

Turning rice into *pilau*

The art of video narration in Tanzania¹

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Introduction

In Tanzania pirated video copies of foreign films are subject to a profound practice of remediation. Video narrators who either perform live simultaneous translations and commentaries on such films in video parlours, or mediatise their interpretations as VHS cassettes and DVDs with Kiswahili voice-over, are in great demand and have established themselves as mediators between American, Chinese, Indian, and Nigerian films and their local audiences. In this essay I will introduce two such video narrators, Lufufu and King Rich, and part of their work, such as sequences from a version of the Nigerian Pentecostal classic *Karishika* (Christian Onu, 1998) by King Rich, and of *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) and *Super Love* (Andy Amenechi, 2003) by Lufufu. Video narrators do far more than simply translate or recreate pre-existing filmic texts in a different language or medium. Their craft consists in the creation of new texts, texts that speak to both the foreign film and its new and unforeseen local context. The practice itself is not peculiar to Tanzania and dates back, in fact, well beyond its current application to pirated foreign films. After a brief exploration of the craft's trajectories within East and Central Africa and a sketch of its recent development in Dar es Salaam, I will place the phenomenon within a wider theoretical debate about the transnational circulation of media and the appropriation of media apparatuses and media content

¹ King Rich's version of *Karishika* reached me with Sandra Gross's and Andres Carvajal's help. Both of them also shared information about Dar es Salaam's video narrators other than Lufufu and King Rich with me, something I greatly appreciate. I also wish to thank Claudia Boehme and Uta Reuster-Jahn for their tremendous support in translating sequences of King Rich's and Lufufu's work for me, as well as for their critical comments on earlier versions of this text. Finally, I also acknowledge the comments of two anonymous readers which helped me refine parts of my argument.

beyond the circuits of their initially intended users and spectators. Following Bouchard's explorations of orality and film spectatorship in Africa², video narration may be understood as a reconfiguration of the video medium within a specific local context. I am arguing that video narration domesticates a comparably new and foreign (audio) visual medium by amalgamating it with a much older local audio medium: the spoken word as used in a number of established speech genres, with story-telling at the forefront. Domestication, however, is not just a matter of reconfiguring the medium as such, but also of deriving meaning from its contents. If Nigerian films such as *Karishika* are subjected to this process, the video narrator's re-mediation serves (among other things) to re-establish the authenticity of their narratives, and thus provides repair. The analysis of sequences from King Rich's and Lufufu's work, however, makes obvious that video narration not only facilitates the communication of the film but, in several instances, subverts its intended meaning, provides additional information — a who's who of Nigerian film, for example — or even distracts audience attention completely from the film by self-advertisements of the narrator. To a certain extent, then, the current practice of video narration in Dar es Salaam addresses two different modes of film spectatorship — a contemplative-hermeneutical one and one which is out for spectacle — and conflates these within a single performance and its mediated output, the dubbed VHS cassette.

Apart from these theoretical considerations, the material at hand has of course some methodological implications for the study of the trans-cultural reception of media in a globalised world as well. I understand the video narrator to be a first among equals amongst the Tanzanian audiences of foreign films. Analyzing his translation and commentary may help us to understand what these audiences get out of such films, how they experience and interpret them and how they transfer and construct meaning against the backdrop of their own

² Vincent Bouchard, "Commentary and Orality in African Film Reception," in Mahir Saul and Ralph Austen (eds.), *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution*, Athens OH, Ohio University Press, 2010, p. 95–107, [forthcoming].

everyday realities. But before we can do so, we need to understand how video narration as a practice of mediation actually works. This essay, then, is a first attempt to provide some clues to this question, however preliminary they may be.

Trajectories of video narration in East Africa

Until recently, video narration in Tanzania was for many years associated with only a single name: Derek Gaspar Mukandala, aka Lufufu. When I first met him in 2007, in Dar es Salaam, he had stopped live interpretation of foreign films more than 15 years earlier and had instead turned to a studio-version of his craft, producing VHS cassettes of foreign films with Kiswahili voice-over. A retired naval officer of 57 years, Lufufu claims to have translated more than one thousand films — mostly American and Chinese action movies, but also about 90 Nigerian films and a number of Indian. He told me that the initial idea came to him in 1971/72 whilst watching a Chinese live interpretation of a North-Vietnamese propaganda movie while based in China for two years under a military training program. Back in Dar es Salaam in the early 1980s, he came across a 16mm film projector in his army barracks and started a mobile cinema show in his spare time. He toured the outskirts of the city with copies of old American Westerns and action movies which he rented from “Anglo-American” (a distributor which was still present in Dar es Salaam at that time) and began live interpretation. In the 1990s, he started to use VHS equipment, later stopped performing live and switched to dubbing cassettes, a technology he had come into contact with through a visit to his wife’s relatives in Uganda. First, he ran the dubbed cassettes only in his own video parlor, later he started selling them to video parlor and video library owners all over Tanzania. For the new generation of Dar es Salaam’s video narrators, who have come up over the last three years, Lufufu became a role model, and one of them who worked as Lufufu’s apprentice for some time, has even acquired the nickname of “Junior Lufufu”.



Lufufu in his private video archives, Dar es Salaam 2007 (© Matthias Krings)

Video narrators are cinematic go-betweens, who speak along with, or aside foreign films and thus mediate between film and audience. Precursors in the history of cinema may be found in the film narrator of the silent movie age (*bonimenteur* in France, *Kinoerzähler* in Germany, *benshi* in Japan)³. In order to unravel the historical trajectories of video narration in East-Africa, one does not have to travel as far as China, as Lufufu did. The forerunners of present Tanzanian video narrators may well be traced to the interpreters of colonial cinema, who “translated” educational films into African languages during mobile cinema shows. The Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment which ran from 1935 to 1937, based in Tanganyika,

³ Germain Lacasse, *Le bonimenteur de vues animées. Le cinéma ‘muet’ entre tradition et modernité*, Québec and Paris, Editions Nota Bene and Méridiens Klincksieck, 2000.

had running commentary in local languages to accompany their silent educational films⁴. Mpungu Mulenda, who reports on film narrators in the cinema halls of Lubumbashi during the 1980s, considers evangelical film shows organized by missionaries, who employed local evangelists as commentators, at the root of this phenomenon.⁵ And well into the 1970s live interpretation was an integral part of promotional mobile cinema shows which were organized by Kenyan operators who toured the Tanzanian countryside with American and Italo-Westerns, Chaplin features, and Laurel & Hardy comedies to attract large crowds for their promotion of Omo detergents, Eveready batteries, and the like.⁶

In its present day East African form live interpretation of film may be traced back to the video parlours of Kampala, Uganda, where the art grew strong during the late 1980s. And to date, Uganda with her three hundred plus video narrators certainly is the East African country where this art is cherished most. The local term is video jockey, and Prince Nakibinge Joe, president of Uganda's Videojockeys Association, compares the VJ to the DJ, "who spices up music in a discotheque" and thus keeps dancers going until the early hours of the morning.

[...] a VJ is also like that. He puts some jokes in the film, at the same time he translates it, at the same time he is also like an actor, because he is also acting ... VJ's are the subtitles of the community, without us people cannot understand the movie⁷.

Although there is some evidence that this practice of video narration recently spread to Tanzania through direct contact to Uganda or Ugandans, local origins, apart from BEKE and the promotional mobile cinema shows of the 1960s/1970s, may also be considered. As Bouchard points out, oral practices in the vicinity of cinema are manifold, and apart from institutionalized cinema narration, informal varieties such as a friend volunteering to interpret

⁴ L.A., Notcutt and G.C. Latham, *The African and the cinema. An account of the work of the Bantu Educational Cinema Experiment during the period of March 1935 to May 1937*, London, The Edinburgh House Press, 1937.

⁵ Saidi Mpungu Mulenda, *Un regard en marge. Le public populaire du cinema au Zaire*, doctoral dissertation, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1987.

⁶ I gained this information in Tanzania in August 2009 through interviews with a number of people who attended such screenings during their youth.

⁷ Didac P. Lagarriga, "Vee-jay translators in Uganda", *oozebap*, February 2007, <http://www.oozebap.org/text/uganda-vj-esp.htm> (last visit August 15, 2010).

to a group of friends, were widespread on the African continent⁸. It seems as if professional video narrating can be traced to such amateur origins. Lingo, the first mythical video jockey of Uganda, who appeared in a Kampala video hall in 1988, seems to have been such an amateur (some even recall him as a migrant from former Zaire):

People could not watch movies without him because they didn't understand. He moved around from the front sit to the back to the front, he didn't sit down; he was moving around all the time, telling to the audience what the movie was about, and everything. This man was not educated and he didn't understand English well, but he could get the story, what was the movie about, like 'the boy buys a sweet, enters in the car ...' or he (would) tell you that a certain person is going to die ... So he was not professional at that time, but people enjoyed this⁹.

Those who followed in Lingo's footsteps began to use electronic equipment — sound mixer, microphone and amplifier — with which they could reduce the volume of the original sound track and insert their own commentary, and a decade later, started dubbing live performances on VHS tapes and sold these to video libraries.

Compared to Uganda, where the profession has even gained some recognition beyond the video halls through VJ-slams organized by the Amakula Kampala International Film Festival¹⁰, video narration in Tanzania is still in its infancy. In Dar es Salaam, it is labeled "tafsiri" (translation), and the one who performs is called "DJ" rather than "VJ". Even in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's economic and cultural capital, less than ten video narrators were operating in 2009. Except for Lufufu, all of these started their careers during the previous four years. Most of them freelance, which means that they offer their services to video hall owners — for free. Since they don't have their own equipment, this is the only way for them to record their performances on VHS tapes. These tapes are then sold for as little as 5.000 TSH (less than three Euro) as master tapes to Ajay Chavda, a local video store owner who reproduces them *en masse*.

⁸ Bouchard, 2010, p. 103.

⁹ Lagarriga, 2007, p. 1.

¹⁰ Ogova Ondego, "Uganda: A new cinema-going culture", *New People*, n° 116, Sept-Oct 2008, <http://www.africafiles.org/article.asp?ID=19215> (last visit August 15, 2010).

King Rich, who calls himself “VC”, “video controller”, or *mkurugenzi* (director general), used to sell his tapes to Ajay Chavda, too, before he managed to buy his own equipment. He began live video narration in 2005 in Tarime, a northern Tanzanian town close to the Kenyan border, after he had finished secondary school (O-level). His first film was *Above the Law* (Andrew Davis, 1988), an American action film, but he soon began to specialize in Nigerian films because he found Nigerian English much easier to understand. After leaving Tarime he continued working as a video narrator in fishing camps on two islands of Lake Victoria before he stopped for about two years. His father had cautioned him to find a “real” job, and suggested that he become a policeman. Following the advice of his father he joined the police force. When he was posted to Dar es Salaam in 2007, he came across Mr. Kobla, the owner of a video parlor, who persuaded him to take up video narration again, and later on also introduced him to Ajay Chavda who bought the recordings of his performances in Kobla’s video parlor. Still working as a policeman, King Rich can only devote half of his time to video narration. Nevertheless, his oeuvre comprises about 90 Nigerian films so far. Since about 2008, when he was able to set up his own recording equipment, he stopped live interpretation and started to produce dubbed master tapes in his own “studio” instead. As he explained, narrating live is more demanding, because the brouhaha in the video parlor sometimes makes it difficult to concentrate on the film, but at the same time it is more rewarding because of the immediate response the narrator gets from the audience. Performing live, however, doesn’t generate much of an income because the audience would rather stay away than pay a higher entrance fee which means that a live narrator has to depend on the token amount he gets from the owner of the video parlor who hires him to attract more customers. It is only consequential, therefore, to mediatise video narration and sell the tapes *en masse* to video parlors and video libraries across the country. According to King Rich, who always makes sure to announce his mobile phone number a couple of times on each of his dubbed tapes, he gets a lot of encouragement from his

dispersed audiences. Such positive feedback notwithstanding, he believes that his audience still prefers live-narration, for when he performed in Kobla's video parlor for about two months in 2007, the room soon became too small to accommodate the daily growing numbers of spectators¹¹.



King Rich performing in a Dar es Salaam video parlour, 2008 (© Sandra Gross)

Theorizing video narration

Video narration comprises two different aspects which, despite their heuristic separation, actually go hand in hand and inform one another in East-African video parlors: the appropriation and accommodation of the video medium itself, and the appropriation of foreign films transmitted on video. “Technologies are unstable things”, Brian Larkin reminds us, and “meanings attached to technologies, their technical functions, and the social uses to which they are put are not an inevitable consequence but something worked out over time in the

¹¹ For a case study of another Tanzanian video narrator see Birgit Englert with Nginjai Paul Moreto, “Inserting Voice: Foreign Language Film Translation into Kiswahili as a Local Phenomenon in Tanzania,” *Journal of African Media Studies*, Vol. 2, n° 2, forthcoming.

context of considerable cultural debate¹².” The spectacular rise of the small medium video, from a recording technology used in private households of the First World, to a cornerstone of African film industries such as “Nollywood”, and its Tanzanian counterpart labeled “Bongowood”, clearly speaks of the video medium’s enormous potential as well as the ingenuity of its African users — totally inconceivable to those who invented it. Less spectacular, but nevertheless still groundbreaking, is the use of the video apparatus and its corresponding “cassette culture”¹³ for the projection of films. Thus, the invention of the video parlor (*vimkandala* in Kiswahili) allowed a cheap alternative to film theatres, and consequentially allowed film viewing to spread to every nook and corner of Africa — a pastime once by and large associated only with town life. Video narration as practised in video parlors reconfigures the video medium to a similar extent as the cinematographic medium, which was reconfigured decades earlier during mobile film shows and in the cinema houses of East and Central Africa. In his forthcoming essay on commentary and orality in African film reception, Vincent Bouchard concludes that “the practice of adding an oral commentary to popular film screenings is the result of a media reconfiguration born during the encounter between (non modern) oral practices and the appropriation of a cinematographic apparatus born out of a foreign culture (in this case Western modernity) ¹⁴.” I propose to further this argument by paying closer attention to the nature of these “oral practices” which informed the reconfiguration of the apparatus and — in the current Tanzanian practice — have brought forth a new narrative genre that situates itself between the word and the screen.

Lufufu compares video narration with “the transformation of rice into *pilau*” (where *pilau* stands for a delicious rice dish of the Swahili-cuisine). According to this metaphor,

¹² Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise. Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2008, p. 3.

¹³ Peter Manuels, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 2-4.

¹⁴ Bouchard, 2010, p. 106.

foreign films are like raw or unprocessed foodstuff that has to be cooked and prepared according to certain principles of local cuisine in order to be turned into a palatable dish. If we understand cooking as a culture-specific way of preparing food, where even new raw material is treated according to well established principles, and transfer this back to our understanding of video narration as a relatively new speech genre, we may look out for those older speech genres that have informed video narration. During her fieldwork on storytelling in southern Tanzania my colleague Uta Reuster-Jahn has been told that performances of rural storytellers may be understood in terms of a “traditional village cinema¹⁵”. Taking this metaphor seriously, I suggest that what the urban video narrators do has to be considered a kind of amalgamation of this “traditional village cinema” with “cassette cinema”, i.e., the local form of cinema which takes place in the video parlor. As a tentative hypothesis I propose to conceptualize video narration as a practice of domestication of foreign films in terms of media. This would imply that in Tanzania such films are made digestible — to apply Lufufu’s metaphor once again — through the use of another medium, the spoken word, and that their exhibition in video parlors is reconfigured in terms of the classical live performance of traditional storytelling. This hypothesis is based upon the idea that live video narration in fact is a means to transfer video films into oral narratives. Freeing narratives from their audio-visual containers and reshaping them according to the principles of “primary orality” may well be considered as a way of accessing and reconstructing meaning through an inversion of the process Ong has described as “technologizing of the word¹⁶”. Film and video are a constitutive part of the age of secondary orality brought about by electronics. Ong considers this new kind of orality “both remarkably like and remarkably unlike primary orality¹⁷.” Mass media such as radio, television, and film share a “participatory mystique” and foster a

¹⁵ Uta Reuster-Jahn, *Erzählte Kultur und Erzählkultur bei den Mwera in Südost-Tansania*, Cologne, Köppe, 2002, p. 177.

¹⁶ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* [1982], London and New York, Routledge, 2010.

¹⁷ Ong, 2010, p. 134.

“communal sense”, two characteristics they hold in common with live performances of primary oral cultures, unlike with print culture. Unlike primary oral narrative, however, feature films are firmly grounded in writing and the printed word. They are based on screenplays — often written and re-written over and over again — on story boards and rehearsed dialogues, and as such are deeply shaped by principles of literacy. It is in this sense that I understand video narration as remediation, as a means to translate technologically mediated words into oral discourse. If King Rich, for instance, establishes generic local names for Nigerian actors, despite their personal names and the changing names of the roles they are playing, and uses these repeatedly across a number of films, he is in fact reshaping them into generic types, a feature, which according to Ong, is characteristic of primary orality¹⁸. Patience Ozokwor thus turns into *Mama mkanga sumu* (Mama, the poison maker), Ramsey Noah into *Loverboy*. Similarly, if Lufufu explicitly formulates a moral at the end of a film, a lesson he wants his audience to take home, he draws on a feature of primary orality. I hurry to caution against misinterpretation of this argument as reiteration of the colonial argument of African audiences being unable to understand film. Remediating foreign films through live performances that are informed by primary orality has to be considered as an attempt to get the utmost meaning out of such films by turning the specific into the generic. Though cassettes and discs with a narrator’s voice-over are screened in video parlors too — a fact that somehow complicates the picture because the technologically mediated voice of the narrator becomes part of a setting of secondary orality — many features of live performance are still retained, for the simple reason that, at least until very recently, the master tapes for such duplicates were recorded during live performances¹⁹. Needless to say, if a voice-over cassette is running, the immediate interaction between audience and narrator becomes

¹⁸ Ong, 2010, p 148.

¹⁹ Lufufu who produces his voice-over narrations single-handedly in his studio is rather exceptional. At this preliminary stage, I have to suspend a detailed analysis of the differences between live performances and studio productions.

impossible, though — as I will demonstrate below — certain forms of directly addressing the audience and calling it to participation are retained.

In his essay, Bouchard sketches a continuum of practices of film commentary in Africa that corresponds with two distinct modes of spectatorship at the opposite extremes of the continuum. On one end, we find what I would call the contemplative-hermeneutical mode characterized by silent spectators who attempt to understand the original meaning of a film and a commentator whose essential task is to make sure that the meaning is transmitted. In colonial Africa, this mode of spectatorship was established during mobile cinema shows that featured religious and governmental propaganda films. This mode corresponds with a conceptualization of cinema as a tool of communicating messages. At the opposite end of the continuum, cinema is conceptualized as spectacle, as an entertaining attraction that addresses the spectators' senses and entails an emotional engagement. Here commentators become an integral part of the attraction and their "objective is not to transmit the original meaning to the spectators, but to bring to light whatever elements can make the show most entertaining."²⁰ According to Bouchard, this type of spectatorship and commentary may be interpreted as "a form of cultural resistance"²¹.

As will become obvious in the following, Tanzanian video narration situates itself in-between these two distinct modes. On the one hand, it is characterized by the narrator's attempt to transmit the original meaning of a film, by repairing the communication of the film through his commentary, on the other hand, by the narrator's disturbance of the film's communication by subverting its meaning, or by simply drawing attention to his own project, in order to foster his career and distinguish himself from his professional colleagues. To illustrate this argument, I will mostly draw on King Rich's version of *Karishika* on which I

²⁰ Bouchard, 2010, p. 96.

²¹ Bouchard, 2010, p. 105.

have been working most thoroughly so far. Wherever appropriate, I will augment this material with sequences from Lufufu's *Titanic* and *Super Love*²².

Video narration as repair

Karishika is most typical of a Nigerian film genre Okome has called "Hallelujah film".²³ An important feature of this genre is the Pentecostal "coloring" of its content. *Karishika* displays how Satan eats his way into the souls of the living. To recruit new followers for his kingdom of darkness he sends out Karishika, queen of the demons, to the world of the living. There she misguides and seduces a number of people, who all fall prey to her because of their own shortcomings. The last, a pastor, resists all temptations and is saved from hell through divine intervention in a final showdown between a Pentecostal congregation and Karishika and her helpers.

Video narrators re-enact dialogues, narrate a story, and add commentary or explanation. When King Rich translates dialogues he speaks in direct speech and changes his voice more or less according to the gender and age of the screen characters (though other film narrators, Lufufu for example, pay considerably more attention to this). He thus mimics women and men, old and young. Technically speaking he oscillates between first person voice-over of dialogue and third person narration and commentary using an audio mixer to add his soundtrack to the original video, whereby he constantly fades in and out (sometimes after every sentence) to preserve as much of the original soundtrack as possible. I interpret this as the narrator's attempt to become invisible — at least to an extent that allows for the unfolding of the film's atmosphere which, beyond its images, equally depends on sound. As narrator, he speaks in the third person and blends the role of the narrator with that of a commentator who

²² My analysis of all three video narrations is based on voice-over VHS copies as sold in Dar es Salaam. According to King Rich, the copy of his *Karishika* narration was produced during a live performance, most likely in 2008. The copies of *Titanic* and *Super Love* are studio versions produced by Lufufu around 1998 and 2004 respectively.

²³ Onokome Okome, "Introducing the Special Issue on West African Cinema: Africa at the Movies", *Postcolonial Text*, Vol. 3, n° 2, 2007, p. 4.

interprets those actions and images he thinks his audience might be unable to understand. He thus acts as a guide through foreign audio-visual terrain.

King Rich opens his version of *Karishika* by introducing himself as the one who translates the film into Kiswahili and an advertisement of where in Dar es Salaam it can be ordered on cassette, including the mobile phone number of “Kobla Video Library” — all of this, while the opening credits are still running. As soon as the first images appear, images that depict a Nollywood *mise en scene* of hell, he changes style and begins to comment as if reporting on a live event, even pretending to be in Nigeria himself:

As usual I am telling you I am in Nigeria, there in West Africa. I am sending you my missiles [here: ‘blockbusters’ = films], and they are sold by Mr. Ajay Chavda, who is based in the Nyamwezi lane. The Nigerians are greeting all of you. May God bless Tanzania! (*Karishika* 0:02:20–34)²⁴

Situating himself in Nigeria adds credibility to his commentary and in fact serves to authorize him. Similar phrases occur throughout the film (see below). King Rich explained this to me as originating early in his career when his ability to interpret Nigerian films led some among his audiences to wonder if he was a Nigerian. Later on, while narrating, he developed this identity of a Tanzanian based in Lagos who sends his commentary direct from Nigeria. This obviously addresses an imagined audience not present at the site of recording and highlights the fact that even though the recording was made during a live-show the narrator has a wider audience in mind.

Lufufu opens his narration of *Super Love*, which is a Nigerian Cinderella story set in rural Igbo land, in quite a similar way. As on all of his tapes, he starts with an introduction of himself and a localization of the film by explaining where the film comes from (sometimes even undertaking an imaginative journey from Dar es Salaam to the place where the film was shot); accompanied by the opening credits of the film he says:

²⁴ This voice-over passage is original in Kiswahili and like all others that follow has been transcribed from VHS tape and translated with the aid of Claudia Boehme, Deograce Komba, and Uta Reuster-Jahn.

My beloved viewers, my beloved relatives, Captain Derek Mukandala Lufufu who is available at Aggrey street, Kariakoo, in the centre of Dar es Salaam city, brings to you one good film from the nation of Nigeria in this season of 2004 — from the nation of Nigeria which is ruled by General Obasanjo (*Super Love* 0:00:26–50).

This is followed by an introduction to the plot:

Our film begins at a time when young Obinna returns from Europe where he went to study. Obinna was a prince as it is normal in a family of the chief. If your son is from that family, you are supposed to prepare his future. Among the things which you should prepare for him is a girl to marry. And that should be arranged while the girl is still very young. Therefore even girls of three years are prepared early in order to become married to the son of a chief. This is what happened in this place (*Super Love* 0:00:51–01:55).

Like Lufufu who obviously felt the need to elaborate on the cultural significance of a chief's son in rural Nigeria, King Rich continues his narration of *Karishika* by elaborating on the meaning of the Christian concept of Satan. The camera pans across “hell”, a place dimly lit by fires and settled with poor captured souls, half naked, hands and feet in chains. King Rich sets in as narrator. Following his opening sentence the original voice of Lucifer becomes partially audible in English, but King Rich, still somewhat attached to the modus of commenting on a live event, refrains from translating what Lucifer says, and instead introduces the actor who plays Lucifer, and then is at pains to translate the meaning of Lucifer into Kiswahili:

We are now formally beginning with our film. Today, we are having someone here who is called Obi Madurugwu who plays Lucifer. Who is Lucifer? Lucifer is the Satan [*shetani*]. One can call him ‘Devil’ [English in Kiswahili version] or Satan (*Karishika* 0:02:36–03:02).

That King Rich combines actors' names with the names of the roles they are playing, and sometimes uses them interchangeably is a typical feature of video narration. To use the actors' names, which are well known to Tanzanian followers of Nigerian films, avoids ambiguity and makes it easier for both narrator and audience to follow the story. Translating “Lucifer” or the Christian concept of “Devil” to a local audience which is mixed in religious terms turns out to

be quite complex, especially since in Kiswahili the Arabic loan word *shetani* is also used to denote any kind of spirit. After this he sets out with the even more complex task to explain the concept “hell” — within just a few words, lest he lose track of the film:

Direct speech: “I am the king of the whole world”.

Narration: This is the one whose name is Obi Madurugwu and who plays Lucifer.

Direct Speech: “I am the ruler over this world. Who dares to challenge me?”

Narration: Now we return to the camp of the *shetani*, where there was Satan who ruled over the world of the spirits. And all the people who once had committed sins, had been thrown into the world of the spirits. Those who are there are people who have pretended to be followers of God, but in fact have used Satan instead. They were thrown into the world of the spirits, to the Devil. Europeans call this “hell” [English in Kiswahili version] (*Karishika* 0:03:03–46)

Most striking about the video narrators’ performances is that their commentaries and translations almost never stop. This becomes most obvious during film sequences without dialogue. During such sequences the narrator’s commentary may perform several different tasks: summarizing for spectators who have arrived late at the video parlor, forecasting to ease the shift from one sequence to the next, establishing the authenticity and truthfulness of certain images, explaining the cultural or historical significance of certain settings — often through comparison to locally known similar forms. A sequence from Lufufu’s narration of *Titanic* is a good example for a number of these functions.

Because he has saved Rose’s life, Jack is invited to have dinner at the first class section of the steamer. Clad in a borrowed dinner suit he enters the section, reluctantly looking at the impressive architecture and the unfamiliar behaviour of other upper class passengers while coming down the massive staircase. The original film version relies solely on images to transmit Jack’s uneasiness and unfamiliarity with upper class customs. Lufufu adds the following commentary which serves as repetition and explanation at once.

For the very first time ... Jack Dawson had never before taken part in such a big festivity. As I have told you, in all of his life so far, even back in his village, he had never gotten an invitation card. On this day he, Jack Dawson, because he had saved

Rose DeWitt Bukater's life, was invited to a venue only rich people are invited to. Everyone who came in had a partner. Carefully he stepped down the staircase, looking here and there to see if he couldn't find Rose somewhere (*Titanic* 0:55:31–56:03).

When Jack arrives at the bottom of the staircase he observes how gentlemen greet each other, how male passengers lead female passengers across the hall, and improvises a little pantomime to get accustomed to the appropriate gestures. The original film version still relies solely on images — unlike Lufufu who continues with his voice-over. This time, however, he makes the images speak through a different register. With a whispering voice, he provides an internal monologue of Jack:

I don't know how I shall wait here. Everyone here has his partner. And what about me? If I had a partner at least ... aha, one hand must be held behind the back, and I should stand like this if I have to greet people, *shikamo, shikamo* [traditional respectful greeting]. If I would only have someone whom I could place by my side, damn it! This is poverty. In deed, poverty is something bad. Even the girl I am waiting for is the fiancée of someone else (*Titanic* 0:56:17–43).

Suddenly Rose's fiancé Caledon and her mother pass Jack, and Rose appears on top of the staircase alone. Lufufu comments this as narrator and then switches back to whispering the internal monologue of Jack while Rose steps down the staircase. When they finally meet each other and original dialogue sets in, Lufufu also switches to direct speech:

Internal monologue Jack: I will take her hand and say welcome to her. Truly, there is a beautiful 'child' coming down the stairs, an angel, how attractive she is, Misses Titanic! [laughs] Let me tell you! Wait, let me move closer to her so that I can shake hands with her.

Direct Speech Jack: I am happy to see you Rose, my Darling, if I may dare to call you my darling (*Titanic* 0:56:54–57:16).

King Rich, too, almost never pauses during his performance. Asked for the reason for this, he explained that he finds moving images without commentary inadequate and that he considers filling such acoustic gaps with meaningful information part of his job. Interestingly enough, he cited the film *Jesus* (John Krish and Peter Sykes, 1979), screenings of which he

experienced many times during his youth, as an authoritative example for a running commentary on otherwise ‘silent’ images²⁵. I interpret this as an attempt to validate his oral performance not only through tying it to a model which in a Christian context has to be considered very authoritative, but moreover through linking it through this very model to scripture. This neatly ties in with the high esteem writing and the written word are accorded within all cultures that still sustain pockets of primary orality.

The exuberant commentating of video narrators also produces what at first glance looks like redundancy. After all, the phrase “Jack carefully stepped down the staircase” provides almost the same information as the images which actually show Jack slowly stepping down the staircase. According to Walter J. Ong, redundancy and repetition are fundamental characteristics of oral thought and speech. “Redundancy, repetition of the just-said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track. (...) In oral delivery, though a pause may be effective, hesitation is always disabling. Hence it is better to repeat something, artfully if possible, rather than simply stop speaking while fishing for the next idea. Oral cultures encourage fluency, fulsomeness, volubility²⁶.” While the kind of redundancy Ong refers to also exists in video narrators’ performances — the repetition of phrases while looking for the right words to continue with the story — the redundancy of a phrase like “Jack carefully stepped down the staircase” dissolves if one considers the fact that such phrases actually double information through remediation. Keeping in mind the peculiarity of video narration as a practice of remediation that exhibits original and copy (the commentary) simultaneously, this means that in cases like the phrase cited above the same information is transmitted twice on two different channels — visually and acoustically. This serves to minimize ambiguity and may provide repair (see below), and — to use Ong’s words — “keeps the spectator on track”. The most important function, however, still lies somewhere else, and pertains to all forms of

²⁵ This film is a major evangelical tool that has been dubbed into more than a thousand languages. The Kiswahili version can be accessed under <http://www.jesusfilm.org/film-and-media/watch-the-film>. The film features a running commentary based on the Gospel according to Luke.

²⁶ Ong, 2010, p. 40.

commentary. As a general effect, the narrator's commentaries and translations cause the (foreign) images and sounds to lose their governing function in telling the story. Whether performed live or produced as added voice-over in a studio, the voice of the narrator takes the upper hand over the pre-existing moving images which turn into mere illustrations of his verbal narrative. The hierarchy of original and copy is thus reversed, something which is also neatly reflected in King Rich's self-ascriptions as "video-controller" and "director general" (*mkurugenzi*). It is the video narrator who gains control of and reigns over foreign audio-visual material. This also explains why the narrator almost never pauses, even if this means that he has to repeat himself, for his silence would imply 'surrender' to the very material he seeks to control through his performance.

The analysis of another 'silent' sequence of *Karishika* may help to highlight some more functions of commentary. In this sequence *Karishika* arrives in a silver-coloured Honda Accord in front of Bianca's house. After she steps out of the car, she changes shape and takes on the appearance of one of Bianca's female friends. At this point the spectator doesn't know that this is Bianca's house, which is only revealed later on through an indoor sequence which follows. What is known, however, is that Bianca is a Pentecostal Christian who craves for a child but seems unable to get pregnant. This is a sequence typical of Nigerian films, which usually do not create suspense, but place their audience in the comfortable viewing position of an omniscient spectator who is always at least one step ahead of the protagonists. As witness to the miraculous shape shifting of *Karishika* the spectator knows that she is up to something evil.

King Rich opens the sequence as narrator. While the car is still moving he provides information about setting and personnel, and since this is not yet known to the spectator, his commentary turns into a forecast: "Today the girl *Karishika*, Becky Okorie, came to Sandra Achums house, because she knew about her problem of not getting a child" (*Karishika* 0:23:24–34). Again King Rich combines actors' names with character names, and even

substitutes the latter with the former. The car stops, and he continues by recalling earlier sequences of the film. This enables the audience to recapitulate Karishika's motives, and also makes it easy to pick up the story for those who may enter a video parlor while the show is already running:

At the same time she was sent by someone who pretends to be Satan, Obi Madurugwu, Lucifer. He had shown her that some people have difficulties to beget children. Now, how should she go about to lead her [Bianca] astray from her faith [in God] so that she will instead turn to the Devil? (*Karishika* 0:23:36–50)

Although he adds information which the uncommented original sequence of the film does not contain, King Rich stays faithful to the overall pedagogical purpose of the film, which is the revelation of the many ways Satan employs to lead faithful Christians astray. In two other sequences, King Rich makes this quite explicit, for instance when he tells the audience: “These are the evil things that take place around us every day. That’s why I like Nigerian films, because they talk about every-day life” (*Karishika* 0:09:30–39). Such commentary in fact serves to authorize Nigerian films as depicting authentic images of the battle between good and evil, despite them being foreign and fictitious. Their moral lessons may therefore be adapted to local every-day realities.

In the case of a Pentecostal film like *Karishika* the video narrator's mediation between audience and film must in fact be considered a remediation, which adds another layer of mediation to the multi-layered mediations which can be observed in Nigerian video films. Using Bolter and Grusin's notion of remediation²⁷, Birgit Meyer has argued that Pentecostal Ghanaian (and by extension also Nigerian) video films may be considered remediations of older, already existing forms of mediation of the divine and the demonic, previously “tied to specific media such as the biblical text, sermons, and services²⁸.” Meyer continues to analyze

²⁷ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1999.

²⁸ Birgit Meyer, “Religious Remediations: Pentecostal views in Ghanaian video movies”, *Postscripts*, vol. 1, n°2-3, 2005, p. 160.

how Ghanaian/Nigerian films with Pentecostal content are constructed in such a way as to allow for an “authentic” and seemingly immediate experience of the divine and the demonic, arguing, however, that the notions of authenticity and immediacy cannot be reduced to an effect of media alone; equally important, she claims, are the practices and discourses that authorize authenticity and immediacy of certain media in particular social fields²⁹. Following Meyer’s argument, I assume that such films risk losing their notion of immediacy and “truth” if watched outside the discursive realm that helps to establish their “authenticity”. In order to produce an effect of immediacy again, they need to be re-mediated, and situated within a new discursive realm that serves to re-authorize their authenticity. This task is fulfilled by the video narrator, whose craft must be considered as re-mediation, albeit as a form of re-mediation which doesn’t absorb the medium it re-mediate but literally speaks along with or parallels it.

Sometimes, King Rich, himself a born-again Christian, asks his spectators to reflect upon a particular religious issue raised in the film. Thus, the sequence quoted above continues with Karishika getting out of her car. She then opens her arms as if to receive a spiritual force from above, and through a morphing effect she changes her appearance into that of Bianca’s friend. While this happens King Rich remains silent as if to accord this astonishing effect, which is frequently used in Nigerian films to visualize the machinations of evil, its due right of undivided audience attention. Only afterwards does he explain what has just happened and combines this again with a statement about Karishika’s plans (yet unknown to the audience):

She has changed herself and taken on the appearance of the friend of Bianca, Sandra Achums. Then she entered into her house in order to persuade her to consult a traditional healer, hehehe [laughs]! (*Karishika* 0:24:18-31).

And while we see her entering a gate and the camera pans across the outer walls of the house before a jump cut takes us inside, King Rich poses a rhetorical question direct to his audience:

²⁹ Birgit Meyer, “Religious Remediations,” p. 161.

“Is it possible for a faithful believer in God to engage with traditional [magical] methods? The answer is up to you! May God bless you, you who are following my Nigerian films!” (*Karishika* 0:24:32–44). As apt followers of Nigerian films mediated through him the audience of course knows, that there is no other answer than “no”. Through this direct address the narrator initiates the active participation and critical inquiry of his audience, a feature which, according to Ong, is typical of primary orality.³⁰ Each spectator may thus pause for a couple of seconds and think about his/her own previous experiences comparable to those of “Sandra Achums”.

Through his commentary and translation the video narrator, as the mediating third between film and audience, actually provides repair. Repair in linguistic conversation theory describes a phenomenon (of turn-taking in conversation) where a hearer helps a speaker to repair an utterance, the meaning of which otherwise would have been ambiguous or totally incomprehensible. This may occur in situations of dialogue without a third party listening, as well as in situations where an audience apart from speaker and primary listener is present. To a certain extent then, the video narrator as facilitator of the film/audience-relationship engages in permanent repair. The video film running on screen is thus constructed as communicating only partially meaningful messages that need the video narrator’s repair to be comprehensible. A somewhat similar constellation can also be found in performances of traditional African storytelling, which often not only involve a narrator and an audience but also an equally important third “part”. My colleague Uta Reuster-Jahn, who has studied storytelling among the Mwera, a tribe living in southern Tanzania, reports on the cooperative style of Mwera oral performances, which apart from narrator and audience always involve a respondent³¹. The respondent serves a couple of functions. One of them is to encourage the narrator through utterances of approval, another one is to step in and help the narrator out if he misses a word,

³⁰ Ong, 2010, p. 41.

³¹ Uta Reuster-Jahn, “Interaction in narration: the cooperative style of Mwera storytelling”, in Anne-Marie Dauphin-Tinturier and Jean Derive (eds.), *Oralité africaine et création*, Paris, Karthala, 2005, p. 161–179.

gets stuck or produces ambiguous meaning, in other words he supplies repair. In such instances he may turn into a co-narrator. A video narrator thus may also be considered a respondent, albeit with the difference that unlike the traditional storyteller who incorporates the repair and clarifications of his respondent into his performance (usually by repeating them), the video narrator's narrator (i.e., the TV-set) does not, and of course cannot react to his repair. It is only the audience that may react through signs of approval.

Video narration as distraction

So far I have only highlighted moments of the narrator's performance that seem to aid or facilitate the relationship of film and audience. Video narration, however, is based on a paradox, for the video narrator's translation and commentary not only supplies repair but *at the same time* also causes distraction. In certain instances he may even carry the attention of the spectators away from the screen, like a respondent-turned-wild, who starts telling his own story, and in so doing, turns against his narrator. In such instances the video narrator seizes the audience's attention and troubles both the preferred meaning of the film and the medium's illusion of immediacy. Most remarkable in this sense are moments of King Rich's performance in which he directly addresses the audience as "I", King Rich. Such addresses clearly have a self-advertising character but also serve to negotiate the art of video narration itself, which has yet to be firmly established as a cultural practice.

One example for such a direct address to the audience and a meta-commentary on the art of interpretation occurs during a rather dramatic sequence of *Karishika* (1:12:30–14:22). Bianca, who is somehow troubled by the pregnancy she has developed through Karishika's satanic intervention, is comforted by her Pentecostal husband. The sequence opens with a medium close shot of the couple lying in bed, Bianca telling her husband that she is not sure "if she is carrying a baby or a stone". The husband comforts her and tells her that she should have faith "in the work of God Almighty". This dialogue is only partially audible in King

Rich's version, neither in the original English nor in Kiswahili translation, for he enters the sequence by situating himself again in Nigeria, reiterating that he is actually based in Lagos, Nigeria, from where he sends "this missile" to the owner of Kobla Video Library, in Nyamwezi Street, Kariakoo quarters (where the cassette can be bought). He then catches up on the last part of the dialogue, switching to the direct speech of the husband (whose part he doesn't translate literally). Next he uses the lack of dialogue of the original to deliver background information on the actor playing Bianca, which he seems to consider as part of his job, as he makes clear in a direct address to his audience: "She is called Sandra Achums and she is well established in the film business. I have promised you to interpret [this film] good..." (*Karishika* 1:13:06–10).

A sudden outbreak of action on screen forces him to redirect his and his audience's attention back to the film. Bianca is haunted by the image of a mermaid — a satanic reaction to the husband who has mentioned God Almighty as the source of her pregnancy — and jumps up screaming. King Rich picks up on this, imitates Bianca's screaming voice and sort of translates what she shouts in direct speech, "I have seen this woman who took me to that healer, I have seen her!", then switches back to commentary and explains that "Karishika appeared to her". After that — Bianca and husband still jumping and screaming on the bed — the video narrator is quiet for a couple of seconds and leaves the original sound untouched, before he picks up the loose thread of his self-advertisement and meta-commentary, which he dropped earlier on:

I have promised you, my beloved spectator, that I will start to explain the pictures and the life of the actors. In the pictures that will follow, I will tell you who each actor is, where he lives in Nigeria – there, where I am living –, how many children he has, how many wives he has, to which school he went. Apart from this I will tell you many other things regarding the art [of filmmaking] itself. I am begging you to sit down and listen, so that I can do my work properly. I wish to thank all of those who are sending me their commentaries which enable me to do my job even better. I have promised you to begin introducing the actors to you one by one, and all pictures, by commenting upon two to three people, if I have the time [to do so] (*Karishika* 1:13:28–14:15).

By redirecting the attention of the spectators to his personal project, King Rich in fact diminishes the importance of this sequence and symbolically tells his audience to ignore the film for a second while he has something important to tell. Though this has a distracting effect in terms of audience attention to the story of the film, King Rich considers such looks behind the screen as an important aspect of his work. As he told me, he gathers the required background information on the Internet and through Tanzanian magazines which sometimes report on Nollywood stars. An important surplus of such interventions is that they expose the medium as medium and call attention to the context in which the film is watched.

Another dramatic sequence that shows how Karishika is sent to the world of the living through a grave is treated in a similar way, as if the video narrator chooses such sequences on purpose to stress his authority as a kind of ethnographer of Nigerian film (*Karishika* 0:12:40–13:50). Just like a foreign correspondent, who is living in the country on which he is reporting, King Rich claims credibility for his expertise by situating himself in Lagos, at the heart of Nollywood. After reiterating again who plays whom he begins to comment on close-ups of dry leaves which start moving as if shaken from below: “Karishika was sent into a world full of evil in order to afflict people and to win them over for the Devil”, then — as if he senses the sequence as too long or lacking sufficient information — he introduces the actress: “She is called Becky Okorie, and she plays Karishika”. When her face becomes visible through the leaves and she starts to straighten up he suddenly switches to direct speech in first person: “I am here at home in Nigeria, at Lagos. I am greeting all Tanzanians who are in Dar es Salaam. May God bless you!” Meanwhile the screen is filled with a close-up of Karishika’s face, her eyes beaming in electric blue rays to symbolize her other-worldly powers, and King Rich continues saying: “I, one day [English in original], I will come, and you will see me, King Rich, with your own eyes, and I will continue to narrate Nigerian films.” This is followed by a series of shots in slow motion showing Karishika’s resurrection from the grave, and he switches back to explaining the pictures. On screen Karishika gets

dressed with clothes that seem to appear from nowhere and he explains: “Karishika now comes out of the grave. She is naked. In another language one could also call her a *djin*.” Most remarkable about King Rich’s treatment of this sequence is that he in fact creates a layer of extra meaning with the material at hand. Through the way he combines images and commentary it seems as if he has lent his voice to Becky Okorie, the actress who plays Karishika, who thus seems to enter into direct contact with her audience. He thus conflates the inner-filmic border between living and dead — the surface of the earth — with the outer-filmic border, the screen, that separates actors and spectators. When Karishika breaks through the earth, the actress — through King Rich’s performance — seems to break through the screen. Although this oscillation of meaning only lasts for a couple of seconds — until he makes clear that he is addressing his audience as himself, King Rich — it certainly must be considered as surplus to the video narrator’s performance.

Film, narrator, and audience are tied together in a triangular relationship. Like a real go-between, who is supposed to stay neutral, or a translator who should show utmost fidelity to his source text, the narrator most often stays close to the film. He acts comparably to an expert for a different culture — as an ethnographer of American, Indian, Chinese or Nigerian film. Like a good ethnographer who hopes that through his translations and explanations the strange may become understandable to his own people, the video narrator shows respect and fidelity to the intended meaning of a film. In certain instances, however, he may also divert from a film’s preferred reading. The dinner sequence of Lufufu’s *Titanic* narration may serve to illustrate this.

In this sequence which shows Jack at the dinner table of the first class section, Lufufu bridges the cultural distance by referring to the food displayed in the film with local names. At the same time he interprets Jack’s astonishment about upper class table manners, small portions and an abundance of cutlery he does not know how to use, as recognition that he probably won’t get enough to eat. Though this reading is not totally over the edge, Lufufu

provides an interpretation which through his allusion to an empty belly is much closer to the everyday life of Tanzanian spectators than the social differences between late Victorian elite and working classes encoded in Jack's unfamiliarity with upper class table manners.

Internal monologue Jack: "On this party one is supposed to eat *ugali* [Maize dumplings] with twenty different spoons. These are things I would never get accustomed to, stupid, useless things."

Narration: "Jack, still on ... like I have told you ... still on the welcoming party, he thought that he would get *ugali*, spinach, beans and cassava, instead he was served only very small portions of food. That's how it is in a decent place like this. That was not very pleasant. He thought to himself that he would go to bed hungry today" (*Titanic* 1:00:13–45).

Through certain comments the narrator may indeed expose cultural differences between those acting on screen and those looking at the screen. He may even subvert the film's preferred meaning by ridiculing certain images. Such instances, again, create a distance between film and audience, and trouble the viewers' identification with screen characters. King Rich's version of *Karishika* contains some hilarious examples of such subversions. When Lucifer is about to send his female agent Karishika to the world of the living, we see a close-up of his face, and Obi Madurugwu who plays Lucifer, declaims in a very theatrical style: "Karishika ... Karishika ... shika ... shika ... shika!" (0:07:00–16). King Rich picks up on this and continues by saying in similar intonation: "*shika, shika, kamata, chukua!*" thus giving Lucifer's acting an ironic, almost absurd twist: *ku-shika* means "to hold" in Kiswahili, its imperative form is *shika*; *kamata* and *chukua* are imperative forms of verbs with similar semantic content. In a similar manner King Rich also ridicules Satan's former antagonists, the two pastors, who fell for Karishika. When they are praying aloud in typical Pentecostal declamatory style he mocks their way of praying by imitating the sound of it using meaningless syllables like "Holy baba shanta baba kunta baba shantra babababa!" (*Karishika* 1:15:00–07). As he explained to me, however, he reserves this mockery only for "fake" pastors, who have already fallen for the Devil.

Finally, video narrators do not hesitate to adapt film sequences that openly contradict cultural standards of decency. Lufufu, for example, who considers explicit sex scenes disturbing, cuts them out of his tapes or pastes them over with inserts of trailers of other films. He explained this to me by referring to children and under-aged teens, who are the main clientele of video parlors, and who might be disturbed watching such scenes. *Karishika* contains two sequences of a couple in bed — more or less explicit. In their original form both are pure acting sequences without dialogue. King Rich “spices them up” through commentary. The “spicing” of such sequences, which adds a comic meaning, also serves to counter the embarrassment they may imply. In such instances the video narrator turns against the film and shields his audience from the embarrassing power of such images that might hit the spectators with full force if left without commentary. For this purpose King Rich comments on such scenes with colloquial expressions for having sex, such as “climbing a mountain” or “riding a bike”. When Pastor James is seduced by Karishika, and thus turns into her “spiritual husband,” King Rich not only mocks his prayers, but imitates the sound of kissing lips, places extra words into Karishika’s mouth using a high-pitched voice and finally advises the pastor “to keep away from that fruit!” (*Karishika* 1:15:48-51).

Conclusion

Video narration serves to bridge cultural gaps between foreign films and local audiences and at the same time contains moments of subversion. It thus fosters a contemplative-hermeneutical mode of spectatorship shot through with instances of spectacle. As a powerful example of cultural resistance, video narration speaks of the agency of local audiences vis-à-vis transnational media circulating in an already globalised world. Far from being victims of an alleged cultural imperialism — be it American, Chinese or Nigerian — Tanzanian spectators of foreign films pirated on video have developed a *modus operandi* to domesticate such films. In the sense of subjecting something alien to the conditions of “home,” the

invention of the video parlor may well be read as a domestication of the video medium itself. Video narration, then, reconfigures the domesticated medium, and domesticates the foreign audio-visual material itself. The video narrator's voice-over channels the foreign material, or — to call up another connotation of domestication — *tames* it through his verbal commentary which gains the upper hand over the pre-fabricated images and sounds.

The infrastructure of the video parlor — hard wooden benches, small TV-screen, bad video copies and bad sound — already restricts the unfolding of cinema's power of illusion and make-believe, which in conventional cinema theatres may cause people to forget the film, forget the screen, and even forget themselves³². Live video narration, which is a non-filmic activity, creates an awareness of the viewing situation as well. Looking at video narration from a historical perspective of global cinema, the current Tanzanian practice inverts a process that began early on in the history of cinema, around 1900, with the shift from the cinema of attractions, that fostered a mode of spectatorship informed by spectacle and vaudeville, to narrative cinema with its power of absorption that fostered silent spectatorship and surrender to the medium. According to Miriam Hansen, this early notion of cinema which allowed non-filmic acts and activities within the theatre space, such as live sound and live commentary, underwent negation early in the evolution of cinema. "This process of negation involved representational strategies aimed at suppressing awareness of the theatre space and absorbing the spectator into the illusionist space on screen³³". Video narration, if performed live, creates an awareness of the medium through the presence of the narrator and the addition of live sound. This even holds true if dubbed voice-over cassettes are shown in video parlors, because comments that lead away from or add meaning to the film, such as the biography of Nollywood actors provided by King Rich, expose the film as film and raise an awareness of the viewing situation as well as a critical distance between spectator and video film.

³² Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon. Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 44.

³³ *Ibid.*

This exposure of the medium, though probably unintended, may well be compared to what Bertolt Brecht called *Verfremdungseffekt* (or V-effect). Brecht employed this device, which can take on many different forms — such as direct address, song, commentary, among others — to constantly remind the spectator that he is actually sitting in a theatre watching a play³⁴. Through such “alienating effects” Brecht meant to prevent spectators from empathically identifying with what was enacted on stage, but to take on an attitude of critical inquiry instead. Brecht developed his theory of epic theatre as a counter concept to the Aristotelian notion of *katharsis*, which was thought to occur through the spectator’s empathy and identification with the figures on stage. Brecht was well aware that certain traditional oral genres employed aesthetic devices such as song, gesturing, comment, and direct address to audience with similar distancing effects as the V-effects of his epic theatre. And like traditional storytelling which combines the notion of pedagogy with entertainment, his theatre was intended to raise awareness and provide entertainment at the same time. The hypothesis of the domestication of foreign films through the narrator’s performance may now gain further ground if we consider the origin of some of the narrator’s aesthetic devices which, indeed, are borrowed from primary oral narrative, where they are traditionally employed — just as the Brechtian V-effects — to expose the medium, prevent identification with characters, and raise an attitude of critical inquiry. This argument works best with mainstream action films à la Hollywood which usually do not care much about didactics but aim at entertainment, employing the full arsenal of aesthetic devices film as technology of make-believe has brought forth since its inception in order to produce the illusion of immediacy. The video narrator’s performance may indeed domesticate such films by exposing them as films and by creating a distance between audience and film. Nigerian films, however, quite unlike Hollywood films, do already have some relationship to primary orality, and though most of them are scripted, improvisation ranks high on Nollywood sets. Aesthetic devices

³⁴ Bertolt Brecht, “Der Messingkauf,” in Bertolt Brecht, *Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 22, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1994, p. 698–699.

originating in primary orality, such as direct addresses to audience, songs, and the use of types rather than round characters may well be found as carry-overs in Nigerian films. Such carry-overs already produce a distancing effect. Above all most Nigerian films do contain a certain amount of didactic aim, and especially evangelical movies such as *Karishika* must be considered to be full of it. However, since Nollywood films equally draw on Hollywood styles, as well as styles borrowed from American soap operas or Latin American *telenovelas*, the hypothesis of domestication through video narration may make sense for the narrators' treatment of Nigerian films, too.

Recently, video narration in Tanzania has suffered a severe set-back. Based as it is on pirated video copies of foreign films, it has called the Tanzanian Copyright Society (COSOTA) into action. During a major raid against video piracy conducted in September 2009, eight distributors were sacked in Dar es Salaam and tons of pirated material impounded. Although primarily hunting for those who illegally reproduce local Kiswahili films, and who thus endanger the growth of the local video film industry, the police also apprehended Ajay Chavda, the major distributor of foreign films dubbed by Dar es Salaam's video narrators on DVD and VHS. Rumor had it that COSOTA was tipped off by some of Chavda's jealous competitors dealing in Kiswahili films who discovered a decline in their sales which they attributed to the competition from Chavda's dubbed foreign films. Whether this is true or not, what remains a fact is that video narration was on the rise during the past two years. This is clearly tied to the shift from live performance towards a mediatization of the craft through recording technologies and mass-production, which allowed video narrators to generate more income. I therefore doubt that King Rich, Lufufu, and the other video narrators of Dar es Salaam, just for fear of legal consequences, will return to mainly performing live again. Since COSOTA intends to stop owners of video parlors from exhibiting pirated copies of foreign films as well, this would not be a legal option anyway. It seems as if their very success — reflected by a high demand for Kiswahili voice-over versions of foreign films that in turn

raised the attention of the Copyright Commission — has now turned against the video narrators. Unless COSOTA legalizes their craft through the introduction of a system of copyright fees, Tanzanian video narrators are doomed to operate in the grey area of the informal economy.