

## *Nyau Cinema*

Synopsis (1876, *On the Penny Farthing*, 2012): In the Museum of London, a man attempts to mount a stationery penny-farthing. He tries again and again, without success. – 1 min 2 secs

### 1

It was the heterogeneous visual culture that developed around *Nyau* cinema which drew my attention to the study of visual arts from an early age – the arresting cinema posters (some original, some improvised) that hung on the trees that lined the road leading to school and the insistent manicule that led you all the way to St Pius. They were more an exhibition than advertising – an unconscious detouring of the globalised channels of commercial cinema distribution. One film show would be advertised with different posters often with conflicting information, and you would not necessarily see the film the posters promised. A film noir poster would turn out to be publicising a martial arts flick from Hong Kong. But it didn't matter. The effect was the same if you knew how to read those posters.<sup>91</sup>

I wanted to draw or collage the manicured posters just as the projectionist had rendered them – with a shotgun barrel pointing out at you to make you shudder and shiver in the spine, the flying ninjas and tuxedoed Bond, Charlie Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle. And like everybody else in the playground I wanted to be a movie star. But that was a distant dream. There was no Hollywood in Malawi. What was more realistic was to be the projectionist so you could draw and photocopy all those posters yourself; make people walk backwards or fast forward; you could make Jesus walk on water or the Life President Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda repeat the same words again and again, in the newsreel, like a crazy *gule* – 'literally naked', 'literally naked', 'literally naked'.<sup>92</sup>

My psychogeographical *Nyau* films are spontaneous and involve site specific performances using readymade 'film sets' on the streets. I walk around on a derivate with my camera in my bag, as if in the bushes looking for materials for a *Nyau* structure with *Kapoli*, and when I spot my *gule* self flitting by in film and in the psychogeography of a given place I stop a

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<sup>91</sup>The *Nyau* of the poster, its ability to rupture continuity of the present moment, of language and narrative, has been described by Desnos (1929) as 'psychic action' cutting through conventional vision, hierarchies and mores. The poster's communication, which infuses language with the power of the image, is immediate and instant, creating a situation in which one is able to experience their real self; see Wild, 2015, p.190.

<sup>92</sup>Dr Hastings Banda posited himself as 'saviour' of the Malawi nation, and kept reminding his opponents in his speeches that when he came back to the country from his studies abroad he had found them 'literally naked'.

stranger and say, ‘Can you film me?’ I do a performance which totally mystifies the stranger. I have the idea of a filmstrip in my head but the onlooker filming is also part of it. ‘What are you doing?’ they ask me. There’s the intervention, interaction and connection with people I otherwise would not speak to in public. I have made friends like that; I have met people in parks, in museums, on the street, and have gone on to befriend them on social networking sites and in real life.

In a lot of my films, the actions and activities that I perform, such as jumping up and down on a bench in a park, are a-narrative, a-historical and repetitious like *Kasiya Maliro’s* cosmic routine. These filmic ‘rants’ also recall aspects of primitive cinema, ‘cinema of attractions’, historical film clips, and the re-animated cinema of my childhood as they grapple with various social issues inspired by the found film set. Cyclical like the phenakistoscope or diagrammatic as if in parody of the chronophotography of Eadweard Muybridge, and Etienne-Jules Marey, they are things that a little tramp or a drifter might also do in disrupting linear time and the utilitarian interpretation of the city. My *Nyau* cinema thus detours not only the reified public space and its histories but also the conventional linear narrative structure of film for its diagrammatic ‘blossoming’, which is of here and now. When performing before the camera I often feel as exhilarated as a *Gule Wamkulu* dance, creating patterns of subjectification in my mind no less colourful and brilliant than the ‘painted films’ of Survage, Kupka or Charchounne.<sup>93</sup>

My *Nyau* cinema star is different from the alienated film actor identified by Benjamin and Metz. *Nyau* cinema is film making as a sovereign activity – a way of creating situations within social, historical, and aesthetic narratives – and ultimately a form of gift giving.

## 2

*Nyau* cinema is thus more than cinema; it’s not just the flickering image projected but the whole dispositif of filmmaking and its distribution and presentation. *Nyau* cinema is filtered in iMovie, Instagram or Final Cut to emphasise its diagrammatic nature, otherness and its pre-occupation with time and gift giving. The sepia look is the look of life/death identified by Anguilar (1996) in *Gule Wamkulu* – the dusty aesthetic of ‘the place of the skull’ *bwalo* and the muddy skin of *gule* – alluding to the nothingness and the field of unknowing from which *Gule Wamkulu* comes. The editing is brutal like a hacked wooden

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<sup>93</sup>See Wild (2015), on the relationship between early film and avant-garde painting.

*Nyau* mask in rags and raffia, and like the instantaneous real-time editing of the projectionist at St Pius. The aesthetic is that of a broken down film, or a primitive filmstrip. The films last less than a minute, and end abruptly like an accidental clip. Let's say I make the film longer than a minute, somehow it doesn't work. *Nyau* films are mostly made by aimless wandering, a derive into the unknown, and when you're walking there are these passing moments and situations – somebody crossing the road, a car passing by – these are the duration of the film. It is the duration natural to the Chewa conception of time as manifest in the subaltern *Nyau* cinema of my childhood where time was conceived as a series of ruptures in an affirmation of transience and of the present moment as advocated by *Gule Wamkulu*<sup>94</sup> and the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962; see Bachelard, 2013, p.47) in opposition to time as *la duree* of Bergson (2001) which has parallels with the accumulative values of the world of necessity, work, and the market (see Wild, 2015, p.221).

In an act of detournement of the distribution of commercial film the dissemination of my *Nyau* films is also diagrammatic. In fact a *Nyau* film is not complete until its intervention in the liminal spaces of commercial and social networks. Like Hollywood, *Nyau* cinema encircles the globe. First when the film is complete it's immediately uploaded onto Facebook and YouTube. My followers at these sites numbers in the thousands. From there *Nyau* film spreads to other social networking sites like a virus: Tumblr, Twitter, Google Plus, Vimeo, Wordpress etc. When I am invited to show in a gallery or theatre I select films that have done their time online first. *Nyau* cinema on Facebook is accompanied by a visual diary of my everyday life, travels and derives around the world – from New York to Moscow, from London to Cape Town – which includes advance stills from the found film sets, notes from my reading and research, and photographs from my various social encounters. This is the place of praxis. Many beautiful muses and people I have met on the road around the world are featured there, and so are my drinking buddies. Press reviews and events around my work are also streamed down the feed with the films. In the gallery the *Nyau* cinema exhibition is accompanied by elaborate publications, postcards, invites, posters and tongue in cheek adverts in newspapers (see samples in the appendix).

### 3

Like the heterogeneous *Nyau* cinema at St Pius, I have combined my *Nyau Cinema*

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<sup>94</sup>For an exploration of the interplay between life and death see Aguilar, 1996, p.232.

screening with live performances, and other conceptual art works and happenings. It is not by chance that when Okwui Enwezor invited me to the Venice Biennale, we included two other performative projects to accompany the *Nyau Cinema* installation, *Hysteresis*, in the Giardini, *Sanguinetti Breakout Area* and *The Last Judgement* at the Arsenale. As elaborated above, *Nyau* cinema is not just films, it's a total art practice and a way of looking at the world. Like *Gule Wamkulu*, to the Chewa in the village, *Nyau* cinema is the very thing orchestrating my contemporary *Nyau* praxis.