

Toolkit: African Screen Worlds Self-Isolation

An Introduction to Decolonising
Netflix, Youtube and Vimeo

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ScreenWorlds



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As the COVID-19 virus relentlessly spreads around the world, digital streaming services and online viewing platforms are providing vital respite from the mundanity and repetitiveness of day-to-day self-isolation. Problematically, our viewing habits become increasingly moulded by Recommendation Lists and their machine learning systems. Netflix, Youtube and Vimeo's pattern-based analysis technologies are yet to operate in a manner that understands the complexities of cultural politics, recognises the depth and variety of human experiences, or, indeed, adopts 'decolonisation' as a key algorithmic function. However, amid the gargantuan digital universes that these websites possess, one can locate thriving constellations of vibrant African Screen Worlds, a series of stimulating screen-based media forms which orbit around Africa and, at the same time, seek to launch the continent into exciting new conceptual territories.

Netflix is on the verge of an Afrocentric transformation. Star Wars actor John Boyega was recently recruited to assist the production and development of a new wave of African-language films for the multimillion dollar company, aiming to tap into the African market by establishing exclusive streaming rights. The platform currently hosts a range of existing feature length African films, preparing online audiences for Boyega's latest venture. Importantly, one of Netflix's most stunning purchases – Mati Diop's mesmeric *Atlantics* (2019) – won the Grand Prix at Cannes Film Festival 2019. However, although Diop became the first black woman to win an award in the festival's main competition, the filmmaker admits she was "moved" yet also "a little sad" that it took so long for the festival to recognise and celebrate black female directors in this way.

As Netflix's 'African turn' gradually takes place, other viewing services must also play a pivotal role in giving underrepresented filmmakers opportunities to promote their works. In terms of uploading videos to the web, Vimeo and Youtube offer very similar services and have been locked in a battle for supremacy for several years. Wanuri Kihiu chose to self-upload her film *Pumzi* (2009) to Vimeo, drawing from the platform's community-driven features to promote and circulate her work. Meanwhile, wholehearted celebrations of open transsexuality in Titica and Geração 80's *Olha o Boneco* (2012) and impassioned depictions of gay communities in *Art Attack's Same Love (Remix)* (2016) circumvent repressive laws and forms of LGBTQ+ discrimination in Angola and Kenya respectively, thereby illustrating the subversive powers of uploading one's music videos into Youtube's vast – albeit oftentimes impersonal – online sphere.

Nosa Igbinedion emblematises the power of our contemporary digital tools by deciding to channel the best of both viewing platforms, uploading content connected to his African superhero film *Oya: Rise of the Orisas* (2015) on both Vimeo and Youtube as means of maximising the work's outreach. Superhero

blockbusters in the vein of Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2016) are hastily acquired by and thus readily available on streaming giants Netflix, yet Youtube and Vimeo offer important online spaces for aspiring independent filmmakers on modest budgets to nurture audiences and promote their work.

This toolkit serves as an introduction to the multitudinous African Screen Worlds that manifest across contemporary digital media services. In order to ensure that the learning pack remains open and accessible for beginner-level researchers, each digital platform has been allocated a particular media form: feature length films for Netflix, short films for Vimeo, and music videos for Youtube. Although certain African Screen Worlds do indeed move across media forms as well as shift between websites, an intermediate-level toolkit will be produced to cover such permutations and configurations in further depth.

One of the key aims of the Screen Worlds project is to challenge the traditional Western-centric paradigms on which traditional Film Studies courses are predominantly constructed. Rather than promoting a rigid 'auteur' approach that focuses solely on the director's input, course leaders are therefore encouraged to scrutinise the ways in which African and Afrodiasporic actors, cinematographers, animators, musicians, dancers and indeed all manner of filmmaking professionals contribute to shaping and nuancing the meaning of these 'co-authored' artworks (Gaut 1997). At the start and end of each lesson, teachers and students are also encouraged to articulate the experiences and beliefs that influence and shape their respective positionalities, updating and developing these positions and understandings as the course progresses and everyone learns from – and about – their course convenors and classmates (Nnaemeka 2004).

Viewing list

Examining the Early Stages of Netflix's African Shift

- *Atlantics* (2019), Mati Diop, Senegal
- *Azali* (2018), Kwabena Gyansah, Ghana
- *The Burial of Kojo* (2018), Blitz Bazawule, Ghana
- *Lionheart* (2018), Genevieve Nnaji, Nigeria
- *The Wedding Party* (2016), Kemi Adetiba, Nigeria

Vimeo's African Shorts: Grand Ideas and Intergalactic Pathways

- *Afronauts* (2014), Frances Bodomo, Zambia
- *Oya: Rise of the Orisas* (2014), Nosa Igbinedion, Nigeria-UK
- *Jonah* (2013), Kibwe Tavares, Tanzania-UK
- *Yellow Fever* (2012), Ng'endo Mukii, Kenya
- *Pumzi* (2009), Wanuri Kahiu, Kenya

Processing Growth and Rebirth in Youtube's African Music Videos

- *Final Form* (2019), Sampa the Great, Zambia-Botswana
- *La Maison Noir* (2018), Petite Noir, Democratic Republic of Congo-South Africa
- *Same Love (Remix)* (2016), Art Attack, Kenya
- *Olha o Boneco* (2012), Titica and Geração 80, Angola
- *Kariba Ya Bintou* (2010), Baloji and Konono No. 1, Democratic Republic of Congo

Reading list

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- Chrispo, Caleb Okumu. "Music Video as a Constituency for Research in Contemporary African Music." *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, no. 153/154, 2002, pp. 114–118.
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- Gaut, Berys, 'Film Authorship and Collaboration.' in Allen, Richard and Smith, Murray, *Film Theory and Philosophy*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 149–172.
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- Jafa, Arthur, in Dent, Gina, et al. *Black Popular Culture*. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), pp. 249–254.
- KKorsgaard, Mathias Bonde. *Music video after MTV: Audiovisual studies, new media, and popular music*. (London: Routledge, 2017) pp. 1–10.
- Nnaemeka, Obioma. "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way." *Signs*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2004, pp. 357–385.
- Saul, Mahir and Ralph Austen, eds. (2010). *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution*. Ohio UP.
- Sawadogo, Boukary. *West African Screen Media: Comedy, TV Series, and Transnationalization*. Michigan State University Press, 2019.
- Tyron, Chuck. *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence*. Rutgers University Press, 2009.
- Uricchio, William (2014). "Film, Cinema, Television... Media?" *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 12.3: pp. 266–279



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Additional viewing

- VIMEO: From A Whisper (2008), Wanuri Kahiu, Kenya
- YOUTUBE: Belhaven Meridian (2010), Kahlil Joseph and Shabazz Palaces, USA
- YOUTUBE: The Model: Chapters One and Two (2010), Kahlil Joseph and Seu Jorge, USA-Brazil
- VIMEO: The Blind Photographer (2011), Carl Houston Mc Millan, South Africa
- YOUTUBE: Papaoutai (2013), Stromae, Belgium
- VIMEO: Tulkou (2013), Sami Guellai, France
- VIMEO: People of the Delta (2015), Joey L., Ethiopia
- YOUTUBE : Lemonade (2016), Beyoncé et al, USA
- NETFLIX: Black Panther (2018), Ryan Coogler, USA
- NETFLIX: Chief Daddy (2018), Niyi Akinmolayan, Nigeria
- YOUTUBE: Dirty Computer (2018), Janelle Monáe, USA
- NETFLIX: Queen Sono (2020), Kagiso Lediga, South Africa-Nigeria-Zimbabwe

Key questions for students may include:

- How do the directors in question choose to represent African citizens and places?
- What possibilities and pitfalls emerge when adopting a particular audiovisual form?
- What obstacles emerge when an audiovisual form is publicised across a particular digital platform, or in a particular region?
- How do successful collaborations form?
- When are collaborations unsuccessful?
- What do these filmmakers envisage for the future of Africa?

About the Toolkit Author

My name is Joseph Owen Jackson. I am a PhD student at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. My doctoral research explores the myriad ways in which experiences of the African diasporas are represented by the films, music videos and commercial works of director Kahlil Joseph. I balance research in contemporary Afrodiasporic media forms with my role as Media Disseminator for the ERC-funded project 'Screen Worlds: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies.'

Our project aims to break down preconceived barriers between 'gatekeepers' and learners, thus I welcome suggestions and discussions about how to develop, update and improve this toolkit. Please email 643069@soas.ac.uk with your thoughts.