

Crises and Crimes: The Nollywoodization of Film Noir Elements in New African Video-Films

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Abstract

That African filmmaker, especially those of Nollywood (Nigeria) and Ghallywood (Ghana) apply Hollywood templates to their productions for commercial reasons excites contentions that call for feedback. There is, therefore, the need to look at the film noir subgenre in particular and use its specific elements to test the assumption of this paper in digital videofilms produced by the Nigerian and Ghanaian film industries. In the end, it theorises the nature of this application as a ‘domestication’ process that takes into consideration the everydayness of the people in their screen adaptations. By looking at Heart of a Widow (Michael Jaja, 2011) and Innocent Devil (Jonathan Emeka, 2012), the paper argues that like noir films of the Hollywood industry, thisvideo-films helpinterrogates the African society while signalling the flexibility of genres across borders to highlight people’s socio-cultural contexts.

Keywords: *Nollywood, Hollywood, film noir, neo-noir and domestic space*

Introduction

The global nature of the new African video-filmssignaled by works like Krings and Okome's*Global Nollywood: Transnational dimensions*

of an African film industry (2013) implies a burden they must carry as cultural industries: the effort to satisfy audience's pleasure across many borders. The context above entails being true to their identity as independent film industries as well as adapt storylines to acceptable genres that viewers can identify with at the same time. Although both Ghallywood and Nollywood are specific national industries, their effort to carry the audience along is one factor that sustains their globality while effectively keeping their narratives in tune with viewers' desire for pleasure. The variously stylized co-productions between the industry stakeholders and other film personnel from outside Africa but also in the wider consumption rate the films enjoy from non-Africans globally require that these contexts are looked at again. It is also the reason for crafting their storylines in widely spoken English language in the Anglophone West Africa to reach audiences both within and outside the continent as well as their use of generic commercial templates known to be successful in mainstream film industries like Hollywood. This paper deals with the situations above in the light of how the new video-film industries of Africa appropriate the film noir elements to sell their stories creatively. Some of the issues addressed here, therefore, revolve around the scheme inherent in the appropriation initiatives and how it materializes in the confines of the new digital filmmaking culture of Africa after the Nollywood model. For instance, it asks: what is film noir? How is the sub-genre deployed as a commercial model in Nollywood and Ghallywood industries? Is there any connection between noir and the melodramatic nature of these video-films?

Deep within the consciousness of any discourse on film noir are the underlying elements that unify its community of texts: "urban setting, criminals, a femme fatale, killings and double crossings" (Sanders, 2009, p. 91). Joan Copjec includes such other tropes as "a morally compromised detective...voice over narration, convoluted plot structure, chiaroscuro lighting, skewed framing..." (1993, p. XI) to describe its depictions in films. In this sense, while some wonder if it is a genre at all, others consider it a trend in film production. Critics like Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland deny that it even exists. They argue that "in a meaningful sense, film noir does

not exist. Put less certainly, film noir is not any one thing, but rather a complex phenomenon that tells us as much about the nature of the genre and the history of film criticism as it does about the dark essence of melodrama or crime thrillers" (2010, p. 124). The aim here is not to circumvent these varying opinions but to look at it as a sub-genre of its kind. In other words, it is a film type that deals with crime scenes in the urban space; makes use of flashback narration technique even though less frequently than people often think; as well as involves sexual initiatives and melodramatic narrative style to pass its messages. Christine Gledhill summarises its core features under five structural subheadings as follows:

- The investigative structure of the narrative
- Plot devices such as voice-over or flashback or frequently both
- Proliferation of points of view
- Frequently unstable characterisation of the heroine
- An 'expressionist' visual style and emphasis on sexuality in the photographing of women (1998, p. 27).

The high point in the history of film noir in Hollywood is between the 1940s and 1950s. Among the films that herald this genre include *Stranger on the third floor* (1940), *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Double Indemnity* (1944). Particularly in *Double Indemnity* and *Big sleep* (1946 and 1978) the issue of crimes in homes is dramatized in a way that details marital infidelity, deceit, lust, killings and domestic investigations that typically resonate with the two chosen texts for analysis here. Particularly in the light of Hollywood's canonical styles being applied to some Nollywood crime stories, in particular. Jonathan Haynes holds the view that Nigerian "filmmakers are apprenticing themselves to the arts of American film violence, but their budgets sharply limit what they can shoot up or blow up" (2007, p. 144). In this sense, Hollywood is the imperial demagogue which other smaller industries across Africa are now looking up to. Thus, the concern here has to do with how they do this by taking their contexts and budgets into consideration. But first, let us foreground a two-pronged approach that arguably informs the exploration of

film noir elements in the new video-films of Africa: the formalist and content-based approaches.

Formalist and content-based film noir types: Pathways to the understanding appropriation of elements in the new video-films of Africa

Following different explications of film noir narratives, especially by scholarly critics, one of Africa's foremost film theorists, Manthia Diawara, identifies two modes of scholarship around the subject matter: formalist and content-based film criticisms. While confining the formalist film noir criticism to the kind of perspective that feminism brings to texts – critically looking at “the formal elements of film noir [types] in order to stabilize patriarchy” (1993, p. 261); he submits that a content-based criticism is all about being thematic – bringing to light specific impressions about social concerns or what he describes as using the “screen as a metaphor” for making people and their cultures visible (1993, p. 263). In this context, he uses some films noir made by some African Americans (in America) to push the argument of *noir* not being so much conceptualised in the light of its Marxist connotation as mainly a critique of the issues like patriarchy and capitalism as feminist criticism would often portend but the redeployment of the screen as a pointer to people’s ‘way of life’ and an “expressive act against their incarceration” (1993, p. 269). Significantly it is the content-based approach to film criticism that Diawara recommends in dealing with films noir by black filmmakers since it helps to thematise the culture of their makers and thereby project their dreams of a ‘good life’ for their community. Analysing such films as *A Rage in Harlem* (1991, Bill Duke), *Boys N the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) and some others, he theorises the films as being statements of their makers’ ‘rage’ and a call for improvement in the condition of their existence.

It is in the context of the content-based film criticism that one looks at the new video-films of Africa as appropriating the film noir elements in their visual storylines, not only to sell their stories but also to comment on the goings-on in the society to interrogate the society and seek for higher values. The situation above is so well accentuated in Nigerian and Ghanaian contexts because most of

the films are situated in the typical domestic space of the people and tell their circumstantial stories that often have to deal with struggles, fights, crimes and corrupt practices. In elucidating this impression further, Haynes describes most Nollywood films, in particular, as bringing the desires and contexts of their makers to the fore, to pass both judgment and information on people's everyday circumstances which make the films to resonate with their proximate viewers. According to him, "the commercial success of Nollywood films depends on their expression of point of view – the values, desires, and the fears – of their popular audience, and therefore they help us see what their intended viewers see or want us to see when they look at the city" (2007, p. 133). In this sense, the films are successful to the extent they are commentaries on the everydayness of the people and thematically represent their worries and fears. Like other narrative devices such as the newspapers, novels and the electronic news media that hold viewpoints on the state of the nation, the films thrive more by revealing some issues of grave concern around the homes in particular.

Analysing the issue of appropriating borrowed templates as standards for global acceptability, Tcheuyap positively considers most African directors and producers, especially those of the new video-films as becoming 'global citizens' (2011, p. 1) by means of what they do. This might be problematic for some who see these new video-films as fraught with experimentations that problematise their quality. But the point he makes is that in all of these experimentations the new video-films of Africa are still able to inject some form of originality into their make-ups that inform viewers of their ideology, identity and craft as coming from Africa. What this means is that appropriating mainstream templates in encoding them has only to do with their form and shape so that they are universally acceptable. Apart from that, the specific identity and uniqueness of the video-films can be attested to contextually as originating from Africa. Tcheuyap testifies to this practice as widely in place among African filmmakers, especially in dealing with the detective genre, by stating that,

With the current cultural, technological, economic and demographic changes, Africa is diversifying its modes of expression. Filmmakers are becoming more interested in detective fiction, a genre popular not only in the huge Nigerian video film industry but also in Francophone Africa, where crime is becoming a major plot driver (2011, p. 99).

More than elsewhere in Africa, these statements testify to Nollywood's and Ghallywood's operational mechanism. But more than that, they also relay information about the societies that produce them which means that the films are typical essays on crimes and crises both in the past and in the present. In other words, they are part of everything that affects the people: politics, corruption, economy, sexual relationships, marriage, youth culture, education and all other socio-cultural situations. The daily massacre of innocent persons in Nigeria by the Islamic sect called *Boko Haram* is an example of an internal war that the nation faces and the films represent. So also are the crimes of discrimination and denigration of the poor who without resources to meet their daily needs also engage in personal battles of one form or the other. In so many homes too, are issues of grave psychological concerns which the film industries use to plot their narratives as will be seen in the two chosen texts for analysis in this exercise.

Heart of a Widow: Unpacking the ‘stigmata’ of a narrative dystopia

Heart of a Widow is one video-film that constructs a narrative trajectory that betrays neo-noir sentiments in Hollywood. It is the story of a young British returnee bemused at the sight of seeing his ex-lover married to his best friend. Attempts to make her leave her husband, by all means, proved very unsuccessful to the tune of his committing so many crimes to have his way, including killing his best friend and himself. With such film noir stylistic narrative elements as – violent crimes, melodrama, and flashback - the film creates a dystopia where actions and inactions scrutinise duplicitous

relationships and reveal paranoia in the life of its actors similar to what obtains in normal Nigerian and Ghanaian circumstances.

Directed by Michael Jaja and starring Kenneth Okonkwo (Emmanuel), Mercy Johnson (June), Frank Artus (Gilbert, generally called Gil), Angela Okorie (Angel), Chioma Iloekwe (Elizabeth), Christabel Egbenye (Amaka) and a host of others, the film dramatizes domestic crises. Opening with the opening credits, it begins with a car framed in a wide angle shot, driving into a beautifully laid out compound in the Lagos metropolis of Nigeria. It is Emmanuel, a middle-class worker, coming back from duty at the close of the day. As he switches off the engine, he hears his wife screaming upstairs and calling for help. She is about to be raped by his best friend Gil, who was putting up with them at the time.

As simple as the synopsis of the film looks, the unpacking of it with series of flashbacks and voice-over musings in-between scenes is what helps the narrative flow be pieced together for a first time viewer to access its noir elements. The death of Emmanuel within the opening sequence as he rescues his wife from Gil does not signify the end of the story but its beginning as typical in most noir narratives. Like Forster Hirsch would argue about films noir which applies to this movie, “noir stories are about departures and lapses from the normal world, and the film’s deliberate visual styling enhances the kind of transformation from reality to nightmare that the narrative dramatizes” (1981, p. 90). Thus, the departure of Emmanuel (Kenneth Okonkwo) from this movie is constructively created to let his absence ferment nightmares that would bedevil both Gil (Frank Artus) and June (Mercy Johnson) throughout the narrative timeline.

Appearing confusing originally but revealed later using flashback is the fact that both Emmanuel and Gil are childhood friends. They do everything together and share youthful dreams between them. But while Emmanuel is sociable and gets girl friends around him, Gil is withdrawn and rebuffs ladies who seek his friendship. As a law student, he always makes excuses with his studies and avoids socialising with them. The twist that happens in the narrative is when Gil visits a hotel and sees a beautiful young lady pass by him along the stairway. He is immediately captivated

by her beauty like a hypnotised juvenile that makes him miss his steps and slips to the ground – only to be helped by the same lady, June to get up. It is the joy and confusion of this scene that sets the storyline flowing as it introduces the intrigue of Gil's attraction to a woman.

Attractions can indeed be fatal as thematically captured in the 1987 Hollywood film noir thriller *Fatal Attraction*, directed by Adrian Lyne. In the case of *Heart of a widow*, Gil's attraction to June is his undoing as well as the nightmare that becomes the meaning of 'existence' for herafterward. The remembrance of June helping Gil to get up after his fall is the constant motif that shoots up the powers of this attraction. With momentary evocative recourse to the 'fall scene' in the form of flashbacks, it is presented as a cherished moment that Gil thinks should be made part of his entire life. On this note, Jonathan Buchsbaum discusses flashbacks as that which "filters the past through the subjective memories of the protagonist" (1992, p. 92). They help Gil in this film to relive his past as they inspire his lust for June which proves too difficult for him to overcome.

The natural element of 'secrecy' in plotting *Heart of a Widow* is one other characteristic quality which brings its *noir* template to visibility. Gil describes the girl he has found to Emmanuel but without telling him her name. Emmanuel gets married to June without giving Gil any clue of who the lady is. Probably in a context like this, Nino Frank was right to label the post-war Hollywood films with blurry imageries and sad circumstances as *noir* films. In other words, being '*noir*' does not necessarily imply 'blackness' even though it translates the word but rather evokes the sentiments of secret deals, moral turpitude, perversion and nightmarish anxieties in people's socio-cultural contexts. In this film, for instance, Gil fights for his desires alone secretly. He also nurses his emotional wounds alone without sharing his worries with his friends who suspect he is 'hiding something.' Nollywood's *noir* or *neo-noir* video-films, therefore, are about threats in the domestic space and the possibility of flights from everyday crimes in the life of individuals.

The trick that brought Emmanuel to June's life in the absence of Gil is the scenario of her dumping for another girl by her former boyfriend, Dimola, who suspects she is in love with Gil. Like an angel

sent from above, Emmanuel emerges from a supermarket hall to see her agonizing over this loss and offers some consoling words. "I don't drink, but I feel like getting drunk and after I wake up to see that Dimola's case is history," June tells Emmanuel who enthusiastically agrees to it and ends up sleeping with her in his apartment that night.

The *Heart of a Widow*, therefore, portrays the life of June who is made a widow by circumstances beyond her, quite early in the marriage and soon after suffering the loss of her original first love and husband. In other words, she does not only lose her love and life in this film but also interrogates the society over her situation as a widow whose future is hijacked by a power beyond hers. Her helplessness is practically seen in the opening crime sequence of the melodrama where Gil murders Emmanuel. She undresses in her bedroom without any inkling that she is under a lustful gaze unknowingly, by Gil who suddenly sneaks in, grabs and forces her to a rape which is interrupted by Emmanuel returning from work. Following this, Gledhill views it that "film noir probes the secrets of female sexuality and male desire within patterns of submission and dominance" (1998, p. 28). It is this discovery of the 'secrets of female sexuality' that imprisons characters like Gil and drives him headlong to possess the 'body' of his prey. On this, Norman Denzin, in relation to Hollywood's cinematic texts of the 1940s and 1950s and by extension, those read here comments that "the voyeur's perverse desire to look and see what others are unable or unwilling to see is always directed to a valued, cultural end and structured by personal and social motives" (1998, p. 1).

The twisted narrative style of *Heart of a Widow* can be said to bring to light some typical issues confronting both the Nigerian and Ghanaian societies as well as many other African countries, especially in their urban areas. Family crises, as well as urban crimes, are topical headlines in the daily news of these nations which the video-films represent in their forms following acceptable universal standards. If it is not a divorce caused by marital infidelity; then, it is some betrayal of family members by seemingly trusted friends. Thus, the video-films discuss all of these especially as silent crimes in cityscapes: secret killings, impetuous use of alcohol, illicit affairs,

betrayals, the terror of hurt, guilt and personal psychological traumas. Suffice to say that like most class B movies of this subgenre in Hollywood, *Heart of a Widow* is a low budget film with all the shortcomings of a non-industrialized nation that speaks truly to the context of its proximate consumers in their everydayness. The same can be said of *Innocent Devil* (2012) that interrogates dysfunctional relationships in the domestic space as we shall now see.

Innocent Devil: Portrait of the power/horror of sex

The overarching motif in *Innocent Devil* (2012) is the power and horror of sex in the marital space. While apparently looking like a Romance [love centred] film from the onset, it combines a whole lot of noir elements to buttress the crimes of subjective individuals in the domestic space. Strategically like most noir films, it engages audiences using its representation of femme fatale, crime scenes, guilt feelings, flashbacks, emotional alienations and melodramatic storyline to probe the boundaries of aggression within homes, using sex as both a weapon and as a means of power.

Innocent Devil is directed by Jonathan Emeka and produced by Victor Ibe. It stars Martha Ankomah (Zita), Chigozie Atuanya (Leonard), Fredrick Leonard (Sam), Chiamaka Nwokoukwu (Tina), Maureen Ginika (Maya), Kimberly Ogue (Samira), Ekemini Enakere (Adleen), Kelvin Mike (Malcom) Chiamaka Eboh (Abigail) among others to explore the labyrinths of emotional ties to committed relationships. It is a film that calls attention to unguarded suspicions within homes while shaping consciousness against misjudgements.

Like *Heart of a widow*, *Innocent Devil* is set within the 'domestic space' in an urban area. With a wide angle shot, the camera opens the initial filmic sequence showcasing a young lady, Zita (Martha Ankomah) emerging from her inner room dressed for bed at the close of the evening. She yawns and moves around like one frustrated with a need. Next in the scene, is the husband, Sam (Fredrick Leonard) who returns from work like a famished man, exchanging pleasantries with her who wishfully says to him, "Why don't you go up and get a shower. I need you to take me to paradise tonight. I have been waiting." In this scene, the notion of 'paradise' sends

feverish whispers to Sam's psychological composition since it is Zita's call for sex metaphorically at the angst of a man who desires nothing but a good meal and sleep. But like one not charged with the emotional pleasure of sleeping with the wife, he makes excuses that get his wife angry. Eventually, he is starved of his dinner and retires to bed to avoid more troubles.

The intrigue in the 'play on sex' is pushed further the next day when Sam dresses for work and asks for breakfast which makes Zita, his wife, to again rebuff him: "so you want breakfast, and you refuse giving me my own dinner." Thus, aligning sex to breakfast and dinner in the domestic context here portrays not only the importance of the act in the homes but shows how couples feel about it as part of their daily nourishment. Like food that sustains energy, sex in marital life energizes relationship in such a way that most dysfunctional unions are traced to it in this film, either in the context of lack of it or that of excessive desire for it. It is a duty that mars or saves marital unions. In *Innocent Devil*, sex is not only an important tool for moving forward the family but also a weapon that frustrates a journey when it is denied. For instance, since Sam is unable to give his wife sex the previous night, he had to go without breakfast again the next day.

Like every good narrative that climaxes to have a resolution, *Innocent Devil* flavours its progress with the introduction of so many women around Sam who is arguably handsome and amiable in nature. The first is Maya (Maureen Ginika), the daughter of the principal owner of his company, who invites him to a hotel room to discuss business. Another is Samira (Kimberly Ogue), a friend of Maya who advises her on how to handle Sam. The next is Adleen (Ekemini Enakere), the main femme fatale in the film who acts like a spy in order to have him. Even though both Zita and Sam take Adleen as a family friend, she nevertheless uses her information on them to problematise their relationship for her selfish desire. At some stage, she visits Sam in office and offers to be giving him daily breakfast since his wife refuses to do so.

The crime scenes in *Innocent Devil* occur at the level of fights and attempted murders on the life of Sam and Dora, wife of Sam's friend. Severally there are manoeuvres by different classes of femmes

fatale like Samira who uses Malcolm (Kelvin Mike) to dupe Maya (her friend) of one hundred thousand dollars. There is also Adleen who desires her friend's (Zita's) husband. At the level of murderers are T.J. (Ejike) who plots to kill his only brother Sam and Abigail, a house girl, who poisons Dora, her mistress after getting pregnant for her husband.

Even though Adleen brings in the element of acriminal investigation to this film by spying on Sam, it is Pat, that is, Maya's house girl, who acts as an in-house eavesdropper on Samira and Malcolm's discussions, that equips it with the intelligent investigator template of neo-noir films. In a particular scene, she eavesdrops on their plans to defraud Maya of more money and uses it to bring both to their shame by telling Maya of their deals. Such pieces of information obtained like this make Christine Gledhill argue that "...these investigations need not necessarily be carried through the agency of police or private detective, but often takes the form of a confession either to another person or oneself/the audience" (1998, p. 29).

Again, the gleam sides of the narrative become clearer as Zita takes her fight to Maya and Samira at the hotel room. She suspects they are the reason why her husband starves her of sex and demands that they leave him alone for her. The above context makes Maya disengage Sam from his employment. In a way, it becomes the pedestal on which Sam's emotional trauma and frustration are castfrom that time till the end of thefilm. This is similar to the fate of most people across Africa who are sacked from work without recourse to labour laws on a regular basis. At times the scenario is created with such constructs as 'redundancy packages,' company's 'downsizing programmes' or government's 'privatization exercises.' At the private sector, it comes at the discretion of company owners which is what befalls Sam in this scene. Like a wounded soldier, he returns home to inform his wife of the development only to be surprised that she interprets it as implying more time for sex at home. Sam's question "do you know that this singular act of yours has caused me my job?" does not elicit in her the apology he wants but brings to his knowledge the helplessness of his situation. At this stage, his confusion is visibly seen as he looks steadily at his wife

and reminds her of the pains she causes him. In utter regret he addresses her, thus: "do you know that if you drop dead, right now, your obituary will read 'to God be the glory,' yeah, it is going to sound like this in capital letters: "we are glad to announce the due death of Zita." Thus, Sam, by this statement reveals his inner feelings for a flight from his domestic space. He begins to think that getting married in the first instance is a mistake which does explain not only his sense of guilt but also signals his struggles against the odds of life.

Innocent Devil is purposefully made overwhelming not only in Sam's life but also in the life of most African citizens who live the same storylines every day. This is explicitly shown as Sam discovers he is not alone in the world of crisis-ridden families as he talks to one of his friends. Here, he meets Leonard whose past life is revealed to viewers using a flashback. Like most Africans, Leonard believes that Sam's problem like his has an expiring date. Graphically zooming into a clock hanging on the wall in a distant room far removed from the office where Sam and Leonard are discussing, the screen in a black and white mode relocates viewers to the 'past' in Leonard's memory. The clock time is 1:30am and walking delicately down the stairs is the 'old' Leonard who furiously exchanges sights between his wife working away on her laptop and the clock ticking away on the wall. The dialogue that follows reveals that Dora, the wife, does not keep to her duties at home and leaves everything to her housemaid, Abigail.

Trying so hard to make Dora take up her role in the home makes them quarrel. Due to Dora's commitment to office work and negligence of family duties, she is hardly there for the husband and the son. Even when Leonard threatens her to resign her job she disagrees with him until one night in her absence Leonard falls for the house maid and begins sleeping with her on a continuous basis. Abigail initially shows uninterested tempers but is lured to it by Leonard. The next scene is where both of them come to an agreement of managing their love life without alerting Dora that something is going on between them. Like most African video-films hesitant on criminalizing such male attitudes to unyielding women, *Innocent*

Devil presents viewers with shots of Leonard and Abigail playing together without qualms of conscience after having sex.

The force of scopophilia initially activates the scene of Leonard's sex with Abigail. With somewide angles and close up shots in this sequence, Leonard is seen admiring Abigail from behind, and since she wears loosepyjamas for the night revealing her shape, the camera leads audiences to penetrate Leonard's psyche as he lusts for her and gradually takes her to bed. In this scene, Abigail's purported innocence can be seen as portraying both the power of sex as well as the horror of it for Leonard. While it is too powerful for him to ignore its attraction as a man, it is nevertheless a horror to him too regarding its consequences if he falls for it.

A more significant element of femme fatale in this narrative lies with Abigail who now begins to sleep with Leonard and in soliloquy boasts of enjoying doing so with him. She starts to feel good with the hope of becoming the new mistress of his house. As she becomes pregnant for Leonard, all her domestic (servant) jobs are relegated to the background including her respect for Dora, her mistress. Thus, she upsets Dora who weeps uncontrollably like a prisoner of emotional tortures not knowing what to do. As if to make matters worse, Abigail starts suspecting Dora of being displeased with her condition and in revenge plots a permanent damage – to kill her and take over her place in the house. This is revealed in her soliloquy as she outlines her plans in a canted camera movement, thus:

So this woman wants to send me back to the gutters where I'm coming from? Can you imagine that? Can you imagine the quality time and sex I enjoy with Mr. Leonard? Delilah was able to destroy Sampson because of the power of sex. I have such powers. I have such strong tools. I never wanted to use them. But I will now use all I have to destroy this woman. I will be the madam of this house very soon.

Invoking the 'power of sex' and the imagery of 'Delilah' in the Bible characterises Abigail as a treacherous woman in the context of noir's femme fatale. The initial pretensions notwithstanding, she

fits into Joan Sanders description of such characters when she states that:

The women in film noirs are stereotypically represented: they are duplicitous sexual predators and death is written all over them. Although the representation is negative, these women are certainly powerful. They manipulate men and are often a step ahead of them...they are not just sexual objects but are fully self-aware and use their sexuality to assert their authority. They kill, and are often a match for the men around them, with their capacity for mental sparring easily the equal of any hard-boiled man (2009, p. 93).

In an attempt to achieve her aim, Abigail poisons Dora's food for which she is rushed to the hospital. Like in most other African video-films where resolutions are often complicated, recourse is made to supernatural powers for intervention, such as *Living in Bondage* (1992) and *Narrow escape* (1998). The closure of *Innocent Devil* follows this trajectory of a pastor praying for Dora and by so doing saves her life. Again, it is at the healing of Dora that the confusion and trauma of Leonard as thehusband of two women is used to depict familiar tensions surrounding most polygamous homes across Africa. Here, the use of split screen shots is employed to showcase Leonard's delusion as the doctor informs him of the death of both Abigail and her baby as at the same time Dora's jubilatory phone call arrives to tell him that she is fullyhealed by a powerful man of God. In other words, this scene brings to life, the unmarriageable union of disparities both in film noir characters and in real life situations: the mixture of happiness and sadness, friendship and enmity, trust and fear; which similarly characterises the back and forth movements of life especially when lived on the side-lines of the society by marginal subjects.

Between Heart of a Widow and Innocent Devil

Analysing these two video-films presents one with some justification on the initial assumption of this paper that most African filmmakers are domesticating some noir elements in their audio-visual

narratives. Even though the effort here departs significantly from looking at the interpretation of the implication of the concept of ‘film noir’ at the instance of black American productions to theorise race and identity construction as done by Diawara, it must be said that the thematic representations of the narratives are no less contextual as those of Hollywood films in the 1940s. Like domestic issues in *Double Indemnity* and *Big sleep*, the two video-films discussed here dwell on matters of threats in the domestic space. They also share boundaries with innate fatalism – where characters have to grapple with circumstances beyond their powers.

Granted that there are issues with the technical use of light designs in the video-films whereby the sophistication that often shrouds Hollywood’s noir narratives like the chiaroscuro lighting design is lacking in them (i.e. they are shot in colour rather than black and white) one thinks that it has to do with the struggle of achieving contrast especially when shooting with present day digital devices in the new video-film industries across Africa. Importantly, the deployment of other primary indicators of the film noir subgenre in the texts, such as the construction of the femme fatale that uses sexual powers selfishly to her advantage without doubt point to the skillful appropriation of some other needed elements to tell African stories. The same can be said of the usefulness of the cityscape in the video-films whereby some socio-cultural anxieties shrouding experiences in urban areas are put to use. In both films, the city is shown to have its worries and troubles especially in the domestic settings where young couples are daily confronted with despair and psychological frustration in the face of difficult moments. The imagery of ordinary citizens becoming criminals is also evoked circumstantially by these texts which distinguish them from other kinds of crime fictions such as the gangster movies. Guiding this kind of reading, Jonathan Auerbach argues that, “in film noir, the crime is no longer committed by a ‘professional’ criminal but by an ‘ordinary’ citizen who is drawn – or appears to have been drawn into crime by accident or some strange, unforeseen combination of factors” (2008, p. 383). In other words, the overbearing circumstances of life is the main push to commit crimes in the films as seen in T.J. (Ejike) plotting to kill Sam in *Soul of a woman*, the

sequel to *Innocent Devil* and Gil, killing his best friend, Emmanuel in *Heart of a Widow*.

It also needs to be said that the use of alternative mechanisms to achieve expected results in the films is an attempt to make storylines mean contextually for its immediate consumers whose everydayness they take into consideration. For instance, the use of a knife to stab rather than killing by gun shots in *Heart of a Widow* and an eavesdropper instead of a specialinvestigator in *Innocent Devil* are indications that these noir elements adapted to African circumstancesarethe norm both in the films and in the society,

Voyeurism in both texts is another motif that informs the narratives by constituting both pleasure and problem. The contexts above, as commented upon by Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland, is so because the female character, especially in the framework of the femme fatale is “both feared and desired...is the cynosure ofimperilled masculinity...” (2010, p. 148 – 149). Againan incidence of the instance aboveis seen in Gil whose imperilled masculinity is tested and vilified in *Heart of a Widow*as in one single moment in the film he is seen to lament in soliloquy, thus: “I’m really in trouble. I’ve been in trouble since ever I met June. In fact, I remember everything. It is just like yesterday.” Here, the use of voice-over narration can be said to draw viewers’ attention to his deep psychological state on the incident of June helping him get up on the stairway which eventually seems to lock him up in theconstant desire for her body and leads him to commit one crime after another.

While most men depicted in the twovideofilmsare confronted with theloss of autonomy in their homes, the case is made that they are no easy match to feminine powers. In other words, the films problematise the notion that ‘patriarchy’ is too powerful, not only in traditional setting but also in the urban space which most noir texts are said to consolidate. For instance, Gledhill in the light of feminist criticism of noir textsargues that “the plots of the thriller/detective story offer a world of action defined in male terms, the locales, situations, iconography, violence are conventions connoting the male sphere” (1998, p. 28). But juxtaposing her views with findings from these video-films, one wonders if her assumption is in tandem with the conflagrant display of feminine powers by the

femmes fatale? Again, is it not the best to drop every idea that films noir are ideologically encoded with some form of masculine conventions in mind upon the fact that masculinity cannot thrive without the complementarity of the feminine other. This is quite arguable looking at the character of Leonard in the second video-film analysed here, who could no restrain the excesses of her maid soon after sleeping with her. The same is the case with Gil who suffered mostsimply because he could not have access to June's body despite all his efforts and daydreams since her powers proved too tough for him to break. In consideration of realities like these, Teuchyaprethinks Gledhill's viewpoint and argues that in the context of African cinema, there is need to theorise a new "unexpected and original turn." Hence, according to him,

The right to sexual happiness has become fundamentally for women as well as for men. The new discourse surrounding sexuality also points to a certain rejection of phallocracy in domestic life. Female spouses and lovers are demonstrating increasing sexual initiative. By divorcing women from hegemonic cultural norms and the self-abnegation that previously figured her as submissive, African filmmakers are stripping men of their dominant status. Not only are they denied mastery of the couples' sex life, they are moreover stripped of the exclusive power to establish and enforce moral precepts. Women are beginning to refuse men the sole right to sexual pleasure (2011, p. 201).

While this impression appears real in the context of the two films read, perhaps what should be emphasized is not how African filmmakers are 'stripping men of their dominant status' presently, but how African film critics do not recall that these powers have ever been with women who pretentiously hide them due to some deep-seated socio-cultural disposition towards patriarchy. Hence, as always, shifting the 'gaze' in theorising noir scholarship from African cinema perspective as well as from non-feminist ambience

could innovatively make a whole lot of difference. These films are soliciting from African film scholars to do as above.

Concluding remarks

Ideally, the two video-films read here are family centred and are so chosen because of the implicit relevance of using their reconstruction of Africa's socio-cultural realities in interrogating the society. They speak to both the context and culture of the filmmakers and their consumers. As innovative as they are, their makers combined actors from both Ghana and Nigeria to tell African stories around crimes within the domestic space: cheating of spouses, rape, murder, illicit love affair and their likes. Others deal with insecurity in the urban areas and other kinds of crimes which of course are critical issues that engage noir characteristics and therefore help us map out the trajectory of connections between the sub-genre and the melodramatic representations of the new digital film making culture of Africa.

Contextualising the neo-noir elements in the new video-films of Africa implies some form of stylistic adaptation of Africa's stories to some acceptable standard appropriate for universal consumption. Hence, it is a process of domestication that is consciously termed 'nollywoodization' in this article to highlight the unique socio-cultural experimentation of Nigerian and Ghanaian filmmakers with digital devices. As a powerful public service media organ that grooms consciousness over salient issues across the continent, the filmmakers by the merit of these films unpack the traumatic conditions of young marriages in the urban areas as well as satirize the society for lack of proper infrastructures to address such emotional concerns in a time of crisis. With a whole lot of noir iconographies and devices, they join forces to push arguments in favour of the fluidity of genres too while signalling the potentials of adapting African stories to highly successful narrative devices in mainstream film industries like Hollywood for global attention and commercial purposes. Thus, this is the nollywoodization of noir elements in the new video-films of Africa which otherwise is hidden and surprisingly left untheorised for so long.

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Filmography

- A Rage in Harlem* (1991), Directed by Bill Duke, Palace Pictures, USA
- Boys N the Hood* (1991), Directed by John Singleton, Columbia Pictures Corporation, USA

Double Indemnity (1944), Directed by Billy Wilder, Paramount Pictures, USA

Big Sleep (1946) Directed by Howard Hawks, Warner Brothers, USA

Fatal Attraction (1987), Directed by Adrian Lyne, Paramount Pictures, USA

Heart of a Widow (2011), Directed by Michael Jaja, Magic Movies Production, Nigeria

Innocent Devil (2012), Directed by Jonathan Emeka, Naidoh Production, Nigeria

Living in Bondage (1992), Directed by Chris Obi Rapu, Nek Productions, Nigeria

Narrow Escape (1998), Directed by Andy Amenechi, Andy Best Electronics Limited, Nigeria

Heart of a Woman (2012), Directed by Jonathan Emeka, Naidoh Production, Nigeria

Stranger on the Third Floor (1940), Directed by Boris Ingster, RKO Radio Pictures, USA

The Maltese Falcon (1941), Directed by John Huston, Warner Brothers, USA

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Dr. Innocent EbereUwah is a lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Prior to this, he taught African Cinema at the Centre for the Study of African Communication and Culture (CESACC), in the Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA), Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He is a recipient of the Global Partners Award in Communications in 2010 (USA) and the All Africa House Fellowship, University of Cape Town, South Africa (2013). His research interests are on the interface between representations and cultures, media education, identity constructions in films and religion communications.