

# FILM REVIEW

**Kunle Afolayan, dir. *Citation*.** Nigeria, 2020. Produced by Golden Effects. Netflix. 151 minutes. English, French, Wolof, Yoruba. No price reported.

For a long time, the field of cinema studies has been boxed in by a focus on national cinemas, defined as works of great auteurs and expressions of an ethnically and linguistically homogenous national culture in the sense of nineteenth-century European romanticism. This approach largely fails when it is applied to the cinemas of Africa. Nigerian cinema, for instance, consists of multiple industries with different production centers. Films are produced in vernacular languages, including Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and, of course, English. Lagos is the most internationally visible production center, but far from the only one.

*Citation*, a social drama on sexual exploitation in the tertiary education system, known in Nigeria and across West Africa as the “sex for grades” problem, illustrates African cinema’s challenge to the established conceptual frameworks of cinema studies. It exemplifies an African cinema which transcends the traditional frameworks, a cinema which engages not so much in cinematic nation building as in what Adom Getachew—in her recent study of the thinkers and political leaders of the transition to the post-colonial order such as Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, or Eric Williams—proposes to call “worldmaking.”

*Citation* was written by Tunde Babalola and directed by Kunle Afolayan, the son of an actor and a former bank clerk who started his own acting career in 1999 in *Saworoide* by veteran director Tunde Kelani. Afolayan made his directorial debut with the supernatural thriller *Irapada* in 2005. With another fantasy thriller, *Figurine* (2009), he established himself as the pioneer of “New Nollywood,” a new type of English-language films with high production values made for the cinema rather than for immediate home video release. Afolayan had his biggest success so far in 2014 with *October 1*, a serial killer drama set on the eve of Nigeria’s independence which addressed the Catholic church’s long history of tolerating and covering up child abuse. Afolayan continues to develop his successful formula of genre films with a focus on social issues with *Citation*, which was distributed by Netflix after its original release in cinemas

and earned the director a three-picture contract with the American streaming company.

*Citation* tells the story of Moremi, a student in political science (played by Nigerian newcomer Temi Odetola) who meets Lucien N'Dyare, a charismatic visiting professor (played by Haitian-French actor Jimmy Jean-Louis), becomes the target of his unwanted sexual advances, and fights back. The “citation” in the title refers to an invitation to appear before an investigative committee which goes out to both Moremi, as the accuser, and Lucien N'Dyare, as the accused. The narrative of the film is that of a crime investigation or a courtroom drama, revolving around the allegation of attempted rape.

*Citation* is both a social drama and a pan-African travelogue. The campus scenes were shot at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile Ife in Osun State. South African director of photography Jonathan Covel, who worked with a Canon Eos C500 Mark II camera with 5.9k resolution, makes excellent use of the iconic modernist architecture of the Awolowo University campus to convey a stylish sense of African modernity. Extended flashbacks are set in Dakar, Senegal, and on Cape Verde. It is certainly no coincidence that these locations cut across all spheres of the European colonization of Africa—the Anglophone (Nigeria), Francophone (Senegal), and Lusophone (Cape Verde) spheres. Key scenes in the Dakar segments are set on the Island of Gorée just off the Dakar coast, which was the major slave trading post on the African coast from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Further gestures toward African history and African modernity include an older professor in Dakar whose name is Ousmane Sembene, an homage to the Senegalese writer and film director. And one could also mention the presence of Seun Kuti in the film, one of the sons of Afrobeat pioneer and political leader Fela Kuti, and the grandson of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the groundbreaking pioneer of African feminism.

At the same time, *Citation* is an unabashedly commercial work. Like other films of the “New Nollywood” which Afolayan helped create, *Citation* fuses film with music, fashion, and the celebration of upscale lifestyles. Temi Odetola, as the female lead, was primarily known as a model, fashion blogger, and social media influencer prior to her participation in the film. Odetola is also in a celebrity relationship with Mr. Eazi, a star of contemporary Nigerian pop music and a pioneer of the Banku fusion of Ghanaian highlife and Nigerian afrobeats. Temi Odetola makes the film’s social agenda appealing by connecting it to the lifestyle of Nigeria’s fashion and music worlds. Incidentally, Odetola is also the daughter of billionaire Femi Otedola, an investor in the film, which points toward yet another level of commercial entrenchment.

Some critics in Nigeria responded negatively to the openly commercial aspects of the film and considered *Citation* inferior to Afolayan’s earlier work. But if we take the film’s historical and cultural references seriously, as we should, we can also read *Citation* as a self-conscious contribution to cinema as a mode of “worldmaking,” a harbinger of a future African cinema which

continues to put into practice what Ousmane Sembene once said when asked whether his films were understood in Europe: “Europe is not my center. Europe is on the outskirts.”

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