



Film

Emily Witt

NOLLYWOOD

The making of a film empire
128pp. Columbia Global Reports. Paperback,
£9.99 (US \$14.99).
978 0 9971264 8 8

“There were a lot of films in Nigeria through the years but none spoke our voice. None recognized our existence as a distinct culture, as a distinct civilization, a distinct aspiration . . . Nollywood has not sought authentication.” So says a Nigerian producer describing his country’s indigenous film industry in the prologue to Emily Witt’s *Nollywood: The making of a film empire*.

Nollywood is one of the most remarkable cultural developments of recent decades. Churning out 3,000 films per year to an increasingly international audience, its output is surpassed only by Hollywood and Bollywood. Yet serious profits have largely eluded it. The American writer Witt traces the culture, business models and origins of this industry, which began in the 1980s when merchants of blank videotapes realized they could boost sales by putting content on those tapes first. Having salesmen as producers made for poor production values, but the content was revolutionary in its indigenous flavour, centred on family values, spirituality and morality.

Witt travels around Nigeria, speaking to players in an industry that has grown more sophisticated. She attends a glamorous film premiere in Lagos and intersperses each chapter of the book with treatments and quotations from selected films, giving us a flavour of the narratives, such as *Living in Bondage* (1992) in which a man sacrifices his wife to a satanic cult in exchange for wealth. She also visits the set of a movie whose grand ambitions (it employs 200 extras and horses) do not preclude it from the usual logistical hassles. Power outages occur regularly, there are no trailers or toilets, and someone’s lantern accidentally sets a hut on fire.

Nevertheless, films like these are increasingly being shown on the big screen. Witt charts the industry’s evolution from shaky-cam videotape fodder to higher-quality cinema multiplex showings. But the challenges are still huge. How do you make money in a country where piracy is rife and per capita income is low? Nigeria’s 180 million people have just twenty cinemas.

The strength of Witt’s book is her exploration of Nollywood’s attempts to formalize its haphazard business model. At times the strategies are as creative as the movies themselves. Witt interviews successful mobile app developers, ambitious multiplex owners and producers who have resorted to beating up copyright infringers or securing distribution

agreements via smartphone video instead of paper contracts. What we don’t hear much about are the views of ordinary Nigerian punters, which is a shame. However, it does not detract from what is an insightful and entertaining book about a rapidly evolving industry.

NOO SARO-WIWA

History

Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks, editors
and translators

SANSOVINO’S VENICE

392pp. Yale University Press. £25 (US \$35).
978 0 300 17506 6

Venice in the sixteenth century was viewed throughout Europe as a wonder of the modern world. The beauty and grandeur of its urban environment was enhanced by a surge of palace-building along the Grand Canal by mercantile patricians and by the realization, in Piazza San Marco, of a superlative public space designed to reflect the dignity and consequence of an ancient republic with venerable institutions. The strongest visual impress on the Piazza was made by the Tuscan Jacopo Sansovino, described by a contemporary as “celebrated in sculpture, distinguished in architecture, living in favour with God and man and endowed with splendid gifts”.

Sansovino’s Venice is a somewhat misleading title, however, for this English translation of an early guidebook to the city. Its author was in fact the artist’s son Francesco, a highly successful author and publisher. *On the Notable Things Which Are in Venice* (1561) takes the form of a dialogue between a discerning visitor, ready to commend the place itself and its civic government, and a native Venetian, expatiating on everything from the structure of senatorial committees and the significance of the flagpoles outside St Mark’s basilica to the sumptuary laws governing dress styles among different social classes.

The Venetian host encourages his foreign guest to look more closely at artworks by “Messer Titian, that illustrious man”, “Jacopo

Tintoretto, full of wit, full of verve” and Veronese, “recognised as special in his profession”. By this means Francesco Sansovino can extol his father’s achievement in buildings such as the Loggetta, the Biblioteca Marciana and the Mint. In the guidebook’s second section he develops the concept of Venetians as God’s chosen people, victorious over Byzantium and Genoa.

Not a vademecum in the modern sense – there are no suggested itineraries or route maps – this is essentially a guide to Venice’s exceptionalism and pre-eminence in different areas. In an appendix, the translators have added a valuable section on the building of Venetian palaces from another Sansovino publication. Their annotation of the principal text is exemplary, they have caught the tone of the Italian original to perfection and the whole book, liberally illustrated, enriches our perspective of Renaissance *Serenissima*.

JONATHAN KEATES

Fiction

Jonathan Tulloch
LARKINLAND

268pp. Seren. Paperback, £9.99.
978 1 78172 395 1

Larkinland might sound like a theme park for misanthropes and librarians, but don’t be fooled: it is a fun place to spend a few hours, and well worth the entry price. Jonathan Tulloch’s new novel is full of wit, smart observation and, yes, Philip Larkin. Set in 1950s Hull, a place “beached on the mudflats at the end of the railway line, like a brick seal with a woodbine in its gob”, *Larkinland* weaves a delightfully dour tapestry from the cloth of Larkin’s poetry (liberally quoted throughout).

The novel opens with the Larkin-surrogate Arthur Merryweather, a bespectacled librarian and aspiring poet, moving into a room “that would flatter a coffin”: his landlady tells him, “this was Mr. Bleaney’s room”, an insurance salesman who has recently vanished, leaving only an eddy of rumour in his wake. Three deftly connected narratives play out from this

desolate room, as Merryweather is drawn into a mysterious spate of petty thefts across the city, a stunted romance with his assistant librarian, and the fate of the enigmatic Bleaney. Connecting all three are an assortment of local worthies and oddballs who drift in and out of each narrative, from the local hoodlum Titch Thomas to the absurd lodger Teesdale, a fur salesman of Dickensian proportions who hopes to make his fortune harvesting the coats of giant hamsters.

For all the characters present though, it is the perennially absent Bleaney who haunts Merryweather’s imagination, a ghost slowly becoming his muse. Bleaney is further entwined with Merryweather’s life by the realization that they are body doubles (leading to an inevitable case of mistaken identity). Thus, in a playful triangulation, Larkin, the character he immortalized in his poem (Bleaney) and their fictional double (Merryweather) conflate, each a part or version of the other. At times, the cleverness of this parallel can feel clumsy; “‘aren’t you frightened of becoming just like your Mr. Bleaney?’ Merryweather is asked”. But it helps that Tulloch is an excellent author of dialogue, has an ear well tuned to comic timing and a relish for pithy phrasing (a naked bulb burns “Gestapo-bright”; the overweening landlady moves “soundless as a draft”). It is these qualities that make *Larkinland* such an enjoyable guide through the grey-ness, the class anxieties and attendant social comedy of post-war Britain.

FRANK LAWTON

Letters

Marcel Proust

LETTERS TO THE LADY UPSTAIRS

Translated by Lydia Davis, and edited by

Estelle Gaudry and Jean-Yves Tadié

112pp. Fourth Estate. £10.
978 0 00 826289 1

Nearly as famous as Marcel Proust’s madeleine is his cork-lined bedroom at 102 Boulevard Haussmann, where he lay in bed and wrote most of *À la Recherche du temps perdu*. Proust moved there provisionally in late 1906, and left in 1919, only three years before his death. The cork bark was to sound-proof the room – constantly ill, Proust suffered intensely from noise and other pollution.

Letters to the Lady Upstairs gives us an oblique portrait of this closeted life. It is a collection of just twenty-six notes, which Proust sent to his upstairs neighbour Marie Williams: a Frenchwoman married to an American dentist, whose dental practice was directly above Proust’s head. Lacking Mme Williams’s replies, the correspondence seems peculiarly one-sided, she the Echo to Proust’s Narcissus; all the more poignantly so since she committed suicide in 1931. The letters, in that light, seem saturated in loss and absence, not neighbourliness.

The letters are carefully annotated and given a foreword by Jean-Yves Tadié, the editor of the definitive four-volume *Pléiade* Proust. He enumerates the themes and central characters – noise, illness, flowers, memory, music, Mrs Williams’s son, the First World War, Proust’s brother and Clary, their oft-mentioned mutual friend, himself ill and blind. There is a substantial translator’s afterword by Lydia Davis, discussing the layout of Proust’s apartment, as well as his idiosyncratic style and syntax. Sandwiched between them, the letters seem wispy and frail, like

their author, a series of excessively polite and plaintive wails from a solitary man.

One of the most moving moments comes in a letter from autumn 1914, in which Proust directly eulogizes his secretary Alfred Agostinelli, who had died when his plane plummeted into the sea in May of that year: “what you could not know is the superior intelligence which was his, and extremely spontaneous since he had had no schooling, having been until then a simple mechanic”. Unlike the floweriness of many of the notes, which come across as passive-aggressive in their sentimental excess (rather than the elegance Tadié would have us see), Proust’s words to his unknown upstairs neighbour move us in their sad simplicity. They hint at Proust’s failed attempt to possess Agostinelli by becoming his patron, and they encapsulate the whole of *Albertine disparue*.

INGRID WASSENAAR

Technology

Adam Greenfield

RADICAL TECHNOLOGIES

The design of everyday life

368pp. Verso. £18.99.

978 1 78478 043 2

Networked digital information technology has become the dominant mode through which we experience the everyday”, Adam Greenfield writes in *Radical Technologies: The design of everyday life*. Maps are a case in point: when I pull up a mapping app, I see a skewed version of reality because the device “presents individual users with a different map” tailored to their browsing history. As well as putting us at the mercy of commercial agendas, Greenfield worries that such technologies are creating rifts in the social fabric of a city, weakening the web of interactions that used to connect us: “Stopping at a newsstand for the afternoon edition, or ducking into a florist shop or a police booth to ask directions . . . What need is there for any of these metropolitan rituals now?”

Greenfield – who teaches urban design at the Bartlett, University College London, and has worked extensively in the design and operation of information systems – has a particular investment in the lives of cities, and this gives *Radical Technologies* a focus often lacking in other attempts to reveal the complex virtual grid of information and surveillance through which we move. His book provides a grounded guide, a cautionary tale in which each chapter walks readers through another layer of a dazzling and treacherous landscape, beginning with smartphones and expanding into augmented reality, cryptocurrency, automation and artificial intelligence. Some of these technologies could be harnessed for the greater good, he points out. 3-D printing, for instance, has the potential to make tools and other items anywhere, quickly and cheaply; it could save lives and create livelihoods, and many makers would rather share their designs than charge for them. In Greenfield’s telling, though, the social imperative is foiled by companies out to patent everything they can.

Greenfield’s driving question is not “What do our technologies let us do?” but rather, “What do we choose to do with our technologies?” He confronts the implications of trusting technology to perceive the world (in order to pilot a car, for instance), to predict via algorithms which neighbourhoods need more police, or calculate a credit score without bias.

“Who can say, in a layered, cascading, probabilistic model of behaviour, what originally triggered a determination that someone is trustworthy, insurable or reliable?”, he asks. “This is not hypothetical . . . Many of the systems we already use every day work in ways that are not fully understood by their designers.” He sketches several – mostly unappealing – scenarios of where all this might lead. And yet hope lies in “technically capable and socially progressive inquiry” and in “pushing back against the rhetoric of transcendence”. We created the technology that shapes our lives; it is up to us not to lose ourselves in it.

JENNIFER HOWARD

Russian Literature

Daniil Kharms

RUSSIAN ABSURD

Selected writings

Translated by Alex Cigale

180pp. Northwestern University Press.

Paperback, \$24.95.

978 0 8101 3457 7

Russian literature’s most famous exports tend to be novelists with beards and serious moral agendas. Their popularity often overshadows a rival tradition that shuns didacticism and relishes perversity, absurdity and humour, preferably in small packages. One of the brightest representatives of this tradition is Daniil Kharms, who claimed to be “interested in life only in its absurd manifestation” and abhorred “heroics, pathos, moralizing . . . all that is hygienic and tasteful”. And he said that in Leningrad in 1937, at the height of Stalin’s Terror – a time when absurdity was in abundant supply, but when resisting self-pity was also no mean feat.

As this new translation of his prose and poetry shows, Kharms’s commitment to absurdism and humour in the face of horror was unshakeable. It is still meaningful too, argues his latest translator, Alex Cigale. In an informative introduction Cigale calls for Kharms to be taken “more seriously”, describing him as a “protoexistentialist” deserving a place in the canon alongside Sartre, Beckett and Camus. There is indeed a bit of Beckett about Kharms, who probes at the void behind the façade of meaning, but he does not need to be a proto-anything, especially considering his affinities with Kafka (psychosexual neuroses meet bureaucratic nightmare) and Flann O’Brien (metaphysics meets acutely comic realia). Cigale is right, however, that Kharms is a serious thinker deserving of a wider readership.

So will this new collection, far from the only recent English translation, help garner Kharms new readers and new respect? One strong advantage is the prose, which is unforced, lively and funny. There are flaws, however: the decision to translate many of the names is distracting and inconsistently applied. More worryingly, it also reveals errors of comprehension: Mr Lynxman should be Mr Trotter, Mr Turnip, Mr Radish and so on.

The abundance of material and its chronological presentation is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, what does the non-specialist gain from the inclusion of Kharms’s opaque early philosophical musings? His depth is more evident and effective when he is also being funny. On the other hand, reading Kharms in bulk and in sequence is a revelation: we gradually sense his earnestness dissipating and

themes of sex, violence, hunger and captivity looming up beneath a still unbroken surface of absurdity. *Russian Absurd: Selected writings* is thus a profound and subtle testament to Kharms and his brutal era, even if those looking for an introduction may be better served elsewhere.

JAMIE RANN

Cultural Studies

Thomas Hegghammer, editor

JIHADI CULTURE

The art and social practices of militant

Islamists

284pp. Cambridge University Press.

Paperback, £22.99.

978 1 107 61456 7

When Ahlam al-Nasr, “the poetess of the Islamic State”, visited Raqqa in 2014, she wrote: “Our state has been established / Absolutely on the basis of Islam / Though we battle against enemies / Our state adjudicates by His guidance”. While already popular in Islamic and Middle Eastern regions, poetry is bestowed with particular prominence in what Thomas Hegghammer calls “jihadi culture”. The poems produced are classical in style, their form and eloquence an authentic expression of Islamic culture. Osama bin Laden himself was known as one of the most famous jihadi poets, a synthesis of military leader and artist composing a unique narrative, rich in potential for analysing the reality that it represents.

Jihadi Culture makes a compelling argument for the study of such matters. In the context of militant Islamism, as elsewhere, the value of cultural practices lies in their ability to evoke emotion, to “reinforce and complement the cognitive persuasion work done by doctrine”. As well as poetry, the book has chapters on *anashid* (religiously themed songs), visual culture, cinematography, the dream tradition and contemporary martyrdom. Each chapter proves why culture is important – how identity is forged from the shared lexicon of words, symbols, images and ideas that have evolved and resonate throughout the global community of jihadis.

The pursuit of authenticity is of great significance for a marginal social group, but also a challenge when modern tools and approaches are used to propagate a vision of a utopian Islamic caliphate whose characteristics do not always have clear historical precedent. Al-Nasr writes, “There are many things we’ve never experienced except in our history books”. Yet *Jihadi Culture* also demonstrates that the cultural practices explored, while rooted in tradition, are shifting with the times. It seems that culture among Islamic militants has, in order to broaden its appeal to a generation exposed to Western consumer culture, become more liberal. Both non-Salafi and non-Islamic practices have emerged, including the Sufi tradition of weeping as a sign of religious devotion. In Afshon Ostovar’s chapter, the Marvel character the Punisher is reinvented as a Mujahid. It is disappointing that Ostovar’s sources reproduced here are so small and monochrome for an essay focusing on images.

A broad and ambitious collection, *Jihadi Culture* offers a nuanced approach for understanding militant jihadism, not through dry doctrine, but through the power of culture – a subject that warrants such attention.

REBECCA WOLFE

Short Stories

Kevin Barry

THERE ARE LITTLE KINGDOMS

160pp. Canongate. Paperback, £8.99.

978 1 78689 017 7

Some way into *There Are Little Kingdoms*, his first collection of short stories, Kevin Barry introduces the reader to Donna and Dee, the teenage scourges of a desultory Irish village. The girls tour this “unimpressive tangle of a dozen streets”, taunting and teasing as they go. The blind shopkeeper is alert to their ways. Down at the takeaway shop, they cast Lawrence Wang, a lad their own age, into a “great adolescent suffering”. And in the end – fulfilling the mocking promise of the story’s title, “Ideal Homes” – the village’s future looms as Donna and Dee come to a construction site at the end of those dozen streets. “They found a JCB left unlocked . . .”

“Ideal Homes” is not the only story in this collection that seems less narrative than concise social conspectus. *There Are Little Kingdoms* begins, for example, with “Atlantic City”, in which James, the undoubted king of a decent night out at the “breeze-block arcade tacked onto Moloney’s Garage”, threads his cool way through one July evening, “after a tar-melter of a day”. Barry tacks on a gasp-begging twist for James as the story zooms off, like “Ideal Homes”, into the future; but really Moloney’s place is plenty to be going on with.

On the whole, however, this debut – now cannily reissued by Canongate after a decade during which Barry has won both acclaim and a readership – is full of delights. Its focus tends to pull towards not the Donnas and the Dees of this world but, kindly, towards the hapless and the hopeless. There are the lucky barflies of “Breakfast Wine” who are present when a bombshell walks in, straight out of her marriage. There is the amnesiac newcomer to Clonmel who improvises running a “chipper” shortly before giving an impromptu performance of Roy Orbison’s “Crying”, accompanied by Casio keyboard, during a “pass-the-mike session” in a “dim-lit lounge”. There are failing farms, taunted taxi drivers, talkative fellow travellers and agitated adolescents. Wine and the rest are imbibed at times other than breakfast.

Meanwhile: “Along the verges there are wild flowers – pipewort, harebell, birdsfoot trefoil, grass of Parnassus, all so melodious sounding it would turn your stomach . . .”. And: “Rush hour thickens on the quay . . . Men parp their horns at each other. Seabirds jacked up on weird emissions from the chemical plants downriver . . .”. Trains, planes and automobiles take us from North Tipperary to a Galway house party to a Wicklow hillside in March. And always, if you care to, you can hear “awful things you’d rather not hear late at night” – but “turn up the television, will you, for Jesus’ sake, is that a shriek or a creaking door?”

The reissue’s blurb likens this book to a “modern-day *Dubliners*”. It has a flavour of its own, blending humour with a sense of ongoing, everyday atrocity. “He drank like it was going out of style”: it is a sign of how free of verbal cliché the book is, too, that this one phrase prompts a minor blip of disappointment when it appears. Barry’s talents are otherwise abundantly plain on every page.

MICHAEL CAINES