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From the Periphery of the Visual Space: Women and the Video Film in Nigeria

Onookome Okome (Ph.D)

Department of Theatre Arts
University of Calabar, CRS
Nigeria

1.

Third Cinema and Popular Video film

Popular video film in Nigeria is only beginning to take its distinct form as an aesthetic practice. In the last twenty years since it made its way in to the center of the narrative life of the Nigerian society, it has raised questions about cinematic practices in Nigeria and indeed in the whole of Africa. In February 2004, a large Nigerian contingent was invited to Berlin for the Berlinale International Film Festival. A special Panel was raised to cope with what the organizers described as “the Nigerian phenomenon” and was financially supported by German Federal Agency for Civil Education (BPB). One of the leaflets announcing the special panel on popular Nigerian video film proclaims that “Most Western film professionals are astonished by the “Nigerian phenomenon,” which is, according to conservative sources, “a \$45 million a year industry.” (Onishi) During this meeting, popular Nigerian video was constantly referred to as “Nollywood,” a phrase I heard for the first time in Berlin. I queried a member of the contingents from Nigeria about this phrase, asking to know when it came into currency. He told me it had to do with a BBC worker, Nick Moran, who came to Nigeria to make the “get rich-quick-video.” Like many people, he was astonished at the popularity of the video film within the continent and in the black diasporas. He came to Nigeria to see for himself. The BBC operative met with stiff opposition from local video filmmakers and had to make a documentary on the making of video film in ten days.

I find the descriptive word, “Nollywood” as it is applied to the Nigerian video industry a very interesting turn of events in the vocabulary of dominant cinema, and I need to point out here too that its invention is not innocent. Its obvious reference to the debate associated with the “third space of visual articulation” and to the idea of “third cinema” is telling in this respect. This new taxonomy places the practice of popular video film in the context of peripheral visual cultures and in a way distinguishes its “peripherality” as a visual practice from those of dominant cinemas. It rekindles the abandoned notion of the “third cinema,” which the Glasgow Screen Conference of 1983 positioned as practical guide to film making in the third world. As interest grows around the visual practice of popular video film that churns out 10 films every Monday of the month, I predict a critical and cultural return to what “Nollywood” really means in the discourse of peripheral cinemas and their connections to dominant cinemas of the West and

North America. As I see it, the very notion of the “Nollywood” argues for another cinematic culture. It argues for the recognition of another regime of visibility outside what we already know. It positions an alternative practice of visual writing that speaks and writes another form of episteme. The oblique reference to Hollywood and “Bollywood” is more than telling in this respect.

It is not only in the West that this interest in the video film is apparent. At home, there is also a growing interest in and concern for what the video film means to contemporary culture and society. If in the West, interest in the video film and the industry that churns out video narrative comes as form of curiosity, in Nigeria reactions have been mixed, uneven. Depending on who one talks to in Nigeria, the popular video film is totally denounced or glossed over as the bastard art of the jobless youth of the city. But to those who patronize it, the video film is the medium of the times. It is the mirror of the contemporary, or as one informant told me “the story of the times retold.” In the early days of the video film, which was late 1970s well into the 1980s, members of educated class shunned anything to do with the video film, denouncing it as full of witchcraft and fetish practices. This attitude has not quite gone away but it is the acceptance of popular video film by the popular audience that makes it possible to resurrect and tie its practice to the moribund idea of “third cinema” which stands as a moral opposition to first and second cinemas of America and Europe. A small part of my paper stresses some of the questions which popular video practice has raised in the practice of African visual space, and its affiliation to the world’s dominant visual space. The comments I make in this regard are tentative. They may need further elucidation as this new cinematic practice moves on, yet it is important to point out that popular video film is doing for the African continent what the so-called Bollywood has done for the Indian subcontinent. Popular video film deals with “stories, themes and faces familiar to other Africans” and writes a new grammar of encoding social texts and cultural activities that are different from what we have known in mainstream cinema. Understanding the codes of popular video film requires a new grammar of the visual image. It surely requires the understanding of a new visual culture. That visual culture carries with it the symbolism of oral narrative techniques while at the same time accommodating the influence of the outside.

All is not well in the video film industry. There is the need to fine-tune aspects of its practices and to build a more enduring infrastructure for this industry, which remains isolated from international financing. The good side of this relative isolation from the deeper influences of dominant cinemas is that it has defined its place as a viable machinery of re-writing codes of visual representation in one of the peripheries of the world’s visual space. It has redefined the images of *selfhood* and *community* from another social episteme. Nigeria is certainly not the only country engaged in the production of video films dealing with and promoting local social texts that reconfigure African localities from the inside. There is the wonderful example of Ghana but with a population of well over 150 million people and an astonishing output of an average of 10 video films every Monday of the month, the Nigerian industry is proving to be the most versatile and viable in the world. It is vibrant, engaging and controversial. This is not an exaggeration.

The practice of the popular Nigerian video film production is implicated in the idea of third cinema in more ways than one. If one of the lead ideas of “third cinema” practice is a longing for “a particular intense moral character” (Jim Pines 1988: 1X), the video film has that in abundance. This cinematic practice defines itself in close ties with the narrative morality of its audience. Popular video film co-opts not only what it sees as important and topical to this audience, it constantly recreates important social events. This makes it possible to see this video culture as the visual equivalent of a social diary. This is significant in a country where the culture of documentation and archiving is anything but organized.

The video film industry challenges the timidity of *the* African film on celluloid, especially *the* African films coming from the Francophone countries and sponsored mostly from grants provided by French Ministry of Cooperation. This is the kind of African film we see at FESPACO every other year. Though not consciously oppositional to Francophone filmmaking and to the cinemas of first and second worlds, the video film insists on being defined in terms of its own aesthetic choices, which is neither purely oral in nature nor modern in outlook. It proclaims its peculiar form of oppositionality. Popular video practice is consciously wired to an enthusiastic local audience. Since it is not a filmmaking tradition that relies on grant from international donors or from local African Governments, its link to the local audience is more than cordial. It is sacred. This point needs to be stressed because this freedom allows this cinematic practice to be what it wants to be at any time. This freedom is crucial to its forms of visual signification and to the interpretation of the cinematic pretexts, which is often a replication of *real* social events. This freedom to act leads often to the production of knowledge outside the official control of Government. Controlled by the new video business men who have their businesses located in the Idumota market in Lagos, video productions are financed and distributed through their business outlets and music shops spread out nationwide. Through this ingenious way of distribution, video film-marketers are spared the discrimination and high-handedness of foreign distribution and exhibition channels in Nigeria. These bodies have held sway since the 1960s. The practice of video film has changed all of that for good and quickly too. If first and second cinema practices define their cinematic practices in visual opulence, the industry that supports the production of popular video films cannot afford that system of visual signification. Video film practice is defined by “aesthetics of poverty.” This aesthetic of poverty is not an option taken by video filmmakers. It is one that is forced upon them by the economic exigencies of the time. They have taken the challenge to work within the poverty of technology. Even so, not all third cinemas do so with ideological clarity. Popular video film has some of the character of this oppositionality but lacks a concerted ideological frame.

The practice of popular video film fits into this discursive space of “cinematic poverty” but not very neatly. Nonetheless it is part of it. Like all third cinema practice, it exists in the precarious social and economic contexts of what the early theorists, the Cuban filmmaker, Julio Garcia Espinosa and the Chilean filmmaker, Ferdinand Solanas refer to as the “new cinema.” Espinosa calls it the “imperfect cinema” and Solanas refers to it as the “third cinema.” One of the major failings of populist video film as a cinema of the “third space” is its apparent lack of political *will*. This is a big gap in its practice. Its theoretical affiliation to “third cinema” is punctured by

this gap. I wish to refer to this visual practice then as belonging to what I will rather refer to as “peripheral cinemas.” I use this phrase to denote a cinematic practice that does not fit neatly into the political space of third cinema but has a lot to do with the moral character of the narrative of visually marginal peoples. By designating the video film as peripheral, I recognize its moral oppositionality as well as its solid locality. I recognize also its peculiar deployment of locality in its narrative options. I recognize too the poverty that defines its aesthetic practice. I recognize its visual peripherality. Having stated the issue of a larger peripherality in the practice of video film, I will now turn the attention of this paper to the discussion of another kind of “peripherality,” which establishes and shapes the “the real language of gender and power relations in a culture.” This “peripherality” concerns the marginality of women in the practice of video film and this is not radically different from what Moreblessings Chitauro et al write about in the discussion of the marginality of Zimbabwean women singers in the urban music sphere. In other words, it is about the negation of the visibility of women in the public sphere even when their “presence” cannot be obliterated in any meaningful way. There are a number of procedural turns, which the negation of the real images of women takes in the narratives of popular video film. The most obvious is the presentation of women’s bodies as the citadel of the “unknowable,” the inscrutable. By fracturing the women’s body in such a way, a procedure of demonization is instituted. The essence of this narrative strategy is to re-write women as the social problems.

This essay tackles the explication of this method of writing women, and attempts to show how the representations of women in popular video film displaces the critical and intellectual voice of women even when it reaffirms the “beauty” of their bodies in this space of being. This form of negation is hard to locate and to extricate in video narratives because as a form of popular art, popular video film, like the popular space in which urban music circulate, puts up a progressive side to global issues but turn away from making hard critical judgment on local matter dealing with women. I am interested in the construction of the conservative images of women that situates them in the narrative periphery of popular video films. My goal is to show how the images of women communicated through popular video films “influence in shaping the real language of gender and power relations.”

At the core of video narratives is the female subject- the woman of the home and of the street. Most, if not all video films produced today, deal with this subject in one way or the other. What does this tell us? One answer to this question is that contemporary society is deeply concerned with the changes in the traditional image of women in Nigeria’s post-colonial framework. Until recently, debates on the changing role of women have never been a matter of public concern of this magnitude. It has always been the marginal part of the sites of social and cultural existence. Once every while, certain social forces may invigorate this marginal site of public debate, but it has never been as prolific as it has been with the video film. The video film is by no means the first of the popular arts where issues of women have been taken as serious concerns by scholars and culture enthusiasts. Rich in cultural values and in the synthesis of cultural diversity from

different parts of the plural entity, the popular public¹ has been treated to a variety of popular expressions since the turn of the 20th century. The evidence is that the common ground that underlies all popular expressions is often, if not always, women. In the Yoruba country famous for its expressive culture, especially in oral and performance arts, Joel Adeyinka Adedeji takes the history far in to the 16th century. In a seminal study of the history of indigenous performance art in Nigeria, he details the artistic composition of highly specialize and semi-professional contribution of the alarinjo art, an itinerant performance troupes that had some parallel with the Italian *commedia d'arte* of the 16th century.² The alarinjo has passed through a number of mutations since its inauguration as masquerade ritual. During this journey of artistic changes, it went from a purely indigenous art expression to what Biodun Jeyifo and Ebun Clark have described as “modern Yoruba popular theatre” in the 1950s and 1960s³. The doyen of this theatre tradition is of course the late Chief Hubert Ogunde. There is also the pamphlets of the Onitsha market fame, which were produced somewhere between the 1940s and 1960s.

At the moment, a number of women video makers produce narratives about social conditions and cultural changes taking place around them. Some of them have ventured into dealing with themes consigned to lesser places in the narratives of video films produced by their male counterparts. As producers, these women have forced upon this public new orientations and perspectives to social and cultural narratives. But as video filmmakers, their influence has been minimal. There are far too few of them currently working in the industry as producers and they do not control the resources of production, distribution and representation in the industry. But as members of the swelling pool of video actors, they do well even if they lack the power to determine how society is narrated and from what perspective. It is possible that as the industry open up a wider base for it practices, women may become even more prominent as stars but even as important members of the star system, they may still lack any substantial power to act. Financing is important in this industry and it remains largely in the hands of the merchants of Idumota (Lagos) and Upper Iwaka Street (Onitsha).

Although hard facts are hard to come by in this industry, the evidence shows that women constitute a huge proportion of video audience in Nigeria. If the choice of themes and the re-

¹ The use of the phrase “popular public” here assumes the broadest range of inclusion in the patronage spectrum of the video film in Nigeria and does not refer merely to its social class connotation, which the phrase often and immediately calls to mind in the debates associated with notions of popular and class divisions in feudal or pre-industrial societies. However, my usage takes into consideration the massive support and input from the poor, the dispossessed and the vulnerable in the Nigerian society.

² See J. A. Adedeji, “The Origins of the Yoruba Masque Theatre: The Uses of Ifa Divination as Historical Evidence.” *African Notes* 6/1, 1997.

³ See “Ebun Clark, Hubert Ogunde: *The Making of Nigerian Theatre*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) and “Biodun Jeyifo, *The Yoruba Popular Traveling Theatre of Nigeria*, (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1984). Both books give very precise accounts of the rise of this popular tradition, focusing on the sociology and cultural impetus that made it possible at the time it did. The sociological treatment of the Jeyifo’s account is more broad-based and radical in some respects. Clark’s account takes on one of the most significant names in the industry and the father of this tradition. It is insightful in this respect and also very thorough in its analysis of the cultural ambiance of the prime examples of this artistic formation.

configuration of the viewing space of video films is anything to go by, then this portion of the vast audience plays an impressive role in the spectatorial arena of the video phenomenon. Video filmmakers are businessmen who know that playing up the popular sentiments of the public is the sure ticket to success at the box-office. They do not fail to catch on this. It is a ploy that is particularly *popular* with “the ironic chorus.” It is the popular public that often suffers the weight and pain of social and economic misnomers of the postcolony. It is also attractive to many sections of the public because it helps the *others* rethink their fortunate position in this political economy of want.

Abstracting from the vast array of the people’s themes, video filmmakers construct narratives of the city, witchcraft and bewitchment within the family, corruption and death in high and low places, violence, sex and prostitution around the whimsicality of women in the city and in the countryside. There are a number of reasons why this is so, the most obvious being that video filmmakers seek to tap into the vast patronage of women. But this does not translate into any form of reciprocity for women in the industry as a whole. In and outside the frames, women are also lacking in the industry as actual agencies of the production of spaces of consumption. They are also lacking in the production of actual content of video films itself. There is the need to make some distinction here between the production of the space of consumption of video narratives and the actual production of video narratives, which are implicated in the patriarchal activation of the discourses and the *real* place of women within the spectatorial pursuit of video films. A pursuit which insist on defining women in the traditional stereotype of the docile, calm family woman who must remain in the background of private and public spaces. The space of consumption is the site of performing *seeing* in a cultural and political exchange. It is the point of re-affirmation or refuting the content of video narrative as social facts. Indeed, it is within this space of performing *seeing* that the social content of video films are effectively transformed into “conversational objects,” which have the potent ability of acquiring “a life of their own”⁴ outside the video narrative time. This is a moment when the viewer experiences the pleasure of the narrative time⁵ and social context. This experiencing can also pose the ambivalence of the image of the women and the reading of that image. Adeyemi-Fayemi discusses the modus of this ambivalence in her essay, “Either One or the *Other*: The Image of Women in Nigerian

⁴ Veenas Das has a thought-provoking discussion on this aspect of the visual image but with a greater emphasis on the soap opera, which is one of *the* women genres. For detailed discussion see Veenas Das, “On the Soap Opera: Egyptian Television and the Cultural Politics of Modernity. In *World Apart: Modernity Through the Eyes of the Local*. (Ed) (London/ New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 190-210. The classical statement, which she proposes in this essay to the effect that “local cultures do not simply kneel down in abject supplication before the onslaught of global culture” is applicable to the study of women in this video film culture. Appropriating the global technology of the video film does not define for the producers the themes or even perspectives of the discourses that are privileged, rather the technology is put to the use of local concerns and the place of concerns is then inserted into what one may call the *local global*.

⁵ I have used the phrase, “narrative pleasure” in the same way that Roland Bathes offers it to his critical audience. See Roland Bathes’ *Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill Wang 19973) Trans. by Richard Howard. But the pleasure of seeing video text reveals other points of pleasurable connections, especially that aspect that connects the viewers with the subject in a way that Bathes may not have focused upon. One such example is the immediate *closeness* of the text to actual lived experiences, some of which are known as the “video parlor.”

Television.”⁶ Like soap operas, video films are not only “dominated by themes of intricate complications in familiar relationships,” the social images are transformed into what Das describes as “a viable platform for the re-critical evaluation of ideas and things that have long been taken for granted.”⁷

There are a number of viewing spaces; some of them located in the domestic arena and others in the public sphere. The sitting room of the family is one of the domestic spaces of experiencing video films. There is also the bedroom, which offers the privacy, which excludes minors of the home and offers to the adult secrecy to contemplate the video image. On the whole, the domestic arena of viewing is subdued, intimate and tamed than it is with any of the public spaces of viewing. The most visible of the public spaces are the video-parlor. This is simply a small room, probably located in an uncompleted building with vacant rooms, in which a television set and a video machine are installed. A small fee is charged for entrance and a variety of entertainment menu advertised for potential audience. The video parlor is mostly found in poor neighborhoods of the city and in villages where average income is less than the poverty level. They can be found aplenty in the rural areas where grinding poverty has become part of the life of the people. I have myself done a study of one of such places in the oil-rich region of the Niger Delta.⁸ There is also the religious audience of the video film. It is mostly located in the church and in religious convention grounds. Unlike the family arena, this space of *seeing* is energized by a number of presences. The video film must conform to a certain theological format and it is usually made for the purpose of evangelizing. The venue is sanctified and the aim of screening in such a sanctified venue is to hit home the moral questions of the day in a way that is sanctioned by the Word of God. This site of experiencing video images is defined by its locality and the sanctity of viewing context. The convention center is the site of God. The action of viewing is presided over by the thaumaturge who often transforms himself/herself in the sight of those gathered into a celestial being in touch with God. If the thaumaturge is not physically present, his/her invented self is.

As points of interactions, these venues produce the *truth* of exchange between producers and consumers. Truth is circumscribed in a lot of ways as it is profoundly mediated by the site of experiencing. The domestic site is active and women hold the balance here. The moral fiber of society which this site focuses upon, debates and enhances comes from a visible but not well articulate realm of the “women’s sphere,”⁹ which according to Ellen Showalter re-inscribes forcefully the place of women in the making of culture and its elements of transition. But this active participation is confined to the domestic. It is not articulated as part of the viable and

⁶ See Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, “Either One or the Other: The Image of Women in Nigerian Television.” *Readings in Popular Culture* (Oxford/Indiana: James Curry/Indiana University Press, 1997), pp.125-130.

⁷ Veenas Das, p. 169.

⁸ Please see my essays, “Through the Prism of the Local: *Real and Imagined* Images in Nigerian Video Films” Forthcoming (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2004)

⁹ Showlater describes and traces the term “women’s sphere” and its uses to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which “expressed the Victorian and Jacksonian vision of the separate roles for men and women, with little or no overlap and with women subordinated. See Elaine Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” in David Lodge(ed), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, (London/ New York: Longman, 1988), p. 345.

respectable public discourse. It is marginal to the whole; it is eclipsed. While women take control of this space of social and cultural means of constructing *meaning*, it is far from being captured, or retrieved from the margins of public debate. It is not inserted into the main body of social discourse. What results from this is nowhere near a “women culture,” which Showalter describes as the appropriation of the women’s voice from the general public by giving “it a signature of women’s concerns.”¹⁰ The reason we assign the possibility of applying this feminist critical tool to the study of the video film is because women play a crucial role in designing the content and eliciting meaning from video films and not because they have a bold hand in the production process in the industry. There is also the reason that the video film, like the soap opera, appeals more to and is consumed mostly by women. This realization foregrounds another critical problem, which implies or suggests that the video film is itself a tool in the hand of the patriarchal system to define and discuss women’s issues for women, thereby withholding the voice of women for the NOW. Yet, this does not in any way diminish the importance of women as the numerically stronger stakeholders in the video industry. It simply amplifies the ambivalent position, which they occupy, and the strong presence of the ideology of patriarchy in the scheme of things even in the popular video, which has the outlook of being a democratic mouthpiece for the people. If the implied argument from the distinction that Elaine Showalters makes relies on some conscious move from a “women’s sphere” to a “women’s culture,” the evidence in the video practice is that so far there has been no such move. The odds against women are quite overwhelming. While women presumably constitute the bulk of video audience, and are said to indirectly dictate thematic preferences for the entire public of the video film, the discourse of their presence is anything but flimsy constructions based on the notions of inherited stereotypes of women perpetuated by male patriarchy. The discourse of their presence as consumers and stakeholders are often, if not always, consigned to the margins of video practice. Women are objectified and expressed in the artistic configuration as *bodies* of desire and pleasure. The phallogocentric regime of constructed images of women weakens even the rather weak presence of women’s images, so that the tokenistic visibility of women performs not the function of defining *real*¹¹ images but one of consigning the collective subject of women into the traditional image of women that is largely *unreal*. In this set of images, we find the “suffering mother,” the “weak and feeble mind”¹² caught in an incomprehensible whirlpool, the prostitute who lives the precariousness of city life and the house-wife who must suffer for the sake of her children while the man goes on philandering in the world. There is also the image of the mother (-in-law), the witch in the family who heartlessly devours her children and pretends to be helping and so on. It is indeed correct to argue in the same line with Adeleye Fayemi when she asserts “...cultural nationalism delayed and made it extremely difficult to criticize systems or institutions that are

¹⁰ See Elaine Showalter, p345. She describes “women’s culture” as “activities and goals from a woman’s-centered point of view... The term implies an assertion of equality and an awareness of sisterhood, the commonality of women. Women’s culture refers to a broad-based commonality of values, institutions, relationships...”

¹¹ I have used the word *real* to denote social truth, meaning social truth that comes from events of everyday social importance and relevance as they unfolds as distinct forms of actions and responses. Defined this way, social truth is embedded in social actions, which is described by Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff as “the saliency of the local.” (“Millennial Capitalism: First Thought on a Second Coming.” *Public Culture*. 12/2, 2000)

¹² Adeleye-Fayemi also makes this point in her study of women and television drama in Nigeria. See pp.127-128.

prejudicial to African women.”¹³ This criticism still holds true in the consumption of video films but there are certainly new “complications and complex issues around gender construction and stratification.”¹⁴ By defining, producing and at the same time eclipsing the female subject as *speaking body* within a new popular public, the images of women so constructed are *de-nuded* of critical distance in the narratives and confined to the dictates of cultural stereotypes. The narrative-dictator in *Living in Bondage 1 & 2*,¹⁵ *Glamour Girls 1&2*,¹⁶ *Ritual*,¹⁷ *The Bastard*,¹⁸ *Blood Money 1&2*¹⁹ is the masculine city under which everything is submerged. The city is rough but it is under the firm control of the men who are able to subdue from time to time. It is the privileged hand of the Lord in the *End of the Wicked*, whose representative, the female thaumaturge, dissolves her sexuality and gender consciousness and calls upon her captive audience to do the same for a far more profitable venture of winning souls for the Kingdom of rest, hope and eternity. I will now turn to the description of women and their place(s) in two kinds of the video film in Nigeria---the video film of the city, dealing with city life and the so-called *hallelujah video film*, which deals with the notion of hell and heaven, placing social actions within the notion of spiritual salvation.

II.

Glamour Girls is a good example of the city video film.²⁰ This is one of the early video films to make it big in the video industry. Shot in two parts, this film deals with life in Lagos, the quintessential haven for the emancipated woman. This is the city where the uncanny is said to happen on a daily basis. The story of the glamour girls of Lagos opens in opulence and style, and we are immediately led into the heart of the city and those who live in it, especially women. Kenneth Nnebue, the producer and scriptwriter of the film, has a chieftaincy title added to his name. An Igbo from the East of the country, he is first a successful businessman before anything else. His place in the video film industry is a special one. As a successful businessman, he came into video filmmaking by chance but he quickly made capital of what he saw in the industry after the successful outing with *Living in Bondage*. Like *Glamour Girls*, *Living in Bondage* was an instant hit, talked about in buses and in the bars, in schools as well as in motor parks. The

¹³ *ibid*, p.126.

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 125.

¹⁵ *Living in Bondage*, 1992; *Living in Bondage II*, 1993, 1993; both: video (VHS), approx.120min. Igbo/English; script by Kenneth Nnebue, produced by NEK Video Link, Lagos.

¹⁶ *Glamour Girls I*, video (VHS), 125 min., color, English, 1992; *Glamour Girls II: The Italian Connection*, video (VHS), 160 min., color, English/Igbo, 1994; both: scripted by Kenneth Nnebue, produced by NEK Video Link, Lagos.

¹⁷ *Ritual*, video (VHS), 120 min., color, English; scripted by Kenneth Nnebue, produced by NEK Video Links, Lagos, 1997.

¹⁸ *The Bastard* (VHS), 130 min, color, English; scripted by Teco Benson, produced by Ossy Affason Video, Lagos, 2002.

¹⁹ *Blood Money I* (VHS) 120 min, color, English; scripted by Ken Oghenejabor, directed by Chico Ejiro, produced by OJ Production, Lagos.

²⁰ The city video film privileges the city as the tropic essence, which dictates the actions of the characters in the narrative. It is by far the most ubiquitous in the video industry. The practice is itself a city phenomenon. The soul of the video film is in the city and the practitioners are themselves part of the upwardly mobile people who inhabit the intermediate zone of the new postcolonial metropolis.

release of *Living in Bondage 1* was a defining moment for the industry. It opened up a larger audience-base for the video film. In clear terms, it was the first truly city video film in Nigeria.

Glamour Girls is told in two parts. *Glamour Girls 1* deals with the lives of the so-called *glamorous girls* in Lagos, detailing how they play out their dubious life style in that city by engaging in sexual trade with rich businessmen and politicians. It is essentially a story of how this group of women tries to negotiate lives with men who see and use them as playthings. As actors, city women think that these rich men are their *moogu*,²¹ people that can be easily fooled. But as the narrative sequence makes clear, these women exist in the lives of these men as recreational objects. They are carefully kept outside the domestic spaces of their preferred soul mates. While the women think that the men who patronize them spend a lot of money on them, believing that they are being used and fooled into spending money on them, the men think that money spent on the women outside amounts to little or nothing. These women are treated with little or no respect.

Glamour Girls reminds one of the city novels of Cyprian Ekwensi, especially *Jagua Nana*²² and *Jagua Nana's Daughter*²³. Like the city novels, *Glamour Girls* discusses the city and women in a way that is at once exciting and ambivalent. As the story opens, Sandra comes to town. She is tired of living the village life. She meets her friend Doris, who seems to be making it big in Lagos. Doris has a coterie of friends who flock to her, all of them looking prosperous, all of them gorgeously decked out. Not long after this meeting, Sandra is introduced by Doris and her closest friend, Thelma, to a group of men. This happens in a lavish party, the kind of which you run into on weekends in highbrow Lagos. Sandra meets Chief Esiri, who becomes her *moogu*. The Chief introduces her to the grand city life. She quickly embraces the city with all her soul, enjoying the largesse of the Chief and pretending that all is now well. Then she meets Daniel Agu, the young, dashing man whom she confesses she would like to marry. Hell is let loose when the Chief discovers this love affair. The Chief throws her out of her rented apartment. Daniel Agu, the young man that she prefers to marry, absconds with her money and she is left in the street. While she is going through the trauma of discovering true love and how to reconcile this with the life that she has assumed in the city, she also falls out of favor with Doris, her city-guide and confidant. The source of quarrel is Daniel Agu. Doris also wants him as a boyfriend. At the end of the first part, the city has thoroughly disappointed Sandra but it has also opened up her vision to another kind of existence, the kind that is very different from what she had known in the village where she is lately recruited-deceit, cunning and falsehood.

²¹ This word re-occurs in many city video films and it is a pidgin word which describes some one as a fool or someone who is being tricked into doing something for the benefit of the other party. In simple terms, it means “to be foolish, to be a fool, to be used by another.”

²² See Cyprian Ekwensi, *Jagua Nana* (London: Heinemann, 1987).

²³ This novel is a sequel to *Jagua Nana*. The debate is that *Jagua Nana's Daughter* is the response from the critical knocks, which Ekwensi had from feminist readings of the earlier novel and more accomplished novel. See Cyprian Ekwensi, *Jagua Nana's Daughter* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1986)

Sandra's first encounter with the city is that of shock. Soon after the first part of the story of the glamour girls opens, Sandra asks this pertinent question, "Who will marry you after all these," referring to Doris' philandering with older men. Doris' answer is quick and to the point: "husbands are no longer the priority." She goes on to say that one can buy a husband if it is absolutely necessary. Sandra is perplexed by this logic, having just come from the village where the thought and every action of women are hemmed around the husband and the family. Sandra does not get out of this frame of mind throughout the story. She gets into trouble with the city for this reason. She wishes to marry Daniel Agu whose ambition is quite different from hers. In the end, Agu declines doing this for the reason that Sandra goes out with older men. He only let her know about this decision after he has defrauded Sandra of her money, reminding us of one of the plights of that memorable character of the city novel, *Jagua Nana* in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*.²⁴ The conflict that Sandra faces here is the conflict that the postcolonial city defines for those who live in it; it is the conflict that people face every day as they try to eek out a living in this precarious domain. On the one hand, Sandra likes the flashiness of the city, yet she also wants to keep her ideas of the traditional values of the family. She looses out as Daniel fails to deliver her desire to marry. The Chief, who feels cheated, literally throws her into the street.

Like many video films, *Glamour Girls* tells many stories, fragmenting the *grand narrative* of the city into bits and pieces that move in different directions at the same time. It is Sandra that links the sub-stories together. She is herself controlled by the heavy hand of the city. In other words, the stories of this video film can be read as one because they are all tied around the theatres of the city. Sandra visits a number of the theatres of the city, and through this journey of induction, she is privileged as the naïve traveler in the city. She is also something else in the plot of this story of the city. She is the link between the city and the village. She brings the discourses of the changing face of the life of people around her in the city and others who have lately come out of the village together. If Sandra is treated as the naïve woman caught up between the values of the village and the city, the clear message that comes through her interaction with the city shows that she hardly understands the sweeping changes going on around her. But she fails to understand that as a woman of no means, she cannot determine her life in this city the way she would have done in the village. She only begins to recognize that she is just an item of pleasure in the hands of men she patronizes at the end of the story, a position that leaves her vulnerable to social and economic risks. It is because she could hardly understand this fact in its truest and clearest dimensions that she falls for the trap that Daniel plots for her. While Doris and Thelma trudge on in the city, reinventing their selfhood and sexuality for the highest male bidder, Sandra is thrown widely in the dark belly of the city, confused and overwhelmed.

²⁴ This novel by one of Nigeria's leading novelists of the popular king has become something of a myth in the literary landscape. Its author, Cyprian Ekwensi, has been vilified as an example of how not to write. On the other hand, Ekwensi has been praised as the precursor of the city novel in Nigeria and a refined version of the Onitsha market pamphlets of the 1940s and 1950s, which depart radically from what Kurt Thometz calls the "mad English" of the Onitsha market pamphlets. See also Kurt Thometz, *Life Turns Man Up and Down, High Life Useful Advice, and Mad English: African Market Literature*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001) pp.xiii-xliv.

Glamour Girls II connects the local to the global in a dubious and telling way. It takes us to the transatlantic connection that deals with prostitution. This is the story of pimps and whoremongers. The story begins in Lagos and we meet the same set of girls in *Glamour Girls I*, doing the same kind of business-hawking their bodies for the lure of the big time. Doris, who is still the leader of the glamour girls, is now engaged in the transatlantic sale of unsuspecting women lured into selling their bodies for money. The destination is Italy. Thelma and Doris operate this syndicate in a big way, with large and well-furnished office in the plush parts of the city-Lagos. Released in 1996, this part of the story of the *glamour girls* is appropriately subtitled the “Italian Connection.” *Glamour Girls II* provides a strong moral backdrop to the activities of local prostitutes and their agents in Lagos, although this moral lesson is poorly attenuated. This moral lesson focuses more on the injured psyche of those who engage in this risky business of selling their bodies and the possibility of their being duped of the hard earned money from this trade by those at home. As it is with the first part, the second part has a number of stories, all of them linked by the business of prostitution engineered by the glamour girls of Lagos who care for nothing other than money. At the center of the story is the debacle that Jessica, one of the prostitutes, goes through at home. She risks her life in the Italian cold, sending money home to the man she thinks she will eventually marry but she is disappointed to know that this man has not only cheated on her, he has actually gone ahead to use her money to marry one of her best friends at home. She comes back smoking, kills husband and wife and hands herself over to the police. The ultimate point that this film makes is the futility of the enterprise of transnational prostitution ring for those who engage in it.

The narrative intervention is patronizing in many ways. The story is told from a patronizing view that sees the action of the *glamour girls* as something coming from fickle minds. It re-enforces the patronizing attitude employed by male video filmmakers in matters dealing with the explosion of a social problem such as prostitution in the city. By producing a second part of the story of the *glamour girls*, the producer indirectly tells us that the first part of the story was a success with the audience and that he is in constant touch with the drift in society. Local newspapers in Nigeria have “wept over” over the theme engaged in the second part of this film as soon after it was discovered that some Nigerians go to Europe just for the purpose of doing prostitution. For Nigerians in the 1980s, the realization was as painful as it was difficult to comprehend. The pride of the nation was hurt badly when it was learned that a large percentage of those who engage in this practice come from Edo State, southwest of the country. It is not clear now if this film had something to do with the collaboration between the Italian and Nigerian police to repatriate these prostitutes to Nigeria. What seems obvious is that the film drew attention to what already existed in a way that made prominent Nigerians to cry out, forcing the government at that time to re-think the situation of Edo girls in this deadly racket. If this was the case, then this video film achieved exactly what according to Venaas Das²⁵

²⁵ In one of the conclusions drawn from Das’s study of the Egyptian soap opera, she makes the point that “...the life of the [electronic images] does not come to an end after they have been viewed within the confines of the domestic space. They become conversational objects and acquire a life of their own. But the matter does not end with the consumption of the images.” See Veenas Das, “On the Soap Opera: Egyptian Television and the Cultural Politics of

television dramas often do, the reaffirmation of social events by dramatizing what is already experienced.

Glamour Girls does not merely reaffirm what is already there, it calls attention to a seedy aspect of the ties that this localized event has with the global. Interestingly, women are at the bottom of this show of shame and the narrative gives the impression that things are the way they are because women are fickle minded. It is, as the point of view insinuates, something that is common with this sex. The narrative forces us to see the problem from this perspective. Yet, there are other ways to look at the issue of transnational prostitution-the economic and sociological angles being some of the possibilities.

As in many video films, women lack critical positioning in the narratives of *Glamour Girls II*. This uncritical description of actions taken by women is not located only in video films dealing with city, it is also found in the so-called *epic* video film,²⁶ where women and children are also marginal items of the narrative. This is also the case with halleluiah video films, sometimes referred to as Christian videos²⁷. The video films of evangelist Helen Ukpabio come to mind here. There has been a spate of this genre of the video film of late and the main motive is to use the power of the visual medium to drive home and sell religious *truth*, which the new Pentecostal churches parade before an ailing and economically shattered society. Ukpabio's stories deal with religious matters in a striking and mundane manner. They subordinate women in a totally different way. If the reasons we proffer for the way city video films are constructed are connected with facts about the structure of financing and the themes preferences dictated by the Idumota traders²⁸, Helen Ukpabio case is different. Here we cannot make these excuses. Her audience is secured in many respects. The financial risks that other video filmmakers working in the popular mode encounter are minimized if not completely eliminated. The primary audience for her video experiments comes from her congregation, and with a growing *born-again* clientele within and outside Calabar, she is often assured of a certain amount of the box-office take even before she goes to shooting. Some members of her congregation think of buying her video films

Modernity, in *World Apart: Modernity Through the Eyes of the Local*. (ed) (London/ New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 169. See also Fredric Jameson, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken, 1975).

²⁶ The epic video film has little or nothing to do with what the word connotes in ordinary literary usage. In other words, its usage in the video industry re-inscribes something different. I first heard of this designation as a video category when I talked with one of the leading video film stars, Sam Loco-Efe, and the way he constructed it then located the theme of history as the center of its narrative order. Basically, the so-called epic video film privileges the spectacular in the rural life-style lost in the foggy memory of local history. Women and children are part of this conservative description of history in which the serene and unsullied landscape, the happy inhabitants with sack-cloth and "barbaric customs" isolated from the rest of the world play a crucial part in the drama of existence.

²⁷ Obododimma Oha prefers to call this genre of video films produced in Nigeria and Ghana "Christian videos" because they are produced by indigenous Christian missions and mostly deal with themes of conversion. See Obododimma, "The Rhetoric of Christian Videos: The War Paradigm of *The Great Mistake*, in *Nigerian Video Films* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000) pp.192-199.

²⁸ The comparatively educated producers and actors often vilify the Idumota traders who they claim run the industry because they provide the money and dictate what is shot at any given time. The Idumota traders are very shrewd businessmen who are often after profit and not necessarily art. They are so-called because most of them are located in the Idumota market is in Lagos.

as a religious obligation and may be willing to pay upfront for the video film to be made. Helen Ukpabio's case is radically different from those of popular video film filmmaker working outside the sanctified domain of the "vineyard of God." Yet, she must also work within the larger ambiance of the popular video industry. While maintaining that she is an evangelist working in the "Lord's vineyard," she still counts on the infrastructure of the larger industry of popular video production, which is anything but spiritual or for that matter inclined toward religious fidelity. By maintaining one leg each in both worlds, her participation in the industry shows how tenuous it can be to make hard and fast dichotomy between one genre of video film from the other.

The history of the religious film is not a long one. It is as long as the history of film in Nigeria, which began with the first screening in 1904.²⁹ It is on record that as early as 1907, the Catholic fathers who were then stationed in Lagos screened religious films as part of their concerted effort to proselytize in the colony. The *Lagos Standard*, which was then the most influential newspaper, criticize one of the films screened as being biased because of "the film's portrayal of Judas as a Blackman and Simon Peter as a light skinned person quietly insinuated a racist undertone."³⁰ The new religious videos followed in the footsteps of this earlier example without any distinct indigenous ideological input. Like most religious video films, Ukpabio's stories merely replace the offensive dark face of Judas with a visual topography of local faces that are evil and sinister, faces that lack human agency and are propelled by the dark forces of the underworld. The other extreme of this presentation are local faces of meek and just characters who then suffer in the sinful world for their belief in the Lord Jesus Christ.

111.

Helen Ukpabio has made eight Christian video films in the past ten years since she got into the business and she is still counting. For a latecomer to the field, this is an enviable feat. Among the films are *Power to Bind*, *Magic Money*, *End of the Wicked*, *Holy Crime* and *the Price*. Others are *Highway to the Grave*, *Wasted Years*, *Grace to Grace* and *My Wife is Witch*. When I visited her video stall in January of 2001, she had brought out an impressive 2001 calendar of her films, an indication that the business of video filmmaking is becoming an important part of her evangelism. Teco Benson, a member of the Lagos club of video stars, directs most of her films. She writes the scripts for her films, a sure way to have a firm hold on the content of the films. This is important since her primary motive is to use the video medium to evangelize. She believes that "As ministers of God, we preach the gospel by different means... and we also discovered that this video film is a new thing in Nigeria and a lot of people are watching." (Personal interview, 2001) This is not only an indication that the religious video film is as

²⁹ The earliest film screening in Nigeria according to Alfred E. Opubor and Onuora E. Nwuneli took place with the Eleko of Eko (the paramount ruler of Lagos) in attendance in 1903 at the Glover Memorial Hall in Yaba, Lagos. See Alfred E. Opubor et al, (eds) *The Development and Growth of the Film Industry in Nigeria*. (Lagos: Third Press International, 1997).

³⁰ See Onookome Okome, "The Rise of the Folkloric Cinema in Nigeria," (PhD Thesis, University of Ibadan, 1991), p.151. See also Onookome Okome, "The Context of Film Production in Nigeria: the Colonial Heritage," in *Cinema and Social Change in West Africa* (Jos: Nigerian Film Corporation, 1997), p.29.

popular as the video film of the city but also a recognition of its centrality in the new business of selling God to a people constructed in Pentecostal theology to be absolutely immoral and in dire need of redemption. Much of the interview,³¹ which Helen Ukpabio granted me, was devoted to hammering on this fact. Helen Ukpabio sees herself as responding to a “calling” from God. She wants to rid the nation of the blanket of sin that has come over it in recent times. The initial reason why she went into video filmmaking was to correct what she saw as “the glorification of the devil” in popular video films.³² Ukpabio’s video films massively deconstruct the power of the devil from the cultural base of local episteme but do not quite dispel the potency of the power of the devil in the socio-psychological frame of the community, her primary constituency.

Soon after she got into video filmmaking, she realized the weight and magical influence of the medium on her congregation and to the finances of her church. She confesses that although she has written three books³³ on the subjects of witchcraft and the occult world, all three books have not done what one of her video films has done to bring new converts to her church. Although the video films of Ukpabio profess a rabid belief in the salvation promised to all by the Christian God, they are also produced in the small entrepreneurial business environment of the popular video industry. In other words, they are part of a secular business operated within a loudly declared evangelical ideology. This fact creates a difficult moral dilemma for this video produce, a dilemma that is replicated in her films as she tries to balance content with form and message with ideology.

End of the Wicked is typically Ukpabio. It is a gripping story of the coven of witches, blood-sucking and flesh-eating vampires. The narrative passes this world of vampires as belonging to local witches who trouble the world of mortals. The domestic upheaval in the life and death of Chris Amadi is very well told and properly connected to the world of the coven. The plot is tight, not as loose as one finds in many popular video films. It is a domestic story with a firm link to the occult. The moral question is summed up around the acceptance of the creed of the Christian God. Chris Amadi, husband and father, now oversees a home torn apart by the forces of darkness. It is not clear how his worries began. It is not obvious either why the coven of witches is after him but the aim is to destroy all that Chris Amadi has achieved in life. The person who brings Chris’ family and the world of the coven is his mother, a member of this grotesque and wicked *other*. She is referred to as Lady Destroyer in that evil space, the great evildoer. She is one of the acolytes of the great Beelzebub. In one of the early scenes, she vows to bring down the family of Chris and to see that Stella, the daughter-in-law, fall from grace to grass. While Chris goes through this never-ending social trauma, the mother pretends to help, suggesting

³¹ This interview was conducted in her old home in Calabar in January 2001. She has since moved to a bigger home, a signal of prosperity but which also ironically shows what scholars of religion describe as the essence of “prosperity gospel.”

³² This is clear reference to the city video films and the bone of contention is the sinister and violent attachment to the occult economies of the city, which does little or nothing to direct the narrative to the clear path of the Lord.

³³ The books she refers to are, *The Seat of Satan Exposed* (Calabar: Liberty Gospel, 1992), *Stepping Out of Demonic Contamination* (Calabar: Liberty Gospel, 1994) and *Unveiling the Mysteries of Witchcraft* (Calabar: Liberty Gospel, 1996). Ukpabio is the author of the three books dealing with witchcraft, sorcery and occultism.

possible ways out of these seemingly intractable problems. Oral folklore³⁴ in Calabar, as is in most of Nigeria, suggests that for the evil work of witches and wizards to thrive, there must be some link within the domestic realm that facilitates the connection between the evil world and the object of the attack. As a common part of the witchcraft lore in Calabar even to this day, Helen Ukpabio, the scriptwriter of this film, is only working around known local episteme of witchcraft. The local audience for which this film was produced to shock into a newer state of consciousness already knew the existence of such story by heart and may even profess having being part of the diabolism of the act of witchcraft practice in one way or the other. This is a common social narrative in Calabar as in most part of Nigeria where there is still tangible ties to the traditional past. The frequent return to the theme of witchcraft reiterates this social trope and also shows the re-configuration of the Manichean duality between good and evil, a favorite structure of her video films. One brilliant example of this is the video film, *Wasted Years*, which has a close resemblance to the classical mediaeval drama, *Pilgrim's Progress* that plays out the moral fable of light and darkness. The brilliant imagistic sequences of the man who wastes his life cheating and philandering in *Wasted Years* are tellingly brought to close when he dies alone in his palatial home abandoned. The images of this man in his last days refusing to accept light (from the pastor-played by Helen Ukpabio herself and her companion) and those of his pain in the after-life in purgatory (or hell) captures the meaning of the binary structure of the narrative style which this preacher/ video filmmaker prefers. It is no surprise then that we find the decaying body of this man badly infested by worms in his sitting room, a similar kind of image we find in John Bunyan's *Pilgrims' Progress*. This structural pattern of popular social myth also functions as a form of legitimization for her "calling": to serve God. It is a way of restating time and time again to her congregation that as a self-confessed witch herself, it only takes a deep desire to repent and to do what is good for those still under the bondage to become like her. She is ready to be the spiritual guide in this difficult journey. In her books on the subject, she makes it clear that no man or women can keep anyone down if the oppressed has made the choice to be free as she did when she opted to leave the "satanic church" of a local and powerful pastor, Olumba Olumba Obu, whose headquarters is at Ambo Street, Calabar. The breakaway from the Church of this man and "his satanic world" is also a very important aspect of her self-styling in this religious space. It reaffirms the power of the Lord, for it is the Lord that has made it possible for this great man of evil not to be able to harm her. By challenging this "evil man", Helen Ukpabio draws attention to herself as one of the chosen. Making capital of this, she built a career for herself as a pastor whose faith in God is absolute. This winning faith negates the fear, which local people nurse for Olumba Olumba Obu. The restatement of the *nothingness* of witchcraft and the evil of the coven in her films then functions as a dramatic strategy of emphasis. It is this ability to reach out and to recapture the mind of her audience about what may be considered an old belief, but which nonetheless lay deep in its spirituality, that provides Ukpabio's religious films with the potency and agency of conversion. While instigating and inscribing the discourse

³⁴ The people of old Calabar believed in witchcraft and sorcery and that did not change after the introduction of Christianity during the early Presbyterian conversion. Witchcraft and sorcery were part of the political order in old Calabar and rumor still has it that some of it is still practiced in the Obong's Palace during very important ceremonies. E.U Aye has a brilliant and lucid account of this aspect of the life of the Efik, the original people of the Calabar coast. See E.U. Aye, *Old Calabar Through the Century* (Hope Waddell Press, 1967), pp. 28-82.

of fear in local evil practice, she also provides the alternative, the power of God. She is the prime example of this power. By re-asserting this local consciousness and debasing it at the same time and creating the discourse of its grotesqueness in the new spirituality of her brand of Pentecostalism, the thaumaturge draws into the plot a local history incongruous with the new local modernity. This is the dilemma, which Chris and members of his family face in the story of *End of the Wicked*. Matters get to a head for the family of Chris: he loses his business and his money as well. Evil spirits and ghosts torment his children, and the maid in his household dies of questionable circumstances. Engineered from the world of the occult through the means of a number of “vernacular technologies” (Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff 2000), Stella begins to look to him like a masquerade. Still pretending to help out with the problems of her son, his mother suggests that Chris consults a local medicine man. Chris is utterly bewildered with this idea but his mother persuades him hard to do this. He does, but his problems do not end. This is the common narrative practice of the hallelujah video film. The fetish priest is vilified and demonized in such a way as to reconstruct the absolutely grotesque in local tradition. He is the grotesque, the unknowable. He is the one to be uprooted from the social fabric so that order and light brought back to this suffering society. But it is only a reconstruction that is geared towards a purpose: to win converts of the local people. The horrific, the *jujuman*, in this tradition of narration is caged and conceptualized as the epitome of darkness to be exorcised or cast into hell.

The ambivalence of this construction comes clearly to surface in this choice of narrative strategy. Existing on two different but interesting poles of spirituality, the hallelujah video film privileges good and evil as choices to be made and taken. Traditional spirituality represents the old ways of things and is bad, backward and barbaric. Christian spirituality is the new is the new way forward. It is the light. Without meaning to privilege the power of local spirituality or give it agency in the life of local people, *End of the Wicked* calls attention to its efficacy by suggesting the pervading influence of the fetish priest, the contact man who represents this tradition. This is true of most of the video films cast in this narrative order. The narrative drill dealing with the local “fetish priest” as a representative of the sinister and grotesque world is pervasive in hallelujah video films. Tobias Wendl has seen in them a distinct “horror genre.”³⁵ In the hallelujah video film, the dramatic encounter between light and darkness is always privileged as a spiritual one. The drama of the “fetish priest” in contact with the gentle, Christ-like figure of Pastor Priscilla in the *End of the Wicked*, is interesting in this regard. In the end, it is not the gentle, meek and exaggerated figure of the pious Priscilla that holds our attention. On the contrary, it is the exuberant and true to life figure of the “fetish priest.” He is believable because he is situated in the concrete reality of the people and it is the fear of his power, rather than the piety of the pastor *casting* out demons, that reaches us clearly. Even as the film draws the

³⁵ Wendl discusses the possibility of this genre in an unpublished essay he presented at the University of Bayreuth Workshop--- “Modes of *Seeing* and the Video film in Africa,” which took place from June 8-9, 2001 at Iwalewa Haus under the direction of Prof. Dr. Till Forster. Although Wendl does not refer to the hallelujah as the fitting example of his taxonomy, the description he gives also fit well with this kind of video film in Nigeria and Ghana. See Tobias Wendl, “Wicked Villagers and the Mysterious Reproduction: An Exploration of Recent Horror Videos From Ghana and Nigeria”.

audience to the anthropological evil of the “fetish priest,” it reestablishes the potency of its place in local tradition and leaves no one in doubt as to whether he can be believed. The need to construct this figure as grotesque, evil and in some cases as an unfriendly being in touch with evil spirits and capable of doing only harm is not unrelated to the ultimate need to convert the spiritual flotsam and jetsam of a “world gone awry” to quote Jean and John Comaroff.³⁶

The mumbo-jumbo uttered by the “fetish priest” baffles Chris Amadi and it is meant to. The narrative purpose is to delete this language from the tangible world of things in which Chris Amadi lives and to re-situate it within the realm of the evil, the unknowable. Chris Amadi is bewildered but has no choice; he must capitulate in the contrived narrative. The presence of the medicine man inspires awe. Chris Amadi is awed and his actions in front of the medicine man show this. The medicine man is strong, very well built. His voice carries. He takes his job seriously. He is convincing as man who is capable of doing things. Clad in a bizarre spiritual work clothes, he represents, not the ordinary man of the street but a man whose wisdom transcends both worlds. As he switches in and out of the language of mankind and of the Gods, he instills in his bewildered listener a broader knowledge of man and of spirit. He presents a picture of the true custodian of the secrets of “vernacular technology.” His presence is hypnotic, and at the same time mundane. He comes in flesh and blood. The apparels of the custodian of this vernacular technology also put him beyond the realm of the flesh and blood being. He is wily in attitude and wild in appearance. He gives the impression that he sees beyond the flesh but has unfettered access to the physical, captivating the soul of the vulnerable and helpless in his charm. He gives the impression that he is the provider of succor to the weak and the vulnerable. The medicine man in *End of the Wicked* is all this and more. His needs are mundane, if not postcolonially outlandish. He too seeks the opulence of the postcolonial modernity. He recognizes his role in the social and cultural contexts of the postcolony, yet he never fails to make the best of the situation by taking advantage of it. He skillfully balances his place in the social and cultural discourse spaces that ties the coven of witches, the world of Chris Amadi and the spirituality of the Pastor. Pastor Priscilla meets Chris at that point of ultimate distress, when everything about the medicine man has failed, yet the negative images of this local character remain etched in the narrative as a collective *thing* to be wary of, something to be frightened of.

Pastor Pricilla engages the spirit of evil in Chris’ mother in a spiritual warfare. The reaction is swift. Chris’s mother becomes extremely uncomfortable. She runs away from the sitting room where a meeting is taking place between Chris and the woman of God. Pastor Pricilla will not stop. She goes deeper into the business of “binding and casting out demon and other principalities.” Chris is asked to accept the Lord Jesus as his personal Lord and Savior, a prerequisite for the miracle of deliverance from evil. He hesitates. His wife takes the initiative, accepting the Lord Jesus for the sake of the household. There is little or no evidence of a dialectics of conversion---religious or otherwise--- rather what we see is acquiescence on her part. This is partly out of frustration and partly because she wants to win back the love of her

³⁶ See Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Millennial capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” *Public Culture* 12/2. 2000:316.

husband destroyed by Lady Destroyer with the help of the coven. Chris' soon mother goes into hysteria, bowing to the power of the almighty God that Pastor Priscilla serves and whom she has invoked. But this is only a temporary setback for Chris' mother. She goes back to the coven where she is thoroughly blamed for letting down the "organization." After due consideration of the matter, a new and more effective strategy to deal with Chris is worked out in the coven of the witches.

Bowing to the pervasive power from the coven, Chris dies in a series of beautifully contrastive shots alternating between images of the substituted goat in the coven and those of Chris Amadi whose sleep is morbidly disrupted by the ordeal of the goat. At the burial of Chris, Stella is exposed to further humiliation, all in the bid to make her show her guilt for the death of her husband. Once more, Pastor Pricilla comes to her aid just on time. She prays out loudly at the funeral, requesting God to intervene and put to shame anyone who has a hand in the death of Chris. Not long after, Chris's mother runs amok in the street, confessing her guilt to the death of her son. Children and other by-standers throw stones at her in the street. The moral plausibility of depicting Stella, the wife of Chris, as responsible for the death of her husband is an idea common among the local. It is part of the cultural episteme, which encourages the presentation of the wife as the first suspect in the case of an unexplained death of the husband. Playing on the belief that women in this locality are often as witches who may want their husband dead in order to prove their worth in the world of the coven, the producer/director structures Stella as social type. She becomes the typical woman who is sweet and lovely on the outside but deadly at night. This traditional image of the woman in this neo-traditional worldview finds a place in the psychology of the audience of the hallelujah films. *End of the Wicked* restates this image forcefully by writing into it how Stella's mother-in-law plays with this fact to further entrench this image. For the video filmmaker/thaumaturge, the ultimate purpose of contesting this socially constructed image is to salvage Stella from the perniciousness of a cultural practice that is not in conformity with her brand of Christian teaching. This purpose does not seek to redefine the place of women in the society in any radical ways. It only seeks to define this woman in relationship to God, implying that this socially constructed image can be socially and culturally cancelled through the intervention of a preferred spirituality and immersion in the regime of God. The diabolical image of the mother as the witch of the family is part of the larger construct of the place of women in contemporary Nigeria.

There is also something to be said of the role of the pastor as a dramatic persona and the pastor as *the* pastor in real life. Helen Ukpabio, the pastor/evangelist of the Liberty Gospel Foundation, is the pastor who rescues Stella from the dramatic life of penury and scorn. By choosing to play this part, the evangelist is not merely restating her *role* as a preacher; she is reaffirming to her congregation the very aim of the video drama she caused to be made for the Church. This dramatic strategy of preaching through the video medium has some problems. Do we, as viewers, construe this action of representing the *actual* in this social drama aimed at conversion a deliberate ploy to re-inscribe the thaumaturge as a woman in a new spiritual vocation that was once the preserve of men? Or do we merely read this mimetic option as a means towards a self-

writing³⁷ that privileges charisma as a compelling method of rallying spiritual bond and bonding? The problematic of self-writing Africa is obvious in this case. As a means for self-writing, *End of the Wicked* makes it even more difficult to contemplate. By recasting herself as Pricilla, the redeemer, Helen Ukpabio is re-ordering and “defending new local frontiers.”³⁸ She takes possession of a place that has shown little respect for women, a position that has been a male domain for a very long time. She ventures into this public space and inserts part of what may only become a burgeoning *female culture* of Africa’s newly discovered spirituality. She is the female thaumaturge, engaged with matters of the domestic kind in *The End of the Wicked*. She ascribes to her body a new charisma, the redeeming *female image*. But in doing this, she also re-states various clichés of “evil women” in the domestic arena without dialectically foregrounding them as social constructs to be deconstructed or rejected. She simply re-writes these clichés, infusing in her version of the ensuing Christian discourse the prescribed place of women in the larger construction of the African “women sphere.” By privileging the loyal, subordinate Christian feminine image over and above images of the speaking women in the male dominant public, *End of the Wicked* suspends the debate of the place of women in contemporary Nigerian society. In its place, this video film negotiates the self-styling of the charisma of the [pastor’s] body as temple of Christ. The pastor’s body is de-feminized, de-located and re-located from the space that is women in that society. The ability to do this, to accomplish what this charisma-generating field offers to the thaumaturge as a cultural and social engineer cannot be over-estimated. As an engineer of this versatile mind, she reaches the religious instinct of her converts and potential converts through narrative capillaries employing cultural and economic facts on the ground in the locality. As Helen Ukpabio, pastor, actress and script-writer, “mines divine power”³⁹ in and outside the text of *End of the Wicked*, she becomes oblivious to the underlying questions that city video films such *Living in Bondage 1&11*, *Glamour Girls 1&11*, *Isakaba 1,11,111*, and *IV*, and *Domitilla* make playful visible. She blocks any critical questioning of the role of women and of social change. Her agenda of social change through the metaphorical bathing with the blood is also suspended for her own *self-styling* and *space clearing* in the business of proselytizing. The suspension of the very art of mimesis in the construction of her role leaves the portrayal of her real *self* as a thaumaturge in the various video films a *fait accompli*. In this case, *End of the Wicked* ventures outside the realm of art because it suggests and rallies the filmic gaze around the body of the thaumaturge, not as a woman but as a vessel of God, through the attention to its double- the real life that the pastor and other characters live in the pro-filmic locality. This is both a narrative strategy to elevate the social *self* within and outside the narrative time in the “nation of the wicked.” The transformation of the *social self* as a ubiquitous preacher, not as an individual, is meant literarily to reflect and actualize the injunction to “go and preach the gospel to nations.” Indeed, this is how Helen Ukpabio construes this character, Pricilla. By assuming Pricilla, she transforms before her audience (and her congregation) but still remaining the evangelist that she is in *real* life.

³⁷ Achille Mbembe has described this as one of the modes of self-writing that Africans have employed in the postcolony of want and deprivation, a postcolony that is still grappling with the twin projects of colonialism and modernity. See Achille Mbembe, “African Mode of Self-Writing”, *Public Culture*, 14/, 1, pp. 239-273.

³⁸ *ibid*, p. 249-250.

³⁹ *ibid*, p. 270.

Another telling aspect of the portrayal of women in this film comes from the squabble between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in the domestic sphere. Chris suffers a lot from the squabbles, yet he cannot in any way be blamed for the quarrels between mother and wife. Always at the fringes of the collision, Chris is merely a pawn as the women play out their struggles to gain control of the domestic arena and get the attention of Chris. As they fight to the last, they reveal the fact that the real trouble at home is pitched around the control of the domestic space, which is effectively the control of Chris' life. Chris' death does not resolve the problem at home. Triumph for Stella only comes when Beelzebub, Chris' mother, runs mad in the street, confessing to the death of her son. In this seemingly inconsequential squabble, the story privileges another set of stereotypes of women. Stella generates two categories of these stereotypes: the dependant woman who is happy only if and when she has a man she calls her husband. She is happy to be married, running a successful natural family unit. The second category is the idea of the complete woman. She is beautiful, yet submissive. She is in love with her husband, respects family life and is attached to the simplicity of a middle-class existence but aspires on behalf of her husband, as others in this class do, to be upwardly mobile in social and economic senses. The stereotype from the action of the mother-in-law is the wicked mother-witch. Lady Destroyer offers Chris a diabolic natal anchor. Stella, the wife, cannot fit into this picture and it is of no consequence if this cliché negates the biblical injunction of one man, one wife or the injunction, "...till death do us part", which the project of the story is supposed to promote. Stella is cowed throughout the torment she goes through during the burial rites of the husband and it is only through the spiritual warfare launched by Pastor Pricilla that frees her spirit and re-integrates her into the unchanged social capital she prefers to hold on to as a wife (now widowed) and a woman.

The End of the Wicked does not give women any special place to maneuver and make the necessary negotiations in a society that takes them for granted. It privileges the domestic realm of existence in contemporary Nigeria and the worries associated with it. It does not discuss the position of women in society in any serious or dialectical manner. The emphasis is placed elsewhere---the stress on the moral teaching of the Bible. Concerned mainly with issues of evangelism, this video film subordinates women to the whims and caprices of either the world of the coven and other "principalities and powers" or the patriarchal ideology of the Christian God. It draws largely on the binary opposition between good and evil, assigning evil to the local belief system and the good life to the teachings of Chris and the life it encourages. While the film promotes a moral background based on the theology of the teaching of Christ, the interactions between Chris and Stella reveal a "narrative surplus."⁴⁰ This "narrative surplus" emphasizes the belief in the world of spirits and daemons and the attribution of actions pertaining to evil to the physical world, even when it is obvious human agencies are at work at specific points in the narrative. Stella's quick and ready acceptance of the "praise the Lord vision" of women in

⁴⁰ There are as number of unintended meanings, which this video film generates but this example, is particularly telling of the "surplus" (the unintended) of the story line, which becomes important clues to the deeper meaning embedded it its narrative structure. See Karin Barber, "Views in the Field: An Introduction." *Reading in African Popular Culture* (Oxford/Indiana: James Curry/Indiana University Press, 1997) pp.1-9.

society immediately calls to mind the stereotype of the gullible woman. Stranded on the moral and spiritual shore of a depraved world, Stella accepts the Lord without question. This is not because she has gone through rules of conversion. It is simply because she wants to get hold of her husband and set her family right again.

1V

While it is increasingly becoming difficult to portray women outside the workplace and other social spaces of recreation, a critical reading of video narratives on women still attempt to silence the feminine voice, even when they run the risk of creating obvious ambivalence. Governed by the phallogocentric dictates of male producers and financiers, Nigerian video films may often “name” the suffering of women, but when this happens, women are merely patronized, pitied or merely depicted as weaklings. The major characters in the two video films mentioned above prove this point. At the end of the story of *Glamour Girls 1*, Sandra goes back to the social station she tries to run away from, reminding viewers of a specific place reserved for women. In the *End of the Wicked*, Stella is vindicated but to what purpose? It is not for the betterment of the social situation of Stella, the battered wife and sister-in-law, but to the glory of the Lord. She is just a vehicle to test the power of the “living Lord.”

In both video films, when the stories around which women are overwhelmed are resolved, it is often the male voice of the city and the domestic arena that triumphs. If there are differences between the video film of the city that Kenneth Nnebue defends so stoutly and the hallelujah video film, which Helen Ukpabio designates as the marker of the “end times,” it is probably in the authorial perspectives deployed in the films. These authorial perspectives are tied to the internally differentiated audiences⁴¹ of the video film industry. The city video film places its narrative accent on the city, a docu-drama of some sort of the city, relying on as many documentary sources and para-narrative procedures to do this. It tips its narrative towards the profane of the postcolony and only marginally hints at the spiritual base of this world. It combines obvious narrative clichés from world cinema but stops short of being entirely structured along the lines of *Casablanca* or *The Godfather*. Selected pastiches from world cinema classics may appear in these video films as fleeting flashpoints but it is the local markers of the savage beauty of video art that stands out and makes it a distinct tradition of the new African visual art. In this savage condition of the art and of the environment it depicts, religion and women are never absent, and in the narratives which are neither traditional in style nor clearly modern, the worries of the local stand out distinctively and are located in the sociology of the political economy of want. Women are important but they are absent in the video industry. Indeed, it is morning yet on creation day for Nigerian women.

⁴¹ Karin Barber gives a very lively picture of the history and shifting alliances of the African audience in her essay, “Preliminary Notes on Audiences in Africa.” *Africa*. 67/3, 1997, pp.347-362.