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Cinema Narration as Oral Performance: DJ Afro and East African Media Practices

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ABSTRACT

This article examines cinema narration in Kenya, a practice that involves artists known as DJs working with audiences in specific socio-cultural contexts. This study uses ethnographic methods to analyse the work of one such practitioner, DJ Afro, and the reflections on his performance by two sets of audiences in Eldoret and Narok respectively. For this purpose, three Hindi films in DJ Afro's repertoire have been selected: *Magadheera* (2009, directed by S. S. Rajamouli), *Bullet Raja* (2013, directed by Tigmanshu Dhulia) and *Shadow* (2013, directed by Meher Ramesh). The choice is influenced by DJ Afro's audiences' responses to his narration and to the genre of the films. The analysis of DJ Afro's oral texts is done using relevant theories of oral performance and popular culture. The article makes two linked arguments. First, in Kenya, cinema narration has evolved into one of the genres of popular culture. Second, this performance may have been initially understood as translation of meaning for local audiences, but it also works as an oral narrative performance involving local performers and their audiences, and in this process the meanings produced are determined in relation to local texts and contexts.

ABSTRACT IN IKISIRI

Makala ya utafiti huu yanachunguza usimulizi wa filamu inchini Kenya, kama mazoezi ambayo yanahusisha wasanii na hadhira katika miktadha mahususi ya kitamaduni na kijamii. Utafiti unatumia mbinu za kiteknolojia kuchanganua kazi ya msanii mmoja ambaye ni Dj Afro na tafakari ya utendaji wake kwa seti mbili za hadhira katika mji wa Eldoret na Narok mtawalia. Kwa madhumuni haya, filamu tatu za kihindi katika hifadhi ya Dj Afro zilichanganuliwa: *Magadheera* (Rajamouli 2009) *Bullet Raja* (Dhulia 2013) na *Shadow* (Ramesh 2013) chaguo hili liliathiriwa na majibu ya hadhira ya Dj Afro kwa masimulizi yake na aina ya filamu. Uchunguzi wa matini ya simulizi ya Dj Afro hufanywa kwa kutumia nadharia husika za utendakazi simulizi na utamaduni maarufu. Makala haya hutoa hoja mbili zilizounganishwa, kwanza, kwamba nchini Kenya, usimulizi wa sinema umekita mizizi na

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kuwa aina ya tamaduni maarufu. Pili, kwamba ingawa usimulizi wa sinema ulieleweka kama tafsiri ya maana kwa hadhira ya mahali, lakini pia hufanya kazi kama utunzi wa simulizi unahusisha wasanii na hadhira wa mahali hapo na kwamba katika mchakato huu maana zimetolewa hubainishwa kuhusiana na matini na miktadha ya pale.

Introduction

This article is about cinema narration, a performance practice that has been part of the East African cinema reception experience of foreign-language films by local audiences.[1] In simple terms, some members of the cinema audience, who refer to themselves as DJs in Kenya and Tanzania and as veejays in Uganda, position themselves between the film narrative and their fellow audiences in what has been popularly defined as cinema translation. In this article I have understood cinema narration as an art form that is hinged on local trends of popular culture, but that could also be understood as oral narrative performance. As part of popular culture, cinema narration is one of the common-place art forms that provide easy entertainment and are easily accessible to and enjoyable by the majority of ordinary people. Critical attention that has been given to this art form has tended to emphasise the position(ing) of the cinema narration between foreign films and local audiences, and so far DJ Afro, whose real name is James Muigai, is the only artist whose work has received serious scholarly attention. Nevertheless, he is not the first cinema narration artist in Kenya but is arguably the one who defined the genre and influenced others to join in the practice. He has also been described as the man who "has made a name for himself among film lovers, especially those from poor backgrounds", and that "whether a movie is in English, Chinese or Indian, he will break it down and humorously voice it over in Sheng, or sometimes in Kikuyu" (Wanja 2016, 21).

This study sets out on the premise that DJ Afro's performance is not just a good example of cinema narration, but that he is an oral narrative performer who positions himself in the immediate context of cinema narration but draws upon individual imagination and other resources from the oral tradition to come up with works of art that are much more than cinema translation. I argue that, in formal terms, this performance is a blend of elements from the oral tradition, popular culture and the everyday social experience of life. Having elevated DJ Afro's cinema narration to the level of oral performance, I undertake a formal analysis of three of his recorded performances; all three are Indian films that are available in Kenya with English subtitles. Locally, these are regarded as foreign-language films, and, in this light, ambivalently associated with the West. In the final analysis, I focus less on what one could term formal meanings of the selected texts and more on what the collaboration between DJ Afro and his audience brings into the process of "translation". In this way, DJ Afro's performances are read beyond translation. Harold Scheub (in another context) has explored the African oral performer's craft as "the media between the story and its target audience", in which the performing artist is responsible for the construction of images, "the building blocks of true stories", and he further observes that "images are repositories of emotions – their function is to move the story and to move the audience" (2002, 25). In this light, one could read the

cinema narrators as mediators and/or animators of an experience. This is evident from the fact that they do not necessarily translate film narratives word for word but rather seek to help the audience to enjoy the reception experience; they are "cinematic go-betweens who speak along with, or alongside of, foreign films and thus act as mediators between film and audience" (Krings 2012, 3). This observation echoes Harold Scheub's argument that every oral narrative performance "is constructed around a poetic interior" and considers this as "the engine of the story". He argues that it is the oral narrator who is in charge of the poetic force that animates and motivates … that which provides the rhythmical flow of the story, that which elicits, controls, and thereby shapes the emotions of the audience into metaphor – the poetic centre of the story (Scheub 2002, 23).

While this study is mainly about a formal engagement with the oral texts, it is preceded and informed by an ethnographic experience with audiences in Kenya, specifically in selected low-income neighbourhoods of Nairobi, Eldoret, Narok, Nakuru and Naivasha, for seven months between November 2021 and May 2022. From this experience it was confirmed that there were at least 40 known practising cinema narrators in Kenya, most of whom were popular only in their local neighbourhoods. However, DJ Afro is the most popular of them and so pivotal is his role in the evolution of cinema narration as part of local popular culture that his name has become synonymous with the genre. The three films sampled for analysis in this study were selected from a larger corpus collected in the ethnographic study. Audiences were able to recall, recite and talk about sections of DJ Afro's performance of these films. I argue that these performances have transformed into locally produced oral texts fairly independent from the specific films and at the same time invoke other texts from oral tradition, popular culture and everyday life.

From Video Hall Performance to a Genre of Popular Art

DJ Afro started performing live in video halls in Bahati, on the outskirts of Nakuru, in 2006. At this point, his performance was part of the live reception experience. He later moved his live performances to Kiserian and Rongai, which are small towns in Kajiado County, which is the immediate neighbour of Nairobi County to the south; he later returned to Nakuru. Because he was now much more experienced, he was more successful in live performance and later shifted to studio recording of his performances to cater to the needs of his widening fan base. This enabled him to distribute his performances in the form of DVDs and VCDs across the country and to become very popular (Kuenzler 2019, 16–17). It is significant that his performance style has been adopted by other cinema narrators and some of his choice vocabulary and imagery has even become part of the language of cinema narration in Kenya. Audiences in turn used him as the yardstick to evaluate other cinema narrators, and some of his stock phrases are used in everyday life, outside the context of cinema narration. They have become part of the metaphors of ordinary conversation.

One of DJ Afro's basic oral strategies is the oral formulaic method that manifests in certain repeated words and even in longer sequences that serve as mnemonic devices used to enable composition in performance. Repeated formulas fill in what would have been awkward moments of silence as the narrator imaginatively composes the next set of lines (Lord 1965, 4–5). But in an age when studio recording has superseded the live oral performance, the oral formulaic method persists. Formulas and themes have ossified in the structure of cinema narration and have effectively developed into a

performance genre whose texture is entirely based on utterance, echoing Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the primary genres of everyday life constituted in unmediated conditions and thus defined by continuous adjustment and adaptation of actual moments of social interaction between speakers and their audiences in specific contexts and around specific themes (1986, 82).

Over time, trends from the wider stream of popular culture have also been woven into this genre of cinema narration in a way that has developed a unique oral poetics. This could be understood as part of research on the intertextual relations of popular cultural forms in Kenya and particularly echoes Joyce Nyairo's remark that "contemporary postcolonial texts inform one another, opening up a dialogue between texts and also between local events, experiences and knowledges" (2004, ii). This argument ties in with the observation that "the traditional African narrative is woven out of everyday events and that all the events become images, and so acquire paradigmatic value and point beyond the moment" (Jahn 1961, 211). In the case of cinema narration, the narrator is situated between an audiovisual medium and the everyday experience of life that pans out in specific social and cultural contexts. This blending of art with everyday life should be understood in the light of the concept of African popular art, which has been described as having "sheer undeniable assertive presence as social facts" (Barber 1987, 1). The cinema narrator seeks to convert cinematography and its audiovisual imagery to oral narrative that not only uses imagery from the local context but also makes intertextual reference to a wide gamut of social experience, ranging from the everyday rhythm of life to other genres of local popular culture such as football commentary and local television drama. When cinema narration is perceived in this sense, it could be understood in the light of micro approaches to the genre, which "tend to concentrate on local, non-western oral genres and work from concrete cases outwards" (Barber 2007, 41). Barber's view that "such genres tend to be situational" ties in with the cinema narrator's art as it exists in and for the situation of audience reception. In this light, the role of the audience is significant not only in the live performance sessions but also in the recorded versions. The cinema narrator works for and with the audience in mind and this is reflected in the oral performance text.

In my discussion with audiences, conducted in a mix of Kiswahili and Sheng, my interlocutors pointed out what they regarded as DJ Afro's strengths and weaknesses and how he has gradually used both positive reinforcement and negative feedback to build a performance style that is arguably the standard for the genre of cinema narration in Kenya. It was observed that, in the beginning, DJ Afro tried to be "very direct and faithful to the script, describing everything as he saw it", and that he tended to "over-dramatise love scenes, using vulgar language and leaving nothing for the imagination". This has to be understood in the context of the live performance, which is characteristically carnivalesque and thrives on the transient poetic licence in the video halls. An interlocutor observed that "it is these vulgar expressions and overarching ludic element in the performance that is enjoyable". While this matter divided opinion, and a number of interlocutors were critical of DJ Afro's use of vulgar imagery, such as his favourite word "*makagari*" (male genitalia), it was agreed unanimously that the DJ Afro version of a film "is slow but sure", and that "he always inserts a moral lesson for his audience". In what worked as a summary of their expectations as audiences of cinema narration, an interlocutor observed: "We go to watch these movies looking for different things. There will be that person that looks out for the DJ's performance and the fun, another person

will be focused on the story of the film and another person on the moral lessons." While it is obviously difficult to make these distinctions in the performance, one gets the impression that, in this case, his audience have a theory of sorts that guides their reception experience. It is also important that the two audience communities considered DJ Afro's performance as having gradually improved to the point that, to an extent, he combined the three elements into one holistic performance. In this light, an analysis of a sample of his work could be considered as an engagement with cinema narration in Kenya, at least from the point of view of the audience.

Cinema Narration as Localisation

One of the dominant discourses on cinema narration has been hinged on the argument that cinema narration is the localisation and creative reconstruction of media from one form to another. It has been described as "the use of innovative remediation strategies by local consumers in a bid to temper the foreignness of transnational media" and as involving "the remixing of imported films for the local market that are technologically reconfigured and refracted to fit in the prism of local cultural sensibilities" (Ogone 2020). This perspective echoes the observation that cinema narration is "a reconfiguration of video as a medium operating within a specific local context" and that it "domesticates a comparably new and foreign (audio) visual medium by amalgamating it with a much older local audio medium: the spoken word as used in a number of established speech genres, with storytelling at the forefront" (Krings 2012). This descriptive approach is useful in locating cinema narration in the context of media ethnography and is what informs earlier scholarship on social experimentation and adaptation of electronic media in studies such as those by Ambler (2002), Larkin (2002), Spitulnik (1993) and Bourgault (1995). The studies have explored what could be termed the socio-cultural life of mass media in African societies, and this study in particular finds useful their understanding of (electronic) media as "experiences, processes and practices" (Spitulnik 1993, 293).

In this light, one could see cinema narration as an inevitable outcome of the infiltration of the electronic media of cinema into the everyday life of audiences, especially in low-income neighbourhoods. The current study foregrounds the human agency involved in the process, defining the individuals involved as oral artists. This perspective is not entirely new but rather an extension of existing debates on media-ethnography scholarship on cinema narration. For instance, cinema narration has been described as "a remixing that does not fragment and reassemble the source texts, but rather engages in a purposeful intrusion into and reworking of the text with a view to imposing some additional content" (Ogone 2020, 3). In this study, the mediation and remixing processes are seen as part of the aesthetics of oral poetics. It is perhaps in this vein that we could think about the status of film narrators in the context of copyright law. Basically, the artists record and distribute their works "through the vibrant local infrastructure of electronic piracy" (Ogone 2020, 942–943). But the status of cinema narration as piracy has been a contentious matter and the subject of academic discourse. Lindiwe Dovey (2015, 99) describes it as "authorized piracy because of the interpretive creativity – rather than mere technological copying – that characterizes it". Krings (2012, 19) calls it "a hermeneutic practice", where the focus should be on the artistic agency displayed and not on possible copyright infringements of the source material. In Kenya, the

Intellectual Property Office has not taken any legal action against the practice of cinema narration. The Kenya Film Commission and Copyright Board, which one would have expected to voice a stance on cinema narration as piracy, has remained silent. Cinema narration would seem to have been accepted as part of legal entertainment and thus video-show entrepreneurs obtain annual licences from the county governments to operate an entertainment business. This has turned out to be a blanket licensing that allows them to show both original and narrated films.

Cinema Narration as Translation

Cinema narration has also been understood as translation. In this sense, it is seen as a linguistic transaction that takes place to make up for the gap between the foreign language and socio-cultural framing of the film and the audience communities that do not understand the language and socio-cultural milieu. Studies have been done from this perspective (Maageria 2018; Kimani and Mugubi 2014). These studies examine language and style in cinema narration with the aim of assessing their effectiveness in communicating the meaning packaged in the film. In Kenya and Tanzania, the language of commentary is Kiswahili, with a few additions from local languages such as Kikuyu, Maasai and Kamba in the Kenyan case. In Uganda, Luganda has been the main language used. But in one sense, the translation approach not only makes light of the art involved in the cinema narration process but arguably redirects focus from the performance to the authenticity of the translation. Cinema narration is an improvement on and enhancement of the film narrative rather than a faithful translation. This has been observed by DJ Lufufu, one of the Tanzanian pioneer cinema narrators, who suggested that cinema narration is "like turning rice into pilau" (Krings 2012, 10). This appeals to the elements of art and entertainment processed through the oral medium. The meaning-oriented translation approach leads to the evaluation of the artist on the basis of how "truthful" he remains to the film text he translates and not what creative spark he adds to the translation in performance, as is the case in Damaris Wanjiru Njeri's study of DJ Afro's performance, where her study is limited to "the transfer of purpose intended by the originator of the movie to the target audience" (2018, v). The current study takes attention away from the "transferred meaning", shifting it to the oral text that is formed in the fluid process of cinema narration as well as the other related texts and contexts; this echoes Joyce Nyairo's approach (in a different context) of reading the (oral) popular text in the context of "the network of referents and associations with texts situated both within and outside the recorded performance" (2004, ii). This is an approach that is anchored in the assumption that specific oral texts can be entextualised out of the fluid oral performance narration (cf. Barber 2007, 67–72). It is in this light that the analysis has isolated sections of the cinema narrator's performance because they call attention to themselves in a way that renders them, in the words of Barber (in another context), "available for repetition, recreation or 'copying' – and thus for transmission over space and perpetuation over time" (2007, 71).

Magadheera and the Creative Use of Meta-Imagery

Magadheera (2009, directed by S. S. Rajamouli 2009), which literally means "the heroic man", has been formally categorised as action/romance. It is the story of a love triangle

involving Princess Mithravinda, Prince Ranadev Billa, the royal general and her cousin, and Kala Bhairava, a palace guard and warrior. The love triangle recurs 400 years later when the three individuals involved have been reincarnated as Indu, Raghuveer and Harsha, respectively. This section examines DJ Afro's reconstruction of parts of the film into an oral performance.

The first section used in the analysis is extracted from a scene at a bus station when Harsha has caught up with Indu, whom he has been chasing without realising that she is the one, as she is not yet ready to reveal herself to him. The dialogue is full of dramatic irony, and perhaps DJ Afro feels obliged to mix narrative and explanation in his perform-ance for the benefit of his audience, most likely because he considers this sequence to be of high aesthetic quality and that it needs to be unpacked for the benefit of his audience. It is a moment of heightened dramatic irony and suspense as the audience knows that Harsha has caught up with Indu, the girl he is desperately looking for. She knows she is the one he is looking for but chooses to toy with him and remain anonymous. She very nearly gives in, though, but then she changes her mind and the scene takes the shape of a game that she apparently enjoys. The narrator seems to wish to invite his audi-ence into the game as well:

> Weee! Kuna dame alikua hapa/ Alikua amevaa vazi la la la white/ Kuna manzi alikua amevaa/ nguo ya white/ ameenda wapi/ Ngai, ni mii mii mmmm/ Manzi akaona/cene/ Nawezaje muambia ni mimi?/ Anatafuta nini?/ … / Na elewa yule dame/ Mtazamaji shika/ na ushike vizuri Zaidi/ Yule dame ndio huyu/ Lakini alibadilisha mavasi/ Alikua na top ya white/ Akaon-geza ya black juu/ Ju ya baridi/ Unaona?

> There was a girl wearing/ a white dress/ where has she gone?/ God, it is mmm mmm/ The girl thought again/ No./ Why would I tell him it is me?/ What is he looking for?/ … / and know that this girl/ viewer understand/ and understand very clearly/ that girl is the same one/ but she just changed her clothes/ she was wearing a white top/ she then added a black one on top/ because of the cold/ You see? (recorded version of DJ Afro's *Magadheera* translation, at 10:58–11:42)

This sequence is rich in what I have termed meta-imagery – a term that in this work I have used in reference to DJ Afro's use of imagery to direct the viewer's reception experience. In other words, he uses verbal art to foreground specific images and sequences so that it becomes another layer of imagery on top of what is self-evident on the screen. In the beginning, the narrator quotes part of the dialogue between Rama Charamteja and Indu, the two lead characters in the film. In this sense, he follows the action and narratively reconstructs it and then switches to an omniscient narration that lets his audience into Indu's thoughts. Finally, he disconnects the viewer from the story to give what he con-siders to be an explanation about what has just happened. In this way, he takes on the agency role fully by directing the audience to see what he wants them to see. Moreover, in the context of Kiswahili, the focalising question "Do you see?" is much more than just an imperative; it is a rhetorical question that echoes the co-constitutive role of the audience in an oral performance. Commenting on this aspect of audiences in another context, Karin Barber (2007, 137) has observed that "in many performance genres, this co-constitutive role is made palpable by the audience's visible and audible participation" and argues that this also serves "to keep the endorsement flowing so that the narrator is not brought to a halt". In this case, one could argue that DJ Afro does not seek to help his

audience to follow the story as it unfolds in the audiovisual form, but instead he aims to unpick and reconstruct the story to the taste and needs of his audience.

Beyond what we could term the structural function of meta-imagery as explained above, DJ Afro also uses meta-imagery in the texture of his performance, which in this case aligns to the context of live performances. Some of these aspects of orality hark back to 1970s oral commentary at cinemas like Cameo, and open-air film screenings in urban and rural Kenya in which the translators assigned labels to the main characters in Western films. In this case, the narrator has used the label "dame" in reference to Indu; this was one of the earliest colloquial terms for a "girl" in Kenya. He also uses rhetorical questions in a way that implies a live performance, which creates the impression of an invitation to reflect on and also take part in the performance. Consider the sequence below, in which he begins by foregrounding an important character in the story, Rachu, who takes centre stage in the sequence. He then takes his audience into the action, performing a play-by-play commentary of the murder of the lawyer. He caps it off with the rhetorical question that is also framed as an argument:

> Delph Kil sasa/ Jina lake original/ Delph Kil/ Jina la sinema/ Rachu/ Alichukua mkuki/ Wakili/ Kwa kujaribu kuwashtaki/ Kwa kujaribu kuwashtaki/ Na alipatiwa kazi/ Na babake aaah aah/ Indu/ Rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr/ Chukua mkuki mkono/ Rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr Raaah/ Amelalaaaa/ Huyo ni wakili/ Halafu uniambie sasa/ Mwenye alishtaki atafanywa nini.

> Delph Kil now/ his original name/ Delph Kil/ his name in the film/ Rachu/ he took a spear/ the lawyer/ because he tried to sue them/ because he tried to sue them/ and he was hired/ by the father of aaah aaah/ Indu/ Rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr/ take the spear in hand/ Rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr Raaah/ he is down/ that lawyer/ then tell me now/ what will be done to the actual plaintiff? (recorded version of DJ Afro's *Magadheera* translation, at 23:15–23:45)

In this case, one could argue that the narrator is like a pendulum that sways back and forth between two points. On one side is the story where the narrator acts as an invisible medium to foreground the action and let in the pathos. On the other side is the discourse where he invites his audience to reflect on significant parts of the story. He frequently links the events in the story to the audience's everyday life experience, as in the sequence below, which is part of the denouement of the film narrative. He places the audience in the shoes of the main characters, prodding them to empathise with him, and tying them to the main string of the film narrative. But he then takes them out of the film narrative so that they think about their own love stories.

> Sasa Rachu amekumbuka story yake/ Sasa mtu ambaye hajakumbuka story yake … / Kuna watu aina mbili tu/ Ambao hawajakumbuka story yao/ Wa kwanza ni huyu manzi wetu Indi/ Hajakumbuka story yake/ Pamoja na wewe mtazamaji/ Hata wewe ningependa ukumbuke/ 400 years ago mlikua mnapendana cene/ Unaona mtu kama mimi?/ Nilikua napendana na Shakira/ Sasa hata wewe ukumbuke mtazamaji.

> Now Rachu has remembered his story/ so the person yet to remember their story … / There are two types of people/ that have not remembered their story/ the first is this our girl Indi/ she has not remembered her story/ together with you viewer/ I would like you too to remember/ 400 years ago who was your lover?/ You see someone like me?/ Shakira was my lover/ so you too should remember. (recorded version of DJ Afro's *Magadheera* translation, at 1:51:12–1:51:42)

In a live performance context, such a call is in keeping with what has been referred to in another context as "the heuristic approach" to the cinema audience experience in local

video halls; it also involves the audience "drawing connections between the video-film narrative and their own lives" (Waliaula 2014, 71–77). Below is another example of the narrator's deliberate strategy to direct his audience's attention momentarily away from the film narrative thread, which concerns a motorcycle race, to aspects of their real life – in this case, public transport motorcycles locally known as *boda boda*.

> Watu wote basi watu wa maboda/ Cheki boda za huko/ Salaaaala!/ Cheki boda za huko/ Bwana cene machezo/ Za kampani ya Honda.

> All people of motorcycles/ look at the motorcycles of that place/ Salaaala!/ Look at the motorcycles of that place/ man, it is joke/ They are of the Honda make. (recorded version of DJ Afro's *Magadheera* translation, at 5:06–5:13)

The immediate context of this is a phantasmagorical extreme sport in which bikers are to fly up to considerable heights and make a perfect landing. The focus is thus on the bikers, not the bikes. But the narrator foregrounds the bikes because, from the turn of the new millennium, *boda boda* public transport has become not only very popular but also part of the local experience of life (cf. Nyairo 2023). They are called *boda boda* because initially they were popular on the Malaba and Busia border points between Kenya and Uganda. Therefore, DJ Afro is aware that the motorcycle spectacle in this sequence strikes the audience with a sense of familiarity that he can hark back to in his performance. But if the motorcycle spectacle has a mnemonic effect, as shown above, then DJ Afro's allusion to the (postcolonial) discourse on the body and African women's perceived lack of beauty is even more vivid in the sequence below, which is part of a showman contest involving motorcycles, in which Harsha took part.

> Reshma!/ Asante sana/ Mrembo wa warembo/ Juu ya warembo, eeeeh/ Weweeee!/ Kipiii!/ Asante sana/ Maridadi/ Cheki urembo uko na/ huyo manzi bwana/ Elewa hii ndio tofauti/ Ya mamanzi wa India/ na mamanzi wa wa/ Pahali kama Thogonoi/ Ju mamanzi wa Thogonoi/ Wanang'ang'ana ati kunona/ Nani atanonesha kabisa/ Lakini hawa wanakaa slim/ Wanakaa kitu mzuri.

> Reshma/ Thank you very much/ a beauty of beauties/ above beauties, eeeeh/ Weweeee! / Young boy!/ Thank you very much/ Beautiful/ Look at the beauty of/ that woman/ understand this is the difference/ between Indian girls/ and girls from, from/ a place like Thogonoi/ Because the girls of Thogonoi/ struggle to get fat/ to be the most plump/ but these ones are slim/ they look good. (recorded version of DJ Afro's *Magadheera* translation, at 5:30–5:53)

At this point, the internal focalisation of the film narrative is on the hero as he rides into the thick of the action, attracting the attention of everyone else. He is ushered to a seat next to the organisers and the mise-en-scène builds the image of a festivity with music and dancing. DJ Afro not only foregrounds the (female) event organiser; his description of the event organiser is poetic and its rendition highly performative, introducing an out-of-context term *kipii*, a word which in the Kikuyu language makes reference to an uncircumcised boy, the same as *kihii*, and that does not fit here but is part of the formulas that underlie his oral narrative performance. His juxtaposing of Indian girls with "girls from Thogonoi", an imaginary place in Kikuyuland, not only echoes the postcolonial ideology but also problematises it. In this scenario, the local social binaries are at play, where the difference is between brown skin and dark skin, and the racial stereotypes towards people of colour are brought to the fore in a playful way. Ultimately, I consider DJ Afro's

performance in this sequences as evidence of his creative manipulation and complication of imagery to influence the audience reception, making it his story.

Bullet Raja and *Shadow* as Oral Texts

Bullet Raja (2013, directed by Tigmanshu Dhulia) is an action film whose star, Raja Mishra, accidentally finds himself at a wedding ceremony as a gate crasher to escape some trouble with a criminal gang that he offended. He strikes up an instant friendship with the bride's cousin, Rudra Tripathi, and with another young woman from the family. While flirting with her at a safe distance from the rest of the crowd, he overhears a plot by a gang to execute everyone at the party. He teams up with Rudra and fights off the gang, which sets him on a path of violence that he eventually escapes; he returns to normal life as a happily married man. *Shadow* (2013, directed by Meher Ramesh) is also formally categorised as an action film. Most of the action in the film is based in Malaysia, where Raghuram, an investigative journalist in a United Nations agency, infiltrates the criminal organisation of Nana Bhai to gather information about the group. Unfortunately, he is found out by the criminal group and killed. The rest of the action revolves around his son's revenge mission, which makes him the hero in the film.

Perhaps because the two films include scenes of intense action, DJ Afro's narrative performance is distinctively hinged on verbal art. Some parts of his performance are so dense in oral stylistic presentation and so open to intertextual relations that they could be detached from the narrative flow and read as texts. They are defined as texts against the background of the argument that "texts are constructed to be detachable from the flow of conversation, so that they can be repeated, quoted and commented upon" (Barber 2007, 3). In the case of DJ Afro, his performance includes sections where a certain chant, word, expression or whole sequence running for as long as 30 seconds stands out of its immediate context and draws the attention of the audience away from the film narrative to itself and to other texts and contexts beyond the film narrative. Arguably, these become the most memorable parts of the narration, and audiences quote them long after the performance and even use some of them in their everyday conversations. Consider the sequence below from *Bullet Raja*, in which the immediate context is a wedding ceremony. The camera picks out Raja and the girl, isolated from the rest. Their movement and posture as well as the darkness around them build a brief atmosphere of romance. However, this is nothing close to what DJ Afro makes out of it. He inserts at least four local stories that the audience can identify with. Indeed, the dialogue reconstructed here is totally different from what is in the film narrative:

> Ka dame kanakuingilia/ Weee!/ Unaitwa nani?/ Akamuambia naitwa Raja Mishra/ Nilikuambia jina lake la sinema/ Basi ni Raja Misra./ Wewe sio wa hii familia/ Unakuja kula mchele?/ … / Unakuanga na girlfriend?/ Sina na sitaki/ Hata mimi sitaki boyfriend./ Ati hutaki!/ Na unataka nini?/ Kuja!/ Manzi akampeleka mahali kuna giza/ okava mwana wa kiveti/ Nio koria kii?/ Hivi venye umejaza kifua/ Na mikono/ Hivyo ndivyo makagari iko na muscle?/ Aiii! Na sindio/ … / Manzi akamwambia/ Mimi sitaki story mingi/ Nataka tu utoe makagari/ Uwekelee kwa mikono yangu.

> The girl comes upon you/ Weee!/ What is your name?/ He told her he was raja Mishra/ I told you his name in the film./ is Raja Mishra./ You are not of this family/ You have come to eat rice?/ … / Do you have a girlfriend?/ I do not have and do not want/ Me too. I do not want

a boyfriend./ You do not want!/ And what do you want?/ Come!/ She took him to a dark place/ come here son of woman/ What do you eat?/ This big chest/ and arms / is this how your genitals are?/ Aiii! Oooh yes/ … / The girl told him/ I don't want many stories/ I want you to get your genitals out/ and put them in my hands. (recorded version of DJ Afro's *Bullet Raja* translation, at 9:12–10:21)

First is the story of food; Raja is seen as a hungry person in search of free food, which echoes the local understanding of weddings as opportunities to eat. Indeed, the most dominant local image of a wedding is eating; "*kula harusi*", literally translating to "to eat a wedding" is the popular phrase for a wedding, in which eating is central. DJ Afro's audience mostly consists of the low-income group and thus the joke about a hungry gate crasher rings a bell. Then the courtship narrative is limited to the body and sexuality. The exaggerated focus on the body plays into the local carnivalesque experience in which the cinema narration takes place and the kind of audience he targets. The apparent poetic licence enjoyed by DJ Afro is applicable to live performance sessions and is part of the transient fun and emotional release enjoyed by the performer and his audience. The anxieties about masculinity are channelled here in a kind of oral therapy. However, this became an important element in the genre and was carried over to the recorded versions. Third, the Baba Yao narrative includes an allusion to a popular Kenyan politician, renowned for being tough and streetwise but in this context also used to show sexual prowess and dominance. The fourth narrative revolves around local mythology about the Akamba women as hypersexual.

At the point when the girl pulls Raja close to her, in a dark corner, DJ Afro inserts Kikamba language "*okava mwana wa kiveti*" (come here child of a woman). Notably, he uses this Kamba phrase frequently in different performances (Kimani and Mugubi 2014, 13). But in this case, *mwana wa kiveti* also invokes the popular use of that phrase by the Kamba. When used by a woman in reference to a man, it is demeaning. But when used by anyone in reference to themselves, it is serves as self-praise. In this context, DJ Afro uses it in a new sense as a pick-up line. He shifts to Kikuyu in the next line when the girl asks Raja what he feeds on to make him very muscled. DJ Afro repeats the use of such words and phrases and in a way that they acquire the status of a motif. *Makagari*, for example, is a neologism that he frequently uses in reference to male sexuality, which is one of the strategies he uses to infuse humour into his performance. Most of the motif words are borrowed from local languages, particularly Kikuyu, Kamba and Maa. For instance, he uses such words as *kemoda* and *babarai*, Maa words that stand for "that which hits hard/destructively" and "my father" respectively. These are used in new contexts where the meaning is not necessarily what it is in the languages from which they are drawn.

The motifs also include local social stereotypes, such as the association of the police with one ethnic community, the Kalenjin, and using the Kalenjin-accented Kiswahili to imaginatively construct dialogue involving the police in the film narrative, as in the case in the following sequence from *Shadow*:

Sasa afisa mmoja alishika mwenzake/ Cheki afisa mmoja alishika mwenzake/ "Ndio hii nimegamata/ Nimegamata namna hii/ Hakuna mtu anaweza toroka/ Nimekamata ndio hii."/ "We Kiprono acha ujinga/ Unanikamata mimi/ unasema ni yeye?"

So one police officer caught his colleague/ see one police officer caught his colleague/ "It is here I have caught it/ I caught it like this/ Nobody can escape/ I have caught it here it is."/

"You Kiprono stop being foolish/ You catch me/ and then say you have caught him?" (recorded version of DJ Afro's *Shadow* translation, at 23:11–23:22)

The sequence above should be read in terms of the subtexts and intertexts that can only be understood in the context of Kenyan politics and society in the 1980s and 1990s up to 2002. It reflects on the image of police officers as unintelligent, childish, inept, and only in the service because of their ethnic identity. This may not have been the case but the bigger picture was the dominance of one ethnic community in governance and politics (cf. Lynch 2011, 133–141). In effect, a social myth about the ethnic identity of the police was entrenched in Kenya. The fact that it is recycled over 20 years after the President Moi era goes to show that DJ Afro's performance is rooted in oral tradition and popular culture that preceded the emergence of cinema narration in Kenya. It is an oral tradition that is fed by the social experience and popular culture. Indeed, one could argue that DJ Afro's distinctive parodying of the figure of the police in his narration is comparable to what Grace Musila, in another context, has termed the "satirization of absurdities of state power and broadly, Kenyan socio-political cultures" that she considers a useful critique on topical issues in the Kenyan socio-political landscape (2011, 283–284). It is in this sense that one could also read DJ Afro's cinema narration as part of what Nyairo has termed "popular expressive forms and idioms with which citizens engage officialdom and institutions" (2004).

Like similar forms of popular art, DJ Afro's narrative performances are a relatively safe mode of artistic expression because they are situated in the penumbra of cinema, which, as a medium of self-evident images, creates the illusion of reality and uses socio-culturally situated language. While the superimposition of words on cinematic images would seem to be diluting the film narrative, it could be understood as just an extension of the narrative. . DJ Afro's performance is thus a case of cinematic image and language blended in narrative performance in a way that adds a new layer to both. His use of linguistic imagery operates as a second layer on a medium that is basically about visual images. DJ Afro uses language in a way that adds value to the image but at the same time the image also provides a surface area upon which more images are made out of the immediate contexts and intertexts. In this study, this is referred to as meta-imagery and it partly echoes DJ Lufufu's description of cinema narration as "the transformation of rice into pilau" (Krings 2012, 11). On another level, and using the same culinary metaphor of rice and pilau, one could argue that pilau invokes new referents beyond the basic image of "an embellishment of rice" to the agents and the contexts where it is to be served.

One could further argue that, for DJ Afro, and for other cinema narrators, to achieve and sustain some relevance in the context of an image-laden medium, they have to add something to and around the images. This is possible because imagery in oral narrative is based on patterns and relationships that appeal to specific socio-cultural contexts (Scheub 1977, 346). In the case of DJ Afro, two patterns stand out in his meta-imagery process: hyperbole in the presentation of images and humour in the reconstruction of dialogue between characters. Consider the use of hyperbole in the sequence below from *Shadow*, which takes place at the airport; this is one of the climactic points in the film when both the protagonist and the antagonists converge in the same place. They have different interests, some of which clash. The scene is full of tension. But DJ Afro

foregrounds a young woman, a minor character in the scene, because she offers an appropriate link to imagery that appeals to the audience.

> Matubara sasaaa!/ Eeeei!/ Unasemanga kuzaliwa nanii!/ Unasemanga wamezaliwa/ Unakosea/ Huyu sio kuzaliwa/ Hakika huyu lazima/ Amechomoka mbinguni direct/ Akiwa ameumbwa/ Huyu ni kuumbwa sio kuzaliwa sasaaa/ Yaaa!/ Cheki tumdomo!/ Cheki tumapua!/ Cheki nywele nanii!/ Aiish!/ Anaitwa Matubara.

> Matubara now!/ Eeeei!/ Man, you talk about [women] being born/ You say they are born/ you are wrong/ this one was not born/ this one truly/ must have come straight from heaven/ ready made/ This one was created and not born/ Yaaa!/ See the small mouth!/ See the small nose!/ See the hair, man!/ Aiish!/ She is called Matubara. (recorded version of DJ Afro's *Shadow* translation, at 24:43–25:07)

This description is full of exaggeration, with DJ Afro literally curating Matubara as if she were an object in a museum. He guides the audience through the constituent parts of Matubara. His poetic delivery and use of tonal inflection not only foregrounds Matubara but also serves to rivet the audience to the film narrative, since DJ Afro nuances the image before them and invites them "to see". This is a form of focalisation. Significantly, it takes the audience's attention back to the visual image by use of exaggeration.

Another dominant pattern of imagery that is also an oral technique in DJ Afro's performance is the comic reconstruction of dialogue which culminates in humour. In most cases, he does not necessarily seek to accurately translate the actual dialogue that plays out in the film narrative. Consider the following dialogue between Raja and Rudra in *Bullet Raja*, after they have been humiliated by a top politician in a boardroom meeting. The chairman ignores them during the introduction session, and when they complain he calls them monkeys:

> "Babarai,/ Sisi ni nugu?/ Unaona venye nugu/ inakaanga vibaya ikitembea/ Haivaangi underwear"/ "Ndio"/ "Na huyo mzee ametuita nugu?"/ "Eeeeh"/ "Kwa sababu yeye ni mkuu/ wa hiki chama?"/ "Eeeh."

> "My father,/ Are we monkeys?/ Do you see how monkeys/ look bad when they walk/ they do not wear underwear?"/ Yes/ And that guy has called us monkey?/ Eeeeh/ Because he is the boss/ in this political party?/ Eeeh. (recorded version of DJ Afro's *Bullet Raja* translation, at 25:09–25:18)

In this sequence, DJ Afro picks on the term "monkey" to reconstruct the dialogue in a humorous way. In this way, the humour is generated from a word that is imaginatively extrapolated in an unusual way that focuses on the perceived image of monkeys as nude beings. Consider this other sequence in the same film, where DJ Afro reconstructs a conversation between Raja and the girlfriend of the kidnapped politician:

> Madam,/ Na wewe ni mrembo hivyo?/ Ndiyo nakuanga mrembo./ Watu wengi wananiambianga./ Lakini sasa ukiwa manzi mzuri kama wewe/ Badala uwe na watu kama DJ Afro/ Eeee,/ Watu, tuseme watu kama/ Mwenda Saba/ Aaah, yule wa Meru FM/ Aaah, watu kama hao./ Unafanya nini na ng'ombe kama hii?

> Madam,/ and you are such a beauty?/ Yes, I am normally beautiful./ Many people tell me./ But now a beautiful woman like you/ instead of dating people like DJ Afro/ Eeee,/ people, let's say people like/ Mwenda Saba/ Aaah, the one at Meru FM/ Aaah, such people./ What are you doing with this animal? (recorded version of DJ Afro's *Bullet Raja* translation, at 30:35–31:00)

The dominant stylistic feature here is humour, and, in this context, it is affiliative humour that echoes the live oral performance, where the humour serves to entertain the audience squeezed up together in the makeshift video halls. In conventional terms, the actual film narrative works as the focal point of attention and is the source of all the fun and entertainment, but the DJ Afro performance of cinema narration is what in decolonial theory terminology may be termed an undoing and redoing of the perceived prepackaged and self-unfolding film narrative to the audiences. By the use of socio-culturally marked language and oral techniques, DJ Afro creates texts that render themselves to his audiences in the experience of reception as an addition to what is presented to them in the audiovisual technology of film.

Conclusion

This article set out to use DJ Afro's art of cinema narration to explore some of the characteristics of the practice and to make a case for the treatment of cinema narration as a genre of oral performance. This is a perception made against the background of existing research on cinema narration in East Africa that situates cinema narration in the context of translation and adaptation of films in foreign languages and from foreign socio-cultural contexts for the benefit of local audiences. It is significant that studies of cinema narration in Kenya have focused on DJ Afro's performance and have explored the technological framing and use of language and style, and the invocation of the audience in performance, which disabuses the view that cinema narration is all about translation and adaptation of foreign cultural forms.

The argument has been made that the practice of cinema narration is a radical shift in audience reception as it is understood in its conventional film theatre experience. It is a shift that is traced back to the local video hall cultures that included active participation of audiences in the reception experience and it has been argued here, as it has elsewhere, that cinema narration as we know it today is largely influenced by the local video hall audience reception experience. It has been argued that cinema narration is, in a sense, part of decolonial aesthetics, to the extent that it is not just a mixing of two different media represented by film narrative and oral narrative but also the delinking of the film reception experience from the standard convention to a new mode where audience reception is bent to fit within and also to express elements of the oral tradition and local trends in popular culture. The analysis of DJ Afro's rendition of the selected films is done with reference to narrative theory as well as to oral poetics. The discussion of the film *Magadheera* is about DJ Afro's creative use of meta-imagery to direct the audience reception experience by foregrounding and elaborating on selected images and sequences. In this way, DJ Afro takes charge and, in a manner of speaking, makes the story his own. *Bullet Raja* and *Shadow* are used to read the texts, intertexts and subtexts that can be read in DJ Afro's performance. These texts are facilitated by the use of local imagery and allusion that detach sections of the narrative from the main strand and create what one could define as additional oral texts, in that they are made out of, but go beyond, the film narrative. In this sense, parts of the cinema narration become detachable and meaningful in ways that are local and familiar to the audience. Overall, this article presents DJ Afro's cinema narration as an oral art that is more than the translation and adaptation of a cultural form. His performance should be seen from the perspective of oral

poetics and understood in this light as an aesthetic option that is situated and interventionist, which is one of the main concerns of decolonial criticism.

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