

# BOOK REVIEW

**Matthew Brown. *Indirect Subjects: Nollywood's Local Address*.** Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. x + 316 pp. Acknowledgements. Notes. Filmography. Bibliography. Index. \$28.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1478014195.

Nollywood's global dimensions have been the subject of considerable critical inquiry, but the topic generally remains confined within the relatively recent history of media globalization. Matthew Brown's *Indirect Subjects: Nollywood's Local Address*, by contrast, takes the long view and, in doing so, provides a valuable and generative contribution to African media studies. The book is valuable because it provides a rich historical account of several formations of screen media in Nigeria and points to overlooked formal and ideological continuities between colonial cinema, state television, and early video films. Brown's access to rare archival materials allows him to offer what is, perhaps, the most sustained investigation of the links between state television and video films to date. The book is generative in that it advances a critical framework that combines economic history, political philosophy, and formal textual analysis and opens new ways to understand and interpret Nigerian screen texts. It offers much for readers to digest and debate, including beyond the specialist community of African media studies scholars, and with its combination of archival methods, theoretical elaboration, and critical attention to textual mode of address, the book would complement the syllabus of general and advanced courses in film history, global media studies, and film and television studies.

The book's six chapters are divided into two parts, which position colonial cinema (Chapter One) and state television (Chapter Two), in Part One, as the formal and ideological antecedents to the video films discussed in Part Two. Brown develops the argument that screen media participates in a social process, dating from formal colonialism and the intellectual emergence of liberalism to today, by which power in the world forms and consolidates itself through the active exclusion of various peripheries. It is in this manner that Nigeria has become "indispensably constitutive of the liberal world order precisely by being held at arm's length from it" (17), a condition Brown terms *periliberism*. With careful attention to mode of address—or how a text envisions, speaks to, and thus calls forth its spectator or its audience—

Brown contends that “from colonial cinema through video film, screen media have positioned themselves between the liberal world order and an imagined public, one that supposedly understands and desires all the benefits of liberal modernity, that feels entitled to its share, but whose job in sustaining that version of modernity is to endure without it until, it bears repeating, conditions somehow change” (11). Some media scholars may not agree with the conceptual categories or historical trajectory borrowed from world systems theory, but the stakes of this argument are clear, important, and a promising source of productive debate.


Chapter One investigates the political doctrine of indirect rule as a flashpoint of ideological contradiction between liberal values and the practice of colonial rule. It also functions as a discursive template for the “indirect subjection” evident in ethnographic exhibitions in Britain and commercial and colonial cinema screened in Nigeria, where the contours of modern subjecthood were defined against both prejudiced and benevolent notions of Nigerians’ difference. Chapter Two argues that state television, which emerged roughly in tandem with national independence, nevertheless “inherited its social and political posture from colonial cinema, attempting to instruct the people of Nigeria about their position relative to the liberal world order” (70). It takes Adebayo Faleti and Segun Olusola, two landmark figures of Nigerian television, as examples of the pedagogical positionality of producers, and the programme *The New Village Headmaster* (1974–90) as a prominent example of the periliberal logic underlying Nigeria’s nascent nationalism.

In a strong maneuver, Chapters Three and Four split Nollywood’s much-discussed video melodramas along the axis of their gendered mode of address. From this perspective, Brown argues that feminine melodramas present marriage to a male breadwinner as the proper path to access the promises and prosperity of liberal modernity, and portrays the long, virtuous wait for a man with money amid economic scarcity as a moral rationalization for the suffering of exclusion from “the liberal world order.” The masculine melodrama invites spectators to view the same dilemma from the obverse perspective, and thereby “redistribute[s] good and evil in such a way that the social pressure exerted by the breadwinner ideal is evil, whereas finding power outside of the family and social pressure makes a man good” (172). Aside from being the most conceptually entwined chapters, this is also where the book’s combination of ideological, materialist, and formal analysis is arguably at its strongest.

Chapter Five opens with a comparison of Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and the Nigerian Television Authority’s 1986 adaptation of it (starring Peter Edochie) as precursors of Nollywood’s epic film genre. Drawing upon Gothic literary theory, Brown argues that if sovereignty represents a crucial ideal of liberal political philosophy, the epic films of Nollywood conjure a fantasy space before or beyond the liberal world order that precludes Nigeria’s full sovereignty in the here and now.

Chapter Six takes up comic narratives of tricksterism and 419 fraud, including *Basi and Company* (1986–90) and *Osuofia in London* (2003), as imagined responses to “the iniquitous dynamics of the modern world system,” its hypocrisy and corruption (260). As the final chapters illustrate, Brown presses his central concepts, such as periliberalism and screen media’s evolving modes of address, to their fullest possible elaboration. As such, the study provides a thought-provoking model for other researchers and a jumping off point for future debates.

doi:10.1017/asr.2023.88

Connor Ryan   
University of Bristol,  
United Kingdom  
[connor.ryan@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:connor.ryan@bristol.ac.uk)