

The Materiality of Genre: Analog and Digital Ghosts in Video Movies from Ghana

Carmela Garritano

This article discusses three representative examples of one particular genre, the Ghanaian ghost movie, to look closely at the creation and evolution of the figure of the ghost in analog and digital video environments. The larger aim is to expand our understanding of African movie genres by accounting for their technological and material dimensions. In Ghana, the earliest ghost movies, here represented by Ghost Tears (Socrate Safo, 1992) and Suzzy (Veronica Cudjoe, 1993), relied on analog visual effects to render the ghost as a visual trace of violence. Appearing almost a decade later, The Chase (Jon Gil, 2011) is noteworthy because it stretches the boundaries of the genre considerably. Jon Gil, the director and producer of the film, exploits digital tools to transform the ghost into a horrifying, multisensory experience; the ghost is felt as a disembodied, affective shock. In both cases, the ghost reflects back on its technological context in unanticipated ways.

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In the Ghanaian and Nigerian screen media environments, genre has been central to the development of viable commercial movie industries and, increasingly, a major topic of academic research. The predictability genre guarantees to consumers and producers has been crucial to sustaining commercial movie production in an under-regulated and fiercely competitive media assemblage in Anglophone West Africa. Jonathan Haynes has argued that it is “the most important structure guiding a potential buyer.”¹ Genre also has been a source of strategic innovation. As Matthew Brown notes, “the [genre] process is both reproductive and productive.”² A new movie attracts attention by fulfilling genre expectations but also by retooling genre conventions to surprise or shock. Among recent studies of Nollywood genres, Jonathan Haynes’s much-anticipated book, *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres*, attests to the centrality of genre as a discursive structuring device for the study of

Carmela Garritano is an associate professor of Africana Studies and Film Studies at Texas A&M University. She is author of *African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History* (Ohio University Press), a 2013 *Choice* Outstanding Academic Title and winner of the African Literature Association’s Best First Book award. (Email: cgarritano@tamu.edu)

1 Jonathan Haynes, “African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradictions,” *Situation* 4.1 (2011): 74.

2 Matthew H. Brown, “At the Threshold of New Political Communities: Some Notes on the History of Nollywood’s Epic Genre,” *The Global South* 7.1 (2013): 57.

Nigerian and Ghanaian commercial movies.³ Much as it does for video-makers and marketers, genre offers film and media scholars a mechanism for organizing the products of a prolific, messy, (mostly) informal, and rapidly innovating transnational cultural formation. Genre, furthermore, brings the aesthetic and narrative multiplicity of African commercial movies into visibility and provides a useful framework for describing historical change as evidenced in the movies themselves.

With the important exceptions of work by Brian Larkin and Lindsey Green-Simms, most of the writing on Nigerian and Ghanaian movie genres has defined genre in terms of narrative patterns.⁴ Haynes, for example, details the “forms and thematic complexes” common to Nollywood genres, giving emphasis to plot, setting, and characters.⁵ In this article, I build on Haynes, Larkin, and Simms and undertake a slightly different mode of genre criticism, one that foregrounds the technological materiality and experiential dimensions of genre: the electronic signals scored onto the analog videotape or converted into digital data and then translated onto the screen as aural and visual effects. I follow the example of Tom Gunning who pioneered a mode of genre criticism attuned to “the specificity of cinema.”⁶ Gunning’s work has theorized the genres of early cinema and argued that in film, genres are not merely about narrative features, but are primarily constituted through the cinematic codes they deploy—the codes that organize space and time—as well as the experiences they deliver. In this case, I attempt a genre analysis focused on the specificity of *video*, its visual and sound codes, and its phenomenological aspects. Attending to three representative examples of one particular genre, the Ghanaian ghost movie, I look closely at the creation and evolution of the figure of the ghost in analog and digital video environments. My larger aim is to expand our understanding of African movie genres by accounting for their technological and material dimensions. In Ghana, the earliest ghost movies, here represented by *Ghost Tears* (Socrate Safo, 1992) and *Suzzy* (Veronica Cudjoe, 1993), relied on analog visual effects to render the ghost as a visual trace of violence.⁷ Appearing almost a decade later, *The Chase* (Jon Gil, 2011) is noteworthy because it stretches the boundaries of the genre considerably.⁸ Jon Gil, the director and producer of the film, exploits digital tools to transform the ghost into a horrifying, multisensory experience; the ghost is felt as a disembodied, affective shock. In both cases, the ghost reflects back on its technological context in unanticipated ways.

A genre that has been popular since the commercial movie industry’s beginnings, the Ghanaian ghost movie is a tangle of media and discourse flows and of deep-rooted and emergent beliefs and practices; a product of the dynamic and fluid West African

3 Jonathan Haynes, *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

4 Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008); Lindsey Green-Simms, “Occult Melodramas: Spectral Affect and West African Video Film,” *Camera Obscura* 80 (2012): 25–59.

5 Haynes, *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres*, xxv.

6 Tom Gunning, “‘Those Drawn with a very fine Camel’s Hair Brush’: The Origins of Film Genres,” *IRIS* 20 (1995): 49–60.

7 *Ghost Tears*, videocassette, directed by Socrate Safo (Accra, Ghana: Hacky Films, 1992); *Suzzy*, videocassette, directed by Veronica Cudjoe (Accra Ghana: 1993).

8 *The Chase*, directed by Jon Gil (Tamale, Ghana: Hollyhock Productions, 2011).

urban ecology, its resilience as a cultural and generic form seems to hinge on its malleability.⁹ Ghost movies draw from an archive of African oral and written texts and performance traditions as well as from Hollywood films, Japanese horror, and other imported media. A popular, “interdiscursive”¹⁰ cultural form, the Ghanaian ghost movie is informed by indigenous sources, while, at the same time, it remains dynamic and flexible, absorbing multiple influences that interact with and continually modify the indigenous. The idea that the ghost returns after death because she died in an unnatural and untimely manner loosely correlates with traditional beliefs common to many West African ethnic groups, including the Asante, Ga, and Ewe in Ghana. These systems of belief hold that the soul is contained in but remains separate from the body; it does not “lose its individuality after death” and survives in the spiritual world of the ancestors, who exert ongoing influence in family and community life.¹¹ Funeral and burial rites are crucial to appease and honor the dead because it is thought that an angry or “restless ghost” could cause family members to suffer bad dreams, unexplained misfortune, or sickness.¹² In Ghanaian ghost movies, traces of these ideas, sifted through a multiplicity of discourses and intertextual influences, find new expression in the borrowed visual iconographies and narrative structures of the global horror genre.¹³ The most popular and profitable Ghanaian ghost movies deploy this creative blending to fulfill consumer expectations and provide some form of novelty.

We might refer to Ato Quayson’s conceptualization of the historical and dynamic filiation between African literary texts and “indigenous conceptual resources” to better understand the intertextual associations between African beliefs and ghost movies. Quayson delineates the “strategic” incorporation of indigenous oral forms and worldviews in his typology of processes of intertextual discursivity in African literary writing. Incorporating resources similarly, Ghanaian video movies interact with and refer to an indigenous archive purposefully, but toward different ends. In a media industry where profit margins are thin, producers make movies that are guaranteed to appeal to local audiences. So they are strategic commercially if not artfully or politically like the writers Quayson analyzes so eloquently. Harry Garuba’s notion of an “animist unconscious” perhaps best describes the cultural sensibility that video-makers share with their audiences. Garuba explains that this “mode of thought” represents “a form of collective subjectivity that structures

9 I draw my conclusions from the following Ghanaian movies: *Abyssinia* (1987); *Worker’s Agony* (1989); *Ghost Tears* (1992); *Step Dad* (1992); *Suzzy* (1993); *A Mother’s Revenge* (1994); *The Visitor* (1999); *London Got Problem* (2006); *A Sting in the Tale* (2009); *Ghost* (2010); and *The Chase* (2011). Nigerian films such as *Living in Bondage* (1992) and *The Ghost* (2005) exhibit many of the narrative features of the ghost genre, though I do not discuss them here.

10 Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (Oxford: James Curry; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997).

11 Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 98.

12 Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo and Kindred Peoples* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949): 116. And see Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 133–34.

13 See Tobias Wendt, “Wicked Villagers and the Mysteries of Reproduction: An Exploration of Horror Movies from Ghana and Nigeria,” *Postcolonial Text* 3.2 (2007): 1–21; Birgit Meyer, *Sensational Movies: Video, Vision, and Christianity in Ghana* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

being and consciousness.”¹⁴ The reimagining of the ghost story by Ghanaian video-makers is not meant to be a nationalistic or Afrocentric “appropriation,” nor is it a “symbolic deployment” of cultural artifacts.¹⁵ It is not, to quote Garuba, a method by means of which the elite “reconnect with its historical and cultural heritage.”¹⁶ Instead, the ghost story is meant to appeal to an audience with whom the video-maker shares a particular and widely held cultural sensibility. The ghost story addresses its spectator as a cultural insider.

Although the ghost story has a long history in Ghanaian oral and written discourses, its emergence as a visual form depended on video technology. Ghosts never appeared in film productions made by the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC). As I have discussed at length elsewhere, professional filmmakers trained at the national film school and employed at the national film company worked within the intellectual formation of official culture where realism was the dominant mode of expression and belief in the supernatural was regarded as backward and inimical to national development.¹⁷ GFIC refused to produce content that perpetuated beliefs in the supernatural or the occult, even in the 1970s when the cost of film production became prohibitive and throughout the 1990s when the company followed the example of Ghanaian independent amateur video-makers and began to shoot and release movies on video. Ghost movies were the creations of the young and ambitious video-makers who pioneered commercial video production in Ghana in the late 1980s. These were individuals such as William Akuffo, George Hackman, Socrate Safo, and Richard Quartey who were detached from state and other official cultural networks and had no professional training in filmmaking or media production. They lived and worked in Accra, an urban setting inundated with foreign, pirated media since the 1980s when the economy and media environment were liberalized under terms set by international financial institutions and incorporated into structural adjustment agreements. During a period of extreme employment scarcity and economic hardship, these savvy young entrepreneurs exploited analog video technology to shoot, edit, and screen their own feature films in the hundreds of small video centers that dotted the cityscape. These were businesses established to show pirated media.¹⁸ For a few cents, ordinary Ghanaians could view films and television programming from Hollywood, Bollywood, and other parts of the world on a television monitor, and later projected onto a screen, in a public setting. When Ghanaian entrepreneurs began releasing their own productions, they screened them in these same centers, transforming everyday spaces into entrepreneurial sites where a multiplicity of media flows overlapped and interacted. The first ghost movies participated in and reflected this context of cultural mixing.

In the context of popular African screen media, the ghost movie resides at the margins of two larger generic categories: the family romance, or what

14 Harry Garuba, “Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society,” *Public Culture* 15.2 (2003): 263.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 262.

17 Carmela Garritano, *African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2013).

18 See Larkin, *Signal and Noise*; Garritano, *African Video Movies and Global Desires*.

Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma calls “the love and romance genre”¹⁹ and, most relevant, the occult horror genre, referred to by Lindsey Green-Simms as “occult melodrama.”²⁰ Its plot turns on the violent murder of an innocent woman who returns to narrate her untimely death in order to intervene in the future.²¹ Oscillating between the visible and the invisible, the past and the future, and the living and the dead, the ghost, at the level of narrative, is a figure produced by violence and breakdown. She is “spectral,” in the words of Green-Simms, “a reminder of the occult world that lurks beneath the visible world.”²² And, I would add, she acts as a ghostly remnant of past violence that fractures the present. The ghost’s traumatic death results from a family crisis caused by the failure of patriarchy. Violence penetrates the home when the father is absent or simply weak and ineffectual and, even more dangerous, when the wife and mother of the family perverts or neglects her “proper place,” wielding too much economic power or spending too much time at work. Much as in other occult melodramas, “women embody extremes, perversions, and private pleasures” that threaten the patriarchal order and so must be sanctioned and contained.²³ Ghosts in Ghanaian movies are conservative; they return to uncover truth, restore order, and affirm gender difference.

In *Ghost Tears* (1992) for example, Dee is a vile and controlling wife who abuses her husband, Kwesi, and her housemaid, Esi. The film implies that Dee’s cruelty stems from her economic independence—she reminds Kwesi continually that her wealth brought him up from the village—and justifies Kwesi’s affair with Esi. When Dee discovers her husband’s infidelity, she threatens to send Esi away. One evening, when Kwesi is out of the house, Esi kills Dee. The act is intimate and appalling. Esi sneaks up behind Dee, who is bent over the bathtub as she prepares for her bath, and drowns her, holding Dee’s head under water until her thrashing and struggling cease. Esi then convinces Kwesi, who has already proven himself to be weak and easily manipulated, that Dee died of natural causes, and shortly after Dee has been buried, Esi pressures Kwesi into marriage, even though, he reminds her, they are violating traditional mourning rites. Now the wealthy head of the household, Esi becomes a monstrous woman who abuses Yakwa, Kwesi and Dee’s young daughter. Kwesi, a failed masculine subject, is incapable of protecting his daughter, so to save her daughter and avenge her murder, Dee’s ghost returns. In the final scene of the film, a violent confrontation with the ghost leads to Kwesi’s and Esi’s deaths.

Suzzy (1993) narrates the story of a meddling widow who tries to control her daughter Suzzy’s choice of husband. Suzzy has fallen in love with Jojo, the protagonist, but Suzzy’s mother colludes with another suitor (who is never referred to by name and in the credits is listed only as “former boyfriend”) to use a magic powder that promises to cast a spell on Suzzy and make her love him. Suzzy unknowingly drinks the potion,

19 Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma, *Trends in Nollywood: A Study of Selected Genres* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Kraft Books, 2014), 92.

20 Lindsey Green-Simms, “Occult Melodramas: Spectral Affect and West African Video-Film,” *Camera Obscura* 80 (2012): 29.

21 In most of the ghost movies that I have been able to see to date, the ghost is a woman. In the earliest movies, the formative years of the genre’s development, the ghost is always a young woman. There are a few recent ghost movies, such as *London Got Problem*, *Bukom Lion* and a Nigeria movie called *Ghost*, that center on men who return as ghosts.

22 Green-Simms, “Occult Melodramas: Spectral Affect and West African Video-Film,” 37.

23 *Ibid.*, 29.

gets sick suddenly, and dies. Her ghost appears to Jojo to signal to him that she was murdered. At the end of the movie, Jojo, guided by Suzzy's ghost and working with the police, discovers that Suzzy's mother was a witch who tricked Jojo's rival into poisoning her daughter. In the Nigerian movie *Living in Bondage* (1992) and the Ghanaian films *Abyssinia* (1987) and *Step Dad* (1992), it is husbands and male lovers who have a hand in the woman's death. In all of these cases, the safety of the home transforms into a nightmare when those expected to give protection and love—parents, husbands, and friends—instead exploit the most vulnerable member of the household.

As these plot summaries demonstrate, the ghost story, like most West African popular movies, enacts an aesthetic of shock and outrage similar to that which Brian Larkin has identified as a defining feature of Nigerian movies. Like their Nigerian counterparts, Ghanaian movies address postcolonial subjects for whom feelings of vulnerability shape the experience of everyday life under neoliberal capitalism. Their appeal, according to Larkin, "lies in their ability to probe the fault lines of this insecurity ... and to transform them into cultural productions based on pleasure and play as well as anxiety."²⁴ He continues to explain that their thematic and embodied pleasures are delivered through "an aesthetics of outrage, a narrative based on continual shocks that transgress religious and social norms and are designed to provoke and affront the audience."²⁵ Put slightly differently, the movies engage audiences affectively but, at least in the earliest ghost movies, it is not the ghost's appearance or actions that provoked shock or outrage, as one might expect. Instead, it is the outrageous violence within the conjugal family—the act of violence against the victim who returns as a ghost—that produces the jolt of horror and shock, whether the violence is visualized in the present or narrated after the fact. Summoned by an unresolved violent act within the family, the ghost returns as an aftershock. Unlike the ghost or monster found in Hollywood and other horror films, the first Ghanaian ghost movies were not meant to be frightening, nor did they set out to provoke disgust by making the abject visible. Instead, the ghost movie stimulated audiences by evoking embodied and emotional responses that mimicked the affective and experiential dimensions of lived unpredictability, and it is an unexpected twist in the narrative or an abhorrent violation of moral codes that incites shock.

The central conflict provoked by the ghost involves its disruption of the present and its potential to change the future. Many but not all ghosts want revenge, but more urgently the ghost needs to communicate the story of its traumatic death to redirect the forward movement of events. Ghanaian ghost stories typically adopt the perspectives of the loved one who the ghost haunts, the person for whom the ghost presents a mystery to be unraveled or a problem to solve, and in this, they emphasize the ghost's uncanny interruption of the present. This narrative structure, moreover, aligns the viewer with the living person whose search for answers generates suspense and powers the plot toward resolution. The denouement takes one of two directions. In the first, it reveals the truth the ghost has come to unearth, sometimes predictably and sometimes with a surprising or shocking twist. The revelation at the end of *Suzzy* that Suzzy's mother is a witch who wanted her own daughter dead is meant to

24 Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 182.

25 *Ibid.*, 184.

stun viewers.²⁶ The second form of resolution realizes the ghost's vengeance, and the villain who contributed to the ghost's death suffers for his or her crime. We find this in *Ghost Tears*. In both cases, the appearance of the ghost punctuates the narrative's end. The revelation of the ghost occurs when the truth of her murder finally comes to light and is narrated, usually by another character, either the perpetrator or another witness. (Suzzy's mother confesses her crime to the police when her daughter appears.) Thematically, the dramatic visualization of the ghost offers the spectator satisfaction when those who have engaged in immoral behavior are punished. Affectively, as I discuss next, the ghost's strange and unnerving presentation fascinates.

Ghostly Analog Effects

In Ghana in the 1980s, analog video replaced film as a production, projection, and distribution medium. Its output always meager, GFIC stopped making films as the company's already stretched resources dwindled during this period of economic liberalization and state divestiture. As the cost of maintaining filmmaking equipment, importing film stock, and sending film to London for processing and printing became prohibitive, the film unit began producing feature-length movies with more affordable analog video, starting with VHS and developing to the broadcast-standard Sony Betacam system. These "video films," like those by independent amateur producers, initially were shown on large screens using video projection devices in cinemas and small video parlors where, formerly, feature films had been shown.²⁷ It was analog video that replaced film as a moviemaking and delivery medium, and only years later did digital video (DV) gradually supplant analog.

Easy-to-use home video cameras made it possible for untrained amateurs in Ghana to begin to shoot and make movies, but professional editors were essential to the creation of ghost movies and, within a few years, had become fully integrated into the commercial industry. Once video-makers started using broadcast-quality analog video cameras, postproduction, including the creation of the simple visual and sound effects found in these ghost movies, required the expertise of a trained video editor with the skills to operate the professional-grade, linear-editing system.²⁸ *Ghost Tears*, for example, was shot with a Sony Betacam by William Sefa, a camera operator employed at GFIC, and was edited by Mark Coleman, a NAFTI graduate who also worked as a video editor at GFIC. The movies' producers, Steven Hackman and Socrate Safo, hired time in an editing studio at GFIC where Coleman edited with an analog Betacam suite.²⁹ Coleman also edited *Suzzy* and many other independent productions.

26 In *Abyssinia*, however, closure is reached after Donko, the protagonist, begs forgiveness from Abyssinia's family and a pastor, who also happens to be a relative, for impregnating and abandoning Abyssinia to die. The ghost of the dead young woman appears to release Donko.

27 For a complete history of film and video production in Ghana, see Carmela Garritano, *African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2013).

28 These amateur, independent producers and directors recognized the economic and educational benefits to be gained from collaborating with professional camera operators and editors, and they engaged film and video-makers who worked for or were affiliated with GFIC, becoming entangled with the national film company.

29 The analog video edit involved a three-machine set-up: a source deck, a multichannel effects mixer, and a master deck. Video footage from the source tapes was edited and dubbed onto a master tape shot by

Analog video records light and sound as changes in the materiality of the videotape; it registers modifications in light and sound waves as electrical charges that score the videotape with an “isomorphic impression” of the original.³⁰ Loss is inherent to this material process, and as Brian Larkin and Lucas Hilderbrand explain, it generates effects that alter the video’s images and sounds and creates a unique aesthetic and affective impact.³¹ Alterations intrinsic to the medium are manifest as sensorial changes that the spectator can see and hear. As a videotape ages, is played, or is copied, the electronic scoring degenerates and the quality of the image and sound deteriorates. Significant signal loss, beyond that caused by age and wear, occurs when the tape is dubbed, first, during the editing process and, later, when multiple copies are made for wide-scale distribution of the movie on videocassette.

Signal decay was an inherent effect of the inflexible and destructive linear system of editing analog video. Dubbing from source to master resulted in one full generation of signal loss, and if errors were made during the linear edit, a process that required entire sequences to be re-created, each run of the source through the editing machine caused further breakdown. After a master was created, it was transferred from Beta to VHS, the format in which the movie was distributed, again incurring image breakdown and distortion. Without question, the final stage of the reproduction process, the duplication of videocassettes for individual sale and theater distribution, resulted in the most significant image distress. In Ghana by the mid-1990s, the sale of individual videocassettes had become the chief method of delivering new movies. Video reproduction outlets copied hundreds of cassettes each day, using a linear chain of linked VCRs. Videos were dubbed in sequence, video deck-to-video deck, with each copy marked by one generation of loss. As a result of this entire process, the videos acquired, in Larkins words, “a hallucinogenic quality” in which “detail is destroyed as realist representation fades into pulsating light. Facial features are smoothed away, colors are broken down into constituent tones, and bodies fade into one another.”³² Images look fuzzy and smudged, eventually appearing ghost-like. Sound drops out and becomes crackly and buzzy with analog noise. Over time and as the signal degrades, this noisiness erases or significantly diminishes the movie’s soundtrack, making dialogue and music indecipherable.

In the first Ghanaian ghost movies, the visual materiality of the ghost, like its ontology, was in flux and fading. Born from an extremely transgressive and traumatic event, the ghost of the Ghanaian ghost movie, unlike the living original, had no historical or psychological depth; it returned as a visual trace of violence, and its visual presentation—a translucent copy of the living person that was eerily incomplete and imperfect—evoked its ontological status. These physical effects demonstrate in an

shot, or in a linear fashion, which meant that the editor could not simply switch out takes or rearrange shots, as is possible with a nonlinear set-up. Any change to the arrangement of scenes or shots required that the entire sequence would have to be rebuilt by returning to the source tape and creating a new master. This complicated process required a skilled technician to operate the editing machines and plan and organize the creation of the master tape.

30 D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 112.

31 See Larkin, *Signal and Noise*; Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009).

32 Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 237.

unanticipated way Gunning's claim that media of reproduction "not only portrays things but participates in, shares, or appropriates the very ontology of the thing it portrays."³³ The analog ghost effect itself was a superimposition created with a visual effects mixer that overlaid footage from one source tape onto another, creating a composite image. (On one tape was the scene shot with the ghost, and on the other, a re-creation of the scene shot without the ghost.) The video editor rendered the ghost's image at an opacity value of 50 percent, so when the tapes were combined, the ghost appeared translucent, its body, in effect, looked as if it were under erasure. The artifacts generated by analog signal loss and decay heightened the ghost's intended strangeness and spectral aura.³⁴ The ghost's indeterminate body materialized its deficiency as an incomplete and imperfect reproduction of the human it was. Visually, then, the ghost might be thought of as a metaphor for analog reproduction. Her material presence is degraded, but still derived from an electronic impression of its human source. In *Suzzy*, the ghost appears initially on her grave as a strangely illuminated, featureless figure; she seems otherworldly amid the dark and flat landscape of the graveyard. Later in the story, she appears much as she did in life, dressed in everyday clothes, in Jojo's living room. She is a silent and transparent specter, a fading imprint of the living body she indexes.

In the climax of the final scene of *Ghost Tears*, Yakwa strangles her stepmother Esi after Esi smashes a bottle over Kwesi's head and kills him. Yakwa collapses into a chair, sobbing and shuddering when a semi-transparent close-up of Dee slowly begins to take shape over Yakwa, as if Dee's ghost were emerging from inside her. The superimposition of Dee's moving figure creates the illusion that the ghost has freed itself from Yakwa, and we are left to conclude that Dee's ghost had taken possession of her daughter and driven her to kill. In these instances, the image's translucence is meant to visualize the liminal status of the ghost.

This low-budget, low-resolution ghost brings to mind the phantoms of spirit photography as analyzed by Gunning: it "juxtaposes physical presence with its contrary, a phantom-like transformation of the human body that does not remove it from our vision but does somehow render it unreal."³⁵ Moreover, its strangely transparent and lossy appearance signifies untimeliness. The ghost looks like what it is, a trace of a lost original. Rendered as an almost-transparent, phantomlike form, unable to speak and emotionally flat, the electronic specter in the analog Ghanaian movie is a bad copy, an illicit double. Detached from its source and original purpose, deteriorating but present, the ghost might be said to have reflected back on the analog media environment from which it was generated.

In the last three decades, the transition from analog to digital video is central among many changes that have transformed commercial moviemaking in Ghana. Over time and in no small part facilitated by digital technologies, the industry's structures of production and distribution have expanded and diversified.

33 Tom Gunning "To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision," *The Spectralities Reader*, eds. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 222.

34 Larkin, furthermore, contextualizes the electronic signal, describing how a wider culture of technological breakdown and piracy common to the African post-colony amplifies or exaggerates its media and sensory effects.

35 Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 213.

In fact, it's rather misleading to refer to a Ghanaian industry at all. Several loose formations of commercial movie production have taken shape within and beyond Ghana's national borders and around the Ghanaian cities of Accra, Kumasi, and, very recently, Tamale. Although Accra remains the center of English-language movie production—sometimes this segment of the industry is referred to as Ghallywood—an assemblage of Akan-language moviemaking, called Kumawood, has emerged in Kumasi, the second largest city in Ghana, which is about 125 miles, and a long drive on notoriously bad and bumpy road, from Accra. It was only with the wide availability of affordable computer-based digital workstations that Kumasi became a production center, in part because computer-based editing freed Kumasi producers from reliance on analog editing studios and professional editors in Accra. Using digital video, filmmakers could shoot and edit a movie in Kumasi.³⁶ This technological context also might explain the central place of outlandish computer-generated special effects, or CGI, in the Kumasi-style movie. From its inception, Kumawood appealed to audiences' interest in special effects and technological experimentation, the conditions out of which it developed, and Kumawood producers have consistently made genre movies in which technological spectacle is a key component, the so-called occult melodramas, and more recently, epic movies. In both, CGI spectacles render fantastic displays of supernatural power. Birgit Meyer has argued that the appeal of these representations of the occult involves the making visible of that which remains unseen, of aligning the audience with a godlike perspective into the invisible workings of the occult.³⁷ I'd go further to suggest that the digital visual effects themselves possess an aura of mystery and magic that is echoed in the narrative but that on its own represents a cinematic attraction. These computer-generated spectacles, the impacts of which might be felt and heard as well as seen by audiences, present an encounter with technological magic that articulates with the film's narrative, but also exceeds it.

Among English-language movies, processes of cross-pollination and transnational exchange between Ghallywood and Nollywood, the larger English-language industry in Nigeria, have further deterritorialized and differentiated Ghanaian productions. A small group of producers have been distinguishing themselves by making fewer, better quality films for audiences inside and outside of Ghana with cinema-quality DV (digital video) cameras. These top-tier producers, like their New Nollywood counterparts in Nigeria, have become entangled with formal networks and global capital through corporate sponsorship and entry into formal agreements with regional and global media corporations, such as DStv in Africa, Sky TV in the United Kingdom, and Dish Network in the United States, to transmit their products on various satellite and cable television stations.³⁸ Shooting with cinema-quality, high-end digital cameras, these elite producers have been able to abandon the straight-to-video model of distribution, which has been the dominant model since the industries' inaugural years, and release their movies in recently constructed multiplex

36 Kumasi movies continued to be duplicated in Accra, where the DVD and VCD factories are located. Most producers hire couriers or traders to deliver the digital master to Accra.

37 Meyer, *Sensational Movies*.

38 Moradewun Adejunmobi, "Evolving Templates for Minor Transnational Film," *Black Camera* 5.2 (2014): 74–94.

cinemas in Ghana and throughout West Africa, all of which use digital projection systems.³⁹ Digital technologies have supported a return to cinema distribution, for the first time since the collapse of film production in the country. In this postcolonial context, digital enabled filmmakers to release cinema-quality movies in cinemas outfitted with digital delivery systems. Attempting to expand their transnational viewership and increase returns, one or two of these top-tier producers also have created subscription-based web channels to stream their content. Indeed one is more likely to find many of these elite DV films online than for individual sale on VCD (video CD) or DVD in Ghana. And again for the first time since the emergence of commercial movie production in Ghana, producers have access to data, accurate and immediate information about ticket sales, viewers, and returns. This marks a major shift that is underway in Ghana's media economy, in which high-end producers have become increasingly integrated into global information networks and the labor of producers and consumers increasingly informationalized.

Although high-end video producers have generated a lot of excitement among viewers and scholars, it is crucial to remember that most producers working in Ghana and Nigeria do not have access to the resources and expertise required to produce, promote, or stream cinema-quality DV movies. This lower tier of the Ghanaian industry, which includes movies made in Akan, Dagbani, and English, is almost completely disconnected from the first. These filmmakers churn out low-budget, local-interest movies for audiences in Ghana and continue to adopt the straight-to-video release model that has dominated the industry since the 1990s. In the last few years, piracy, overproduction, and the wide availability of Nollywood and Ghanaian movies on television and the Internet have choked this segment of the Ghanaian industry, forcing many low-end producers out of the filmmaking business. When Jon Gil made *The Chase*, local sales were decreasing rapidly due to a combination of factors: the ongoing challenges of piracy, the wide availability of Ghanaian and Nigerian movies on television, an oversaturated market, and the collapse of all structures put in place by local producers and marketers to regulate the release of locally made films. With *The Chase*, Gil attempted to navigate this complicated and competitive terrain. The film was the first English-language Ghanaian movie shot in Tamale, a city approximately 270 miles north of Accra, where a small configuration of movie production has developed. It also is, as far as I know, the first Ghanaian movie to adopt the conventions of the slasher film, innovations intended to distinguish Gil's movie from the hundreds it competed with in the local media economy. The movie incorporates the digital effects and supernatural themes that are hallmarks of Kumawood and, at the same time, appropriates features of global horror to transform the Ghanaian ghost movie into something new.

Although analog and digital are both video technologies and work through the medium of electricity, the relationship of each technology to the originating image is fundamentally different. As previously explained the analog video camera's image

39 These producers also can exploit the transnational networks and mechanisms through which an artist accrues cultural capital and acquires marks of distinction. They seek entry into the international film festival circuit, participate in workshops and training programs that are often sponsored by universities in the global north, and most recently, they have organized competitive film festivals in Ghana.

sensor detects the attenuation of light waves and converts those into electronic signals that are stored on the videotape. The link between the object and its image is direct. In the digital camera, the sensor converts changes in light and sound into numerical computations, and it is from these computations that images are derived. Restated by D. N. Rodowick in another way, “Where analog video registers light values and records them as analogous changes in voltage values, digital video samples light values and encodes them as symbolic notations of color, intensity, and position.”⁴⁰ So whereas analog video “preserves an indexical trace” of the original object, DV presents a numerical conversion of its source, computational fabrications that might be completely detached from an origin in the real world.⁴¹

The most remarkable feature of Gil’s ghost movie is its incorporation of digital effects to simulate the ferocity of the ghost and visualize the violence her vengeance demands, advances made possible by video-editing software and an array of computer-generated effects. In the last decade in Ghana, the availability of affordable computer-based digital workstations and user-friendly software like Adobe Premiere has simplified the entire postproduction process and expanded the creative choices available to Gil and other Ghanaian moviemakers. With the click and drag of a mouse, editors are able to cut, copy, paste, and swap scenes and shots on a timeline instantaneously.⁴² Once a producer invested in the computer-based editing system, he or she no longer needed to pay to rent an editing bench or studio, as was required with analog postproduction. Perhaps most consequential, digital software, designed for general use, freed the producer from reliance on the expertise of a professional editor as well as from the aesthetic or ideological constraints imposed by the editor’s professional training. It facilitated play and experimentation. Additionally, digital software and online special effects libraries gave editors access to hundreds of visual and sound effects, and because digital images and sounds are derived from data files, a digital editor is free to import and make unlimited changes to these files without incurring signal loss or degradation. Digital video opened a space for creative experimentation, which the ghost movie’s narrative readily accommodated.

The Chase, unlike the other Ghanaian ghost movies discussed here, is a scary and gory horror movie. Terrifying and bloody, it deploys shock cuts and musical jump scares, among other horror conventions, to generate an affective atmosphere of fear and anxiety. Gil tapped into the local ghost genre and modified it significantly by intensifying its affective impact at narrative and cinematographic registers and creating a Ghanaian version of the mode of horror movie that is “a body genre,” famously described by Linda Williams as a form in which “the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body

40 Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 135.

41 The DV sensor rewrites its source as code that is severed from its source in space and time, and because light and sound have been converted into code, or information, a digital recording can be manipulated and replicated (copied without loss).

42 See Ragnild Brøvig-Hanssen and Anne Danielsen, *Digital Signatures: The Impact of Digitization on Popular Music Sound* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016).

They point out that editing software did not invent new editing tools or methods. Instead, it made a wide array of tools easier to use and readily available and provided editing methods that are much less expensive and far more efficient than their analog predecessors.

on the screen.”⁴³ Thematically, *The Chase* offers nothing new. As in other Ghanaian ghost movies, a young woman from a broken family is violated by those closest to her and her ghost rises from the dead seeking vengeance. Gil, however, amplifies the emotional force of the narrative conventions of the genre. Gil’s ghost movie, like its predecessors, creates a world cleaved by gender difference where neglectful mothers expose their defenseless daughters to the predatory instincts of men. To emphasize the helplessness of his female victim, Gil cast a petite and slim actor with huge, luminous eyes and a thin, high-pitched and childlike voice as Sadia, whose performance further exaggerates her vulnerability. She moves through space hesitantly, averts her gaze when spoken to, and rarely speaks. When alone, she mournfully sings, in a childlike soprano, a lullaby her mother once sang to her. After the first sexual assault, she does little more than scream and cry through violence that seems endless. One rape follows another and another.

In the earliest scenes, Sadia is left alone with her stepfather because her mother is working late, which the movie highlights by focusing on the face of the clock when Sadia’s mother arrives home after dark. Without the protection of her mother, Sadia is victimized by her stepfather. Sadia is too frightened to tell her mother, but one afternoon her mother returns home from work unexpectedly and discovers her husband forcing himself on her daughter. An altercation ensues between the couple during which Sadia’s mother hits her head and is killed. Sadia is sent to live with her uncle, and her life seems a little brighter. She has friends and her uncle treats her lovingly. But when the uncle leaves town on business, his son Martin abuses Sadia, locking her in the house and raping her repeatedly. On one occasion, a male friend, Raoul, passes by and peeks into a window. He sees Martin molesting Sadia and takes out his cell phone. Using the phone’s low-resolution video camera, he surreptitiously records the rape. That day, he passes his phone and the video among his friends who decide to threaten Martin that if he does not allow them to have “their turn” with Sadia, they will show the video to his father. Martin’s friends, young men whom Sadia knows and trusts, lure her deep into the bush and gang rape her. Abandoned and in pain, Sadia calls out to two men who pass by. Instead of helping her, the strangers rape her with such brutality and violence that she dies. The men dig a hole and bury her body, but not before a circle of bright red blood seeps from her wounded vagina to stain her nightdress.⁴⁴ The final hour of the film advances “several months later,” and we return to the very forest where Sadia was killed and buried. The forest calls to mind Amos Tutuola’s *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. It’s a horrifying place where we experience a multisensory assault. Here, a large group of young women and men, including Martin and the other rapists, attend a birthday party hosted by Andy, the only young man who did not participate in the assault. Sadia’s ghost returns as a digital simulation, a nightmarish version of her living self, to settle scores, and one after the other, she chases down and murders her attackers.

Dematerialized, like the cell-phone recording of her rape, Sadia reveals herself as pure, disembodied rage, a brutal force sensed and experienced. Gill constructs a visual

43 Williams, Linda, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (1991): 2–13.

44 The film includes a subplot in which two other young women are drugged by two men at a party, dragged into the bush, raped, and killed. These two women appear briefly in the bush as well.

field that immerses the spectator in the world of the movie. William Whittington has linked this “immersive effect” to the transmedial influence of video games on cinema aesthetics.⁴⁵ When Sadia’s ghost chases after the rapists, Gil relies on phantom shots and a black-and-white visual filter to focalize the viewer through its perspective. The ghost is not visualized, but the camera adopts its point of view, and the spectator experiences the ghost as vision and movement. As Whittington explains, these effects are intended to imaginatively emplace the spectator into the movie and transform the experience of watching into “a cinema of sensation.”⁴⁶ In Gil’s movie, immersive visualization produces the ghost as purely fantastical. She is virtual intensity, a swift and violent force hunting its victims. The camera tears through tall grass, swiftly gaining ground on the men, and upon impact, cuts to black. When the next scene begins, we find the mutilated bodies of Sadia’s rapists. The point of view is unattributed and the camera is stable, positioning the spectator as witness to the carnage. The violent deaths of Sadia’s assailants are put on full display, and Gil overwhelms the viewer with computer-generated effects in his attempt to generate “direct horror,” defined by Julian Hanich as a type of horror that “presents the threatening violent event or monstrous object in full vision.”⁴⁷ The men’s mutilated bodies, riven by bloody and gaping wounds, visually refer back to Sadia’s bloody vagina on the night she was raped to death. One young man has his eye gouged out; another is rammed into the sharp branch of a tree, the end of which protrudes from his body like a bloody penis. When Sadia does finally appear, near the end of the film, she materializes as an animated image that has been almost completely detached from the human form it is meant to represent. Again, like the digital animation meant to represent it, the ghost is a digital manipulation disconnected from the human.

The Chase manipulates sound to register Sadia’s presence and incite fear and dread, creating a soundscape that would not have been possible previously. The first analog ghost movies were shot with one boom microphone and incorporated rudimentary sound designs that relied principally on character dialogue and ambient sounds, the situation best suited to a microphone attached to a long boom pole held above the characters and out of the camera’s frame. Post-production music and simple sound effects were incorporated to complement the narrative, providing plot cues or setting an emotional tone. The limited capacity and inherent noisiness of the analog sound environment, however, meant that visual, not sound, effects were intended to engender the uncanny presence of the ghost; the movies sometimes signaled the ghost’s presence with extradiegetic sound cues, but these merely provided a backdrop to character dialogue or actions. In *Suzzy*, a musical motif accompanied the ghost’s appearance or revealed her presence to the audience when she was meant to be present but not visible. The ghost’s motif was a simple tune created with an electronic keyboard. It was innocuous and without distinction. Characters reported to other characters that they heard strange sounds at home, doors slamming, and pots banging,

45 William Whittington, “Lost in Sensation: Reevaluating the Role of Cinematic Sound in the Digital Age,” *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media*, eds. Carol Vernallis, Amy Herzog, and John Richardson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 67.

46 Ibid.

47 Julian Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 82.

and wondered if it could be a ghost, but these sounds were described secondhand and were not part of the movie's diegetic soundscape.

In *The Chase*, Gil takes advantage of digital sound tools to create a multi-dimensional soundscape that is intensely expressive and dissociates sounds from human or natural causes. Sound enacts Sadia's rage and presence. Sharp and synthetic diegetic sounds as well as computer-generated ripping, dragging, and screeching terrify the partygoers who cannot identify their sources. Thunder crashes through the forest though the day is clear. Shrill, childlike laughter—eerily misshapen by the autotune tool—reverberates from everywhere. Clean and crisp, the digital soundtrack lacks the crackle and static hum that was inherent to analog video, and because digital noise is nonperceptible, narrative silence is experienced as silence. Likewise, the contrast between soft and booming sounds is dramatic, and this dynamic range heightens moments of suspense and tension, becoming particularly unnerving when sounds generated by bodies, or by violence against bodies, dominate. As the partygoers scatter and run through the forest to escape the ghost, they pause nervously to rest, and we hear only their rapid and labored breathing. The sound mix provides no musical cues to alert us to impending danger; instead it draws us closer to the bodies of the young people. Suddenly, we experience the shock of a loud blow as a young man is knocked violently to the ground by Sadia, who remains invisible.

A few survivors manage to fight their way out of the forest, including Andy, but before he escapes, Sadia appears, fully embodied and human and dressed in the same clothes she wore on the night she was murdered. She tells Andy that she will let him live if he retrieves the chip (the phone's memory card), which contains the video of Martin raping her, and takes it to the police. In a later scene, Andy returns home where he removes the chip from a ceiling tile in his bedroom before the camera cuts suddenly to a shot of Andy asleep on his couch. A knock at his door wakes him, and he mumbles a few incoherent words about "Sadia" and "it was all just a dream." When he glances up at the TV, however, he sees Sadia's face there, silently staring at him. Then the screen cuts to black and the credits roll. Though this ending is disjointed and confusing, and even if the ghost in the machine trope is incorporated for no other reason than to insert one last shock, it is noteworthy that the final shot is of Sadia as a digital, televisual form that has been derived from information read and translated onto a screen. She, like the recording of her rape that Andy holds in his hand, has been transformed into an information-based image. Her ghost haunts through the digital screen, and much as I suggested that the analog ghost might be read as a metaphor for the analog technological environment, Sadia materializes as pure virtual spectacle, a specter detached from its human body and a metaphor for the break from the logic of indexicality in the digital age.

The Ghanaian ghost genre presents a compelling opportunity to explore the relationship between innovation and technology as well as between representation and materiality, and here I have tried to perform a genre analysis that analyzes the specificity of the ghost movie as a video genre, taking into account its material and experiential dimensions. But more than this, I would like to conclude by suggesting that the history of the ghost genre in Ghana also demonstrates the multiple and heterogeneous itineraries of video technologies under globalization. The history of the ghost movie interrupts the dominant film studies history of the transition from

film-to-digital moviemaking and reveals that such histories are always located somewhere, even if they present themselves as universal and worldwide. In Ghana and in the Anglophone West African region more broadly, the transition from analog to digital video is unique. Digital technology did not gradually replace film, as is typically assumed to be the case in film studies scholarship, including in the work of D. N. Rodowick, which I have cited in this article. In this postcolonial setting and in the aftermath of economic liberalization and the retraction of the state from film production, analog video was not only used as a broadcast medium; it supplanted film as a moviemaking and delivery technology, and only gradually has DV become the industry standard, building on and modifying configurations of production and artistic practices stabilized by analog video. This brief discussion of the shift from analog to digital video movie production through the evolution of the ghost movie illustrates not only the value of paying attention to materiality in our writing about African screen media, but it also demonstrates that narratives of technological evolution, for the most part drawn from examples in the global north, are fractured by alternate histories that offer a much more richly variegated and creative use of new technologies.