In his richly detailed and insightful new book *Cinematic Independence: Constructing the Big Screen in Nigeria*, Noah Tsika charts the history of theatrical film in Nigeria. Taking a *longue-durée* approach to cinema history in Nigeria, focusing on industry dynamics from the late colonial period to the present day, Tsika offers a searing critique of the relationship between Hollywood and Nigeria. Through an intense focus on empirical and historical detail, he unveils the dramatic power asymmetries at the heart of this relationship.

Key to this critical endeavor is keeping Nigeria at the center of the analysis instead of relegating it to the margins of film history, and more specifically Hollywood history. Nollywood is too often read as a site of alterity—whether lambasting its supposedly bad films or breathlessly speaking about its enormous growth—Nigeria is read as different, as an exotic Other. Yet “Nigeria has never been beyond Hollywood’s global consciousness,” whether it was Disney’s consciousness when the company sent a team of Imagineers to the country in 1979, or as a place of cutting-edge technological development

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with the development of Cinestar International’s innovative multilingual projection system Multitrax.²

Tsika makes clear that the striking features of Old Nollywood, its “legendary productivity, its awesome annual output of ‘bad’ straight-to-video films,” is not so different from the contemporary “deluge” of Netflix originals.³ And “Nigeria’s transmogrified infrastructures”—its cinemas becoming houses of worship or stores—“are not isolated examples, utterly eccentric in their Africanness”; indeed, this conversion has taken place many times in the United States, including in key centers of American cinema such as New York and Los Angeles, as Tsika shows.⁴ These two examples—two of many in the book—show how Nigerian cinema is not so different from that found in the United States and that scholars looking to understand the future of filmmaking would do well to turn to Nigeria.

Hollywood—whether studios or associated technologies such as Cinerama—has had an enduring interest in Nigeria, as chapter 1 shows. The case of Cinerama is a prescient example of the kind of interest Hollywood studios and movie technology companies had in Nigeria: this corporation, which erected temporary theaters in Nigeria to display its widescreen technology, “expected to be so welcomed in Nigeria as to be able to construct permanent facilities on the government’s dime.”⁵ Cinerama, like many other cases in the book, wanted to benefit from Nigeria, and particularly its vast population of potential consumers, but did little to make that relationship reciprocally beneficial. As Tsika repeatedly shows, Nigeria’s possibility as a consumer market (of movies and what could be advertised in them and sold in theaters around them) was the irresistible lure bringing Hollywood and related American corporations to Nigeria—much as they would like to dress that up in discourses of developing Nigeria, satisfying its “movie hungry” audiences, or being part of a “Rising Africa.”⁶ Rather, as many examples across the book show, they “sought to couch exploitation as camaraderie”—as when Eric Johnston, president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), stated, “Two needs must be filled in Nigeria if there is to be a massive and loyal following for U.S. product. . . . The first is more better-quality American films, and the second is more and better theatres. The U.S. industry can, and should, be doing something about both.”⁷ Building theaters, and stocking them with American films, was envisaged as something that would directly benefit Hollywood companies and American interests. That Nigerians would want this was simply assumed, and more audaciously, it was assumed that the Nigerian government would both want and pay for this construction.

Chapter 2 takes a detour from the stated aim of the book to explore theatrical exhibition, focusing instead on the production of The Mark of

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3. Tsika, 182.
4. Tsika, 23.
5. Tsika, 34.
6. Tsika, 42, 45.
7. Tsika, 45, 46.
the Hawk (Michael Audley, 1957) and the film text itself. Nonetheless, it’s a telling case for the kind of imaginary Hollywood has long had for Nigeria. These imaginaries shape the political economy of film exhibition. The chapter uses the film, produced by Lloyd Young and Associates in Enugu, to offer fascinating insights into the relationship between Hollywood and Nigeria. The Eastern Region was keenly interested in developing its film industry and building associations with Hollywood. In part, this was a political strategy to create “an impression of connectedness to the wider world” and thus increased status in Nigeria, in a context where regions competed with one another. Yet the dominant story of the chapter is one of Hollywood, via the figure of Lloyd Young, walking away with the lion’s share of the benefits that the relationship created. While The Mark of the Hawk certainly benefited Lloyd Young reputationally (the film received glowing praise from both Dr. Martin Luther King and US president Dwight D. Eisenhower, for example) and financially, it did neither for Enugu. “Developing” Nigeria has long been an idée fixe of Hollywood, however one chooses to define the industry,” but that development is in service of capitalist markets for American products, as Tsika explains in vivid detail.

Chapter 3 is expansive in its coverage of Hollywood’s relationship with Nigerian exhibition spaces (e.g., the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, more commonly known as FESTAC) as well as Nollywood’s relationship with cinemas outside Nigeria. Hollywood has and continues to exert tremendous disciplining power on Nigerian screens, as with the MPAA export ban that began in 1981 and lasted until the return to civilian rule in 1999. Cinemas died in this period, but as we all know, movies did not: this is the period, of course, when Nollywood emerged. Tsika shows how intertwined theatrical distribution in Nigeria is with Hollywood—for example, he shows how FilmHouse “became the largest theater chain in Nigeria by partnering with Fox and the IMAX Corporation”—but also how this relationship is fundamentally asymmetrical and to the immense benefit of Hollywood and American corporations. Tsika demonstrates how Hollywood, whether through banning film exports or partnering with cinema chains, exerts massive power in determining what will be projected on the screens of Nigeria’s cinemas.

The book is at its most rhetorically powerful when explaining the emergence of multiplex cinema in Nigeria post-2004 in chapter 4. As Tsika argues, these multiplexes are emphatically not for most Nigerians because of their prices, gatekeeping measures, security arrangements, and locations in upscale areas, but rather for an affluent minority. In this way, they stand in stark contrast to Old Nollywood’s audiences and production and distribution strategies. Tsika is particularly scathing in his critique of FilmHouse, a vertically integrated enterprise, producing and exhibiting its own movies. Unsurprisingly, they favor their own films to the direct detriment of unaffiliated filmmakers. FilmHouse, but also the other multiplexes, are tightly connected...

8. Tsika, 88.
to Hollywood studios and corporations such as IMAX, Coke, and Pepsi. The multiplexes must treat Hollywood movies preferentially, but perhaps more importantly, corporate interests are shaping the content of Nigerian movies, as Tsika illustrates through a close reading of *Couple of Days* (Tolu “Lord Tanner” Awobiyi, 2016) and its “promotional aesthetic.” Strikingly, in one scene the characters watch a movie at a FilmHouse location, but beyond mere product placement, the scene was designed to be excerpted as an ad for FilmHouse and its concession stands. At the same time, New Nollywood as an artistic practice can exist because of Nigerian multiplexes, as Tsika himself acknowledges. It is not a practice free of commercial relationships, but then no filmmaking practice is, and the fact that multiplexes could lead to the creation of this new and distinctly Nigerian artform is important, no matter how imbricated this artform is with corporate interests.

Cinemas are spaces of contestation where various interests clash and harmonize: they do not have simple effects in a media landscape. While pointing out the immense power differential between various players in this landscape—as Tsika does—is essential to avoiding an overly celebratory discourse of the rebirth of theatrical film in Nigeria, it is equally important to examine the ways in which various Nigerian players work with and contest multiplexes and the new business relationships they bring into being. Along these lines, I wish Tsika had given more space to unfolding how Nigerian filmmakers challenge, subvert, or rework the new systems that multiplexes have introduced into the Nigerian cinematic landscape and how they attempt to turn them to their own advantage. The history of Nollywood shows nothing if not that in the face of impossibility, new filmmaking practices emerge. Thus, I would have liked to have read more about how Nigerian filmmakers navigate the challenges and opportunities posed by multiplexes because their work also shapes Nigeria’s cinematic landscape, just as it is shaped by Hollywood behemoths.

In conclusion, the book carefully charts Nigeria’s cinema history and, in so doing, lays the foundation needed to understand the multiplex in present-day Nigerian cinema with all its multiple power configurations. This kind of historically detailed scholarship is vital—especially in a time of proliferating platforms and screen media forms and the discourses of newness that they inevitably generate. While in Nigeria multiplexes are new, the political economy of exploitation and power asymmetry underpinning them is a tale as old as Hollywood itself, and this is what Tsika most powerfully demonstrates in *Cinematic Independence*.

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11. Tsika, 175.