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## A prequel to Nollywood: South African photo novels and their pan-African consumption in the late 1960s

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This article interrogates the history of the photo novel in Africa with particular reference to *African Film*, a magazine of almost pan-African circulation, published between 1968 and 1972 in South Africa. Featuring the adventures of Lance Spearman, an African crime fighter, the magazine was read widely across Anglophone Africa, from Nigeria and Ghana to South Africa, Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. After a brief introduction to the history of the photo novel, the author discusses the production, content, reception, and legacy of the Lance Spearman photo novels. It is argued that Lance Spearman may be understood as a crossover of James Bond and Philip Marlowe, and several influences from contemporary Western popular culture are traced. Contemporary readers cherished the visual modernity of the photo novels and readily identified with their stylish and street-wise main character. It is argued that *African Film* magazine played an important (today almost forgotten) role within the history of visual media in Africa. It was instrumental in spreading the new format of the photo novel to many Anglophone post-colonies, where it subsequently was ‘vernacularized’. Photo novels served as surrogates for films, as a means to tell almost film-like stories, at a time when commercial African cinema was not yet invented. In terms of its commercial orientation, its readiness to borrow from Western popular culture, its transportability, and its almost pan-African circulation, *African Film* magazine may be called a distant forerunner of the current commercial video film industry of Nigeria.

**Keywords:** photo novel; Lance Spearman; crime fiction; popular culture; visual culture; *Drum* magazine

### 1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to draw attention to a genre and format of African popular culture which, despite its wide historical circulation and immense popularity, tends to be largely overlooked in current discussions about African visual media – the photo novel. Although still in circulation in various forms and countries, I am especially interested in the heyday of African photo novels, which was in the late 1960s to the early 1970s. I suggest that at a time when African filmmaking was still a rather new and highly expensive venture, the photo novel as sequential visual art form served as a kind of surrogate for film. Probably no single title makes this argument more plausible than *African Film*, a series published weekly from 1968 to about 1972 by South Africa based ‘Drum Publications Ltd’. Through Drum’s subsidiaries in Nairobi and Lagos, *African Film* had an almost pan-African circulation, at least in regards to the Anglophone post-colonies. Devoted to the adventures of Lance Spearman, an African crime fighter inspired by the private eyes of the American hard-boiled genre and James Bond alike, *African Film* introduced an African visual modernity and provided a stylish streetwise character with whom young urban Africans could readily identify. Unlike African celluloid film-making, which at the time was very much driven by the political zeal to decolonize the screens

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and the minds of African audiences, *African Film* had a commercial orientation. The photo novels were geared towards evoking pleasures and thrills in their viewer-readers as well as providing them with a template of modernity with which to identify. In their openness to borrowing from American and European media, and their trans-national circulation, the photo novels of the late 1960s have much in common with current Nollywood video films. In an endeavour to remap the trajectories of African Cinema, as indeed the articles of this special edition of *Journal of African Cultural Studies* are undertaking to do, the historical commercial South African photo novels of the late 1960s and early 1970s may well be understood to be a 'prequel' to the contemporary phenomenon of Nollywood.

## 2. Roots and routes of the photo novel in Africa

As a generic form, the photo novel first emerged as *fotoromanzo* with by and large romantic content in post-war Italy (Schimming 2002). As a medium, the photo novel seems to have a close relationship to film, and in fact it emerged out of two early forms that re-mediated film: the graphic novel (which indicates the proximity to comic books) and pictorial summaries based on film stills with captions. Both forms appeared in Italian magazines during the 1930s as so-called *cineromanzi*. From early on, Italian photo novels also served as stepping stones into the film business; Sophia Loren, for example, started her career in the cast of *fotoromanzi* (Schimming 2002, 41–2). Lastly, the emergence of the photo novel in Italy and its ready adoption in neighbouring France and Spain, as well as in Latin America, during the late 1940s and 1950s, has been interpreted as an indication of the form's functioning as a kind of surrogate cinema which catered for those who could not afford to attend cinema halls (Schimming 2002, 39). While the explanatory power of this argument in terms of Europe in the 1950s is doubtful, and the popularity of these early photo novels seems rather to stem from the new form's transportability, which brought an equivalent of cinema much closer to its consumers, the idea of the photo novel as an Ersatz-cinema gains in plausibility under conditions where local film production was almost non-existent, such as in sub-Saharan Africa of the late 1960s.

The spread of the new generic form to sub-Saharan Africa seems to have different roots and routes.<sup>1</sup> Most likely, Francophone West Africa already witnessed the circulation of French *photo-romans* (Nye 1977) either as part of women's magazines or as independent publications during the 1960s. In the 1970s, popular women's magazines in Senegal such as *Amina*, *Bella* and *Bingo* devoted large sections to photo novels dealing with the complexities of gender relationships under the rapidly changing conditions of urban Africa (Rejholec 1986, 366).

South Africa seems to have been instrumental in the introduction of the format to Anglo-phone Africa. During the 1960s, Italian *fotoromanzi*, translated into English, entered the South African market, and from 1965 onwards local South African production of 'look-reads' – as photo novels were called in South Africa – seems to have firmly taken root.<sup>2</sup> The first look-reads featured white characters such as Captain Devil of the South African Secret Police and thus addressed a white audience. Some time in the second half of the 1960s, Drum Publications – the publishing house of the famous *Drum* magazine – 'decided to get in on the publishing boom and produce look-reads for Africans' (Meisler 1969, 80). At that time, the much-written-about golden age of *Drum* magazine, the decade of the 1950s, was long since gone. With the tightening of apartheid rule, many of *Drum*'s former staff had been forced out of the country and the magazine had somewhat changed its face and more or less shied away from investigative journalism and politics (Sampson 2005, 227). Still, Jim Bailey, the owner of Drum Publications, had been able to set up and maintain a distribution network for his magazine with main satellite offices in Nairobi, Lagos and Accra, which also provided content for the local issues of *Drum*. During the late 1960s, Bailey had also begun to expand

the business of his publishing house beyond *Drum* magazine (Sutton 2006, 7), and one can only assume that it was on account of this endeavour that he began publishing look-reads with an African cast. According to Jürgen Schadeberg, *Drum*'s now-famous photographer during its first decade, *Drum* had already experimented with the photo novel format during the mid 1950s, in the form of two-page inserts to the magazine, but decided to drop it without further developing the format (personal communication). With the look-read boom of the 1960s, this changed completely and Drum Publications introduced at least three new magazines solely built on the photo novel format.

At first, Drum Publications experimented with a couple of heroes, all more or less modelled after famous characters from Western popular culture. There was Fearless Fang, a black Tarzan whose stories appeared in *Boom* magazine; The Stranger, a black Lone Ranger-type of cowboy; and Lance Spearman, who turned out to be the most successful of the Drum characters. While a black Tarzan and the jungle scenery in which his stories were set turned out to be too close to the rural environment the young urban migrants who counted among the look-reads' most avid readers had left behind, a cowboy-like The Stranger was just too far removed from everyday African life. These characters were therefore dropped around 1969. In the early 1970s, *Sadness and Joy* was added, a magazine dedicated to photo novels with romantic content, which seems to have catered largely for a female audience.

About 25 writers produced scripts for Drum's look-reads in 1969. Most of them were Africans, some students at the University of Lesotho (Meisler 1969, 81). They were paid the equivalent of 65 USD per script. According to Meisler, the scripts were edited in Johannesburg, then sent to Swaziland where the actual shooting took place, and the strips finally rushed to London for printing.<sup>3</sup> From there the magazines were distributed throughout the former Anglophone colonies of West, East and South Africa via Drum's subsidiaries. With a cover in colour-print, usually sporting a dramatic scene of the story, and 31 pages of black-and-white photographs, the technical quality of the look-reads was quite comparable to that of contemporary American or British comic booklets with which they had to compete on the African markets (see Figure 1). In East and West Africa they sold at a shilling per copy. The back sides of the booklets as well as the flipsides of cover and back side were used for advertisements (for, among other things, Bic pens, Bennett Airmail College, and Johnson insecticide) and self-advertisement for the publishing house's other journals ('You Must Read *Drum*/People Who Think Read *Drum*').

To ensure the circulation of a South African product in independent black African countries, most of which had begun to boycott the apartheid state, the same look-reads appeared under different names in and outside of South Africa.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the West and East African editions indicated 'Drum Publications Nigeria Ltd.' and 'Drum Publications East Africa Ltd.' respectively as publishers, as well as local personnel as editors. The content of these magazines, however, was essentially the same and was all produced in South Africa. For the same reason the editors at Johannesburg took the utmost care to delete all references to a South African environment, such as advertisements for South African beer and other boycotted products present in Swazi towns where the look-reads were photographed (Meisler 1969, 80). In 1969, *African Film* alone had a circulation of about 45,000 copies in East Africa, 100,000 in West Africa and 20,000 in South Africa, where it was published as *Spear* magazine (Meisler 1969, 81).

Not much has been recorded about the cast of the look-reads and so far I have been unable to trace any of the actors. The man who acted as both Fearless Fang and The Stranger was a certain Alfred Holmes. Lance Spearman was portrayed by Joe Mkwanzazi, who had been working as 'a houseboy, scrubbing floors in an apartment in Durban for \$35 a month and playing the piano in a night club for USD1.50 a night, when a white photographer, Stanley N. Bunn, discovered him and decided he had the tough, sophisticated face needed for the role



Figure 1. Colourful action on each cover.

of Spear' (Meisler 1969, 81). For his incarnation of the African crime fighter he earned \$215 a month — which has to be considered a very comfortable salary at the time.

### 3. Lance Spearman – Africa's top crime buster

Lance Spearman, a.k.a. Spear, is a nattily dressed detective whose trademark is a fashionable straw hat, bow-tie and goatee. He likes scotch on the rocks, cigars and is very fond of beautiful women. According to the magazine's self-advertisement he is 'Africa's top crime buster' who 'has a charming way with girls' and 'a deadly way with thugs' (see Figure 2). Though he is somehow attached to the police of the fictional African state in which his adventures are set, it never becomes quite clear if he is actually on that state's pay-roll or working as a freelancer. In his fight against crime he is aided by Captain Victor, a police officer mostly dressed in uniform, his female assistant Sonia, who – despite her elegant dresses and handbags – knows how to fight gangsters perfectly with karate kicks, and his little helper Lemmy, a cunning boy, about twelve years old, whose bow-tie already indicates that one day he is going to be Spear's successor. This firmly fixed set of protagonists (only Sonia disappears about three years into the series) ensured both a high recognition value for readers, a wide range of possible narrative constellations (Spear in peril, rescued by Lemmy; Sonia and Captain Vic kidnapped, rescued by Spear, and so on), and characters with whom male and

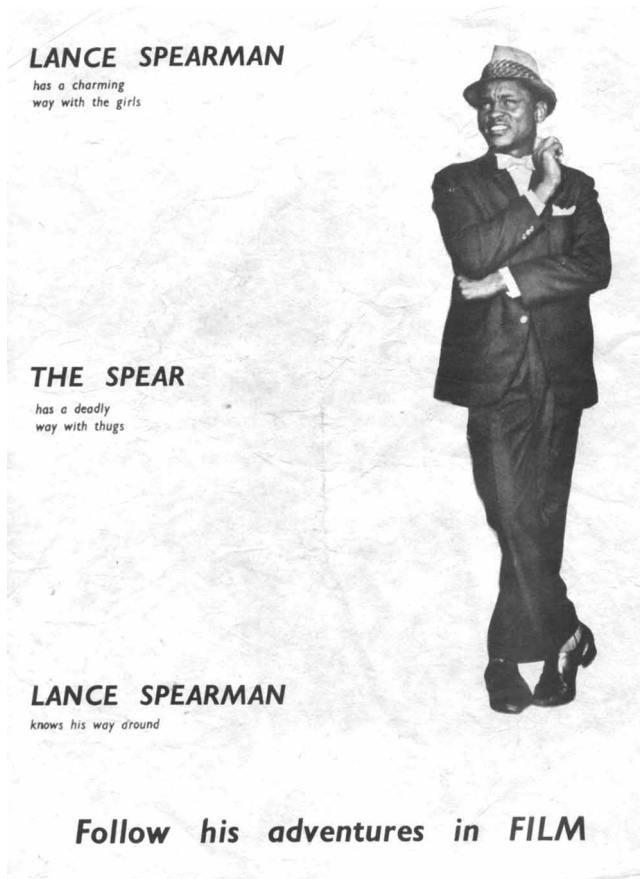


Figure 2. Promotion of a role model for young urban Africans.

female readers of at least three age groups could identify. Young Lemmy was the envy of many readers, for as a one-time reader recalls, ‘when Spearman took on a young sidekick called Lemmy, many of us almost died of jealousy – we so wanted to be in his shoes’ (Giwa 2008).

Spear’s enemies come from various evil backgrounds. There are ordinary thieves, power-mad wannabe rulers of the world, and masked gangsters like the Cats, a group of cat-burglars all dressed in black, with eye-shades and claw-gloves, who mysteriously cling to the highest wall of any building (nos 130–3; 144–5; 164–5). Rabon Zollo, dressed in black with an eye-patch, is Spear’s nemesis in the earlier episodes, later succeeded by a pandemonium of evil characters, whose make-up and sinister plans become ever more fantastic. There is Dr Devil, dressed with a rubber Halloween mask and a cape, who wants to rule the world (nos 134–6), the one-eyed Hook-Hand Killer who kills out of passion (nos 172–3), and a syndicate boss, who uses the Earth Monster, a furry giant, to execute his will (nos 181–5). The later episodes also introduce a certain amount of science fiction, epitomized by several mad professors, such as Mad Doc, who has developed a special serum to shrink people (nos 171–5); Professor Thor, who possesses a brain-machine which is able to read and transfer people’s minds (nos 150–2); and Professor Rubens, who succeeds in his medical experiments to transplant animal organs into humans by producing a werewolf (nos 176–80). All of these evil antagonists have a number of ordinary thugs in their service who regularly kidnap any of the four

protagonists, allowing Spear and his friends to engage in a minimum of at least one fist-fight per issue. As white faces were literally excluded from the magazine, all bad guys were portrayed by a black cast – just like Spear and his friends.

The Spear's templates are not difficult to make out. His style, dress and habits seem to be inspired by James Bond, as already noted by contemporary observers (Meisler 1969), and one-time fans, too, remember him as the 'African James Bond' (see below). Although there is surely a great deal of truth in this observation, I suggest that the 'tone' of the Lance Spearman series – both in terms of language and imagery – is even more deeply rooted in American crime fiction of the hard-boiled school.<sup>5</sup> This may well have been mediated by Hollywood gangster movies of the 1940s and 1950s, or by the novels of James Hadley Chase which were, and still are, widely read in Africa. Though himself British, most of Chase's thrillers are set in America. Influenced by Chandler and other writers of the hard-boiled school, he is said to have written his books by using American slang dictionaries. Some of the language of *African Film* – expressions such as 'You dirty crime-busting punk', 'She was a real doll, we got on like a house on fire', or the onomatopoeic 'Phew! That was close!' mimicking the sound of exhalation in relief at a narrow escape – sounds as though it has come straight out of a Chase novel. It is well known that the *Drum* writers of the 1950s appropriated American crime thrillers and gave their short stories, set in the underworld of Johannesburg, a flavour of the hard-boiled school. This complemented the style of the Johannesburg gangsters themselves, who were avid followers of American B movies, which they used as inspiration for the personal names of gang leaders and gang names, as well as for their language, the so-called *tsotsitaal* (Sampson 2005, 76–83). As one commentator points out, 'The harsh world of the hard-boiled thriller requires special, tough skills to negotiate – it is the world of fast cars, fast dames, hot gangs and smart private eyes who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty; it's translatable to Sophiatown in the fifties, *Drum's* world' (Stiebel 2002, 188). Although Sophiatown had been bulldozed for over ten years and the world of *Drum* buried with it when Lesotho students and others began to script the Spearman series at the end of the 1960s, the model of *Drum's* short crime stories may not have been forgotten. A big difference between this earlier African genre and the photo novels, however, is the complete absence of the political in the latter, so prominent in the former. This is surely an effect of publishing under apartheid rule which had firmly taken root in the 1960s, when *Drum* publications were regularly scrutinised by the censors. In *African Film* the political is instead overwritten with the fantastic – and that's where James Bond and the fantastic world of espionage come in. Like James Bond, Lance Spearman has a couple of special gimmicks, such as a wrist watch walkie-talkie, a knife-throwing boot and special cigars that contain either explosives or sleeping gas. The fantastic science fiction of the espionage film, however, is much more elaborate with Spear's antagonists. They do not only employ brain machines, shrinking serums, and other medical devices, but also such fancy things as flying jet wheel chairs and jet cars (in fact a flying VW beetle; see Meisler 1969).

Geared towards thrills and pleasures, *African Film* seems to be completely apolitical – at first glance. However, despite the announcement on every issue's last page that 'all characters in this publication are fictitious', the magazine is deeply rooted in the wider political and social context of its time of production. In 'The Diamonds of Salamar' (no. 118), for example, the fictitious country of the Spearman adventures turns out to be one whose economy (which is largely based on diamond exports) is threatened because the precious stones (Spear calls them 'sparklers') are stolen in large amounts. In this case it is not difficult to make out South Africa, as well as other African countries, whose economies depended on the exploitation of mineral resources, as frames of reference. The five-chapter series 'The Power-mad Tycoon' (nos 122–6) introduces a power-hungry man who threatens the world with nuclear weapons he hides on a lonely island, from where he plans to stir up war

between the East and the West to become ruler of the world: 'Once I have the East and the West committed to a nuclear war, there will be no difficulty for me to pick up the rest' (no. 126, 20). Although this plot could be seen to come straight out of a James Bond movie (even a submarine is part of the power-mad tycoon's plan), it could also be seen as reflecting the contemporary scenario of the Cold War. A similar plan to conquer the world is devised by one of Spear's arch-enemies, Dr Devil (no. 117, 14–15), who initiates his henchmen into his plan, by telling them: 'Today all the big countries are trying to land a rocket on the moon' – a clear indication of this episode's production date around 1969. Dr Devil continues:

I will hi-jack these rockets by powerful radio control and send them crashing into the sea. // Then we will send our secret agents to give the governments of the different countries false information about the missing rockets. // They will suspect each other for hi-jacking their rockets and war will break out! // We will then move in and assassinate the leaders and take over. Each of you will be head of a country!

Other adventures of Spear reference prominent figures of the time, such as British football legend Tony 'Bomber' Brown, who lends his name to the underworld boss of the four chapter episode 'The Spear meets Bomber Brown' (nos 102–5); and Ronald Biggs, the most prominent member of the British gang that committed 'The Great Train Robbery' in 1963. In 'The Cats and £1,000,000' (nos 164–6), 'the Cats are loose again in England' and are after one million pounds 'that is still outstanding from the Great Train Robbery' (no. 165, 1). Rarely, Lance Spearman leaves Africa and visits European countries during his investigations, such as in 'London Holiday' (nos 156–7) where he meets a long-haired black hippie who calls himself 'Love', and in 'Assignment Athens' where he chases the Cats (no 166). This can be interpreted as an attempt to speak to the imagined readers' desire for the exotic. However, since such exotic places could only be conjured by using pre-existing pictures of ordinary European street scenery, or typical landmarks such as the Acropolis, as backdrops, on top of which images of the actors were superimposed, the resulting images are below the general quality of the magazine's artwork. One can only assume that it is for this reason that Lance Spearman was not sent on more overseas expeditions.

What is most striking about the imagery of *African Film* is that it is set almost entirely in a modern urban setting. Outdoor sequences show neat buildings (sometimes several storeys high), shops, sidewalks, well-paved streets, and cars of the then latest models. Indoor sequences display modern, sometimes luxurious, interiors with tiled bathrooms, living rooms with coffee tables and easy-chairs, bookshelves and framed pictures on the walls. While Captain Vic's office is rather poorly equipped (desk, telephone, and name tag on the table) Spearman's office, which only seems to appear in the earlier episodes, seems to have come straight out of a Hollywood B-movie: blinds on the window, a bottle of scotch in the drawer, a detective smoking a cheroot relaxing casually in his chair, legs stretched on the table. The imagery of *African Film* is a celebration of an African modernity devoid of any reminiscence of 'traditional' Africa. In 'Gold Fever' (nos 146–9), Lemmy and Spear travel to the countryside – with the purpose of going on a holiday. Their destination is characterized as such:

Pic.1 – Lemmy: 'Where are we going Spear?' Spear: 'It's an old mining town, and the mines have all closed down: Now it's just a settlement which caters for the farming people.' Pic. 2 – Lemmy: 'Aw! That doesn't sound exciting.' Spear: 'Well, I want a rest.' Pic. 3 – Spear: 'There are still some of the old-timers around who haven't given up prospecting for gold, and it's quite a tourist attraction these days. We won't be bored.' (no. 146, 4)

Throughout this episode – in fact one of the rare episodes to take place outside of the city – rural African architecture is remarkably missing. The 'farming people', too, are nowhere to be seen toiling the earth. Instead, the town has a black 'Sheriff' whose clothing is clearly derived from a Hollywood Western, and all of the 'old-timers' are dressed in similar cowboy-style dress. An



exchange between Lemmy and Spear, which takes place in a curio shop early in the same episode, may well be read as a meta-commentary on this absence of Africa in the whole of *African Film*: Lemmy marvels at some jewellery and says ‘Gee! Spear, look at that. It’s real African art’. Spear gives him one of his typical laconic replies: ‘Don’t you believe it. It’s either made in Birmingham or Hong Kong!’ (no. 146, 5).

The world of Lance Spearman is a macho world where young women are addressed as ‘doll’ or ‘pretty’ and only seem to wait to be picked up by handsome men. This is probably where contemporaneous African male attitudes towards women and the gender matrix observable within the two templates of *African Film*, the contemporary espionage film and earlier American crime thrillers of the hard-boiled school, merge. Still, Lance Spearman, who is always out for romantic adventures, probably has more of James Bond’s elegance and appetite for women, than Sam Spade’s or Phillip Marlowe’s deep-seated ambivalence towards the opposite sex. As in the James Bond movies, seductive women are also collaborators of Spearman’s antagonists, and even if he is fully aware of the role they are playing, he only rarely declines an invitation. Most often Spearman and a woman end up in her apartment. ‘You help yourself to a drink while I put on something more comfortable’, she tells him before getting re-dressed, and he may reply: ‘Gee. Thanks Doll.’ What follows, however, is never shown. Showing kissing is as explicit as *African Film* gets, and even this only occurs occasionally.

Women may also turn out, however, to be man-eaters in their own right, as the ‘Head Huntress’ demonstrates (no. 50). This episode opens with a bar scene, in which ‘Mister Munn E. Spinna, a rich married man’ trips over his own sexual desire. ‘He sees a shapely doll with all the curves in the right places coming towards him. She gives him a big, friendly smile’ (no. 50, 1), which the beholder cannot see for the actress is captured from behind, thus offering a substantial part of her ‘curves’ to the gaze of the presumably male viewer-reader. ‘Wow! That’s what I call real sexy!’ thinks Mister Munn E. Spinna, and two pages later loses his head, quite literally, because Hilda, the Head Huntress, a stylish modern woman, turns out to be avenging a racket that once destroyed her family and left her insane.

The only departure from these staples of female characterization in *African Film* is Sonia, Spearman’s female crime-fighting assistant. She always resists Spearman’s advances and also knows how to use her fists in fighting. In episode no. 128, for example, ‘Sonia gets into the mood’ (no. 128, 28) and enters a fight in which Spearman is already engaged. One of the thugs pushes her aside, displaying a stereotypical ‘masculine’ attitude: ‘Out of the way, lady, this is a man’s game.’ She replies: ‘Remember equal rights for women?’ And, when she punches him hard with her right in the next picture, she comments: ‘This is one of them.’ This sequence of only three pictures (see Figure 3) is not only remarkable for its reference to the contemporary women’s liberation movement, and a modern African woman’s claim to be part of it, but in its ironic twist is characteristic also of the juxtaposition of text and images so typical of *African Film*. This is most frequently displayed in the fighting routines. Harsh violence is accompanied by a commentary which seeks to establish the ‘coolness’ with which the protagonists use violence – for it is always Spearman and his friends who comment on their own actions, the antagonists being granted only an occasional ‘Ooeff!’ or ‘Aarrg!’. At the same time, Spear’s commentary turns karate kicks and upper cuts into comedy skits. He announces a punch into a thug’s face with the words ‘Have a knuckle sandwich’ (no. 107, 10), and a few pages further on he is in the air knocking two guys out with a karate kick, telling them: ‘You guys look hungry. Have a meal’ (no. 107, 23).

The fighting routines are central to the elaborate imagery of *African Film*. They convey a sense of action rarely found elsewhere in photo novels. This is achieved by capturing actors as though they are in the middle of a dynamic move, through camera angles usually associated with film. Sometimes speed lines, borrowed from comic books, are added. Frequent changes of



Figure 3. Equal rights for women: fight sequence (no. 128, 28).

point of view, reverse-shots, a meaningful variation of different camera distances (from long shots to close-ups), and varying picture sizes per panel, account for *African Film's* cinematic appeal. Actors also display vivid facial expressions. This adds to the liveliness of the imagery and is quite distinct from the often boring visual aesthetics of contemporary non-African photo novels, where actors, even if engaged in lively conversation, are captured with lips closed in order to appear as immaculate as possible. While the images in European and American photo novels have been analyzed as being only supportive of the text-based narratives (Schimming 2002, 73), images and text are on a much more equal footing in *African Film*,

and in many sequences – especially the fighting routines – images take the lead and could even function without accompanying texts. This is a unique and remarkable development which sets *African Film* apart from the earlier European format of the photo novel it was built on.

#### 4. A pan-African fan culture

Most issues of *African Film* I could get hold of carry a last page with a portrait of Lance Spearman and a direct address to the magazine's readers: 'If you are a Lance Spearman fan, cut out and save this portrait. Then write to: The Spear, P.O. Box 3372, Nairobi and ask to be enrolled as a member of the Spear Fan Club.' In some issues this page is substituted by another, which indicates lists of names and addresses of new fan club members from Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. The two pages that I have in my possession count 91 male names, but only six female names. Access to such fan mail would provide an ideal entry point for a discussion of the historical reception of the magazine. Since the offices of Drum Publications have long been closed, however, these letters seem to be lost.

'No one, including *Drum* magazine, has done a market analysis,' writes Stanley Meisler, 'but anyone familiar with Africa can quickly deduce who the readers are' (1969, 81). He suspects 'ordinary semi-educated young men [...] who have left the rural areas after a few years of schooling and come to the towns' (1969, 81) in search of a white-collar career as *The Spear*'s most avid fans, because the magazine mirrors 'their yearning, their uncertain identification with the fringes of Western culture, their need for fancy in a harsh urban world' (1969, 80). It is precisely because such high-spirited expectations of participating in the rich and sophisticated world of cities rarely came true that the fictitious crime fighter gained an immense popularity according to Meisler: 'Spear is their fancy come to life. He is the black man – smart, witty, tough – who rules the urban world they want to enter' (1969, 81). There is surely some truth in this argument. However, *African Film*'s readership also extended beyond this type of reader. Reminiscences from one-time fans which I have gathered from different internet discussion groups and websites dedicated to African popular culture, lead me to suspect that the *Drum* look-reads also had a readership among young urban middle class schoolchildren. A certain Count1 from Nigeria, for instance, posted the following comment on 1 January 2009 on [www.nigeriavillagesquare.com](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com): 'Me, I used to wait by the door for the vendor to bring my *Boom* every Monday and later, *African Film*. We devoured those things o.' Ibrahim Mkamba, who grew up in the small town of Kilosa, Tanzania, states: 'A copy was sent to my dad every month. I really loved Spearman' (Mkamba 2008). And Vincent Kizza, who is working as liaison officer at the Uganda Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, writes:

It is only now that I come across a discussion on Lance Spearman and Fearless Fang issues of which I would pay anything to get. Thinking about them makes me re-live my great childhood. By the way, were the characters themselves real?!! How I wish they were! (Vincent Kizza, 6 April 2009, [www.chimurengalibrary.co.za](http://www.chimurengalibrary.co.za))

Clearly such memories are clouded by nostalgia, and such voices, invaluable as they may be, make up only a fraction of the magazines' former consumers whose numbers must have reached up to 500,000 per week (based on the circulation of 165,000 copies mentioned by Meisler in 1969 and the fact that a single copy had more than just one reader). In 2009 I was able to talk to about ten former Spearman fans in Tanzania who helped me to get an idea of how and in what contexts *African Film* was consumed around 1970. Most of them were in their teens when they encountered *Spear*, and only two were above twenty years old. All of them had at least a secondary school education and it was during their schooldays that they had read *African Film*. Judging from where they lived at the time it becomes clear that the magazine penetrated far into the hinterland beyond the major cities and towns. Only some were lucky enough to

acquire their own copies; others had to borrow. Some even had copies bought for them by their parents who thought reading them would enhance the English language skills of their children. The young readers, of course, were looking for something else in *African Film*. ‘When you read Spearman it was actually as if you were watching a film’, one respondent said, and almost all agreed that the Tanzanian mediascape in about 1970 did not offer much for teenagers in terms of entertainment. Cinema was only available in the cities, and only for those who could afford it. Rural areas only had a mobile cinema show once in a while. It was the action of the fighting routines that was readily translated into the lives of the Spearman fans. Spear became a favourite nickname (one fan even told me about a seventy-year-old cousin still called Spear today), and the bad guys were called Zollo, after Spear’s arch enemy. Spear’s dress, especially hat and tie, was also copied. Only those who attended English medium schools were really able to follow the bubble texts, most others had to make do with the pictures and the little they could grasp from the explanations of their peers who could read English. One former fan who grew up in the household of a primary school teacher in the rural area around Mwanza remembered that each month on pay day the head of the household bought copies of *African Film* for himself. Back home while he was leafing through the magazines he commented upon them in his native language Kisukuma, talking to himself non-stop. The children who watched the scene from a distance raised their ears lest they miss a word. As soon as the teacher was out of the house they would gather around the copies and try to match what they had heard to what they saw in the magazines. Usually heated debates about the proper interpretation of certain sequences would follow until a consensus was established. *African Film* was so popular that it also found its way into the household of a more prominent ‘teacher’ – President Julius Nyerere – where it was consumed by several of his seven children. Rose Nyerere, the youngest of the children, told me that it must have been her brothers who brought it into the house, though she also read it. In fact, she is the only female former reader I spoke to, and from her responses I assume that *African Film* must have been more prominent with boys and young men than with girls. Three longer essays written by former fans and published on different websites draw attention to the mediascapes in which the generic form of the photo novel was situated and are also extremely valuable in offering further explanations of Lance Spearman’s popularity. In an essay which focuses on the social role of actors in current Tanzanian video films, for example, Ibrahim Mkamba recalls at length how he enjoyed mobile cinema shows that came to his rural home town every month during his childhood in Tanzania in the 1960s. He mentions Chaplin comedies and John Wayne Westerns and draws a parallel between such films and the photo novels, especially between the figure of the cowboy and Lance Spearman:

Because I loved film, I found myself a fan of Lance Spearman African detective picture magazines (Spear magazines) which were acted in Africa by Africans only. [...] Many people loved Spearman and there were some who called themselves that name, there were also those who imitated his yellowish-brown suit, and his wide hat, which was different from those of the cowboys. Some even started smoking by imitating him. He really loved cigars. He was an expert in using pistols, having a heavy blow like a stone! What people loved and respected about cowboys and Lance Spearman was the kind of job they did. They were law’s sideliners against criminals (Mkamba 2008).

This is an interesting explanation of The Spear’s popularity, probably partially inspired by the point this writer wants to drive home. His argument is that, unlike cowboy films and Spear look-reads, current Tanzanian video films, which depict a great deal of crime, do not actually portrait figures who fight *against* it. This is one variation of a staple argument which frequently surfaces in debates about the negative social effects of all sorts of media, and, ironically enough, it was applied 40 years earlier by contemporary observers of the Spearman phenomenon. Meisler (1969, 83) reports on contemporary discourse which held the look-reads accountable for the increase of crime in the cities. The East African Standard, one of Kenya’s leading newspapers,

attacked the ‘violence and gangster dialogue of the Spear’ already in 1968, and columnist John Elgon wrote: ‘Africans who desire a secret agent hero of their own, apparently considerable in number, deserve something better’ (quoted in Meisler 1969, 83).

In a reminiscence about her childhood days in Nairobi, Kate Getao places the Drum look-reads into a wider context of an urban middle-class youth culture in which comic books played an important part. ‘When I was a youngster,’ she begins, ‘I was lucky to receive exactly five shillings as pocket money’. She continues:

With that amount of money, you could buy two comics, a bar of chocolate, a packet of liquorice all-sorts and have change to spare. [...] There were also ‘film strips’ something that I have not seen for many years. These had one syllable names like ‘Boom’ and ‘Film’. They consisted of a story board of black and white photographs with balloons for dialogue, in other words, comics that used photographs instead of drawings. The hero of Boom wore a leopard skin thong and swung on trees, while the hero of Film was improbably named ‘Lance Spearman’ and was often photographed leaping horizontally through the air to kick someone while screaming ‘Aaaaargh! Take that!’ [...] These comics and film strips were so addictive that a collection of them gave one stature in the community [...]. In those days, you could win friends and influence people by swapping comics. I knew my relatives by what sort of comic collection they possessed, and never resisted visiting anyone who had a large pile of Boom or Film stored under their bed (Getao 2008).

In his critical essay titled ‘Black like us’, Tunde Giwa – himself a Nigerian one-time fan of Lance Spearman – places the photo novels in the same context. Furthermore, he calls attention to the fact that comics sold in Africa during the 1960s came from America and Europe and therefore were dominated by white characters such as the Marvel Superheroes, Thor and Tintin. If Africans appeared at all, then it was only as extras colouring an exotic landscape against which the adventures of the white main characters were set. He points out that

Into this culturally colonised milieu came a new comic published by Drum Publications called *African Film* featuring Lance Spearman, a raffish and nattily-dressed black super cop with an ever-present Panama hat. And we all instantly fell deeply in love with him. No one forced Spearman on us. For the first time, we had a comic hero who was actually black like us. *African Film* was very different from other comics of the time. Not hand-drawn as other comics were, it was a photoplay magazine that used actual photographs of real black people with the dialog typed at the bottom of each panel. Located in an unnamed but strictly urban setting, Lance Spearman was cast as a black James Bond type (Giwa 2008).

In searching for explanations of The Spear’s popularity across the English-speaking post-colonies of Africa, it is perhaps important to remember that the magazine emerged at the end of a decade during which most former colonies had gained their independence, sometimes – as in Kenya – only after a severe struggle against the colonizers. This post-independence era was marked by nationalism and political and cultural attempts to shape a new identity and self-confidence for the young nations. Within this historical context a multi-purpose black super crime fighter who not only contained crime within the fictitious nation his adventures were set in, but who was also regularly assigned to defend the nation against aggressors from outside made perfect sense (‘When the country’s existence is threatened its leaders at once call in The Spear’, announces the cover of no. 118). And as Africa’s answer to James Bond and Marvel comics’ Superheroes alike, Lance Spearman, who not only saved his nation but the whole world in many of his adventures, may have helped to satisfy a deep-seated desire for equality within his postcolonial readership.

## 5. Conclusion: *African Film*’s legacy

The period from the late 1960s to the 1970s marked the heyday of the photo novel in Africa. The pioneering Drum look-reads served as templates for a number of local adaptations, often in

vernacular languages. This is comparable to the pacesetter role of Nollywood, which during the latter part of the 1990s spread across the continent where it inspired several local film industries. Tanzanians could read their first Kiswahili photo novel in *Film Tanzania*, a magazine founded in 1969 and which – despite several interruptions – still exists (no. 141 came out in 2006).<sup>6</sup> A magazine called *New Film Azania*, whose title indicates an aspiration to cater for a readership of a liberated South Africa, appeared in Tanzania in the early 1980s. Unlike *African Film*, these magazines were rather didactically oriented and featured stories dealing with everyday problems of ordinary people. In terms of quality and style they were a far cry from the Drum look-reads. In Nigeria, however, the generic form was appropriated by drama groups of the Yoruba travelling theatre tradition, who adapted their plays very successfully to the new medium. Famous company leaders such as Hubert Ogunde, Oyin Adejobi, Kola Ogunmola and others had their plays re-shot as ‘photo plays’ and published by West African Book Publishers in Lagos. These booklets, larger in size than the South African templates, provided the companies with a supplement to their income from stage performances and were in fact the first portable records of such plays available to a mass audience (prior to the printed photo plays, dramas had been broadcast on television; see Barber 2000, Chapter 8). Founded in 1969, the Yoruba photo-play magazine *Atoka*, which in each of its issues featured a play from a different theatre company, survived well into the 1980s and went out of print only when stage drama declined and theatre companies began to experiment with film and video (Barber 2002, 258–64). While Drum look-reads were scripted by anonymous authors who were never mentioned in the magazines, Yoruba photo plays always indicated the scriptwriter’s name on the cover. The Nigerian photo plays must in fact be considered the first distinctly African photo novels: unlike *African Film*, which merely recast European or American stories with an African cast, the Yoruba photo-plays are self-conscious about the display of a very specific and clearly located African culture – the culture of 1970s Nigerian Yorubaland, including its rich mythology and contemporary urban lore.

In spite of being a medium that is able to convey thrills and pleasures, the photo novel has almost ceased to exist in Africa today. Of the once-famous Drum look-reads only *True Love*, the South African version of Nigerian/Kenyan *Sadness and Joy*, seems to still be published. Video, the medium which has made the reinvention of a truly popular African cinema possible, currently fills the place once occupied by the photo novel in the popular culture of many African cities. Interestingly enough, in Tanzania, cultural producers have recently recombined the two media by reinventing the format of the early *cineromanzi*. Thus, some of the mushrooming tabloids include a page on which Nigerian and Tanzanian video films are retold with video screenshots and pasted bubbles with dialogue in Kiswahili (Krings 2010). Within the paradigm of development communication, the photo novel also resurfaces here and there, albeit as a non-commercial ‘tool of communication’. Various development agencies make use of the generic form to spread the topics of their agenda – for example, HIV prevention, health education, and empowerment of women – to clients imagined as being only barely able to read and thus receptive to an image-based form of communication.<sup>7</sup> Even the once-famous *Atoka* series seems to have been stripped of its initial entertainment values and remodelled into a tool for evangelism. Radio Abeokuta commissioned the first edition of a new Yoruba photo play magazine called *Atoka Akewijesu* written and directed by Adeleke Osindeko and performed by a group called ‘Akewijesu Drama Ministry’.<sup>8</sup> This appropriation of a popular form by a religious (most likely Pentecostal) organisation provides another possible parallel between the photo novels and Nollywood, since Pentecostal churches are amongst the leading producers of Nollywood films.

Though I have proposed to conceptualize the Drum look-reads as distant forerunners of Nollywood videos, it is perhaps important to highlight some of the major differences as well.

Unlike Nigerian video films, Drum look-reads never directly addressed the contemporary social, economic and political conditions prevailing at the time, but opted for the fantastic, which they borrowed from European and American templates. Although Nigerian video films also owe a great deal to foreign media formats, such formats are employed as a kind of framework in which African stories are told, a process which may be understood as a re-mediation of either 'traditional' or current urban lore, or a combination of both. Nowhere does this become more obvious than in the Nollywood reformulation of the 'traditional' African witchdoctor as mad scientist (Wendl 2004, 275–6). While *African Film* is full of mad scientists borrowed from genres of Western popular culture, Nollywood videos localize the figure of the mad scientist, recasting him as an African witchdoctor. Similarly, although both photo novels and Nollywood revel in a display of an African modernity, Lance Spearman's modernity looks rather like that of Europe or America, while that of Nollywood is distinctly African.

Their trans-national and even pan-African consumption is certainly the biggest similarity of the two genres, though what remains obscure is how far Drum look-reads were successful in crossing the Atlantic to Europe and America. Judging from the covers of the Nigerian editions that indicate one Shilling as UK and 20 cents as US price, the publishing house must have at least envisioned that the magazines could find readers in the African diaspora as well. Eventually some copies must have made it even to the Caribbean: one of the internet discussions I monitored was initiated by a comic book fan who had heard from a friend who grew up in the Caribbean that he remembered Fearless Fang look-reads from his childhood days. Given the popularity of Nollywood videos in the Caribbean (Cartelli 2007), the plan to sell African photo novel magazines outside of the continent seems to have been not totally unfounded. Perhaps the rise of television, especially of the related formats of *telenovela* and daily soap, which during the late 1970s caused a decline of photo novel consumption everywhere, prevented a thorough circulation of Spearman's adventures beyond Africa. 'After he spent so many years enlivening my youth', writes Esther Getao (2008), 'I wonder what happened to Lance Spearman. Did he retire, impoverished and unappreciated, into obscurity?' In a debate about memories of schooldays which took place on [www.naijarules.com](http://www.naijarules.com), the leading internet forum used by Nigerians living abroad, someone asked if others remembered Lance Spearman. A certain Vince replied: 'Do I remember SPEAR you ask? Man, LANCE SPEARMAN should be made into a movie for real!' (16 February 2004). More than two years later, someone writing under the pseudonym of 'takestyle' eventually came across this thread and replied: 'I actually DID start writing a Lance Spearman screenplay a few years ago, but then I changed the character into an original creation because I wasn't sure what the situation was with the rights to the Spear character. I actually should look into that. . .because I think that movie SHOULD be made, if not by me then by someone else. (But preferably by me)' (18 March 2006).

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## Notes

1. The following tentative historical sketch has to be considered preliminary in many ways.
2. For a contemporary account of Drum look-reads I heavily rely on a short but very informative article by Stanley Meisler (1969), by then foreign correspondent of the *Los Angeles Times* based in Nairobi, whose readiness to get himself seriously interested in a seemingly silly cultural product cannot be overstated.
3. Later on the East African and West African editions were printed in Tanzania (and, even later, in Kenya) and Nigeria respectively.
4. *African Film* was used as the title of the look-read in East and West Africa, while the same content was published as *Spear* magazine in South Africa; similarly, *Boom* magazine, which contained the stories of Fearless Fang and The Stranger, was published in Nigeria and Kenya, while *The Stranger* served as the magazine title in South Africa. The South African photo novel *True Love* appeared in East and West Africa as *Sadness and Joy*.
5. I am especially referring to the suspense novels of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammet, whose detectives, Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade respectively, also appeared on screen in the 1940s and 1950s.
6. In the 1990s this magazine appeared fortnightly with a circulation of 10,000 (Sturmer 1998, 219).
7. The Tanzanian magazine *Femina* which is sponsored by the Swedish Development agency SIDA, for example, included a three page full-colour photo novel encouraging female empowerment in its 2006 issues. Another example is a set of photo novels 'that addresses social issues such as alcoholism, HIV, and abuse in a compelling, fun and easy-to-understand format' produced by South African Strika Communications and the Goedgedacht Trust in 2006. See [http://strika.com/communications/news\\_article.php?NewsItem=30](http://strika.com/communications/news_article.php?NewsItem=30) (accessed 19 December 2009).
8. This can be viewed on the website of Radio Abeokuta: <http://www.abekokuta.org/Atoka1ac.htm> (accessed 19 December 2009)

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