

'Who wants a BlackBerry these days?' Serialized new media and its trash

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'Some money miss road guy. I doubt if I alone can drain his wallet. need help urgently.' So reads a text that Damisa sends to ask six of her college friends to come and join her on her date. A close-up of her BlackBerry fills the screen as we watch her cherry-red painted nails tap out the message and hit send. She continues to text for a minute, laughing now and then, before her bored date chides her for texting on her phone. Unlike the date, the audience is aware of the exchange happening on the BlackBerry through a sequence of four extreme close-ups of the phone, cut between establishing shots of the couple at a white-tablecloth restaurant, and medium close-ups of Damisa, completely engrossed, and of her ignored date's growing exasperation. 'Help is on ur way in a jiffy. we're r u?' The BlackBerry's small screen again dominates the frame as Damisa types her response, 'Crystal Prawns'. Throughout Ubong Basse Nya's three-part Nigerian film serial *BlackBerry Babes* (2011–12), BlackBerry phones share a leading role with the Nigerian stars who play the women who flaunt them as status symbols around a university campus. The series not only shows the content of the many texts between characters in extreme close-up, it also lingers on the phones long enough to show audiences the BlackBerry menu interface and its basic functionality. The technology is so central to the film that plot points appear to be a series of infomercials about what you can, or should not, do with a BlackBerry, with the 'Babes' as smartphone demonstrators. When Damisa's date asks her to order some food so that

they can at least eat while she texts, she condescendingly explains to her technologically inept companion that she is not texting, but instead using her BlackBerry to connect to the internet, a feature of BlackBerrys of which he is ignorant. ‘What it is called’, she informs him, ‘is modern technology’.

Following their exchange, Damisa’s crew arrives to take advantage of the man’s wealth and partake in a free meal. The film series follows this clique of upper-class, trend-setting college girls as they use their BlackBerrys to swindle men, like Damisa’s date, out of their money. Damisa, who has the newest BlackBerry, is the leader of the group; her best friend, Vivienne, is her closest rival. Damisa and Vivienne vie for men and for lead status among their friends. Other women in the group, such as Kimberly and Nicole, also have BlackBerrys but their models are too old to make them leaders in the circle’s technology-based hierarchy. Kaisha is the only Babe without a BlackBerry. Her modest upbringing is made visible in her familial relationship to Apolonia, a plus-sized classmate with a thick Yoruba accent and lower-class background, whom the Babes love to ridicule. Desperation for social mobility and inclusion prompts the girls to engage in petty theft, credit card fraud and prostitution in order to secure the latest BlackBerry model. The ‘BB’ Babes are eventually punished for their actions, but the absurdity of their exploits to obtain a BlackBerry – ultimately an empty signifier of status – is the joke that fuels this serial comedy across three two-hour parts.

In this essay I draw on the discourse about BlackBerry in *BlackBerry Babes* to unpack global trends in mobile telephony, and to critique the history of a media discourse that projects African new media use as the delayed, shoddy sequel to a series of media inventions originating in the western world. I expand contemporary debates about media seriality to argue that seriality is the narrative form of capitalism. Like the new models of the BlackBerry phones the girls fetishize, the *BlackBerry Babes* serial becomes a means of reinforcing both the phones and the Nigerian video industry as evidence of equal participation within global capitalism, while still expressing cynicism towards the potential of social and economic mobility that these screen technologies seem to offer. I address the global ambiguities of the new media fetish as they are expressed in *BlackBerry Babes*, hovering between disenchantment and the continuing desire for the techno-utopian promise of the new.

After the disappointing unveiling of the BlackBerry tablet PlayBook in April 2011, and the global three-day Research in Motion (RIM) system failure in October 2011, the popularity of the Canadian company that brought the world the so-called ‘CrackBerry’ was in decline with little promise of recovery. Much to the disappointment of BlackBerry customers, RIM’s answer to the iPad had been plagued with functionality issues. When the PlayBook tablet was released on 19 April 2011 it did not have native e-mail: for users to access their e-mail on both devices they were required to download a bridge app to link their BlackBerry e-mail to the PlayBook. Furthermore, since the PlayBook and BlackBerry

- 1 Nicole Perloth, 'The BlackBerry as black sheep', *The New York Times*, 15 October 2012, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/16/technology/blackberry-becomes-a-source-of-shame-for-users.html?smid=url-share>> accessed 8 April 2021.
- 2 Joshua Brustein, 'The BlackBerry stigma,' *The New York Times*, 15 October 2012, <<https://www.nytimes.com/video/business/100000001842474/the-blackberry-stigma.html>> accessed 8 April 2021.
- 3 Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park has several 'Empathy Labs', a project initiated by the Facebook accessibility team, that allow employees to experience the Facebook interface via various modes of accessibility. The team works on designing Facebook for differently-abled individuals and for those users, largely from the global South, who have different technology infrastructures, such as slow internet speeds or older equipment. The 'labs' are not specifically designed for engineers to consult, but instead are strategically located around the campus in an attempt to permeate the 'hacker' culture with an ethical acknowledgement that not everyone experiences Facebook in the same way. For more information, see Cade Metz, 'Meet the team that makes it possible for the blind to use Facebook', *WIRED*, 22 February 2015, <<https://www.wired.com/2015/02/meet-team-makes-possible-blind-use-facebook/>> accessed 8 April 2021; Hayley Tsukayama, 'Facebook's "Empathy Lab": how Facebook designs for disabled users', in *The Washington Post*, 31 March 2015, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2015/03/31/facebook-empathy-lab-how-facebook-designs-for-disabled-users/>> accessed 8 April 2021.
- 4 'BlackBerry finally gets some love ... in Nigeria', *Wall Street Daily*, 11 March 2013; Brian Fung, 'BlackBerry is doing incredibly well – in Africa', *The Washington Post*, 13 November 2013, <<https://>

used different operating systems, the apps that BlackBerry users enjoyed on their phones would not function on the PlayBook. Several months later, customer dissatisfaction was exacerbated when BlackBerry's global internet service went down for three days. Offended customers took to Twitter with the mutinous 'DearBlackBerry' hashtag to vent their frustrations.

By 2012 *The New York Times* had declared that BlackBerry, once a symbol of wealth and power for executives in the USA, was now the 'black sheep' of smartphones. US BlackBerry users were reportedly so ashamed of their phones that they were hiding them under more fashionable Apple products during business meetings.¹ They were described as stuck in the Stone Age with those other obstinate luddites who still used AOL and Myspace.² BlackBerry appeared to be an artefact from another era destined for the museum, the media archaeology classroom, or Facebook headquarters Empathy Labs.³

Following the *New York Times* piece, headlines across the blogosphere began to exclaim with incredulity, 'BlackBerry dead? Don't tell Africa', 'BlackBerry is doing incredibly well – in Africa', and 'BlackBerry finally gets some love ... in Nigeria'. Notably all of these headlines followed a similar dramatic logic in which the inherent absurdity of BlackBerry as 'an object of desire' is discovered to still be enrapturing consumers in a world technologically apart – in 'a world where people still dream of new BlackBerry'.⁴ A slippage between elsewhere and 'elsewhen' runs under the surface of this language. On the one hand these headlines depicted a modern Africa connected to global capital through smartphone information and communication technologies, but they also rehearsed a vision of a unilineal technological evolution in which Africa, marked by technological lag, was the brutal punchline. The butt of the joke may have been BlackBerry, but along with it so was Africa.

African difference is often accentuated and codified by new media discourse. Around the time of the #DearBlackBerry fiasco and RIM's subsequent forfeiture of the number-one position in global smartphone sales, the phrase 'first world problems' entered the American lexicon.⁵ The phrase is often used to qualify complaints about the small inconveniences that sometimes come with the consumption of high-status goods, particularly coalescing around the latest media technologies. An example of a 'first world problem' from 2015 – 'when you're just trying to watch *That 70s Show* but too many people are on Netflix' – has now been rendered obsolete by Netflix's globalization.⁶ 'First world problems' is in effect a humble-brag about overindulgence. In response to the popular coinage, Nigerian-American author Teju Cole wrote a biting critique of the concept – appropriately enough on Twitter:

I don't like this expression 'First World problems.' It is false and it is condescending. Yes, Nigerians struggle with floods or infant mortality. But these same Nigerians also deal with mundane and

www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2013/11/13/blackberry-is-doing-incredibly-well-in-africa/>; Steve McCaskill, 'BlackBerry smartphones still an object of desire in Africa', *TechWeek Europe*, 27 November 2013 <<https://www.silicon.co.uk/workspace/blackberry-smartphones-africa-curve-132817>>; 'BlackBerry dead? Don't tell Africa' *Tech Central*, 7 April 2015 <<https://techcentral.co.za/blackberry-dead-dont-tell-africa/55684/>>; David Cotris, 'A world where people still dream of new BlackBerry', *Sectornomics*, *CNBC*, 27 February 2014 <<https://www.cnb.com/2014/02/27/a-world-where-people-still-dream-of-new-blackberry.html>> all accessed 8 April 2021.

- 5 The earliest definition on Urban Dictionary is from 2005. The First World Problems subreddit began in January 2011, while Google trend analytics shows that search interest spiked in December 2011 and then again in July 2014 with the release of Weird Al's song of the same title.
- 6 dominic frissora 'When you're just trying to watch *That 70s Show* but too many people are on Netflix', 3 January 2015, <<https://twitter.com/DomFrissora/status/683872366087122945>>. Others that stand out are Kayleigh Johnson 'I'm always sooo critical of my instagram feed and think it looks crap in comparison to everyone else's!', 3 January 2016, <https://twitter.com/k_leexj/status/683654161796329472>; Helen Freer 'I miss that new phone feeling ...When you'd spend a day figuring out how it all worked. But now it's just another iPhone', <<https://twitter.com/hmfreer/status/680896661674180608>> all accessed 8 April 2021.
- 7 @tejucole. *Twitter*, 19 November 2011. As quoted in Alexis C. Madrigal, 'What's wrong with #FirstWorldProblems', *The Atlantic*, 21 November 2011, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/11/whats-wrong-with->

seemingly luxurious hassles. Connectivity issues on your BlackBerry, cost of car repair, how to sync your iPad, what brand of noodles to buy: Third World problems. All the silly stuff of life doesn't disappear just because you're black and live in a poorer country. People in the richer nations need a more robust sense of the lives being lived in the darker nations. Here's a First World problem: the inability to see that others are as fully complex and as keen on technology and pleasure as you are.⁷

As Cole pointed out, the notion of first world problems works on the assumption that the third world is too occupied with the serious problems of famine, disease and corruption to have time to engage in such trivial technological indulgences. New media technologies in Africa are instead burdened with solving such serious third world problems as infant mortality, poor agricultural production, the spread of Ebola and the underselling of market goods, but ignore what Cole pleads for at the end of his tweet, the fact that those in the third world are consumers too. In the early 2000s, instead of being viewed as global consumers, Africans were seen as a world apart on the other side of the digital divide, with West African IP addresses barred from digital marketplaces. The combination of 'first world problems' and the sardonic 'BlackBerry Dead? Don't tell Africa' headlines of the early 2010s established new media as the symbolic means to define, rank and maintain hierarchical relationships between the ideological binaries of rich/poor, first/third world, and white/black. These representations of new media thus effectively preserve the racial divisions that have been necessary for racial capitalism, or the accumulation of capitalist wealth based on the exploitation of racialized groups through imperialism, the transatlantic slave trade and globalization.⁸ Cole's tweet exposes the consequences of a racial divide between media 'worlds' as the global hold of racial capitalism. When the persistence of global white supremacy means that Africa continues to be represented perpetually in a pre-modern past without access to the latest media technologies, Africans demanding to be seen as equally modern must plead to be seen as consumers.

A few months after *The New York Times* reported on the American public's revulsion toward BlackBerry phones, *The Economist* published an article relating the shocking rise of BlackBerry popularity in Nigeria and other parts of Africa to *BlackBerry Babes*, declaring that 'the plot may be absurd, but its sense of fashion is spot on'.⁹ Stories that circulated at the time of the film's release implied that young men and women would only consider dating one another if they had a BlackBerry, and that entrepreneurs found that they were not taken seriously in business if they could not produce one. The circulation of these apocryphal claims followed online discussions of the film, signalling that at least some Nigerians equated the phone with the same status-granting capacity depicted in the sensational *BlackBerry Babes* series.¹⁰

firstworldproblems/248829/>
accessed 8 April 2021.

- 8 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983).
- 9 'BlackBerry babes', *The Economist*, 8 December 2012, <<https://www.economist.com/business/2012/12/08/blackberry-babes>> accessed 8 April 2021.
- 10 "'BlackBerry Babes' – what does this movie say about us?', *BellaNaija*, 18 March 2011, <<https://www.bellanaija.com/2011/03/blackberry-babes-what-does-this-movie-say-about-us/>> accessed 7 April 2021.
- 11 Jonathan Haynes, *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 263.
- 12 Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), p. xvii. Entwistle describes how fashion often recycles and revisits past trends rather than only ever representing the utterly novel: 'This fashion quality is held in place by the multitude of choices and decisions that momentarily secure the particular appeal and celebrate it as the new' (p. xv). See also Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Ilya Parkins, *Poiret, Dior and Schiaparelli: Fashion, Femininity and Modernity* (London: Berg, 2012).
- 13 Parkins, *Poiret, Dior and Schiaparelli*, p. 2.
- 14 Jean Baudrillard, 'Fashion, or the enchanting spectacle of the code', in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1976), p. 111. See also Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (1863), trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1995), p. 12.
- 15 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 30.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 1–35.

Not only did the characters' obsessions with BlackBerry parallel rising sales in Nigeria and across Africa more generally during the early 2010s, the Babes display a frequent concern about the trendiness of the BlackBerry model they use. In the second part of the first film, Vivienne asks her wealthy uncle for a new BlackBerry. When her uncle points out that she already has four, Vivienne explains, 'Uncle, what I'm asking for is the BlackBerry Torch. It's high resolution. It's new! It's not here. It's different. My messages can go faster, I can reach the world faster. The fashion is incredible.' Her uncle asks if her other phones have stopped working, but Vivienne dodges the question, repeatedly insisting that her other phones are 'out of fashion' and that she therefore needs the newest model. This articulation of the 'fashion gaze' – which Jonathan Haynes calls 'a mechanism for enabling and controlling social mobility'¹¹ – is a central quality of campus films like *BlackBerry Babes* that follow the scandalous lives of college girls on Nigerian campuses.

Fashion has long held a special relationship to conceptions of time; it is the 'incessant, cyclical pursuit of the "new"',¹² and it is that relationship to time that makes it such a 'quintessentially modern form'.¹³ As Jean Baudrillard declared, 'Modernity is a code, and fashion is its emblem'.¹⁴ In *BlackBerry Babes* the emphasis on the fashion status of the mobile phone tethers the new telecommunications technology to a model of time in which some mobile phones represent the recent past and others the contemporary moment. Vivienne's uncle advises her that 'Life is not all about new models of phones', but when Vivienne teaches him about how social networking allows her to stay in touch with the rest of the world, he responds, 'So, that means the rest of us [those not using smartphones] are living in the Stone Age?' Her uncle's description of himself as stuck in another epoch parallels what *The New York Times* said about BlackBerry users. Both texts refer to people who use out-of-fashion technologies as coming from the Stone Age, making BlackBerry simultaneously both anachronistic and cutting-edge in different parts of the world. BlackBerry demonstrates how 2011 mobile phone trends can define geographic space through what Johannes Fabian calls temporal distancing.¹⁵ Some places, those where the 'Stone Age' BlackBerry remained fashionable, were projected further into the past than others, aligning the elsewhere of Africa even more with the sense of an elsewhere. The distance between Stone Age technologies in Africa and new media in Euro-America rehearses ideologies of universal progress developed with imperial capitalism in which the 'civilized' West was heralded as the visible future of the developing world.¹⁶ Within the diegeses of *BlackBerry Babes* it is non-BlackBerry phones – the formerly ubiquitous Nokia – that would signify the time of the class-based Other.

The newer models of phones employed in *BlackBerry Babes* instil their owners with different class possibilities. Vivienne's first lines in the film, for example, are her snarky response to a proposition for a date from a suave stranger (who happens to be Damisa's boyfriend/pimp). She responds:

Mister, in my hand here I have the BlackBerry Javelin; I have the BlackBerry Bold 1; the BlackBerry Bold 2; and I also have the BlackBerry Curve. And if I was to get anything new for myself, obviously it would be something higher than what I have here, which is the BlackBerry Bold 3. So, if you really want to talk to me, you'll get me the BlackBerry Bold 3, with a four-year internet connection.

Within her exaggerated requests she lays out the hierarchy of the different models, with the Bold 3 being 'something higher' than the BlackBerrys she already possesses. This sets up the corollary throughout the film between phone models and the social standing of each of the Babes.

Repeatedly throughout the series, gaining ownership of a better model catapults the owner to a higher social rung. Kaisha steals a BlackBerry Torch from a stranger, propelling her from the bottom of the social ladder to near the top; when she announces her new acquisition, Kimberly tells her that she has 'stepped up so high'. When Damisa drives to school in a Hummer that she bought with money extorted through smartphone-enabled credit card fraud, her friends pop champagne and cheer for her: 'This is another step up!'; 'Here is to the step-up, girl!' This elevation in status is reinforced by the height of the Hummer. When she gets out to celebrate with her coterie, she has to step down to meet them.

Even in her role as the least wealthy character, Apolonia's purchase of a 'dummy' BlackBerry boosts her higher than her peers. Eager to be one of the Babes, she attempts to buy a BlackBerry at a local kiosk but grossly miscalculates how much they cost. Wanting to make a deal, the phone salesman offers to sell her his non-functioning 'dummy' phone. Apolonia buys it and shows it off to Vivienne and her friends. When she refuses to take it out of the box, they are unconvinced it is real and continue to scorn her. Only Vivienne's house cleaner Aggie is impressed, and she follows Apolonia out of the house excitedly, hoping to catch a glance of the fetishized phone. Apolonia, mimicking the Babes, scoffs at Aggie, exaggerating their suddenly apparent class difference: 'Do we belong in the same class? Aggie, look at me, look at me very well.' As Apolonia spins around for Aggie to consider, the camera tilts down to survey her figure. 'Aggie, look at Apolo very well, we don't belong on the same level.' Apolonia demands that Aggie recognize her higher status, which Aggie seems willing to do, but Apolonia's direct invitation to pass judgement on her extends to the camera and the audience. The camera angle treats Apolonia as it would one of the other BlackBerry Babes, but her larger body, ill-fitting clothes and poor command of English expose any purported class mobility as empty posturing. Apolonia struggles to speak the polished English that the other BlackBerry Babes employ, often slipping between pidgin and Yoruba. Her blue, tight-fitting blouse, indicative of popular western fashion, accentuates her large form. Unlike the natural tones and artfully shaded eye-shadow worn by the BlackBerry Babes, Apolonia's lipstick is a

garish red and her blue eye-shadow is caked on, giving an overall clownish impression. Even worse, her wig is made of cheap synthetic hair that has already started to mat together. Apolonia is equivalent to the dummy and the Chinese ‘knock-off’ BlackBerrys she buys. The not-quite-real BlackBerry is doubled in the woman who is physically and socially not quite a babe.

Apolonia’s character is reminiscent of a stock character from Ghanaian concert-party theatre of the 1920s and 1930s, which became popular in Nigeria after several such shows were performed there.¹⁷ The character was based on a colonial stereotype of a formally educated Ghanaian man who wore western clothing, worked in trade or for the government, but who could not effectively master anglophone mannerisms, revealing his ‘failure’ through over-dressing and his over-ambitious attempts to speak the ‘Queen’s English’. The concert party ‘gentleman’ aspires towards whiteness through affectation and style, and his inability to achieve verisimilitude – he is inevitably ‘not quite’ white – is the joke: he wears a tailcoat but a crumpled shirt; he speaks upper-class inflected English until, in his anger, he slips into a local dialect. Catherine Cole describes these concert party characters as depicting a ‘contrast between surface and substance, between their performed exteriority and their interior ontological status’.¹⁸ She argues that by mimicking colonial stereotypes, the concert party resembled a drag show that ‘revealed the imitative structure of colonialism itself, as well as its contingency’, and showed that ‘civilization was something one did, rather than something one *was* or *was not*’.¹⁹

As a female version of the concert party gentleman, Apolonia’s attempts to be a BlackBerry Babe always fall short. But if Apolonia is in drag, her performance reveals that so too is every BlackBerry Babe. Her outlandish imitation of Vivienne and the others exposes how much their aspiration for class mobility via the mobile phone – within a system of global capitalism whose animating core is still based on global white supremacy – is just as foolish as her own. Apolonia’s ‘not quite/not white’ act of mimicry,²⁰ like a moment of *détournement*, breaks the spectacle of the phones that naturalizes and perpetuates capitalism as the dominant ideological system of control.²¹ Since her performance plays on the unfitness of her body as too dark and too fat, it is not only the ideology of capitalism that is derailed but also the racial and gender politics with which that system is entwined.

Her performance exposes the foolishness of fetishistic, new media-based hierarchies embodied in the headlines that made Nigerian desire for BlackBerry an international joke. *BlackBerry Babes* thus acknowledges that media fetishism is dependent on those who believe that others believe.²² The ridicule with which the film treats these mobile-phone-based social hierarchies allows audiences to laugh at their own desire to participate in global consumerism while experiencing its contingency. By mocking the ability of new media technologies such as the BlackBerry to bestow modernity, postmodernity, or any post-post variant yet to be

17 The Axim Trio concert party toured Nigeria with the Cape Coast Sugar Babies dance band in 1935. See Efua Sutherland, *The Original Bob: The Story of Bob Johnson: Ghana’s Ace Comedian* (Accra: Anowuo Educational Publications, 1970), pp. 16–20. Hubert Ogunnde took his Nigerian theatre company, Ogunde Concert Party, to Ghana twice, where he gained knowledge of the Ghanaian concert party.

18 Catherine Cole, *Ghana’s Concert Party Theatre* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 129.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 129–130.

20 Homi Bhabha, ‘Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse’, *October*, no. 28 (1984), p. 132.

21 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1994). See also the use of Debord to discuss the photographic practices of the Black Panther movement, in Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), pp. 147–48.

22 See Bruno Latour, ‘Fetish-factish’, *Material Religion*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2011), p. 43.

determined on its user, *BlackBerry Babes* turns the system of global capital in upon itself. If the Babes aspire to be modern, Apolonia reminds us that to be modern is something that one does, not something one is. Or perhaps, even more concisely, modernity is revealed to be nothing more than something one buys.

Fittingly the film narrative of *BlackBerry Babes* joins in the spectacle of modernity through its own serial form. Like the phones the film mocks, *BlackBerry Babes* was sold in multiple editions and is an example of what Moradewun Adejunmobi has called the ‘televsual turn’ in African cinema. The televsual style, with the trend for ‘open-ended’ narrative structure ‘to accommodate the possibility of deferred resolution’, resembles the soap operas and telenovelas that have influenced Nollywood style.²³ Between the mid 1980s and the early 1990s, African nations began massive structural adjustment programmes in which the privatization of state-owned broadcasters lead to an influx of US soap operas and Latin American telenovelas. The Nigerian commercial film industry – which exploded in the mid 1990s with the increased availability of affordable VHS video equipment – adopted the serial approach to filmmaking, breaking their stories into segments and thereby suspending the resolution of dramatic action across multiple instalments.²⁴ Thus the first part of *BlackBerry Babes* ends on a cliffhanger, making it necessary to watch the second part for its narrative resolution, in which the Babes are arrested and punished. But the popularity of the series resulted in a third part being made to extend the story. In a signal to its televsual seriality, part three of the *BlackBerry Babes* film series was entitled, ‘BlackBerry Babes Season 2’.

Televsual modes of storytelling in Nigerian cinema appeared around the time that serialized narratives on US television were being elevated in terms of cultural prestige by the reception of new programming coming from companies like HBO. Yet while US prestige television shows have, since the 1990s, been valorized as exceptional and novel examples of seriality (especially by the entertainment press), other forms of seriality in global screen culture remain sullied by their relationship to unsophisticated genres such as soap opera. As Jeffrey Sconce has argued, the extension of narrative in US primetime television was a move away from the ‘amnesia television’ of *Gilligan’s Island* towards greater ‘realism’.²⁵ Jason Mittell describes these changes as ‘narrative complexity’ or the redefinition of ‘episodic forms under the influence of serial narration’.²⁶ Mittell maintains that ‘narrative complexity’ is not synonymous with ‘quality television’, while he admits ‘complexity can be a virtue’ and that its use as an adjective suggests a type of television with ‘sophistication and nuance’.²⁷ He may argue convincingly that ‘complex television’ is not value-laden, but he does little to assuage the implied artistic substance of a television show’s narrative complexity in comparison to those shows from another era, like *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–70), however pleasurable he admits to finding them. Inherent in his ‘complexity’ is a comparison with US television’s ‘simple’ alternatives.²⁸

23 Moradewun Adejunmobi, ‘African film’s televsual turn’, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2015), p. 123.

24 Jonathan Haynes, ‘Introduction’, in Haynes (ed.), *Nigerian Video Films* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000), p. 22.

25 Jeffrey Sconce, ‘What if? Charting televisions new textual boundaries’, in Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (eds), *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 99–101.

26 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015), p. 18.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 216–17.

28 As Linda Williams argues, ‘Complex is the positive that refutes the older negative judgment that TV is a simplistic wasteland’. See Williams, ‘World and time: serial television melodrama in America’, in Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds), *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media and National Cultures* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 177.

- 29 This critique was made by a group of feminist television scholars at 'Television for Women: An International Conference', held at the University of Warwick in 2013, of which Jane Feuer wrote, 'My personal favorite critique was of the idea (that some straight male scholars promote) that narrative complexity did not occur in television until *Lost*. There was a big laugh from the audience when we gals all agreed that these men do not realize the shows they are fetishizing are soap operas.' See Jane Feuer, 'Conference report', *Television and New Media*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2014), p. 83.
- 30 It is important to note that this list was made based on surveys completed by 52 writers, showrunners, actors, producers and critics, only eight of whom were female. See Rob Sheffield, '100 greatest TV shows of all time', *Rolling Stone*, 21 September 2016, <<https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-lists/100-greatest-tv-shows-of-all-time-105998/>> accessed 8 April 2021.
- 31 Linda Williams, *On The Wire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 46.
- 32 Notable examples include *Fazebook Babes 1 & 2* and *Fazebook Lovers 1 & 2* (2012) and *Twitter Babes 1 & 2* (2014). The 'Babes' in these titles undoubtedly refers to the earlier campus film series *Hottest Babes 1 & 2* and *Super Babes 1 & 2* (2008).
- 33 While advanced-fee scams existed prior to the internet, originating in letter correspondence, e-mail advanced-fee scams have become tightly associated with Nigeria – hence the popularity of the phrase '419 scam', which refers to the article number in Nigeria's criminal code that relates to fraud. An example of a common advanced-fee e-mail fraud is one in which a message

The serial-driven complexity that Mittell and Sconce describe mimics the narrative structure of 'lowly' female-centred melodramas and repackages this narrative strategy into masculine stories.²⁹ The top four shows in *Rolling Stone's* 2016 '100 greatest TV shows of all time' – *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *The Wire* (2002–08), *Breaking Bad* (2008–13) and *Mad Men* (2007–15) – are all serial television based upon a male protagonist's wavering morality.³⁰ Writing on *The Wire*, Linda Williams speculates that 'the masculine dominance of so many contemporary serials [...] is the desire to disassociate such work from the taint of the feminine family melodrama and their earlier soap-opera origins'.³¹

The seriality of *BlackBerry Babes* that Adejunmobi has identified as televisual not only draws on telenovelas and other feminine genres, but also maintains some affinity with US silent era serials, particularly those of serial queens like Helen Holmes and Helen Gibson of *The Hazards of Helen* (1914–17), or Pearl White of *The Perils of Pauline* (1914), *The Exploits of Elaine* (1914) and *The New Exploits of Elaine* (1915). The role of women in rapidly changing social situations that arise from the proliferation and use of new media appear in both early US film and a number of Nollywood films besides *BlackBerry Babes*.³² Serial stories of plucky young women demonstrating their mastery of new technologies (often telecommunications technologies like the telegraph and telephone, or transportation technologies, particularly the train) dominated screens in the early 1900s. Like these serial queens, the BlackBerry Babes are highly competent users of new media, often exuding expertise that surpasses that of the men around them. Yet rather than use technology to save the day, the Babes use it to extort favours, money and higher grades from men in power. For instance, in the first scene of the series Damisa uses her BlackBerry to defraud a wealthy and overconfident man who is shopping for new dress shirts at a local store. The shop is small and crammed with products; every inch seems to be filled with things to buy. When the credit card machine inexplicably goes down, Damisa offers to let him use her BlackBerry to make his purchases online. Unbeknownst to the man, Damisa steals his credit card information and rewards the female store clerk, who was in on the swindle.

This opening scene imitates both a BlackBerry advertisement and a public service warning against advanced-fee e-mail frauds, known colloquially as 419 scams, while aligning the viewer with the criminal element.³³ Shot with a handheld camera and making frequent use of zoom, there is a jumpy and amateurish quality to the scene that makes it appear to capture an actual cybercrime in progress. The sequence imparts the wonders of mobile smartphones for both commerce and crime. When the man is told that the credit card machine is down, Damisa suggests 'Why not pay online'. 'Online?', he responds, 'but there are no internet connections around here'. Knowing he has been taken in, she continues, 'So why not use my phone then?' The dialogue, delivered in a stilted, demonstrative way, lays out the conveniences of the BlackBerry, teaching the viewer what it is capable of – you can buy merchandise

is sent from someone claiming to be a Nigerian prince, who offers to pay you for moving a large amount of his money from one location to another, but needs your bank account number to do so. For more information, see Stephen Ellis, *This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

34 Haynes, *Nollywood*, p. 259.

35 Adejunmobi, 'African film's televisual turn', p. 123.

36 Afolabi Adesanya, 'From film to video', in Haynes (ed.), *Nigerian Video Films*, p. 49.

online! No internet connection? Use a BlackBerry. 'One cannot underestimate these new devices', declares the man as Damisa hands him her phone. The audience may read the line as a positive pronouncement about the astonishing hassle-saving possibilities of the new technology, but steeped in rumour and news stories about the myriad and infamous Nigerian 419 scammers, it equally nods to the illegal dangers of the new technology. It is both a warning about the illegal ways 'these new devices' can be used, and a subtle invitation to the viewer to explore the legal potential associated with the BlackBerry. The scene closes with Damisa celebrating both her cunning hoax, in which the commodities in the store were used as props in the accumulation of capital, and her technological aptitude that has enabled this success.

The moral boundaries crossed by the Babes in order to exert control over their financial and social status on campus both horrifies and titillates the audience. Their devious and extreme acts of coercion designed to solidify power and status are central to the campus film genre. Young undergraduate women, who are as Haynes puts it 'in a state of great freedom and volatility', are the visual focus of campus films.³⁴ Prostitution rings may seem like an unlikely staple of films about campus life, but as Haynes points out, the financial strain that tuition and college expenses place on many students gives these women the motive for monetary gain by any means possible. Meanwhile the public's fascination with the perceived sexual freedom of privileged young college women, unencumbered by marriage or adult supervision, provides Nollywood producers with characters ripe for sexual exploitation.

While the technologies themselves have changed, female sexuality in both the US serial queen melodrama and the Nollywood serial is often the means by which fears about technological change and shifting gender dynamics are expressed and ameliorated. As Adejunmobi asserts, serialized African films eventually 'aim for decisive ideological closure' in order to 'reaffirm conservative social values'.³⁵ The tendency for a moralizing conclusion is a hallmark of the melodramatic 'Onitsha Market' literature, popular ephemeral chapbooks sold in the Nigerian markets from the 1940s to the 1970s, from which the Nigerian film industry drew early influence.³⁶ The BlackBerry Babes' mastery over mobile technologies through nefarious dealings in crime and prostitution actually educates viewers on what *not* to do with new technologies. Damisa's use of her BlackBerrys to steal money, run a prostitution ring, and extort straight 'A's from her professors are countered by Natalie. Though a minor character in the films, Natalie appears multiple times throughout the series to reassert the idea that working hard in college is the best way to guarantee upward mobility. In her hands, the BlackBerry is a tool to help her study for exams and to enroll in an American MBA programme.

Like the serial queen who drove across the country and jumped from one train car to another, for the BlackBerry Babes technologies are used

to prevent male aggression. They punish lecherous and abusive male teachers, possessive boyfriends and selfish uncles. Even Natalie uses her BlackBerry to protect herself and her friends from potential sex abuse by accessing a publicly searchable database of sex offenders. So while the Babes' deviant use of BlackBerry is at times unequivocally wrong, at other times it is a revolutionary corrective to the injustices of the patriarchy.

Scholarship suggests that intertextuality and complexity were key aspects of the film serial of the mid 1910s. Ben Singer writes of how 'Just as the rise of the metropolis involved an infinitely busier and more varied arena of human intersection, so too did the rise of modernity involve a much more active and complex network of interconnections among texts'.³⁷ Serial melodramas often tied in stories from dime novels, newspapers, magazines and other popular print fictions that required an understanding of the content from multiple textual sources. Roger Hagedorn suggests that film serials began as supplemental to newspaper serials, designed to sell papers as much as they were to sell movies, and thus cannot be disassociated from capitalist modes of production.³⁸

The mutually beneficial cross-media pollination of early silent serials is similar to the cross-marketing of *BlackBerry Babes* between the telecommunications sector and the Nigerian film industry. Noah Tsika argues that because the *BlackBerry Babes* series is dependent on stars that represent Globacom (Glo), the popular Nigerian telecommunications company, but had no direct commercial relationship with Glo or BlackBerry, the film is free to satirize mobile phone fetishism while still maintaining a nuanced relationship to telecommunications that does not reject it outright.³⁹ Tsika shows how one *BlackBerry Babes* star, Tonto Dikeh, appears as 'an instantly recognizable (albeit unofficial) ambassador for BlackBerry' as she appears on MTV Base Africa holding a BlackBerry to promote Nollywood and sell BlackBerry across the continent.⁴⁰ While *BlackBerry Babes* is not sponsored by either Globacom or BlackBerry, Glo appears as the 'gift of life' that delivers the service that lets characters talk, text and visit the internet on their BlackBerry phones.⁴¹ Like the cross-over stories of the serial heroines in US movies and newspapers, the prevalence of mobile phones in Nigerian films from the 2010s attracted audiences to the new medium; their serial form helped to sell mobile phones as much as it sold the film industry.

The parallels between *BlackBerry Babes* and a silent serial like *The Hazards of Helen* – two serials made almost one hundred years apart that emerge from vastly different social, historical and political geographies – end here. For in no way do their many affinities suggest that West Africa is only now experiencing the modernity, cinematic or otherwise, that characterized the USA or Europe of the early 1900s. That assumption would support diffusion models of modernity from a Euro-American centre to the periphery like those of Anthony Giddens,⁴² and would further insist upon the supposed temporal lag between Euro-America and West Africa through the familiar techno-hierarchy previously discussed.

37 Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 263.

38 Roger Hagedorn, 'Doubtless to be continued: a brief history of serial narrative', in Robert Allen (ed.), *To Be Continued: Soap Operas around the World* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995), pp. 29, 33–34.

39 Noah Tsika, *Nollywood Stars: Media and Migration in West Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 137.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

42 See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

43 Haynes, 'Introduction', p. 30.

44 Ibid.

However, the hazardous juxtaposition of serial queens and BlackBerry Babes *does* throw the concept of modernity and its privileged relationship to particular media technologies into crisis in a productive way. As Haynes has noted, the 'popular social origin of the Nigerian videos tends to disrupt the application of the notion of melodramas as conveyor belts of modernity'.⁴³ In the 1990s, when Nigerian video-films first became popular, Nigeria was experiencing a downturn in its economy. The 'modernity' that was promised upon independence in 1960 never arrived. 'There is', as Haynes puts it, 'something like a crisis, then, not only in the process of modernization but also in the concept of modernity as applied to Africa'.⁴⁴

The comparison should be a warning against the idea that these serial films demonstrate that Africa is finally becoming modern, or modernity's serialized 'part two' (post-modern). Seriality is not medium-specific. Rather than simply or exclusively a formal trait of television or cinema, the serial operates as the narrative structure of capitalism. The serialization of mobile phones within *BlackBerry Babes* shows how the idea of a unitary progressive history of development is perpetuated indefinitely through an emphasis on the new. The social rankings the Babes make by equating their status with their category of phone – new, second-hand, broken or old – recalls the way that Africa's place and time in the world has been symbolized through discourse about mobile phone technology. Just as the Babes are seen endlessly scrambling to get the newest BlackBerry model, which will predictably soon become obsolete, Africa is expected to develop a foreign standard that is never stable, and thus only ever realizable in the next episode. The moral resolution of global equality, where everyone has access to the newest smart phone regardless of race/class/gender, is always '... to be continued'.

By comparing current debates on seriality in contemporary US television with West African televisual filmmaking, the politics in poetic readings of recent US television, which focus on uncovering changing art forms outside the influence of social-cultural context, is laid bare. The valorization of 'complex television' takes any potential reflexive critique of the narrative form of capitalism (seriality) in popular contemporary serials and consumes the ideology of the form through a bourgeois sense of aesthetic achievement. On the other hand, with its Black African female cast and overtly 'trashy' melodramatic appeal, *BlackBerry Babes* is the antithesis of the white male-centred dramas of 'quality' primetime US television. As a serialized film, any critique of capitalism in *BlackBerry Babes* is certainly contained within that same system, but exploring such a series shows us that serialized trash is just as complex, and perhaps has the political potential to burst asunder a system of power that maintains itself through the perpetuation of the new.

Midway through the series, in a contradictory move, Damisa insists that BlackBerry is nothing. She asks Nicole, 'Come on. What is all this BlackBerry stuff? What is a BlackBerry phone? It is nothing.' Nicole is confused by Damisa's flippant disregard for the technology that that she

has thus far deftly used to maintain her prestige among the women in her clique. Nicole expects Damisa to ridicule her as she does with Kaisha. But instead Damisa gives Nicole her oldest phone, while complaining that there is no fifth telecommunications network with which to use it. Accepting the phone, Nicole worries to herself that Damisa might tell everyone that her phone is Damisa's discarded one, making her a charity case. This scene, placed within a discourse on charity and recycled smartphones, further analogizes the class system developed by the seriality of BlackBerry models and global telecommunications discourse.

Damisa's gift and Nicole's reluctant acceptance recall the trade in second-hand computers and other electronic equipment that dominates West African markets, whether in Dakar or Lagos. Second-hand computers in West African markets commonly have property tags indicating their previous lives in a miscellany of US or European institutions. Ethnographer Jenna Burrell describes seeing computers in Ghanaian internet cafes with labels from the New York Public Library, Anne Arundel Community College or United States Environmental Protection Agency.⁴⁵ The second-hand status of the equipment, according to Burrell's research, was a negotiating point for sellers and buyers of used electronic goods. Sellers would positively inflect their products with the term 'home used', which signified that the computer was 'affordable and also a high quality and reliable good'.⁴⁶ Buyers, however, hoping to negotiate a lower price, called second-hand electronics *aburokyire bola* (meaning 'garbage from abroad' in Twi). As Burrell notes, the positive inflection of 'home used' is expressed in English, while the insult is communicated in Twi.⁴⁷ Again, like the gentleman character in the concert party, or Apolonia's BlackBerry Babe performance, language itself imparts social standing. Burrell's account of second-hand electronics demonstrates that 'consumers of this class of goods are reduced to the level of selling or using the (literal) garbage of more privileged others' that explicitly reside elsewhere in the world, as the property tags that remain on the computers indicate.⁴⁸ Implicitly at stake in Damisa's hand-me-down BlackBerry are the politics of the global electronic trade in which West Africans are reminded of their second-class status through the materiality and visible origins of the second-hand goods that fill the marketplace. The phone Damisa offers is not donated 'from abroad', but similarly comes with a 'home used' label that makes visible power relations in which the acceptance of a material object obliges the recipient to accept a diminutive position.

'Garbage from abroad' is also a claim that was once levelled at Nollywood film. Focused on entertainment and commercial value, Nollywood is full of Hollywood remakes and draws on popular US genres. Like India's Bollywood, even the name Nollywood, with its single consonant difference, is an imitation. Sub-Saharan African popular cinema, it turns out, is full of Hollywood's bastard siblings: Kannywood (Kano, Nigeria), Ghallywood (Accra, Ghana), Kumawood (Kumasi, Ghana) and Swahiliwood/Bongowood (Tanzania).⁴⁹ The term

45 Jenna Burrell, *Invisible Users: Youth in the Internet Cafes of Urban Ghana* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), p. 160.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 172.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 173.

49 Let us not forget that Silicon Valley has its own proximate doubles in Nairobi, Kenya's 'Silicon Savannah', and in Shenzhen, China's 'Silicon Delta'.

Nollywood originated in a 2002 *New York Times* article by Norimitsu Onishi, and quickly became a popular local brand for the international commercialization of the Nigerian film industry, though not without some contention about its neo-colonial aspects.⁵⁰ According to Manthia Diawara, Nollywood's appropriation of Hollywood, the thing that makes it bad, is actually what makes it so iconoclastic:

The digital revolution we are talking about here, which makes everything available everywhere, has at the same time been characterized by some as a bad imitation of Western consumerism and an alienation from pure African values. But as an avid consumer of Nollywood videos, I consider it subversive, an attack on the Western monopoly on consumption. By stealing from Hollywood the star system, the dress style, the music, by remaking Western genre films, and by appropriating the digital video camera as an African storytelling instrument, Nollywood is, in a sense, a copy of a copy that has become original through the embrace of its spectators.⁵¹

As Diawara notes, Nollywood borrows special effects, costumes and mannerisms from US popular cinema. The 'trashy' plots – filled with tacky characters who sleep with married men and women, use Juju against their rivals, or extort money from wealthy individuals – adapt melodramatic soap-opera twists for African audiences. Accordingly *BlackBerry Babes* might contain garbage from abroad, but what it has stolen and innovated from Hollywood has also made it reliably successful in African markets. Diawara reiterates that 'Nollywood enables Nigerians to enter the capitalist system of consumption and erases the difference between the West and Africa'.⁵² As with Cole's plea for the West to see Africans as consumers in his takedown of #FirstWorldProblems, for Diawara, Nollywood's subversive act is in defining and legitimating African audiences as consumers.

Nollywood has been both celebrated for raising the Nigerian film industry to the level of other globally recognizable film industries, and scoffed at for its amateurish productions in degraded formats such as VHS or VCD (Video Compact Disc). Initially Nigerian filmmakers who worked in celluloid rejected the idea of Nollywood as an industry because its productions were made with low-quality consumer technology and lacked the distribution standards of other film industries – namely, celluloid exhibition halls.⁵³ The technological hierarchy of legitimization that dominated discourse about Nollywood has thus found its expression in the *BlackBerry Babes* narrative, where all smartphones are not created equal.

While the trashy, low-budget Nollywood serial continues to sell, during the early 2010s a select group of Nigerian filmmakers started producing larger-budget features, calling their movement 'New Nollywood'. Along with higher budgets, instead of distribution on VHS or VCD the New Nollywood films were released in the cinema or streamed online by companies like iROKOTv, which caters to diasporic

50 Alessandro Jedlowski, 'When the Nigerian video film industry became "Nollywood": naming, branding and the videos' transnational mobility', *Estudios Afro-Asiáticos*, vol. 33, nos 1/2/3 (2011), p. 229.

51 Manthia Diawara, *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* (Munich: Prestel, 2010), p. 185.

52 Ibid.

53 Jedlowski, 'When the Nigerian video film industry became "Nollywood"', p. 241.

54 Ibid., p. 246.

55 Jonathan Haynes, "New Nollywood": Kunle Afolayan', *Black Camera*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2014), p. 60.

56 Shujen Wang, *Framing Piracy: Globalization and Film Distribution in Greater China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), pp. 50–51.

57 Robert Stam, 'Palimpsestic aesthetics: a mediation on hybridity and garbage', in Joseph May and Jennifer Natalya Fink (eds), *Performing Hybridity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 59.

58 Ibid., pp. 59–78.

audiences. The Nigerian director Tunde Kelani has refused to be associated with a Nollywood that is correlated with low-production values and quick production times,⁵⁴ but campus films like *BlackBerry Babes* continue to be made in the old Nollywood style, where quantity appears to rule over quality.⁵⁵

Originally distributed on VCD, a CD with video files, the image quality of *BlackBerry Babes* is noticeably inferior to the New Nollywood productions that use top-of-the-line digital video cameras and editing suites. In addition, the image quality for each *BlackBerry Babe* VCD is dependent on the production of the individual VCD. The lasting effects of piracy in the form of digital video artefacts is also not uncommon. A poorly compressed video file becomes pixelated, jumpy and often blocky. The *BlackBerry Babes* production at times suffers from inconsistent sound mixing, inaudible dialogue and washed-out images. Debuting in 1993, the VCD itself was an inferior by-product of DVD research and development. Deciding that DVD would be the international standard, Dutch and Japanese electronics companies Philips and Sony decided to dump the VCD format on poorer economies with an understanding that 'international standards' are not intended to be internationally inclusive.⁵⁶ The VCD format, then, was already garbage from abroad, even when it was not second-hand.

Despite its revenue-generating popularity, *BlackBerry Babes* is undeniably a trashy series. The Babes, whose moral impropriety is the primary spectacle of the film, are themselves presented as trashy characters. Their outlandish actions seem to compound with time: trash piles up as each plot twist reveals a new madness. Even the cinematic style of the series might be described as trashy: melodramatic acting, affected pauses and heavy-handed musical cues all recall the lowly status of soap opera. The emphasis on commodities – Hummers and BlackBerries – suggests that *BlackBerry Babes* is a series of advertisements, complete with the its own tiresomely catchy jingle.

BlackBerry Babes hawks its wares in the basest way possible, but its trashy aesthetic could also be the site of its revolutionary potential. Robert Stam, for instance, argues that postcolonial trashy aesthetics take 'what had formerly been seen as negative, especially within colonialist discourse', and revalorize it through a process of inversion.⁵⁷ In the redemption of detritus that Stam describes, be it the intertextual mixing of jazz or the salvage work of quilting, discarded commodities are remade, re-envisioned and refashioned through artistic practice. Centring on trash shifts our vantage point from the site of commodity production to its margins. The garbage dump, according to Stam, 'reveals the social formation as seen "from below"'.⁵⁸ Arguably, *BlackBerry Babes*' revolutionary potential lies not just in its ability to offer views of trash, but in its perspective *from* the vantage point of the trash heap.

Garbage is the central metaphor in a host of revolutionary Latin American and Caribbean cinematic theories, most notably in Julio García Espinosa's theorization of an imperfect cinema that celebrates the

59 Julio García Espinosa, 'For an imperfect cinema', trans. Julianne Burton, *Jump Cut*, no. 20 (1979), pp. 24–26.

60 Ibid.

61 Kenneth Harrow, *Trash: African Cinema from Below* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 1.

62 See Geoffrey Kantaris's argument about the 2010 Lucy Walker documentary *Waste Land*. 'Waste not, want not: garbage and the philosopher of the dump (*Waste Land and Estamira*)', in Christoph Linder and Miriam Meissner (eds), *Global Garbage: Urban Imaginaries of Waste, Excess and Abandonment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).

63 Ismail Xavier, 'Red light bandit: allegory and irony', in *Allegories of Underdevelopment: Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 109.

64 Ibid., p. 96.

65 Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man'.

amateur as a salve to the burn of bourgeois Euro-American exclusionary tastes. Espinosa theorizes a cinema that 'is no longer interested in quality or technique', nor 'interested in predetermined taste, and much less in "good taste"'.⁵⁹ Instead, imperfect cinema opposes a system in which 'the "cultured" elite audience' is privileged to define what counts as artistic work in the first place.⁶⁰ Little in the *BlackBerry Babes* series is in 'good taste'. If we understand 'trashy' as an example of the political efficacy of the aesthetics of trash, *BlackBerry Babes* not only critiques the insidious workings of globalized commodity fetishism, but its 'imperfect' aesthetics resists the commercial 'tyranny of technique' as well.

'Trash', Kenneth Harrow argues, 'has haunted African cinema from the start', but it is impossible to think about trash without evoking its opposite.⁶¹ Indeed, while Nollywood scholarship celebrates the political potentials of West African serial melodrama, the 'redemption of detritus' for political or social means simultaneously leads to its inevitable recommodification.⁶² Once trash becomes political critique, it is repositioned as art and becomes a commodity that has its own consumer base. As Diawara notes, the 'copy of a copy' that characterizes Nollywood's reorganization of Hollywood trash is subversive only in the sense that the Nigerian industry legitimates African audiences as consumers, albeit with localized tastes.

Brazilian filmmaker Rogerio Sganzerla's cinematic manifesto *The Red Light Bandit* (1968) offers a model for understanding *BlackBerry Babes* as both a commodity and a medium for capitalist critique. Ismail Xavier argues that Sganzerla's 'aesthetics of garbage' interrogates the political ambitions of the 'aesthetics of hunger' that Rocha popularized in 1960s Brazil. Sganzerla's film rejects the possibility of a Third Cinema alternative through 'its skeptical view of the destiny of critical, dissident film production within the capitalist system'.⁶³ *The Red Light Bandit* embraces a pastiche of trashy Hollywood genres – Western, gangster, science fiction – and combines them to create a violent mess. Full of narrative holes and digressive elements, the noirish protagonist meanders meaninglessly, much like the plot, around São Paulo's 'Boca de Lixo' ('mouth of trash'), killing, raping and stealing money, while still having time to appreciate the cinema and go to the beach with his girlfriend. As Xavier points out, *The Red Light Bandit*, while deliberately lacking plot or coherence, opts 'instead for a ludic arbitrariness of collage'.⁶⁴

BlackBerry Babes, like Nollywood more broadly, celebrates a mimetic relationship to Hollywood; it repeats but does not re-present.⁶⁵ The melodramatic larger-than-life entertainment of *BlackBerry Babes* strategically resists revolutionary usefulness, much like Sganzerla's *The Red Light Bandit*. Both films acknowledge that they are products, and as such do not pretend to be outside the system of global capital. Yet each maintains a critical distance from capitalist ideology by rejecting a glorified sense of aesthetic achievement and refusing to be politically

didactic to the point of being hypocritical. This is not Third Cinema, but it is not quite Hollywood either – it is *too* trashy.

What better way to accentuate the serial quality of the Nigerian film industry than the arbitrariness of collage that comes to define the e-waste garbage dumps that occupy West Africa's poorest districts? Trash is the double, the shadow, or the afterimage of a commodity that has outlived its usefulness. In the trash heap, where all commodities are eventually destined, the status that new smartphone models once bestowed for the benefit of racial capital is evaporated. Garbage is radically egalitarian. That is, until as in *art récupéré*, fashion returns to the dump to revisit, recall and remake, romantically and nostalgically, trash anew.

In conclusion, I return to the beginning of the film, and the scene in the gift store. After the man successfully uses Damisa's phone to make an online purchase of items from the store, he hands her back her BlackBerry and asks, 'Wa's the name?' Damisa scorns his grammatical imprecision by following up with, 'Excuse me. Is it the phone or is it me?' Thus the film series begins with a confusion between the BlackBerry phones and the Babes who own them. Even the title bonds blackness, BlackBerry and babes through cleverly arranged alliteration. 'Is it the phone or is it me?' is the lingering question that confronts global discourse about the relationship between new media, serialized modernity and Africa that are embedded within headlines like 'Who wants a BlackBerry these days?' While new models of phones continue to be fetishized objects, imbued with global relations of power that privilege some over others, *BlackBerry Babes*, through its aesthetic evocation of the arbitrariness of the trash heap, empties seriality of the promise of what 'more' can bring. The view from the heap might not offer a revolution: the look of consternation left on a soap opera star's face at the end of an episode raises an ambivalent eyebrow to capitalist means of production, yet it also sassily asks a question: 'Is this the end?' Of course it is not – more product means more profit. In resisting the need to make the view from below into a productive counter-discourse, *BlackBerry Babes* is both ambivalent towards, and works to elucidate, the serial function of 'the new' within global racial capital.