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Volta Volta

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

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2017

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Volta Volta

by

Erick Msumanje

Masters of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2017

Professor Brian Cross, Chair

This thesis paper examines the fear and anxieties of being black in White America. This is done through the lens of film theory, black studies, and sound design. It's further grounded in the analysis of filmmaker Erick Msumanje's film Volta Volta that explores the issue in a hybrid manner.

Volta Volta

In his book *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, scholar Hamid Naficy coins the term “accented filmmaking” as a way of discussing film work situated in the post-colonial era. The word “accented” refers to exilic and diasporic filmmakers who engage in alternative production and style. According to Naficy, they “exist in a state of tension and dissension with both their original and current homes.” As a Tanzanian-born filmmaker, I find his statement to be true living in the United States. My African status does not protect me from getting harassed by law enforcement agencies. After they rule out that I am not a threatening black man, they double check to see that I am not a potential terrorist. On a surface level, this is because of my complicated last name, and perhaps because they have images of Nigerian Boko Haram terrorists circulating in their mindscape as cultivated by today’s mainstream media.

On the receiving end, this induces high levels of fear and anxiety over the possibility of getting shot and killed. The constant murders of black men in the hands of the law and racist fanatics has turned into a form of modern day lynching. The main difference is that there are no longer large crowds of blood-thirsty American whites encircling black bodies dangling from trees and devoid of life. In scholar David Marriott’s book *On Black Men*, he explores the twisted phenomenon of whites deriving a sense of pleasure and satisfaction from the destruction of the black male body. He closely analyzes photographs in which white people are captured in front of infamous lynchings of black men. In front of the camera, they want to be seen as “judges and executioners in the lives, and deaths of black men. A moment [...] in the heat of [...] passion.” (6)

Marriott's analysis raises a couple questions, "what are they thinking about as they gaze out at the camera, pointing at black bodies dangling in the trees? [...] What do they want us to see?" (6) He answers this by quoting author Richard Wright who once said, "the law is white." (6) This being the case, navigating White America is extremely traumatic. I am hyper aware that there are forces that want me to cease to exist. I experience scholar W.E.B. Du Bois's "double consciousness." Simply put, Du Bois describes it as someone who has their identity divided by society therefore making it difficult to develop a sense of self. Psychiatrist Frantz Fanon describes this in the form of looking into a mirror. "Black men need to look, and be reflected, otherwise, (they will become) the distorted and fantasmic image of white desire." (12) If the mirror isn't replaced with a new image, then it turns into what scholar James Baldwin describes as a "mirror of confusion in which only the shade, or shadow, of the black man can appear." (12)

Since it's difficult to establish a sense of self, I experience the sensation that my identity is distorted and scattered. White America has cast me in a negative light, one which frames me as dangerous. I am an alien force that needs to be controlled, monitored, and managed. They find pleasure in my destruction and pray for my ultimate extinction. Often times, I feel like White America is a huge national park where black people are hunted for sport. My main objective while living in this environment is to survive to the best of my ability by engaging in a never-ending performance. Whenever I get pulled over by a police officer, I recite exactly what I am going to say over and over again. I

attempt to engage in body movement and speech that doesn't come off as threatening. I know that the slightest mistake could result in my death. I think of my family and whether or not this is the last time they will see me. It's awful, but this is the reality that I live in.

As a filmmaker, I struggle with two basic things. The first is not feeling at home in the United States. Living in constant fear, triggers immense nostalgia and urgent need to return to my original homeland. I feel out of place and not wanted here. Much like Naficy describes of the accented filmmaker, I miss home because I know it's a place where I do not get the feeling that I do not belong there. It's a place where I am embraced and feel grounded. I do not experience the paranoia of getting killed nor is there a need to perform. This leads to my second struggle: here, in the United States my identity is shattered and essentially non-existent. This is because if a person has an identity, it means they are actually human beings. I believe that White America doesn't want black people to have a true sense of identity out of fear of a second uprising.

The reason for such an uprising is beautifully explored in Euzhan Palcy's 1983 film *Sugar Cane Alley* set on a Martinique plantation. It tells the story of black workers working in sugarcane fields under a white force. A character named Moudouze discusses slavery and the brutality black people face. He further emphasizes the need for them to fight for a second freedom because under the current system they are not actually free. He also dabbles in questions of belonging because he knows Martinique isn't his original homeland. He accepts that he can't return to Africa, but holds onto the idea that after his death his spirit will.

Since my original home is far away, Haiti has become my second



Figure 1: Kids in Fridge from Volta Volta

home. In Haiti, I honestly feel at ease and much safer. I do not feel like my life is in constant danger. Whenever I am there, I do not have to perform and have a stronger sense of self. I feel comfortable in my own black skin. I can confidently walk in the streets without worrying about encountering a racist fanatic or trigger-happy police officer. I feel like a human being who is loved and fully alive. Naficy argues, that home is a “segment of space that people imbue with special meaning and value. [...] It refers not only to a physical entity [...] but also to our relations to it and our social relations within it.” (152)

Haiti is the place where I continue to develop as an accented filmmaker. My approach to filmmaking, is grounded in docufiction. My

thesis film *Volta Volta* (2017) engages in this approach. In the making of this film, I recruited non-professional actors who played themselves along with embodying fictitious characters. I work with non-professional actors because they have an ability to connect with inner emotions and personal experiences in a way professional actors can't. This technique, is influenced by Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa. For example, his film *In Vanda's Room* which is about heroin addicts from Cape Verde living in Lisbon, captures the technique in a masterful manner. It's executed in such a way the viewer virtually has no real sense if the film is fiction or nonfiction. This is because the non-professional actors are so good at playing themselves while navigating fictitious scenarios (?). I believe this illusion is effectively accomplished by Costa because he spends long periods of time with his actors. They are not under tight industry deadlines and therefore can purely focus on creating a film together. In doing so, Costa is able to immerse himself in the community and really work with his actors. This gives him the ability to ultimately tell the kind of narrative he wants to tell.

In my own practice, I work similarly with my non-professional actors. This allows me to effectively visualize the kind of narrative I want to tell. Furthermore, in spending time with my actors, I am able to insert moments from their personal experiences and daily lives into the story. Also, by immersing myself into their communities I am able to sketch out scenes for a piece. When comparing my work to Costa, the main difference is that he uses dialogue in his work. This is an important tool that I haven't utilized in my work yet. This is because I haven't been able to spend a substantial amount of time with my actors to come up with



Figure 2: Bull Fighting from Volta Volta



Figure 3: Bull Fighting from Volta Volta

dialogue that would be fitting for a narrative. However, this will certainly change in the future with the right amount of time and resources. It's a useful tool because it provides the viewer more information into characters lives and the spaces they occupy. I believe this will allow my characters not to give off a haunting presence and will give them more agency. This is because they are silent and therefore look ghostly. Furthermore, perhaps dialogue will free them from the sense of timelessness and therefore bring their existence to the forefront.

I find this question of timelessness to be apparent in a technical manner in my work as well. For some reason, often viewers find it difficult to gage exactly how long my films are. *Volta Volta*, is only thirty minutes. However, viewers tend to think that it's actually much longer. Clearly, this isn't an issue for me because it taps into my ability as a filmmaker in terms of manipulating time. This is done through long takes and calculated cuts. This gives the viewer the opportunity to be immersed in each individual scene. Another component within this manipulation, is not following the traditional three act structure. It's very formulaic and gives the viewer a blueprint in digesting time. In such a structure, they know what to expect and when. However, by not working in that way the viewer remains suspended in terms of what's going to happen next and cannot pinpoint the duration of any given piece.

This simply allows them to be observers and listeners. Since my work engages in a lot of long takes, it's accompanied by a multi-layered sound design and soundtrack. Each sound, is meant to add information for the viewer to experience what's unfolding in each scene. This gives them another point to focus on besides the visual image. It's also manipulated



Figure 4: Lion from Volta Volta

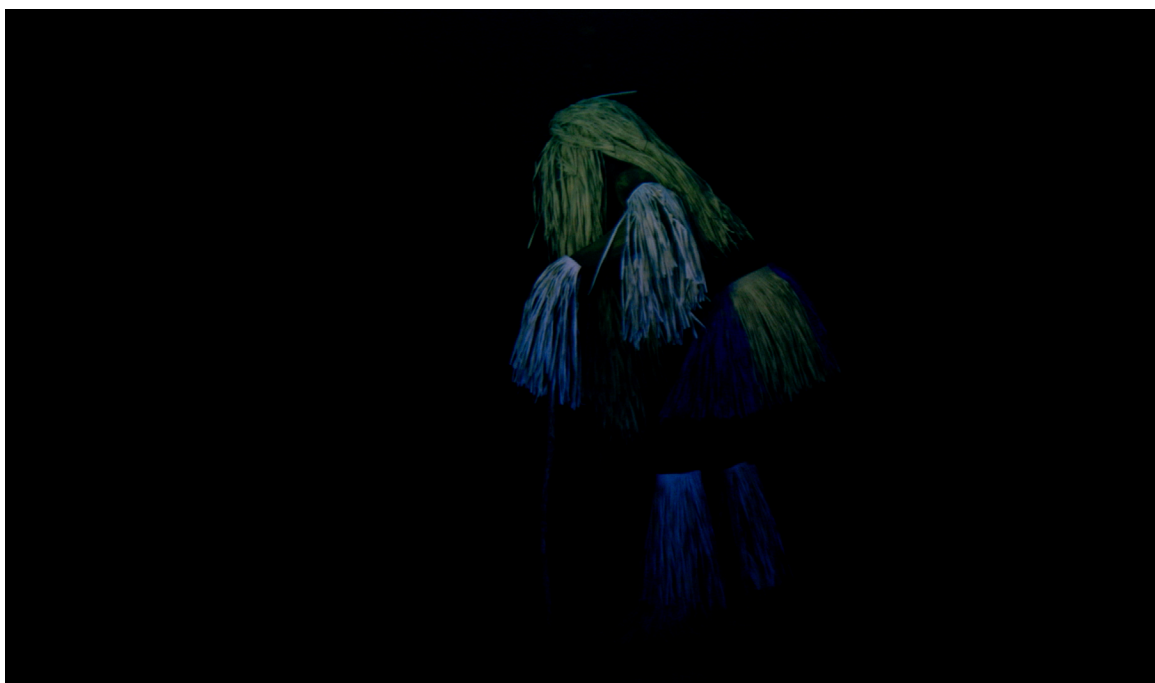


Figure 5: Lion from Volta Volta

in order to subtly keep their focus. For example, the scene with the young kids floating in the ocean on a refrigerator is constructed to do just that. To illustrate, in the foreground waves gently crash on a wall, while a traditional Haitian band is playing in a bar. In the middle ground, the young kids in the refrigerator are paddling and shouting. However, you can't actually hear them even though they seem to be really close to the band playing music. This is purposely done to give a slight jolt that something isn't quite right. In the scene with Red Eyes, you cannot hear his hands moving on the rope nor the object he is pulling towards him. However, you can hear sounds of whispers and breathing surrounding him. They give off a haunting feeling that's intertwined with an ancestral presence. The soundtrack, is very experimental and ambient. It shape-shifts between each scene to offer emotional information on the condition of a character and the environment they are in. In certain moments, it's cold and depressing then suddenly the music picks up like someone rising from the dead. This is because it samples and remixes high-tempo Haitian voodoo music and weaves them into hip-hop trap beats. This process is fascinating because it takes fragments of sounds and styles to create something entirely new.

This is a similar process to the way British filmmaker Joseph Akomfrah expands the docufiction style who also influences my own filmmaking practice. In particular, his process involves blending together two dimensions of realities that are dissonant. This is evident in his 2010 film *The Nine Muses*, which explores the ushering of immigrant workers in post-WW2 Britain from mainly Caribbean and Indian territories. In the film, he blends real archival footage showcasing the immigration process with



Figure 6: Red Eyes (Pulling Rope) from Volta Volta

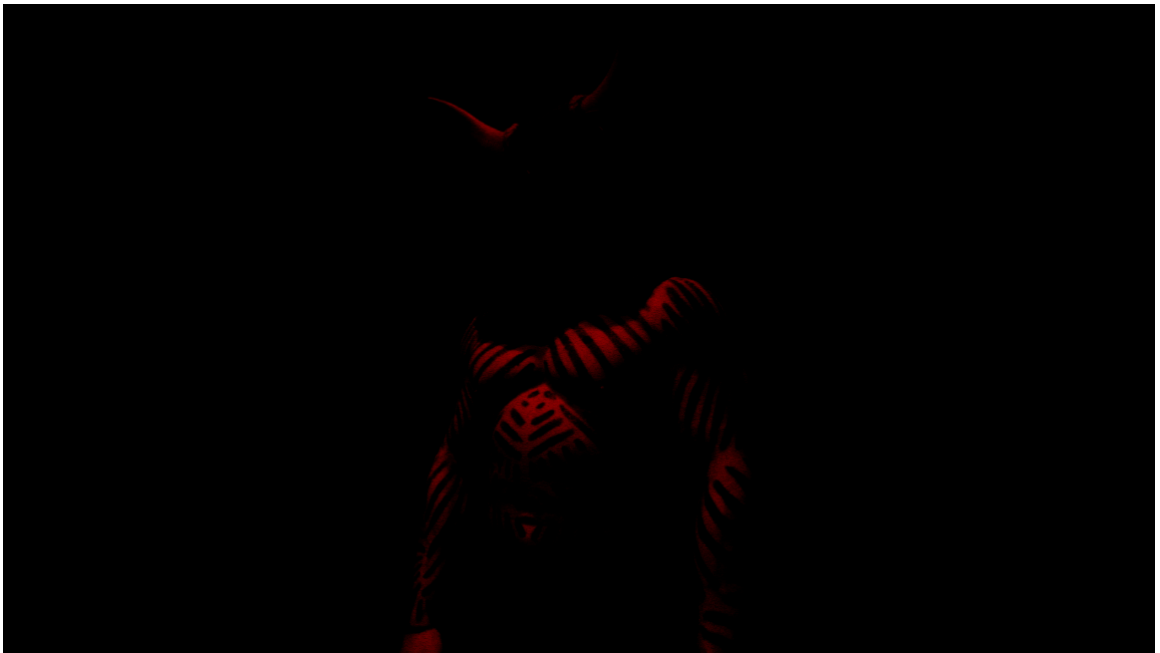


Figure 7: Red Eyes (Pulling Rope) from Volta Volta

his artistically driven shots from cold Alaskan landscapes. This blending is effective because it allows two realities to coexist to the point where the viewer is comfortable that they are from two different time periods. This is because the longer you watch them blended together, the more difficult it becomes telling them apart.

My film takes this approach of blending two dimensions together in a much more creative manner. To illustrate, the film consists of two worlds placed alongside one another. The first, is in our own reality filmed in various parts of Haiti with non-professional actors who act out minimal gestures. The second dimension, is a black fictitious space where non-professional actors embody characters also engaging in various gestures. These dimensions are interconnected by seen and unseen actions that replicate one another. For example, the character Lion replicates the old man's slow movements in Haiti. Another example, is of fighting bulls in Haiti that have the same exact horns as the character Red Eyes. Blending dimensions together is a powerful tool because it expands the way in which a narrative is constructed. Furthermore, it allows for different realities to coexist in unexpected ways. It has propelled my artistic voice in a new direction and given me the ability to engage in magical realism which is the intertwining of fictional characters into our own realities. This is something not very prevalent in docufiction and therefore I will continue engaging in it. This will further expand my practice because I can use it to complicate narratives about the Black experience.

My work is different from Akomfrah because his films seem very calculated and scripted. In my own work, I primarily engage in an improvisational manner. This allows my work to take any creative direction



Figure 8: Warrior from Volta Volta

depending on what influences me when I am actively filming.

In conclusion, I have positioned myself as an accented filmmaker because it gives me the ability to tell stories in a unique manner. In particular, it allows me to channel the realities of being displaced and being a person of color in a country where I oftentimes feel I do not belong in. It also puts me in a position where I can critically analyze the structures of oppression in a creative manner. Furthermore, it gives me the opportunity to work with non-professional actors in places like Haiti. In doing so, I am able to collaborate with people to tell stories and experiences not often seen on screen. This is a powerful outlet for myself

because it gives my artistic voice a sense of purpose and meaning. I find this to be important because it's something that I've struggled to find as a filmmaker. Moreover, working in docufiction allows me to explore elements like magical realism and creative dimensions outside of our own reality. This is effective because it's really expanded the way in which I tell stories. This is evident in *Volta Volta* (2017), in subtle and dynamic ways that can be found in the sound and fictional characters. Lastly, my hope is to continue telling stories that cross pollinate styles, continue reflecting on my personal experiences, and bringing diasporic realities to the limelight.

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