

BOOK REVIEW

Connor Ryan. *Lagos Never Spoils: Nollywood and Nigerian City Life*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2023. 269 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$39.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-472-05579-1.

Lagos Never Spoils: Nollywood and Nigerian City Life presents a fresh perspective on the relationship between Nollywood and Lagos. Ryan's unique approach is a critique and a profound dismantling of Eurocentric academic works that present cities in a standard, familiar manner. His argument is compelling, suggesting that such studies often neglect cinemas in the Global South, creating a biased view of cinema and urban environments. In response, his work seeks to disrupt conventional ideas about cities, challenge assumptions about cinema, and address the absence of African cities and screen media in film studies discourse, emphasizing the urgency and importance of this issue.

In his effort to juxtapose media and city life in Lagos, Nigeria, Ryan's intuitive book introduces three key concepts: ambivalence, enlargement, and enclosure. These theoretical constructs and practical tools will equip you, the reader, with a new lens for understanding the relationship between screen media and urban spaces. Ryan's unique approach is not about relying on common themes in Western urban theory like "sensorial shock or flânerie" but building his analysis on personal experiences in Lagos, conversations with local producers and distributors, and a growing body of research on African urbanism.

The work delves into the significant transition of Yoruba theater companies to producing films set in Lagos, focusing on the city's modern infrastructure and architecture. These elements became central to the movies, serving as attractions and symbols of societal change. The films blend cinematic and theatrical styles, combining visual spectacle with Yoruba theater's moral lessons and cultural richness. Ryan's book highlights television's significant influence on Nollywood's development and its representations of Lagos.

Ryan highlights the influence of the "Basi and Company" series, produced in Enugu but set in Lagos. This series created urban narratives through dialogue and performance rather than a visual representation of the city. This approach prefigured Nollywood's depiction of Lagos, emphasizing social dynamics over physical space. It also demonstrates how Nollywood films often explore the distinctions between newcomers, lifelong residents, and original inhabitants of Lagos rather than ethnic or cultural differences and use the genre of village-to-city migration comedies to contrast urban and rural life.

What is most intriguing is the author's presentation of a narrative of entanglement, examining how Lagosians survive economic hardship and struggle through familial bonds and social connections. Despite the economic structural adjustments

in late 1980s Nigeria that led to significant financial hardship and social instability in Lagos, residents were compelled to adopt various survival strategies and rely heavily on social connections for stability amidst political turmoil. These connections, crucial for personal progress and attaining a “good life,” also came with obligations and could become burdensome. This dual nature of social ties—providing support but potentially becoming overwhelming—highlights city life’s complex entanglements.


Lagos Never Spoils captures the evolution of Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry, and highlights the transition from a prolific producer of direct-to-video films to creating high-budget cinematic releases known as “New Nollywood,” which thrived in the 1990s and early 2000s by distributing films through video markets and petty commerce across West Africa. The industry’s segmentation led to new distribution channels such as satellite television, streaming websites, video on demand, in-flight entertainment, and theaters, bypassing the traditional home video market. It also illustrated the challenges and strategies related to film production, distribution, and audience engagement.

What is more, the rise of multiplex cinemas in Nigeria in the early 2000s, particularly in Lagos—such as Genesis Deluxe Cinemas, Ozone Cinemas, and Filmhouse Cinemas—and their impact on the film industry created cinematic experiences in these venues, a sense of global consumerism, and an escape from the challenges of Lagos life.

Moreover, Ryan did not miss out on analyzing the corporatization of Nollywood, where corporate distributors such as ROK Studios, Ebony Life TV, and so on, aim to manage the industry’s creative activities and audience engagement. This includes changes in distribution methods, such as moving from tangible to intangible forms, such as television broadcast and internet streaming, and the concentration of capital around a small number of prominent media corporations in the industry.

Another essential concept Ryan explores is the growing influence of logistical management in Nollywood and its impact on creative labor and audience engagement. This includes the commodification of art and the formalization of precariousness in Lagos’s filmmaking structures. He concludes by delving into a subset of Nollywood films that present a dark and gritty portrayal of Lagos, such as *Taxi Driver: Oko Ashewo* (2015), *Gbomo Gbomo Express* (2015), *Catcher* (2017) and so on, focusing on clever criminals and stylish transgressions. Despite their dark portrayals, these films reflect a transformation in Lagos from the deep urban crisis of the 1990s to improved conditions in recent years. These films continue to make Nollywood compelling, as its stories of proximate experience remain immediately recognizable and resonant for local audiences.

Lagos Never Spoils is a transformative manifesto that advocates for a more inclusive and nuanced approach to studying cinema and urbanism, particularly in African contexts. It challenges dominant narratives and aims to broaden perspectives on screen media’s role in shaping urban life in Africa’s megacity.

Sochima Peppertus Okafor 
 University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, USA
spokafor@go.olemiss.edu