

Genre as Ideological Impulse: Reflections on Big Data and African Cultural Production

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This article draws from “big-data” analysis of Netflix’s usage, which suggests that what spectators tend to like about films is inherently generic. Moreover, the process of liking serves as a metaphor, over and above the process of taking pleasure, for the ways in which spectators make texts meaningful rather than deriving meaning from them. The article then discusses some examples of African cultural production in order to focus attention on the category of analysis at stake in theorizing genre—a discussion that helps to distinguish genre’s thematic ontology from its material, formal, and stylistic features. Finally, at the intersection of spectator agency and theme, genre appears to be an “ideological impulse,” a way of relating to and encoding experience that begins with people and that they distribute over texts. This way of understanding genre, the article argues, may help scholars write more productively about the social nature of the concept.

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Rick Altman speculated in 1999 that data about usage patterns would one day liberate film genre studies from the “residual tyranny of the text-king.”¹ A decade later, the American entertainment company, Netflix, made his claims empirically testable. The company sponsored a competition in predictive analytics by releasing its usage data (scrubbed of identifying information) and offering \$1 million to anyone who could mine it to predict subscribers’ future consumption. Indeed, as capital harnessed the tools and expertise necessary to encroach further into people’s discursive habits, it may also have uncovered something interesting about those habits, which helps us understand the concept of genre and which I will explore in this essay. The invasiveness of the contest, however, was also its undoing. One team of computer scientists eventually proved that, by cross-referencing the Netflix data set with other Internet sites, some users could be personally identified, meaning that the contest violated the company’s privacy agreement.² The company was sued and the data set was withdrawn. More recently, Netflix has changed the system by which it solicits user

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1 Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 213.

2 Arvind Narayanan and Vitaly Shmatikov, “Robust De-anonymization of Large Sparse Datasets,” *Proceedings of the 2012 IEEE Symposium on Security and Privacy* (2008): 111–25.

reactions to content, meaning that it may no longer offer insights about genre, however invasive.

At the heart of the Netflix data set were ratings, on a scale of one to five stars, which many users had applied to many of the films they had seen—100 million ratings in all. If a user liked a film a great deal, she might have awarded it five stars. If a user did not like a film at all, she might have awarded it one star. The recent system change replaces the five-star scale with a thumbs up or down option, a shift that itself tells us something about the ways in which usage patterns are of interest to genre scholars. Netflix's CEO claims that rating a film on a scale is a way of representing to others one's critical appraisal of it. Meanwhile, giving a binary thumbs-up or thumbs-down is a way of performing how one feels. The former, argues Netflix, is an act of telling while the latter is an act of doing.³ If the company is right, then the key to the now-defunct five-star rating system is its sociality. As opposed to reacting on a personal level, rating a film means that a user acknowledges the relations between films, as well as between one's self and other users. It is only in the context of a social relationship between films, between spectators, and between spectators and films that the concept of genre has any real value.

In this article, I draw from academic analyses of the Netflix data set, which suggest that what spectators tend to like about films is inherently generic. Moreover, the process of liking serves as a metaphor, over and above the process of taking pleasure, for the ways in which spectators make texts meaningful rather than deriving meaning from them. I then discuss some examples of African cultural production in order to focus attention on the category of analysis at stake in theorizing genre—a discussion that helps to distinguish genre's thematic ontology from its material, formal, and stylistic features. The thematic nature of genre deserves fresh attention in the context of new knowledge about usage patterns because we can think more specifically about the ideas—rather or more so than the forms—that people are using when they consume media. At the intersection of spectator agency and theme, genre appears to be what I am provisionally calling an “ideological impulse,” a way of relating to and encoding experience that begins with individual spectators. There is no doubt that texts can never be eliminated from the circuits that produce genres—or the concept of genre more generally speaking—and thus research on usage patterns may not truly liberate genre studies from the tyranny of the text-king, but it may help us rethink the power of the potentate. In the end, I admit to taking comfort in the analysis of texts rather than actual spectators, but I am willing to consider texts the servants rather than the rulers of genre.

Ultimately, a spectatorial theory of genre may be particularly relevant to the study of Nollywood, Nigeria's commercial film industry. Until the emergence of multiplex cinemas in Nigeria—a relatively recent phenomenon—Nollywood relied extensively and perhaps even disproportionately on genre for sustenance. In Jonathan Haynes's description of the various marketplaces where Nollywood “video-films” are sold:

Genre is the most important structure guiding a potential buyer through the stack of the week's new releases, even more important than the faces of the actors on the film's jacket or

3 David Sims, “Netflix Believes in the Power of Thumbs,” *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2017, accessed April 10, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/03/netflix-believes-in-the-power-of-thumbs/520242/?utm_source=eb.

the names of the director and marketing company. Nollywood films are essentially generic; they cannot afford not to be, both in the sense that a film that does not clearly signal its nature will get lost in the market and that individualizing a film takes both time and money, complicating a system that works fast because everybody already knows what to do.⁴

Haynes subsequently wrote the foremost book on Nollywood's major genres, in which he argues that "Much of the films' meanings lie in their common forms and thematic complexes."⁵ I often return to Haynes's description because, indeed, it captures a truth about Nollywood.⁶ Notice, however, that Haynes emphasizes markets, texts, and production, thereby attributing the active role in generic processes to films, their producers, and their distributors. Genre is responsible for "guiding" consumers. A film "signals" its genre. Filmmakers are dis-incentivized to "individualize" a film. A film's meaning is an index of its "forms and thematic complexes." But if, as research on the Netflix data set suggests, spectators distribute genre over texts, and if Nollywood is essentially generic, then perhaps spectators play a particularly significant role in shaping Nollywood. Nigeria, in fact, might be one of the most important and productive sites in the world for doing genre studies, precisely because its film industry relies less on institutional heft and more on market responsiveness for generating stories. The wager of this article is that, even though big-data analyses of Nollywood are not yet widely available, the insights from big-data analysis, more broadly speaking, might tell us something about the ways in which Nollywood products can be interpreted. If an industry is so essentially generic, and if certain films appear to be both incredibly popular and full participants in the industry's genre system, then we might be able to speculate effectively about the meaning-making processes that give the industry social and other forms of value.

The Spectator as "Mixture of Genres"

In 2010 and 2013, Andrew McGregor Olney, a computer scientist and psychologist, published a series of studies based on the Netflix data set that illustrate the ways in which usage patterns connect films to one another. As Olney writes:

By viewing users as nodes and items [films] as edges, we can study how users are related to each other through item connectivity. Conversely, we can study how items are related to each other through users who have rated them. Another way of looking at this second scenario is as "mass criticism" wherein each user is afforded the same status as a critic, and the mass action of all critics determines not only the overall value of the item (through ratings) but also the association of an item with other items (through connectivity).⁷

4 Jonathan Haynes, "African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradictions," *Situations: Project of the Radical Imagination* 4.1 (2011): 74.

5 Jonathan Haynes, *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2016), xxv.

6 Matthew H. Brown, "At the Threshold of New Political Communities: Some Notes on the History of Nollywood's Epic Genre," *The Global South* 7.1 (2013): 55–78.

7 Andrew McGregor Olney, "Likability-Based Genres: Analysis and Evaluation of the Netflix Dataset," *Proceedings of the 32nd Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society*, eds. S. Ohlsson and R. Catrambone (Austin, TX: Cognitive Science Society, 2010), 37–42.

The nomenclature of “nodes” and “edges” comes from graph theory, which often informs the kind of probabilistic modeling used in many forms of big-data analysis. Each of the ratings in the data set were conceptualized as an ordered pair, either element of which could be used to understand relationships between examples of the other element. Films can connect users and users can connect films. And if users can connect films, then perhaps users can create groups of films. The surprising finding in Olney’s analysis is that this process proceeds without any sustained attention to the content of the text. By simply focusing on how much, or to what degree, users like particular titles, genre seems to emerge.

Indeed, Olney’s analysis of likability ratings has produced groups of films, which, it turns out, align more closely than any other grouping with the genre designations that Netflix’s staff have already provided for its titles. So it is not just that liking films creates groups; those groups correlate as closely as possible with what we already understand as genres. Of course, we must assume that users like a film according to the content or features of the film text, but it is important to note that Olney’s initial analysis did not take the text into account. It simply processed the ratings that users provided for films, and those ratings naturally coalesced into groups that just so happened to correlate with the kinds of genre designations that tend to appear in production and marketing practices. So Olney designed a second series of studies to test the reliability of his likability-based genre groups.⁸

In the second round, Olney analyzed a data set freely available at the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), which includes human-annotated genres for each film, along with many other kinds of data, such as production company, director, actors, year of release, and much more. IMDb users also tend to provide reviews and, importantly, their own synopses of films, which are ways of describing content. Olney therefore set out to compare his likability findings to genre groupings that might emerge from the IMDb content data. In order to do so, he was forced to create a fairly rigid, structuralist model of genre-related terms, including *laugh* as a comedy genre term, meaning that his results provide an incomplete picture of the ways in which genres overlap, are internally complex, and are perhaps bound by social context. Nevertheless, Olney found that synopses also created groupings of films that aligned with the genre designations provided by the site’s managers. What is surprising is that the content-based analysis created much less clear and stable correlations between groupings and human-annotated genre designations. In other words, content is a less reliable predictor of genre than likability. As Olney puts it:

Rather than being a taxonomic set of categories determined by family-resemblance, film genre appears to be based on our ideals of enjoyment. These ideals, which vary from person to person, are consistent enough across hundreds of thousands of people for traditional genres to emerge from likability ratings.⁹

Olney further theorizes that genre groupings emerge from likability ratings precisely because the very thing that spectators like is the genre-ness of the content they

8 Andrew McGregor Olney, “Predicting Film Genres with Implicit Ideals,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 3 (2013): 10.

9 *Ibid.*, 14.

consume, even when they are not thinking consciously in those terms. He speculates, for example, that a three-star rating of *Whale Rider* (2002) might be interpreted as two stars awarded for its dramatic delivery, or what we might call its success as an example of the “drama genre,” and one star awarded for its foreignness, or what Netflix might label the “foreign film genre.” The fact that there are not more stars awarded suggests that the imagined spectator does not consider *Wale Rider* a particularly strong example of either genre.

Olney’s model is useful particularly in its suggestion that genre has less to do with the content that people might report about a film, and more to do with how they are willing to represent the pleasure they experience in relation to it. Even without reporting on content, the five-star ratings system implies a step in the process where spectators reflect intellectually on the content they have consumed, meaning that even if genre is about pleasure, it is not a primal, gut reaction. We may never know if the thumbs-up or thumbs-down likability system produces genre-related groupings because Netflix learned that sharing data sets is problematic, but an uncompromising, binary likability system would, at the very least, not work along the lines that Olney’s model suggests. What allows for genre to emerge from a ratings-based likability system are the compromises built into that system. After all, genres are also compromises. No one genre term describes any particular film, and no one film constitutes a genre. It is precisely the ability to map the ways in which people, genres, and films intersect that makes the distinctions between groupings meaningful.

Perhaps the most striking features of Olney’s work are the assumptions that underlie the algorithm he composed for processing the data set. Olney writes that, in his calculations, he conceptualized each subscriber as “a mixture of genres and each genre [as] a distribution over movies.”¹⁰ The fact that Olney’s algorithm did so well at predicting genre suggests that it has some theoretical potential. We might seriously consider the idea that, as a spectator regards a film, she distributes something that she possesses, or from which she is composed, over it. There is little sense in speculating too much about, or attempting to qualitatively assess, the mixture of things that constitute particular individuals or even small groups of them, but in the aggregate, vast numbers of spectators bring something to films that may be recognized widely as genre. All of this leads me to the following provision conclusions.

Texts do not have genres; people have genres. Acting as readers, spectators, listeners, and other kinds of consumers, people distribute their genres over texts and, after doing so many times, those texts begin to take on the genre-ness bequeathed by consumers. But what are the sources of people’s genres? Well, we already know that genres emerge in social settings, so perhaps people accrue genres by the very fact of being situated in and responding to particular social processes. This may explain why, even if genres come from people, not texts, they carry a sense of textuality. For in responding to the social environment, people encode consciousness—sometimes, though not always, narrating it. Moreover, the process of encoding is fundamentally ideological. As people encode the world, they frame it, limit it, and construct a perspective on it. From moment to moment, one’s frames may shift, suggesting that people are capable of multiple ideological orientations, but they always interpret social

10 Olney, “Likability-Based Genres,” 37.

categories and events in ways that can only be described as political. How else can a person be in the world? It is these shifting orientations, sometimes overlapping, sometimes completely divergent, that people encode and allocate to the texts that others offer for consumption. Another way to describe the term *genre*, therefore, is as an *ideological impulse*. People distribute ideological impulses over texts in ways that help the texts find one another, help people find one another, and help people find texts.

The claim that genre is or derives from ideological impulses actually finds support in the history in African film studies. As Olney notes, we can never be sure about the specific individual impulse that aligns with the “foreign film genre” for any one of Netflix’s ostensibly American subscribers, but with a large enough data set, ideas about that impulse tend to emerge. Consider the theoretical anxiety that has accompanied Africanist scholarship on so-called “calabash films,” which dominated Francophone celluloid output throughout the 1980s. As many observers noted, film projects set in the precolonial past, which sought to recuperate an oral style in search of a new film language, attracted funding and interest in France precisely because they seemed to eschew modern politics and history.¹¹ Whether or not that is true, the crisis engendered by the calabash phenomenon produced a theory of genre and likeability that was based not on interviews or surveys of spectators, and not solely on the texts themselves, but on relatively big data regarding funding, sales volume, and geography. Looking at numerous examples over many years, it became clear to both filmmakers and critics that a particular impulse prevalent in France was being distributed over African films in such a way that something like a genre coalesced. Moreover, that impulse was, according to the critics, distinctly ideological. What made for a pleasurable night at the cinema in Paris had everything to do with how Parisians liked to see the world and Africa in it.

The Thematic Nature of Genre

The simple fact that genres are discussed across a number of media, such as film, literature, and drama, should call our attention to the way we use the lexicon of formal analysis. Is the motion picture a kind of genre, or is it a medium? Is a motion picture comedy different from a literary comedy? Does one, perhaps, tend to make greater use of a particular mode of address, such as the melodramatic? Perhaps it matters whether the motion picture appears on a television or a cinema screen. Some critics may find these questions stimulating, while others find them stultifying. I would suggest that they become relevant when genre theory is being applied transmedially. Moreover, transmedial genre analysis reinforces unimedial genre analysis.

This orientation has become commonplace in Hollywood film studies. Tom Gunning’s foundational work on film’s relationship to circus spectacles and vaudeville made it impossible for Hollywood scholars to understand their object of analysis outside of a relationship with adjacent media.¹² Critics who have examined Buster

11 Kenneth W. Harrow, “Manthia Diawara’s Waves and the Problem of the ‘Authentic,’” *African Studies Review* 58.3 (2015): 17.

12 Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” *Wide Angle* 8.3 (1986).

Keaton's oeuvre, for example, have been able to produce interesting insights about various analytical concepts like form, mode, and genre precisely because Keaton's work cuts across the media of stage and film.¹³ Of course, as the film medium evolved, its relationships to other media did, too, but the fact of film's intermedial status has remained.

In African film studies, transmedial genre analysis has a different history, with just a few methods being regularly practiced and none very deliberately. For example, art house or festival films from Africa often appear comfortably alongside acclaimed novels, plays, and poems in works of African literary and cultural criticism. This proximity, however, usually arises from the political affinity between the texts, while issues of mediation are seldom discussed at length. The other prime example of transmedial genre analysis in African film studies is actually germane to African literary studies more generally. In short, it is a commonplace, or obligatory gesture in the field to at least consider a comparison to oral traditions. Certainly, films like *Keita: Heritage of a Griot* (1995), as well as many of the aforementioned "calabash films," invite transmedial analysis of oral and filmic conventions. Aside from intellectual film living alongside intellectual literature, however, and aside from the intersections of film and orality, transmedial analysis has been rather subdued in African film studies. Recently, however, scholars have been more adventurous. Lindiwe Dovey's 2009 monograph on film adaptations of literature is particularly noteworthy.¹⁴ In the following, I consider two other examples that raise specific questions of genre.

In a 2012 article, "Signs of Femininity, Symptoms of Malaise: Contextualizing Figurations of 'Woman' in Nollywood," Jane Bryce draws attention to some of the continuities between video film and the kind of serialized romances that appeared in Nigerian newspapers and magazines during the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁵ Bryce writes that periodical romances, along with Nollywood and even popular literature, share a "semiotic pool" that swirls around the anxieties that arise from changes in the social processes that govern access, for both men and women, to economic, social, and political power. Romance, which she calls a "'feminine' form," appeared in these media to displace "public issues that were too politically sensitive to deal with directly."¹⁶ Bryce's article represents an innovation in African screen media studies, not least because it places Nollywood at the center of a much larger "crisis of representation," which spans the various media consumed on the continent. The crisis may be dealt with similarly by all kinds of romances, and often through modalities of indirection, but the medium of video film appears to have multiplied, amplified, and invested more in "femininity-as-sign," according to Bryce, than other examples. Nollywood modes of representing gender, therefore, are not mimetic figurations of the society from which the movies spring and to which they are addressed, but rather constitutive constructions of a crisis of patriarchy that cannot be glossed over, made

13 See, for example, Kevin W. Sweeney, "Three Ages: Keaton's Burlesque of the 'Mythic Ages' Genre," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5.3 (2007): 285–97.

14 Lindiwe Dovey, *African Film and Literature: Adapting Violence to the Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

15 Jane Bryce, "Signs of Femininity, Symptoms of Malaise: Contextualizing Figurations of 'Woman' in Nollywood," *Research in African Literatures* 43.4 (2012): 71–87.

16 *Ibid.*, 78.

positive, or wished away. Indeed, Bryce suggests, the medium has made a genre and its modes of address more relevant than ever.

In an equally innovative article, Mathias Krings compares Nollywood to *African Film* photo novels, which circulated throughout the continent in the 1960s and 1970s. He sees in both an attempt to use cheaper and more readily available media to create a surrogate for the continent's non-existent formal commercial film sector. The fact that Nollywood is currently attempting a return to the cinema, as a formal site of distribution and financial recuperation, suggests that Krings's argument has legs. We may credit video films with constructing a new kind of motion picture culture in Africa, but Nollywood's energy might have always derived from its interest in emulating an existing, but unavailable, motion picture culture—something “out there” in the world of formal, commercial entertainment. Although Krings's article is highly suggestive, it also muddies the waters of transmedial genre analysis. Unlike Bryce's sharp focus on the genre of romance and “femininity-as-sign,” Krings refers to the photo novel at various points as a “genre,” a “form,” and a “medium.” It is never quite clear which category of analysis invites the comparison with Nollywood. Are the types of stories found in photo novels, such as Lance Spearman detective stories, similar to Nollywood crime fictions? Does the impulse to narrate through images explain Nollywood's popularity? If so, what does it mean when the images move? Does a medium play an important role in the way that reader-spectators understand a text's generic qualities? Or is video film one genre and the photo novel another? Perhaps the hard-boiled detective story is a genre, but does it employ different modes of address across celluloid, photograph, and video? The lack of methodological specificity leaves these and other questions up in the air.

At the intersection of African literary and popular culture studies, Onitsha Market Literature makes a particularly useful site for disaggregating the terms that Krings uses. Named by scholars for its primary place of publication and exchange, Onitsha Market Literature is a formally, generically, and modally heterogeneous corpus of popular, commercial literary production that thrived in the 1950s and 1960s. It is also, by the way, ripe for transmedial comparison to Nollywood. For beyond the features of its narratives, which make heavy use of the melodramatic mode, Onitsha Market Literature resembles Nollywood in three significant structural aspects. For one, market literature was supported by informal economic systems very similar to those that enabled Nollywood's emergence.¹⁷ Secondly, market literature relied, like Nollywood, on eye-catching covers that clearly signaled the generic nature of the content within them. In fact, they were often sold alongside school materials, such as textbooks and notebooks, whereas video films have often been sold alongside a range of electronics and other compact discs. Thirdly, as Moradewun Adejunmobi has pointed out, Onitsha Market Literature and Nollywood both place a seemingly inexplicable emphasis on the English language.¹⁸ Adejunmobi's argument is multifaceted, but she primarily argues that both media are engaged in conceptualizing Nigerian modernity

17 Don Dodson, “The Role of the Publisher in Onitsha Market Literature,” *Research in African Literatures* 4.2 (1973): 172–88.

18 Moradewun Adejunmobi, “English and the Audience of an African Popular Culture: The Case of the Nigerian Video Film,” *Cultural Critique* 50 (2002): 85.

as a process dependent on languages of power, so that, even while the producers and their audiences may not have fully mastered it, English prevails in popular narratives because it remains central to their ideological projects.

Within the Onitsha Market Literature corpus, there are a number of analytical approaches and subcategories that might describe genre, but it seems unlikely that they all do because each is of a different order of classification. For example, one order of classification might be called formal, in that it describes, essentially, the shape or spatial arrangement of the text. The most prominent forms are what we might call novellas, histories, dramas, and advice or informational pamphlets. Many scholars, including Emmanuel Obiechina and Stephanie Newell, refer to the entirety of Onitsha Market output as “pamphlets,” but that practice may stem from the fact that nearly half of all the booklets fall into that formal category.¹⁹ Titles like *How to Marry a Good Girl and Live in Peace with Her*, *How to Make Meetings*, *How to Know Who Loves You and Hates You*, and *How to Write Successful Letters and Applications* exemplify the pamphlet form, which is usually characterized by a hybrid combination of short stories, enumerated lists, examples of love and business letters, dramatic skits, and essays. Within the pamphlet form, a small set of thematic preoccupations prevail. Some are concerned with the skills necessary for identifying and winning the affections of a marriageable woman, for which we might use the label “romance.” Some are concerned with mobilizing the skills attained in primary education—the level of education most writers and readers had achieved—toward landing a job in the emerging state bureaucracy. We might label the major thematic preoccupation of these texts as “professional.” And some pamphlets offer elementary instruction in the major Nigerian languages, which would have been useful for navigating the rapid expansion of urban, cosmopolitan life taking place when they were published. We might label these texts “linguistic” in their thematic preoccupations. What is key here is a distinction between form and the various thematic preoccupations it conveys.

Another major form of Onitsha Market Literature offers a narrative primarily through dialogue, divided into scenes, attributed to characters who are listed at the beginning of the publication. We might call this form “drama.” Many drama narratives in the Onitsha Market corpus deal with love and marriage, such as the well-known *Veronica, My Daughter*, so perhaps the thematic preoccupation of romance transcends forms within the corpus. Once again, however, the drama form is not collapsible with romance. There are also a number of historical, hagiographic dialogues, in which statesmen such as Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, and Nnamdi Azikiwe become characters in imagined versions of their lives. In addition to romance, therefore, the drama form may include “biography” as a major thematic preoccupation.

Other biographies, however, are presented in the form of historical narratives, in which past events are represented through prose as unembellished, academic facts. Prose texts tend to follow a clear system for the use of conventions like sentences, paragraphs, and punctuation. They use description and explanation to narrate, as

19 Emmanuel Obiechina, *An African Popular Literature: A Study of Onitsha Market Pamphlets* (London, England: Cambridge University Press, 1971); Stephanie Newell, “Devotion and Domesticity: The Reconfiguration of Gender in Popular Christian Pamphlets from Ghana and Nigeria,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35.1 (2005): 296–323.

much or more than dialogue. And their form is consistent throughout, with no lists, letters, or short drama scenes inserted. Similar books in this form describe small communities, such as the southwestern town of Ijebu-Ode. Nonetheless, these prose narratives about real people and places constitute a small fraction of the overall output. The vast majority of the prose narratives found in market literature are semi-realist fictions of moderate length, or “novellas,” which are dominated by stories about the affective relationships between men and women, once again signaling a thematic preoccupation with romance. In my study of approximately one hundred examples, I have come across only one market novella, *The Gentle Giant* “Alakuku,” that has a thematic preoccupation other than romance—it is presented as a biography, but not clearly of a real person—yet it still includes a brief section on the protagonist’s marriage. Therefore, among the major *forms* of Onitsha Market Literature—pamphlet, drama, history, and novella—there are many distinct thematic preoccupations, some of which transcend form, such as romance.

Besides form and thematic preoccupation, Onitsha Market Literature also requires that we deal with other orders of classification that might imply genre. For example, the material properties of the texts—the substance from which they are made or the technology that transmits them—must also be considered. After all, film and literature are often described as two different genres, suggesting that genre and medium are collapsible terms. But all Onitsha Market Literature appeared in one medium, print, and there are just so many other ways to classify the texts that genre would do little work conceptually if it implied medium. In other media ecologies, things can be even more complicated. In contemporary film, for example, celluloid is clearly a medium, but many of us never encounter it; rather, we encounter digital reproductions of it. Some of us may watch the digital reproduction of a celluloid film on a large screen in a cinema, while others will view a similar digital reproduction on a small(er) screen at home. The same film (Is it the same?) is, therefore, transmitted via different material and technological processes. Meanwhile, video is distinct from celluloid, but it too can be digitally reproduced for large and small screens. Does a text therefore change genre when it changes medium? Or is each an example of one medium, the motion picture, which is less material than conceptual? One’s answer might depend on what kind of study one is interested in pursuing, but the underlying distinctions can never be fully resolved. Furthermore, the classificatory order of medium does not directly overlap with form or thematic preoccupation. One medium, print, can offer any number of forms, many of which might share a similar thematic preoccupation. And as Bryce’s work has already established, one thematic preoccupation can appear across at least two different media.

Another term often used in the systematic analysis of textual configurations is *mode*, which is not, on its face, of a different order than medium, form, or theme. In the world of Nigerian popular culture, however, one kind of film text invites particular kinds of transmedial comparison, which may help elucidate the concept of mode. Specifically, Yoruba-language video films have a genealogy in the Yoruba traveling theater movement, which lasted from roughly the 1940s to the 1980s in southwestern Nigeria. Different troupes had different styles, though they all, generally speaking, delivered popular performances of stories grounded either in contemporary anxieties and fantasies, or in the mythical traditions of Yoruba religious discourse.

Indeed, the transmedial analysis of Yoruba video films, Yoruba traveling theater, and Yoruba oral traditions is potentially one of the most productive in African film and popular culture studies.

In the early days of Yoruba-language video film production, the publics convened by films may have been more-or-less the same publics convened by traveling theater. After all, some of the very first Yoruba films produced on video were screened in the very same venues—including churches and civic centers—which had once hosted traveling theater performances. That moment, however, was short-lived. Soon, the primary method of consuming Yoruba video films—like all Nigerian video films—was to buy or rent a tape from a vendor and screen it at home, using a television. The change in medium, therefore, was accompanied by a radical change in the composition of the publics convened by the narratives, from relatively large, civic publics to relatively small, domestic ones. Wole Ogundele argues that the formal attributes of the narratives changed, too. As he frames it, Yoruba video films depend on a fraught inscription of “pseudorealism” and hypermasculinism, which inflate class and gender distinctions and push their characters to the edge of a moral precipice.²⁰ Karin Barber’s seminal work on the Yoruba traveling theater suggests, however, that these class-conditioned and gendered moral precipices were well-worn devices.²¹ It seems that video films and traveling theater actually share rather than diverge according to a mode of address we might call “melodramatic.” Regardless, it is the comparison of the two media that raises the issue. “Mode” surfaces as a way of describing the narrative elements that are emphasized or deemphasized by certain stylistic choices, meaning that the narrative addresses itself to its audience in a particular way. Language, register, characterization, and plot open up space for the text’s public to identify with and enter into that narrative’s fictional field.

Medium, form, and mode, therefore, are of different orders—one material, one spatial (but also spatio-temporal in the case of a medium like film, sound recording, or oral performance), and one vectorial—but they all refer to some way in which a text is configured. Meanwhile, the thematic preoccupations of a text have less to do with what the text is, than what it is *about*. Of course, configuration and theme converge, intersect, and reinforce one another in various specific ways, but they are not entirely collapsible. The order of textual classification covered by the concept of “about,” therefore, is the order I want to mark for questions of genre, particularly when it comes to transmedial analysis. As we have seen, a thematic preoccupation with human sexual affective relationships can appear across media, forms, and modes. Perhaps, then, the genre we call romance supersedes various media and the ways they are configured—into feature films, novels, poems, television programs, documentaries, and so forth. But is romance not also a theme? And, therefore, do “genre” and “theme” not mean precisely the same thing?

One of the Nollywood genres identified by Haynes is what he calls the “diaspora” genre. As he argues, films set outside of Nigeria, for one reason or another, “clearly constitute a genre (though it does not have a generally accepted name), with a typical

20 Wole Ogundele, “From Folk Opera to Soap Opera: Improvisations and Transformations in Yoruba Popular Theater,” *Nigerian Video Films*, ed. Jonathan Haynes (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000), 108–29.

21 Karin Barber, *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theater* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000).

setting, formal features, story arc, and moral and psychological themes.”²² This may be Haynes’s clearest description of the order of textual classification by which he conceptualizes genre, and it includes what I have already separated into different orders, including “formal features,” and “themes.” My point, however, is not to quibble with Haynes’s description (which is geared to his purposes, as mine is to mine, which may be a most important caveat to make about genre studies more generally); rather, I want to draw attention to the idea that one major preoccupation of films that participate in—or “constitute,” as Haynes writes—the diaspora genre is the experience of Nigerians outside of Nigeria. Within that preoccupation, a range of what Haynes calls “moral and psychological themes” is pursued, including alienation, exploitation, and community, as well as twenty-six others that he charts.²³ Theme, therefore, seems to be of a very different order than genre. It may describe something about a text, but it alone does not account for the major preoccupations of the text, nor to the uses that such preoccupations might be put by the audience. Indeed, the idea of a diaspora genre in Nollywood is particularly important for drawing attention to the site-specific nature of genres. Unlike romance, which may be global, the diaspora genre has a particular use for Nigerian, and perhaps pan-African, audiences. Of course, romance does, too. It is simply the case that any genre, no matter how widespread, must be considered in terms of the ways that, as a particular set of unstable, amorphous, overlapping, but nonetheless observable thematic preoccupations, it is constituted socially. It would seem that thematic preoccupations crop up among various texts and get repeated—particularly in commercial entertainment—because they do a particular kind of work for people.

Finally, the fact that genres are unstable, amorphous, and overlapping is not incompatible with the idea that they have major thematic preoccupations, or reducible to the idea that they may treat any number of themes. As film genre theorist Steve Neal has argued, drawing on the work of Jurij Tynyanov, texts exhibit many generic features, but one or two features may play dominant and organizing roles in the text, aligning that text with a particular set of genre categories.²⁴ It is for this reason that we use multiple genre terms for specific texts, or that specific texts seem to straddle what would otherwise be the arbitrary boundaries of various genres. As Olney’s work with the Netflix data set suggests, readers, spectators, and listeners have a number of genres to distribute over texts and may do so in many different combinations. What remains is to understand how that process is social and contextual. And what can we know about the social by studying texts in light of the idea that everything we think we know about genre—based on our studies of previous texts, paratexts, and contexts—actually begins with people and their ideological impulses?

Positioning the Spectator

In his concise and evocative introductory guide, *Genre*, John Frow writes that “genres create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, which are central

²² Haynes, *Nollywood*, 237.

²³ *Ibid.*, 242–43.

²⁴ Jurij Tynyanov, “On Literary Evolution,” *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, eds. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1978), 66–78.

to the different ways the world is understood.”²⁵ This could easily be a definition of ideology, and Frow subsequently falls back on the traditional centrality of texts in describing this process, calling them “uses” of genre. Frow also attributes to texts the ability to do things like constitute worlds, which is no doubt an important way of understanding their role in culture. Texts make the world by representing it, which is indeed part of the way the world is made or, at least, made meaningful. Frow gets even more systematic, however, by stipulating that:

In calling this story a “world” I don’t mean to imply that it is a *complete* world, the infinitely complex totality of everything that exists. This is a schematic world, a limited piece of reality, which is sketched in outline and carved out from a larger continuum. It has its own coordinates of space and time. . . . This world is populated by specific players . . . and infused with a moral ethos which brings with it certain attitudes to these players.²⁶

This kind of “schematic” world is also implied in my interpretation of Olney’s work, but Olney’s work actually suggests that genre is constituted through the schematic understanding available to and produced by its readers, spectators, and listeners. Indeed, the process Frow is describing could be turned around to precisely describe the ideological encoding of the world that people perform every day. Of course, the process is probably mutually constitutive. Simultaneous procedures of textual encoding and audience decoding are taking place at once, but we must also consider the possibility that audiences are themselves powerful textual encoders. In stressing the ideological impulses of spectators, as made legible by their work as members of an audience—which therefore reveals usage patterns—I am seeking merely to redistribute the power in this wide generative context (schematic as it may be).

I retain in my understanding of ideology, much like W.J.T. Mitchell does in *Iconology*, a strong affinity for its classical Marxist definition, while also acknowledging that ideology is, in fact, part of the very structure of consciousness, of subjectivity, and therefore cannot be encapsulated by, or ultimately transcend some kind of “false consciousness.”²⁷ It may very well be true that human consciousness would cease to function (as we know it) without a structured orientation to reality that is laden with values and interests, and indeed politics. For example, one of the principle ideological orientations of modern subjects is to modernity itself, or to our understanding of our relationship with the now as opposed to the then. We do not simply apprehend this orientation, but we place ourselves in it as we apprehend it. Our position necessarily implies certain values and generates certain interests. Ideology, therefore, is not merely a lens, but an impulse. It is a motivation as it is simultaneously an interpretation. Through ideology we constitute the world under conditions we never had the chance to select.

Our ideological impulses are many, sometimes contradictory and often overlapping. When we consume a text, we do not simply filter it through ideology, but—in the terms implied by Olney—we distribute ideology over the texts. Some impulses will

25 John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2.

26 *Ibid.*, 7–8, emphasis in original.

27 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1986).

cover the bulk of a text, but others will cover parts. Take, for example, the famous Nollywood comedy *Osuofia in London* (2003), which is also described by Haynes as a diaspora film. In it, a poor hunter, Osuofia (Nkem Owoh), who has no experience beyond his village, is sent to London to retrieve an inheritance. Once he lands there, the film generates a series of hilarious gags from the classic country-bumpkin-in-the-city theme. Osuofia violates metropolitan norms, while immoral denizens of the metropolis prey upon his innocence. Osuofia, however, is a trickster—unwittingly, but successfully defying the forces that conspire against him. Some critics lament Osuofia’s hypervisible backwardness as a poor representation of modern Africa, whereas others celebrate his confidence and subversion of, or even indifference to, an ethics of representation.²⁸ The fact that *Osuofia in London* is often considered Nollywood’s most successful film suggests that, were it to be rated, its likability index would be high. Yet how would the spectators who like the film distribute their ideological impulses over it in ways that constitute genre?

We can begin at the end and work backward. The two genre designations often applied to the film, comedy and diaspora, may be epiphenomena of the ideological impulses brought to bear on it. Critics can therefore consider whether Osuofia’s story is likable primarily because he makes people laugh, or perhaps because of his geopolitical mobility. In the case of the former, Osuofia is a stock character, a “bushman,” who may be funny precisely because he is less sophisticated than his spectator. Humor, as cognitive neuroscience suggests, is a means of dealing with incongruity.²⁹ And Osuofia is incongruous because he is unmodern in a modern world. Adejunmobi has described this kind of humor as a way of positioning the spectator, in this case as quintessentially modern, which generates a certain kind of pleasure in a place like Nigeria where, whether it is factually true or not, one may never take one’s modern status for granted.³⁰ More than pleasurable, however, the construction of modernity is of course ideological. It bends to an impulse constitutive of the spectator who is in the process of generating a conscious assessment of her or his own constantly shifting relationship to modernity. Simply put, the spectator likes the way that Osuofia makes her feel modern, and stably so. This process of liking is critically significant because it is based on a large number of genuine laughs. In terms of the way I am employing Olney’s model, then, the film becomes a comedy—a good one, with high ideals of enjoyment—because spectators distribute an ideological impulse associated with incongruously unmodern modernity generously over the film. Comedy itself, therefore, may be fundamentally ideological, a rather conservative impulse to flatten out incongruity, but the more thoroughly descriptive language for the impulse on display here might be “comic unmodernity,” and indeed that might point to the best genre designation for the film. In Nigeria, this impulse has been distributed over dozens of films featuring the Osuofia character and others like him, including Mr. Ibu, Jenifa, and Bishop.

28 See Onookome Okome, “Reversing the Filmic Gaze: Comedy and the Critique of the Postcolony in *Osuofia in London*,” *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry*, eds. Mathias Kings and Onookome Okome (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 2013), 139–57.

29 Matthew M. Hurley, Daniel C. Dennett, and Reginald B. Adams, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).

30 Moradewun Adejunmobi, “Intersecting Parallels” (roundtable hosted by the Mellon Workshop on “New Media and Mass/Popular Culture from the Global South,” Madison, Wisconsin, April 16, 2013).

In the case of *Osuofia*'s mobility, however, it may not be the comedy so much as the ability to cross borders and interact with various features of London that makes the story appealing. Spectators would be positioned less as *Osuofia*'s superiors than his peers, taking part in the experience of navigating a foreign city and discovering a certain kind of cultural self-consciousness. This process bends to the ideological impulse to see one's self as a liberal citizen, as someone who may not have knowledge of the world but has the right to explore it anyhow. Here, spectators might be composed of liberal political ideals—whether or not they actually promote or have the opportunity to practice those ideals—which they distribute over narratives dealing with borders and movement.

If a ratings-based likability system were in operation in Nollywood, and if it functioned as Olney speculates, perhaps *Osuofia in London* would generate three stars for the comedy-of-unmodernity genre and two for the diaspora genre, but it would almost certainly register very high on the likability scale—a four- for five-star film—given its well-documented popularity. Moreover, the fact that it registers so high might suggest that not only is it a strong example of comic unmodernity and a solid example of foreign travel, but that the two reinforce each other. *Osuofia*'s mobility is remarkable not simply in spite of, but in fact because of his hilarious distance from modernity. Whereas the liberal citizen has a right to the modern world, she also has obligations to it. *Osuofia* spurns those obligations in ways that no modern subject ever would, but at which every modern subject would like to laugh.

Osuofia in London spawned a wave of copycat video films in the early 2000s, suggesting that the ideological impulses it attracted are widespread and durable. As such, the members of the publics convened by each of the subsequent texts likely share greater and lesser degrees of intersecting ideological impulses. It is in this way that texts not only attract spectators, but that texts come together in groups and spectators come together in social units. Altman describes these kinds of social units, in which individuals often do not see or know one another, as “constellated communities.”³¹ Genres cannot exist without these communities, which further suggests that, even if texts convene publics, publics make genres.

As a methodological intervention, the concept of “ideological impulses,” may not be particularly radical. As a way of fine-tuning the language we use when we discuss genres, however, the concept may prove useful. If people are a “mixture of genres,” and if genres are ideological impulses—meaning that people are a mixture of ideological impulses—and if people distribute their ideological impulses over texts, producing what critics have long intuited as genres, then the genres we are faced with are, in fact, the ideological impulses of people. Rather than writing about comedies or diaspora films, which frame the world in a particular way, we can write about—for example—the impulse to claim modernity, which claims certain texts as useful in certain ways. What other texts are used for similar purposes? What do they tell us about the context of consumption? What politics seem to be meaningful to spectators? Even if it is speculative, a method oriented toward usage patterns can focus attention on these kinds of questions. Ultimately, the questions may not depose the text-king, but they might suggest the vulnerability of the text-king, that his rule is in fact a kind of service and that it may be extended or revoked at the pleasure of the people.

31 Altman, *Film/Genre*, 163–64.