

## Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy

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In Kano, the economic center of northern Nigeria, media piracy is part of the “organizational architecture” of globalization (Sassen 2002), providing the infrastructure that allows media goods to circulate. Infrastructures organize the construction of buildings, the training of personnel, the building of railway lines, and the elaboration of juridicolegal frameworks without which the movement of goods and people cannot occur. But once in place, infrastructures generate possibilities for their own corruption and parasitism. Media piracy is one

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example of this in operation. It represents the potential of technologies of reproduction—the supply ability to store, reproduce, and retrieve data—when shorn from the legal frameworks that limit their application. It depends heavily on the flow of media from official, highly regulated forms of trade but then develops its own structures of reproduction and distribution external and internal to the state economy.

It is through this generative quality that pirate infrastructure is expressive of a paradigmatic shift in Nigerian economy and capital and represents the extension of a logic of privatization into everyday life. Piracy's negative characteristics are often commented on: its criminality, the erosion of property rights it entails, and its function as a pathology of information processing, parasitically derivative of legal media flows (Chesterman and Lipman 1988; Coombe 1998). As important as these questions are, the structural focus on legal issues tends to obscure the mediating nature of infrastructure itself. In the Nigerian case, this is seen most strikingly in the rise of a new video industry that makes feature-length films directly for domestic video consumption (see Larkin 2000; Haynes 2000; Ukadike 2000; Ukah 2003). This new industry has pioneered new film genres and generated an entirely novel mode of reproduction and distribution that uses the capital, equipment, personnel, and distribution networks of pirate media. These Nigerian videos are a legitimate media form that could not exist without the infrastructure created by its illegitimate double, pirate media.

In recent years, then, there has been a wholesale shift in which many entrepreneurs previously involved in the distribution of pirate material have switched to the reproduction and dissemination of legal media. The mass importation of foreign music and films brought about the capital and professional expertise that facilitated the rise of a local film industry. This wandering over the lines that separate the legal from the nonlegal has been a common experience for urban Africans, who have been progressively disembedded from the infrastructures linking them to the official world economy and instead have poured energy into developing informal networks—equally global—that facilitate traffic in economic and cultural goods outside the established institutions of world trade (Simone 2000, 2001; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Mbembe 2001).

In addition to generating new economic networks, piracy, like all infrastructural modes, has distinct material qualities that influence the media that travel under its regime of reproduction. Piracy imposes particular conditions on the recording, transmission, and retrieval of data. Constant copying erodes data storage, degrading image and sound, overwhelming the signal of media content with

the noise produced by the means of reproduction. Pirate videos are marked by blurred images and distorted sound, creating a material screen that filters audiences' engagement with media technologies and their senses of time, speed, space, and contemporaneity. In this way, piracy creates an aesthetic, a set of formal qualities that generates a particular sensorial experience of media marked by poor transmission, interference, and noise. Contemporary scholars of technology returning to the Frankfurt school have stressed that technology's operation on the body is a key factor in producing a sense of shock—the complex training of the human sensorium associated with modern urbanism (Benjamin 1999; Crary 2000; Doane 2002; Hansen 1995, 2000; Kracauer 1995; Schivelbusch 1986). This work is crucial in understanding the phenomenological and cognitive effects of technology when it is working at its optimum. What is less discussed (but see Schivelbusch 1986; Virilio 2003) is how technology influences through its failure as much as through its successes. Yet the inability of technologies to perform the operations they were assigned must be subject to the same critical scrutiny as their achievements. Breakdown and failure are, of course, inherent in all technologies, but in societies such as Nigeria, where collapse is often the default state of technological existence, they take on a far greater material and political presence (see also Mbembe and Roitman 1995; Koolhaas et al. 2001).

Rather than elide pirate infrastructure by using it as a window into legal questions of intellectual property, I wish to foreground it. If infrastructures represent attempts to order, regulate, and rationalize society, then breakdowns in their operation, or the rise of provisional and informal infrastructures, highlight the failure of that ordering and the recoding that takes its place. By subjecting the material operation of piracy and its social consequences to scrutiny, it becomes clear that pirate infrastructure is a powerful mediating force that produces new modes of organizing sensory perception, time, space, and economic networks.

## **Infrastructure**

Capitalism, as many thinkers from Marx to Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey have reminded us, is not separable from space but produces the spaces through which it operates. All regimes of capital depend on infrastructures—shipping, trains, fiber optic lines, warehouses—whereby space gets produced and networked. Cities, or social space itself in Lefebvre's (1991) terms, take on real existence through their insertion into networks and pathways of commodity exchange, and it is infrastructure that provides these channels of communication. Infrastruc-

ture is the structural condition of the movement of commodities, whether they are waste, energy, or information. It brings diverse places into interaction, connecting some while divorcing others, constantly ranking, connecting, and segmenting spaces and people (Graham and Marvin 1996, 2001; Sassen 2002).

Infrastructures were key to the first modern corporations, which were organized around the continuous circulation of goods, services, and information on a large scale (Mattelart 2000). As such they have been enormously influential by organizing territory, standardizing time, and innovating new forms of economic organization. The rise of new electronic communication has intensified these processes, in turn instituting their own effects on people's sense of time and distance and on their conceptions of the present and simultaneity (Kern 1983; Mattelart 1996; Schivelbusch 1986; Virilio 1997).

The difficulty here is that much of the work on the transformative effects of media on notions of space, time, and perception takes for granted a media system that is smoothly efficient rather than the reality of infrastructural connections that are frequently messy, discontinuous, and poor. Technologies of speed and the infrastructures they create have had a profound impact on countries like Nigeria, but it is painfully obvious to people who live there that they often do not work as they are supposed to. This does not simply reflect national poverty but rather is inherent in the functioning (and the threat of collapse) of all technological systems. What distinguishes poor countries is the systemic nature of these failures, so that infrastructure, or the lack of it, becomes a pressing economic and social issue and a locus of political resentment toward the failures of the state and state elites. At the same time, the creation of successful infrastructures sets in motion other types of flows that operate in the space capital provides and that travel the routes created by these new networks of communication. The organization of one system sets in motion other systems spinning off in different directions.

### **The Corruption of Infrastructure**

Piracy's success lies in its own infrastructural order that preys on the official distribution of globalized media, thus making it part of the corruption of infrastructure. By *corruption* I mean the pirating of a system's mode of communication—the viruses that attach to other kinds of official or recognized movement. Technological infrastructure creates material channels that organize the movement of energy, information, and economic and cultural goods between societies but at the same time creates possibilities for new actions. In Nigeria, this can be

seen clearly in the so-called 419 schemes.<sup>1</sup> Sending letters by fax and e-mail, 419 fraudsters claim to be a senior Nigerian official—a bank president, a petroleum minister, a relative of a dictator—and state that they urgently need to transfer a large amount of money out of the country (for an overview see Apter 1999; Hibou 1999). The recipients are told that if they agree to help, they will receive a percentage of the money. In this way, complete strangers are lured into what the FBI has described as the most successful fraud in the history of the world—and one of Nigeria's main foreign currency earners. The 419ers target foreign businesses; they make use of international financial arrangements, such as bank accounts and international money transfers; and they depend on new communication technologies—first fax machines and now e-mail. It is a form of fraud that depends on a certain cosmopolitanism, on the internationalization of finance, and as a form of action it is inconceivable without the technological and financial infrastructure brought by Nigeria's oil boom. The oil monies of the 1970s and 1980s allowed for a deep penetration of corporate capitalism in Nigeria and created the professional and technological networks upon which 419ers prey. It also inaugurated the spectacular corruption that gives 419 letters believability to victims. The fraud pirates the discourses and procedures of capitalism but also requires its own infrastructure of communication. In this way, the very success of any infrastructural flows create possibilities for their own corruption, placing in motion the potential for other sets of relations to occur and creating a ripple effect on movements of people, culture, and religion.

Like 419, piracy operates as a corruption of communications infrastructures that develops its own circuits of distribution using officially organized media. Films made in Hollywood and intended for distribution in an organized, domestic circuit are copied by pirates; sent to Asia or the Middle East, where they are subtitled; recopied in large numbers as videocassettes, video CDs (VCDs are the dominant technology for media storage in much of Asia), or DVDs; and then reshipped mainly within the developing world. In recent years, as Nigeria has become progressively disembedded from the official global economy (with the single exception of its oil industry), it has become ever more integrated into a parallel, unofficial world economy that reorients Nigeria toward new metropolises such as Dubai, Singapore, and Beirut (what AbdouMalik Simone [2001] more broadly calls the “worlding of African cities.” See also Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; MacGaffey and Banzenguissa-Ganga 2000; Mbembe 2001).

1. 419 refers to the section of the Nigerian criminal code that deals with cases of fraud. Criminals who engage in this type of crime are known as 419ers (Apter 1999).

Let us take the example of this picture of the sign for Alhaji B. K.'s video shop in the Kofar Wambai market in Kano, Nigeria:



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Figure 1

Kofar Wambai is best known for the sale of thread used in the elaborate embroidery of the long Hausa gown, the *babban riga*. Whole tracts of the market are suffused in the bright colors of thread hanging from the stall doorways, but in one section is lane after lane of small shops specializing in the reproduction and wholesale distribution of audio- and videocassettes: Indian, Sudanese, Western, and Hausa music; Islamic preaching; and Indian, Western, and Hausa videocassettes.

Cassette sellers at Kofar Wambai are represented by the Kano Cassette Sellers Recording and Co-operative Society Ltd. (Kungiyar Gawa Kai Ta Masu Sayar Da Kaset Da Dauka Ta Jihar Kano), a society whose headquarters is at Kofar Wambai but whose members spill out far beyond the confines of the market. The success of Kano's cassette reproduction industry is grounded in three developments: First, in 1981, the Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA) suspended the distribution of Hollywood films to Nigeria. This was in response to the seizure of MPAA assets by the Nigerian government in an attempt to indigenize the control of Nigerian companies. Second, the oil boom of the late 1970s boosted consumption, allowing for the mass dissemination of cassette-based tech-

nologies. Finally, the longstanding position of Kano at the apex of wide-ranging transnational trading networks facilitated the quick exploitation of these possibilities and the forging of a distribution network that stretches over northern Nigeria and beyond. The subsequent rise of piracy means that far from disappearing, Hollywood films have become available at a speed and volume as never before.

The everyday practice of piracy in Kano was based around the mass distribution of the two most popular drama forms, Indian and Hollywood films, and the reproduction of televised Hausa dramas and Islamic religious cassettes. Nearly all of those who might be described as pirates were at the same time involved in the duplication and sale of legitimate media, and the organization that emerged made Kano the regional distribution center for electronic media in northern Nigeria and the wider Hausaphone area (which covers parts of Chad, Cameroon, Benin, Ghana, and the Sudan). The system is this: the main dealers are based at centers in Kano, like Kofar Wambai market. They then sell to distributors in other northern cities, and these in turn supply smaller urban and rural dealers who provide goods for itinerant peddlers. The system is based on a complex balance of credit and trust; and although it depends, in part, on piracy, it has evolved into a highly organized, extensive distribution system for audio- and videocassettes. The success of this new form of distribution has not been lost on the government, which—though critical of piracy—has used cassette distribution as a way of spreading political messages.<sup>2</sup> As Alhaji Musa Na Sale, president of the cassette sellers association, told me, if something is popular, “even the nomads will hear it.” The decentralized nature of this distribution system means that neither the government nor the association knows exactly how many people are tied to the industry, especially given its massive expansion with the rise of Hausa video films.

Hausa distributors have had to rely on Lebanese and Indian traders for access to foreign videos that were coming from the Persian Gulf. In the 1990s, these videos often had the distributor’s name superimposed on the tape itself: for example, *Excellence Kano* for Hollywood films and *Al-Mansoor, Dubai* for Indian ones. Hollywood films were imported to Kano directly from the Middle East or transported north from Lagos. Because of the great popularity of Indian films among

2. After the Maitatsine riots of 1981, the Nigerian government circulated a video of the mass arrest of followers of the millenarian leader Maitatsine as a warning to other followers. Musa Na Sale, one of the most prominent cassette dealers working with traditional Hausa singers, said that he would meet with singers and *malams* (religious leaders whose teachings were sold on cassette) to instruct them as to “what the government needs to talk about and what the government doesn’t want.”

the Hausa (Larkin 1997, 2003), Kano was and is the main clearinghouse for Indian films. This traffic is controlled by two primary distributors, both based in Kano. For many years the trade was routed through Dubai, and it was common to watch Indian films with advertisements scrolling across the bottom of the screen announcing “Al Mansoor’s video” followed by a long list of his many shops in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and other parts of the gulf, along with their telephone, telex, and fax numbers. These videos often found their way to the Kano television station, CTV, where announcements for Al Mansoor’s many video shops sometimes obliterated the Arabic and English subtitles at the bottom of the screen.

With the recent emergence of video CDs, the routes of the market for Indian film have changed considerably. According to one Indian distributor, the market is now oriented toward Pakistan, where VCD plants make high-quality dubs of Indian films. Master copies are shipped via DHL to Kano, where they are then transferred to tape and sold in bulk to Hausa distributors. I was told the gap between a film’s release in India and its appearance in Kano could be as little as seven days.<sup>3</sup> American films are pirated through similar networks. They are copied illegally in the United States and shipped to Dubai or Beirut, often arriving in Nigeria while they are still on first-run release in the United States. One Jean-Claude Van Damme film I watched had Chinese subtitles superimposed over Arabic ones, providing a visible inscription of the routes of media piracy. Frequently U.S. videos contain a message scrolling across the bottom of the film every few minutes stating: “Demo tape only. Not for rental or sale. If you have rented or purchased this cassette call 1-800 NO COPYS (1-800-662-6787).<sup>4</sup> Federal law provides severe civil and criminal penalties for unauthorized duplication or distribution.”

Kofar Wambai is the apex of a formal, highly ordered system of reproduction and distribution for media goods in northern Nigeria and is one example of the ways in which media piracy generates new infrastructures of the parallel economy in Nigeria. It is part of a much larger process whereby the Nigerian economy has split between a traditional official economy oriented toward legal participation in the international division of labor and an unofficial economy, each one

3. This could be true, but there is likely an element of boastfulness to this claim. In 1993 when distribution was still by cassette, I was told that films could arrive in Kano as little as seven days after their release in India. In 2002, I was told by the same distributor (but a different person) that the reason for the shift to VCDs was to increase speed and quality and that the problem with videos was that they could take up to a month or more to be received from Dubai.

4. This is now a number for information about new drugs.

with its own infrastructures and networks, sometimes overlapping, sometimes opposed.

## **Piracy**

Piracy is an ambivalent phenomenon in countries like Nigeria. It is widely feared by indigenous film- and music makers as destructive of the small profits they make by way of intellectual property. It has had disastrous effects on indigenous music makers and contributes substantially to the erosion of the industry as a whole. Yet at the same time, many of these same people consume pirate media both privately and professionally. Piracy has made available to Nigerians a vast array of world media at a speed they could never imagine, hooking them up to the accelerated circuit of global media flows. Where cinema screens were once filled with outdated films from the United States or India, pirate media means that Nigerian audiences can watch films contemporaneously with audiences in New York or Bombay. Instead of being marginalized by official distribution networks, Nigerian consumers can now participate in the immediacy of an international consumer culture—but only through the mediating capacity of piracy.

Piracy is part of a so-called shadow (second, marginal, informal, black) economy existing in varying degrees beyond the law. It produces profits, but not for corporations, and provides no revenue for the state.<sup>5</sup> The second economy is untaxed and unmonitored and enjoys all of the benefits and precariousness of this location. Until recently, media infrastructures in Nigeria, from the construction of radio diffusion networks to the building of television stations, have usually been state controlled and organized around the fundamental logic of providing publicity for the state—indeed, of representing its progressivist, developmentalist logic (Larkin 2000). Piracy, by contrast, is based in unofficial, decentralized networks, and Nigerian video represents the migration of these networks into the mainstream.

The rise of privatized media represents not so much an erosion of state power but a larger movement in which the shadow economy has reconfigured the state itself. According to U.S. State Department figures, Nigeria is the largest market for pirate goods in Africa, and one estimate suggests that up to 70 percent of current Nigerian GDP is derived from the shadow economy, making it, in percentage terms, the largest such economy in the world, matched only by Thailand (see

5. Although, as Jonathan Haynes pointed out to me, governments do collect revenue through taxes on blank cassettes.

Schneider 2000; Simone 1998; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Mbembe 2001; Apter 1999). Figures such as these are always provisional and, like many statistics about Nigeria, often simulacral, being not so much a numerical reference to the actual state of affairs in Nigeria but rather a mimicking of rationalist representations of economies that are measurable. But in Nigeria, the second economy has grown to such a scale that no one really knows how to represent it. No one is sure how large the GDP is; no one can calculate the balance of payments or even the size of Nigeria's population (Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Hecht and Simone 1994). Strong forces are at work to make sure that revenue streams from major industries, like oil, are obligingly opaque. Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Béatrice Hibou (1999) have argued that illegal activities in Nigeria (such as fraud, corruption, and the import and export of illegal oil, drugs, and videos) have grown to such a degree that they now form part of the routine operations of the state rather than a pathology outside of it. Nigerians have become famous within Africa and beyond for migrating as workers, importers, exporters, smugglers, drug carriers, and fraudsters. While the federal state continues to take part in the formalized ritual of the official economy, many Nigerians see a widening gap between it and the everyday reality of how Nigeria functions. Piracy is part of this larger reconfiguration of the Nigerian state and economy.

Ravi Sundaram (1999) argues that informal processes in Indian media ecology should be seen as a pirate modernity—a mode of incorporation into the economy that is disorganized, nonideological, and marked by mobility and innovation. This formulation nicely captures the ambivalence of piracy, refusing the simple equation that piracy is an alternative or oppositional modernity (though there are elements of this in people's justification that pirate media goods redress economic inequalities between developed and underdeveloped countries). Piracy is nonideological in that it does not represent a self-conscious political opposition to capitalism—it is not a kind of tactical media (Garcia and Lovink 2001). But it is also worth stressing the high degree of formality that marks this “informal” world. A focus on the mobility, innovation, and provisionality of piracy elides the fact that pirate networks are highly organized and determinative of other sets of relations.

### **Hausa Video**

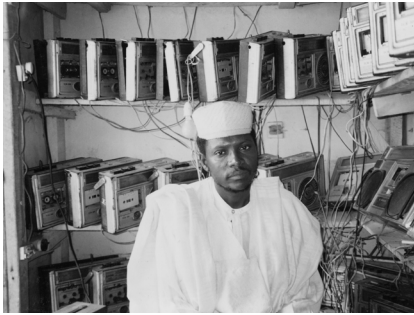
In the 1990s, distributors who had been involved with the reproduction and distribution of religious, Hollywood, and Indian cassettes began to turn their atten-

tion to Nigerian and especially Hausa-language videos. Nigerian videos are narrative, feature-length films produced in English, Hausa, or Yoruba (Haynes 2000; Ukadike 2000; Ukah 2003; see also Meyer 2003 and Wendl 2001).<sup>6</sup> They are not the kind of African movies usually screened at film festivals but rather are oriented toward popular audiences—meaning that their production and financing depends entirely on how well they perform in the marketplace. By 2001, over 3,500 films had passed through the Nigerian film and censorship board—dwarfing by many times the total number of Nigerian feature films. The films are produced in Yoruba, English, and Hausa, with English-language videos—commonly called “Nigerian videos”—receiving the greatest investment and prestige and distribution to Ghana, Kenya, and as far south as South Africa. Hausa-language videos emerged in the mid-1990s, spurred by local drama troupes, disaffected television professionals, and popular Hausa-language authors seeking to make films of their books. In 2001 alone, two hundred Hausa videos were released, easily making this one of the most vibrant forms of African media.

Hausa films have distinguished themselves from southern Nigerian videos by de-emphasizing story lines about magic and the corruption of urban life, concentrating instead on themes of love. In this they draw heavily on the narrative and visual style of Indian films, especially in their use of spectacular song and dance sequences (Larkin 2000, 2003). The production of such a large number of videos has resulted in a small army of people working in the industry as editors, camera operators, directors, set designers, actors, composers, musicians, singers, and graphic designers as well as those involved in distribution and sales. At least three video magazines modeled after the Indian film magazine *Stardust* are in circulation, and, as with Indian films, there is a substantial local audio market based on the sale of movie sound tracks.<sup>7</sup> Hausa videos, which can sell anywhere from ten thousand to one hundred thousand copies, have come to dominate audio- and videocassette production, marginalizing—for the moment—foreign film and music distribution. Video rental shops that used to carry a mixture of many different cassettes are now dominated by Hausa films, and the shops themselves, along with video clubs (many of them illegal), have proliferated across the urban landscape.

6. Ghana is the only other country in West Africa to have developed its own video film industry. Over time, there has been a cross-pollination between Ghanaian and Nigerian English-language videos, so that similar themes, genres, and cultural styles crop up in both.

7. Two of these magazines, *Mujallar Fim* and *Mujallar Bidiyo*, can be accessed online at [www.kanoonline.com](http://www.kanoonline.com).



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**Figures 2–3**

*Alhaji B.K. in his shop in 1995 (left) and in 2002 (right)*

Figures 2 and 3 show the office of Alhaji B. K., former vice president of the Kano Cassette Sellers Recording and Co-operative Society Ltd. In 1995, Alhaji B. K. specialized in recording religious cassettes that he dubbed in his studio/shop in Kofar Wambai. Figure 2 shows the hardware and equipment involved in cassette distribution. The explosive market for Hausa video films transformed his business, so that by 2002 it was almost wholly devoted to the reproduction and distribution of Hausa films. Figure 3 shows his shop now: the dubbing facilities have been moved off-site, the audiocassette machines are gone, and the walls are lined with video jackets. His shop now functions primarily as a place to meet clients traveling to Kano. This transformation is common among most, if not all, distributors. Many still sell Indian and American films, of course; their sales do not seem to have suffered even though their proportion of the market has dropped with the unprecedented popularity of Hausa and Nigerian videos. The shift in businesses like this is indicative that, in the north, Hausa video films have fed off of the networks of piracy much as piracy fed off networks of official media.

As Hausa film exploded in popularity, the style and shape of the video market changed considerably. Hausa videos have come to dominate the market, creating a huge demand that was not there previously.<sup>8</sup> Hausa video film production has become highly organized and regulated, with producers, distributors, and camera operators organized into their own professional associations. An established sys-

8. This trend is confirmed by Indian film distributors who told me their sales remained constant during the rise of Hausa films and that sales currently remained strong. Certainly, Indian films remain hugely popular among Hausa filmmakers and continue to provide a source of inspiration, technical ideas, and narrative themes for Hausa films.

tem of production, postproduction, and distribution has been put into effect: a producer puts up the initial money, finds a writer, director, and actors, and produces the film. Once the film is made, the editing complete, and the covers for the tapes printed, the film enters into a waiting list for release, which ensures that no more than six films come out per month. On the release date, the producer takes the film to one of the distributors in Kano and sells a master copy of the tape and several hundred copies of the jacket for about ₦50 (about 50 cents) each. The film sells for ₦250 (about \$2.50) each. Intellectual property is vested not so much in the tape, which is the prerogative of the distributor, but in the jacket, which is created and controlled by the filmmakers themselves. The jackets for Hausa films—wraparound sleeves in which cassettes are inserted (see fig. 4)—are the only way to distinguish pirate from legal media. The distributor covers the cost of the dubbing machines and the capital outlay and provides important access to the network of distributors. No money is paid to the producer until the film has been sold. Unsurprisingly, this system has been the source of considerable tension between producers and distributors, as it leaves producers carrying all the risks of failure. On at least one occasion, producers in the Kano State Filmmakers Association got together to threaten to boycott distributors in order to increase the price of the jackets.<sup>9</sup> Some filmmakers do exhibit films at the cinema, and others try to sell to television stations, but the economic heart of the industry is the exploitation of domestic video technology.

Video filmmaking, like many aspects of the informal economy, is a precarious and highly volatile business. The tension between distributors and filmmakers is indicative of a struggle for control over the industry, but both parties remain vulnerable to the leveling out of the market. The early boom period of Hausa and Nigerian videos—when it seemed that anyone could make money in the film industry—has passed. Now filmmakers say they have to work harder for less profit, and this has led to an exodus of key directors from the industry (especially in southern Nigeria and Ghana). The precariousness of the industry in the



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**Figure 4**

9. I was told on a number of occasions that many people in the video industry—distributors, editors, jacket designers, musicians, and actors—can make more money than producers, though many actors complain that they do not get paid until after the producer receives money from the distributor.

north also comes from increasing moral criticism of the films themselves, especially the contentious accusation that they are influenced by un-Islamic Indian films. This threat was heightened in 2001 when, following the introduction of sharia law in Kano State, all Hausa filmmaking was banned.

Filmmakers responded to the government's ban by organizing themselves under the Kano State Filmmakers Association, a formal interest group that could negotiate with the government. Because filmmaking was such a new phenomenon, most filmmakers were young (many in their thirties) and lacked ties to senior patrons allied with older forms of trade. Still, the association possessed several ways of exerting pressure on the government. First, magazines such as *Fim* argued that even Islamic states such as Iran had film industries, so that film was not inherently un-Islamic. Tabloids such as *Bidiyo* noted that sharia law was being applied only to filmmakers—there was no question of banning films from India, Hollywood, or southern Nigeria—and threatened to run popular actors and actresses against incumbent politicians. In a meeting with the Ministry of Information of Kano State, the association pointed out that when Zamfara State (the first state in northern Nigeria to turn to sharia law) banned prostitution, they supplied prostitutes with alternative forms of employment and that when they closed down cinema halls, they compensated the owners.<sup>10</sup> By this precedent, they argued, the Kano State government should now be responsible for the welfare of the producers, directors, actors, musicians, composers, writers, editors, and graphic designers employed in the film industry. Since the industry was so large and established, there was no way such compensation would be possible. As a compromise, the filmmakers proposed establishing a censorship board that would certify the Islamic and cultural acceptability of films but allow filmmaking to continue. When the proposal was accepted in March 2001 and the censorship board was put in place, one of its first moves was to ban mixed-sex song sequences in films.

The market for Hausa films has solidified, so that five main distributors now dominate the industry. Cassettes are dubbed in bulk and sold on a wholesale basis through wide-ranging networks forged when Hausa films did not yet exist. Kano, long important as a media center for Indian films and religious cassettes, is now the dominant center for the much larger market for Hausa films. Small distributors travel there from all over northern Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Ghana. Hausa distributors have their own networks that are restricted almost wholly to the Hausa-speaking diaspora.

10. Ironically, perhaps, when filmmakers from Kano traveled to Zamfara to shoot a film, they were invited to the governor's mansion to meet Zamfara's first lady—a huge fan of Hausa video.

The roots of all Nigerian film (whether English, Hausa, or Yoruba) in piracy means that the physical quality and look of Nigerian video films has been determined by the formal qualities of pirate infrastructure. Piracy standardized a particular quality of reproduction; both filmmakers and distributors believe that while people like Nigerian videos, they will not pay higher prices for better image or sound quality. Because the new Hausa videos are dubbed using the same machines as pirate films, because they rely on the same blank cassettes and are distributed through the same channels, piracy has created the aesthetic and technical horizons for nonpirate media. It is this question of aesthetics to which I now turn.

### **The Materiality of Piracy**

In his film *Kumar Talkies*, director Pankaj Kumar evokes the role of the cinema in small-town Indian life. In one scene, a group of men talk about going to watch films in the nearby city. The newness of the films there, the high quality of their reproduction, and the experience of moviegoing come to stand for a temporal and cultural difference between the town and the city. One man says that he doesn't watch films at home because he never gets to see the entire film. Kumar then cuts to the local cinema owner, who explains that this indeed is the case: in order to save electricity costs, he takes out a few reels from each film, imposing enormous jump cuts on the formal integration, slicing whole chunks of narrative from the audience's view. The big city, not surprisingly, becomes the place where this fracture can be repaired, where films are shown in their entirety, and where audiences do not have to confront their physical and cultural marginality every time they attend the cinema.

I have argued elsewhere (Larkin 1998–1999) that media technologies do not just store time, they represent it. As Stephen Kern (1983) has written, different societies can feel cut off from history or excessively attached to the past—without a future or rushing toward one. Technology, especially the media, often provides the conduit for our experience of being “inside” or “outside” history. The materiality of media creates the physical details and the quotidian sensory uses through which these experiences are formed. In *Kumar Talkies*, the everyday operations of cinema houses provide a sign vehicle and symbol for marginality and provincialism. In postcolonial societies, such as India or Nigeria, this sense is intensified due to the powerful link between technology and colonial rule, where modern technology was part of a civilizing mission of colonial power (Adas 1989; Mrázek 2002; Prakash 1999; Spitulnik 1998–1999).

In Nigeria, the ubiquity of technological breakdown and repair imposes a particular experience of technology and its cultural effects. Contemporary urban theory, perhaps understandably, has been less quick to explore these cultural articulations, focusing instead on the reconfiguration of urban space brought about by new media. Paul Virilio, in a typically contradictory fashion, lobbies fiercely for both sides of the argument. On the one hand, he proclaims with dystopian excess that the immediacy of real-time technologies has fundamentally transformed our ability to understand time and space. Instead of being marked by duration or the unfolding of events in succession, time, he argues, is now exposed instantaneously (Virilio 1997, 2000). Events that take place at a distance are experienced immediately thanks to the telepresence brought about by real-time technologies. Speed here is the crucial dimension (see also Kern 1983). Speed conditions our experience of time, producing temporal compression and allowing us to act at a distance. Cities that used to be organized around entrances and exits—nodes that regulate the exchange of people and goods—have given way to the immaterial interface of information exchange. This is certainly the case in contemporary Nigeria, where a series of technological changes over the last ten years, including the rise of satellite television, the growing penetration of Internet culture, and the belated arrival of mobile phone networks, has created new technological portals through which Nigerians engage with one another and the world beyond.

The difficulty with this side of Virilio is his assumption that the experiential transformations he analyzes presume a stable, smoothly operating technological infrastructure. The transition he identifies is totalizing, penetrating homogeneously and organizing universally. It partakes of a world of fast-operating computers, clear-picture televisions, and constant telecommunication signals. But Virilio (2003) also notes that with the invention of the train came the derailment, and few thinkers have been as insistent as he is that the development of technology is tied to the development of catastrophe. My interest in technological collapse is somewhat different. It is not in extravagant spectacles like collapsing bridges or exploding space shuttles but in the small, ubiquitous experience of breakdown as a condition of technological existence. In Nigeria, cars, televisions, VCRs, buses, and motorbikes are often out of service. Even when they work, electricity supplies are unreliable and beset by power surges that damage consumer equipment. NEPA, the Nigerian Electric Power Authority, is famously known by the epithet “Never Expect Power Always,” and phone lines are expensive and difficult to obtain. Poverty and the disorganization of the Nigerian economy mean that con-

sumer technologies such as scooters and cars arrive already used and worn out. After their useful life in Belgium or Holland, cars are exported to Nigeria as “new” second-hand vehicles.<sup>11</sup> After these vehicles arrive in Nigeria, worn parts are repaired, dents are banged out, and paint is resprayed to remake and “tropicalize” them (see Verrips and Meyer 2001). This is, of course, a temporary state of affairs. Other parts expire, second-hand parts break down, while local “innovations” and adjustments designed to make cars, televisions, and VCRs work fail. A cycle of breakdown, repair, and breakdown again is the condition of existence for many technologies in Nigeria. As a consequence, Nigeria employs a vast army of people who specialize in repairing and reconditioning broken technological goods, since the need for repair is frequent and the cost of it cheap (Sundaram 1999; Verrips and Myers 2001).

Critical work on urbanism has argued that utopian theories of technology and urban transformation de-emphasize the fact that entire societies are excluded from the new information infrastructures (what Manuel Castells [1998] terms “technological apartheid”; see also Castells 1996; Graham and Marvin 1996, 2001; Sassen 2002). These arguments recur somewhat in debates over the so-called digital divide and the division of the world into technological haves and have-nots. My difficulty with this move is with the dichotomizing logic it promotes and its assumption that the economic and cultural effects of new technologies are absent from “disconnected” societies. The danger here is that this polemic looks through rather than at the object at hand and fails to examine the structuring effects that technologies and their failures—however dysfunctional—have in everyday life. Virilio’s account of the experience of speed in contemporary urbanization is highly relevant to societies such as Nigeria, but perhaps not in the ways he imagines. There is no question, for instance, that new technologies have resulted in profound temporal acceleration for Nigerians. But the poor material infrastructure of Nigeria ensures that as the speed of Nigerian life increases, so too does the gap between *actual* and *potential* acceleration, between what technologies *can* do and what they *do* do. Thus, even as life speeds up, the experience of technological marginalization intensifies, and the gap between how fast society is moving and how fast it could move becomes a site of considerable political tension.

The poor condition of infrastructure and the ubiquity of breakdown bring

11. For an interesting comparative example, see the trade in second-hand clothing analyzed by Karin Hansen (2000). Also, Gerald Lombardi’s 1999 study of computer use in Brazil includes a fascinating discussion of the informal (and illegal) market in phone lines that feeds off poor infrastructure.

about their corollary: repair as a cultural mode of existence for technology. This is a consequence of both poverty and innovation. Breakdown and repair structure the ability of subjects to use and be used by technologies and also these subjects' sense of time and place. The culture of repair rests on the experience of duration in the everyday use of technology. Breakdown creates a temporal experience that has less to do with dizzying, real-time global integration than with waiting for e-mail messages to open, machines to be repaired, or electricity to be restored. In Nigeria, all technologies are variously subject to a constant cycle of breakdown and repair; the promise of technological prosthesis is thwarted by the common experience of technological collapse. Each repair enforces another waiting period, an often frustrating experience of duration brought about by the technology of speed itself. The temporal experience of slowness comes as a consequence of speed-producing technologies, so that speed and acceleration, deceleration and stasis are relative, continually shifting states.

In figure 5 we see the stringing together of cassette recorders used to dub audiocassettes in Kano. The covers—intended to protect the cassette while recording—have been ripped off for ease of ejection. Wires hang loosely, sometimes tangled in bunches; many machines have their casings broken, and all are exposed to the harmattan winds that deposit layers of dust on every surface of the city. Piracy depends on material modes of reproduction such as these. The operations of piracy create material effects on the storage and retrieval of data and sensorial effects on notions of space, time, culture, and the body. In Nigeria, the infrastructure for media, especially pirate media, is often marked by disrepair and noise.



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Figures 5–6

Nigerian dealers in the legal and illegal reproduction of media record data on cheap tapes with low-quality machines. This information is retrieved for the most part through old VCRs, televisions, and cassette players marked by distortion and interference. Watching, say, Hollywood or Indian films on VCRs in Nigeria, where there is no official distribution of nonpirate media, means necessarily watching the dub of a dub of a dub. As the same dealers, using the same equipment and same blank cassettes, dub Hausa video films, the result is that the visual standard for pirate media remains in place. Pirated images have a hallucinogenic quality. Detail is destroyed as realist representation fades into pulsating, pure light. Facial features are smoothed away, colors are broken down into constituent tones, and bodies fade into one another. Reproduction takes its toll, degrading the image by injecting dropouts and bursts of fuzzy noise, breaking down dialogue into muddy, often inaudible sound. This distortion is often heard in the vibrating shrillness of the tape players used by *masu saida kaset*, itinerant cassette hawkers who travel around the city selling eclectic collections of music (see fig. 6).

The quality of the tape player used by these cassette sellers is standard in Nigeria. As the seller travels, the cassette player blares out Indian film sound tracks, Islamic preaching, or Hausa songs at such a high volume that the signal degenerates into the pure vibration of the machine. In this, the machine actually mimics the sound of live musical performances in Kano, which often rely on the distorted amplification of microphones, loudspeakers, and portable generators.<sup>12</sup> This distortion affects many media in Nigeria. Film prints, for instance, arrive at the end of long, picaresque journeys that begin in the metropolitan cinematic centers of India or Europe and cross the cinema halls of many countries before reaching the Nigerian circuit. There, they are often shown until they literally fall apart. All are scratched and heavily damaged, full of surprising and lengthy jump cuts where film has stuck in the projector and burned. Although the image and sound of video are poor, Ghanaian video filmmaker Willy Akuffo has warned video makers against a nostalgia for the “quality” of film that forgets how terrible film prints actually were. As a former projectionist, he had to deal with repairing burned film and refixing previous repairs that the prints had accumulated on their journey to Africa.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the quality of video projection, with its low-resolution, ghostly

12. Christopher Waterman (1990) points out that distortion by amplifiers became such an accepted part of live performance that musicians would intentionally destroy new loudspeakers to achieve the desired buzzing sound. I thank Andrew Apter for reminding me of this.

13. Birgit Meyer reminded me that Akuffo described this problem with poor film prints at a workshop organized by the International Study Commission of Media, Religion, and Culture (19–27 May 2000, Accra, Ghana).

images, can be highly variable depending on the age and condition of the equipment. In the poorer cinemas that converted to video in the mid-1990s, there were terrible problems with tracking and inaudible sound. The projected image often filled only a portion of the cinema screen or would be distorted into an hourglass shape. At other times, the corners of the image vibrated as if the screen were a photograph peeling off.<sup>14</sup>

The infrastructure of reproduction, like most contemporary infrastructures in Nigeria, is marked by cheapness, faulty operation, and constant repair. “All data flows,” the media theorist Friedrich Kittler (1999: 14) reminds us, “must pass through the bottleneck of the signifier,” and in so doing they are vulnerable to being “engulfed by the noise of the real.” The “real” here is precisely the fuzziness of cinematic images or the hissing of tape recorders—the noise produced by the medium of transmission itself as it encodes and disseminates data across space and time. Yuri Tsivian (1994) has termed this effect the “semiotics of interference” and has analyzed the operation of early Russian cinema, arguing that the physical conditions of media exhibition—scratches on the film and noise and vibrations from projectors—became part of the “message” of films themselves.<sup>15</sup> For Nigerians, the costs of consuming and producing world media require operating on the margins of technology. Distortion on an audio tape, like dropouts on a video or a slow connection to the Internet, are the material conditions of existence for media. While media infrastructure creates the reality of being ever more connected to a globalized world, it does so by emphasizing Nigerians’ marginalization at the same time. Electricity blackouts, snowy television images, difficulties getting international phone lines, and distorted loudspeakers on cassette players all create a technological veil of semiotic distortion for Nigerians.

Some of this distortion is taken for granted, rendered invisible to people by its ubiquity. It is clear, for instance, that many of the most popular transnational media forms, such as sports, action films, wrestling, and Indian films, are highly visual and thus capable of overcoming both linguistic differences and audio degra-

14. Yet despite these problems, cassettes remain the more popular medium in northern Nigeria. In January 2002, when I asked Hausa video filmmakers why they had not switched to video CDs to distribute their movies, they pointed out that the technology was not yet widely available in the north, in part because damage to a VCD could ruin the entire disc, while damage to a tape created only passing moments of fuzziness.

15. James Ferguson (1999) makes an interesting but different argument on the role of “noise” in globalization. Ferguson focuses on the traffic in cultural meanings, arguing that cities are culturally “noisy” in that all sorts of forms of cultural flows clash and are available to urban dwellers. But Ferguson’s (1999: 208) central question concerns “which of the bits floating in the swirl of events does any given social actor bear?”

dation. But this degradation is rarely commented on. Instead, what these films evoke is the fantasy of other countries where deficiencies in infrastructure are believed not to exist. For many northern Nigerians, Saudi Arabia is a place where electricity always flows, where roads have no potholes, and where hospitals are of the highest quality—just as everyone in Europe and America is thought to own televisions and mobile phones.<sup>16</sup> These fantasies represent implicit and sometimes explicit critiques of the failures of the Nigerian state to provide basic infrastructures for everyday life. The breakdown of infrastructure provides a conduit for critiques of the state and of the corruption and ethnic favoritism of political elites (Verrips and Meyer 2001).

## **Conclusion**

In his exhaustive study of the rise of print, the historian Adrian Johns (1998) argues that piracy, rather than being an aberration of an “original” mode of text production, is central to the way print operates and spreads over time and space. The qualities we now associate with print—its fixity, guarantee of authorship, and commodity form—were not inherent in the technology but the result of a social compact, the institution of a technological order of reality. Johns is instructive in reminding us that, in many parts of the world, media piracy is not a pathology of the circulation of media forms but its prerequisite. In many places, piracy is the only means by which certain media—usually foreign—are available. And in countries like Nigeria, the technological constraints that fuel pirate media provide the industrial template through which other, nonpirate media are reproduced, disseminated, and consumed.

Piracy and the wider infrastructure of reproduction it has generated reveal the organization of contemporary Nigerian society. They show how the parallel economy has migrated onto center stage, overlapping and interpenetrating with the official economy, mixing legal and illegal regimes, uniting social actors, and organizing common networks. This infrastructure creates its own modes of spatiality, linking Nigeria into new economic and social networks. Piracy means that Nigerian media production and circulation no longer depend on the intervention

16. Writing about the cosmopolitan sexual relations between Hausa *‘yan daudu* (men who act like women) and men in Saudi Arabia, Rudolf Gaudio (1996) argues that when these *‘yan daudu* return from Saudi Arabia, they parade their sophistication and cultural savoir faire—part of which involves raving “about the creature comforts that Saudi Arabia [has] to offer: telephones, air conditioning, a constant supply of electricity and running water. *‘Ba abin da babu’* they would say, ‘there’s nothing that isn’t there.’” See also O’Brien 1999.

of the state (colonial or postcolonial) but are captured by the logic of privatization and gradually extend over differing areas of social experience. Sundaram (1999: 61), writing about everyday electronic culture in India—self-trained programmers who build computers and servers by cobbling together second-hand computer parts—refers to this as “recycled modernity,” one that is “everyday in its imaginary, pirate in its practice, and mobile in its innovation.” Rem Koolhaas (Koolhaas et al. 2001) has recently explored a similar phenomenon in the collapse of traffic systems in Lagos, a city overwhelmed by an increase in cars and a lack of roads. There, jams and bottlenecks force detours through “non-flow” areas, spreading traffic off the planned grids and expanding the motorable space of the city. As cars back up for longer periods of time, they create markets for hawkers. Over time the markets get formalized, roadside mosques are marked out to service the workers, and new infrastructures emerge to paper over the inefficiencies of the old (see also Mbembe and Roitman 1995; Simone 2001; Verrips and Meyer 2001).

The infrastructure of reproduction created by piracy generates material and sensorial effects on both media and their consumers. Cheap tape recorders, old televisions, blurred videos that are the copy of a copy of a copy—these are the material distortions endemic to the reproduction of media goods in situations of poverty and illegality, and they shape the ways these media take on cultural value and act on individuals and groups. The dialectic of technological breakdown and repair imposes its own cultural experience of modernity, an alternative speeding up and stasis, and a world where gaps in space and time are continually annihilated and reinforced.

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