PRELIMINARY NOTES ON AUDIENCES IN AFRICA

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AUDIENCES AS A HISTORICAL PRODUCT

There have been audiences, presumably, as long as there has been performance. If, as Richard Bauman suggests, ‘performance as a mode of spoken verbal communication consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence’ (Bauman, 1977: 11), then the audience is the body of people prepared to grant the performer space and time in which to mount such a display, by suspending or bending the normal patterns of communicative turn-taking. The perception that what creates an audience is the listeners’ intentional orientation towards the speaker is the starting point for a far-reaching development in performance and media studies, which focuses on the activity and creativity of the audience. If the audience has an active role in constituting the performance, cultural historians seeking to uncover histories of consciousness in African popular genres cannot afford to ignore it.

But audiences are not all the same. Just as much as performances, they are a historical product. There are different ways of convening, and of experiencing reception, whether collectively or in dispersal, which are deeply connected to the nature of social life of the age and place. How people come together; how they relate to each other and to the spectacle or utterance they are attending to; what they consider themselves to be part of in doing so; how the spectacle/utterance addresses them: all these are historically and culturally specific and need to be empirically investigated.

In colonial Africa, new kinds of audience emerged along with new forms of popular culture. Very generally, they were characterised by greater extension and greater diffuseness than older forms of communal cultural participation. These expanded audiences were variably imagined as regional, religious, ethnic or linguistic constituencies, as nations, as the entire continent or just as ‘the people’. Changes in ways of being an audience can be related to changes in the institutionalisation and economics of entertainment, and to the degree to which performances are ‘embedded’ in other social forms. Performances which are commercial, to which one gains access by paying for a ticket, convene people on a different basis from performances that are embedded in the ritual year or the domestic cycle. Changes in the ways of being an audience can also be described in terms of the technology of communication. Literacy makes possible (though not inevitable) the deferred and displaced transmission of a message, removed from the face-to-face interaction of speaker and hearer; print makes possible (though not inevitable) an address which is ‘broadcast’, sent out to an unknown and potentially indefinitely expansive readership. Television has made possible the imagining of an atomised, dispersed but mass audience tuning in simultaneously to the same programme; cassette and video recorders have made possible the proliferation of local markets of production and consumption.
To put it at its broadest, one could say that ways of being an audience are made possible only by existing ways of being in society. Huge seismic changes have taken place, transforming what it is to be a collectivity. The history of colonial Africa could be understood as the history of the formation, or emergence, of new kinds of crowd, related, but only obliquely, to a new imaginary of the public emanating from industrial Europe. The industrial revolution and the massive urbanisation that accompanied it produced the possibility of conceiving of collectivities united not by the multiple filaments of kinship, co-residence or co-operation, but by the sheer fact of human interchangeability. If workers, severed from ownership of the means of production, could be boiled down to their labour power, for sale on the open market, then human beings could be imagined as equivalent, and duplicable. It is a striking feature of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century European life that the distribution of the human body in social space began to take forms that foregrounded this presumed equivalence and uniformity. In English schools, beginning with the elementary schools for the poor in the 1820s, the ‘simultaneous method’ of teaching began to be tried out for the first time, where ‘all the children in the room received instruction at the same time and from the master himself’ (Seaborne, 1971: 143). Instead of being taught in small groups by older pupils, or in individual lessons with the master, pupils would be arranged as an audience in front-facing rows where all could see, as well as be seen by, the authority figure addressing them. It was only in this period too that classes were sorted according to age and pupils were expected to progress steadily and uniformly through a series of graded levels; principles of uniformity and homogeneity replaced the mixed, fragmented groupings that had prevailed before. Thus the master would be directing his undifferentiated address to a body made up of units assembled as if interchangeable and equivalent to each other, and the pupils for the first time became a kind of ‘public’.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, European armies—particularly the Napoleonic forces—really wore uniforms in the true sense, rather than clothes acquired from a variety of sources and intended as a badge of identity more than as a submergence of individuality (Parker, 1988). Beginning in the nineteenth century, church congregations began to give up the highly personalised and hierarchical use of space, in the form of pews for the rich—on which they paid rent and which had lockable doors and often elaborate interior furnishings—and plain benches for the poor. Seating began to be neutral, undifferentiated, and available alike to all. Organised team sport, involving rigorous observation of the ‘levelling’ principle of bracketing every characteristic except the relevant strength and skill, took on much greater prominence in the boarding schools of the second half of the nineteenth century (Mangan, 1987). All these new disciplines of the body in space seemed to involve the imagining of human beings as, in principle, equivalent to each other, and thus to make possible the conceptualisation of an audience which is a ‘public’ in the sense of being in principle an indefinitely extensible horizon of anonymous and interchangeable members, to be addressed not as known persons marked by family, rank, class or resident but as persons—not just unknown but in principle not to be known,
because individual difference is irrelevant to the purpose for which they have convened.

This conception of the ‘public’ is much broader than Habermas’s conception of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century bourgeois public sphere, but it is implicit in Habermas’ focus on the twin characteristics of (1) print and (2) the commercialisation of cultural forms. Print renders address in principle indefinitely extensive; the ‘speaker’ does not know who, or how many people, will read the text, which can be multiplied indefinitely. Even when intended for a specific type of reader, of a specific class and background, the address is by its very nature generalised, projected to an unseen audience ‘out there’. The commercialisation of forms renders them in principle accessible to an indefinitely large and undifferentiated audience (accessible in practice, of course, only to those who can pay). Habermas observes that one of the consequences of detaching high culture from its embeddedness within court and aristocratic ritual was that forms such as musical concerts became open, available (again, in principle) to any citizen prepared to pay for admission. ‘The emergence of the diffuse public formed in the course of the commercialization of cultural production’ established a potentially indefinitely expansible constituency, despite the objective fact that the majority of the population was illiterate, impoverished and therefore debarred from participation (1962: 39). The essential characteristic of a ‘public’ constituted by print culture and commercial cultural forms is that it is addressed as if, in principle, its members were equivalent, emptied of specific characteristics of status, family and individual personal identity. This imagined equivalence is focused and idealised in the bourgeois public sphere’s conception of itself as representing the equality of ‘universal man’ speaking for the public good. Indeed, one of the interesting things about Habermas’s discussion of the public sphere is the way he fastens an expansive, open notion of public address and access to what was a small, sociable and of course self-interested class. This produces a tension at the heart of Habermas’s model which critics have repeatedly attempted to defuse.

Thus the broad social transformations of industrial Europe were given visible form in new disciplines of space and time (see Thompson, 1967), initially administered primarily to the lower classes, and these disciplines involved recognising that humans could be imagined as, in principle, equivalent and interchangeable in large numbers. I would suggest that such disciplines of time and space, and such a conception of human equivalence, contributed fundamentally to the conceptual framework in which audiences were imagined and addressed as ‘publics’.

In nineteenth and twentieth-century Africa these same disciplines of time and space were imported by missionaries, employers and town planners, but imposed on a different social reality. The alien and objectifying intent of such disciplinary impositions has been illuminatingly analysed in the case of Egypt (Mitchell, 1988), as has the local population’s creative modification of them in the generation of a new urban popular culture in the case of colonial Brazzaville (Martin, 1995).

In much of colonial Africa rapid urbanisation took place but without the full reduction of human beings to sellers of labour power, even in heavily industrial
and mining centres. As Frederick Cooper put it, ‘Capital’s inconclusive assault on Africa created a guerilla army of the underemployed rather than the juxtaposition of disciplined troops and the reserve army of the unemployed characteristic of industrial capitalism’ (Cooper, 1983). Migrant workers and even long-term urban residents kept one foot in another mode of production, for people had an alternative and a back-up in the rural agricultural sphere which so often subsidised urban wage-earners (Cooper, 1983). And many urban centres were not industrial but commercial and administrative; workers were as often hustlers, petty traders or brokers in the informal sector as waged employees. In this domain, individual difference, personal networks, creative abilities to innovate and mediate were often essential to economic survival. The disciplines of equivalence were imported in the forms of church, school, army and organised sport, but they did not function as the imaginary of a population whose labour rendered them in principle equivalent to each other. Rather, they were overlaid upon a deeply heterogeneous mass, united and divided by religion, occupation, language, family, place of origin and degree of education, and often by popular philosophies of irreducible human difference. The uses of space that inscribed human homogeneity and equivalence were widely adopted, and parodied, in African popular culture; but the ways in which they were used were selective and creative, and this has implications for the way the expanded ‘publics’ of colonial Africa were variously imagined and addressed.

Let me give an example. The Yorùbá popular theatre, originating primarily in church and school dramas, entered a dynamic and expansive commercial phase in the 1940s. Throughout its efflorescence, during which it secularised, diversified, experimented and incorporated an array of indigenous performance modes, it never relinquished its fundamental demarcation of space. It staged its plays exclusively on platform stages with curtains, scenery and lights. The venues in which the travelling companies performed were rarely purpose-built theatres: more often, school halls, community centres, co-operative halls, hotels and church halls were used. Where there was no platform stage a makeshift one was erected or a rectangular space was demarcated to represent one; where there was no proscenium arch the curtains were rigged up in such a way as to suggest one. Having travelled with one of these companies, I can testify to the lengths to which they would go to establish the required acting space. The performance took place in linear fashion across the front of the stage. The auditorium mirrored the acting space: front-facing, rectangular and demarcated with rows of chairs or benches. The space in which the action was to take place, and the space which the spectators were to occupy, were thus not only clearly separated but—more important—were allocated in advance of the theatrical event; performers and audiences entered a frame which had already been established before the action began.

The theatres thus set up a stark contrast with older but still flourishing forms of theatre such as the egúngún ọjè (also known as apidán and alárínjọ) groups, who, like the popular theatre, were professional travelling performers. Egúngún ọjè masquerade shows are performed in an arena constituted in the act of performance itself, through the interaction of the audience and the performers. The troupe takes up a position in an open site such as a market place, open ground in front of the Oba’s palace, or a wide
court yard inside it. The audience gathers round, either forming a circle right round the troupe, or making up a three-quarter circle with a wall or wide veranda steps making up the fourth quarter. The boundaries are established in the act of performance as spectators press forward and the performers, by their movements, press them back to maintain a wide, clear arena. It is remarkable how smooth and even the curve thus constituted often is. The performers use the entire area thus established, moving across it and round it in long straight runs and wide looping circles. For special dramatic effect, they break right out of it. There is often a section along one side of the arena where Oba, chiefs and dignitaries of the town have had chairs placed for them, making highly visible the differentiation of status among the spectators. The divide in such spectacles is not between ‘backstage’ and ‘on stage’ but between unseen forces that are invoked to empower the performers and the visible stunts and transformations that are the manifestations of such empowerment (see Götrick, 1984). Rather than ‘dressing up’ backstage in order to perform mimesis on stage, the alárinjó masqueraders change under wraps, but in the middle of the arena, before the eyes of the spectators.

These different uses of space are connected with different forms of address to the audience. Before the masquerade spectacle commences, the leading praise-singer of the troupe makes enquiries to discover the oríkì orílè (praise epithets relating to place of origin) of the chiefs and other important people present, so that he can salute them individually during his opening invocations. The gratified addressees would be expected to reward the singer with gifts of money. Approaches to individual members of the audience continue throughout the show, as for example when the whirling mat (fààfàà) offers selected individuals a peep at the masquerader inside who is operating it, or when the comic dyímbó mask (the European, with awkward gait, umbrella and gloves) struts up to a number of different members of the audience to shake them by the hand and enquire gutturally ‘How ah you?’ In these approaches they give precedence to the ‘big men’—more visible because of their chairs, voluminous robes and clusters of attendants, and more attractive because of their greater potential as generous patrons. Thus, while the performers and the audience share the same plane in space, the audience is treated as internally differentiated, with its own foci or centres of attention, which the performers acknowledge and address.

The popular travelling theatre, by contrast, invariably addressed the audience as an anonymous and undifferentiated public. No individual was ever selected for personal attention. Even when the actors knew that prominent people were present in the audience, they refrained from singling them out. Only before and after the show would they demonstrate their appreciation and recognition of these big men and women. They always spoke of their audience as ‘the public’, and the way they marked out spatial relations in their performances did constitute the audience precisely as that: as rows of interchangeable units, in principle anonymous and indefinitely extensible—and in practice, because of the way the lighting and stage were set up, hard to distinguish and difficult to approach.

It suited their purpose to keep hold of these spatial relations long after they had moved away from the church ambience that shaped their early phase.
One reason was that, though they now staged mythological plays, underworld crime dramas and satirical-domestic comedies rather than Bible plays, they still wished to make clear their affiliation with Christianity, literacy and ‘enlightenment’ and their difference from theatrical forms such as egungun, rooted in what they thought of as ‘paganism’ and ‘stark illiteracy’. To use the spatial relations typical of church and school served to highlight their association with colonial modernity, even after the theatre companies had secularised and moved several rungs down the social scale in their recruitment (by the 1970s most people entering theatre companies were not highly educated, though all had some years of schooling). It also enabled them to conceptualise their market as potentially infinite: the anonymous, undifferentiated ‘public’ stretched out in all directions, waiting for them to tap it. Personal contacts with town chiefs or community leaders were not necessary; since they played to a ‘public’ they could go—unlike the egungun ojè troupes—to any town they chose without seeking permission or giving notice. All that was required was adequate publicity to ensure that the potential audience turned up: and this, like the plays themselves, was ‘broadcast’ to anyone and everyone, through posters in public places, ‘parades’ in the theatre lorry with a megaphone through which announcements were made, and announcements on the radio. This address implied to potential ticket buyers that any and every Yoruba-speaker (the public was implicitly limited by language) was interpellated equally: ‘come one, come all’. Like jujú and fijí records discussed by Waterman (1990), this conceptualisation of an extended and homogeneous public imagined a market coterminous with a new cultural nationalist category of the population, ‘the Yoruba’. Or, to put it the other way round, fostering a pan-Yoruba constituency, as Yoruba language print culture, church organisation and school system all helped to do, defined an expanded market for cultural products. The popular theatre, like the fijí records, spoke in ‘standard’ Yoruba to a public imagined as homogeneously accessible. The theatre thus actively sought to construct its audiences as a new kind of public, different from the personal audiences, meeting only as part of a communal celebration, convened by the egungun ojè troupes.

There are two points to be made here: first, that though the disciplines of time and space associated with church and school were introduced with a regulatory intent, just as in the Egyptian situation described by Mitchell, they were taken up by aspiring lower-class and petty-bourgeois western Nigerians with a view to self-betterment. They became, not second nature, but the token of an unrealised ideal, of order, regularity and high status. So this use of theatre space was not just a result of culture contact or ‘mimicry’; it was a project of self-realisation, deliberately adopted and adhered to through thick and thin—but only to the extent that suited the practitioners. And, second, when this use of time and space was adopted, it was immediately perforated and bent. The public, though addressed as anonymous and undifferentiated, did not really function like that, for the actors all said they liked the profession because it enabled them to become ‘publicly known to many people’, ‘people who will give us any kind of help’, in a bank queue, a hospital emergency room or any other situation where personal contacts may make all the difference. In other words, the
apparently homogeneous audience was seen as a sea of potential ‘helpers’—clients, patrons—who could be activated at any moment as if they were personal friends. And the spectacle, though staged as if allusionistic and realist in mode (the proscenium arch framing a room with the fourth wall removed, revealing a slice of domestic life), was not realist so much as exhortatory and spectacular. Actors improvised verbal stunts, expanded their parts, and created points of intense theatrical salience for themselves, embodying rather than depicting the potential for social power.

The concept of ‘the public’, then, as a new form of coming-together characteristic of the colonial era, is a powerful one, but one which must be carefully qualified and which can be properly understood only if the specific forms of address, use of space, modes of staging, and expectations and interactions of performers and spectators, are empirically established in all their surprising and subtle detail.

The articles in this special issue all deal with new urban popular cultures and their relation to new kinds of expanded publics, active in different ways and taking up different relations to the performance or text. The Ghanaian concert party, dating from the beginning of the century, was a new kind of entertainment, undertaken for commercial gain and disengaged from chiefship, matrilineal or religious associations (Cole). Popular print fiction also became widely available in the Gold Coast even before the Second World War, convening readerships of a distinctive sort (Newell). Around the same period, Indian films became one of the most popular forms of entertainment in northern Nigerian cities (Larkin). Old forms of oral performance in the northern Transvaal were recast by urban migrants to negotiate emerging class and cultural identities (James). Islamic preaching—itself a relatively new form of ‘entertainment’ in northern Ivory Coast—reached, and constituted, new kinds of audience with the arrival of diffusion by cassette recordings and television, while the arrival of printed Arabic texts signalled a radically changed relationship between ‘reader’ and ‘writer’ (Launay). Even more recently, video dramas in western Nigeria envisage ‘audience’ as a horizon of consumption, where what is consumed is the spectacle of others’ more conspicuous consumption (Lawuyi).

The nature of the audiences and publics thus convened cannot be predicted simply from the nature of the medium. How a text or performance addresses a public, and how people out there take up that address, selectively and for their own purposes, are questions addressed, in their local and historical specificity, by these articles. The case studies advance a number of propositions which have implications for the future study of cultural production and reception in Africa. I will indicate some of these in a brief and preliminary way.

PERFORMANCES CONSTITUTE AUDIENCES, AND VICE VERSA

Performances do not just play to ready-made congregations of spectators which are out there awaiting address; they convene those congregations and by their mode of address assign them a certain position from which to
receive the address. Thus performances, in the act of addressing audiences, constitute those audiences as a particular form of collectivity.

Every genre has conventions which assign a position from which it expects to be received.

Each epoch, each literary trend and literary-artistic style, each literary genre within an epoch or trend, is typified by its own special concepts of the addressee of the literary work, a special sense and understanding of its reader, listener, public or people. (Bakhtin, 1986: 98).

This particular ‘sense and understanding of its reader, listener, public or people’ is detectable within the utterance itself, for it is one of the dimensions of utterance, an aspect of its form. Bakhtin speaks of ‘... addressivity, the quality of turning to someone’ as ‘a constitutive feature of the utterance; without it the utterance does not and cannot exist. The various typical forms this addressivity assumes and the various concepts of the addressee are constitutive, definitive features of various speech genres’ (1986: 99).

Catherine Cole’s article shows how the performance’s ‘address’ can assign a new position from which to understand the world and one’s place in it, in the particular historical situation of post-war Ghana. Ghanaian concert party, like all the other genres discussed here, was an institutionally new form. Concert party pioneers early detected the potential for convening a new kind of audience, one which would pay to come and watch their ‘concerts’, professionally staged to offer entertainment to urban populations. Indeed—as with Yorùbá popular theatre (see Jeyifo, 1984)—it was the projected audience’s immediate enthusiastic response to their summons which fuelled the genre’s take-off. The history of the genre can be read as the history of an expanding address: over forty years the concerts broadened the range of those they spoke to by travelling up and down the country, carrying ‘news’ of fashion and novelty as they went, and by increasingly adopting a linguistic mode (polyglottism dominated by Akan instead of English) and musical mode (highlife rather than Western dance music) which were comprehensible or familiar to large numbers of people. In addressing this expanded public, Ghanaian concert party implicitly assigned to it a certain relationship to the spectacle. It did this, first, through language: listeners were interpellated not just as Akan-speakers but as citizens of a polyglot nation able to operate mixed codes, while still remaining capable of decoding the condensed allusions of Akan proverbial discourse. It did it through its range of allusions, addressing the audience as people who shared a knowledge of very local concerns but who also recognised references to Ghana, other African countries and other parts of the world. It did it by offering both involvement in, and distance from, the dramatic action: by presenting familiar domestic conflicts on the proscenium stage, framed as in a picture, it offered distance, but when characters spoke to the audience as ‘brothers and sisters’ and asked for advice or even money to tide them over a financial crisis, it offered them a concrete, though fictitious, involvement. And it did it through its form. Cole argues that the disjunctive and eclectic mode of concert party, with its sudden switches, its contradictions and roller-
coaster effects, offered the audience a position from which to conduct the operations constitutive of ‘modernity’ in Ghana: for ‘modernity’ meant the power to select from and combine the conflicting and contradictory elements of social experience, rather than to endorse one homogeneous state at the expense of another (for example, ‘Westernisation’ at the expense of ‘tradition’). Concert party might be said to offer a peculiarly free and enjoyable scope to conduct these operations of selection and combination, for its noncommittal, loose-jointed presentations allowed you simultaneously to mock and admire the same things, to discard while endorsing them, to try out allegiances in a disloyal way. The ‘address’ of the concert party, then, is implied not only in what the actors or characters actually say to the spectators, but in its medium and its form.

Equally important, however, is the fact that audiences themselves, by choosing to participate, constitute themselves as members of a collectivity. They may thus be active participants in the emergence of new alignments. Deborah James’s article describes a complex situation where a performance genre which may be called ‘neo-traditional’ is used as a point of orientation and as an emblem of solidarity for a range of overlapping, shifting and emerging class and cultural identities. She shows how people in the northern Transvaal in South Africa define themselves within a force-field of identities whose polarities are the oppositions between badiishaba (people of the ‘nation’ or traditional belief) and majekane (‘Christians’), between ‘Sotho’-oriented and ‘white’-oriented: cultural distinctions which formed an unstable amalgam with class distinctions based on people’s position in the labour force, producing shifting categorisations, partly given and partly chosen. Kiba performances—adaptations of an old Sotho oral genre—were a central means of signalling alignment with the badiishaba. But in different contexts this alignment meant different things. The rural-based wives of male migrant workers were, collectively, seen as more ‘Sotho’ than their husbands; some among them adhered more to ‘Sotho’ ways than others; when they participated in kiba performance such differences were suspended and their sense of ‘Sothoness’ deepened. Women migrant workers, coming from a background where most of their performance culture was of the ‘Christian’ type, took up kiba on arrival in the city; in this situation it was an affirmation of their identity as migrant workers, shared also with their male counterparts, from whom they learnt kiba. And kiba also became the focus of larger coalitions: patronised first by the regional elites of the Lebowa ‘homeland’, later by the national elite of the ANC leadership, who would in most contexts be thought of as majekane, and, by extension, ‘all speakers of northern Sotho—even all South Africans’. With the entry of kiba on to the world music scene, James hints, kiba might become the tethering post for even more expanded cultural allegiances. The point, then, is that performances like kiba are a site where both performers and audiences, by the act of participation, may claim to belong to—or become aware of belonging to—a collectivity. It is a collectivity which is variably construed, emergent and continually undergoing redefinition and expansion, but which is nonetheless a powerful active organising principle in people’s experience. James invites us to consider not so much how kiba address audiences as how audiences
constitute themselves around *kiba* and thus affirm the things they have in common.

Launay’s article takes us on a gentle tour of a whole range of new forms of address and new patterns of ‘uptake’ which became established in the northern Côte d’Ivoire in the last few decades, and particularly as they happened in the town of Korhogo and a neighbouring village between 1973 and 1984. During this time, television and cassette recorders substantially replaced radio and film as the most popular media. The ways the various media were adopted by different segments of the population provide ample illustration of the point that ‘media effects’ on ‘media audiences’ cannot be predicted from the nature of the technology alone: much depends on people’s existing interests, modes of interaction and entertainment, and their relations to the state—including relations determined by physical and social distance, religious affiliation and linguistic knowledge. Launay’s examples show that in some cases the sheer fact of being addressed by the national centre—as, for instance, by the Dyula-language news broadcast, for fifteen minutes a few times a week—may be more important than the content of the message; while in other cases listeners, by ‘eavesdropping’ on the broadcasts of neighbouring nation states, may in effect be participating in the constitution of a regional–linguistic–religious constituency not recognised by any official treaty or boundary. Clearly, the fact of being part of an audience is very significant in both these cases, but not necessarily because the listeners are ‘decoding’ the ‘message’ which has been ‘encoded’ by the broadcaster.

So what do we make of the case of performances avidly received and interpreted by people to whom they cannot conceivably have been addressed? This, after all, has long been a dimension of popular culture consumption, not only in Africa; and, with the globalisation of media forms, it is probably becoming more prevalent everywhere. An example is the Indian films which, as Brian Larkin points out, have been a major component of Hausa popular culture for forty years but which are in a language the Hausa cannot understand. Larkin suggests that their appeal lies precisely in their otherness—an otherness which is nonetheless perceived as ‘just like’ Hausa life and culture, providing a kind of imaginative third space, representing neither ‘the West’ nor local realities, an intra-Third World fantasy laboratory where ‘modernity’ and its manifestations in changing gender roles, waning parental authority, political corruption and other burning contemporary issues can be given fictional resolutions which are relevant without getting too near the bone. Here the concept of the specific ‘address’ of the film is less helpful than the concept of the audience’s work of appropriation and self-positioning to receive it: a point to which I return.

**AUDIENCES CONSTITUTE ‘MEANING’**

The best reason for studying audiences is that they have a hand in the constitution of the ‘meaning’ of a performance, text or utterance. Cultural historians or anthropologists who study texts and performances in order better to understand ‘what people think’ need to look not only at the utterance but also at the interpretation of that utterance. Meaning, according to Voloshinov, belongs neither to the speaker nor to the hearer: rather, it
inhabits the zone between them. It 'is like an electric spark that occurs only when two different terminals are hooked together' (Vološinov, 1929: 103). Significant works in recent British cultural studies have drawn attention to the consumer's activity in using media products to reflect upon their own concerns (Gray, 1992; Willis, 1990). Similar approaches are only just beginning to be taken up in African studies (see, for example, Fuglesang, 1994; Esan, 1994). What has not yet been sufficiently explored is the possibility that specific African audiences have distinctive, conventional modes and styles of making meaning, just as performers/speakers do. We need to ask how audiences do their work of interpretation.

Stephanie Newell's article explores Ghanaian popular fiction readerships with this question in mind. She shows that genres that might at first sight be presumed to be 'escapist' are not in fact taken up by Ghanaian readers in that way. Popular romance narratives in Ghana are rather read as 'true': true not in the sense of being mimetic representations of reality, but rather in the sense of being applicable to reality. Readers grasp essential features of characters and situations, and use them to interpret their own social experience. Both authors and readers acknowledge the active role of the reader: the story is provided to help the readers 'make up their own minds' about things. The act of application is a creative one, and not all readers will do it alike: "Making up the mind" is thus a moment of reading participation which parallels authorial activity.

Popular fiction characters and plots, then, function like proverbs, whose meaning is never complete until they are applied to a concrete situation. In the fictional mode of Ghanaian popular pamphlets, the stereotype—so generally despised by critics—is actually a way of making models that can be applied to reader's own specific circumstances, because stereotypes, like proverbs, are abstracted from the mesh of specificity and given peg-like properties. The function of stereotypes, clichés and formulas in African popular culture generally could fruitfully be treated as the point at which individual experience and shared concerns intersect. This approach is also implied in Catherine Cole's discussion of the way in which the stock characters of domestic strife in concert party are transposed, in characteristic sudden flips and switches, into representatives of national and pan-African concern. Stereotypes are also the point at which models of behaviour (representation) become models for behaviour (warnings, advice), making narrative available for practical application to the reader's own experience.

The Ghanaian readers discussed by Newell do not function as a neutral and homogeneous 'public'. Despite the potential impersonal and generalising mode of print fiction, readers divide into sharply demarcated constituencies. Newell shows that different categories of people extract different models from texts and performances: notably, the audience as reading constituency is divided along gender lines—readers 'taking sides with the character type whose social position most closely resembles their own'. The 'youngman' aligns himself with his fictional counterpart and reads the fiction as a warning to young men to beware of exploitative women; a woman reader would be put in the position of endorsing the behaviour of the 'good' female character and rejecting that of the 'bad' one. Thus the 'public', on closer inspection, breaks up into distinct reading
constituencies, along well marked social cleavages, and the act of interpreting is also the act of self-recognition as occupant of a defined social category.

PRODUCTION AS RECEPTION

Newell furthermore suggests that women may perform their operations of ‘reception’ not just by applying models from male-authored texts selectively to their own situations, but also by producing further texts: so that their own stories may be seen as ‘readings’ of male-authored texts which are too biased to be consumed unmediated but which women writers can convert to usable material by their own creative act. Women writers may thus ‘read’ male-authored plots by rewriting them with a different inflection, as Newell’s discussion of Awura-Ekuwa Badoe’s novel *Beloved Twin* strikingly demonstrates.

Larkin’s article shows this process—of textual production as a form of ‘reading’ or reception—in a very interesting and highly developed form. It is clear from his discussion that, though Indian films have been enormously popular in Hausaland for several decades, they have been absorbed without generating extensive local commentary and debate. Apart from a few general comments to the effect that Indian culture was ‘just like’ Hausa culture, that Indian films may arouse false expectations of romantic partners, and that Indian films have become more violent in recent years, the interpretation of Indian films offered in the article comes from Larkin’s own observations and is speculative, if persuasive. Almost all the other responses to ‘Indian films’ that Larkin alludes to actually took the form of comments on a new genre of Hausa-language romantic fiction, the locally produced *soyayya* books. The detailed, impassioned, articulate commentary and debate which he cites—letters to authors, articles in newspapers, discussions in the street—are about *soyayya* books. One Hausa commentator put the reason for this very clearly: ‘in those films they don’t usually understand what they are about. But now you [i.e. a *soyayya* author] are telling us in our own language.’ The *soyayya* books, in Larkin’s view, explore the themes made popular and familiar by Indian film; it seems that their popularity derives in part from the fact that they do so in a language and a discursive medium that renders these themes more available for discussion and criticism. *Soyayya* books, then, can be seen as a mode of reception, a way of capturing the implications of Indian films for local digestion. In turn, the booklets give rise to further written documents in Hausa and to video dramas.

Here, then, ‘production’ and ‘reception’ appear as moments in a cycle rather than two poles at opposite ends of a process. What is production is also reception; the act of reception is an act of production, quite literally rather than in the aesthetic and disembodied sense implied by Collingwood when he said that the person who contemplates a work of art repeats the artist’s imaginative act, reconstituting the idea for himself; without which imaginative work, he has not experienced the work of art (Collingwood, 1938). One could suggest that in a sense all popular culture in Africa—so striking for its capacity to generate ubiquitous, continuous, small-scale *production* (making consumer-oriented models of mass culture look
peculiarly inappropriate)—is also a form of reception, for it is the means by which ideas are domesticated and reconsumed.

CONSUMPTION AND RE-CONSUMPTION

With the arrival of cassette recorders and video cameras the distinction between the categories ‘locally produced’ and ‘imported’ cultural forms, already much contested, becomes even more dubious. These recording technologies are relatively cheap, easy to operate by a single entrepreneur, and can be profitably operated on a small scale; copies can be made on demand, and virtually any local performance or event can be recorded at will. Imported, commercial media entertainment and locally produced oral performance are found on sale side-by-side in the same audio and video tape shops. The ease with which both local and imported genres can be recorded off-air, or dubbed and pirated for private use or for resale, by-passing both state control and business monopolies, produces a zone where ‘local’ and ‘imported’ become technically interchangeable. Launay’s article suggests that they may be functionally interchangeable too: in Korhogo consumers use home-made cassette tapes of locally performed traditional music or Islamic sermons in just the same contexts and ways as they use commercial recordings of ‘out-of-town’ preachers or imported popular music.

One of the raging fashions in western Nigeria is for video-recording important events such as weddings and funerals where the ‘celebrants’ are on display. The same young men who run video rental shops, stocking everything from Rambo to Ayinde Barrister’s Fuji Extravaganza, function as video artists who produce a complete record of a wealthy patron’s celebration, for copying and distribution to his favoured relatives, friends and clients. Though these private recordings are not put on sale alongside the drama, music and sport videos stocked in shops, they share the same double relationship to consumption. Video tapes (like audio tapes and records) are primarily objects of consumption, goods which are purchased, rented or commissioned, owned and consumed. But the videos made as records of big men’s celebrations are like Fuji Extravaganza and innumerable Yorùbá video dramas in that they are also spectacles of consumption. That is, consumption itself is a spectacle; and in Lawuyi’s stirring article consumption is the act of self-production. By consuming women, food, music and all the other good things of life, big men—whether fictional (as in Yorùbá video dramas), real (as in the record of a wedding) or an amalgam of the two (like Ayinde Barrister)—create themselves, concretising the potential which activates everyone in fluid trading cultures like that of Ogbomoso. As objects of consumption, videos are luxuries which the youth browbeat or blackmail their struggling parents into renting for their recreation. In consuming video dramas, the youth also witness their own activity—of conspicuous consumption—writ large. Thus in the act of ‘reception’ they are mimicking the process of big men’s self-creation, making it unsurprising that their self-appointed scenarios of revolt and social transformation die stillborn. In this world, consumption and production become one.
These articles, then, from different perspectives, help to develop an inquiry into modern African audiences which is long overdue.

NOTES

1 The Lancastrian or ‘monitorial’ system, pioneered by Joseph Lancaster only a decade earlier than the beginning of the ‘simultaneous’ system, involved an extremely rigorous regimentation of pupils and meticulous control of their movements. They sat in graded rows on long benches, facing forward—but not so that they could all see the master, rather so that they could all be kept under surveillance. Older pupils, or ‘monitors’, were assigned to each bench and would lead them out to prescribed positions at the side wall, where graded instructional boards were set up and the semicircle around which the group of eight to ten pupils would stand was marked on the floor. This system, according to Mitchell (1988), was the one that was imported into Egypt in the 1840s. Its disciplinary and surveillance functions, vividly evoked by Mitchell, were extremely striking. But it was essentially a formalisation of the old method of teaching, prevalent in grammar schools since the sixteenth century: pupils learnt individually or in small groups and were never addressed as a collectivity. It did not enjoy much success in English schools and was soon eclipsed by the ‘simultaneous method’.

2 The practice of segregated and hierarchical church space persisted for a long time because pew rents were an important part of church income. The seventeenth and eighteenth-century use of pews has been described by one authority on church architecture like this: ‘Medieval churches from the time of the Restoration onwards were disfigured by the erection of huge family pews, frequently cut from medieval chancel screens, often curtained enclosures with sofas, armchairs, and fireplaces (the tedium of a long service being sometimes relieved by the entrance of a livered servant with sherry)’ (Drummond, 1934: 38).

3 For a subtle exploration of these themes in eighteenth-century America see Warner (1990, 1992).

4 School seating arrangements appear to have been the focus of a particularly strong lust for ‘order’. Anna and David Hinderer, missionaries in Ibadan in the 1850s, adopted notably informal, personal methods of instruction and interaction with their first converts, but as soon as they had built a proper church, classes were conducted within it and relations between instructor and instructed became those of a speaker addressing orderly front-facing rows—on benches nailed to the ground (Hone, 1877: 295–6). The benches not only prescribed an orderly division of space, they made this division immovable. In later colonial schools it seems that, even when chairs were not available for the classroom, substitutes would be found to mark out the space: Victor Murray, surveying village schools all over the British colonies in Africa in 1926–27, described as standard the ‘mud building . . . perhaps 30 feet by 16 . . . It has an earth floor, and at one end there is an earth platform 9 inches high, on which there is a table. Behind the table stands . . . the teacher. He has a blackboard hanging on the wall behind him. . . . The seats are branches of trees stuck in the floor . . . ’ (1929: 79). And this rigid demarcation of place persisted even when it was beginning to look archaic in Britain. Kit Elliott, who took up a teaching post in a secondary school in Jos in 1960, was horrified by the classroom, which ‘looks like a re-enactment of educational history. The dungeon-like classrooms, the oppressive masonry walls, the straight rows of primitive furniture—their precise position marked on the floor by a principal with a mania for straight lines, the blackboard screwed to the wall, the teacher in front of it, barricaded behind his massive table, chalk in hand and in full pedagogic spate, the boys with their heads down, writing all he says . . .’ (1970: 30).

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**ABSTRACT**

There have been audiences, presumably, as long as there has been performance. The perception that what creates an audience is the listeners’ intentional orientation
towards the speaker is the starting point of a far-reaching development in performance and media studies which focuses on the activity and creativity of the audience. If the audience has an active role in constituting the performance, cultural historians seeking to uncover histories of consciousness in African popular genres cannot afford to ignore it. But audiences are not all the same. Just as much as performances, they are a historical product. There are different ways of convening and of experiencing reception, whether collectively or in dispersal, which are deeply connected with the nature of the social life of the age and place. How people come together; how they relate to each other and to the spectacle or utterance they are attending to; what they consider themselves to be part of in doing so; how the spectacle/utterance addresses them—all these are historically and culturally specific and need to be empirically investigated. Specific African audiences have distinctive, conventional modes and styles of making meaning, just as performers/speakers have. We need to ask how audiences do their work of interpretation.

RÉSUMÉ

Il est vraisemblable qu’il y ait des spectateurs à condition qu’il y ait des spectacles. La perception que c’est l’orientation de l’auditoire vers l’orateur qui crée les spectateurs est le point de départ pour un développement plus approfondi dans les études des média et de spectacles qui met l’accent sur l’activité et la créativité du public. Si le public a un rôle actif dans la création du spectacle, les historiens culturels qui cherchent à découvrir les histoires de conscience dans les genres populaires africain ne peuvent pas se permettre de l’ignorer. Mais les publics ne sont pas tous les mêmes. Ils sont un produit historique tout autant que le sont les spectacles. Il y a des manières différentes d’interpréter et de faire l’expérience du spectacle, soit collectivement ou en dispersion, qui sont profondément liées à la nature de la vie sociale, l’âge, et l’endroit. La façon dont les gens se retrouvent ensemble; la façon dont ils établissent un rapport entre eux et avec le spectacle ou le discours auquel ils assistent; de quoi ils se considèrent eux-mêmes faire partie en établissant ce rapport; la façon dont le spectacle/discours leur est adressé—tout ceci est spécifiquement culturel et nécessaire des recherches empiriques. Certain publics africains particuliers ont des manières et des styles conventionnels de trouver du sens, tout autant que les artistes/orateurs. On doit se demander comment les publics font leur travail d’interprétation.