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Encountering Mudi Yahaya's *Nina Fischer-Stephan's Respectful Gaze* in Lagos

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ABSTRACT


Mudi Yahaya's film *Nina Fischer-Stephan's Respectful Gaze* (2022) is a reconstruction of Nigerian history presented through a meta-representational forcefield of images. The film is a documentary work that explores the resurgent vitality of the German photographer's archive from the early 1960s. In the Nigerian context, this film explores how forms of historical mediality are conditioned by a multiplicity of aesthetic and creative modes that strengthen the power of moving images to document historical memory. Drawing on social media archives such as the Nigerian Nostalgia Project, a Facebook account where Fischer-Stephan's historical photographs circulate, I examine the ways in which the film engages the critic in reading a film derived from photographic texts that have been mediated in multiple ways.

KEYWORDS

Photography; social media; historical memory; intermediality

Mudi Yahaya's film on the outdoor installation of Nina Fischer-Stephan's photographs in Lagos, *The Respectful Gaze* (2022, see supplemental information), invites attention to the power of the moving image to document historical memory – that is, the ways in which the past is remembered by individuals and collectives and the shape that process takes. The film depicts an open-air exhibition of the historical photographs of Fischer-Stephan and their representation of particular histories and memories in Nigeria. But the film also raises the question of how to read a cinematic work that derives from photographic texts which themselves have the capacity to produce an intermedial archive – that is, an archive whose formal aesthetics depend on the interconnections of different media types. Beyond the intersecting economies of images that feed off one another to reconstruct the Nigerian past in Yahaya's film, the resurgent vitality of the German photographer's visual texts from the early 1960s enables a historical mediality contingent on a multiplicity of aesthetic and interconnected modes of visual representation. These different modalities of the photographs, both in the exhibition and in other locations, have been made possible by renewed interest in Fischer-Stephan's works, and they now circulate more broadly through diverse spatial, digital, and cinematic locations, which are explored in this article. I reflect on the broader visual politics of Fischer-Stephan's photographs, whose several afterlives reinforce a logic of remediation that is congealed in Yahaya's film, to articulate

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an aesthetic dissatisfaction with a stereotypic image of Africa that Fischer-Stephan sought to deconstruct in her work, a subject I revisit in the closing stages of this article.

Fischer-Stephan, along with her husband Klaus Stephan, who was a correspondent for what was then West German television in early post-independence Nigeria, traveled widely throughout the country and produced a rich visual archive. Fischer-Stephan's photographic images began to circulate from the 2010s in online spaces, largely posted by her son, Oliver Stephan, at a time when social media increasingly became one of the major media avenues for the reconstruction and transmission of Nigerian history. The Nigeria Nostalgia Project (NNP), the platform on which I first encountered her photographs, is based on a crowd-sourced model of historical recovery that relies on audiovisual collections from private individuals and other members of the Facebook group. The NNP members include Nigerians and descendants of Western expatriates who have historical connections to colonial and independent Nigeria. Non-Nigerians such as Oliver Stephan can participate in the group's historiographic efforts, and this underscores the ways in which histories and memories are connected at a transnational level. It also demonstrates the globalism and global reach of the loosely organized social media group. To illustrate this global dimension of the NNP, for example, it is instructive to look at the comments posted in response to photographs from the Fischer-Stephan archive. The archive documents different aspects of Nigerian urban history, with depictions of Brazilian architecture in Oshogbo, southwest Nigeria, or other images that show the automobile cultures of the era. These are now glossed and accompanied by comments from both professional and non-expert historians from around the world. In some of the discussions generated by the images he posts on the group, Oliver Stephan can be seen providing anecdotal commentaries on the photographs, extending textually the cultural meanings of his mother's works. This is consistent with the varied ways in which several non-Nigerians differently engage with the platform, although interactions tend to be generally respectful and horizontal.

That said, the politics of representation in the digital archive enabled by the NNP is worthy of scrutiny, if, for example, one were to read its material constitution and the makeup of its members through a decolonial lens. While exchanges are indeed horizontal, the fact that the NNP sometimes centers historical contents from the descendants of empire or non-Nigerians who are somewhat directly implicated in colonialism suggests that the platform sometimes reifies colonial ideologies and epistemic violence. Some of the primary sources for the NNP are not public or historical records in Nigerian institutions, but instead come from private collections, both those of Nigerians and those of expatriates or colonial officials. The external sourcing of these records highlights how the official culture in Nigeria gestures toward a willing capitulation to the forces of forgetfulness that Leela Gandhi describes as "the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath" (Gandhi [1998] 2020, 4). This situation raises a sociological question about the infrastructural politics of memory – how it is made and unmade. With its traces, absences, and the endangered conditions of some of its collections, the institutional archive in Nigeria offers a material instantiation of this will to forget. Together with Ayo Ojebode, I have discussed this topic extensively in a previous article in which we show how private initiatives such as the NNP fill in these gaps and absences in the processes of historical recovery (Yékú and Ojebode 2021). This 2021 article tracks NNP's online activities, and the digital labors of members engaged in the preservation of all kinds of social

and family histories (such as those of the Stephan family). As social media emerges as an ephemeral site of historical recovery through peer-to-peer reconstructions of the past and collective acts of digital remembering, Nigeria's troubled history with official forgetfulness becomes obvious as something to be resisted, even as questions of social class and representation remain in the background. Of course, there are other, possibly non-academic, ways of resisting the politics of forgetting, and the NNP – initiated and curated by individuals external to the locations of high theory – is one of these. Encounters with history on the NNP are, therefore, shaped publicly by digital media spaces that facilitate connections among users, who reconstruct the past as a way to address the particular kind of anti-historical sensibility that appears to be ingrained in the Nigerian ruling elite.

Although divorced from their original history and context of production, Fischer-Stephan's photographs have provoked lively discussions of Nigerian history on the NNP and figure in the group's emphasis on nostalgia as an agonizing return to better images of the Nigerian past that both document a continuing infrastructural regression and reimagine possibilities of present and futurist transformations. In other words, as the visual performance of nostalgia on the NNP platform relies on images such as those of Fischer-Stephan, it provokes an understanding of the Nigerian past that connects to a sense of hope for the future. At the same time, her photographic archive demonstrates the value of historical memory and the ways in which visual technologies can be used to unsettle the foundational myths of colonial essentialism.

This work of unsettling is one reason why Mudi Yahaya's film is pertinent. From the digital to the cinematic, Yahaya's 40-minute documentary of an outdoor installation at Tinubu Square in Lagos renders visible these shifting mediascapes of Fischer-Stephan's visual documentations and their various sites of medialities and remediation. Here, I refer to the shift from her initial printed photographs to their digital reconstructions (on social media and through more sustainable, even if not fully developed, digital archive initiatives at Iwalewaha at the University of Bayreuth) and to images that were exhibited online and installed at Tinubu Square, a space which is itself the subject of Yahaya's cinematic reproduction, as evident in [Figure 1](#). Besides the different intermedial connections they enable, each of these various archives also convokes different interpretative aesthetics and publics, although access to each is based on class.



Figure 1. Still of the Fischer-Stephan installation, Tinubu Square, Lagos from Mudi Yahaya's film.

Source: Image reproduced with permission of Mudi Yahaya.

Based on the Stephan Estate held at Iwalewahaus, the exhibition was curated by Akinbode Akinbiyi and Gisela Kayser, with Mareike Palmeira and Mudi Yahaya providing some necessary historical background and cultural context that is usually absent on social media archives such as the NNP. Although commentaries and discussions on the NNP serve a similar function when they are offered by professional historians and other well-informed members of the group, they are not as systematic as the organized information that accompanies the exhibition. Hence, the epistemic value of the Fischer-Stephan archive on Facebook is generally contingent on social media commentary practices and collective rituals of decoding and interpretation. I have already discussed the value of social media commentary practice as an epistemological process elsewhere, and it is a similar tendency that underpins digital practice of a public historical consciousness on the NNP (Yékú 2022, 171). In addition, the concrete and offline space of the installation at Tinubu Square produces knowledge through a curated assemblage of texts and images that conduce popular audiences on Lagos Island to rare photographic reconstructions. Among them are images of the Northern Nigerian elite with their infrastructural and cultural performances of wealth and social prestige, but also of Tinubu Square itself.

Fischer-Stephan's photographs offer a humanizing narrative of the artifacts and subjects they represent, indicating her aesthetic discontent with problematic depictions of Africa. Hence, as is evident from this 2022 reinstallation of her work, one of the assumptions most challenged by the exhibition is the power of the photographic object as a means of combating problematic representations of Africa through the medium of photography. Such stereotypic narratives that reinforced European prejudices were a widespread practice in the colonial era and have been the subject of recent studies. For example, Paul Landau describes this colonialist tendency as informing "empires of the visual" (Landau 2003, 141) and producing an exoticizing gaze of otherness that more ethical artists, such as Fisher-Stephan, would later undercut through their work. In both the online space of the exhibition (which ran concurrently with the physical installation) and Yahaya's film, what might come across for viewers is Fisher-Stephan's poetics of subversion. Her images sought to deconstruct ubiquitous Eurocentric narratives of Africa through displays of photographs that reassess an entrenched culture of stereotypical images pandering to the Western gaze. Hence, the respectful gaze as a self-reflexive installation operates with an awareness of its own ethical intervention in the history and politics of colonial and anthropological discourses on Africa. Beyond the self-reflexive aesthetic that manifests in this self-aware understanding of the hegemonic narratives being deconstructed by the exhibition, there is crucially the presence of the filmmaker in the cinematic text produced. As part of the textual elements to which they are exposed in Yahaya's film, the audience encounters him as an expert offering his ideological agenda and his desire to convey an image of Fischer-Stephan as a respectful and ethical photographer. While the most obvious example of this approach by Yahaya is the scene in the film showing everyday Lagosians who interact with the photographs, the film's opening scene is even more telling. The first shots invite us to follow the powerful symbol of Ganiyu Abiodun, a rollerblader, pictured in [Figure 2](#), who skates on different roads around the Tinubu area of Lagos as part of Yahaya's exploration of the spaces of the everyday and the quotidian subjects that bring them to life.

Not much has been written on the figure of the Lagos rollerblader, but his presence may be read as Yahaya's commentary on and display of the city's many subcultures



Figure 2. Still of rollerblader Ganiyu Abiodun, from Mudi Yahaya's film.

Source: Image reproduced with permission of Mudi Yahaya.

and its many clubs, which include thousands of competitive bladers. Far from being an exoticizing presence in the scene designed to appeal to Western gazes, it is a reflection of the city. In this inaugural point of filmic action, following the wheels of Abiodun's rollerblades means being led to the outdoor exhibition itself. In that kinetic process, we are taken through some of the historical places and architecture (such as the famous center of Freemasonry in Nigeria, St. George's Hall, built in 1907 on Broad Street) that create a backdrop to the historical encounter the film eventually facilitates.

My experience of watching the film induced in me the reliving of memories of locations and spaces that have receded and have become vague because of time and diasporic displacement. For many years I used to go to Lagos Island for a weekly visit, with family and friends who lived around the Brazilian quarters. I also had relatives who had trading activities around Tinubu Square. Hence, aside from the photographic journey back to a Nigerian past in Fischer-Stephan's archive, Yahaya's film on the exhibition also transported me back in time to that period in my own life, as I could recall walking around the square on several occasions.

The Tinubu Square location of the exhibition has much significance in the context of the history of Lagos, but these personal memories are equally important. Along with the film's soundtrack, which includes music by Ambrose Campbell and Vincent Ezelle and reinforces the cityscape of Lagos through sound, the film's commentators (the architects Françoise Akinosho and Adeyemo Shokunbi, as well as Yahaya himself) also offer some contextualizing insights into the film's themes. For instance, Shokunbi, and Akinosho present some helpful information on the sense of history captured in the film through transformations in the architectural landscape and spatial oppositions. Yahaya comments on the interactive possibilities of the memory-making installation, as the film, at the same time, shifts to archival photographs of Tinubu Square to juxtapose the current space. Akinosho makes a point about Wakanda, saying that a futuristic African city should not always be imagined externally, since African cities like Lagos and their histories and cultural politics can sufficiently offer a framework for the futurist imagination. This comment presents a counterpoint to visions of Afrofuturism that sometimes elide the logics of African particularities and cultures, something the Africanfuturist writer Nnedi Okorafor addresses in her work by foregrounding the agency of Lagos and

other African cities in literary representations of Africa's liberatory futures (Okorafor 2015).

Furthermore, equally generative is the film's documentation of the space around Tinubu Square itself. Yahaya appears to expose Fisher-Stephan's work to a local space or popular audience that is included in an open-space interpretation of the works. His camera follows everyday people and the space around the exhibition in multiple directions, constructing it from different angles; and, in the process, he reinforces the exhibition's workings as a performance of quotidian subjectivities in Lagos. Pertinent to this performative exploration of multiple spaces is the film's meta-depiction of some three-wheeled vehicle drivers praying beside a photograph that shows some religious leaders from the North in a prayer scene, as seen in [Figure 3](#).

In the scene, a trader is also depicted arranging her wares beside the exhibited photographs. Additionally, an assembly of street parliamentarians is evident around the exhibition space, spending time at a newspaper stand that records a print culture of public discourses in Lagos, something Duncan Omanga has also written about in the Kenyan context (Omanga 2016, 335). Some of the photographs themselves are placed above promotional posters; from the perspective of print culture and its connections to the city, the posters and the newspaper space, therefore, combine with the photographs to complicate further the several layers of intermedial entanglements in Yahaya's film.

Through this expansive process, one that pays tribute to multiple localities, we are presented with both an aesthetic reorganization of urban locations and a heterotopic representation of other spaces, such as Freedom Park, another potential exhibition location. In its frontal depictions of the park, the film invites attention to past and present cultural politics of the space. As a former colonial prison, Freedom Park is a powerful statement on the aesthetic repurposing of space. The ironic transformation of a cultural space such as Freedom Park from a place of incarceration to a symbolic space of freedom marks a paradox of urban conversion that is peculiar to Lagos as a postcolonial African city, and that is graphically depicted in the film. One of Lagos's many transformative impulses is its inhabitants' repurposing of space for economic and cultural purposes – as evidenced by the Fisher-Stephan exhibition or graffiti emblazoned on a wall at the end of the film titled "Chaotic Creative – Keep Walking". The Fisher-Stephan exhibition at



Figure 3. Prayer scene from Mudi Yahaya's film.

Source: Image reproduced with permission of Mudi Yahaya.

Tinubu Square is, therefore, a symbolic engagement with an urban location where such mediated performances are sometimes rare. Tinubu Square itself is momentarily transformed into an aesthetic location in which narratives and images of old Lagos and those of Northern Nigeria are presented to everyday people who stop in front of the exhibition to interact with the photographs.

In conclusion, the brief focus here on a former carceral location which now facilitates aesthetic expressions is meant to signal Yahaya's spatial mediation of the urbanity of contemporary Lagos. This is represented in the film to convey the continued importance of space as a social and cultural product that enables media and performative practices. In this sense, an urban Lagos space such as Tinubu Square is aesthetically engaged to demonstrate the value of Nigeria's cultural forms in the reconstruction of the past and the reimagining of the future. The pressing urgency of the film and the Fischer-Stephan exhibition as critical interventions in historical education is finally articulated through the rollerblader who returns at the film's denouement to comment on the exhibition, saying that it presented him with "the opportunity to see a Nigeria I had never seen before". Ganiyu Abiodun's lamentation in the film over the pedagogical decline of history lessons in Nigerian schools helps to clarify a dimension of Yahaya's film, which, like the NNP on Facebook, deploys the Nina Fisher-Stephan archive to articulate a recovery project. That such recovery efforts – whether digital or photographic – are mostly dependent on technologies and archives that are either based or sourced in the so-called global North signals the precariousness of postcolonial memory-making in Nigeria.

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