

The Video Film Industry

Having watched *Diabolo* in the Rex Cinema in December of 1991, I was eager to speak to William Akuffo, who had produced, directed, and edited the movie. Since I stayed mainly in the Volta region, it took some months before we met (in June 1992) in a small room, furnished with a TV and video deck, at the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC). Although Akuffo had no formal link with this institution, the GFIC premises were the obvious place to meet with anyone involved in movie production. Intending to further analyze the movie, I was eager to get a copy that I could take home to the Netherlands. Since the movie had been shot with a video camera, I expected that a request for a copy of the cassette would not be problematic. This was not the case. Akuffo had one “master” tape (the immediate product of editing) and a limited number of copies of the film that were used in exhibition. Precisely because the technological properties of video made it easy to copy and pirate cassettes—this happened on a large scale with foreign movies that were sent home by Ghanaians abroad—Akuffo made sure that he was in control of the way the copies were used. At that time video movies were screened only in cinema houses, and there was no possibility to buy copies anywhere in town. Akuffo or his assistants would take a copy to the venue where the movie was to be screened, count the number of viewers to make sure he would receive the producer’s share of the admission fee, and then take the cassette home after the show. Having explained my motivation as a researcher and perhaps having impressed Akuffo a bit with my interpretation and the prospect of his being discussed in a scholarly article, I eventually gained his trust and received a copy of the cassette. When we met again in 1996 and my article featuring his movie had appeared (Meyer 1995; see also Wendl 1999), he told me that many of the other filmmakers had declared him

crazy for giving a copy of his cassette to an unknown lady, who could easily abuse his trust and pirate the film.

I mention this early encounter with Akuffo—long before I started my actual research on the video scene in 1996—to make clear that the technological characteristics of the medium of video, rather than determining a particular use, offer a range of possibilities that are subject to negotiation (see also Spielmann 2008). In other words the affordances of video technology entail certain constraining and yet not fixed possibilities for action that enable a particular use (Hutchby 2001). Initially, producers had no interest in selling home-video cassettes to the public. Instead, video was hailed as a technology that could be adopted in the realm of cinema and operate as a substitute for celluloid. While the easy accessibility, cheapness, and portability of video technology were welcomed, the intrinsic possibility for mass reproduction was a constant source of worry for producers who wanted to hold this reproduction in check. As Brian Larkin put it in his thought-provoking study of media technologies and urban imaginary in Nigeria, “What media are, needs to be interrogated, not presumed” (Larkin 2008, 3). The point, then, is to explore the nexus of technical affordances, the meanings attached to the technologies, their aesthetics, and their use in a particular social setting.

This chapter traces the rise of the video industry and follows its development until 2010. After setting the scene with a brief sketch of colonial and postindependence cinema, I distinguish three major shifts that transformed practices of movie production, distribution, and consumption: (1) the rise of video and the end of state film production, entailing the sale of the GFIC to a Malaysian private company in November 1996 (mid-1980s–1996); (2) the transition from reliance on hitherto state-run venues for movie (post)production and exhibition to the rise of a new commercial field, bringing about a shift from cinema screenings to the marketing of home videos (late 1996–2001); and (3) the phenomenal popularity of Nigerian movies, implying the transition from video to VCD (a cheap alternative to DVD) and from analog to digital (2002–10). Video technology, as this chapter will show, entailed new possibilities for shared popular imaginaries to evolve and become public in a way that was no longer fully controlled by the state yet all the same was shaped and constrained by older social-political uses of cinema, which placed strong emphasis on film as promoting the moral education of the nation. There was no clear and immediate break with state cinema after the adoption of video; rather, a set of gradual transitions emerged, yielding new contradic-

tions, constraints, and possibilities that have characterized the industry over the past thirty years.

CELLULOID CINEMA IN THE COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL PERIODS

Cinema in Colonial Ghana: 1920s–1957

For informed discussion on the film industry in Ghana today, a detailed history of the industry still needs to be written.¹ Available historical documents indicate that the first cinema in the Gold Coast, the Cinematographic Palace, was opened in 1913 by the British company John Holt Bartholomew Ltd. in Accra (Pinther 2010, 94).² Then in 1922 the Palladium Cinema opened its doors to the viewing public. The fact that Palladium served as a dance hall for the local elite (Prais 2014) shows that, at the time, cinema was at the center of modern urban entertainment. Its owner, John Ocansey, a wealthy Ga who also founded the first Ghanaian bank, set up more theaters in other parts of the country (Mensah 1989, 9). In the course of the 1930s Ocansey, Bartholomew, and other entrepreneurs deployed cinema vans to tour the countryside (especially the cocoa-growing areas). Films were imported from India, America, and Britain. Usually, they were split into sections, so that screening a full movie took three or four nights (Mensah 1989, 9). In the 1930s, when synchronized dialogue was becoming the norm in new movie productions, most films shown in the Gold Coast were still “silent,” because for technical reasons many cinemas could not play the sound that went with “talkies.” Some people were employed to interpret film episodes into English and the local languages. Regarding the exhibition of movies as part of legitimate commercial activities, up to the 1940s the colonial administration interfered with the field of cinema solely through censorship and taxes (which were paid according to the length of a film).

In the initial period of the establishment of cinema, the Gold Coast colonial administration did not regard film as a vehicle for addressing the “natives.” Tellingly, in a response to a report of the Colonial Films Committee dispatched via the Colonial Office in London in 1931, the acting governor expressed his doubts about the effectiveness of employing film in the service of education: “Local cinematograph proprietors maintain that educational or cultural films do not attract audiences and that they are compelled to depend more or less entirely on the more thrilling or amusing type of film to ensure

satisfactory attendance.”³ In response to a request to report on “the influence, good and bad, that cinema has on backward races in the countries directly and indirectly under your control,” the secretary for native affairs and the director of education wrote a memorandum in 1933 that states that there were six cinema halls in the Gold Coast, showing about 180 films a month. Both authors stressed that there was “careful censorship” (as the archival files show, at times this evoked protests on the part of exhibitors) and that “there is no reason to think that the films exhibited locally have any moral effect demoralizing or otherwise.” Only a small percentage of the population had access to movies, and films had “but little influence on the audiences.”⁴ In 1938 there were eleven cinematograph theaters listed (five of them located in Accra and the others in cocoa-growing and gold mining areas).

Only at the beginning of World War II did the colonial administration adopt the medium of film as a means of education and promotion of the colonial project.⁵ Subsequently, the British Ministry for Information acquired the rights to show films, which were supplied “free of charge to Colonial Governments,”⁶ and its Information Services Department produced and distributed films considered suitable to local colonial settings. Established in the Gold Coast in 1940, this department made use of cinema vans to organize film shows in the rural and urban areas, where it would assemble people in open-air spaces “to show documentary films and newsreels to explain the colonial government’s policies to people in towns and villages free of charge” (Sakyi 1996, 9). An important feature of these open-air film screenings was propaganda films about the war produced by the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) in London (see also Diawara 1992, 3). Commercial cinema owners were required to screen CFU movies in addition to their own programming. Since watching movies was gradually becoming a popular leisure activity, in 1932, a Lebanese, Salim Captan, established Captan Cinema Company and ventured into the film industry by acquiring the Palladium Cinema; later it bought all the other cinema houses previously owned by Ocansey. In 1940 Salim Captan opened Opera Cinema and later a number of new cinema theaters in Accra (including Olympia, Orion, and Oxford), Kumasi, and some important towns in the cocoa-growing areas.⁷ Another Lebanese company, West Africa Pictures Limited, ran cinema houses in Accra, including the Plaza, Rex, Royal, Regal, and Roxy. In 1950 the Indian Nankani family also opened a number of cinemas in Kumasi. These exhibition companies also engaged in film distribution and shared movies with each other.

After the war the CFU also started to produce educational films and a number of feature movies that were screened in Britain's African colonies. Contrasting the Western and African way of life, these movies presented the former as an embodiment of "civilization" and the latter as "backward" and "superstitious" customs to be abandoned (see Diawara 1992, 3; 1994, 44–48; see also Larkin 2008, 73–122, on colonial cinema in Nigeria). Film thus was closely related to governmental and imperial interests and employed to create loyal subjects. Placing film in the service of "civilization," the CFU was suspicious of Western movies—especially of American origin—that ridiculed or undermined the sense of Western superiority that the colonial power sought to convey to Africans (Diawara 1992, 1; Bloom 2008, 150). At the same time, as cinema operators continued to show foreign movies, film screening was never fully controlled by the colonial authorities; the latter were even obliged to at least partly give in to audiences' yearning for entertainment and show them their beloved Charlie Chaplin or cowboy movies after a number of educational films made by the CFU had been screened.⁸ From the 1950s, cinema started booming, spreading into the popular neighborhoods and traditional Ga areas in Accra and exposing viewers to mainly foreign films (Pinther 2010, 101–2). Many of the cinema houses built at that time were open-air and stood for a modern form of commercialized leisure that addressed more or less anonymous strangers as a new urban public.

The Gold Coast Film Unit (founded in 1948 as part of the Information Services Department), which was to produce local educational films, took up themes perceived to be particularly relevant to the Gold Coast (Bloom and Skinner 2009–10; Mensah 1989, 11). These movies, too, were to serve colonial interests, and the focus was on promoting "purposes of better health, better crops, better living, better marketing and better human co-operation in the colonies" (Middleton-Mends 1995, 1; see also Diawara 1992, 5). As these objectives were thought to be best achieved "on the native soil with native characters" (Middleton-Mends 1995, 1), the unit trained African filmmakers. With the exception of one feature film, *The Boy Kumasenu* (Bloom and Skinner 2009–10; Garritano 2013, 33–46) all these films were newsreels and documentaries. As Mensah concludes: "So films mainly on subjects like the 'Police' and others bordering on law and order were produced to influence the people to respect the orders of the colonial government. Quite a few documentaries were however designed to educate on health, agriculture, civic responsibilities and current affairs" (Mensah 1989, 12; see also Morton-Williams 1953 for his study of audience receptions of these movies; and Meyer

2003a: 205–7). Also, as Kodjo Senah told me, there were quite a lot of advertisements—for instance for Barclays Bank or toothpaste from Lever Brothers—that promoted British products.

As the medium and mediator of colonialism, colonial films clearly were meant above all to “educate” the people. Film was to contribute to the colonial effort to produce a new kind of colonial subject who would acknowledge British superiority and agree to be “civilized” while resisting the dangers of modernity, especially the immorality of the city, the drive for selfish riches, and the discarding of family ties (Bloom and Skinner 2009–10). Nonetheless, colonial cinema cannot be reduced to these aims. Starting as a commercial enterprise, cinema generated a new audience with clear preferences for entertainment rather than “education” (as advocated by CFU films) and contributed to the rise of leisure and a new urban public culture (see Akyeampong and Ambler 2002; Barber 1997a; Martin 1995; Pinther 2010, 100). Thus, from the outset, cinema in Ghana was characterized by tensions between education, as propagated by the colonial authorities, and the realm of entertainment, as perceived by local populations. While colonial authorities did not oppose entertainment, per se, they were suspicious of certain aspects of commercial cinema. Offering, as Prais (2014, 202) puts it, “new vocabularies and images of modernity,” as well as lessons to perform it, cinema emerged together with a deeply moral discourse about the virtues and dangers of film (see also Larkin 2008).

Cinema in Independent Ghana: 1957 to Mid-1980s

After independence in 1957, the Gold Coast Film Unit was transformed into the Ghana Film Unit and, in 1961, renamed the Ghana Film Production Corporation (Mensah 1989, 41).⁹ The main purpose of cinema being educational, there was a clear continuity between colonial and postcolonial policies. Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah (1957–66), attributed much importance to the medium of film in “educating,” “uplifting,” and “enlightening” the population and “explaining” state institutions, health interventions, and other policies to the young nation. Above all, film was to contribute to the emergence and consolidation of a national culture and identity. The ideal spectator addressed by state cinema discourse was a loyal subject, grounded in Nkrumah’s vision of “African personality” (Nkrumah 1964; Hagan 1993; Schramm 2000, 340–41). This entailed pride in indigenous cultural roots and trust in the role of the government as the key instance for

safeguarding African culture and identity. Film was to operate in line with Nkrumah's cultural policy of *Sankofa*. Referring to the Akan image of a bird turning its head backward—meaning “go back and take”—Sankofa came to stand for a politics of culture that proudly incorporates certain traditional cultural forms and values as a means to move forward. Highlighting the importance of the past, Sankofa nonetheless stresses the importance of progress, the point being to bring together development and African cultural traditions (instead of opposing them, as had been the case in colonial times). In this regard film not only exemplified modern technology but also signified modernity itself and was found to be a particularly powerful means to conjoin African culture and modern “development.”

Whereas in colonial times film exhibition had been in private hands and exhibitors were obliged to have their movies approved by the censorship board and (after 1940) to show a number of educational movies at the request of the colonial administration, Nkrumah sought to bring film exhibition fully under state control. In 1962 the state purchased the hitherto private West Africa Pictures Limited company and fused it with the Ghana Film Production Corporation, giving birth to the Ghana Film Industry Corporation, which combined film production, exhibition, and distribution. In 1965 the GFIC was renamed the State Film Industry Corporation (SFC) (Mensah 1989, 41). The industry was located in the modern neighborhood of Kanda, which also hosted the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) and a number of government institutions, as well as modern private homes. In principle, as I will show in this chapter, Nkrumah's vision for film has continued to underpin the state discourse about and policies toward cinema. After he was overthrown in 1966, the cinema houses bought from West Africa Pictures remained state property, and the Cinematograph Act, passed in 1961 to regulate the exhibition and censorship of films, was retained until the emergence of video technology called for new policies.¹⁰

In the aftermath of the introduction of television in 1965, the government diverted the bulk of funds for filmmaking to the GBC, which was in charge of radio and television. Because of the deplorable state of the economy, the state invested little in filmmaking. In 1971 the SFC was again renamed the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC). Between 1948 and 1996, the year of the sale of the GFIC, the GFIC and its predecessors (the Gold Coast Film Unit and SFC) produced 385 newsreels and 200 documentaries but only 13 feature films on celluloid (Sakyi 1996, 13). Although the need for decent, locally made information and feature films was emphasized, alongside its

newsreels the GFIC actually screened American, European, Indian, and Chinese films. From the outset the realization of a fully state-run and state-controlled national cinema industry was hampered by lack of funds, which prevented a significant production of local movies. Even though the GFIC at least partly controlled exhibition and distribution, to make money it was necessary to cater to the expectations of the audiences in the GFIC theaters, many of whom loved foreign movies. As far as exhibition and distribution were concerned, the GFIC operated *de facto* in ways similar to commercial film exhibitors and distributors such as Nankani and Captan.¹¹

The lack of locally produced feature movies was compensated for by a strong mobilization of the state discourse on cinema as education. Against this backdrop it is necessary to avoid confounding state discourse and policies with the actual world of film production, distribution, and exhibition. As sketched in the previous section, an urban audience attending commercial cinema had existed since the early twentieth century, and there were private and state cinemas all over Accra (as well as in other cities and cocoa-growing areas). In her evocative travelogue on her visit to Ghana, Jane Rouch (1964, 183–84), wife of anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch, offers a short but vivid description of cinema. Reporting the tremendous appeal of movies involving love, action, and magic, which went “straight to the heart,” she noted that the screen virtually dissolved, drawing the audiences into the cinematic world.

There was a hierarchy of cinemas, with Globe Cinema and Rex Cinema ranking on top. In these theaters visitors were supposed to follow a dress code and behave civilly—meaning that they would sit and watch quietly. In contrast, cinemas located in popular or traditional Ga areas did not maintain dress codes or enforce restrained behavior. The GFIC-affiliated filmmaker Ernest Abbeyquaye told me, “If you didn’t want to behave, not be restricted, you went to the Opera, where you could scream as much as you liked.”¹² This also held true for the Palladium, Regal, and Plaza. In these cinema houses people would shout, stand up, whistle, stand in front of the screen, or tell the projectionists to hold on for a while because they needed to have their laugh before the film continued. If not pleased, audiences would shout obscenities in Ga at the operator such as “onyaa ye . . .” (meaning “your mother’s . . .”), throw tomatoes when something went wrong or they disliked the movie, or even (threaten to) destroy the furniture.¹³ Movie watching was a highly interactive and lively affair. Many persons I interviewed stated that the different “classes” of cinemas attracted different “classes” of people, with different

tastes and viewing behaviors. In the popular venues people would bring drums, which were beaten when there was exciting action on the screen.

Telling is the account of Kofi Middleton-Mends, a well-known actor and teacher at the National Film and Television Institute (NAFTI). He told me that in the 1970s, when he once went to watch a movie in the Royal Cinema at Labadi, he recognized for the first time the differentiation of cinema venues according to social class:

I had never entered that place; I had been to the Rex, Roxy, and Plaza, which is close to my house. But I had never been to the Royal. One evening, I drove there with my car and I went and parked there; I wanted to see the film there. The man at the gate said, "Oh, Master, what do you want here? Master, this place is not for you. The film will come to the Rex soon, so you watch it there." I did not fit in with the character of the people and left. So people are very class-conscious, they know that at the Rex Cinema another type of people comes, and the rates are higher there. Troublemakers and riffraff, if I may say so, were not there; they knew it was not a place for them.¹⁴

In vogue in these popular venues were Hollywood movies, especially cowboy movies and Indian films, as well as films on boxing, kung fu, and other martial arts. The state discourse on film as being in the service of education was far removed from actual practices of watching in the popular cinemas. Here, people came to have fun and entertainment and were eager to see (and shout along with) fighting scenes. For those adopting a view on film as education, these venues embodied the wild side of cinema, where people were exposed to the worst of foreign cultural influences. Criticism of cinema was not confined to state instances. Also within popular neighborhoods there was a discourse on the cinema as immoral and dubious (see also Larkin 2008). Church leaders frowned on attending these dark and rough venues, and many parents forbade their kids to go there. Ironically, in the course of the 1990s many of these cinema halls became places of worship for Pentecostal-charismatic churches.

Notwithstanding its actual participation in exhibiting foreign films and in catering to the needs of audiences in its popular cinema venues, the GFIC continued to produce an extensive discourse on the proper and morally sound use of cinema that condemned the bulk of foreign movies as having a bad influence that would induce local audiences to mimic the errant behavior they displayed. Summarizing the rationale behind the GFIC effort, Kwamina Sakyi mentions that it sought to "promote the ethical state, personality, and

culture of the African and to give them a wide international exposure,” and to “help remedy the harm that Western media, particularly film, has done and continues to do to the African through the presentation of distorted pictures and information about him and manipulation of his mind” (Sakyi 1996, 2). This view about the need to produce alternative images of Africans for the world and to counter the negative influence of foreign films by promoting African culture and personality has been central to the state discourse on cinema up to the present. This discourse also underpinned the establishment in 1978, with the support of the German Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, of NAFTI, which offered professional training in all aspects of filmmaking and was legally bound to produce educational films. After 1978 many members of the technical staff of the GFIC were trained at NAFTI. In the state discourse on cinema, audiences were seen as copycats who were prone to reenact what they watched onscreen—hence the need, as also emphasized by the censorship board, to make sure that inappropriate behavior is punished right within the movie plot. Imported movies were accused not only of glorifying immorality but also of leading people astray from their cultural identity, both as Ghanaians and as Africans.

I will return to the vision of moral education adopted by the censorship board in chapter 3; for the moment, however, I want to stress that these ideas about desirable African movies existed in a void. Notwithstanding all the criticisms of the potentially alienating and dangerous effects of foreign movies, African art films, of the kind that thrived to some extent and have been celebrated in francophone settings, were virtually absent in Ghana. An important exception is Kwaw Ansah,¹⁵ who produced and directed the internationally acclaimed film *Love Brewed in an African Pot* (1980), which won the Oumarou Grand Prize (FESPACO). The movie explores the clash between alienating colonial mind-sets and local culture, reflected in a difficult love relation between an ordinary fisherman and an educated girl whose father initially strongly opposes their marriage. In Ghana *Love Brewed* has been tremendously popular. During the 1980s, it was screened many times in high- and low-class cinemas (Mensah 1989, 67; Collatos 2010, 26), and a lot of people whom I interviewed during my research still spoke passionately about it.¹⁶ In the wake of the emergence of video films, Kwaw Ansah became one of the most outspoken local critics. All the same, many of my interlocutors in the video industry referred to *Love Brewed* as a stimulating example that showed that local audiences were interested in movies made in and about Africa. Video filmmakers took the fact that this movie even contained a

quite spectacular witchcraft scene as a confirmation that depictions of spirits and the realm of the occult, which became one of the targets of criticism of video films, were generally acceptable. Until the emergence of video, no other African-made film had received similar attention. In cinemas and on television (which became more widely accessible in the 1980s), foreign films were dominant,¹⁷ while the state cinema discourse kept on telling its own same story. The tension between this discourse and actual viewing practices was further exacerbated with the video boom that implied the influx of foreign movies on an unprecedented scale.

**VIDEO IN THE VACUUM OF STATE CINEMA:
MID-1980S TO 1996**

In the first years of the military regime of J.J. Rawlings (1981–92) curfews and lack of resources affected public entertainment such as attending concert parties, musical performances, plays, and cinema and made people turn to television. Consequently, in this period hundreds of small video libraries and neighborhood video theaters sprang up in the suburbs of major urban centers. Quickly it was realized that video technology enabled more than easy access to foreign films. Various video enterprises were founded that recorded major family occasions, such as funerals and weddings, for a fee and thus facilitated communication between Ghanaians at home and abroad. Ghanaians in the diaspora used video recordings of funerals of dead relations at home to organize similar funerals in their countries of residence. More important, however, video was also appreciated as a useful means for making local movies.

Allen Gyimah, a trader in secondhand clothes, discovered the possibilities of video during a business trip to London in the early 1980s, when he visited a shop called Video City and bought some video equipment, including a camera, player, and telejector (using U-matic technology).¹⁸ Back home he amused his guests in his nightclub, Copper Palace (Accra), by recording them on the spot and showing the clips onscreen. Greatly interested in cultural matters, he had close contacts with theater groups performing for GBC television and involved them in shooting a movie titled *Abyssinia* (see also Garritano 2008, 27; 2013, 68–69). Since at that time there were no editing facilities available in Ghana, the scenes had to be shot from the start in the order desired in the finished product. When *Abyssinia* was filmed, prior to

1985, no Ghanaian video feature movie had yet been publically screened. Released in 1987, however, it was not the first movie on display in cinema venues. Gyimah opened a number of small-scale cinema halls, all called Video City, which screened both foreign films and movies he and other Ghanaian producers made. His freelance filming activities incurred the wrath of state authorities, who then thwarted his efforts. Disappointed by low profits, Gyimah eventually withdrew from the world of film around 1990. It seems that in the early years of Rawlings's rule, when the government was bent on taking full control of the media, there was little room for allowing alternative private players to operate in Ghana's mediascape.¹⁹

A more successful attempt to go into private video film production was that of William Akuffo, who had been in the business of importing and screening foreign films for years. Offering his films to both private cinema owners and the GFIC, he had developed a keen sense for the type of movies that appealed to Ghanaian audiences. He told me how as an "operator" (shorthand for projectionist) he learned which films would do well in which area and how at times he would quickly switch to a movie that had less talking and more action. He disclosed that because of the difficult economic situation of the country in the 1980s, he worked with celluloid copies that were in such a deplorable state that viewers could barely discern the images on the screen. He observed that because the sprocket holes of films were constantly breaking and reels had to be pasted together, films became shorter and shorter. Video, even though far from perfect, offered footage of a higher quality, and for this reason Akuffo was much intrigued by the new technology:

So in 1985, I went to visit a friend and I saw him showing a film, a very popular film I knew, *Snake in the Monkey's Shadow* [a martial arts film by Cheung Sum, Hong Kong, 1979], on his television and it was in color. I was wondering, "What is happening?" So he showed me the movie, and I was like, how come? And he said: "It is a new technology called video and it is just put in a cassette for the same play of time." So I said "wow" and sat down and watched it and found it very interesting. Then I asked him what he did with it and he said, "Oh, just show it to my friends," and I said, "This is money." He said, "How?" I said, "This is money, this is in color and everything." The TV stations were in black and white, you know. So I convinced him. And the house in which I was living in Chorkor [an area on the coast in Accra, inhabited mainly by Ga fishermen], I told him I could convert it into a theater and then we would start showing it. But I saw that taking the video from his room made him feel very uncomfortable, but I forced him and took it out and

placed it in front of my place and my place was by the road, so any person could see the video screen facing the road. (interview, 1 Oct. 2002)

Like Gyimah, Akuffo first encountered video as a possibility for screening foreign films, and likewise, the idea of using video cameras to shoot a movie followed suit. He much preferred to screen films in popular venues, where people would not be restrained in their mode of dressing and would feel free to make a lot of noise, commenting on the film, talking to and sometimes insulting the operator. This experience with audience reactions influenced his own filmmaking in that he sought to generate very lively responses. Long-winded films with much conversation “where nothing is happening” would not do well at all: “In my films I make sure that in the first five minutes at least something happens for them to sit on the edge of their seats and that they wait for more things to happen, you know” (interview, 1 Oct. 2002).

In 1985 Akuffo and Richard Quartey made their first movie, *Zinabu*, which was about a witch who converts to Christianity.²⁰ The script was written by Quartey, but Akuffo served as director, cameraman, and producer. They employed friends and acquaintances as actors and creatively experimented with the new technology. Editing was done by connecting two VCRs and copying scenes from one tape to another, in the right order of scenes. Displaying the realm of invisible powers, such as witchcraft, *Zinabu* epitomizes a key characteristic of Ghanaian (and for that matter Nigerian) video movies. Featuring the spiritual or occult, such movies became subject to heavy contestations, as well as popular appraisal. Unfortunately, once *Zinabu* was completed in 1985, the government imposed a ban on video films. In line with the state discourse on cinema, state authorities claimed that the American and Asian movies and “blue” (i.e., pornographic) movies that came into the country were having a bad effect on the public.²¹ However, Akuffo pleaded successfully with the minister of communication to allow the production and screening of local movies, arguing that, in the long run, this would be the only adequate measurement to stop the influx of foreign ones.

The ban was lifted in 1987. Both local and foreign video movies were to be treated like celluloid films and thus would be subject to censorship by the government.²² Though these films were usually pirated copies, the video centers screening them were to pay a fee to the Copyright Office, thereby somehow legalizing them. I say “somehow” because this was a partial legalization operating within global “infrastructures of piracy” that brought the movies and technology to Ghana and other countries (Larkin 2004).

Therefore, it would be a mistake to analyze the rise of video simply in terms of its technological characteristics (as often happens in mediacentric analyses of the “video boom”). The fact that video did not simply unfold as a new technology with its own logic, but was approached by the state *as if* it were cinema, cautions us against adopting a crude technological determinism. Video was the proverbial new wine poured into old skins, while, at the same time, its emergence was a symptom of the birth of a new public culture in the era of easy accessibility of electronic media. The rise and popularity of video exposed the tension between the state’s wish to control movie exhibition and consumption, on the one hand, and the actual impossibility of this project, on the other. The negative discourse and written policies intended to control video’s dangers could ultimately not be matched by efficient measures. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that, in the early days, video filmmakers themselves actively partook in framing their video movies as cinema for the nation, thereby gaining some degree of acceptance, while at the same time running into problems and contradictions.

In screening for paying audiences, video was literally made to mimic celluloid. When Akuffo showed *Zinabu* in the Globe Cinema, he camouflaged the video deck and made sure that he himself appeared in the projection room, as if he was operating the show from there. The spectators readily accepted the video movie as cinema, as Akuffo told me with satisfaction: “I talked to people and asked them, ‘Was that video?’ and they said ‘No, no, it was shown on the wall, so it was cinema.” The movie was phenomenally successful, and Globe Cinema screened it three times a day for weeks (Garritano 2008, 27). Video was celebrated as a new, easily accessible medium that would make it possible to revive a local film industry with limited means. In this context it is telling that Akuffo and his peers preferred to describe themselves as *filmmakers* rather than as *video filmmakers*, advertising their products as “Ghanaian films.” The ambition was big, as the names of Akuffo’s company—World Wide Motion Pictures—and that of Socrate Safo—Movie Africa Productions—show.

When video movies started to thrive and to bring fresh films into the system, the GFIC was not only unable to produce feature movies but also lost control over distribution and exhibition. Until 1984 the GFIC had organized the import and distribution of movies by itself, but after 1984, 85 percent of all movies screened were hired from private distributors, who received 40 to 50 percent of the admission fee (Mensah 1989, 48). The GFIC was caught in a vicious circle. Supposed to import movies that would be attractive to audi-

ences, the GFIC exhibition branch was to be self-supporting. Because of a lack of funds, however, it could not import a large number of new movies, and this implied that the same old ones were shown over and over again, resulting in a decrease in attendance and exacerbating its financial difficulties. By hiring films from local distributors, the GFIC started to make some profit again (Mensah 1989, 51–53), and this led it to open its cinema houses for the screening of local productions.

After the success of *Love Brewed*, Kwaw Ansah came out with *Heritage Africa* (Film Africa Limited, 1989), the first Anglophone film to win the Etalon de Yennenga Prize (FESPACO) and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) award for the film “that best addresses the cultural problems of Africa.”²³ *Heritage Africa* is about the inner conflict of a black colonial official who eventually reclaims his own culture, from which he has been alienated through colonialism (and thus fully resonating with the Sankofa discourse on culture). After launching *Heritage Africa*, Kwaw Ansah encountered severe financial problems that prevented him from making another film on celluloid. Although he made some video movies, for him video was not a viable alternative to celluloid,²⁴ and in 2003 he eventually opened his own television station, TV Africa (de Witte 2012). The commercial failure of *Heritage Africa* and the GFIC’s difficulty in offering its audiences movies in line with the state discourse on film both indicate the deep crisis of celluloid and of the educational and Sankofaist vision associated with it.

From the early 1990s on, Ghanaian video movies started to boom. Markedly distinct from African art films, these movies should be understood as a hybrid outcome of a complicated process of incorporation, in which initially foreign imagery and global technology are articulated toward the local setting. Many videos can be characterized as *bricolage*, containing elements from Hindi films, kung fu films, horror movies, and Latin American soap operas—all available on television and as videos—as well as Christian popular imagery and, last but certainly not least, Pentecostal sermons. The rising popularity of these movies generated a full-fledged industry that evolved at the interface of established, though partly defunct, cinema structures for production and exhibition and the new possibilities offered by video. Although the first set of movies had been made by groups of amateurs “from the street,” some degree of professionalization gradually emerged. The new video industry included new actors and established ones, whose faces were known from local drama plays screened on television, as well as directors, scriptwriters, cameramen, location managers, sound and light controllers,

and editors. Often one person combined several of these tasks. Most producers, many of whom also served as directors and at times also handled the camera, were men, but a number of women (for instance, Veronica Codjoe, Hajia Meizongo, and Nana Akua Frempoma) also went into production. There was a mix of people who had received training within NAFTI and the GFIC and those learning on the spot. In the absence of reliable formal structures and the impossibility of receiving loans from official sources, video film production thrived to a large extent on personal informal networks, with part of the payment for services often taking place only after a film had been screened and had generated money. In the early days the budget for producing one movie was around US\$2,000. If about five thousand copies were sold, the producer could break even; from ten thousand sold copies on, a movie was regarded as a big success. Producers usually sought to maintain personal relations with important persons involved in the production, distribution, and exhibition of their movies, and this included a social commitment to people's well-being. If a member of the crew fell sick or had to cope with the death of a family member, producers were expected to give support, as was also the case in other professional cultures.²⁵ Video film production depended to a large extent on relations involving mutual financial and moral obligations. Only in this way could the industry evolve, while, at the same time, the heavy dependence on personal relations was a constant source of conflicts and disappointments (see also Adejunmobi 2007, 9, who describes a similar setting of film production and marketing outside of the formal economy for Nigeria).

Ghanaian film producers formed the Video and Film Distributors Association of Ghana, which organized the sequence in which movies were to be screened in the cinema houses,²⁶ with the Ghana Films Theatre, the air-conditioned cinema located on the GFIC premises,²⁷ ranking on top, followed by the Rex Cinema and the other GFIC cinemas. Actual film distribution was organized via "boys" who worked with a particular producer, advertising and screening the movie throughout the country. In the early days distributors employed colorful hand-painted posters on canvas or flower sacks, which were painted by popular sign writers and roadside artists who were already involved in making posters for foreign movies (Wolfe 2000; see also Woets 2011).²⁸ The portability of the posters and videotapes made it easy to offer programs—sometimes requiring only a TV and video deck, sometimes a telejector and screen—throughout the urban areas and eventually all over the country. The posters, which were later replaced by more fashionable

promotion materials (such as a number of still photographs of the video's scenes pasted on paper or, again later, a computer-designed poster), were spectacular eye-catchers for Ghana's and—later on—Nigeria's evolving movie culture.

The success of initially untrained movie entrepreneurs prompted the filmmakers at the GFIC to consider video a viable alternative to celluloid. Although a number of established filmmakers, such as the eminent cameraman and GFIC director Rev. Dr. Chris Hesse, who had worked for Nkrumah, were reluctant to do so, the fact that the black-and-white laboratory had broken down and there were no facilities or funds for color made video acceptable as a technology for film production.²⁹ Gado Mohammed, who had been a member of the GFIC board of directors in the early 1990s and who acted as the chairman of the Video and Film Producers Association of Ghana (VIFPAG) at the time of our interview, told me about the transition within the GFIC:

So it was obvious in those days that celluloid had no future in Ghana, given first that we had no color laboratories for us to process films; you had to go to London, together with an editor, and you still had to pay for an editor in London to process for you. These are some of the difficulties by which you could see that the future lay in video. So the emphasis in those days was to encourage GFIC to move into video. . . . So reluctantly they started to do it. . . . You know Akuffo and others had low budgets, but the GFIC budgets were very high, so they realized that if they continued like that, they couldn't survive, because they could not recoup their money. (interview, 16 Nov. 2002)

For many of the professional filmmakers who were affiliated with the GFIC as civil servants but had never made a feature film because of the lack of funds, the acceptance of video technology offered a long-awaited opportunity to finally produce *movies*. This turn opened new possibilities for reconfiguring the GFIC in line with the Structural Adjustment measures implemented by the Rawlings Regime at the instigation of the IMF. Thus, in 1993 the GFIC was transformed into a limited liability company (in which the government retained 49 percent of the shares) that had to go commercial and be self-sustaining. Until it was sold to a private Malaysian television company in November 1996, the GFIC registered twelve video movies with the censorship board. After taking up video, the GFIC premises became the central node of Ghana's evolving industry. Not only were actors and other technicians on hand to sell their services to the private producers, the latter also

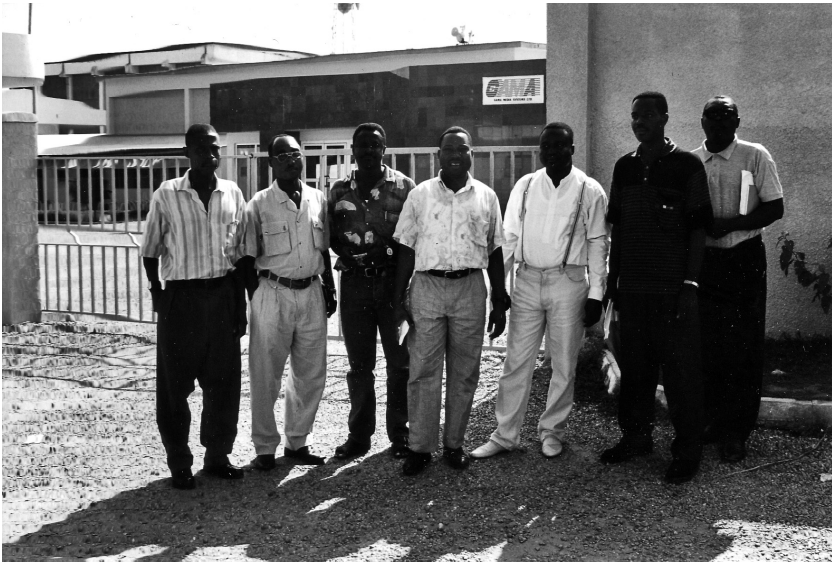


FIGURE 2. Filmmakers at Gama (from left to right: Moro Yaro, Seth Ashong-Katai, Kofi Owusu, Ashangbor Akwetey-Kanyi, Hammond Mensah, Billy Anyomi Agbotse, Stanley Sackey; August 1998). Photograph by author.

came to rent cameras and lights and to use the services of the GFIC's experienced editors, who had switched quite easily from celluloid to VHS. The bulk of these costs would usually be settled once a film generated box-office income. The fact that movies were screened mainly in the GFIC cinemas brought many producers to the GFIC premises to negotiate a place in line and a running time (preferably more than just a weeklong screening per venue). Notwithstanding the animosities between private self-trained and established filmmakers, the GFIC premises were the central space where their encounters took place and the industry evolved (fig. 2).

Facing the popularity of video movies launched by self-trained producer/directors such as William Akuffo, Sam Bea, Socrate Safo, Steve Asare Hackman, and Augustine Abbey, the GFIC had to find a way to make films that would "educate," as well as appeal to the audiences. While some of the GFIC movies were celebrated as very successful—*Baby Thief* (GFIC, 1992), directed by Seth Ashong-Katai, was especially well-liked by audiences—other films were dismissed as "artificial" or "book-long." From the early days of video there was a clear tension between GFIC productions, with their focus on morals and family life and embedded in the film-as-education framework of state cinema, and films by private producers, who spiced their

melodramatic and moralizing plots with special effects that visualized spiritual forces, such as ghosts, witches, ancestor spirits, and mermaids. Many video filmmakers also framed their stories in dualistic terms of struggles between divine and satanic powers that resonated with the messages of the phenomenally popular Pentecostal-charismatic churches, which, as I outlined in my introduction, had become an increasingly public factor since the mid-1980s. Indeed, the distinction between films that affirm the reality of spiritual or occult powers, on the one hand, and those that neglect them or even dismiss beliefs in their existence as “superstition,” on the other, is a thread that has run through the Ghanaian video film scene ever since its inception.³⁰ This distinction can be mapped onto the one between higher- and lower-class cinemas. While GFIC productions targeted mainly the former, private producers sought to make movies that would appeal to, as they put it, “all classes of people,” not just “elites.”³¹

Adopting video as a substitute for celluloid implied that private video entrepreneurs, many of whom had previously been involved in the now defunct sphere of celluloid film screening as operators, distributors, or electricians, had to position themselves in relation to the educational project of the state-run film industry. Occupying a long-standing void in the national cinema tradition, they had to face both censorship and the established discourse on what cinema was supposed to be. As I will explain in more detail in chapter 3, though the censorship board was often critical of the content and technical standards of video movies, it rejected very few films submitted. From the outset video films have been subjected to criticisms from the Ghanaian film establishment—for example, formally trained filmmakers at NAFTI and the GFIC, policy makers, film critics, and intellectuals whose vision is to link national culture, heritage, and film in Ghana. Kwaw Ansah complained: “I have seen films by Ghanaians created through the video medium where you find Africans eating human flesh with European angels descending from heaven to exercise justice or whatever on them. This is one of the dangers that people should be cautioned against in film production” (1995, 29). In an interview with Steve Ayorinde and Olivier Barlet, Ansah pointed out that “Hollywood has made so much against the black race and when we have the opportunity to tell our own stories, we are confirming the same thing! Even we are doing worse than Hollywood!” (quoted in Ayorinde and Barlet 2005).³² Such criticisms have been expressed over and over again, lamenting the overdose of men’s sexual escapades with young schoolgirls, the strong inclination to visualize such matters as ghosts, witches, and *juju*, the

staging of spiritual fights in which the Christian God eventually overpowers indigenous deities, and of course the overall low technological standards for plots, acting, editing, and sound. Video movies elicited the constant criticism that they affirm “superstitions,” thereby failing to “educate” and instead keeping people “ignorant,” and that they “misrepresent” Ghana to outsiders (see Asare 2013, 72–73; Okome 2010).

Right from the beginning private video filmmakers were torn between accommodating the established state discourse on film as education—or at least avoiding being reprimanded in public for failing to “educate” the people by displaying bad behavior and affirming “superstitions”—and the need to sell their films to paying audiences, which placed quite different expectations on a “good” movie. Many (targeted) viewers were more or less committed to the new Pentecostal-charismatic churches, which started to thrive in the mid-1980s in conjunction with the rise of video films and the opening of the public sphere to alternative voices. Increasingly, producers realized that to stay in the business they could not afford to live up to the expectations of the establishment by shifting into the production of enlightening and educational movies. The following statement by Ashangbor Akwetey-Kanyi, which he made when I asked him in 2002 to reflect on his vision of the video film industry, brings out private producers’ views:

You see, when celluloid died out in Ghana it was the ordinary man in the street who picked up the video camera and started to make movies, just to fill in the gap. Whether you like it or not, the self-trained filmmakers have sustained the industry up till now, do you understand? And these guys call themselves professionals? All these years they have done nothing, there is not a single one of them that can say he has made about ten movies all over the years or that kind of stuff. All these years they have been sitting down in their offices and they have done nothing to help the industry, but always they get up to say this and say that. No, they should just go ahead and make movies, just like the self-trained professionals are making, they should make movies and then we can start to compare notes, because if the self-trained films are not good, then their films will knock them off the street. It’s on record that all the self-trained filmmakers have made the most successful films in Ghana, so what are they talking about? (interview, 12 Nov. 2002)

This statement not only addresses the constant assaults and humiliations from the establishment but also asserts that without the initiatives and risks taken by self-trained producers, Ghanaian cinema would in all likelihood have ceased to exist. The next section explores the growing antagonism

between the world of self-trained video filmmakers and the national establishment during a new era when, somewhat ironically, film production no longer was a task of the state.

FROM CINEMA TO VIDEO FOR HOME CONSUMPTION: LATE 1996 TO 2001

Video movies started to flourish in the very same period when the state withdrew from wielding immediate control over mass media in the aftermath of liberalizing the economy and adopting a democratic constitution. Opening up the public sphere to alternative voices after 1992, a new public culture was in the making that allowed the expression of divergent views, creating new tensions and confrontations. This development not only implied political debate and criticism of government policies but also facilitated public articulation of popular imaginaries that had hitherto circulated through alternative circuits, including cheap tabloids, church sermons, or rumors, yet had been barred from “big” state-controlled media (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994). Opening up such respected and official media as radio, television, and film for these circuits triggered heated discussions about what had value in Ghana’s new “representational economy” (Keane 1997). Given the close link between state cinema and national culture, the question was how the arrival of the highly fluid and poorly controlled medium of video would influence the public representation of culture. In hindsight it is clear that for the video film industry, 1996 was an important point in time that opened up possibilities for renegotiating the relation between video film and the state.

When I started my research in September of 1996, the GFIC was still in place, in the midst of a changing media environment and public sphere. Once a modern state institution with good equipment, now the premises appeared somewhat run-down. All the same, thanks to adopting video, the GFIC staff was very busy making films and screening local movies in its cinemas. Despite many objections from the national film establishment, in November of 1996 the state sold 70 percent of the shares of the GFIC to the private Malaysian television company Sistem Televisyen Malaysia Berhad of Kuala Lumpur. The new company was called Gama Media Systems Ltd. and had two sections: Gama Film Company (GFC) was devoted to film production and TV3 to television. Just a short while before this, the upgrading of the premises

had been started. The takeover of the GFIC did not bring a revival of filmmaking on the basis of celluloid, as many had hoped; instead, it affirmed the use of video as a cheap and accessible technology. The Malaysians—as they were popularly referred to—brought in new video equipment for use within Gama and for rent to ensure that movies had the quality required for television. This implied that VHS, still in use at that time (certainly by private producers), was replaced by Betacam (or at least S-VHS).³³ Gama showed little interest in attending festivals for African cinema, such as FESPACO. Instead, the company tried to establish itself as a springboard to market Ghanaian films in the television format throughout Africa.

Seeking to transform the old GFIC into a private company producing popular films for television, the Malaysian directors of Gama faced the stubborn resilience of the view of cinema as a nationalizing and educational project. Former civil servants who were now employees of Gama (placed in the GFC section) were still dedicated to the state vision of cinema. Even though some of them had directed movies for private producers, they were quite critical of the new type of movies, which they found went too far in depicting juju (occult practices or magic), witches, and ghosts. I had extensive discussions about the implications of video for the development of the Ghanaian movie scene with directors Nick Teye and Seth Ashong-Katai, who had long worked for the GFIC before it was taken over by Gama. While they very much welcomed the use of video as a medium, they were suspicious of my (in their view all-too-positive) analysis of private producers' movies as instances of a popular culture going public in new ways and insisted on the importance of cinema for educating people. At the very least, they found that video entertainment should not mislead people into a negative view about their own cultural heritage, as was the case in many video movies.

In contrast, the chief executive officer of Gama, Khairuddin Othman, complained that many of his employees still regarded the GFC as “Nkrumah’s baby” and were reluctant to make films that appealed to popular taste (interview, 30 June 2000). Othman pointed out to me that he saw nothing wrong with making movies that visualized occult forces, as such depictions were standard in Hollywood horror movies, as well as in Indian cinema. The Malaysians sought to push filmmakers working at Gama to adapt to the new situation, to realize that cinema was now a matter of business, and hence was to appeal through entertainment. The use of cinema to educate the nation was outdated, and the main aim of Gama was to open up the African market.³⁴

Gama sought to launch a new kind of movie that differed significantly from the type of films made by the GFIC and that was not based on the view of cinema as education but was profit-driven (see Garritano 2013, 210). Between the takeover in November 1996 and the end of 2004 the company registered twenty-six films, the peak being in the years 1997, 1998, and 1999. Although a number of movies were still indebted to the GFIC approach, others offered new perspectives. A much-celebrated movie, appearing in 1999, was *Dark Sands* (dir. Lambert Hama), about a corrupt police officer who is involved in the drug trade (Meyer 2001). Many viewers were enthusiastic about this film, both because of the topic (police corruption was a matter of concern that had been kept out of the public realm prior to the liberalization of the media) and the technically sophisticated action scenes. Tellingly, Gama ran into problems with the censorship board when it presented *Set on Edge* (dir. Tom Ribeiro, 1999), another movie about a corrupt police officer. In this case members of the board, including the representative of the police, objected to showing the officer receiving a bribe and visiting (and suggesting he had sex with) his girlfriend while on duty and while a criminal en route to prison sat waiting in the car. It was feared this scenario would damage the reputation of the police. The fact that this movie was rejected twice before it was passed in August 1999 shows the degree of separation that existed between the sphere of state cinema, represented by the censorship board, and commercial film entertainment as represented by Gama.

Reducing its investment in video film production, Gama ceased to be a major player in the video scene. Taking up the possibilities arising from the liberalization and commercialization of formerly state-controlled media, the company promoted its television station, TV3, as an alternative to GBC-TV. Focusing on television, its involvement in film production became more and more indirect, in that it rented out equipment for filmmaking and editing and offered video producers the possibility of screen advertisements of upcoming movies on TV, sometimes for cash, sometimes in exchange for the right to screen a producer's old Ghanaian films, provided they were judged to be on a satisfactory technological level. Although Gama was officially responsible for the GFIC's equipment and film stock, to workers within the company it soon became clear that there was little commitment to earlier achievements. Figure 3, depicting part of a garbage heap of reels and films that was left for months (in 2002) in the vicinity of the Gama parking lot, testifies to the effects of the sale: the end of celluloid and of the institutionalizing of state cinema (fig. 3).³⁵



FIGURE 3. The end of celluloid, Gama parking lot (October 2002). Photograph by author.

Ironically, in the face of media liberalization that culminated in the sale of the GFIC and that reconfigured the production, distribution, and consumption of films, the film censorship board and the interventions of politicians and policy makers in the field of video kept on mobilizing the state discourse on cinema. A “Draft of the National Film and Video Policy,” written in September 1995, stipulated that video and film are “image-building tools and need to be positively directed for public good” as “strategic tools for national integration and national development.” Stating that the video boom “needs to be encouraged and assisted in the national interest,” the policy sought to intervene in video production. The point was to ensure that movies “promote positive and desirable aspects of Ghanaian culture,” offer images of indigenous and African hero(in)es “as role models for our people in all areas of human endeavor,” and contribute to “establish the common identity and interest of all African and Black people and cultures everywhere.” The use of “indecent, inhuman and dehumanizing images” was to be avoided, while the “extensive and authentic use of local and African costumes, music, dance and other national symbols” was encouraged (Ghana Ministry of Information 1995, 3).

Even though the policy was not implemented, it has continued to express and shape the attitude of state institutions toward video movies up until the

present. NAFTI also reiterated this perspective and conveyed it to its students; the few graduates who worked for private producers and went so far as to make films featuring witchcraft and juju were subject to heavy criticism. Since the mid-1990s there have been numerous seminars, sometimes also organized in conjunction with European institutions such as Germany's Goethe Institute, intended to educate self-trained filmmakers and raise their awareness about the medium of film. The organization of national film (award) festivals also reiterated this point.

In 1999 the National Media Commission, which had been set up by the Ghanaian Parliament in 1993 as an oversight body for the media, drew up its *National Media Policy*. Addressing the new role of media in the age of democracy and commercialization, the policy moved beyond a view of media as promoting "positive national identity and confidence" (National Media Commission 1999, 22) and was mainly concerned with the balance between the positive and negative effects of the globalization of information and communication on local culture (especially regarding the gap between the information-rich and the information-poor). Nevertheless, reminiscent of the earlier "Draft of the National Film and Video Policy," it still was critical of the "poor technical, artistic and ethical standards with most of the current generation of films made in Ghana" (National Media Commission 1999, 12). With regard to video, the *National Media Policy* echoed the earlier draft policy, demanding that steps be taken to ensure that films are "in keeping with Ghanaian traditions and mores and promote desirable aspects of Ghanaian culture," entail "the extensive use of authentic national cultural forms and symbols" and "establish the common identity and shared interests of all African and black peoples and cultures everywhere" (National Media Commission 1999, 50). From this perspective video movies were still criticized for affirming obsolete "superstitions" and fears and for offering disturbing misrepresentations of Ghanaians.

Around 2000 it was clear that filmmaking had become a matter of small-scale private business. Complaining bitterly about the commercial takeover of the GFIC and the new style of operation and communication, several filmmakers left Gama voluntarily or were fired. Realizing that filmmaking was no longer funded by the state, they were obliged to offer their services on the private market with its own dynamics and dependency on the approval of audiences. Even in the realm of business, most of them, as well as many filmmakers then graduating from NAFTI, still embodied the spirit of national cinema and reproduced what Gado Mohammed called "the mentality of celluloid." The cooperation between directors hitherto affiliated with

GFIC/Gama and NAFTI, on the one hand, and private producers, on the other, proved to be quite tense, as there was little agreement between the two parties about what constituted a good film. The depiction of juju was an especially contentious issue. While these directors did not want to lose their reputations (one reason why some even worked anonymously), private producers did not believe in the success of GFIC-type, “book-long” educational films and found it impossible to synthesize the tenets of the “Draft of the National Film and Video Policy” and the *National Media Policy* with their business.

To keep going in a heavily commercialized industry without state funding, without a major private investor, and with no possibility to receive bank loans, self-trained private video producers struggled to secure the approval of their audiences at home and to find new publics in other African countries and the diaspora. They experienced—even felt in their pockets—that films that did well in the local market might fail to appeal to the national film establishment, as well as to the world of African cinema, and vice versa. Conversely, they knew perfectly well how to distinguish “FESPACO films” from their own most successful productions.

For instance, Socrate Safo has been experimenting with different types of films for years. He told me that he once made *Chronicles of Africa* (Movie African Productions, n.d. [between 1997 and 2000]), a film that was critical of evangelism and that valorized indigenous culture. The film not only flopped in the Ghanaian market, because people did not like this kind of “colo” (old-fashioned and directed toward the past) and anti-Christian movie; it also received little recognition from the establishment. Safo even recounted with some bitterness that Ghanaian professionals associated with the GFIC and NAFTI actively contributed to marginalizing Ghanaian videos made by self-trained people at FESPACO. Therefore, he could not help but turn to making movies that resonated with people’s imagination and lifeworlds. Safo’s example reveals that video filmmakers were conscious of different movie genres and styles of filmmaking, with distinct aims—ranging between national identity and development, safeguarding cultural heritage, and appealing to popular culture. They certainly longed for some recognition and were frustrated that their attempts to create a viable Ghanaian video film industry met with such harsh criticism.

While it thus became increasingly clear that video movies were unlikely to live up to the expectations of the national film establishment, independent producers moved away from their own understanding of video as a substitute

for national cinema. The understanding and use of video as an easily marketable, mobile medium implied a shift in Ghanaian video filmmakers' orientation. Gradually, they lost their ambition to receive awards at established film festivals. After all, the point was to make ends meet. Increasingly, producers made use of the easy reproducibility and transportability intrinsic to video, thereby realizing yet another feature of this technology's potential.³⁶ This trend transformed film exhibition and distribution. As sketched earlier, video movies were initially screened only in cinemas and neighborhood video centers, with the producer or his assistants sitting at the entrance and counting the number of patrons, so as to be able to claim the producer's part of the entrance fee (typically about 50 percent). In the mid-1990s, video shops began to sell videos for home consumption, after they had been screened in the state-owned and some of the private cinemas, and well before they would be shown on television. Ghanaian videos were less and less often shown in cinemas, which were increasingly taken over by Pentecostal churches, but were advertised on television and in the streets as videos to take home. Toward the end of the 1990s the main income was generated through the sale of tapes rather than the box office. Also, because of the great number of movies being released, the waiting line of films to be screened in the cinemas became very long. Often producers sought to come out at strategic moments, for instance releasing the second part of a film just after the first part had been on TV. At this time the video shops—the most prominent among them being Hacky Films, Miracle Films, H. M. Films, and Alexiboat, located near Opera Square in central Accra—had become the central nodes of the industry (fig. 4). Located in a buzzing area in central Accra, Opera Square derived its name from the Opera Cinema. The square is a node in the public transport system and a hotspot for foreign exchange, shops selling electric articles, sewing materials, and videos. The shift from the GFIC/Gama premises to Opera Square as the vibrant epicenter of the industry mirrors the severance of the link between the video industry and (the idea of) state cinema.

The video marketers would not only sell movies but also import tape cassettes (from China and Korea) and magnetic tape (from the Netherlands) so that they could copy a movie using only the required tape length and organize cassette duplication on a large scale. Producers had various options to sell a movie via a shop owner. Either the latter would invest in the production and deduct the investment from the sales, or the producer would hand over to the shop owner a fixed number of so-called sleeves, featuring the movie title and attractive pictures, that would be placed inside the plastic tape

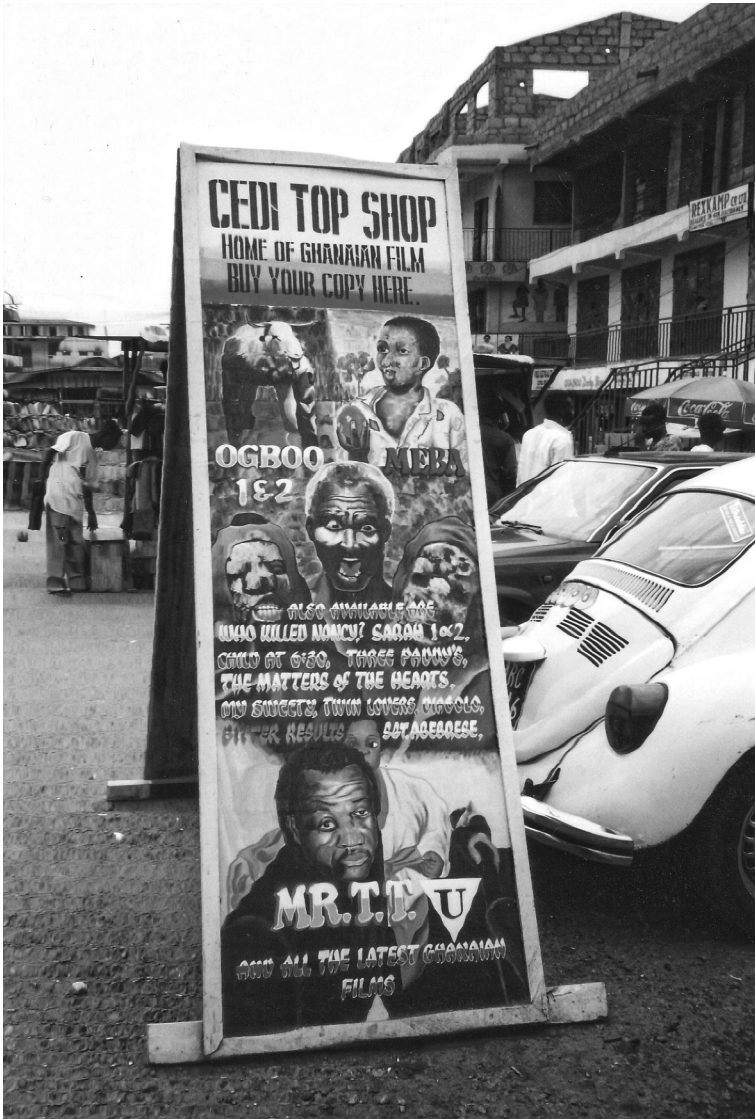


FIGURE 4. Billboard advertising videotapes, Opera Square (October 1996). Photograph by author.

casket. The producer would then be paid on the basis of sleeves sold.³⁷ Given the interest in selling a large number of copies, shop owners started to develop new forms of promotion. A particularly spectacular one was the so-called float (started around 2000), which implied hiring a brass band that would travel on an open truck throughout Greater Accra, accompanied by swarms of “boys” who sold tapes to passers-by and motorists in the omnipresent traffic jams. The idea was to make a lot of noise, literally, to attract the attention of potential buyers. Not surprisingly, producers who also ran their own shops did well, since they could profit not only from the sale of their own movies but also from those of their rivals. Around 2000 the most popular and flourishing shops were owned by H. M. Films, Miracle Films, and Princess Films, who were all known for their “high-class” movies.

The move away from the GFIC/Gama premises, which had played a vital role especially for editing, was also facilitated by the shift from Betacam and VHS to digital video, as a result of which producers could make use of digital editing programs, such as Adobe Premiere.³⁸ From 2000 on new enterprises came up that offered digital editing services, including a vast array of special effects. Next to Gama, other institutions also offered editing services. These included the Indian Nankani company, which had a long history in importing movies and exhibition equipment; the Church of Pentecost, which had discovered the importance of media in spreading the Gospel and now was prepared to rent out its editing bench; the Ministry of Agriculture, which offered its editing facilities for commercial use; and individual entrepreneurs like Big Star Studio Bin Yahya (Big Daddy), which was run by a young man called Afra in Nima, who had mastered Adobe Premiere and specialized in special effects. The rise of expertise in creating special effects within Ghana was regarded as a major achievement. It relieved producers from traveling to MadHouse studio and similar sites in Lagos, which first dominated the creation of effects by using the digital format.

Whereas in the beginning producers’ prime worry had been to deal with the criticism made in the light of the state discourse on cinema, which they simultaneously internalized and/or resisted, after 1996 their key concern gradually shifted toward appealing to commercial audiences interested in videos for home consumption. From the end of the century on Ghanaian producers faced the problem of surviving the onslaught of highly popular Nigerian movies on the Ghanaian market. This trend reconfigured the market and required that Ghanaian producers once again reposition themselves.

THE CHALLENGE OF NOLLYWOOD: 2002–2010

Although the challenging presence of Nigerian video movies had been debated since the late 1990s, their impact has become considerable since the beginning of the twenty-first century. During my stay in Ghana in the fall of 2002, I noted that Ghanaian video filmmakers complained more bitterly than ever about the influx of these imported African movies. Now they not only faced criticism in the name of the state discourse on cinema, but they also felt the danger of losing their audiences—and thus their market—to the Nigerians. They found themselves in a deeply ambivalent position, for it was clear that what fascinated the Ghanaian audiences about Nigerian films—their lavish display of riches, occult powers, and violence—was the very focus of criticism from the establishment. Most obviously, Nigerian producers were less restricted in visualizing occult matters, violence, sex, and dualistic fights between God and Satan than were Ghanaian producers, who still felt constrained by the standards of the national film establishment. Ironically, through pressure from the establishment, Ghanaian video producers had moved away from making films about witchcraft and toward new, somewhat artificial, plots that involved cocaine and policemen, while Ghanaian audiences still enjoyed the former kind of movies. Nigerian videos filled the gap (Haynes 2007; Krings and Okome 2013).

Many spectators with whom I discussed their preference for Nigerian movies told me that they were impressed by the superb display of wealth and costumes, the spectacular special effects, the visualization of magic, the stardom of the Nigerian actors, and the emotionally moving plots.³⁹ I remember that one of my friends, who had been a staunch fan of Ghanaian movies, told me enthusiastically that she had wept when watching a Nigerian movie, which she took as a sign of the superior emotional appeal of these productions.

The entry of Nigerian movies into the system made Ghanaian video filmmakers realize that in order for them to stay in the business they had to offer something unique to their audiences. While some producers engaged in coproductions with Nigerians, resulting in movies with spectacular special effects and big Nigerian stars⁴⁰ who acted alongside Ghanaian actors, others shot movies featuring well-known concert party comedians, including Santo and Judas, who spoke in Twi. The latter trend gave rise to the Kumasi video film industry, in which Miracle Films, whose owner, Samuel Nyamekye, was based in Kumasi, played a central role (Köhn 2008). Others again made good

use of their international network and shot movies that were partly situated in Ghana and partly abroad.⁴¹

The popularity of Nigerian movies among the audiences reconfigured the market. While initially video shops were run by Ghanaians who sold mainly Ghanaian films, after 2000 about half of the twenty video shops I counted around Opera Square were operated by Nigerians and sold mainly Nigerian films. This change derived partly from increased contacts between Ghanaian and Nigerian video producers, which yielded a number of coproductions and opened up the Ghanaian market for Nigerians. A number of Ghanaian shop owners, some of whom also operated as producers—including Hammond Mensah (H.M. Films), Samuel Nyamekye (Miracle Films), and Abdul Salam Mumuni (Venus Films)—shifted to marketing Nigerian movies. Since the rights for selling Nigerian films could be purchased at a comparatively cheap price, while at the same time experiencing high demand, a lot of money could be earned without going through the trouble of film production. The major shop owners thus brought out a host of Nigerian films, thereby playing an active part in the downfall of Ghanaian movies (see Garritano 2013, 158). This made it increasingly difficult to draw the attention of the public to a single Ghanaian film, while the sale of a substantial number of copies was necessary to recoup one's investment and generate capital for another production. This flooding of the market with Nigerian products almost killed the Ghanaian industry.

In response to these developments, the Film Producers Association of Ghana (FIPAG, as VIFPAG was renamed in 2002) sought the help of the state to protect the market against the “dumping” of Nigerian movies. Remarkably, in a document called “Influx of Foreign Films” (Film Producers Association of Ghana 2002) presented to the government, FIPAG adopted the state discourse on cinema in criticizing Nigerian films. FIPAG acknowledged that Ghanaian producers had made mistakes in the past and conceded that “our films must ultimately aim at liberating the minds of our people from superstition, devisive [*sic*] tendencies, ethnic and religious wars, ignorance, squalor and diseases such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic [*sic*] which is currently engulfing the entire African continent” (Film Producers Association of Ghana 2002, 2). Next to the bad cultural and social effects of the “influx” of Nigerian movies—which were criticized for displaying excessive violence and sex-related activities and for enhancing superstition—the producers also pointed to the disastrous economic effects. Nigerian movies usually were smuggled into Ghana.⁴² Thus, importers circumvented the payment of the required import duties and did not submit the movies to

ensorship authorities. In FIPAG's view this was against ECOWAS (Economy Community of West African States) trading protocol, stating that it was "shameful that dumping in combination with the practice of exclusion [of Ghanaian movies from the Nigerian market] is being perpetrated by one set of traders against their counterparts in a friendly neighbouring ECOWAS country" (Film Producers Association of Ghana 2002, 5).⁴³

FIPAG demanded that the government take measures against smuggling Nigerian movies into Ghana and make sure that all movies were approved by the censorship board. To protect the market, it called for a release system that would lower the number of Nigerian movies launched per week. The producers also formed an antipiracy committee that mobilized customs officers to prevent the import of Nigerian movies and pleaded with the government to place a ban on Nigerian movies in 2003. Video film marketing even became the topic of a meeting between a high-powered Nigerian delegation and Ghanaian government officials, but no regulatory measures against the influx of Nigerian movies were ever undertaken. This outcome shows even more clearly that private video producers could not expect much from the state, as film production and consumption now were entirely controlled by the free market.

The overwhelming success of Nigerian movies among Ghanaian audiences generated a severe crisis in the Ghanaian video film industry. In 2003 its future looked grim. Movie production was down. Many producers shifted to other activities, at times related to film production (e.g., making product advertisement spots for television), at times unrelated (e.g., selling ice water). The records of the censorship office show that after 2004 there were hardly any new Ghanaian films registered, and the industry almost died. In this period the bulk of films presented to the censorship board were Nigerian (even though most Nigerian movies were not taken there at all). As I have mentioned, I had originally contemplated framing the book I intended to write in terms of the rise and fall of the Ghanaian video industry. Yet, against all odds, the industry has been able to regain strength.

The only way to survive was to try to win back the hearts of Ghanaian audiences by direct competition with Nollywood. This implied, first of all, that it was necessary to shift to the VCD format in which Nigerian movies had been sold since 2003. For some time VHS and VCD technology coexisted, yet within a span of a few years the latter replaced the former. Established video sellers who had invested in technology for VHS reproduction experienced big losses when they launched Nigerian movies in the VHS format, while informal traders already illegally imported VCDs of the same

films. Ghanaian audiences adjusted rapidly to the change, because cheap VCD players from Asia were available. Offered at a cost of around GHC 25,000 (GHS 2.5), a VCD player was within relatively easy reach and became present in many urban homes.⁴⁴ In a setting such as Ghana, where the “latest” fashion is much valued, Nigerian movies had the aura of being technologically more advanced, whereas Ghanaian videos looked comparatively old-fashioned. In retrospect Safo analyzed the situation as follows: “We were overtaken by technology. We released films on VHS, they already used VCD. We used an outdated technology” (interview, 10 Jan. 2008).

In 2004, together with video shop owner Danfo B. A., Safo successfully relaunched a number of his old VHS movies in VCD format.⁴⁵ VCD reproduction, which was carried out in specific plants (since 2005 there have been two in Ghana), was much cheaper than copying VHS tapes. The relaunch generated substantial capital, which Safo and Danfo B. A. invested to come back into the business. They rented a huge space in an office building in Newtown, bought their own equipment, including digital cameras and editing facilities, and employed several crews, each of which would work on a movie. The movies were mainly in Twi (with English subtitles), and many of them were shot in Danfo B. A.’s home village Sapeiman, where they set up a film village. Also, following the example of Nigerian producers, Safo founded his own acting club in which he trained young people not only to act but also to perform other aspects of film production. He proudly likened the enterprise to “a well-oiled machine, like a German car” (interview, 10 Nov. 2007).⁴⁶

Safo and Danfo B. A. made a lot of money through a series of witchcraft movies, called *Kyeiwaa*. Completely ignoring the constant and typical criticisms from the film establishment, Safo made the kind of movies popular audiences were craving: witchcraft, comedy, “rituals” or occultism, and last but not least sex. Provoking scandals by transgressing boundaries became his new trademark, and he actively called on the media, which he himself called “hyping,” to make his movies become the talk of the town.

Other film producers also returned to the business in 2005. Following Safo’s example, they placed importance on having one’s own office, equipment, and personnel (usually employed on a freelance basis).⁴⁷ Thanks to the total shift from analog to digital electronic technology, producers got control over the whole production process up to the final version of the movie and ordered its reproduction at the VCD plant. Simply by owning a number of computers—often ingeniously adapted to the tropical environment (fig. 5)—and having the know-how to use editing programs, producers no longer



FIGURE 5. Editing at Aak-Kan Films (April 2010). Photograph by author.

needed to depend on editing facilities and the services of editors. Many producers started to run their own acting clubs or acting schools, from which they recruited most of their casts. The improved quality of the movies' camera work, plot, and sound was appreciated by audiences, who were even prepared to pay more for a Ghanaian VCD (GHS 2.5) than for a Nigerian one (GHS 2.00). Filmmaking paid again and was a lot of fun.

The shift from VHS to VCD reconfigured the field. Those who had been major players before and had big stakes in VHS technology were surpassed by people like Safo and Danfo B.A., who first adopted the new technology and were able not only to produce a number of blockbusters but also to sell them in Danfo B.A.'s shop (fig. 6). Other big producers taking up VCD emerged. Along with Miracle Films, which was never out of the business

thanks to its key role in the Kumasi Twi language film scene and a capacity to quickly adjust to the new technology, Venus Films, owned by Abdul Salam Mumuni, emerged as a producer of “high-class” glamour films. There is a huge contrast between Safo’s movies, which bring a lot of juju and other occult matters to the screen, on the one hand, and Abdul Salam Mumuni’s films, which visualize the life of the wealthy and beautiful, on the other. Whereas the former worked extremely quickly and made concessions on quality, the latter established his company as technologically sophisticated. Having operated as a video shop owner since 1999, Salam made a name as a first-class film producer with *Beyonce: The President’s Daughter* (Venus Films, 2007), a blockbuster movie featuring spectacular cars, houses, and costumes—and for this reason mistaken by many viewers for a Nigerian production. With this kind of movie Salam consciously and successfully competed with Nollywood. Much of his inspiration for the type of films he produced came from Indian movies; when I last spoke to him (23 April 2010), he was actually developing his network into the circles of Bollywood. Having traveled to India, he realized the importance of the cinema for generating good publicity, so he launched his movies in the only posh cinema in Accra, the Silverbird, in the Accra Shopping Mall (established in 2007). Salam was able to “create” some new stars, including Jackie Appiah, Nadia Buari, John Dumelo, Majid Michel, and Yvonne Nelson, and as all producers readily admitted, these set new and high standards for Ghanaian movies. It is remarkable that many of these stars have light skin, suggesting that Salam’s movies profile a particular (and problematic) ideal of beauty (as a well-known actress with a darker skin who was sidelined by him complained to me). Some of these stars, who were also featured in joint Ghanaian-Nigerian productions, contributed to the rise of the Ghanaian industry. Many viewers believed that by taking part in such coproductions, Ghanaian actors polished their acting skills considerably. So whenever these star actors appeared in Ghanaian movies, people were easily drawn.

Safo and Salam Mumuni represent the two sides—juju and glamour—that demarcated the field of Ghanaian movies and acted as trendsetters for other producers over the past few years. Driven by the urge to keep audiences attracted, Safo and Salam Mumuni released extremely controversial movies with, for Ghanaian standards, highly revealing sexual scenes and suggestive titles like *Hot Fork*, *Sexy Angel*, *Love and Sex* (all produced by Safo in 2010), and *Guilty Pleasures*, *Heart of Man*, and *Dirty Secret* (Venus Films, 2009, 2010, 2011), with many other producers following their example.⁴⁸



FIGURE 6. Danfo B. A.'s shop at Opera Square (January 2008). Photograph by author.

The rebirth of the Ghanaian video film industry in VCD format again faced criticisms from the perspective of the state discourse on cinema for failing to educate and affirm African culture and values. During my visit in 2010 movies containing sex scenes were heavily criticized, both from the film establishment and in public debates.⁴⁹ All in all, the shift to VCD implied further severance from the realm of state cinema and its emphasis on education and a move toward a kind of cinema thriving on attraction and excitement, just like Nigerian movies.

The phenomenal attention paid to Nigerian movies throughout Africa (via the sale of VCDs and the TV satellite channel Africa Magic) and the coinage of the term *Nollywood*⁵⁰ generated a debate among Ghanaian producers about their position in the field of moviemaking in Africa. They believed that, even though the use of video for film production had started in Ghana some years before Nigerians also ventured into video production, the Nigerians had been able not only to win over Ghanaian audiences but also to gain some international recognition and esteem. Clearly, the point was no longer to make it at FESPACO but to be as successful as Nollywood. In 2005 William Akuffo founded a movie studio, located on the road between Tema and Sogakope,

which he called Ghallywood. He registered the label under his name. The huge terrain contains not only a number of private houses for actors, a canteen, and Akuffo's personal office but also a boarding school that offers three-month courses in film production for youngsters from Accra and the neighboring countryside. During my visit in 2010 Akuffo expressed his high ambitions and his dream about Ghallywood becoming the center of "high-class" movies made in Africa, operating on the same plane as Hollywood and Bollywood. His initiative met with some reservations from his fellow video film producers, partly because they were suspicious about Akuffo's ownership of the label *Ghallywood* and therefore preferred to use the label *Ghallygold*.⁵¹ Nonetheless, all agreed that Ghanaian producers needed to unite to be able to compete with Nollywood and gain global recognition.

During my last field trip I noted that ultimately the reshuffling of the video film industry had yielded a new self-confidence among Ghanaian producers. Many of the old producers were back in the business, and new ones were entering the field. Now the more established ones looked critically at the technologically mediocre productions of the newcomers. While the former acknowledged that they had also made a lot of mistakes in the early days, they insisted that the improvements made over the past years set a new standard that needed to be met. Along with films being launched as VCDs, the satellite channel Africa Magic Plus broadcasted nonstop films made by Ghanaian producers and from some other African countries (while Africa Magic is restricted to Nigerian movies). African movies were shown on TV all the time, and Opera Square was the place for new movies to be launched, with huge and spectacular computer-printed posters screaming for attention (fig. 7). With many new productions coming out, all competing for audiences, FIPAG took on the task of organizing producers and sellers in order to control the release of new movies. Obviously, this was a feeble enterprise, as the imposition of release schemes depended on the acceptance of successful producers with their own shops, who needed huge sales to keep their companies going.

Since 2011, however, the industry has started to face an even larger challenge: the rise of private television channels that broadcast Ghanaian and Nigerian films day in and day out. These channels had bought rights for screening old movies as often as they liked from producers for the relatively low sum of GHS 200. In early 2015, as I finished the last revisions of this book, the video film industry as I got to know it has almost broken down, and it remains to be seen whether and how it will rise again. With so many movies on display via television and the Internet, audiences feel less inclined



FIGURE 7. Opera Square (April 2010). Photograph by author.

to buy new films than they were before; this makes it difficult for producers to generate the capital necessary to make new films and requires them to develop new procedures to generate attention (Socrate Safo, phone interview, 13 Dec. 2014; Akwetey-Kanyi, phone interview, 16 Jan. 2015; and Augustine Abbey, e-mail, 17 Jan. 2015).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that Ghana's evolving video industry was framed in the context of existing practices of mediating culture and the discourses around it. There is a clear line from the concerns about the potentially immoral or misleading effects of commercial entertainment in colonial times, to the rejection of foreign movies as detrimental to the "African personality" in the postindependence state discourse on cinema, to the film establishment's fierce criticism of Ghanaian video movies as alienating audiences from African culture, and even to Ghanaian video film producers' worry about the influx of Nollywood films. Clearly, the discourse about

video incorporated earlier discourses about colonial and postindependence cinema, involving the ideal spectator, the threat from outside, and the (im) morality of moving images. Even though video technology ultimately came to replace celluloid, it would be a mistake to conceptualize the relation between cinema and video as a linear move from one medium to the other. Put differently, video was mediated through cinema (see Larkin 2008, 6).

The fact that, for a considerable time span, video producers deliberately presented video as a mere substitute for celluloid, and hence as operating within the well-established sphere of cinema, shows what is at stake. Producers, audiences, and the national film establishment did not use video as an entirely new technology with its own unique features but as one that encompasses and makes up for the shortcomings of good old celluloid. While it was certainly acknowledged that video differed from celluloid in terms of production—cost, handling, development, and capacity for color—the meaning attached to video as a technology and its use in social settings was grafted onto the long-standing meanings and uses of cinema.

This placed video in a minefield of contradictions. I have pointed out that a gap exists between the state discourse on the educational purpose of cinema and its actual social uses. The ideal spectator addressed by this discourse and actual audiences did not converge. The tension between education and entertainment that has existed since the British colonial administration recognized cinema as a useful medium and mediator of colonialism has been exacerbated over the years. After independence this tension was mapped onto a sharp opposition drawn between African culture and national identity, on the one hand, and the “influx” of dangerous materials from outside, on the other. This opposition underpins a scenario in which the ideal spectator of educational cinema was under siege, threatened by immoral and alienating moving images from outside. The task of the state was to protect and guide this endangered subject, who was prone to imitate the pictures he or she saw. As we have seen, however, there was a gap between the strong articulation of a view of cinema as harbinger of national education and cultural identity, on the one hand, and the actual capacity of the state to make this view materialize, on the other. Cinema appeared difficult for the state to master, technologically as well politically.

This chapter has traced the actual demise of celluloid, which started with the lack of funds to produce feature movies and ended up in the sale of the GFIC to a private television company, opening the doors wide to the rise of a commercial film culture. Notwithstanding the fact that the GFIC shifted

to video and that censorship was imposed on all locally produced and publicly screened video movies, it is clear that the arrival of video did not restore the capacity of the state to control film production and exhibition. The rise of video entailed a phenomenal boost for the sphere of commercial film that was closely tied to the expectations and desires of local audiences and was dominant in the “low-class” cinema venues. Like Akuffo, many of the self-trained video filmmakers had a background in commercial cinema (as managers, operators, or just as fans of movies) and made use of their expertise to design movies that would be a hit among the audiences. Operating as a substitute for celluloid, video increased the presence and appeal of commercial cinema, thereby invoking harsh and often repeated criticisms from the film establishment and worries about the kind of spectator addressed in popular video movies. The post-1992 liberalization and commercialization of the media, including film, further exacerbated the rise of commercial cinema and entailed a decline of state control over the means and modes of cultural representation.

The trajectory of the Ghanaian video film industry over the past twenty-five years, as examined in this chapter, can be situated at the interface of the state cinema discourse and the privatization of filmmaking, along with the public sphere at large. This official discourse persisted in the face of a changing political economy of culture that allots the state a less and less effective say over film production and consumption. Instead, the success of movies and the profitability of the Ghanaian film industry depended ever more on meeting the taste of its audiences. This situation was intensified by the phenomenal popularity of Nigerian movies, in response to which Ghanaian video film producers’ resistance to the discourse of the establishment strengthened. Along with wielding control over video’s capacity for reproduction, it became crucial to please audiences, even if, as was the case for many Ghanaian producers, this implied deliberately moving beyond the state discourse on film (which was still maintained against all odds and ever more severed from actual control over film, as I have shown). It is ironic that Ghanaian private, self-trained producers, who initially were able to satisfy the wishes of audiences by making films that diverged from the usual movies in the framework of cinema as education (which still largely underpinned GFIC productions), had by the turn of the century almost lost their audiences, who turned en masse to Nollywood productions. From then on Ghanaian producers struggled to retrieve their viewing public by intensely mobilizing an aesthetic of attraction and transgression similar to that in Nigerian movies.

Having stressed that video was welcomed into the void left by the downfall of celluloid, it is nonetheless important to stress that the two technologies differ considerably. Though framed as a substitute for celluloid, and hence fit to slip into the sphere of cinema, this chapter has shown that video is a far more accessible and cheaper technology. This particular affordance allowed new players, who had hitherto not had the opportunity (or the skills) to handle a camera and shoot a movie, to enter the circles of movie production, exhibition, and distribution, giving rise to a thriving popular video film industry with numerous types of jobs and new audiences. Like the big transition from celluloid to video, which brought new actors into the circles of moviemaking, the smaller transitions from cinema screenings to the sale of videos for home viewing and the shift from VHS to VCD reshuffled yet again the field of movie production. The quick appropriation of the technological aspects of these transitions made it possible for some producers, such as Safo and Danfo B. A., to assume a more central role in the aftermath of their shift to VCD.

The easy accessibility, reproducibility, and portability of video entailed their own contradictions for private video filmmakers. Video is a democratic medium that is easy to handle but difficult to control. In contrast to celluloid, virtually everyone can shoot video movies, get access to pirated copies, and exhibit or sell them. When video filmmakers were still satisfied with screening their movies in the cinemas, piracy was not yet a big problem. Drawing video into the ambit of cinema worked as a mechanism of control, through which the potential for mass reproduction was blocked. This changed with the transition to selling movies as videos for the home, itself a consequence of the increasing quantities of movies awaiting screening. Video producers, as this chapter has shown, were haunted by the reproductive potential of video. Not only did they face the threat that their own movies could be pirated by others, especially outside of Ghana in the diaspora, but they also worried about the incessant presence of huge numbers of movies from other Ghanaian producers and above all from Nigeria, which decreases the chance for a single video to receive much audience attention. With the rise of Nollywood—described in terms of “influx” reminiscent of the earlier state criticism of the rise of video in the 1980s—producers attempted to control the situation by claiming and regulating the Ghanaian market, a project for which they even appropriated the state discourse on cinema and sought the support of the state. Clearly, an ultimately irresolvable tension existed between the easy accessibility and the control of video. Video’s technological

properties made it both a blessing and a curse for producers. Next to this, the propensity of audiences to watch movies at home and the increasing availability of old video movies on private television channels also affected the industry. It seems that, ironically, producers suffer from the ongoing demand for screening their old productions on television, with heavy financial consequences that preempt the making of new movies.

To conclude: in this chapter I have sought to offer insight into the contradictions, paradoxes, and ironies of filmmaking in contemporary Ghana. State discourses about the virtues of film (and African culture at large) and the need to “educate the people” coexisted alongside thoroughly liberalized and commercialized infrastructures for the production and consumption of movies. The reproductive potential of video called for modes of controlling what ultimately was uncontrollable. At stake is the opening up of the public sphere as a stage for displaying, on a massive scale, hitherto silenced popular imaginaries that addressed not the ideal spectator of the state discourse on cinema but an alternative one that had so far thrived outside of the spotlight of state cultural politics. The visualization of these imaginaries onscreen, as undertaken by the video film industry, reflected as well as contributed to a fundamental reconfiguration of the public sphere. The particular aesthetic of these movies will be explored further throughout this book.