
Moving Pictures and Lived Experience

When I started my research on Ghana's video film industry in September 1996, the number of movies that had appeared so far was around 220.¹ Along with watching movies screened in cinemas and video centers, I wanted to catch up with the stock of older Ghanaian movies that had been produced since the making of *Zinabu* in 1985. Especially in the first month of my research, I asked a number of persons—taxi drivers, shopkeepers, merchants, and neighbors—about movies. I quickly noted that there was a set of very popular films that were associated with particular producers who had achieved the status of household names and who pretty much guaranteed quality. Many people were able to immediately mention a number of titles—*Zinabu*, *Diabolo*, *Ghost Tears*, *Fatal Decision*, *Whose Fault?*—and enthusiastically told me the story line of their favorite movie. In this way I became acquainted with the field. I visited the few video shops that existed at the time—Sidiku Buari and Hacky Films at Opera Square and the store on the GFIC premises—and talked to the sellers about popular movies. Based on their advice and on the titles that were frequently mentioned in my random talks with people, I purchased a large number of cassette tapes (around fifty). Thanks to my contacts with producers, I was also able to get a number of tapes that were not yet or no longer available as videos for home viewing.

Because I was interested in audience reactions as much as in the movies themselves, I did not watch alone. I rented a video player and television set, and our living room turned into a mini-video center with at times up to forty people present on several evenings in the week. These were women and men, and many young girls and boys, aged between five and fifty years. Even though the sound and image quality of the video player and the tapes was

quite bad, most of our visitors were prepared to neglect these shortcomings, eager as they were to get involved in the movies. For quite some time I tried to initiate discussion after a movie had been shown. Over and over again, however, I was confronted with people's lack of interest in this kind of endeavor. A few polite sentences were uttered to answer my questions, and then there was an uneasy silence to be broken by a demand for another movie. Gradually, I realized that my own, at the time ill-conceptualized, idea of doing audience research by discussing a movie afterward echoed my personal and quite intellectualist approach to movies as bounded cultural products demanding interpretation. Such a stance presumes a distance between the movie and its viewers, with the latter having to figure out the meaning of the former.²

This was not how the audiences assembled in our living room looked at movies. Constantly commenting on the pictures, cracking jokes, shouting when there was a struggle, and at times directly addressing the protagonists onscreen, these viewers made watching a film a rather noisy social event. It was an interactive performance. The audiences in our living room—and in Accra's video centers and cinemas at large—acted as sentient and sensual beings, pulling the movie and its characters right into their everyday lives. A good movie, I began to realize, was one that affected people emotionally and made them recognize something about themselves. While special effects were welcomed with intense pleasure, and sometimes anxiety, the basic appeal of movies lay in the fact that they successfully zoomed in on familiar—and family—matters, making people say, “This happened in my house.”

Pondering the difficult question of how to do “audience research” in this setting, my understanding of spectators' attitudes toward video movies was sharpened by a remark made by our neighbor and frequent visitor Kwaku after we had watched *Not Without* (Hacky Films, 1996). This movie was about a marital conflict instigated by a mischievous mother-in-law who treats her son's God-fearing wife badly. At that time Kwaku himself was having a conflict with his wife, who had temporarily left him, having taken their little daughter and gone to stay with her parents. Right after having watched the film, Kwaku stated that it made him realize that he had made a big mistake in his marriage and that he felt very sorry about it. Even though the family in the movie was better off than he was—they lived in a mansion, whereas he lived in a compound house, and they had a good car, whereas he had only a run-down taxi (Verrips and Meyer 2001)—he believed immediately that the

film related to his own life. This spontaneous remark opened up my understanding that audiences, in watching Ghanaian movies, expected to recognize themselves and to extract from the movies moral messages for their everyday lives.

Even though the state discourse on film as education and its vision of the ideal spectator collided with actual viewing practices, it is still true that “education”—albeit of a special kind—was a matter of big concern to audiences. Over and over again I heard that they wanted not only to be entertained by a film but also “to get something out of it.” The point is that they referred to a moral education that taught how to go about relational matters, especially with regard to marriage, family life, and the extended family. Basing my audience research on an experiential approach to film in which audiences are understood to participate, in this chapter I argue that Ghanaian movies were anchored in and shaped audiences’ world of lived experience. Thriving on familiarity and recognition, movies owed their appeal to their capacity for offering moral direction and advice to those living in a modern urban setting. Filmmakers, spectators, and the censorship board all partook in shaping the movies as cultural products expected to do moral work. Exploring the ways in which watching movies was embedded in the world of everyday lived experience, this chapter argues that the movies addressed and constituted audiences as a moral public with a particular ethics of watching.

FILM AND EXPERIENCE

As I explained in my introduction, a great deal of work on African art cinema disengages from actual audiences and imagines the “ideal spectator” as a silent, gazing eye. Focusing on movies as mere objects for viewing, the question of what and how they represent looms large. With regard to the Ghanaian (and for that matter Nigerian) video phenomenon, such approaches have serious shortcomings because they do not get to the heart of the specific relation that exists between state institutions, filmmakers, movies, and audiences in specific historically situated contexts. In the Ghanaian setting in which I lived, filmmakers were closely related to actual audiences, whose world of lived experience they shared, whose stories inspired their scripts, and with whom they sat in order to learn about their watching behavior. Movies were designed in such a way that watching was a communicative and sensory

experience that was linked with issues that mattered in everyday life. Indeed, filmmakers knew very well that “getting something out of a movie” depended on audiences being able to *get into it* and *take it in*. In this understanding a film, as such, would be inadequate as a unit of analysis, the point being that what matters is the overall performance in which audiences engage with a movie in the cinema, in a video center, or in front of a TV.

The basic characteristic of Ghanaian video movies being that they nourish themselves from and feed back into everyday life, a phenomenology of film experience offers fruitful incentives to deepen our understanding. Identifying film as a communicative system that involves relations linking filmmaker, film, and spectators, Vivian Sobchack played a pioneering role in formulating an approach to film theory that examined the act of viewing itself and the communicative competence of viewers to make sense of a movie. Famously, she advocated an understanding of film as “the expression of experience by experience” (Sobchack 1992, 3). Film, in other words, creates a space in which the screening of the *experience of the film characters* simultaneously becomes an *experience for the audiences*.

For Sobchack film is the medium of communication that condenses the exchange between embodied perception and “enworlded” expression: “A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood” (Sobchack 1992, 3). Or, in the words of Jennifer Barker: “What we do see is *the film seeing*: we see its own (if humanly enabled) process of perception and expression unfolding in space and time” (Barker 2009, 9). This exchange is also at the core of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology.³ From this perspective film is not simply an object for viewing but is best understood as a particular kind of audiovisual language that addresses audiences through the registers of the flesh and via the senses. In other words film is not a mere audiovisual representation but a presence of animated, moving pictures that have the capacity to touch and affect spectators (see also Marks 2000; Sobchack 2004). Intriguing here is Sobchack’s view of film as a kind of sensing actor that invites—or seduces—spectators to sense along and thereby participate actively. Though vision is obviously central to film, seeing is not confined to the gaze but is understood to work synesthetically with other senses, especially hearing and touch. What is invoked here is the “corporeal eye,” circumscribed as “the embodied view or tactility in our meeting with ‘screenic’ persons, things, and events” (Verrips 2002, 38; see also Barker 2013; and Morgan 2012). This embodied, sensory kind of viewing resonates

strongly with Ghanaian audiences' visceral, interactive engagement with video movies and underpins an understanding of film as offering a superior "spiritual eye."

Of course, for a film to operate as the "expression of experience through experience," shared structures of experience must link the filmmaker, the film, and the spectators in one communicative fabric: "In so far as the embodied structure and modes of being of a film are like those of filmmaker and spectator, the film has the capacity and competency to signify, to not only have sense but also to make sense through a unique and systematic form of communication" (Sobchack 1992, 5–6). This is a very important general point, helpful for understanding the interactive dynamics that account for the success of a movie with a particular audience. In relation to the Ghanaian video film industry, it resonates strongly with what I referred to in my introduction as the *circularity* between filmmakers and audiences. As I pointed out, for a filmmaker the survival of the business depends on his or her capacity to come up with *moving* pictures that captivate audiences sensorially, emotionally, morally, and intellectually and that leave ample space for interaction among themselves and with the film. *Moving*, here, is invoked in the double sense of cinematic motion pictures and their potential to *touch* the spectators (see also Barker 2013, 13–20; Spyer and Steedly 2013). Filmmakers seek to grip audiences with pictures that resonate, albeit in complicated ways, with their shared world of lived experience. I say "complicated" because this shared world is not congruent with an empirical reality that is simply observable out there but is constituted phenomenologically (see also Jackson 1996, 15). As I have intimated already, this is a world driven by imagined visions and possibilities for the future, haunted by specters of failure and despair, and full of hidden dangers that call for vigilance. It is a world in which a spiritual realm intersects with the physical one, even though the former is not apprehended by ordinary perception—and this is why specialists for spiritual vision, such as traditional priests and Pentecostal pastors, are in high demand. Importantly, as will become clear in this chapter and the next, this demand for some kind of extraordinary vision also includes film. It is for this very reason that a study of film is such a suitable entry point into the urban life-world of southern Ghana.

The success or failure of a movie for spectators depends on the capacity of filmmakers to mediate everyday experiences in such a way that the movie incites recognition by and participation of the audiences. *Mediation* is a key term here, as Sobchack also acknowledges in her characterization of film

watching as “both a direct and mediated experience of direct experience as mediation” (Sobchack 1992, 10). By this, she seeks to further refine the statement that film is an “expression of experience through experience.” Her point is to emphasize that even though filmic expression both *mediates* (namely, the experience enacted by the film characters) and *is mediated* (i.e., through the cinematic apparatus), it is still “directly” perceived by audiences. Film, as she also puts it, offers “mediating acts of perception-cum-expression that we take up and invisibly perform by appropriating and incorporating them into our own existential performance” (10). Even though she recognizes that film mediates *and* conveys experience, Sobchack’s line of reasoning about mediation appears to lack clarity because it retains existential phenomenology’s tendency to privilege “direct” perception and experience above mediation.

Here we touch on a more fundamental problem in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. I am sympathetic to existential phenomenology’s grounding of language and culture in the materiality of the body and its insistence on the interdependency of sensing and making sense. Rather than reducing language to a system of arbitrary signifiers that stand in a referential, and hence distancing, relation to the world, the interdependency of perception and expression allows for an understanding of language—or, more broadly, semiotic systems—as fundamental to processes of both world making *and* signification. Language is rooted in the sensing body and is therefore part of the world, while it also offers the possibility to communicate about the world.

Thus, the centrality that Merleau-Ponty assigned to the body, implying a grounded and embodied understanding of language and communication, is key to get at the constitution of the world of people’s lived, “thick” experience that, in my view, is anthropology’s domain (see also Csordas 1990; Geertz 1973; Jackson 1996, 2005; Stoller 1997). Nonetheless, one weakness noted by many critics is that phenomenology tends to brush over the fact that perception itself is shaped by sociocultural expressions. Obviously, Merleau-Ponty’s version of phenomenology, by understanding perception and expression as “reversible,” acknowledges some degree of feedback of sociocultural expressions into perception and experience. This is also highlighted in Sobchack’s phrase “mediating acts of perception-cum-expression.” The importance, however, of mediation in generating and sustaining *particular possibilities for perception*, while excluding others, is elaborated insufficiently because of the emphasis placed on the primacy of “direct” perception.

We perceive a world that is already shaped by sociocultural expressions that render perceptible particular matters rather than others and that we

engage and possibly make our own through perception. Perceptions, in this understanding, are mediated by expressions that tune the senses of the perceivers, involving them in a socially constituted world that foregrounds certain sensibilities and sense impressions and discards others. “Direct” or “immediate” perception, then, does not precede mediation but is born of it (Meyer 2011b; see also Eisenlohr 2009; Mazzarella 2004). Experience, too, depends on shared modes of perception that allow for a particular experientiality and is thus always mediated. In short, I propose to place center stage the fact that sensations and sensibilities do not emerge from an unmediated, direct encounter with the “world” but arise and are sustained as part of particular sociocultural and sensorial regimes that underpin a particular “distribution of the sensible,” to invoke Jacques Rancière. I call these regimes “aesthetic formations” (Meyer 2009a; see also introduction).

Therefore, I propose to advance the understanding of film as mediation by taking into account that, by implying selection, mediation is a project with social and political implications. Instead of remaining within the warm language of phenomenology’s existential framework, in which perception and experience are immediate and primary over expression and which entails some degree of blindness to power (see also Knibbe and Versteeg 2008), it is important to acknowledge that film ingeniously converts the mediated experience of others into audiences’ own experience. Audiences—provided they do indeed get “into” a film—inhabit and by the same token animate the mediated experiences of the film characters. Nothing can express this process of inhabitation better than the praiseful statement “this happened in my house.” Based on this experiential recognition, spectators were prepared to rework, more or less consciously and explicitly, their personal experiences in the light of the movie.

Thus, while for me the phenomenology of film proposed by Sobchack is indispensable for analyzing the impact and effects of video movies, it is imperative to broaden—and, indeed, politicize—this phenomenology by recognizing the ideological operation of movies from *within* the realm of experience.⁴ If, in watching a movie, mediated expressions are being incorporated into spectators’ bodies and enlivened, we can pose the question of how video movies, as sensational forms, take part in a broader process of aesthetic formation of moral personhood. This is the key question that underpins this chapter. Before getting into the morality purported by movies, it is necessary to explore how Ghanaian audiences were addressed, and hence constituted, as resonating bodies by filmmakers and the censorship board.

ADDRESSING THE AUDIENCES

As I explained in chapter 1, from the outset Ghanaian video filmmakers found themselves in a crossfire of criticisms launched by the film establishment. Video filmmakers' increasingly self-conscious insistence that their movies were woven from the stuff of everyday life—and thus were “true stories”—spotlights a new direction in filmmaking in Ghana that accompanied the deregulation and commercialization of film. Their attitude toward their critics is well captured in the statement Akwetey-Kanyi made about a debate at NAFTI: “They are in the office. We are in the street to hear what people are talking about, and this is what we make our films from” (interview, 7 Sept. 1999). Audiences were not just out there but were constituted by being addressed in a manner that appealed to them. Certainly with the rise of Nollywood, this required that filmmakers constantly struggle not to lose or to recapture their spectators. As film was primarily a matter of business, filmmakers sought to live up to the expectations of the audiences by anticipating what they might like, observing their reactions, and listening to their criticisms. This was more or less successful, and certainly with the increasing availability of Nigerian movies and the overall large number of movies launched per week, it became difficult for Ghanaian filmmakers to keep their audiences tuned in order to at least recoup what had been invested in the production. Importantly, these constraints made for a highly interactive attitude on the part of filmmakers, who, rather than opting for a movie that would express their own idiosyncratic vision, went for audiovisualizing what lived in popular imaginaries and sought to entice audiences to recognize and get into the film plot. In so doing, they had to walk the fine line that separated joyful recognition of what is familiar—“This is (about) us!”—from boredom—“It’s always the same old story.” Profit came from getting audiences to visit the cinema or video theater (the prime source of income until around 2000), or to buy a cassette in order to watch the “latest” film, and to a lesser extent from selling exhibition rights to national and all-African TV stations.⁵

The necessity to capture and bind paying audiences implied that filmmakers themselves were constantly engaged in an “audience research” of sorts, making themselves receptive to pervasive moods and seeking to harmonize with popular sentiments. In the period when movies were still shown primarily in cinemas and video theaters, filmmakers would regularly sit with the audiences (this was convenient because they had to be present to get their

share of the box office anyway). As Safo explained, “It’s a whole culture, you get into the cinema hall and you dissolve into that culture, you will have to flow with the flow, and sometimes when people cry you have to cry along, and when the poor girl is being poorly treated, then people will also cry along. You must study the audience” (interview, 18 Nov. 2002). There was general agreement that studying the audience was necessary for success and could even give inspiration for a new movie.⁶ This stance brought about a kind of cinema that, like early Euro-American (Elsaesser 1990; Hansen 1991) and early Indian cinema, “imagined its audience to be present, and was therefore alert to its cultural expectations” (Vasudevan 2000, 11). Movies thereby engaged viewers in an experiential, sensational dynamic that involved, as Safo put it, “a whole culture.”

A successful movie, as filmmakers would phrase it, was a film “that is talked about in town.” Indeed, movies were not only born out of, but, if successful, also fed back into, stories that circulated in public space. Video filmmakers explicitly aimed to achieve this, for instance by designing short slogans that lent themselves to become part of popular discourse and that were repeated over and over again in the movie’s advertising clips on television and via “floats” (when the release of the latest movie was advertised by a loud procession through the city). This could be a phrase like, “There is something in the soup” (*The Other Side of the Rich* [GFIC, 1992]); “Mabodam” (Twi, “I am sick”), which became the name of a popular hairstyle (*Step Dad* [Movie Africa Productions and Hacky Films, 1993]); or “Eshe wobu, Eshe wosisi, eshewo tiatia” (Twi, “Your guilt is in your chest, your guilt is in your waist, and therefore you are growing thin,” *Dangerous Game* [Aak-Kan Films, 1996]). The point here is that video filmmakers not only designed films that resonated with their audiences but also sought to make audiences resonate with the films by adopting their vocabulary, as also happened with rap and “hiplife” music (see Shipley 2009a, 637; 2013; see also McCall 2002, 85, for a similar account regarding Nollywood as “a forum for public discourse”).⁷

So who were the audiences addressed by filmmakers? From the outset video movies have been a popular phenomenon that speaks mainly, though not exclusively, to urban audiences in the lower and middle classes. Persons with a high level of education and access to satellite television showed little interest in buying Ghanaian films (though they might appreciate Nigerian ones). As William Akuffo put it: “You have to look at what type of audience we are dealing with. The elite people don’t attend films. They criticise films. They like

the society films. They have M-net. When they come out to see your film, they will like to compare it with what they see. A lot of them cannot see through. It is not the type of film they are used to" (interview, 12 Dec. 1996). Although the situation changed with the rise of glamour movies such as those brought out by Salam Mumuni, the majority of spectators were what was seen as common people. By and large, the video phenomenon was situated mainly in urban areas in southern Ghana, appealing to people in professional groups like small-scale traders, seamstresses, hairdressers, office workers, car mechanics, and workers in all kinds of more or less informal jobs. While the number of people who actually bought a movie tape was limited, movie audiences were much larger than the sale of cassettes suggested because viewing usually occurred in a social setting. Also, cassettes circulated in social networks and were bartered. Especially with the increased screening of video movies on television, which was further enhanced by the introduction of the Africa Magic and Africa Magic Plus satellite channels, movies came to be screened in workplaces, such as Floxy's (see chapter 2), offices, roadside stalls, restaurants, and other public venues. With this massive expansion it became more difficult for filmmakers, as well as for researchers like myself, to pin down the audiences in distinct categories. Like Pentecostalism, Ghanaian and Nigerian movies achieved a public omnipresence, and virtually everyone had an idea about these products, in a range covering enthusiastic appreciation, sympathetic support, relative indifference, and fierce rejection.

When asked about their audiences, filmmakers often differentiated among kinds of movie theaters and, by implication, the neighborhoods in which they were located. As I have pointed out, they had little illusion that they could attract the elites. They had in mind different sets or "classes" of people, ranging from educated middle-class viewers who would visit the Ghana Films Theatre (where it was not permitted to enter with slippers), to quite respectable venues such as the Rex and the Roxy (fig. 10), to "rough" theaters, such as the Dunia in Nima or the Royal in Labadi, where audiences were notorious for their preference for fighting scenes and special effects, and further down to the video centers (fig. 11). The higher a movie theater's class, the quieter and more educated the audience. Still, private filmmakers usually sought to make movies that would "crosscut" and reach all these audiences by catering a bit to each of their tastes. This resulted in the production of movies that could not easily be assigned to one particular genre. Local distinctions mobilized in advertisement campaigns were romance, action, comedy, "spirit" or "rituals," horror, history or old times, love and sex, glamour,



FIGURE 10. Rex Cinema (November 2002). Photograph by author.

Kumasi films (i.e., films in Twi), and Nigerian films (and, as old film posters show, Ghanaian films were quite often advertised as Nigerian to draw a larger crowd). I would be wary about taking these distinctions as indicative of fixed genres, however. The labels themselves were fluid, and many movies combined elements from, for example, comedy, action, “spirit,” and horror.⁸ Melodrama was the overarching framework for most movies. Interestingly, the classification of the audiences’ classes based on types of cinemas did not cease with the decline of the cinema as the prime setting for watching movies. Up until I concluded my fieldwork in 2010, filmmakers would still refer to types of audiences by invoking types of cinemas (e.g., “this is something for Dunia people”). Again, this testifies to the fact that, as a medium, film is fully realized only by including the space in which it is screened.

Striving to articulate a common denominator, many filmmakers told me that they were aware that most viewers more or less strongly endorsed Christianity, in particular its Pentecostal version, which was grafted onto popular grassroots Christianity. As I noted in chapter 1, this preference on the part of the addressed audiences impeded the possibility of making movies that were explicitly anti-Christian. Filmmakers were also very much aware that most spectators were women (70 percent according to Akwetey-Kanyi). This was also confirmed by managers of cinemas and video theaters. While



FIGURE 11. Video center (October 2002). Photograph by author.

youngsters patronized American action movies, and fishermen were much into kung fu and various other martial arts, Ghanaian videos were taken as a family entertainment, typically on the instigation of women. As the manager of the Rex explained, “It is the ladies who want to go to the movies, because the films portray something about them, the story line tells them something about themselves, about marriage, about how men behave” (interview, 9 Sept. 1999). Video film sellers, too, told me that most of their customers were women, or at least men who were sent by their wives or girlfriends to buy a particular film. Women found Ghanaian (and Nigerian) movies suitable devices to warn their men against all kinds of trespasses, including affairs with immoral, loose young girls.

Eager to make popular movies that became the talk of the town and sold like hotcakes, for a long time many filmmakers took as the imagined ideal spectator the faithful and Christian yet desperate woman who experienced domestic problems and yearned for a better life. She embodied the moral values of the nuclear family that were constantly under siege. With this ideal spectator in mind, filmmakers were inclined to design movies that resonated especially with their female viewers’ experiences, consoling them and giving them moral support, while teaching a lesson to the wicked. Of course, there were always attempts to digress so as to privilege other subject positions, for

instance that of the good man suffering from a bitchy woman, or to depict an intriguing transgression, like that of the woman who engages in a lesbian relationship with a mermaid. But on the whole, filmmakers believed that it was difficult to successfully launch a film that was critical of the ideal Christian woman or failed to represent that character and that rejected Christianity outright. Somehow the strong presence of Pentecostalism in the ecology of Ghana's public sphere had to be taken into account.

This dawned on me for the first time when I watched *The Beast Within* (Astron Productions, 1993) with a group of youngsters in our living room in Teshie in the fall of 1996. This film chronicles the mishaps befalling the managing director of a big company and his family, who struggle to get things right again. While the husband loses himself in agony and despair, his wife continuously prays in front of a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus—but to no avail. On the contrary, things get worse and worse. While the setting of the movie—a typical self-contained house inhabited by a nuclear family with a modern middle-class lifestyle—was all right, my young friends greatly disliked the end. In the last scene a “fetish priest” from the village appears. Dressed in a loincloth and holding a horsetail in his hand, he reveals the spiritual source of all the troubles that have befallen the family. What was found most scandalous was that the “fetish priest” detects a juju that was hidden behind the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in front of which the family had so often prayed in despair, hereby calling a troublesome spirit into the house (see also Meyer 2010b). In the youngsters' view it should have fallen to a man of God to put things right again rather than to a native priest who, as these viewers asserted, was himself in league with “the powers of darkness.” The youngsters told me that for that reason the film, produced with much care and presumably a substantial outlay of money, had flopped in the cinemas. Other examples of failure, for instance movies about lesbian sexuality, such as *Supi Supi* (Cobvision Productions, 1996) and *Women in Love* (Movie Africa Productions, 1996), also confirmed audiences' preference for a Christian heroine. The point is not that there was no room for the character of the bad woman—the loose girl was the natural foil for the pious wife—but that the central figure should be an object for positive identification. While, certainly after the renaissance of the Ghanaian video scene in the digital format after 2005, the imagined audiences became more diverse, there still was a preference for the morally sound heroine and an overall modern and Christian ethos.

Of course, with ever more movies being put into the system and the tremendous public appeal of Nigerian films, filmmakers struggled more and

more to retain and, if necessary, recapture their audiences. While the latter greatly appreciated seeing their own surroundings and stories projected onto the screen, they were nonetheless critical spectators whose taste and judgment grew more refined with the rise of the industry. Over and over again I met people who were generally positive about Ghanaian movies but criticized Ghanaian filmmakers for failing to portray a local lifeworld realistically. For instance, a young student who loved to watch movies in the cinema, at school, and at home told me that she was irritated by the fact that in some movies persons who, given their dress and material culture, obviously had a certain social standing, went into emotional outbursts of anger that were absolutely unconvincing for people of this kind. How could a well-educated father run into a school and beat up the headmaster, as happened in *Killing Me Softly* (Astral Pictures, 1997)? Also, the tendency, especially in GFIC/Gama productions, to offer much talking in so-called Big English was regarded as problematic, both by audiences who did not understand English very well and yearned for “telling pictures” and by those who had mastered English and easily identified the movie discourse as artificial.

Another problem concerned the portrayal of emotions. Emotional movies, and in particular those that made viewers weep, were held in high esteem. Whereas Nigerians were credited with a natural talent for invoking emotions of despair, Ghanaian filmmakers were criticized as having difficulties getting their actors to express emotions in a realistic and compelling manner. When people found out that I knew many filmmakers, they told me to let them know that especially the portrayals of emotions should be improved. In fact, based on deep appreciation and high expectations of video movies, such criticisms differed from those invoked by the perspective of film as education. The latter raised fundamental issues about video movies’ politics of representation; the former just asked for “improvement” to make the movies easier to identify with. While filmmakers shrugged their shoulders when faced with objections that mobilized the state film discourse, they took the statements made by their targeted audience very seriously. After all, the spectators’ irritation about artificiality was the flip side of their desire for realistic film characters grounded in the world of their own lived experience. Such realism was a condition for audiences to recognize themselves in, get into, and hence endorse and coauthor a movie.

Another criticism, made from the same sympathetic perspective, concerned problems of continuity. Many viewers found it difficult to follow movies that did not show clearly how a person got from point A to point B.

There was a popular demand to avoid leaving too much to the audience's imagination and to visualize all occurrences within the movie, just as in the genre of the telenovela that became increasingly popular in the 1990s with the deregulation and commercialization of television. This was of particular concern for people who could not follow the dialogue because of their lack of proficiency in English and who therefore could not be taken over the thresholds between different scenes and editorial cuts. People also disliked what was called a "bad" (in the sense of morally unsatisfactory) ending. They also complained that many movies were serialized, each part of which ended with a cliffhanger so that they had to wait far too long to "get something out of it." Many also disliked endings that left audiences wondering how the story would go on or failed to satisfactorily restore the proverbial "triumph of good over evil." The demand for a proper end and a moral lesson echoed the rather explicit regulations formulated by the film censorship board that will be central in the next section.

CENSORSHIP AND THE MORAL OF THE STORY

Even though video filmmakers transcended the old, paternalistic state discourse on film and its vision of the ideal spectator as needing protection against dangerous influences from outside and requiring a solid grounding in the Nkrumahist African personality, the role of the state in controlling films has not ended. Filmmakers have become increasingly laconic about criticisms raised from the perspective of the film-as-education discourse, but they still have to make sure their films will pass inspection by the censors. As I pointed out in chapter 1, the attempted market regulation launched by FIPAG in 2009 required that a film receive approval by the censorship board in order to be eligible for sale and public viewing. The censorship board bases its decision on whether a movie should be passed and what its classification should be (U for "universal," X for "adults only," or A for "children in the company of adults") on the verdict of previewers. These previewers consist of representatives of different societal groups (including the Muslim Council, various churches, and the Ga Traditional Council), commissions (such as the National Commission on Culture, the National Commission on Children, and the Trade Union), and representatives of state institutions (such as the military, the police, and the education system).⁹ Not surprisingly, the board's regulations implicitly construed the audiences as vulnerable to

the impact of violent, vulgar, sexual, or otherwise offensive images, against which they need to be protected by censorship. In other words, film being regarded as extremely powerful in impressing pictures upon the audiences, the imagined spectator was held to easily succumb to the power of pictures and to lapse into copycat behavior and therefore needed an explicit moral framework.

In a small folder distributed by Ghana's Information Services Department, titled "Guide to Film Censorship" (which I received in 1996 and which was still in place in 2010), the terms of reference are explained in detail. After the preview session, in which the filmmaker presented his or her film, the board could reject a movie in full if it was found to offend "religious feelings" or "good taste" by inappropriate behavior or vulgarity, to cause racial hostility, or to depict cruelty. The board could also recommend cutting certain scenes, particularly those involving fighting, killing, punishment, torture, violence against women, the inferiority of Africans, or the undermining of law and order. While the guide recognizes that certain scenes need to be included for the sake of the story, it is against excessive or prolonged portrayals of problematic, transgressing acts. Interestingly, it explicitly discards a particular use of sound and camera angles, such as the close-up, to amplify undesirable behavior, especially violence. Championing the female cause, the regulations also authorized the board to object "to scenes in which women are subjected to violence [*sic*] and they should be avoided, wherever possible. The board can only allow where they are absolutely essential to the story and when they are introduced with the minimum of emphasis. *Shots of men striking women* in the face are included under this head" ("Guide to Film Censorship," emphasis in the original). The basic idea, stated as the document's conclusion, was "that it is not the type of film that matters but the treatment and the moral tone. Adventure films such as gangster and cowboy films may do little harm to children as long as they are not brutal and sadistic, and as long as the moral, that is, *the triumph of right over wrong*, is abundantly made clear" ("Guide to Film Censorship," my emphasis). By and large, the movies presented for preview remained more or less within the limits set by the board surprisingly well. My file of movies presented for preview at the censorship office indicates that between 1993 and 1996 the board rejected just twenty movies (out of 220). No later rejection is mentioned, and I take this as an indication that all movies in this period eventually passed. Rejection only happened when a movie was considered beyond repair because it lacked scenes in which evildoers were punished, as stipulated by the regulations, or

because it was not clear what kind of moral lesson the movie was attempting to convey. More often, the board requested that certain scenes be taken out or that the title be changed. At the beginning of my research filmmakers, seeking to push the limits of the permissible, especially with regard to violence and sex scenes, complained that the board gave them a difficult time, especially because they needed to win back the audiences who were turning en masse to the far less restricted Nigerian video movies. Later, complaints about censorship greatly diminished, and in 2010 I was surprised to note that many of the established filmmakers who were back in the business expected the board to restrict the release of technically and otherwise mediocre movies made by newcomers to the business and to have a critical eye on Nigerian movies. In fact, FIPAG developed smoother relations with the board and effected a shift in the preview procedure from the threat of rejection toward classification into different categories. Even the boom of movies with quite explicit “love and sex” scenes, fashionable since 2008, passed through censorship, the only stipulation being their classification as for adults only.¹⁰ However, the launch of this type of movie triggered a lot of critical response from audiences who complained about the low moral standards of these products. Even people who were not opposed to watching porn, per se, stated that they felt uncomfortable about the idea of watching such films in other than private settings (see Asare 2013, 71–73, on the debates triggered by these movies).

In 1996 the actual terms set for the censorship of videos were still being negotiated. Here it is important to recall that, given the small number of local movies made under the auspices of the GFIC, the board did not have much to worry about until it was confronted with the huge number of privately produced video movies in the late 1980s. In other words an institution established in the context of the state film industry that mainly previewed foreign movies now became a key player in a deregulated media environment. In contrast to the discourse on film as education, which was still mobilized by people affiliated with NAFTI and GFIC/Gama to critique video movies, the censorship board showed a far more pragmatic attitude. Although the regulations suggest a rather strict procedure, the preview sessions that I attended took place in a down-to-earth spirit, at times with few previewers attending. With the rise of local productions there were logistical problems related to paying an allowance to the previewers and arranging for their transport. Attending a number of sessions, I quickly realized that board members generally had little appreciation for Ghanaian videos, per se, even

though they made them pass through the preview. While panel members had problems with the general orientation of the movies, echoing the state discourse on film as education, in the preview sessions they were mainly concerned with details.

For instance, during the preview of *The Intruder* (Jubal Productions, 1996), a movie about an evil man who uses juju to intrude on the romance between a young man and woman yet is ultimately overpowered thanks to Christian preaching,¹¹ I was surprised at the attention previewers gave to particular scenes that had not struck me as problematic. A board member requested that one scene featuring a pickpocket who was never caught or punished during the movie be removed. The Muslim representative complained about the representation of the “fetish priest” who sells juju as a Mallam, which was contrasted with the positive representation of a Christian pastor—to no avail, as other members did not regard this as reason to reject the movie. Questions were raised about the last scene, in which the evildoer received a wound that immediately attracted flies. This was regarded as “culturally inappropriate,” and the board recommended that it be shortened. On the whole the majority of the previewers appreciated the message—criticizing the destructive use of juju to achieve material benefits for oneself—and passed the movie.

Adopting a pragmatic stance toward local productions, members of the censorship board in principle appreciated the existence of video movies because they catered to the demands of local audiences. Although these movies were found to be not yet up to standard and to be dabbling in “superstitions,” they were considered less harmful than many foreign movies. I was able to get some information from members of the board via a questionnaire that Sakyi, who held a degree in mass communication, designed on my behalf and to which nine persons responded.¹² As one previewer (from the Church of Pentecost) put it, “in terms of technical quality, they are far behind the foreign films, but in the main, the audience may be more comfortable with the Ghanaian films because of the cultural background of the messages they portray.” Along with frequent criticisms about the lack of technical mastery of video and story lines, there were also complaints about the strong emphasis on “superstitions.” One previewer noted drily that “most of the films are on fetish and the usual belief that every mishap by man is influenced by Satan.”

Notwithstanding its fundamental criticism of the failure of video movies to live up to the state discourse of film as education, the board only

occasionally requested that films be revised and resubmitted and even more rarely rejected a movie (except in the early days). This not only testifies to a high level of pragmatism on the part of the board but also indicates that video filmmakers, even though challenging state cinema, internalized the regulations stipulated in the “Guide to Film Censorship” to such an extent that their products would be difficult to reject. The reason for the relative convergence between the regulations and the design of the film plots stems from the fact that these regulations themselves crystallize a long-standing regime of addressing—and hence constituting—film audiences that harks back to the colonial and early postcolonial era. As I pointed out in chapter 1, colonial film censorship was set up to protect audiences from foreign influences that were regarded as potentially disruptive for the maintenance of colonial rule. The postcolonial state’s concern to shield moviegoers from foreign movies, which were perceived as alienating and thus a threat to African personality, persisted. Clearly, the individual imagination had to be harmonized with a desired national imaginary, thereby constituting film viewing as a space for negotiating habitus. Along with the censorship board’s paternalistic project of protecting audiences, the need to teach moral virtues also became an explicit concern. This is not simply a top-down approach but part and parcel of an interactive process in which the expectations of the audiences played a key role in the specific way cinematic culture and the discourse related to it took shape. The strong emphasis on morality echoed a broader, commonsense view of the educative purpose of cultural forms. Popular stories about the trickster Ananse, proverbs, “concert parties,” TV drama, and Christian sermons were all premised on the expectation that they must teach virtues by telling stories.¹³ The censorship board’s insistence on ensuring that films show “the triumph of right over wrong” and audiences’ wish “to get something out of a movie” both echo this long-standing expectation, which filmmakers struggle to fulfill. Local movies operate within a heavily moral framework that is deeply engrained in common sense.

“GETTING SOMETHING OUT OF IT”

Even when a movie passed inspection by the censorship board, spectators could be critical of its moral teachings. A film could be found to be quite entertaining, but spectators might still dismiss it, saying, “There is nothing in it.” Frequent statements like “I want to get something out of it” or “I want

to advise—or educate—myself” point to a popular pedagogy, claimed by audiences, that appreciates film as conveying important lessons for the future.¹⁴ Since it was expected that these lessons be clearly discernible, much depended on how the movie ended. William Akuffo told me that he quickly had to change the end of *Diabolo* after the first showing, in December of 1991. In that version the Diabolo character, who had committed several murders, was shown sneaking away: “In *Diabolo 1* the snake escaped and people thought what sort of stupid film is this? I always watch the audience reaction. So I asked, ‘Why do you think it is a stupid film?’ They said: ‘How can they allow the snake to go just like that?’ They want punishment immediately. So I changed the end. We reshot the portion where the boys attack the snake and hit it and finally burn it. They wanted to see it burned. Then they were happy” (interview, 12 Dec. 1996). Given the close face-to-face contacts between filmmakers and audiences, Akuffo quickly heard the latter’s criticisms and adjusted his movie. This example spotlights the dynamic relation that exists between filmmakers and audiences in Ghana. Even though I classify Ghanaian movies as part of “popular culture,” it would be a mistake to presume that this entails a self-evident match between a movie and the expectations of the spectators. On the contrary, I discovered that filmmakers needed to work hard to achieve a product that was “popular” in the double sense of the term: a recognized part of the popular imagination and popular in the sense of having mass appeal. Making a popular movie depended on a process of negotiation between audiences and filmmakers, through which the latter anticipated and responded to criticisms and complaints from the former.

Having been prompted to design the new ending in which the snake got burned, Akuffo had to worry about how to produce a follow-up. The solution he found was to have *Diabolo 2* start with a severely injured Diabolo (in the shape of a person), suggesting that somehow the snake had escaped the fire, leaving Diabolo almost dead. People’s moral concerns persisted about the proper punishment of this character who, like a trickster, was able to survive all kinds of assaults. For instance, Kofi Middleton-Mends told me that he was once approached by a taxi driver who recognized him as having played a role in *Diabolo 3* (World Wide Motion Pictures, 1994). The taxi driver was furious about this movie because it failed to fulfill his moral expectations. Regarding the Diabolo character as evil, he was annoyed that at the end of the movie the character still lived on. He found that the value of film should be that “good must always triumph over evil.” That was also his hope for his

own life. So he told Middleton-Mends: “This film must be finished for me, this bad character must be destroyed, no matter if the filmmaker wants to give it a follow-up” (Middleton-Mends interview, 12 June 1998). Interestingly, even if a movie was found to be unsatisfactory in not offering a sound moral, spectators would still reinstate their own morality through film criticism. Again this shows that what should matter to scholarly analysis is not just a film as such but also the space in which it is produced and consumed.

The emphasis both the censorship board and the audiences placed on a crisp, clear moral and the need to show *within the film* that evil deeds are punished affirmed the heavily moral undertone that movies were expected to convey. As producer (and actor) Augustine Abbey also explained:

At the end there is always a message, because people go to watch these films not because they just want to go out, but because they want to learn at the same time. Take “Osɔfo” [i.e., Osɔfo Dadze], for instance, a program that has been on TV for thirteen years. Osɔfo means pastor. At the end of the show the pastor comes and faces the audience, the viewers, and addresses them: “You have seen the program, so when you commit a crime, this is what will happen to you.” It was a very interesting show. Instead of allowing the people to pick whatever message there is in the program, he will come at the end of the show to tell them. People believed then that every film must have a message at the end. So if you do a film that is very artistic, but has no lesson, people will ask you, “Why? What are you telling us?” At the end of every production, the good person is vindicated and the bad person is punished. We do dramatic justice at the end of any literary work, every film, every drama, any piece of art. (interview, 10 Dec. 1996)

Still, movies were not flat morality tales that showed only what is good. Here it is important to recall that the censorship board was prepared to legitimize the depiction of morally problematic behavior if it was required by the story line. This worked in favor of a narrative structure in which the “triumph of right over wrong”—or, as many spectators would phrase it more existentially, of “good over evil”—allowed for an obsessive focus on what was wrong or evil. Inciting a prurient encounter with the evil that one despised yet nonetheless found (all the more?) intriguing, this narrative structure translated easily into Christianity’s dramatic logic of the spiritual fight between God and Satan. Although from the perspective of born-again faith Satan was to be fought, it is also clear that Satan’s very existence was necessary for the Holy Spirit to be recognized as a superior force. Just as video movies had to depict evil in order to teach a lesson, Pentecostalism “needed” the devil—and all he

was made to stand for—as much as it fought him. The paradoxical logic of morality requiring and even producing transgression is what the two share.

Pondering all the movies I saw (including the more recent glamour movies that came up around 2007), I cannot think of a single movie that does not thrive on the dramatic structure of a moral combat of some sort. While, as I have pointed out, filmmakers distinguished among “classes” of audiences that were related to certain “classes” of cinemas, the notion of a moral fight in which what is right and good is ultimately shown to be victorious appealed to all spectators. The domestic domain, which was central in most of the movies, was the prime theater in which stupid husbands stood against their faithful wives, mothers maltreated their daughters-in-law, madams or masters made their maids suffer, lovers were broken apart by greedy parents or other mischievous characters, and so on. Ultimately it was always about right and wrong, good and evil, angels and demons, God and Satan. One of the key attractions of movies, as I realized by visiting cinemas and video theaters, was the pleasure that spectators experienced when, finally, evil was shown to be punished and order restored, conveying a deep satisfaction at witnessing the correct operation of shared moral principles in action (Meyer 2003b).

Importantly, movies were not expected to teach morals in an abstract manner but through the narrative in which they were embedded. While, as I have pointed out, movies were designed in such a way that they resonated with audiences’ worlds of lived experience, there still was a remarkable difference between the two. Film crystallized shared imaginaries that, by being offered as an “experience of experience,” became imaginable for the viewers and that they could carry into their own lives. In their everyday settings people found it difficult to understand their own predicament from their positions in the midst of things. In contrast, films, as I was often told, “expose and reveal many things people do not see so clearly in their daily lives.” The gift of seeing clearly—also invoked in Kwaku’s statement that thanks to *Not Without* he realized what he had done wrong in his marriage—was one of the major ways through which films were thought to educate spectators. This possibility to make people see things that they found difficult to discern clearly in their daily lives stemmed from the technical properties of film as a particular representational device that works through compelling, “motional” pictures, rather than mere texts or words.¹⁵ Conducive to a still largely oral culture, film was at the same time understood as a quintessential modern audiovisual medium that allowed even people with a low education to engage with the wider world.

It is important here to highlight three properties of film and their specific use. One, as film compresses time (for instance through flashbacks), it is able to show the consequences of certain bad or immoral acts that unfold over a long period in real life. Many movies depict how certain sins committed in the past shape the predicament of the film characters with whom spectators engage. While in daily life it is difficult to know how past acts have affected one's present, films "reveal" this. Showing the disastrous consequences of particular acts—for instance squandering money, sacking a loving wife, or neglecting one's children—and the positive outcome of good behavior, especially staying upright and God-fearing, movies were found to give valuable directions for the future. Displaying how a certain character went astray and regretted it when everything was too late, movies instilled in audiences an urge to avoid similar faults or to correct them before it was too late. The lessons learned from movies, as I was told over and over again, were important for planning one's future.¹⁶ Films could even convey a sense of hope and direction. As one woman put it: "Film teaches that you can rise up."

Second, film transcends social and spatial boundaries. While the protagonists in a movie, just like people in real life, may wonder what is in another person's mind or what goes on in inaccessible spaces, audiences get the whole picture, certainly in social viewing settings in which reactions from others can be taken into account; they are therefore positioned to have a good overview of a situation. In this way movies speak to an overall sense of insecurity about what motivates other people, suggesting that it is important to be alert and "vigilant" so as to get a clearer picture of a whole setting or situation.

Third, as I will point out in more detail in chapter 4, spectators perceived movies as able to conjure the spiritual realm that was considered inaccessible with the ordinary senses. The use of special effects revealed to viewers the machinations of evil spirits and the hand of God. Many viewers felt deep satisfaction about such scenes. Convinced of the reality of spirits, they were pleased that movies made these forces visible. Movies were found to be superior to the naked eye because they could audiovisualize such forces, generating a public whose members helped each other believe in the existence of these forces.

Thus, film was particularly appreciated for teaching moral lessons because of its special capacity to encompass extended periods, peep into what remains inaccessible and secret, and conjure up the spiritual realm. It was a device able to show what was conceived as "real" (understood in the phenomenological sense) in its totality. In distinction to the moral teachings conveyed through

other cultural forms, film offered a special kind of superior vision that uplifted spectators from their position in the midst of things, in which many important matters remained opaque. The moral teachings offered by movies were accompanied by a particular possibility to witness what is impossible to see with the “naked eye.” Ultimately, the morality of a movie was to be delivered in the cinematic experience. People were invited to “get into” the movie yet at the same time were offered a superior perspective that allowed them to know more than the protagonists themselves. This is how lessons were learned, lessons that were found useful in everyday life. Although vision is obviously central to film, it is important to stress the synesthetic involvement of other senses in the process of what is—problematically—called “watching.” Both still and moving pictures appeal to the eye, but they also touch beholders on a deeper level.

WATCHING MOVIES: A “LIVE” PERFORMANCE

Pictures and Sounds

I have to confess that I often found watching a Ghanaian or Nigerian movie on my own quite boring. In such a situation certain scenes, such as the lengthy car rides mentioned in chapter 2, appeared a bit long to me. This sense of being somewhat bored was intensified by the fact that often the dialogue was difficult to understand and the sound editing lacking. And while I usually find it difficult to watch scary movies alone, I find it telling that I had no problem with horrific scenes in Ghanaian ones. This, in my view, is because in the latter little attention was paid to bringing in sound effects that vested moving pictures with horror and anxiety in a way that would work effectively for a spectator, like myself, who was socialized in the cinema in a different manner from Ghanaian audiences.

Whenever I watched movies in the company of Ghanaians, however, things were different, provided the movie was good—appealing as far as content and presentation were concerned and not dismissed as “artificial.” I was fascinated by the audiences’ willingness to ignore technological shortcomings, including the periodic overall breakdown of the system, tracking problems, or inaudible sound, and to work their way into the movie (fig. 12). The scenes I would otherwise experience as lengthy were just right to allow for extensive commentary, scary pictures were greeted with shrieks of horror, and at all times—though to a lesser degree at Ghana Films—audiences



FIGURE 12. Inside Drisdale video center (November 2002). Photograph by author.

engaged with the movie by talking and shouting. Pondering the difference between my personal experience of watching alone and watching with others, I realized that Ghanaian (and Nigerian) movies were not closed cultural products that stood by themselves but were open and incomplete, in need, as it were, of audience attendance. A movie, one could say, is fully realized only in the performance of watching, with the audiences making “noise.” Indeed, audiences participate above all via sound, that is, by commenting, chatting along, shouting, laughing, or singing.

I have noted that in the production of movies, getting good pictures got far more attention than the quality of the soundtrack. Of course, filmmakers underscored scenes with appropriate music, either from Western classical music files or with songs composed for the movie,¹⁷ and made sure that there were a number of catchy sentences and slogans that appealed to the audiences. Many movies, certainly those designed to cut across “classes” of people, including spectators with little education or mastery of English, used minimal dialogue. What was actually said was often left to the actors, many of whom did not learn the—often incomplete—script by heart and who improvised. This testifies again to the prevalence of orality in the setting of filmmaking, in which actors were the ones expected to speak with an appropriate voice, thereby bringing to life the often somewhat artificial written text.

Especially in older productions, there is quite a lot of “Big English” with significant mistakes,¹⁸ followed by tirades of insults and curses in Twi (in the early days often performed by the actress Grace Omaboe, who has great experience in television drama). With time correct use of English and more elaborate dialogue became a mark of distinction; however, such movies were often considered “book-long” by audiences in popular venues. When Ghanaian movies had their comeback in 2005, many had dialogue in Twi (sometimes with English subtitles), which is used along with English as a lingua franca in southern Ghana, while glamour movies were shot in English. Still, good sound was difficult to produce. Since movies were not shot in studios but on location, it was difficult to exclude ambient noise. And so, for instance, the sound of a little horn blown by ice cream sellers—Fan Milk—made its way into a movie and rendered understanding difficult in a scene in *Tasheena* (Aak-Kan Films, 2008).

Imperfect sound, however, should not simply be taken as a symptom of technological failure but also as offering a possibility for audience involvement. Ever since the introduction of the cinema in colonial times, sound was the domain that primarily belonged to film audiences. As we saw in chapter 1, even after the production and global circulation of “talkies,” many movie theaters in Accra did not have the equipment necessary to play the soundtrack. This did not mean that watching a movie was a silent enterprise, though, because there was a storyteller who would comment on the pictures. Also, people brought in drums that were beaten during fighting scenes and loudly engaged both with the operator, if something went wrong or they disliked the movie, and with the pictures on the screen.¹⁹ Thus, from the outset oral audience participation accompanied watching a movie.

The long-standing tradition of audience participation by contributing its own sound remained very much alive, especially in the cinemas and video centers in popular neighborhoods. Significantly, it was regarded as a mark of distinction of “high-class” cinemas such as Ghana Films that people were expected to watch quietly. In such a venue occasional outbursts by individuals who stood up and shouted were regarded as inappropriate and were, at a minimum, ridiculed. In contrast, “lower-class” venues were associated with a noisy process of watching in which people enjoyed what others said as much as the movie itself. This was the setting in which most of the current filmmakers, many of whom were involved with the cinema professionally or were at least fervent cinemagoers, had familiarized themselves with the medium of film. From the outset video filmmakers sought to make movies that could

be understood without necessarily following the dialogue (either because of potential technical problems or because audiences do not understand English). Films were deliberately designed to entice audiences to engage orally with what they encountered on the screen. Indian movies, which have long been popular in Ghana and which were found to be understandable even though the dialogue was not dubbed, were often invoked as an example of movies that involve audiences successfully. The point is that even though filmmakers struggled to improve the sound quality, movies have long been organized in such a way that they leave room for audiences to involve themselves by making their own sound. This began to change gradually after 2005, with the transition to digital technology and its faster editing and quicker cuts. Ultimately, the more perfect and tautly cut a movie, the less possibility for interactive audience involvement.

Watching Together

Gradually the higher classes, who had access to color television and satellite channels, abandoned the cinema. The transition from attending the cinema to watching movies in the more secluded, domestic setting, taking place in the mid-to-late 1990s, implied that much of the fun of watching as a public performance was being lost. But watching movies at home was still a social affair and, moreover, did not fully replace public viewing, especially in popular neighborhoods in which many people lived in cramped circumstances. For instance, one of the frequent spectators at the Roxy (interview, 29 Sept. 1999) told me that he did not like watching movies on television at home, because with his father, mother, and wife present he could not let himself go as he could when he was in the cinema with his friends. Many other people, too, appreciated the experience of watching together. Even in the living room at home, as I experienced in our house in Teshie in 1996 and later in the homes of friends, animated and noisy ways of watching together still occurred, though with the decline of cinema this mode of active audience participation may ultimately be coming to an end. In 2010, however, there were still many video theaters in popular areas, making the public viewing experience possible, while in homes, as well, viewing was still a social activity that involved plenty of commentary and debates. As Kodjo Senah put it in a comment on an earlier version of this chapter, “Watching film is supposed to be a communal or at least a group affair. The lone viewer is often pitied as someone who has a domestic problem and simply wants to avoid a conflict

situation.” Films were to make people talk, and only in that way was their participatory potential realized.

Let me evoke the atmosphere of watching together by describing a visit Charles Asiedu and I paid to the Kwa Ofori video center in Jamestown on the evening of 10 July 1998.²⁰ At the time, power cuts left parts of the city in the dark on fixed evenings. The venue, located in a popular, severely impoverished, neighborhood populated mainly by Ga fishermen and their families, consisted of rows of wooden benches and a big television set placed in front. The operator was in a small room at the back, lit by a blue bulb. When we arrived, an Asian action film was in progress. Except for one woman, all of the approximately twenty-five spectators were men. Throughout the screening audience members commented on what they saw and accompanied fighting scenes by shouting, “Paa, paaa!” When the good guy, who had the sympathy of the audience, had a sexual dream, people appreciated this, saying that this was a nice thing. Everyone clapped when the bad guy drowned in the end.

At around nine o'clock the screening was over, and we went outside, where we talked to Nana, a young man who came to Kwa Ofori to screen the Ghanaian movie *The Suspect* (Aak-Kan Films, 1998) on behalf of its producer, Akwetey-Kanyi. Spotting me outside in this rather wretched environment, many people expressed surprise—a mismatch between the “class” of the video center and their perception of me as an educated person who would rather be in a place befitting her station at Ghana Films. Charles and I were hanging out at the entrance of the venue near a poster that consisted of a set of still photographs advertising the movie (fig. 13). One woman who had seen the movie already told the bystanders what it was about. This was good word-of-mouth publicity, as she said that the film was “very nice.” When we entered the hall again because another screening was about to start, music clips were shown, much to the joy of the audience. This stopped quite abruptly when about seventy people, most of them women, were present. All of a sudden the light and the television went off, making people become impatient and shout. But then the film could be shown smoothly, though the sound quality was so bad that the dialogue could barely be heard. After a period of initial complaints about the sound, the commotion calmed down, and the spectators got into the story. As usual, and in a manner reminiscent of concert party performances (Barber 2000, 204–39; Cole 2001, 135), the audience commented on the moving pictures and explained the story to each other. In the following, the reactions of members of the audience will be rendered in italics to show graphically what they brought into and got out of the movie scenes.

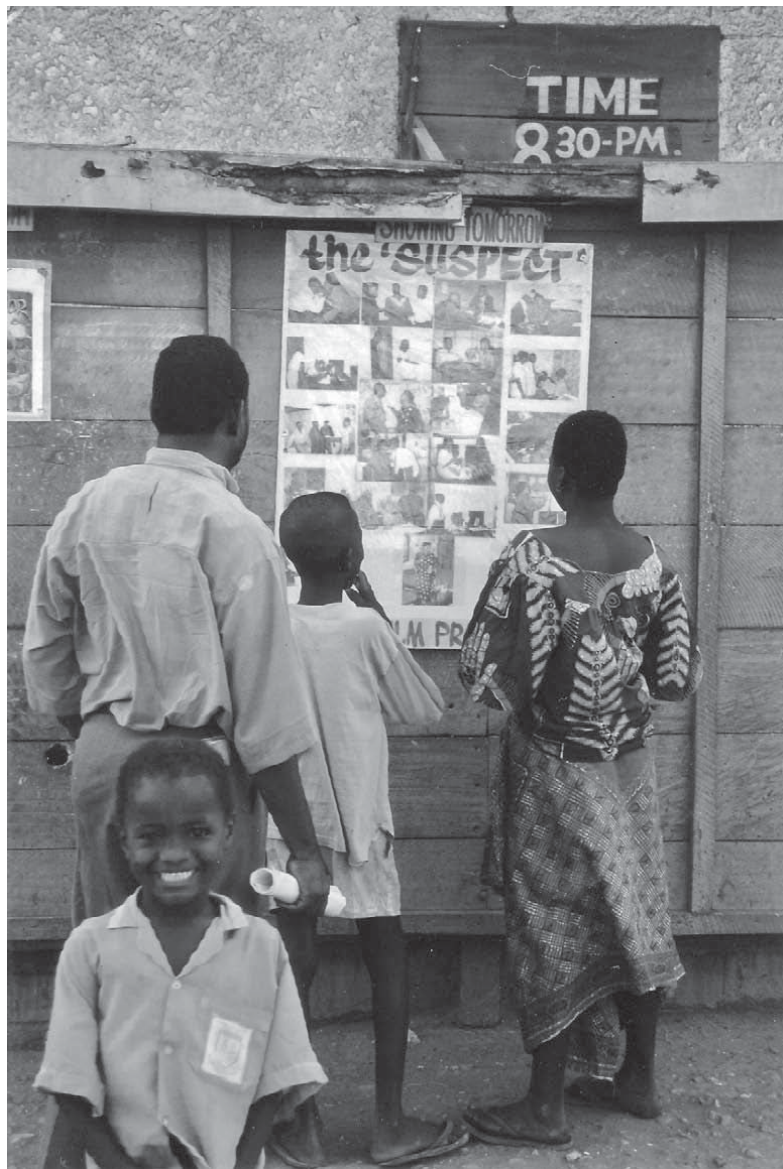


FIGURE 13. Advertising *The Suspect*, Video Center Kwa Ofori (July 1998). Photograph by author.

The Suspect is a movie about two childhood friends, one of whom is rich and successful, one of whom is poor. *People in the audience commented on the fate of the latter with sympathy: "Oh, he cannot go to places in town, he is poor, he has to stay at home."* But then he gets involved in the business of his rich and God-fearing friend. As soon as the hitherto poor fellow gets some money, he starts to enjoy life ostentatiously and is unfaithful to his wife and takes a girlfriend. *The audience criticized him sharply, shouting, "Chameleon!!! Foolish man!!!"* They disapproved of him eating chips and chicken in a restaurant together with his new love, saying that he now eats "rich men's food," while he fails to give even chop money to his wife. One evening his wife waits for him in the living room, blocking the door to the bedroom so that she can ques-

tion him. *People burst out in laughter when he tries to crawl underneath her legs and she suddenly lets her legs fall on him so as to trap him.* In one scene the guy arrives at home and refuses to eat the kinkey and fish (a typical Ga dish) that his wife kept for him. *The audience got angry about this behavior (not eating what your wife prepared is a big insult). "Ah, now he is eating chips only." The engagement of the spectators was like an informal trial in the street or on the market in which they insulted and judged the bad protagonist, whose behavior certainly resonated with actual everyday life experiences. When he has his girlfriend sit on his lap, they called for him to take her from behind, thereby underlining his immoral behavior.* The man gets deeper and deeper into immoral behavior and starts cheating. He embezzles money and, as the audience is led to understand, he has a hand in getting his friend and boss arrested for possession of cocaine. All the good characters in the movie pray that the truth will soon come out. *On the occasion of each prayer spectators expressed their sympathy for those who believe in God, especially the poor wife who suffers and the friend who is in jail.*

One time the desperate wife of the bad man wants to send a cassette letter to his brother abroad to complain about his behavior. But when she has just started speaking into the microphone, a woman comes to fetch her for Bible classes. She leaves, leaving the recorder on. Then the husband comes home with his girlfriend, taking her to the marital bed—*an act that completely appalled the audience*—and sleeping with her (this is not shown in full but suggested by zooming in on a lot of tissue paper put on the ground). The girlfriend, who claims that she is pregnant, wants to know why he is so rich, and then and there he admits that he put cocaine in his friend's house and alerted the police so that the friend was arrested. On her return the wife is shocked to see the traces of the sexual encounter. She realizes that she left the recorder on and starts listening to the tape, sighing, "Oh God, Oh God." Through this involuntarily recorded confession the bad man is ultimately exposed. His friend is set free. *The spectators loudly expressed their happiness and applauded.* The movie ends with the rich friend feeling flabbergasted; he weeps, saying: "I took him as my brother." *People in the audience echoed that, indeed, as the film shows, "some friends are very bad." The moral of the movie, according to a number of people we asked outside, was that "greed is very bad." The movie was found to be very good because it showed this.*

The Suspect had everything audiences expected of a good movie: a clear dualistic structure in which God-fearing people ultimately expose and overcome the selfish and immoral evildoer, much attention to transgressive acts

(especially sex and crime), a good wife and a trustworthy friend with whom to sympathize, an evocation of the modern setting of the city and the mansion of a nuclear Christian family, some degree of suspense, a recognizable moral message, and lots of room for involvement through sound. It is no surprise that the movie was a blockbuster at the time.

Ethics of Watching: Opening and Closing Off the Self

The ease with which audiences involved themselves emotionally in *The Suspect* and were prepared to sense and feel alongside the characters should not be taken for granted. The flip side of the appreciation of moving pictures as a way to appeal to and educate audiences was a concern with the potentially destructive impact of such pictures. In other words, in a manner reminiscent of the ideas behind the censorship guide, exactly because movies were found to be powerful, they could be enlightening but also dangerous. This became very clear to me during my conversations with several teenage girls—Beatrice, Faustina, Lisbeth, Mefia, Mabel, and Nancy, all around fifteen to seventeen years old—in the fall of 1996. These girls had taken a keen interest in our family—especially in our then almost two-year-old son, Sybren alias Kofi (he was born on a Friday). They attended most of the film showings in our living room but also accompanied me at times to watch Ghanaian movies in the Lascala Cinema nearby.²¹

Living in the same compound house next door, the girls, all of whom still went to school, knew each other very well. They attended the Church of Pentecost that was located in the neighborhood and had big dreams about their future, which they hoped would lead them out of the noise and crowdedness of a compound house. I noticed a very strong concern to avoid mixing with the wrong people and to stay “pure”—not an easy project in a world in which people lived so close to each other and in which poverty easily drove young women into offering sexual services to well-to-do men to enable them, ironically, to pay their school fees. They wanted to keep their virginity until they got married and to have a church wedding in which to wear a white bridal gown. They struck me as deeply moralistic and fearful that they would open themselves up to Satan. As I noted in my diary: “They want to stay pure by all means” (20 Oct. 1996).

While, obviously, Ghanaian movies were conducive to the morality to which the girls aspired—like Kwaku, they often praised movies for teaching good lessons—they still had second thoughts about certain scenes and about

cinema as a whole. Even though they would watch quite a lot of Ghanaian and Nigerian movies in church, their pastor disapproved of church members going to the cinema. This was a morally dangerous space, and, as they put it, “When you are there, Satan may get hold of you easier.” Fond of Ghanaian movies, yet afraid of the immorality of the cinema and the spiritual dangers inherent in a great number of films with powerful pictures that did not endorse a Christian perspective (especially fantasy, horror, and porn; see Pype 2012, 152), these girls had internalized a particular, and as I found out later, more broadly shared, though often implicit, “ethics of watching.” Resonating with the Islamic “ethics of listening” that developed with regard to cassette sermons in Cairo (Hirschkind 2006, 67–104), with this phrase I wish to emphasize that watching is an active, moral practice—an act of gazing—through which spectators engage with movies in a way that is conducive to their own vision of the moral self. This ethics of watching is not only deployed to *open* one’s mind and watch attentively but is also mobilized in acts of sensorial *closure* in order to avoid being polluted by the intrusion of evil pictures and sounds (see Bakker 2007).

On 19 October 1996 we visited the Lascala to watch *Supi Supi: The Real Woman to Woman*, a movie about lesbian sexuality. While the clips shown prior to the start of the movie—Michael Jackson dancing, including at times sexually explicit gestures—were on, the girls next to me closed their eyes and covered their ears. They asked me to let them know when *Supi Supi* started. The movie itself was quite moralistic, showing how a young woman is lured into a sexual relationship with a rich female trader. Ultimately, through this relationship she loses not only her boyfriend but also her fertility—the suggestion is made that the women use a tightly rolled piece of paper in their intercourse, injuring the young woman’s uterus. Of course, a moral framework is a prerogative, not to say excuse, for screening transgressive acts. And obviously a movie on the immorality of sexual relations between women must include bedroom scenes. As soon as such scenes were shown, the girls would again close their eyes and put their fingers in their ears to close themselves off. One girl even used her cloth to cover her head. The point for them was to block immoral pictures and sounds from entering their bodies. This ethics of watching was also mobilized at times when we watched movies in our living room, prompting spectators to, for instance, hide behind a chair. Of course, to get back into the movie when a scene with powerful, morally problematic (often sexual) pictures was over, it was necessary to allow some bad pictures and sounds to come through every now and then so as to know

when matters were clean again. As it was thus impossible to fully shield oneself from dangerous pictures, cinema and movies were said to have a polluting potential. Precisely for this reason, as the girls told me, it was important to perform a cleansing prayer after having watched a movie, most certainly after having been to the Lascala to see a movie with filthy scenes such as *Supi Supi*.

I understand these attempts to shield oneself by not letting in certain sounds and pictures as acts of anesthesia (Verrips 2006; see also Buck-Morss 1992) through which the vast possibilities for perception are limited by practices of numbing. Grounded in a vision of what constitutes a moral subject, self-anesthetization is part of a particular, strongly Christian ethics of watching deployed by spectators such as my young friends to stay pure and sane. While the girls were particularly explicit about their attempts to close themselves off from potentially harmful pictures and sounds, their concern with being accessible via such sense impressions was broadly shared. As I explained in chapter 2, the person is understood to be porous and open to outside influences that must always be blocked out so that some degree of “buffering” is reached, while at the same time good influences are allowed to come in. The acts of anesthetization while watching movies I am describing here were countered by moments of utmost attention and receptivity. Audiences at times joined in aloud with prayers uttered by characters onscreen, shouted “Hallelujah!” at the defeat of an evildoer, or sang along with a hymn. So in addition to closing themselves off from pictures and sounds that were considered inappropriate and polluting, viewers sought to open themselves up to virtuous sensory impressions, especially those related to divine power. Watching a movie was a kind of moral exercise that had much in common with attending a sermon. My point here is that, precisely because movies were attributed the capacity to leave deep, long-lasting sensory impressions, spectators negotiated—more or less consciously—the modality of their own receptivity and moral personhood.

This bodily and sensory engagement with movies—and the appreciation of the haptic potential of pictures that goes along with it—was part and parcel of a broader sensitive subjectivity mobilized most explicitly in Pentecostal churches and conducive for navigating the space of the modern city, with its dangers lurking behind the surface of shiny appearances. The city was a “sensuous geography” (Rodaway 1994) that was never merely subject to the gaze and contemplation but also engaged people in myriad sensory and bodily ways that required an attitude of constant “vigilance.” The dream of the self-contained mansion and the secluded self that went along with it involved a

sense of an urgent necessity for closure and, indeed, of a certain kind of anesthesia that made people immune to particular sensory experiences of the world. A sticker, “I am an untouchable Christian. Pure Fire Miracles Ministries,” which I saw on the dashboard of a taxi in January 2008, perfectly expresses this attitude. The act of closing off was not only required when visiting the cinema but also stood for a broader set of “techniques of the self” that involved a particular sensory self-discipline. Because the city had many spaces that were hot and visceral, and because family and marriage relations had their own dark side, as well, it was through one’s own moral behavior and acts of anesthetization and opening up that one had to shield oneself from potentially destructive, evil influences and let in the good.

The popularity of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity, as I have argued elsewhere (Meyer 1998b), may be seen to reside at least in part in its capacity to offer people certain guidelines on how to open and close themselves to impressions from outside and a number of practices, such as a quick internal prayer, to ward off the potentially dangerous and intrusive influences that they are exposed to in everyday life in the city. Since what meets the eye and the ear could be ultimately deceptive, it is important to alert oneself to matters that are difficult to perceive in an ordinary way because they are linked to the realm of the “spiritual.” This extraordinary perception demanded particular techniques of closing off and opening up that were offered by religious practitioners and mimicked in movies. Film taught not only the need to deploy sensory techniques such as vigilance, receptivity, and closing oneself off. By virtue of bringing onto the screen transgressive acts—especially regarding the occult and sex, pointing to acts that are morally untenable—film also requires that such techniques be mobilized in an ethics of watching. Indeed, these movies not only took part in articulating a morality that shaped, affected, and confronted audiences but also demanded a careful screening and sensory management of the self that echoed Christian, and particularly Pentecostal, teachings. In this sense Ghanaian and Nigerian movies had the potential to both purvey and assault morality.

CONCLUSION

Numerous video movies digressed from the state discourse on film as education in various respects. Most saliently, in line with popular Christian understandings, these movies framed African spiritual forces as demons, thereby

confirming the existence of a spiritual realm invisible to “the naked eye.” The state discourse on cinema branded the picturing of this realm as an unfortunate and deeply problematic confirmation of “superstitions.” Still, as this chapter has shown, these movies and the state discourse on cinema saliently converged in their understanding of film as a moral medium. Video movies, like African art films and state cinema, were expected to express a “cautionary pedagogy” (Sereda 2010), warning viewers against going astray in one way or another. Indeed, the idea that movies have to convey moral lessons was held in common by the audiences, the filmmakers, and the censorship board, and it lay at the base of a strongly moralistic video film aesthetic. But whereas the ideal spectator imagined by the state discourse on cinema was to be educated about his or her African personality that needed to be (re)captured through Sankofaism, many video movies (except, to some extent, epic films) addressed viewers who were in search of security and orientation in a quickly transforming, insecure world, without taking recourse to cultural heritage as a positive resource. Although movies confirmed the existence of an invisible spiritual realm, they opted against a positive valuation of spirits in terms of heritage, as advocated by Sankofaism. The moral public that was addressed and constituted by Ghanaian video movies was regarded as needing ethical guidelines for personal behavior to ensure protection and progress in everyday urban life.

Grounded in audiences’ world of lived experience, movies appealed to them, to invoke Vivian Sobchack once again, by “expressing experience through experience.” Stressing that filmic mediation implies making certain choices about the representation and expression of audiences’ phenomenological lifeworld, I have argued that video movies were part of a broadly shared sensory regime that framed perception, induced and affirmed certain sensibilities, and propounded a particular notion of the sentient subject that was indebted to Christianity and its idea of modern subjecthood. Therefore, rather than understanding perception as a primary process through which people engage with the world, as phenomenology would have it, I understand video movies as sensory devices that do not simply reflect, but also intervene in, everyday lived experience by addressing spectators and inviting them to perceive in a particular manner.

Taking this understanding as a starting point, in this chapter I have argued that movies raised Ghanaian viewers’ sensitivity to matters that remained hidden behind the surface of appearance yet were nonetheless believed to exist. Exposing hidden or secret acts and the machinations of

spirits in the framework of the realism that was characteristic of video movies' popular aesthetic, films took part in rendering people alert to matters that could not be sensed ordinarily. As successful films resonated seemingly naturally with spectators' world of lived experience *and* deployed a particular vision of how to be a modern person, they can be understood as powerful devices that partake in anchoring new modes of subjecthood in the bodies of the viewers. The need to be vigilant and alert to what is hidden was one of the prime sensorial attitudes conveyed by movies. Movies mediated and by the same token naturalized these specific modes of perceiving and relating to the world. Being both the ground of being and the prime site of sociopolitical (or ideological) inscription, the body was placed at the center of converting mediations into personal experiences, thereby vesting the former with sensory and experiential immediacy. This is why this book is not merely a study of a particular popular film culture. I take popular film as a prism through which to gain insight into the constitution of subjecthood in contemporary Ghana. From this perspective audiences are not merely spectators of movies but, more broadly, are understood as people of flesh and blood grappling to develop and internalize particular techniques of the self. These techniques of the self, I suggest, fit easily into the sphere of film in that they emphasize the importance of "seeing clearly" and of opening oneself up to and closing oneself off from outside impressions. Conversely, the ethics of watching deployed with regard to movies flowed into a broader ethical mode of conduct. In this sense film was involved in shaping a modern habitus.

The moral teachings conveyed by movies are immediately related to the constitution of a "cinesthetic" subject (Sobchack 2004) that is enabled to see a bit more clearly than when left in the midst of things. The possibility to extract a moral vision from a movie follows from being shown, by various audiovisual techniques, the hidden precursors and consequences of certain acts. In this sense a particular sensorial engagement of the spectators is the *sine qua non* for conveying an ethics suitable to help one get along in everyday life. The possibility to learn, as we have seen, went along with a high degree of audience involvement. While bad movies might be branded as "too artificial" or as unsuitable "to get something out of it," a positive engagement is expressed via statements that stress recognition ("this happened in my house"). Audience participation is also secured by tailoring movies to accommodate long-standing social viewing practices in which audiences, as it were, "complete" the movie by bringing in their own sound. The basic assurance that movies offer is the proverbial victory of "good over evil." One of the

attractions of movies is that they make audiences experience pleasure at this victory and, hence, at the well-functioning of the moral fabric at large. In other words movies not only offer teachings about morality but also convey these teachings in an entertaining manner. Getting something out of a movie and having fun in watching it belong together. The moral lessons through which people “advise themselves” are always embedded in specific narratives that are recognizable and also offer the possibility for a good laugh.

Even though movies are approached as teaching moral lessons, they are not on the safe side of morality. Movies involve spectators in an “aesthetics of outrage” that, “aimed at bodily stimulation, represents an experience of film integral to film itself” (Larkin 2008, 187). Precisely because moving pictures are attributed the power to impress themselves on people, while, in turn, people are held to be permeable to the materiality and visceral nature of pictures and words that reach them from outside, movies are found to have both virtues and vices. Given the Manichaean dualism and the logic of transgression on which Ghanaian video movies thrive, even the most pious movie implies this danger of unleashing the very forces that are to be defeated and that are branded as evil. Here we touch on the ultimate ambivalence of the popular video aesthetic: the greater the importance of a moral message that shows the triumph of good over evil, the greater the need to depict transgressions, to bring to life what is despised and feared.