can be expected to have a preference for one-off, pay-per-view schemes rather than monthly subscriptions, again with the exception of upper-middle class groups.

Two of the three digital distribution platforms discussed in chapter 6 have recently moved from a free and ad-supported model to a subscription-based revenue scheme with a monthly payable fee, suggesting that advertising has been a much bigger challenge than initially expected. Considering

²¹³ When someone calls a Skiza-subscriber on their mobile phones, instead of hearing a regular ringtone while waiting for their interlocutor to respond, they hear the Skiza-subscriber's favorite tune. The service is popular in Kenya and in Tanzania.

that core Buni+ audiences are middle class rather than the majorities, it will be instructive to see how its paying offer performs: will Buni+ signal a sufficiently large audience group ready to pay for a curated offer, thus inspiring hope for sustainable business models for VOD in the future? Will the numbers of paying customers be too small to consider pay-models as sufficiently locally-relevant in the spheres of digital distribution, or will they push platforms to aim for continent-wide reach and/or a more widely popular offer such as iROKO's Nollywood? It seems unlikely that large groups will pay monthly fees of 5 USD (Buni+) and 8 USD (iROKOtv) but then, much depends on the numbers required and on the willingness to pay amongst diaspora viewers.

For now, what is clear is that locally-relevant models in the spheres of digital distribution are preferably mobile-targeted, free or micro-payable, and – tied in with the preference for mobile viewing – attentive to the non-feature, shorter formats that are part of a local extended cinema. In addition, their success depends on the general commercial and technological environment in which they are active, and on market characteristics (such as the proportion of people likely to be able and willing to afford video streaming).

A final question that remains unanswered is whether technological innovation has led to more locally relevant distribution methods in the more traditional spheres of communal viewing, television and DVD/VCD-viewing. Most cinema theatres in East Africa have switched to digital screening (Buddhdev Patel, 2013),²¹⁴ yet the relevance of their offer – high in price, targeted at upper-middle class groups, and situated in uptown malls – has not changed, exceptions such as *Nairobi Half Life* aside. Local majorities have no habit of visiting these malls, and the social, cultural and financial barriers to a cinema-visit remain prohibitive. These things do not change simply with a switch from celluloid to digital projection. On the other hand, low-barrier video dens screening films on optical discs have filled an important availability gap, one that seems more widespread in Tanzania than in Kenya. These are new and locally-relevant elements of the local distribution eco-system, with an offer that attempts to cater for different audience segments: in Tanzania for instance there are appropriate “times” for housewives, men, and – in the later hours – for a more violent or otherwise sensitive programming. Similarly, initiatives such as Cinemart in Kenya (see chapter 1) and low-barrier cultural venues using digital technology to screen local stories – such as The Nest and the Kuona Trust in Nairobi - further add to this increasing local relevance of communal viewing.

And yet, the home remains the preferred place for film and television viewing. Especially for the sales and rental of Bongo films in Tanzania elaborate distribution networks are in close proximity to audiences, also in terms of their shopping habits and/or daily activities. In television broadcasting the most conspicuous form of innovation is the ongoing shift from analogue to digital television, for which many problems remain unsolved, most of them related to accessibility. In light of the limited financial means and the budget-consciousness of majority Kenyans and Tanzanians, the question will not only be whether audiences are *able* to pay for digital offerings, but also if they are *willing* to buy the gadgetry required. Access to the offer of traditionally free-to-air broadcasts is a matter of the one-time purchase of a set top box and aerial (assuming an acceptable period of time before replacement is due). Monthly subscription fees to digital television “bouquets” – or for that matter, to the digital distribution platforms discussed in chapter 6 - are less attuned to the “kadogo” habits

²¹⁴ Digital screening here refers to DCP (digital cinema package) technology, the American (and almost global) standard for cinema projection technology.

of majority audiences described earlier; but then, these are not the viewers aimed for with these offerings. According to Hannelie Bekker, Zuku's target audiences are not necessarily affluent, but they have a stable income, allowing them to calculate the subscription cost into their monthly budgets (Bekker, 2013).

In conclusion: as was the case with my previous hypotheses, this last and final hypothesis on the relation between technological innovation and the local relevance of audiovisual production and distribution is partially, but not entirely, supported by the data assembled. In addition to examples of local stories with strong cultural proximity – Bongo movies, music videos, the movie *Nairobi Half Life*, and the emerging field of local animation – we see productions with a more ambiguous local relevance, or one that speaks only to well-delineated groups: for instance many of the newly-emerging Kenyan television shows, and higher-end film and television in Tanzania. If we broaden our idea of local relevance to include the creative “input” of foreign funders (something which I did not choose to do for the purpose of this dissertation) we enter an old and much wider debate on cultural neocolonialism and its alleged detrimental effects on “truly authentic” African stories.

A new layer of cultural affinity becomes discernible, if only in the context of Nairobi. I have called this layer “hyper-local”, and have situated a range of very different cases in it. This new layer of “hyper-local” cultural identification is in need of further theorizing; at present it pulls together cases of storytelling that sit together rather awkwardly. However in view of the lowering barriers to audiovisual production posited with my first hypothesis, I believe this layer may become more important in the future.

Technological innovation has undeniably been conducive of a growing local (habit-related) relevance of distribution systems, but also here exceptions can be found. The biggest exception is that of cinema theatres: they cater for elite audiences as they have always done, and technology has not made them more “relevant” to anyone. Secondly, there may be a disconnect between local audiences' attitudes towards paying for online content and the revenue schemes of upcoming digital distribution platforms and digital television as a substitute for analogue broadcasting. It is too soon to tell which models will become sustainable; what is clear for now is that a free- or micropayment-based approach, and sufficient attention to shorter pieces of content for mobile viewing, seem better attuned to local preferences than traditional production formats and pricing models.

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IIX. FINAL NOTES AND REFLECTIONS

IIX. FINAL NOTES AND REFLECTIONS

With this research project the interrelations between technological innovation and trends in audiovisual storytelling in Kenya and Tanzania – and where relevant, other African countries - were explored. The final dissertation compiles six articles approaching this topic from different angles, and critically assesses the following over-arching statements related to it: (1) that technological innovation in Kenya and Tanzania is associated with a **democratization** of local audiovisual production and distribution; (2) that it leads to a **diversification** of local circuits of audiovisual production and distribution; and (3) that it causes a **growing local relevance** of locally-produced stories and the way they are distributed. The data assembled for the different chapters were gathered through qualitative research methods: several rounds of expert interviews and literature reviews (academic and non-academic), additional ethnographic observations, and peer corroboration of draft reports. With this concluding chapter I will briefly summarize the main outcomes of my study, outline its contributions to current scholarship on African film and media studies, and take the liberty of adding some final reflections on a more personal note.

1. Technology as one of many factors

The general outcome of my study comes as no surprise: technology has strong potential to affect audiovisual storytelling. In fact the emergence and evolution of audiovisual media has always been intertwined with that of technology, and the empirical data gathered here are only a small part of an older and broader joint history of technology and moving images. It was demonstrated that technological innovation in Kenya and Tanzania is indeed instrumental in an increased access to audiovisual storytelling tools and to the stories produced, that it plays an important role in processes of diversification, and that it has the potential to facilitate a growing local relevance of locally-made stories and their distribution.

This threefold agency is at the same time partial and bound by many other variables. A potentially increased access to storytelling and to local stories is affected by factors of policy, economy, the presence and nature of incumbent industry structures, the social and cultural background of viewers and producers, and the types of production formats in question. The outcome of technology's diversifying potential is shaped by historical and social-demographic specificities, policy, and questions of political economy. In the field of digital distribution and digital broadcasting, opportunities for increased diversity exist alongside a risk of reduced diversity: for instance if a monopolization of the TV signal distribution in Kenya benefits only a small number of broadcasters, or if the strongest company active in the online space in Africa crowds out niche players. Thirdly, while it seems obvious to expect a growing local relevance of locally-produced stories (this is, after all, the essence of the cultural proximity thesis; La Pastina and Straubhaar 2005: 272), my cases show that factors of economy and considerations of quality and production value also influence audience preferences, and cultural affinities are not as directly relatable to geographic proximity as is often assumed. In other words, my hypotheses are supported, but at the same time are grounded in, limited and shaped by, a myriad of relevant context variables. Technology is important, but it is just one of many factors.

Of course I did not expect technology to have an all-encompassing or unilateral effect on audiovisual storytelling. Already in its introduction this thesis has inscribed itself in an academic tradition skeptical of assumptions of technological determinism. My hypotheses have served much rather as pretexts for gathering, structuring and contextualizing new data related to the fast-evolving field of extended cinema in East Africa, while providing the conceptual framework to study it directly in relation with different relevant contexts. The way these hypotheses were articulated has allowed for an analysis that is alert to existing power structures and resource distribution, which I believe is vital to an informed understanding of the industries and creative circuits under study.

2. Contributions and a call for further research

This study makes several contributions to today's field of African film and media studies. First of all, it assembles and contextualizes new empirical data related to the many circuits of extended cinema in East Africa, an under-researched creative space in fast development. Through six essays it presents different samples of how such data can be approached in terms of theory, structure, and contextualization. By proposing, theorizing and testing three hypotheses it introduces a research framework that is at the same time relevant for scholars interested in contemporary forms of audiovisual storytelling, and concrete and flexible enough to be easily applicable elsewhere – particularly in areas that are scarcely documented in terms of their local circuits of audiovisual storytelling. Where relevant I have further infused my analysis with considerations of a more societal nature. What is democratization in the context of cinema, and who benefits from it? What is local relevance, why is it so elusive, and how can we try to theoretically grasp it? What are the power structures in which the media circuits under study are embedded, and what are the implications for the actors involved? Questions as these are by no means pertinent to (East) Africa alone, and I have tried to bring together theoretical notions from global media studies and critical political economy that may be helpful in replicating the research effort elsewhere.

In addition I have made a conceptual case for considering audiovisual storytelling in Africa more inclusively than is common practice today. In addition to widescreen cinema I have considered television, popular cinema, short film, underground storytelling circuits, ironic remixes of television footage, music videos, animation, and more. The arguments for this approach were both theoretical and empirical: the importance of mobile technology, the preference for shorter formats, and the small volumes and limited history of locally-produced widescreen cinema in East Africa. By looking across the boundaries of traditionally separate media circuits interesting new insights can be generated, and smaller or less visible formats are less at risk of being overlooked. Such approach in my view is a useful and future-oriented complement to existing research practice.

A more modest theoretical contribution has consisted in suggesting an additional level of “hyper-local” affinity to Straubhaar's layers of cultural identification, and situating a number of cases in it. While Straubhaar has made reference to the importance of this very local dimension of cultural appeal, he has not explicitly considered it a separate layer of identification. Especially in today's era of growing user-generated and user-shared content, I believe that adding such a hyper-local layer makes sense, as always in awareness and acknowledgement of transnational and global influences.

In view of the growing mutual interest and exchange between Africa and its diaspora, I have suggested adding an Africa-specific layer of Afropolitanism to Straubhaar's framework: a space of political and cultural interest, situated between that of global circuits such as Nollywood and

Bollywood, and that of transnational cultural affinities such as those between countries and their former colonial empires or diaspora (for instance Bongo or *The XYZ Show*). Afropolitanism is a controversial notion, associated as much with modern and self-confident (pan-)African culture as with elitism, capitalism, and middle-class commodification. I use it here in the sense of Mbembe (2007), as a contemporary way of being in the world, aware of Africa's history, feeding on multiple racial and cultural legacies, and with a commitment to the African continent and (all) its people. Much more than an attraction to the fashionable and the globally-appealing, this concerns a cultural interest inscribed in a wider set of political and societal attitudes. The art of Just A Band belongs in this layer, as does the Afro-futurist short film *Pumzi* by Wanuri Kahiu, or the work of New York-based visual artist Wangechi Mutu.

In addition, my data help to reflect on the use, usefulness, and limits of the theoretical notion of "cultural proximity". Cultural proximity has not been used here as a predictive or an explanatory tool for audience success: the media studied are too diverse and multi-faceted to obtain reliable and comparable data to underpin such claims. Instead I have used elements constituting cultural proximity – language, settings, characters, topics, style, et cetera – as indicators of the local relevance of my cases. Cultural proximity, then, was used as a tool for operationalization and as a descriptor of local relevance in the context of my third hypothesis. Taken together, my cases provide support for the position taken by most scholars, that cultural proximity's effects on audience uptake are significant but at the same time are affected by a wide range of additional factors (see also La Pastina and Straubhaar 2005: 272-273). While Bongo films on optical discs are more popular than foreign fare, Riverwood films cannot compete with dumped and/or pirated Hollywood movies; the reasons have to do with issues of pricing, policy, and production value. In commercial cinema theatres on the other hand, local movies are rarely screened; and when they are, only the most accomplished ones (such as hit film *Nairobi Half Life* in Kenya) are successful at the box office. Here we can point to issues of pricing, market power imbalances, (social) audience demographics, and differences in product value.

Hollywood and Bollywood dominate the Kenyan and Tanzanian media space mostly in the spheres of widescreen cinema. The distinction made by Douglas Bicket (2005) between "higher" and "lower" levels of media circulation, from commercial cinema to television and other, "lower" levels of cultural interchange, is relevant here. Bicket situates the market dominance of the "global popular" (a concept borrowed from Simon During [1997], by which he refers to global franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *Terminator*, *Twilight*, etc.) primarily in the higher-level space of commercial cinema. He writes (Bicket 2005):

"If the global popular is movie-oriented and resides in the form of the big-budget Hollywood blockbuster, the glocal is television-oriented and resides primarily in the soap opera and other relatively low-budget television content. (...) While the global popular remains firmly rooted in the realm of U.S. domination of the movie industry, the 'lower' level of transnational cultural and economic interchange is much more diverse and is becoming steadily more important (...). This is where cultural proximity, absent the overwhelming economic forces of the global popular, come [sic] more clearly into play."

While especially in Kenya the production of films made for the big screen is visibly growing, it is indeed on this lower level of hybrid forms and affinities with the television format that most diversification takes place, and that concerns over the homogenization, or indeed an Americanization (or an American-skewed hybridization; see Louw in Wasserman 2011: 32-45) of the African media space as a result of globalization, could be put in perspective.

Then again, such diversification of local production tells us nothing about its economic sustainability, nor about the resources with which it is expected to compete with powerful players in an increasingly commercial and global space. Many of the cases described in this thesis have faced considerable challenges. The promising initiative of Jitu Films has folded, it is unclear if *Kulahappy* will find the financing to continue, I am not sure if Cinemart will succeed in building more sites, I do not know if Bozza will succeed in developing a much-needed revenue model, and I have no idea whether Donald Akech will eventually return from China and continue his Foxhole productions. New research could pick up from here, and could focus less on the description and structuring of the field under study, and more explicitly on local-global media relations and power (im)balances.

I would not expect such research to be occupied primarily with the presence of Hollywood and Bollywood. By looking locally one easily discerns the more significant concentrations of market power “on the ground”. Consider the Africa-wide market and screen dominance of Nollywood for instance, the supremacy of iROKOTv in the VOD space, the quasi-monopoly of Steps Entertainment in Tanzania’s popular cinema industry, the monopoly of Kenya’s Safaricom, or the dominance of DStv across the continent. These players are more relevant to the future life expectancy of a diverse field of local media production in Africa than are foreign imports. In that sense I am in agreement with Adejunmobi (2011) who asserts that “(...) regional media corporations represent a greater threat to local media production than global media corporations (...). The threat often consists in seeking to co-opt rather than to suppress local media production, since these regional corporations do not actually stand to benefit from suppressing local production” (Adejunmobi 2011: 67).

3. Final reflections

As a scholar it is my task to try and contextualize phenomena, and put them in critical perspective. However, I want to take the opportunity of this final conclusion to reflect more freely on the outcomes of my study. Most of the trends, cases and circuits reviewed here are young – less than ten years old. The practitioners I have spoken with share an excitement and anticipation of more productions, more diversity, and improving quality standards. The body of new formats and genres currently emerging is remarkable, and I expect also the online distribution space to grow further.

What is not clear yet is how this dynamic field of creativity is to evolve into a sustainable, genuinely plural, and locally-appropriate eco-system. Producers are doing their part in experimenting - online storytelling, interactive formats, mobile-targeted content - but local audiences have not followed *en masse*. Possibly the vocal middle-class communities in the cities make it seem as if new and widespread habits of media consumption are around the corner, while in reality they are a minority, insufficient in numbers for now to sustain these developments. Rather than curtailing the enthusiasm of these entrepreneurs, what can be done is to help them with the financial risks they take: through small government grants, incubation in larger companies (admittedly at the risk of being co-opted, see Adejunmobi 2011), or private sponsorship (not the easiest option as companies look for maximum visibility). This does not have to be costly, as many of the cases discussed in this

thesis were realized on small budgets that are easily recouped. Neither is it such a far-fetched idea, as similar efforts have been made in the past, for instance with the *Tandaa* grants awarded by Kenya's ICT Board: small amounts in support of new projects involving digital technology and local content²¹⁵. The Kenya Film Commission, too, has allocated small production grants in the past (Boy, 2013; Mutie, 2013), and in addition organizes workshops targeted at developing skills that are lacking in the Kenyan industry, such as screenwriting and sound editing (Asiago, 2012). The situation is different in Tanzania, where film policy is industry-organized rather than government-steered (Hiluka, 2013). Here practitioners work towards shared rules and good practices; an approach that has its own difficulties – for instance when stronger players are reluctant to cooperate – but that can be fruitful and rewarding nevertheless, as was shown in chapter 4. From a distance it would appear that the Kenyan industry would benefit from the reflex of cooperation and exchange attributed so often to Tanzanians, while policy-makers in Tanzania would do well, if possible, to replicate some of the micro-funding schemes implemented in Kenya²¹⁶.

Whatever the case, when everything is nascent little can be perfect. To me as a foreign observer, not all that is currently produced in the extended cinema circuits of East Africa is as artistically interesting or as fascinating in terms of storytelling - aesthetically pleasing though it may be. This tells me three things: firstly, I am reminded that foreign scholars are not the core audience of producers in East Africa, and fortunately so. The creative field we see unfolding today is exciting, and refreshingly hard to situate in existing schemes of postcolonial African film and media. Multi-faceted and hybrid in form, for now it is difficult to describe in generalizing terms. It seems to be evolving into something new and proper, the outlines of which are not entirely clear yet.

Secondly, considering the short time that local creatives have spent developing a body of work, the volume and diversity turned out today commands respect, regardless of any critiques it may be susceptible to. It merits to be seen as what it is: an emerging and steadily developing new corpus of audiovisual work, different from traditional cinema as seen in festivals in the West, and often different from African popular cinema as we have come to know it through Nollywood.

Thirdly, and finally, Kenyan and Tanzanian practitioners are self-critical and attentive to what they feel is missing today. Many point, for instance, to a lack of screenwriters, post-production labs, and specialized technical professionals in general. They know which hurdles are to be overcome, as they keep their gaze fixed on the future. Concerned with commercial viability more than an ambiguous "authenticity" or political messages, their practice further benefits from a cosmopolitan openness to external cultural influences, one that has been called characteristic of African popular culture (Barber 1987: 6; Dolby 2006: 42). In an era in which large parts of the Western world seem to look away from, or be bothered by, such external influences, this openness is refreshing, admirable, and a valuable "asset" for the future.

²¹⁵ "Local content" was understood widely under the *Tandaa* scheme: it could refer to mobile apps, local films, or even local technology; Kobia, 2013).

²¹⁶ This is not as easy as it sounds: the Kenyan ICT Board enjoys support from the World Bank while the Kenya Film Commission only rarely has the means for direct funding, and is focused much more on finding external support for the industry as a whole.

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During, S. (1997). "Popular culture on a global scale: A challenge for cultural studies?" In: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 23, nr. 4: 808-21.

La Pastina, A. C., and Straubhaar, J. D. (2005). "Multiple Proximities between Television Genres and Audiences. The Schism between Telenovelas' Global Distribution and Local Consumption." In: *Gazette: the International Journal for Communication Studies*, Vol. 67, nr. 3: 271-288.

Wasserman, H. (ed.) 2011. *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa. Internationalizing Media Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

IX. APPENDIX:

**AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ACTIVITIES, INTERVIEWS,
AND AUDIOVISUAL STORIES DISCUSSED**

1. Overview of respondents cited in this dissertation

- Akech, Donald (Don Fox). Foxhole Entertainment. 20 February 2012 and 13 July 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in introduction, in chapters 1, 2, 3, and in final chapter).
- Asiago, Nathan. Kenya Film Commission. 15 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in chapters 1 and 6).
- Barasa, Simyu. Film, documentary, and television director. 27 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 2).
- Bekker, Hannelie. Zuku / Wananchi Group. 14 February 2012 and 9 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapters 2, 5, and in final chapter).
- Boy, Cajetan. Scriptwriter and director. 16 February 2012 and 23 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 3 and in final chapter).
- Buddhev-Patel, Trushna. Crimson Media. 17 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in final chapter).
- Burnet, Rob. Well Told Story. 21 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 3).
- Campbell, David. Mediae. 6 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in final chapter).
- Chuchu, Jim. Director, photographer, musician. Founder of arts centre the Nest in Nairobi. 7 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in introduction, and in chapter 3 and in final chapter).
- Colaço, Jessica. iHub Kenya. 7 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 1).
- Colombo, Fabrizio. Former director of the festival of African cinema in Verona. July 2011, Stone Town, Zanzibar. (Cited in final chapter).
- Conrad, Timothy. Filmmaker. 15 July 2013, Dar es Salaam. (Cited in chapters 4,
- Damodaran, Jairaj. Steps Entertainment. July 2011 and 11 July 2013, Dar es Salaam. (Cited in chapter 4).
- Desmond (Orijako), Chiaka. Filmbiz Africa. 8 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 2 and in final chapter).
- Dundas Nilsen-Moe, Irene. Real2Reel. 17 July 2013, Dar es Salaam. (Cited in chapter 4 and in final chapter).
- Essuman, Hawa. Film director. 19 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 1 and in final chapter).
- Ghettuba, Dorothy. Spielworks Media Group. 13 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 2 and in final chapter).
- Hiluka, Bishop. Tanzania Film Federation. 15 July 2013, Dar es Salaam. (Cited in chapter 4).
- Hope, Jessica. iROKOTv. E-mail conversation. 31 July 2014. (Cited in chapter 6).
- Jorams, Richard. Tanzanian Video Library Association. 20 July 2013, Dar es Salaam. (Cited in chapter 4).
- Kahiu, Wanuri. Film director. July 2011, Tarifa, and 8 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 2 and in final chapter).
- Kaigwa, Mark. Digital creative and developer, Afrinnovator. 18 February 2012, Nairobi. (Only notes available, conversation was not recorded. Cited in chapters 1 and 2, and in final chapter).
- Kangethe, Nicholas. Vivid Features, Nairobi branch. 16 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in chapters 1 and 2).
- Kaye, Emma. Bozza. July 2011, Durban; 20 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in chapters 1 and 6, and in final chapter).
- Keya, Josphat. Hot Sun Foundation. 17 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in chapters 1 and 2).
- Kihunrwa, Anaeli. MediaOne. 16 July 2013, Dar es Salaam. (Cited in final chapter).
- Kimani, Kezzy. July 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 2).

Kimani, Kezzy and George (duo interview). 27 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 6 and in final chapter).

Kimani, Mburu. Filmmaker and actor. 24 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 2).

Kimani Ndungu, Simon. IT engineer. 27 August 2014, Ghent. (Cited in chapter 1).

Kimotho, Rose. Three Stones digital broadcaster. 27 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in final chapter).

Kinyanjui, Wanjiru. Film director. 13 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 1).

Kiptinnes, Stephen. K&O Associates, digital broadcasting migration expert. 10 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 2 and in final chapter).

Konstantaras, Alexandros. Film director and actor. 22 May, 2013. (Cited in chapter 2).

Kobia, Kaburo. Kenya ICT Board. 22 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 1 and in final chapter).

Kukubo, Paul. Kenya ICT Board. 15 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 1).

Lora-Mungai, Marie. Buni Media. 28 February 2013, Skype conversation. (Cited in chapters 5, 6, Macharia, Julian. Buni Media, Kulahappy. July 2012 (interview), 18 February 2013 (email), and 7 May 2013 (interview). (Cited in chapters 1, 6, and in final chapter).

Mageria, Mwaniki. Riverwood Ensemble. 16 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 2).

Mahugu, Mwangi. Sub Sahara Limited. 20 February 2012 and 28 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapters 1, 2, 3, and in final chapter).

Masyuko, Nathan. Afroes Games. 21 May 2013. (Cited in final chapter).

Matere, Appie. Film and documentary director and producer. 13 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in introduction, and in chapters 1 and 2).

Mbura, Issa. Film director and instructor. 17 July 2013, Dar es Salaam. (Cited in chapter 4).

Muriuki, King. Buni Media. 14 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in final chapter).

Mushala, Jerry. Music video director. 13 July 2013, Dar es Salaam. (Cited in final chapter).

Mututa, Addams. Researcher on Riverwood. 10 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 2).

Ndemo, Bitange. (At the time) Permanent Secretary of Information and Communication, Government of Kenya. 7 February 2012, Nairobi (only notes available, conversation was not recorded). (Cited in chapter 1).

Nduka-Agwu, Adibeli. iROKO Partners. 25 March 2013, Skype conversation. (Cited in chapter 6).

Nyong'o, Kwame. Apes in Space. 17 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in final chapter).

Odhiambo, Kennedy. African Slum Journal and Africa Interactive. 9 February 2012. (Cited in chapter 2 and in final chapter).

Ogunyemi, Dayo. Starflix and Cinemart. 7 February 2012, 9 July 2012, and 29 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapters 1, 2, and final chapter).

Okottah, Santos. Eziki TV. 10 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in chapters 1 and 6, and in final chapter).

Reinartz, Peter. Eaton Towers, formerly Orange/Telkom and Wananchi Group. 13 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in chapter 2 and in final chapter).

Riber, John. Media for Development International. 16 July 2013, Dar es Salaam. (Cited in chapters 4, Rombouts, Heidi. GIZ, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit. 7 February 2012, Nairobi. (Cited in final chapter).

Shivji, Amil. Film director. 13 July 2013, Dar es Salaam. (Cited in chapters 4, 6, and final chapter).

Southwood, Russell. Balancing Act. 20 March 2013, London. (Cited in final chapter).

Wamola, Angela. Safaricom. 20 May 2013, Nairobi. (Cited in final chapter).

2. Overview of festivals, conferences, workshops visited in the course of this project

ZIFF, Zanzibar International Film Festival, edition 2013 (29 July – 7 July; I attended as a visiting scholar 5-7 July).

AIMAC, 7th International Conference on Arts and Cultural management, June 26-29 2013, Bogotá. Paper presentation of an earlier version of “Digital distribution of creative audiovisual content in and from Africa: a comparative study of three cases.”

NECS-European Network for Cinema and Media Studies Conference: “Media Politics, Political Media”. June 20-22 2013, Prague. Paper presentation of an earlier version of “The Political Economy of Kenya’s Riverwood movie circuit.”

Point Sud Academic Workshop. “How does transnational mobility transform cultural production? Informality and remediation in African popular cultures.” Organized by the Goethe University of Frankfurt, University of Dakar, University of Lagos, University of Naples ‘l’Orientale’. January 4-10 2013, Ouagadougou. Paper presentation of an earlier version of “Targeting Urbanites: Nairobi-bred audiovisual narratives in Sheng.”

Africa Media Centre, University of Westminster, Conference: “Evolving African Film Cultures. Local and Global Experiences Conference”. 10-11 November 2012, London. Paper presentation of an earlier version of “Technological innovation and the diversification of audiovisual storytelling circuits in Kenya.”

Non-academic workshop presentation for the British Council in sub-Saharan Africa Staff. “ICT Innovation and opportunities for the creative and cultural economies in Africa.” September 11, 2012, London. With Russell Southwood.

African Studies Association of the UK (ASA UK) 2012: Paper presentation of an earlier version of Targeting Urbanites: Nairobi-bred audiovisual narratives in Sheng.” University of Leeds, 6-8 September 2012, Leeds.

Aitec 2012: Broadcast, Film and Music Africa. Keynote presentation: “Content production in Africa. Potential and challenges.” Panel moderator: “Livestreaming and webcasting: a broadcaster’s friend or foe?” July 10-11 2012, Nairobi.

Congreso Ibérico de Estudios Africanos 2012: “Bajo el árbol de la palabra: resistencias y transformaciones entre lo local y lo global”. Panel: Culture, Media, and African Cinema. Paper: “New technology, new media, and emerging audiovisual formats and genres in Kenya.” June 14-16 2012, Madrid.

ASC Afrika Studies Centre Leiden. Seminar by Laura Fair, Michigan State University: “Socialist Modernities and Discourses of Development: the Drive-in Cinema in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.” March 8 2012, Leiden.

“New Forms of Cinema Exhibition: Film Consumption in the Digital Age (UEA-ECREA - European Communication Research and Education Association)”. Panel: “Foreign Exchanges”; paper: “Digitization and Film industries in Africa.” November 11-12 2011, Norwich.

ASC Afrika Studies Centre Leiden. Seminar by Jasper Grosskurth: “Futures of Technology in Africa.” May 16 2011, Leiden.

Durban International Film Festival, July 21-31 2011.

FCAT Festival de Cine Africano Tarifa, June 2011. Espacio Profesional: voluntary worker (plus first orientative conversations and interviews)

Zanzibar International Film Festival, July 2011.

Yèelba FESPACO: orientation trip organized by Africalia to FESPACO (Festival Panafricain du Cinéma de Ouagadougou), February 2011. First informal interviews and conversations.

Fill the Gap Conference 8: Africa as a growth market for entrepreneurship. January 24 2011, Amsterdam.

3. List of films and video discussed

a. Chapter 1

Jitu Films: copies of a selection of Jitu films were supplied as an annex to this dissertation. One film can be viewed on <http://buni.tv>: *Me, My Wife, and Her Guru*.

Foxhole Entertainment: copies of several Foxhole Entertainment films supplied as an annex to this dissertation. *Nangos*, one of the films discussed in this dissertation, is also available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sazsEvKilvc&list=UU0MoW6I9DgBKfM4gL5pycdw>

The *Kulahappy* YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/kulahappy>; first episode of the animated series discussed in chapter 3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRIuhjGNmEE>

b. Chapter 2

A selection of Riverwood were supplied as an annex to this dissertation.

Robby Bresson's *Simiyu Samurai* is available online: <http://vimeo.com/45751950>

Robby Bresson's *Clayton's Ghost* is available online: <http://vimeo.com/97244110>

Robby Bresson's *African Djinn* is available online: <http://www.africandjinn.com/>

The "making of" of *African Djinn* is available here: <http://vimeo.com/74637226>

c. Chapter 3

All video related to *Shujaaz.FM* can be found on YouTube. First episode: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsqkRB77m9w>

The *Ha He* video by Just A Band is available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mG1vIeETHc

d. Chapter 4

A selection of Steps Entertainment movies have been supplied on DVD as an annex to this dissertation.

Criminal Investigations Department by Timamu FX was supplied as an annex to this dissertation. Timamu's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/THETIMAMU>

Crush by Issa Mbura was supplied as an annex to this dissertation.

e. Chapter 5

Wrong Decision by William J. Mtitu and Adam J. Mwasa is available online: <http://www.greatlakesmixmovies.com/videos/2045/Wrong-Decision-1-Part1-of-4>

Unfortunately the online link to *She is My Sister* by Femi Ogedegbe is no longer working. The film trailer is still available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arXYxG-K3Ho>; I was able to acquire the second part of the movie as a pirated copy, supplied with this dissertation.

The *Siri Ya Mtungi* series and *Chumo* (Media for Development) are available online on the Swahiliwood YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmUD5KY2F1OXbgWYZOs8Fdg>

Buni Media's *XYZ Show*, *Ogas at the Top*, and their *Comedy Series* are all available on their platform <http://buni.tv>

The *In the Forest* series is available online; first episode here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbzS2sljWco>

The *Bonoko* videos referred to are available here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2WqXcUQKBk> and here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZScwMubqxRI>

The videos regarding Miguna's speech ("Come Baby Come") are available here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZpamsiUArl> and here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQT292eXgls>

f. Chapter 6

The Bozza app can be downloaded from the Google Play market, and trending content can be viewed on <http://bozza.mobi/>

e. Chapter 7

Nairobi Half Life is available on Buni.tv, and has been supplied with this dissertation on optical disc.

Online links to the animation videos discussed in chapter 7 are inserted as footnotes.