

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE POPULARITY OF AMERICAN  
ACTION MOVIES SHOWN IN INFORMAL VIDEO HOUSES IN  
ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA**

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## DEDICATION

*To the memory of my dearest late mother  
for widely opening a world of possibilities and for never putting me,  
and my passion for life, on a leash.  
Thank you for believing in me, and for your unconditional love,  
encouragement and support.  
Your inspiration is bearing fruit,  
your spirit and legacy will always live on.*

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## ABSTRACT

The early 1990s saw a major change in the Ethiopian history in so far as Ethiopian media consumption practices was concerned. With the change of government in 1991, the 'Iron Curtain' prohibiting the dissemination of Western symbolic products within the country was lifted which in turn led to a surge in demand for Western predominantly American media texts. In order to supply this new demand, informal video houses showing primarily American action movies were opened in Addis Ababa. There was a significant shift in Ethiopians' films consumption practices which were previously limited to watching films produced by socialist countries mainly the former Soviet Union. This study set out to probe reasons for the attraction of American action movies shown in video-viewing houses in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia amongst the urban unemployed male youth. Particularly, it examines how the meanings produced by and embedded in the cultural industries of the West are appropriated in the day-to-day lives of the youth. The importance of video houses as a shared male cultural space for Ethiopian unemployed youth and the watching of American action movies in this space are the main entry and focus of this study. Using qualitative methods such as observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the study explores what happens in this cultural space and how one makes sense of the impact of American media on local audiences.

The findings of the study point to the embeddedness of viewing practice in everyday life and the importance of local contexts in understanding text-reader interaction. This is shown by the male youth's tendency to use media messages as a mode of escape and a symbolic distancing from their lived impoverished reality. The study also seeks to highlight that the video houses as cultural space have contributed to the creation of marginal male youth identities in the Ethiopian patriarchal society. As such, these and other findings, the study argues, highlight the deficiencies of the media imperialism thesis with its definitive claims for cultural homogenisation as effect of globalisation of media. As such, this study should be read as emphasising the capability of local audience groups in Third World country like Ethiopia to construct their own meanings and thus their own local cultures and identities, even in the face of their virtually complete dependence on the image flows distributed by the transnational culture industries.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This study investigates how unemployed Ethiopian youth in selected informal video viewing houses in Addis Ababa make meaning out of the global, primarily American, media within their day-to-day lived experiences. It takes a critical view of what Schiller (1976) and Boyd-Barrett (1977) describe as the media imperialism thesis, which sees the Third World as being passive consumers of global media contents disseminated from First World countries like America and Western Europe. The media imperialism thesis is based on the premise that saturation of global media messages overwhelms the specificities of national identity and culture leading to cultural homogenisation. I will discuss the media imperialism thesis's assumption that the influx of global media on unsuspecting and economically disadvantaged Third World countries has led to cultural homogenisation, the result of poor countries being avid consumers of Western market-oriented values.

In particular, this study investigates whether or not the viewing of films, primarily American action movies, by Ethiopian youth is part of the process of global cultural homogenisation identified by Schiller and others. In other words, has youth media consumption practices destroyed or undermined the specificity of Ethiopian culture (like its adherence to Coptic Orthodox Christianity and cultural identity uninfluenced by colonialism) as pointed out by media imperialism thesis? Alternatively, are there more complex processes at play in this interaction between the global and the local?

In addressing this issue, I will draw on the ethnographic critique of media imperialism thesis, as advanced by Ang (1982) and Fiske (1987) which looks at global media from the perspective of local audiences and the meaning they make in the text/audience encounter. This shifts attention away from an exclusive focus on media production and distribution. Consumption of global media messages among local audiences in Third World countries has been the subject focus of many media theorists over the past four decades (Schiller 1976, 1991; Boyd-Barrett 1977; Ang 1982, 1996; Hall 1977, 1980; Fiske 1987; Morley 1986; Silverstone 1990; Radway 1988; Murphy and Kardiy 2003). In reviewing the literature, I will attempt to establish the theoretical

frameworks under which this subject has been studied and the common themes running through these studies.

This chapter provides a personal and general background to the study and highlights the research problem and the significance of the study. It also outlines the objectives of the study, pertinent research issues, including methods used to collect data, and the thesis structure.

## **1. Background to the Study**

### *1.1 A personal note*

My interest to investigate the popularity of US action movies shown in video-viewing houses in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia began in the early 1990s while I was completing high school. It was then that I started to be fascinated by the ways in which local audiences in Third World countries consume, and make meaning from, global media messages. Two different but related media global messages prompted my interest. The first was linked to my interaction with my brother, and the second, my earlier fascination for Madonna and her dress style.

At that time, my small brother and I used to watch American movies and TV programmes together. Since my brother had limited English language skills, these viewing sessions were interspersed with his asking me about the meanings of the dialogues. (In Ethiopia, most students are taught English in their own language and in Addis Ababa the language used was Amharic, the official language of the country.) I translated the dialogues although my mastery of language was elementary and most of the translations were guesswork. On completing high school, I went to India to do my higher studies and these viewing sessions were interrupted for four years. However, on returning home I found my brother, who was then 14, immersed in watching action movies. I also noticed that he rarely watched movies with me and when he did he seldom asked me to translate. He seemed to have lost interest in American-made family sitcoms and soap operas shown on national TV and was more fascinated by home movies which he rented from video shops. This was when I first realised that action movies appealed to him. I asked him why he liked watching those movies and he said, “When you left, there was no one to translate the dialogues. So instead I started watching action movies because they don’t need translation. I just watch who

beats who and I get the story”. He said, “I now love watching American action movies, though I do not understand most of what they are saying”. In short, this interaction with my brother first introduced me to Ethiopian youth’s attraction to American action movies.

The second reason for my earlier fascination with the local audience/global media encounter relates to images of Madonna. In my final year in high school, also in the early 1990s, I copied Madonna’s style and wore fishnet stockings, tights and crucifix earrings and necklaces whenever I got the chance. It was my way of resisting the Ethiopian traditional culture in girls’ dress codes which included wearing skirts that cover the knees and no sleeveless or tight tops. I remembered the disapproval I received from my extended family members (grandparents, uncles and aunts) who considered my dress style unconventional and ‘un-Ethiopian’. It formed part of my rebellious stance against the conformity of Ethiopian society.

Some years went by and I joined the masters programme in media studies and journalism at Rhodes University in South Africa. During the course of my study, I was introduced to cultural studies, audience research and encounters between local audiences and global media. It was then that I was struck by Fiske’s discussion on popular culture and the meanings teenage girls and young women make out of the image of Madonna. I came to understand that Fiske’s argument could explain my earlier fascination with Madonna. Fiske’s (1987) analysis of Madonna and how she seemed to be in control of her own image and the process of making it her own provided a means to understand my attraction. According to Fiske (1987: 277–278), Madonna offers audiences ‘resistance’ to hegemony. My copying of Madonna’s style of dress, however, ironically articulates the cultural foundation of the sex/gender and kinship systems, the conflation of power and sex, in women. Much in line with Madonna, the way I dressed was an assertion of my sexuality which can be interpreted as the articulation by women of a whole new set of libratory images associated with Madonna. My stance at that age clearly resonates with a Madonna-esque defiance. McClary argues that Madonna’s image enables girls to see that the meanings of feminine sexuality “can be in their control, can be made in their interests, and that their subjectivities are not necessarily totally determined by the dominant patriarchy” (Fiske, 1987 in McClary, 1991: 148). For example, the crucifix plays an

important part in sustaining the canons of the Coptic Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia (to which my extended family belong). However, the wearing of the crucifix when I was a teenager was “neither a religious nor sacrilegious” act but because it was “beautiful” (Fiske 1987: 276). It can be argued that dressing like Madonna had offered me a new kind of agency for self-representation in post-Mengistu Ethiopia. Like Madonna, I have learned to effectively navigate within a repressive discourse to create libratory images.

As such, the course provided me with the tool to understand the interaction between global messages and local audiences, especially in Third World countries.

### *1.2 Background to the study*

From 1974 until the early 1990s Ethiopia as a socialist country was behind an ‘Iron Curtain’, a phrase Winston Churchill used to describe the division between Western powers and the area controlled by the former Soviet Union (Churchill 1946). It experienced a total censorship of Western, primarily US, cultural goods and artefacts such as newspapers, magazines, movies, documentaries and books. With the removal of the socialist government from power in 1991, the ‘Iron Curtain’ was lifted and Ethiopians, for the first time, experienced an influx of US films and videos. Corresponding with, and linked to, this influx, there emerged the rise of informal video-viewing houses showing American movies. These cater mainly for the predominately poor, male, urban youth who cannot afford to watch movies in their homes or cinema theatres (my personal observation is that females rarely attend these US movies viewing sessions). These houses offer a unique, shared, cultural space for poor male urban youth in Addis Ababa. Primarily pirated US movies and DVDs are shown in these houses. Often these are action movies, for example the *Terminator* series and *Rocky*.

### **1.3 Statement of the problem and significance of the study**

The impact of the global media on local audiences in Third World countries has been the subject of several media theorists’ research (see for example, Boyd-Barrett 1977; Schiller 1976; 1986; 1991; 1998; Hamelink 1983; Dorfman and Mattelart 1975). As elsewhere in Africa, Ethiopia has been one of the countries most affected by the surge of global, primarily American, media into its borders, as lack of resources and poor

local film industry have prevented the country's capacity to produce local contents. Yet, amidst all these challenges, much of the literature surrounding ethnographic audience research is written from a Western perspective which to a large extent takes an ethnographic approach to data collection (see for example Ang 1996; Radway 1984; Fiske 1987, 1989; Morley 1992; Staid and Tufte 2002; Murphy and Kraidy 2003). Little or no research has been conducted by Africans themselves on how local audiences in Third World countries perceive and make use of the global media in Africa, let alone from the Ethiopian perspective. This is insufficient because most researches tend to ignore African values like the coexistence of the public and private life and stable consensual cultural values.

The significance of my study, therefore, lies in its attempt to contribute to African, particularly Ethiopian, perspectives on the youth's use of global media contents rooted in their day-to-day lived experiences. This study attempts to look at the Ethiopian culture from an Ethiopian perspective, which would differ from a Western perspective that relies on values derived from a particular interpretation of Western experience. These values, as has been observed by Rajagopal (2000: 293), are based on a "culture of modern-liberal citizenship" which is assumed

[a]s a norm, with certain kinds of political behaviour, (e.g. representative democracy, with a well behaved electorate) and certain divisions between public and private behaviours (e.g. with religious and community culture excluded from the public experience). These are values deriving from a particular interpretation of Western experience (2000: 293).

My interest in looking at the factors and Ethiopian/African values that underlie the youth's consumption practice follows Natrajan's and Parmeswaran's argument that the rise of "everyday life" as an area of study in media studies and ethnography makes this, "rather than the academy...the primary site for political struggle" (1997: 37). Their argument highlights the dangers of reducing critical engagement with the academy to internal struggles mostly of a "textual" nature and calls instead for the pursuit, in the media ethnography, of "alternative knowledge" in the broadest sense. The strategy for such a goal is summarised by them as follows:

Alternative knowledge may be better produced if Third World ethnographers write about the everyday lives of Third World people with an awareness of the political need for claiming legitimacy as Third World scholars. (1997: 53)

This interest in producing an ‘alternative knowledge’ as a Third World researcher will impact on the kinds of issues I address and kinds of questions I ask in this study.

#### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

The study is aimed primarily at investigating the factors (such as high youth unemployment, poor access to home TVs, the relative expensive nature of cinema theatres’ entrance fees) that underlie the distinctive nature of the informal video-viewing houses in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. I have achieved this by conducting observation research at selected video houses in the *Merkato* area in Addis Ababa. Through interviews, I have investigated how, in reality, the poor, urban youth in Addis Ababa make meaning of global media contents, primarily American action movies, within their shared cultural space. Thus, this research’s goal is to examine the complexity of global/local interaction in the viewing by Ethiopian youth of American produced action movies.

#### **1.5 Research Issues and Assumptions**

In this study, I am partly guided by the assumption that the media, being part of the Western economic system, bear the ideological imprint of the main centres of the capitalist economy and reinforce existing economic and political relations between nations (see for example, Boyd-Barrett 1977; Schiller 1976; 1986; 1991; 1998; Hamelink 1983; Dorfman and Mattelart 1975). However, I also take into account the ethnographic audience research which closely looks at “what popular audiences are doing with the cultural products that they consume in their everyday lives” (Skovmand and Schroder 1992: 3). What interests me is the cultural resilience and dynamism of non-Western cultures, their capacity to ‘indigenise’ Western cultural imports, imbue them with different cultural meanings and appropriate them actively rather than be passively swamped.

#### **1.6 Methods of the Study**

This research takes the form of an ethnographic audience study to investigate how Ethiopian youth in informal video-viewing houses in Addis Ababa make meaning out of the global media, primarily American action movies. The methodological approach I chose for this study falls within the qualitative research tradition. Lindlof (1991)

says that qualitative inquiry examines the constitution of meaning in everyday phenomena. The conceptual benchmarks of qualitative research are, according to Lindlof, “found in the meanings of media content or technology which are enacted in actual practices and performances” (1991: 24). The study looks at the different situations and contexts that underlie the consumption of global media by local audiences. Bryman (1988: 61) notes that qualitative research allows the use of versatile techniques to understand social phenomena and has an express commitment to viewing events and actions from local perspectives. Thus, I applied observation, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions in data collection. Through observations, I was able to witness and record the process of global media consumption practices of the Ethiopian youth. The respondents discussed, at length, the personal experience of their encounters with global media, particularly the viewing of American action movies. They spoke about their views and interpretation of the global texts they consume in their shared male space of the video-viewing houses in Addis Ababa.

### **1.7 Thesis Outline**

This thesis comprises seven chapters. Chapter One presents a general background to the study. It highlights the research problem and spells out the significance of the study. It also outlines the study objectives, methods of the study and pertinent research issues.

Chapter Two looks at the theoretical considerations underlying the study. It presents a review of literature on the understanding of text/audience encounters of global media among local audiences. It also addresses debates surrounding the media imperialism thesis and theoretical arguments concerning its limitations as advanced by active audience theory and ethnographic audience researches. The Third Chapter provides the context within which the study is conducted by looking at the rise of the informal video viewing houses in Addis Ababa and Ethiopian movie consumption practices since the early 1990s as well as locating the youth. All the arguments in this chapter correspond with the research objectives, issues and assumptions outlined in the introduction.



The methods, procedures and techniques employed by the study are the focus of the Fourth Chapter. This chapter gives a rationale for the adoption of qualitative techniques of data collection and analysis. It also discusses and gives a justification for the selection of observation, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews and the process of their application in the study. Finally, the Chapter outlines the limitations encountered in the course of the study.

In Chapter Five, I present and discuss the first part of the findings of the study which fall under three of seven major themes addressed in this study, namely:

- Video-viewing houses as shared, male, cultural space;
- Traditional film viewing houses (cinema theatres and home videos);
- The creation of marginal youth identity.

Chapter Six provides findings with regard to the differentiated meanings the Ethiopian unemployed youth appropriate under the heading of negotiating the global media. This Chapter will address the four thematic issues raised by audience research theorists on subjects like:

- Masculinity in Ethiopian youth culture;
- Global media as ‘carrier of modernity’;
- Global media as mode of ‘symbolic distancing’ and ‘escapism’;
- Americanisation/Westernisation of Ethiopian youth culture.

In looking at these thematic concerns, this study investigates how the consumption of these films impacts Ethiopian youth’s cultural understanding of their lived realities. In line with Tomlinson, this study investigates whether or not the consumption of movies by the Ethiopian youth has constituted in them the “cultural ills of the West – its obsession with consumption, the fragmentation of cultural identity, its loss of central, stable consensual cultural values” (1999: 168).

In this Chapter, I combine findings from the in-depth or unstructured interviews, observations, and focus group discussions. The findings are presented, illustrated and corroborated by quotations arising from the extensive period of observation of video-viewing houses and in-depth interviews. The Chapter also discusses the findings in

relation to the issues raised in the introduction and revisits the theoretical perspectives and literature review raised in Chapter Two.

Finally, Chapter Seven suggests some broad conclusions on Ethiopian youth's use of the global media contents they consume at the selected video-viewing houses in Addis Ababa. It goes on to highlight some further research questions raised by the study and makes recommendations in the light of the study's findings.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Media Imperialism Thesis and Ethnographic Audience Research**

### **2.0 Introduction**

This study draws on both the media imperialism thesis and its ethnographic critique to critically examine the text/audience encounter that underlies the meeting of global media with local audiences in a Third World country like Ethiopia. It investigates how Ethiopian, predominantly male, youths at selected informal video-viewing houses in Addis Ababa relate to, and make use of, global media contents in Third World conditions. This Chapter presents a review of literature on theoretical arguments surrounding the consumption of global, primarily American, media messages among local audiences in Third World countries. As a focal point of entry, this Chapter investigates the factors (such as high youth unemployment, poor access to home televisions and the relatively expensive nature of cinema theatres' entrance fees) that underlie the distinctive nature of the informal video-viewing houses in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Divided into eight sections, this Chapter begins by discussing the evolving practice of reception/audience research. The second section defines the media imperialism thesis and outlines how the thesis has informed major communication research over past years up to the early 1980s. The third section looks at the advent of the ethnographic critique of the media imperialism thesis in relation to audience research. The fourth section outlines one of the tenets of major theories that were advanced to critique the media imperialism thesis and the assumptions that underlie them, namely the active audience theory and popular culture. The fifth section presents the argument that global media provide a means of 'symbolic distancing', an argument put forward by the ethnographic audience research theorists. The sixth section looks at global media consumption as a means of escape and the notion of masculinity constituted in watching American action movies is discussed. These theories combined provide a basis to critique the media imperialism thesis. In section seven, the issue of language and global media is highlighted. The last section concludes the Chapter.

### **2.1. The Evolving Practice of Reception/Audience Research**

Almost thirty years ago, Tunstall (1977) postulated in *The Media is American* that at least two contrary media trends could be foreseen. First, the Americanisation of media, particularly film and television, would continue. The second and contrary trend would be that new media forms, like cable television, cheap videotapes and local radio, would encourage ethnicity and diversity. This trend, the advent of cheap videotapes and local radio, allowed small film industries in some Third World countries like Nigeria to produce movies relatively cheaply. As such, the former trend can best be explained if one investigates the media imperialism thesis, while the latter can best be understood when one looks at the ethnographic critique of the media imperialism thesis. This study, therefore, looks at these two trends through the two theoretical frameworks so as to comprehend the ways in which local audiences appropriate global media messages.

## **2.2 The Media Imperialism Thesis**

Importantly, with regard to this study, the points cited above will help to trace the rise of the media imperialism thesis. The argument is that while global cultural industries like the American movie industry in the First World produced media images that entered the homes of Third World countries, small film industries in peripheral countries began to produce local content. In order to explain the global media consumption practices of audiences in Third World countries, several media theorists emerged during the 1970s who advanced the media imperialism thesis. Livingston (2001) points to critical theorists who coined various phrases in reference to notions of the media imperialism thesis. These include the terms ‘media imperialism’ (Boyd-Barrett), ‘structural imperialism’ (Galtung), ‘cultural dependency and domination’ (Link; Mohammadi), ‘cultural synchronization’ (Hamelink), ‘electronic colonialism’ (McPhail), ‘communication imperialism’ (Sui-Nam Lee), ‘ideological imperialism’, and ‘economic imperialism’ (Mattleart) - all relating to the same basic notion of media imperialism. White (2001: 1) points out that the thesis gained prominence in the 1970s to the extent that it provided one of the major conceptual thrusts behind the movement for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) which was concerned with the flow of information between nations of the world. It was then that scholars proposed grouping the various currents of critical research on international communication under the heading ‘media imperialism’. An important theorist in the media imperialism thesis tradition is Herbert Schiller. In his 1976 work

*Communication and Cultural Domination*, Schiller proposed the use of the term "cultural imperialism" to explain the way in which large multinational corporations of developed countries, including the media, dominated developing countries. He has been lauded as one of the major proponents of cultural imperialism theory and his 1976 publication is often cited in studies relating to media imperialism thesis. The other theorist who popularised the media imperialism thesis was British scholar Boyd-Barrett, who defined media imperialism as:

The process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution, or content of the media in any country are singly or together subject to substantial external pressures from the media interests of any other country or countries, without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected. (1977: 117)

From this formulation, a number of factors arise that relate to the financial domination of a country by global media industries and powerful multi-national corporations controlling the flow of information and distribution of media products. These global media industries promote the values of a capitalist consumer society. The charge has been the capacity of this phenomenon to destroy or undermine local cultures, which become captive recipients of capitalist values transmitted through the media (Boyd-Barrett 1977: 119).

Further, Boyd-Barrett argues that the media, being part of the Western economic system, bear the ideological imprint of the main centres of capitalist economy. The result is "the cultural and ideological homogenisation of the world" (1976: 17). He views media imperialism as a process which serves to reinforce existing economic and political relations between nations. As he explains: "The media ...perform an *ideological* role. This occurs overtly in the form of explicit propaganda channels; covertly through the expression of certain values in what otherwise appears to be neutral entertainment and informational fare" (Boyd-Barrett 1977: 132, emphasis in original). Thus, implicit to the thesis is a model of one-way flow of cultural influence.

Media imperialism thesis is further defined as:

[t]he sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to or even promote the values and structures of the dominant centre of system. (Boyd-Barrett 1977: 117)

Thus, focusing on Ethiopian youth, the main thrust of this study is to investigate whether or not global media have an overwhelming power to create a willing market for their products in Third World countries.

One of the enduring concerns that media imperialism theorists advance is how global media have constituted a “Westernisation” of the global culture. Tomlinson (1999: 167) describes it thus: “Globalised culture is the enforced installation, worldwide, of one particular culture, born out of one particular, privileged historical experience. It is, in short, simply the global extension of *Western* culture” (emphasis in the original). Tomlinson (1998: 1968) argues that this implies that there are four reasons for critical concern: first, the process is seen as homogenising; bringing standardised, commoditised culture in its wake and threatening to obliterate the world’s rich cultural diversity. Second, it visits the various cultural ills of the West – its obsession with consumption practices, the fragmentation of cultural identity and its loss of consensual cultural values – on to other cultures. Third, these tendencies are seen as particular threats to the ‘traditional’ cultures of the peripheral, ‘Third World’ nations. Fourth, the process is viewed as part of wider forms of domination, such as those involved in the ever-widening grip of transnational capitalism and those involved in the maintenance of post-colonial relations of (economic and cultural) dependency.

It is important to note here that the media imperialism thesis is built on the assumption that the media exerts direct effects on society. Morley (1992: 46) observes that the media imperialism thesis was a result of one of the two major research traditions in the 1940s. He points out that, beginning in the forties, the use of two different methods of research have been characterised by an oscillation between message-based studies, like ‘uses-and-gratifications’ and audience-based approaches such as ethnographic audience research. The former approach moved from analysis of the content of messages to their effects on audiences, while the latter focused on the social characteristics, environment and subsequently, needs which audiences derived from, or brought to, the message. The media imperialism thesis follows the tradition of “the message/effects link which looks at how the behaviour of audiences reflects the influences on them of the messages they receive” (Morley 1992: 46). The research of the second type, into which ethnographic audience research falls, has been

largely structural, “focusing on the social characteristics of different audiences, reflecting their different degrees of ‘openness’ to the messaged they received” (Morley 1999: 47).

Reflecting this second position, Ang (1982; 1996) and Fiske (1987) have observed that text/audience encounters depend on the context and conditions in which the media messages are appropriated. They argue that local audiences in Third World countries are not passive media consumers but bring their own realities into the meanings they make of global media messages. I develop this further in the next section.

### **2.3 The Ethnographic Critique of Media Imperialism Thesis**

The media imperialism thesis came under sustained attack in the early 1980s for being too limited in explaining the text/audience encounter of global media messages. Livingstone (1998) notes that one of the shortcomings of the media imperialism thesis is that it does not acknowledge the active media audience member. Several theorists similarly argue that the conclusions reached by theorists in the tradition of the media imperialism thesis are based on textual and institutional analysis; missing from their analysis is any investigation of what meanings local audiences take from global media at the moment of consumption (Ang 1996; Appadurai 1990; Tomlinson 1991; 1999; Skovmand and Schroder 1992; Murphy and Kraidy 2003; Stald and Tufte 2002). Their focus on reception of media messages is part of what Skovmand and Schroder refer to as the ‘general shift’ in media research over the last twenty-five years which examines “what popular audiences are doing with the cultural products that they consume in their everyday lives” (1992: 3).

Ang notes that local audience research came out of the school of reception analysis, which she defines as “the study of audience interpretations and uses of media texts and technologies” (1990: 242). This is one of the most prominent developments in recent communication studies, including cultural studies (e.g. Morley 1980, 1986; Radway 1984). Reception analysis has intensified media theorists’ interest in the ways in which “people actively and creatively make their own meanings and create their own culture, rather than passively absorb pre-given meanings imposed upon them” (Ang 1990: 242).

Moreover, within cultural studies there has been a shift towards audience studies, through ethnographic audience research, which places emphasis on looking at how local audiences consume global messages within their lived reality. For example, Barker (1991: 4) usefully notes that the ‘authority’ of all texts, and the centrality that was once accorded to them in cultural studies, has been questioned. In line with this, McRobbie observes that “gradually there has been a marginalisation of narrow text-based analyses in place of a more conceptualised approach which recognises the multiplicity of meanings and readings which any one text or image is capable of generating” (1990: 138). This critique of text-based cultural studies approach, as argued by McRobbie, indicates “a movement away from the text in all its ideological glory, and recognition of the fact that texts do not simply assert their meanings on ‘unsuspecting’ readers and viewers” (1990: 138).

The movement away from this ‘Althusserian moment’ in cultural studies, in which ideology was conceived in monolithic terms, is also evident in the audience and reader research of Morley (1992) and Radway (1984), in Ang’s (1990) reassessment of ethnographic approaches to the study of audiences, and in Willis’s “celebration of the symbolic creativity inherent in the ordinary culture of young people” (1990: 7).

Consequent to this new interest in ‘powerful audiences’ as opposed to ‘powerful media’, there has been widespread agreement that the study of everyday life is central to the study of the media (Ang 1990, 1993; Drotner 1994; Grossberg 1989; Moores 1993; Morley 1992, 1993; Radway 1984, 1988, 1996; Silverstone 1989, 1994). However, as has been observed by Algan (2003), there are not many researches made in the field. He notes that one of the most important reasons for the lack of studies on everyday life and media consumption is that “reception studies have always focused on how a particular text is received” (Algan 2003: 25). Therefore it is essential to illustrate the need for an ethnographic approach that “priorities the *audience* in its unique geographical, cultural and social environment rather than the media *text* or *genre*” (Algan 2003: 25, emphasis in the original).

Algan thus moves away from reception studies which have been thought of as a way to examine how a particular *text* or *genre* – such as *Dallas*, *The Cosby Show*, *Star*



*Trek*, romance novels, soap operas and so on – is “received and interpreted rather than as a way to study how *audiences* consume and interpret media or what the meaning and place of media are in their daily lives” (2003: 26). Algan describes this position as a “perspective that views the media as a collection of texts and treats the audience as readers” (2003: 26).

Jensen and Pauly, cited in Algan, similarly argue that because reception studies “construct people as readers, text-based approaches will understand family, friendship, and community as secondary or nontextual forces that ‘construct’ the reader subject, not as the experienced rubric in and through which people read, think, love and plan” (2003: 26). In other words, it can be argued, the contexts in which the audience consumes the media messages are ignored or left out and need to be re-visited.

This shift of attention from a textual focus to audiences is called ethnographic audience research approach. The approach involves a “holistic description of cultural membership” and attempts to describe “*all* relevant aspects of a culture’s material existence, social system, and collective beliefs and experiences” (Lindlof 1995: 20, emphasis in the original). In other words, and in line with Bryman’s observation, this study will exhibit a “preference for contextualism in its commitment to understanding events, behaviours, etc. in their contexts” (1988: 64).

Ang points out that ethnographic study of media audiences emphasises “the capability of audience groups to construct their own meanings and thus their own local cultures and identities, even in the face of their virtually complete dependence on the image flows distributed by the transnational culture industries” (1990: 250–251). It is this capability of the audience to select from myriad global message that puts the one-way communication model of media imperialism thesis into question.

Further, Tomlinson (1999: 169) argues that the media imperialism thesis underestimates the cultural resilience and dynamism of non-Western cultures, their capacity to ‘indigenise’ Western cultural imports, imbue them with different cultural meanings and appropriate them actively rather than be passively swamped.

Significantly, this shift towards a focus on audiences has coincided with the rise of qualitative media research methods.

In line with the above argument, Murphy and Kraidy (2003: 5) have come up with what they call ‘the field’ to look at the cultural space in which global messages are consumed. They argue that ‘the field’ is increasingly loaded with local adaptation of global cultural messages mediated via new ‘spaces’, practices and imagined communities of reception. As such, they point out that the ethnographic project should be committed to understanding how the phenomenon of globalisation is played out locally in relation to particular traditions, systems of belief and texts which have altered them.

The point of analysis, therefore, should be the resulting hybrid cultures: that is, as Geertz (1983) cited in Murphy and Kraidy (2003) observes, the stylistic features of local cultural life that emerge materially and discursively as “tonalities” of global culture. Similarly, as outlined by Murphy and Kraidy, the important questions that underlie this study when looking at the shared cultural space in the informal video houses in Addis Ababa are: what patterns and practices link global media consumption to a lived culture? How do audiences negotiate global messages locally? How do the global/ideological elements of mediated messages affix to and acquire class, regional and/or community characteristics? How does the introduction of Western ideals about consumption shape local notions of national identity and values (2003: 5–6)?

Important to note here is that how the context of reception impacts the meanings local audiences makes out of global media messages. As a result, when conducting a research, focusing on the lived reality of the researched becomes paramount. Consequently, my interest in looking at the factors that underline the youth’s consumption practice follows Natrajan and Parmeswaran’s argument that the rise of “everyday life” as an area of study in media studies and ethnography makes this, “the primary site for political struggle” (1997: 37). Their argument highlights the dangers of reducing critical engagement with the academy to internal struggles mostly of a “textual” nature, and calls instead for the pursuit, in the media ethnography, of

“alternative knowledge” in the broadest sense. The strategies for such a goal is summarised by them as follows:

Alternative knowledge may be better produced if Third World ethnographers write about the everyday lives of Third World people with an awareness of the political need for claiming legitimacy as Third World scholars (1993: 53).

Thus, the quest for ‘alternative knowledge’ as a Third World researcher prompted me to investigate the youths’ lived reality in the context of my familiarity with the Ethiopian society.

Also relevant to this study is Hall’s (1980) essay “Encoding/Decoding”. In this seminal essay, Hall advances his preferred reading theory according to which the text has the power to propose or suggest particular ideological readings. He argues that the audience should be seen as active decoders who will not necessarily accept the positions being offered by the text (Strelitz 2002: 15). The viewer’s appropriation of media messages can resist the dominant ideology and end up with oppositional reading to the dominant culture.

In this tradition, important theorists are Liebes (1982), Radaway (1984) and Fiske (1987; 1989) who argue that a popular culture is constituted as subordinate and sub-cultures resist the dominant ideology. Given these debates, the next section examines the active audience theory in detail, since it is one of the theories that inform this study.

#### **2.4 The Active Audience**

Several media theorist have conducted audience researches on active audiences that appropriate differentiated meanings from global media messages. One author is Liebes (1982) who has conducted research illustrating how domestic audiences respond to Western media in an attempt to prove the media imperialism thesis as being too simplistic. Liebes studied the impact of the popular TV programme *Dallas* in Israel and her work refutes the assertion that American programmes, art, culture and other values that are exported completely overwhelm those of foreign countries.

Applying the active-audience frame of analysis, Liebes's study included four groups of Israeli viewers: Israeli Arabs, Moroccan Jewish immigrants, kibbutz members and new Russian immigrants. Liebes found that the message imparted by *Dallas* depended on the viewer's values and varied according to the experiences of the particular group to which the viewer belonged. The viewer, therefore, actively produces meaning while consuming the media product or programme. Ang has also supported this finding through studying the impact of *Dallas* to confront what she terms "a stubborn fixation on the threat of American cultural imperialism" (as cited in Schiller, 1989: 150).

Similarly, Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) investigates the appeal of mass marketed romantic fiction to local audiences. Radway argues that romantic fiction offers its female readers real pleasures, but at the same time perpetuates a restricting evaluation of women's lives. Radway challenges "the commonplace view that mass cultural forms like the romance perform their social functions by imposing alien ideologies upon unsuspecting if not somnolent readers" (1984: 8). In other words, she supports the active audience model and rejects the passive role audiences are said to take within the media imperialism thesis tradition. To do this, she asserts:

The analytic focus must shift from the text itself, taken in isolation, to the complex social event of reading where a woman actively attributes sense to lexical signs in a silent process carried on in the context of her ordinary life. (Cited in Purdie 1992: 353)

Asked why they read romantic fiction, the women Radway spoke to said that it helped them to escape from the drudgery of servicing their families – and thus to cope with it. They read at quiet moments (in bed, in the bath) when they could recall the tattered dreams of their youth and long for someone to love them as they wanted to be loved. Purdie (1992: 354) citing Radway to explain the attraction of the romance for women argues that their reading was therefore double-edged: not only a way of coming to terms with their daily lives, but also an act of resistance and hope. Women invest hope and pleasure in romantic fiction, thus Radway is frequently cited to insist upon the active and even oppositional use of popular texts by audiences.

Fiske's (1989) notion of popular culture is particularly relevant to this study as he explains the readings subordinate cultures, in this case Ethiopian marginalised and

poor youth, make of global messages produced by dominant groups. Fiske (1989:1) argues that popular culture is made by various subordinated or disempowered people out of the resources, both discursive and material, that are provided by the social system that disempowers them. It is therefore contradictory to its core and full of conflict. He argues that any resources, such as television, records, clothes, video games, movies and language, carry the interests of the economically and ideologically dominant; they have lines of force within them that are hegemonic and that work in favour of the status quo. As such, popular culture “lies outside social control that escapes or opposes hegemonic forces” and as a result it is a “culture of conflict” (Fiske 1989: 2). It always involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate and that are not those preferred by the dominant ideology. He further points out that popular culture is made in relationship to structures of dominance which can take in two main forms: that of resistance and evasion.

According to Fiske (1987b: 15), texts are marked by multiplicity of meanings (polysemic). Meanings are not constituted within the text itself, but are a result of the interaction between the text and the socially and cultural situated audience and as such reception is where meaning resides. He argues that audiences bring in their own social experiences to the text when decoding it, thereby leading to the meanings constituted being “disunited, as site of struggle, not a unified site of ideological reconciliation” (1987b: 67).

In line with the above literature, it can be argued that ethnographic audience studies have certainly enhanced and transformed the understanding of the dynamics of media consumption. These studies have shifted attention to the moment of the media/audience encounter that

[a]ddresses the differentiated meaning and significance of specific reception patterns in articulating more general social relations of power ...complicated political tensions, ideological dilemmas and economic pressures (for example related to lack of film industries) find their expression in ways which have worldwide consequences. (Ang 1990: 243–244)

Ang cautions, however, that it is important to not reduce reception to psychological process, but to conceptualise it as a deeply politicised, cultural one:

It is in this very living out of their everyday lives that people are inscribed into large-scale, structural and historical relations of power which are not of their own making. This set of theoretical assumptions will be born in mind in charting a conceptual terrain that can inform such a ‘globalisation’ of the ethnographic pursuit. (Ang 1990: 244)

There are other theorists who contend that local audiences actively make meanings that best suit their lived experiences. These theorists argue that part of the attraction local audiences consuming global media messages is drawn from the perception that these messages are ‘carrier of modernity’ (Berger *et al.* 1976; Schou 1992). Schou (1992) points to, for example, the role played by mass mediated popular culture as being a ‘carrier of modernity’ in post-Second World War Denmark. Therefore, this study investigates whether or not American movies, specifically action movies, are influential in the Ethiopian youths’ ‘mental modernisation’ (Schou 1992: 24) in providing them with “new senses of possibility – new options, new desires, new freedoms” (Tomlinson 1991: 41) (Also see Berman 1982; 1992.)

However, at the same time, it has to be noted that the notion of modernity as opposed to pre-modernity or tradition, which is mostly associated with African cultures, becomes problematic. Balcomb notes that global media can play a part in sustaining or legitimising the “anti-tradition syndrome...which is symptomatic of the colonised mind syndrome” (1999: 7). Quoting Ashcroft (1989) he further argues that there is the danger of what is called “mimicry of the centre” in which “those from the periphery ‘immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins’” (1999: 7). Hence, do the Ethiopian unemployed youth show the ‘anti-tradition syndrome’ and view African/Ethiopian tradition as ‘not modern’ and ‘mimic’ the global media messages disseminated by Western societies? This is one of the questions that this study aims to investigate.

Relevant to this study is also Tomlinson’s (1991) explanation of ‘the subtle interplay of mediations’ (1991: 61). He argues that media messages are themselves mediated by other modes of cultural experience. He observes that although the media are seen as the dominant representational aspect of modern culture, one has to take note of the importance of the ‘lived experience’ of culture. As such, by giving emphasise to this ‘lived experience’ of culture, Tomlinson (1991: 61) thus moves away from the claims

that media power arises when it is seen as the determining, rather than mediating, cultural experience. In other words, media messages mediate the way we view the world, but are not all that powerful to determine the meaning we take from them.

From the above literature, it can be argued, therefore, that ethnographic studies of media consumption are one of the most powerful criticisms directed at the media imperialism thesis. Furthermore, there are many forms in which local audiences resist being overwhelmed by global media messages and appropriate meanings that are most suitable to their everyday experiences. In order to establish this argument, the next section will give a brief outline of the different strategies local audiences use in their contact with global media.

## **2.5 Symbolic Distancing**

Several theorists, in rejecting the media imperialism thesis, have put forward ways in which active local audiences resist or appropriate global messages attuned to their social contexts. One such theorist is Thompson (1995) who argues that local audiences, particularly in Third World countries, actually gain meaning in the process of appropriating global media messages. He argues that it provides them with what he calls 'symbolic distancing' from the plight of their everyday lives.

In his critique of the media imperialism thesis, Thompson points out that part of the attraction of global media for local audiences is that their consumption often provides meanings which enable "...the accentuation of symbolic distancing from the special-temporal contexts of everyday life" (1995: 175). The appropriation of these materials, he further notes, enables individuals "to take some distance from the conditions of their day-to-day lives – not literally but symbolically, imaginatively, vicariously" (1995: 175). Through this process, he writes: "[I]ndividuals are able to gain some conception, however partial, of ways of life and life conditions which differ significantly from their own" (1995: 175). Thus, global media images can provide a resource for individuals to think critically about their own lives and life conditions (1995: 175).

An example of this process is provided by Davis and Davis (1995) who note that the exposure of young people in a semi-rural Moroccan town to an increasing array of

Western media between the early 1980s and 1990s has made it possible for them “to re-imagine many aspects of their lives”.

Adolescents used the rapidly expanding array of media in a period of rapid change to re-imagine many aspects of their lives, including a desire for more autonomy, for more variety in heterosexual interactions, and for more choice of job and of a mate. While male and female media consumption varied, they used with similar goals (1995: 578).

Furthermore, Davis and Davis (1995: 591) note the involvement of media with social change, especially changing gender roles. Quoting Belarbi, they looked at how media messages are read by Moroccans to explore changing male-female dynamics. Belarbi argues that media can limit change in gender roles:

One can say that the school actively participates in maintaining a “traditional image” of the woman, an image which deprives her most of the time of an active participation in political, economic and cultural life. (Belarbi 1987, cited in Davis and Davis 1995: 591)

Thus, with regard to this study, we need to ask whether or not the Ethiopian youths’ exposure to Western action movies offers them what Thompson (1995) calls a ‘symbolic distancing’ from their impoverished lived-experience.

Related to this argument for symbolic distancing is the notion of escape that Walkerdine (1989; 1990) advances to explain how global media texts are appropriated by people in differentiated contexts and in differentiated manner than explained by the cultural homogenisations feared by the media imperialism thesis.

## **2.6 Escapism**

Walkerdine’s (1990) discussion on the *Rocky* films investigates the appeal of Hollywood blockbuster movies like *Rocky* to audiences. She argues that one aspect of the popularity of action films like the *Rocky* series is that “they *are* escapist fantasies: the imaginary fulfilment of the working-class dream for bourgeois order” (1990: 342, emphasis in the original). The movies reveal an escape route, one which is all the more enticing given the realistic mode of its presentation, despite the very impossibility of its realism. Walkerdine observes the reason for the popularity of these films is “not because violence or sex-role stereotyping is part of the pathology of working-class life, but because escape is what we are set up to want, whatever way



we can get it” (1990: 342). Comparing herself to the people who enjoy the fighting in *Rocky*, she writes:

For the majority of women and men, the escape-route open to me, that of the mind, of being clever, is closed. It is the body which represents itself either as the appropriate vehicle for bourgeois wardship...or for the conquering champion who has beaten the opponents into submission. (Walkerdine 1990: 342–3)

Arguing that “watching is by itself a moment of *creation*,” Walkerdine (1990: 342) says that it is because of this sense of creation that *Rocky* was a great box-office success and it was effective and successful as a cultural product for the mass market whose desires it helps to form (emphasis in the original). In movies like *Rocky*, pleasures are “red hot” which is what “makes the youths in cinema audiences cheer and scream for *Rocky* to win the match – including many black youths, even though the Mr. Big of boxing, whom he defeats is black” (Walkerdine 1990: 342–3).

*Rocky* taps into the classic working-class image of boxing as an escape-route for tough young men. For them, Walkerdine argues, boxing turns oppression into a struggle to master, and this is seen as a spectacle. She stresses:

Although it is easy to dismiss such films as macho, stupid and fascist, it is more revealing to see them as fantasies of omnipotence, heroism and salvation. They can thus be understood as a counterpoint to the experience of oppression and powerlessness. (Walkerdine 1990: 343)

It is imperative to note that in most American action movies, fighting is important. Fighting as key signifier in the film is related to a class-specific and gendered-use of the body (as against the mind). In the context of this study, Walkerdine’s (1990) discussion on masculinity becomes, therefore, relevant. She argues: “Masculinity as winning is constantly played across by the possibility of humiliation and cowardice...and physical violence is presented as the only way open to those whose lot is manual and not intellectual labour” (1990: 344).

In action movies, it can be argued that fighting can be turned into a celebration of masculinity, but its basis is in oppression. This should also be understood, as in *Rocky*, as a desperate retreat to the body, because it is the ‘way out’ (Walkerdine 1990: 351). Therefore, fighting is a key term in a discourse of powerlessness, of a

constant struggle not to sink, to get rights, not to be marginalised. Walkerdine stresses that fighting is “quite unlike the pathological object of a liberal anti-sexist discourse which would understand fighting as ‘simply’ macho violence” (1990: 351).

This literature is, therefore, relevant to this study which looks at the attraction of Ethiopian youth to action/violent movies. As such, one of the issues explored in this study is to establish how American action movies speak to the male identities of Ethiopian youth. It is to investigate whether action movies and their fighting are just a show of masculinity or counter-resistance to oppression and powerlessness.

Given Walkerdine’s (1990: 352) argument, do urban male youth in Addis Ababa view fighting as representing a triumph over, repression of or defence against the terror of powerlessness – humiliation of cowardice? Walkerdine observes that the implication is that “we should stop being obsessed by the illusory tropes of an oppressive ideology, and that we should start to look at fantasy spaces as places for hope and escape from oppression as well” (1990: 353-4).

Walkerdine cautions, however, that her discussion is not a populist defence of Hollywood, but a reassessment of what is involved in watching films which become part of the experience of oppression, pain and desire. Walkerdine says: “Watching a Hollywood movie is not simply an escape from drudgery into dreaming: it is a place of desperate dreaming, of hope for transformation” (1990: 354).

In line with the above argument, Brookfield (1985) views the working-class youths’ identification with *Rocky*, around which the narrative framework was structured, as a ‘success story’. In his discussion of aspects of social class within the film, Brookfield observes that the boys watching *Rocky* tended to adopt an oppositional stance towards the ‘American Dream’ ideology. In doing so, Brookfield observes, they “picked up as relevant to their lives an element present in the lyrics of the theme music to the film. These suggest that poverty brutalises and makes it necessary to take to the streets and kill to survive” (1985: 88). Brookfield further notes: “The [*Rocky*] film addresses a wide and differentiated audience, who will bring a variety of readings to them; these different readings are based on different assumptions about ‘masculinity’” (1985: 85).

This implies the notion that working-class masculinity is always lived as class specific, in relation to the body and the mental/manual division of labour. This is important to note for this study, as it relates to Addis Ababa unemployed youths' identification with the lower class of the metropolitan society.

Of similar interest is how characters in American action movies can be identified by the youth as role models. For example, Nair (1999) in *Rambo's Boys: The Lure of the Violent Father* discusses the ways in which black South African youth in the early 1990s looked up to Rambo as a father figure. He describes how in an abandoned rural settlement in the Midlands, a childish scrawl in red print proclaims: "We are soldiers. We kill and rape. Rambo is our hero; fuck the world". What intrigued Nair was that a popular American action hero, in a film produced in very different social and political conditions, had become their cultural icon and role model, but he further observes that a close look at the film character reveals a common masculine identity based on the rebel-soldier figure, which could explain the boys' attraction to the hero.

The Midlands boy soldiers' message is a disturbing sign of the way many boys in African conflicts try to find empowering identities for themselves by assuming an aggressive masculinity...the conditions of intense violence that rob children of a stable home life with parents and community, basic rights, food, shelter, and security make many boys susceptible to an aggressive masculinity which promises self-empowerment. (Nair 1997: 17)

Nair states that it is not ridiculous that a child can make a *meaningful* life of killing and raping from watching a violent movie. He points out: "Such a film can become the means of negotiating a powerful new identity through an appealing masculine identity on screen – a situation of life imitating art. This new gender identity is negotiated through the father/son relationship" (Nair 1999: 17).

In similar manner, Jeffords argues that the dynamic of the father/son relationship in American movies, or what he calls 'the combat film', is "to define and determine power as existing only in and through the exchange of father and son" (1991: 988). He points out: "The combat film is, first and foremost, a film not simply about the construction of the masculine subject", but rather it "reflects masculinity defined by violence, one in which women are defeated and denied" (1991:989).

Having discussed the literature with regards to the ethnographic critique of the media imperialism thesis, it is now time to briefly touch upon the theory that ties language as a key component for the attraction of action movies to local audiences in Addis Ababa, most of who are non-English speakers.

## **2.7 Global Media and Language**

In attempting to explain the popularity of American action movies, I will investigate Gerbner's claim that television and film action movies are a "good commodity for the global market since violence travels well and one does not need to translate it" (2000:1). Many Ethiopian youth have few or no English language skills and Gerbner's explanation may help us understand the reason for the popularity of these action movies with their sparse dialogue.

There are some theoretical arguments on English language skills that could" explain the Ethiopian non-English speaking youths' attraction to action movies. They are related to the role language plays in the understanding of global media messages. Concerns about the saturation of the English language as a global, media language have been raised. For example, Fiske argues that resources such as "movies and language carry the interests of the economically and ideologically dominant; they have lines of force within them that are hegemonic and that work in favour of the status quo" (1989: 2). Importation of programmes from the West, primarily American, to Ethiopia entails the introduction of English language, foreign to most of the country's youth. All global media in Ethiopia are consumed as messages in English language with few of them subtitled. Where media imperialism thesis theorists have alleged this is a deliberate attempt to re-colonise the world through language, cultural studies fear the loss of identity and pride in native languages, its erasure being replaced by English (A. S. Adu-Gyimah 2003: 4). Moreover, the language issue is an important factor for the popularity of video houses amongst the youths in Addis Ababa. As most of the regular visitors to the houses are uneducated and rarely speak English, these houses become attractive as they provide the service of translation for both American- and Indian-made movies.

However, this study looks at whether or not the issue of lack of English language skills has actually contributed to the popularity of American action movies among the

young males in Ethiopia. Therefore, important to this study is the question: has the dominance of English language in the global media contributed to hybridism in Ethiopian culture portraying the mixtures occurring in an age of migration and communications?

From the above literature it can be argued, therefore, that while the media imperialism thesis might have been the major explanatory framework in understanding the complex nature of the interaction of global media with local audiences, it leaves out many facets that play a role during the process of consumption. Ethnographic audience research has provided the focus on how audiences create meanings out of items in global media. The interaction of global media among local audiences needs to be analysed in relations to the socio-cultural contexts in which the consumption practices are undertaken.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

The literature review has provided the basis on which the complexity of global/local interaction in the viewing of American action movies by Ethiopian youth can be examined. As discussed earlier, the text/audience encounter and the attraction of the action movies to Ethiopian youth is analysed at a point of consumption in their shared cultural space of the video-viewing houses. The study will examine how the social context impacts on meanings they take from global media.

To contextualise Ethiopian youths' consumption practices at the video-viewing houses in Addis Ababa, the next Chapter will give a brief background of Ethiopia's film industry and how the global media have evolved in a country previously closed to Western influence under the Iron Curtain. An introduction to the context of this study, which provides a broad overview of Ethiopia's contemporary history which has led to the influx of the video houses in Addis Ababa and a profile of film consumption practices in Ethiopia, follows.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

To contextualise the Ethiopian youths' use of global media like American action movies at the video-viewing houses and the conditions under which they consume global media texts, this chapter gives a brief background to Ethiopia's history, Ethiopians' film consumption practices and how the video houses have evolved since their advent in the early 1990s. Moreover, it attempts to locate the Ethiopian youth under investigation within the broader historical and social context of the country.

The introduction of informal video-viewing houses in Addis Ababa arose from Ethiopia's historical and socio-economic contexts. The first, the historical aspect, relates to the country's transition from a socialist country (1974–1991) to that of a relatively free and capitalist-oriented society. The second relates to the poor economic conditions under which most Ethiopians live. It was argued that the change of government in 1991 opened up the country to outside, primarily Western, influence and the rise of the informal video viewing houses is related to, and has expanded, this trend.

This Chapter is divided into five sections. Given the importance of looking at the socio-political context in which Ethiopian youth consume global media messages in ethnographic audience studies, the first section presents a brief background to the history and people of Ethiopia. The second section outlines the profile of the film consumption practices in Ethiopia. Section three discusses the advent of the informal video-viewing houses in Addis Ababa. Section four provides a brief profile of the Ethiopian youth under investigation. Section five concludes this Chapter.

#### **3.1 Ethiopian History**

This section discusses the salient features of Ethiopia's long history and its people since an understanding of Ethiopian youths' consumption practices of American action movies must be rooted in an understanding of the historical experiences of the group being researched; a position developed out of the ethnographic audience studies

tradition. This general discussion of Ethiopia's history is made in order to emphasise that although Ethiopia has a long history, its contact with the outside world has been limited. As a result, I will argue that Ethiopian youths' first experience with the American media in the early 1990s has been significant. As will be explored further in the next sub-section, contemporary Ethiopians experienced foreign, mainly American, media availability and consumption since the early 1990s. The issue of foreign media availability relates to this study's research problem because global media messages provide significant influences on Ethiopian marginal youth culture's formation of its identity.

According to tradition, the Ethiopian kingdom was founded (10th century B.C.) by Solomon's first son, Menelik I, whom the Queen of Sheba is supposed to have borne. However, the first kingdom for which there is documentary evidence is that of Aksum (Axum), a kingdom which probably emerged in the 2nd century A.D., thus making Ethiopia the oldest independent country in Africa and one of the most ancient in the world (Alvarez 1961: 5). Historically, Ethiopia has Muslim, Christian and Jewish influences in its culture. Immigrants (mainly traders) from Saudi Arabia who had been settling in North Ethiopia since about 500 B.C. influenced the economy and culture of Ethiopia. In similar manner, Ethiopia was introduced to Christianity as early as the 4th century A.D. This early introduction to Christianity closed the door to later potential colonialists who used the excuse of 'civilising' the natives in other African countries (Bahru Zewde 1991: 83). Moreover, in the 6th century A.D., Jewish influence penetrated Aksum, and some Ethiopians were converted to Judaism.

On the whole, however, Ethiopia has been noted for its isolation by many authors (see for example Alvarez 1961, Abir 1968, 1980; Bates 1979; Darkwah 1975; Akpan 1985; Bahru Zewde 1991) and its limited contact with the outside world can be traced as back as early as the 7th century, when the Aksum Empire declined and it was largely cut off from the outside world. In the 17th and 18th centuries the Ethiopian kingdom was again isolated from the outside world. Moreover, as the country has never been colonised (except for Italy's five year occupation of Ethiopia from 1936–

1941<sup>1</sup>), this has also contributed to its isolation. This was further strengthened during the period from 1974–1991 of the Mengistu’s regime when the ‘Iron Curtain’ was introduced (Bahru Zewde 1991: 223).

### *3.1.1 Contemporary Ethiopian History*

In September 1974, a group of military officers seized control of the government to oust Haile Selassie. Haile Selassie's failure to deal adequately with the long-term drought in North Ethiopia in 1973–1974 was reportedly a major reason for his downfall. With Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam as a leader a land reform (‘land to the tiller’) was introduced abolishing private ownership; no household was allowed to farm more than 10 hectares (Bevan 2000: 4). All private property was confiscated and nationalised by the proto-Marxist military government (Derg) in its nationalities programme of 1976 (Cohen 1973: 72). This period turned Ethiopia from a relatively capitalist and Western-oriented<sup>2</sup> society to a socialist country that frowned upon any influence from Western, especially American, influence. Ethiopia became a socialist republic based on the model of the former Soviet Union (USSR). With regards to this study, this entailed the introduction of the ‘Iron Curtain’ in the country.

Though Ethiopia’s long history has resulted in the formation of a strong national identity among the youth under study prior to the early 1990s, it is the identity formation that has occurred since 1991 that primarily concerns this researcher. Since 1991, as a country in transition from a socialist regime to a relatively free and capitalist society, Ethiopia has seen a change in the consumption practices of symbolic products disseminated by Western capitalist countries like America. As stated earlier while tracing Ethiopia’s history, the country was a socialist country from 1974 to 1991. As a result, it was behind an ‘Iron Curtain’, a phrase Winston Churchill used to describe the division between Western powers and the area controlled by the former Soviet Union (Churchill 1946). It experienced a total censorship of Western, primarily US, cultural goods and artefacts such as newspapers, magazines, movies, documentaries and books. With the removal of the socialist

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<sup>1</sup> Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1895 but was decisively defeated by Menelik's forces at Adwa on March 1, 1896. In the early 1930s, Emperor Haile Selassie faced threats from Italy's ruler, Mussolini, who was determined to establish an Italian empire and to avenge the defeat at Adwa. In 1936, Italy invaded Ethiopia.

<sup>2</sup> Emperor Haile Selassie had close contacts with the American and British governments during his reign.



government from power in 1991, the 'Iron Curtain' was lifted and Ethiopians, for the first time, experienced an influx of US films and videos.

The influence of this influx can be viewed as significant. Historically, unlike many other African countries, Ethiopia had not been colonised and as a result there had been relatively little foreign influence on the Ethiopian national identity (see Balcomb 1999). It was with the lifting the 'Iron Curtain' that the specificity of Ethiopian culture (such as its adherence to mainly Orthodox Christianity, patriarchy and a strong national identity) was affected. The early 1990s thus become a milestone in Ethiopia's contact with the outside, primarily Western, world. It was then that the freedom of the press that abolished state censorship on cultural commodities was established and Ethiopian youth were introduced to the global world through American-made movies and news.

### *3.1.2 The Ethiopian People and Geography*

Ethiopia is a country of high cultural and ecological diversity; 18 agro-ecological zones have been identified (Bevan 2000: 3). Overall the economy is predominantly subsistence and coffee based. The estimated population for 2004 is over 67 million people and the capital and largest city is Addis Ababa with a population of nearly 3 million people.

Almost half the people are Muslim, while over a third belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; about 15 percent practice traditional religions. There are a great number of distinct ethnic groups in Ethiopia. The Amhara and Tigrean, who together make up about 33 percent of the people, live mostly in the central and Northern Ethiopian Plateau; they are Christian and hold most of the higher positions in the government. The Oromos, who make up about 40 percent of the country's population, live in Central and Southern Ethiopia. The pastoral Somali, who are also Muslim, live in Eastern and South Eastern Ethiopia. Until the 1980s a small group of Jews, known as *Beta Israel* or Falashas, lived north of Lake Tana in Gondar. In the midst of famine and political instability, 10,000 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted (1984–1985) to Israel and another 14,000 were airlifted in 1991. By the end of 1999 virtually all the Falashas who were practicing Jews had had been flown to Israel.

Amharic is the country's official language, but a great many other languages (over 70) are spoken, including Tigrinya, Oromo, Somali and Arabic. A substantial number of Ethiopians speak English, which is commonly taught as a foreign language in school. Educational facilities in the nation are very limited, however, and in the late 1990s adult literacy was estimated at just over 43 percent (2003 estimate).

### **3.2 The Ethiopian Youth**

Ethiopia is a nation of young people – over 65 percent of its population is under 25 years of age (Scholl *et al.* 2002: 8). Lack of education, unemployment and extreme poverty exacerbate the problems faced by Ethiopian youth. Young people in Ethiopia also suffer disproportionately from the country's unsustainable population growth (Govindasamy *et al.* 2002: 13). Ethiopia's population of 71 million is projected to increase to 173 million by 2050, becoming Africa's second most populous country after Nigeria (Scholl *et al.* 2002: 8).

The issue of unemployment among the Ethiopian youth, especially those in Addis Ababa is important as it relates to this study. Therefore, providing some statistics regarding the unemployment rate in Addis Ababa is relevant here. According to the Ethiopian Census Report (1998), 40 percent of the Ethiopian population is unemployed and the majority are young Ethiopians.

As noted in the introductory chapter, my former attraction to the image of Madonna and my personal encounter with my brother's interaction with global media and the ways in which these experiences were reflected in the contemporary media studies debate provided the impetus for this study. As such, I have chosen to look at the Ethiopian youth as a focus of the study. It is with the youth that the American action movies become a key resource for young people to negotiate meaning in the media and their understanding of their lived reality. As has been observed in Radway, *Reading the Romance* (1984), the appeal of mass marketed romantic fiction lies in its offering its "female readers real pleasures but at the same time perpetuates a restricting evaluation of women's lives" (1984: 148). Therefore, this study investigates the mass appeal of action movies which are a means for the youth to escape their impoverished reality (see also Fiske 1987; 1989).

Though the specific period of adolescence is difficult to agree upon as evidenced by literature, this study follows Bonfadellie's (1993) definition of the youth as its guiding framework. He says that the transition from adolescence to adulthood takes place between the ages of 18 and 25, or even later (1993: 236). Similarly, Jennings *et al.* state that the most commonly used international definition of youth is between the ages of 16 and 24 (1997: 2).

Moreover, investigating Ethiopian youths' consumption of global, primarily American, action movies provides a rich narrative for understanding the interaction of the youth audience with global media because it is during this period that the youth make their first contact with the outside world through, among other things, the media. According to Bonfadellie, psychologically, adolescence is "a very dynamic and unstable phase where the individual has to acquire the skills to fulfil adult roles and norms and has to search for and develop an identity" (1993: 236). It is a period of "rapid physical and intellectual development and emotional intensity" (1993: 236). It is this dynamism, instability and identity that make the Ethiopian youth a point of focus. Willis, cited by Strelitz (2002: 80), argues that it is during this period that the youth form 'symbolic moulds' through which they understand themselves and their possibilities for the rest of the lives. Willis further observes that adolescence is the period when people begin to construct themselves through nuance and complexity, through differences as well as similarity.

Fornas argues that youth is a period of "socially and culturally-conditioned flexibility" (1995: 1), and it is for this primary reason that youth, by definition have more free time and less responsibility than adults (Reimer 1995a: 63). It has to be noted here that the youth under investigation come from poor family backgrounds and their unemployed status is linked to their family background. Krishnan (1996: 166–7) argues that most studies suggest that family background in Ethiopia has a strong effect on earnings both directly and indirectly through the links to educational status. Krishnan's findings arose from a survey of 16 to 29 year-olds in urban Ethiopia that examined the impact of family background on selection into work and potential earnings. However, the effects might reflect the influence of family background on entry into work rather than on earnings. He observes that those youths who come from poor family backgrounds lack sufficient education to allow them to gain access

to employment. He argues that family background (those with *zemedes* or relatives in high places) strongly influences entry into public sector (Krishnan 1996: 167).

A discussion on the Ethiopian definition of who is marginal and who is part of the dominant group is pertinent here. Ethiopian youths portray individuals according to the income levels of their family and their backgrounds in ways that are barely perceptible, in some cases even impossible to categorise, in the Western frame of reference. The essential description of youths in the Addis Ababa slang system include the *chewa*, *yebet lij* and the range of marginal identities, which run the gamut from *duruye* to *findata*. Between *chewa* and *findata* is an additional distinction for the *kelemes*, the *hardegnas* and the *adegena bozenes*. The youth visiting the video houses perceive themselves as *duruyes* and *findatas* and this identity is believed to be linked to their identification with the American action heroes they watch and imitate in the way of dressing, walking and behaving. To clarify the abovementioned terms the English translation of these Amharic words are provided as follows:

- *Chewa*: literal translation ‘someone who is quiet’ and means a person with a royal blood,
- *yebet lij*: literal translation ‘a home’s child’ and means a person who is from good family background,
- *keleme*: literal translation ‘the colourful’ but means a person from poor background but who is good at schoolwork,
- *duruye*: the term has a specific Ethiopian connotation which indicates someone without a job, a misfit, a wanderer and who does not respect or rejects authority,
- *findata*: literal translation ‘the explosive’ or someone on a verge of exploding but means a hooligan or a thug,
- *hardeгна*: literally a combination of the English word “hard” and Amharic word “*egna*”, and means a bully who gives others a hard time and who exercises and builds muscles to demand respect or fear,
- *adegena bozene*: literal translation ‘dangerously unemployed’ and means a person who is without a job and is criminally involved.

The marginal identities of the subordinate youth cultural hierarchies were conveyed to me during the interviews and focus group discussions in Amharic which I then

translated into English, a second language for the interviewees and this researcher. The difficulty in transcending not only the unavoidable terminological barriers between English and Amharic, but also the conceptual gaps that cannot be resolved through attempts at literal translation, gives rise to certain ambiguities. Even the term “*chewa*” is not a shared concept that can be taken for granted, as I learned from Salamon’s (2000)<sup>3</sup> discussion of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel who used the term *chewa* for something completely different. Here the term relates to racial identity of the colour of the skin black (*barya*) and white (*chewa*) in Ethiopian history (Salamon 2000: 1).

### 3.3 The Ethiopian Movie Consumption Practice Profile

As indicated in the introductory chapter, I have observed a media phenomenon peculiar to Ethiopia, wherein the urban poor in the capital city of Addis Ababa attracted by Hollywood’s blockbuster action movies, visit informal video-viewing houses situated in the poor section of the city. This importance of the video houses in the consumption practices of the urban poor, specifically young males, can be best explained by looking at recent Ethiopian political history. Though as stated earlier, Ethiopians have enjoyed a relatively free society with the new government since 1991<sup>4</sup>, there is also a contradictory and restrictive trend. This restrictive trend seems evident when looking at the government’s broadcasting policy which shows a reluctance to free the airwaves and allow private companies to open broadcasting stations in the country<sup>5</sup>.

Thus currently, as the result of the government’s broadcasting policy, for the majority of Ethiopians, electronic audio-visual access to information and entertainment is mainly by way of watching programmes aired by the state-owned and state-run Ethiopian Television (Etv) (Maria and Genanow 2000: 2). The fact that the airwaves are a tightly controlled government monopoly allowed Etv to become the sole national broadcaster in the country. Lacking competition, Etv has been in a position to survive to date with only one channel and a programming schedule that is limited

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<sup>3</sup> Salamon’s discussion on Ethiopian *baryas* and *chewas* could be found in *Journal of Folklore Research* Volume 40, Number 1.

<sup>4</sup> This government, led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, is still in power to date.

<sup>5</sup> Bevan (2000: 2) observes that former guerrilla fighters who started a movement based on the ideas of Albanian socialism run the new government. The government’s earlier Marxist tendency might explain its unwillingness to free the airwaves.

from 6pm to midnight during the weekdays and from 9am to midnight on weekends. Moreover, since Ethiopia is a multi-lingual country, the limited daily hours available for TV programming have to be divided amongst the major local languages namely, Amharic, Oromoiffa and Tigrigna. As a result the English language services broadcasted on national TV are limited to one to two hours after 10.30pm long after the children's and young students' bedtime. Moreover there are inadequate Western programmes shown on ETV; these are limited to the screenings of feature movies on Saturday nights and American sitcoms (mostly African American comedies, for example *The Cosby Show*, *A Wonderful World*, *Fresh Prince of Beverly Hill*, etc.) three to four times a week. Therefore, there is a tension: Ethiopia has opened up to the West, yet there is only one state-controlled TV station in the country. There is the alternative of watching satellite TV operated by the South African-owned MNET/DSTV, but due to its high subscription fee, this channel is only open to the upwardly mobile and well-off sections of the Ethiopian society.

Moreover, in itself getting access to television in the country is problematic. According to Population Concern, a UNDP website (2004), in Ethiopia there are only four television sets per thousand people. *World Almanac* (2005) similarly points out that the communication landscape of Ethiopia is not significant. The country has 231,900 telephone lines, 17,800 mobile cellular users, 15.2 million radios, one television broadcast station, 682,000 televisions sets, one Internet Service Provider (ISP) and 40,000 Internet users. Therefore, it can be argued that Ethiopia has an information and entertainment scarcity instead of the information overload or saturation characterising the majority of the rest of the world (*World Almanac* 2005).

Having outlined the first factor that underlies the attraction of foreign, primarily American, action movies for Ethiopian youth, it is now time to discuss a second factor which can be traced to the poor socio-economic condition of the country. Ethiopia remains one of Africa's poorest states, with a very low per capita income and a population that is almost two-thirds illiterate (BBC Country Profile 2004). Lack of resources has led to few or no movies being produced locally in Ethiopia and the cultural products consumed in Ethiopia are mainly foreign film products, which in turn are mostly American action movies. According to a website called *Indianchild.com* (2002), "fewer than 10 Ethiopian movies have been produced over the last century."

Though going to the cinema can be an alternative way to pass leisure time for the urban poor in the country, the entrance fee (ranging from 3 Ethiopian birr to 20 Ethiopian birr<sup>6</sup>) is considered expensive for the poor who cannot afford to attend movies. Moreover, cinemas are few and far between in Addis Ababa. According to the National Census Report (1998), for a population of over 2.7 million people in Addis Ababa, there are only seven movie theatres.

### **3.4 The Informal Video-Viewing Houses**

The scope of this study is limited to the capital city of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, where half of the youth population is unemployed and over 30,000 street children live on the streets (Ethiopian Census Report 1998). A point of entry is, therefore, the observation that the urban poor, having little or no access to private, domestic TVs and cinemas, pass their leisure time by watching movies produced by Hollywood at informal home video-viewing houses.

Currently, like Nigeria, Ethiopia is known for its thriving and expanding home-video watching audience (BBC Report 2004). The expanding interest in home videos and the rise of the video houses corresponded with the influx of American films into the country. This interest was not a matter of coincidence, but was related to the lifting of the 'Iron Curtain' that banned Western cultural goods in the country. The video houses mainly cater for the predominately poor, male, urban youth who cannot afford to watch movies in their homes or cinemas. These houses offer a unique, shared, cultural space for the poor, male, urban youth in Addis Ababa. Moreover, unlike the cinema theatres described above, the video houses are in the position of being able to show pirated US movies and DVDs of newly released movies because of the lenient copyright law in the country. There are instances that the newly released movies are made available in these houses even before they are premiered in cinemas situated in the Western world. Often these are action movies, for example the *Terminator*, *Rocky* series and *I, Robot*.

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<sup>6</sup> One American dollar is approximately 8.50 Ethiopian currency notes which is called birr.

These video houses are a new phenomenon in Ethiopia and are run by enterprising young males living in poor households who make brisk business. They provide a range of services including the screening of American, primarily action, movies, and football matches showings at 0.50 Ethiopian cents<sup>7</sup>. These video houses are mostly found in shanty parts of Addis Ababa. According to the Addis Ababa Trade and Tourism Bureau, the body responsible for granting licences to video houses, there are 98 video houses currently operating in Addis Ababa, down from 243 in the early 1990s.

The sharp downfall in the number of video-houses was a result of a series of actions carried out by the Addis Ababa City Administration during the mid 1990s. At the time, the City Administration's authorities made a citywide crack down on illegally operated video houses and closed down most of them (*Addis Lisan* 1996). One of the reasons given for such action was that the video houses were showing pornographic movies, an illegal act by the country's law. The second reason was that they did not pay taxes, while the third was that these houses were alleged to provide haven to petty criminals such as pickpockets and burglars. To date, there are many occasions when the police raid these houses and confiscate equipment and/or shut down the establishment for these reasons (*Addis Lisan* 2004). It can be argued, thus, that the video houses' illegality forms part of the attraction for the unemployed youth who view themselves as "the dispossessed" (see Radway 1984; Fiske 1989).

Since the mid 1990s, most of the video houses that have remained open are screening American action movies during the afternoons and evenings. During the evening shows, some houses include a bed if the customer pays 1 Ethiopian birr, transforming them into makeshift motels. According to observations made, there are occasions when some customers, who paid 0.50 Ethiopian cents, were found sleeping while inside the houses and they were told to either wake up and watch the movie or pay the full amount of 1 Ethiopian birr.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

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<sup>7</sup> One American dollar is approximately 8.50 Ethiopian birr.



This Chapter highlighted the informal video-viewing houses' historical background and the Third World context in which Ethiopian youths in Addis Ababa make meaning from the American action movies. It discussed factors such as the socio-economic and political contexts that underlie their consumption practices in watching American action movies. The next Chapter discusses the choice of research methods employed in collecting data and the research focus of the study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS**

#### **4.0 Introduction**

This Chapter presents the methodology used to carry out this study. In this chapter, I discuss the research design and methods of data collection, the research procedure, the physical location of the study and the selection of video viewing houses, as well as data analysis and processing. The Chapter will also highlight some of the limitations of the study. The methodological approaches will be discussed in line with the theoretical framework and their relevance to the goals and aims of the study.

#### **4.1 The Research Design**

This research took the form of an ethnographic audience study which is part of the qualitative research tradition. Lindlof (1991: 24) says that qualitative inquiry examines the constitution of meaning in everyday phenomena. Lindlof (1991: 24) further observes that in audience research, conceptual benchmarks are found in the meanings of media content or technology which are enacted in actual practices and performances. As such, the study looks at the different situations and contexts that underlie the consumption of global media by Ethiopian audiences.

The qualitative research tradition is chosen because it allows one to use different techniques to understand a social phenomenon as well as to look at the phenomenon from the perspective of the researched. In other words, as observed by Bryman, qualitative research has an expressed commitment to “viewing events, actions, norms, values, etc. from the perspective of the people who are being studied” (1988: 61). Morley and Silverstone argue that the ethnographer’s task is to ‘go into the field’ and, by way of observation and interview, attempts to “describe – and inevitably interpret – the practices of the subjects in that cultural context, on the basis of her/his first-observation of day-to-day activities” (1992: 153). Thus, I have used observational methods to examine the process of consumption/reception of media texts. This has enabled me to gain insights into how Ethiopian youth speak about the movies they watch and how their conversations and interactions with each other impact on the meanings they take from these textual encounters.

Furthermore, in order to gain detailed narratives and insights into the meanings they make of the global media, I have conducted individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with youths visiting selected video-viewing houses in Addis Ababa. I also interviewed selected owners of informal video-viewing houses as well as an official of the Addis Ababa City Films' Administration to seek their explanations about the reasons behind the popularity of action movies amongst Ethiopian youth. The responses are categorized thematically for qualitative analysis (Hansen *et al.* 1998).

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the conclusions reached depended on the theoretical narrative I used to explain my findings. As Ang (1996: 73) admits, it is a difficult task to take into consideration the 'whole horizon' of media consumption. She writes that we need to rethink qualitative research not as realist knowledge, but as a narrative:

Any cultural description is not only constructive...but also of a provisional nature, creating the discursive objectification and sedimentation of 'culture' through the singling out and highlighting of a series of discontinuous occurrence from ongoing, never-ending flux. (1996: 24–25)

Similarly, Radway observes:

The ethnographic account is never a perfectly transparent, objective duplication of one individual's culture for another. Consequently, the content of that account depends equally upon the culture being described and upon the individual who, in describing, also translates and interprets. (1984: 9)

In line with Ang's and Radway's arguments, I have selected narratives from the group discussions and individual interviews which speak to the theoretical assumptions put forward by the media imperialism thesis and ethnographic audience research. Importantly, the ethnographic audience research provided me a rich source of narratives that could explain the Ethiopian youths' understandings of global media and the perceptions they gain from global media messages.

In the next sub-section, I will discuss the size and sample of the respondents I have used to gather the data for the research.

## 4.2 Sample Selection and Size

Given the qualitative nature of the study, I chose purposive or non-random sampling and 'snowball' sampling, to select the participants for the group discussions and the individual interviews. I combined the two sampling modes, since qualitative sampling operates "within contexts – which will have been pre-selected, like the 'populations' of quantitative studies, according to theoretical criteria" (Jensen 1982: 238). I used purposive sampling since, as argued by Hansen *et al.* (1998: 241), the concern of quantitative research to have a sample that is representative is not critical (See also Deacon *et al.* 1999: 50). As has been observed by Hansen *et al.* (1998: 242), having representative samples in qualitative research may be neither necessary nor desirable because the object of the study is simply to test a particular hypothesis, such as the media imperialism thesis in this case. In other words, as Bryman has observed:

The qualitative researcher frequently conducts research in a specific milieu (a case study) whose representativeness is unknown and probably unknowable, so that the generalisability of such findings is also unknown (1988: 100) (see also Lindloff 1995: 23).

I also used 'snowball sampling' in which initial contact with an informant generates further contacts (Jensen 1982: 239). Deacon *et al.* (1999) explain that snowball sampling is mainly used where no list of institutions exists that could be used as the basis for sampling. Also following Deacon *et al.*'s argument, I used this method in the research since the video viewing houses cater to "informal social groupings, where the social knowledge and personal recommendations of the initial contacts are invaluable in opening up and mapping tight social networks" (1999: 53). Thus, I asked the owners of the video houses to provide me with a list of names of young people who regularly visit their houses, which I then compared to my list of names of youths that were active viewing audience members during the course of the observation. As Radway argues, an audience research should include long discussions with young men, individual interviews with "most articulate and enthusiastic readers" (1984: 10). Further, the owners also suggested people worthy of interviewing. I conducted interviews with what I believe to be a fair sample of the youth group, covering all the themes I outlined in my interview guide, which I will elaborate on later. Though Hansen *et al.* (1998: 268) argue that one should have a minimum of six focus groups, until comments begin to repeat and little new material

is generated, I decided to have three group discussions due to the resources available and the number of participants willing to participate in the sessions.

In line with Bonfadellie (1993) and Jennings *et al.* (1997) definitions of youth, all the Ethiopian youths interviewed fall under the age range of 18 and 26. All of them live with their parents. The respondents for this study included the ten participants in the three focus group discussions, the three youth respondents, owners of three video houses and the general manager I have talked to during the individual interviews. The selection of youth respondents was based on their experience as an audience and their availability. The general manager was chosen to provide information regarding the traditional film viewing houses such as cinemas while the owners of the video houses were selected to provide information regarding the regularly visiting youths in the video viewing houses.

Thus, in this study, I have used a three-stage approach to examine the attraction of American action movies among the Ethiopian youth and the meanings they take out of global messages. The three stages were:

- (i) Observation
- (ii) Focus Group Discussion
- (iii) Individual Interviews.

Prior to discussing the research techniques I have used to collect the research data, however, I will discuss my role as a moderator and the interview guide in the next section.

### **4.3 The Interview Guide and My Role as a Moderator**

To compile my data, I drew up an interview guide to ensure that the focus group discussions concentrated on the subjects and issues relevant to my research. This has enabled me to ensure that similar issues were discussed in the different groups to enable later comparison (See Knodel 1993: 37). However, in line with Morgan (1998: 56) I did not rigidly follow the interview guide, but allowed the discussions and interviews to flow at length and when the necessity arose to probe a topic more deeply.

Moreover, I also paid attention to the role I played as moderator. Following Hansen *et al.* (1998: 272) and Morgan (1988: 57), my purpose as moderator in the focus groups was to facilitate and stimulate the discussions and not dominate the proceedings. I have compiled narratives from the focus group discussions and used the individual semi-structured interviews to compare and follow up on the thematic issues raised during the group discussions. For this study, interviewees were interviewed several times, using information from previous interviewees to seek illumination. This was done to reveal common knowledge related to the issue being researched. I have recognised the inconsistencies in some of the statements the respondents made and I have interpreted them accordingly. In other words, my role as moderator was to ensure that the thematic topics outlined in the literature review were covered.

In the following sub-section, I will discuss and give justifications for the use of each research techniques, and how I applied them in this study, in the order in which I used them.

#### **4.4 Observations**

During November 2004, I visited three selected informal video-viewing houses in *Merkato* area in Addis Ababa. I observed and took notes on how Ethiopian youth, mostly unemployed, make use of the global messages they consume at the video viewing houses and the meanings they take from the movies they watch. During this period, I was allowed access to the video-viewing houses only because I was first introduced as a relative to one of the regular male viewers. I accompanied the person each time I visited the houses, because being a female and attending the viewing sessions was culturally unacceptable.

However, by being present in the houses, I had the advantage of witnessing the group dynamism among the male youth and recorded the process of watching movies. Furthermore, by becoming part of the audience in the houses, I was able to gain first-hand insight into the practice of film watching. As Deacon *et al.* (1999: 258) have argued, one of the strongest points made for observation research is being physically there, actually witnessing the events being researched. Observational study gave me an opportunity to produce an independent assessment of events and processes

(Deacon *et al.* 1999: 258–259). I have attempted to spend a relatively long time (up to three hours) in each house per day, since the activities undertaken by local audiences in the viewing houses are processes rather than static.

From the observations in three video houses, the study established that all the houses provide two shows per day; one in the afternoons and one in the evenings for an entrance fee of 0.50 Ethiopian cents. The afternoon show normally has two screenings, mostly American action movies. The regulars who visit the video houses during the afternoon show, which begins at 1 o'clock, are mainly unemployed youth with a few students who cut classes. Young people who work during the day, but whose income is minimal, mostly frequent the evening show, which starts at 7pm. During the evening show only one movie is screened. I have made the afternoon shows the focus of this study because they last longer (over three hours as against less than two hours in the evening). It was during these viewing sessions that the unemployed were found and where the selected interviewees had more free time on their hands. The atmosphere at the houses ranges from relaxed to despondent. I also established that none of the respondents own a VCR or a TV in their own homes and all the youths prefer watching American action movies.

#### **4.5 Focus Group Discussions**

Since the early 1980s, the use of focus group discussion as a qualitative research method gained popularity for analysing media audiences (Deacon *et al.* 1999: 55). According to Lunt and Livingstone, focus group research “involves bringing together a group or, more often, a series of groups, of subjects, to discuss issues in the presence of a moderator” (1996: 8). In other words, focus group discussion research entails conducting discussion of particular media texts by the participants. This method became useful in understanding the differentiated meaning audiences advance when watching or consuming global media. Gamson (1992) usefully outlines the advantages of focus groups over interviews and surveys as a method for understanding how people socially construct meanings about public issues. The advantages are three-fold: people search for a common basis of discourse to talk about issues with other people; focus groups allow the researcher to observe the “natural vocabulary with which people formulate meaning about the issues” and participants

are forced to become more consciously aware of their perspective when framing an issue (Gamson 1992: 191–192).

In line with this and as noted earlier, I randomly selected three participants from each of the selected video viewing houses. These participants were chosen because they regularly visit the houses and, from my observation during the viewing sections, actively participate in the informal discussions among the viewers in these houses. What interested me here were the interactions among the group discussion participants that would not normally arise during individual interviews. As Hansen *et al.* point out: “It is precisely the group dynamics and interaction found where several people are brought together to discuss a subject that is seen as the attraction of this mode of data collection over individual interviews” (1998: 262). Further, there were occasions when the participants were more forthcoming in the group discussions than during the interviews. It has to be noted here, however, that some individuals dominated the discussion and other members were silenced. Hence, I have taken note of the caution advanced by Hansen *et al.* (1998: 263) that participants in the group discussions tend to move towards ‘consensus’ and dissenting or different views might be marginalised. Therefore, I made sure that I included, and gave due attention to, those who were silent during the discussions.

In doing so, I followed Juluri’s (2003) observation that focuses on the importance of silences in conducting audience research. He notes that despite the emphasis in reception studies on speaking, it is important to note the pattern of silences in interviews and group discussions as well. As argued by Juluri (2003: 225), these silences may constitute the boundaries of not only what people would like to say, but perhaps what they are capable of saying as well. In other words, what is not said points out the ‘limits of intelligibility’ of certain discourses (Juluri 2003: 225). What was brought to the fore therefore during the focus group discussions was that in the case of both selecting what is said and speculating what is unsaid, the role of the researcher becomes all the more important – including the question of how he or she negotiate, in the sessions and later in the academic institutional context, questions of authority and representation (Juluri 2003: 225). As such, some of the focus group discussions were filled with silences and responses occurred after much probing. The question of language, and what people actually said in a course of these interviews,



raises an important issue that is pertinent not only to factors of access, but also to broader questions of analysis and authority.

#### **4.6 Semi-structured Interviews**

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the general manager of the Addis Ababa City Films' Administration, the owners of the three video houses and three male youths who frequent the selected three video-viewing houses within the same month that the observations were made. The selection of the interviewees was a result of my observation in the video viewing houses where the said interviewees seemed to hold dominant positions in relations to the other members of the audience. Moreover, they have been regular visitors to the video houses for a period of seven to nine years.

I have used the semi-structured or in-depth interviews, since, as Jensen has noted, in-depth interviewing, "with its affinities to conversation, may be well suited to tap social agents' perspective on the media" (1982: 240). He points out that spoken language remains "a primary and familiar mode of social interaction, and one people habitually relate to the technological media" (1982: 240). Similarly, Bryman argues that the semi-structured interviewing method is useful, as it requires the researcher to show minimal guidance and allows "considerable latitude for interviewees to express themselves freely" (1988: 46). In line with this interviewing technique, I operated within a loose collection of themes. In this way, I allowed my interviewees free rein during the interviews. However, there are moments, as Bryman (1988: 46) has noted, where the interviewees did 'ramble'. I took these ramblings as constructive to my study, since they revealed something about the interviewees' concerns and showed the perspective of the youths I was investigating.

Bryman (1988: 47) points that semi-structured interviewing is often used with observation. I have thus combined two of the most favoured qualitative research methods, namely interviewing and observation, since they capture the inside view and provide 'thick' descriptions (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Bryman 1984). It is important to mention here that my role as a female researcher created some complications during the individual interviews with the male interviewees. Though my role as a researcher has been an 'interpretive subject' (Jensen 1982: 236) and 'researcher participant' (Gans cited in Bryman 1988: 48), in the interviews there was

the concern that the interviewees would have felt more comfortable had I been a male researcher.

Consequently, in the course of these interviews, my presence as a witnessing "other" (as a researcher and a woman) both encouraged and inhibited the interviewees. Furthermore, the encounter between the storytellers and the researcher, a representative of the "not-so-poor" part of the society, filters and shapes the stories told. In the moments when I felt my presence to be somewhat less obtrusive, I tried to probe more so that the dynamics that exist when the different hierarchies in the youth culture came into relief in the stories told, as well as the meanings they make of the movies and the differentiated identities they take up from the movies, were gradually revealed. The dialogue thus became an arena hospitable to exploring how youth identities are constructed and perceptions are embodied and articulated in stories in the wake of the youths' encounter with global media texts. Focusing on selected stories and story fragments, I listened for the actual and potential heterogeneity and nuances of the dynamic of local audience/global textual encounters.

#### **4.7 Physical location of the Study**

The study was conducted in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia at three selected informal video-viewing houses namely *Sky Film House*, *Daniel Video House* and *Anwar Video House*. The houses chosen were situated in *Merkato*, the biggest commercial area in the city. According to the Trade and Culture Bureau Report (2003), most of the informal video viewing houses are situated in *Merkato* area.

Following Morgan (1988), I chose a nearby café as the individual interview setting for the youths. This interview setting balanced the needs of the researcher with those of the participants (Morgan 1988: 60). Morgan (1988: 60) suggests the best-suited venues as the researcher's office, at participants' homes or at some neutral site such as a church. The use of the café was justifiable, as it was the most neutral site for the research. Further, since the viewing-houses were crowded and noisy, I asked the participants to meet in the nearby café so that we would not be disturbed. The owners of the video houses and the General Manager of the Addis Ababa City Films' Administration were interviewed in their respective offices.

#### 4.8 Research Procedure

With the aid of Professor Larry Strelitz of the Rhodes University Journalism Department, a list of thematic questions was compiled prior to my embarking on field research in Addis Ababa. I was advised to pay close attention to the theoretical assumptions made in Chapter Two in organising and categorising the information from the respondents. (The seven thematic questions are reproduced in Appendix II.)

Since observation was one of the methods used for collecting the data, I had to make sure that I gained access to the video viewing houses. Being female, I knew beforehand that access to these predominately male spaces would be complex. Therefore, I communicated with my relative to draw a list of video-viewing houses in the *Merkato* area and to introduce me to the owners of the houses. Moreover, my supervisor supplied a letter of introduction clearly stating the purpose of my research and I took that letter to each of the houses I visited. The full letter is reproduced in Appendix I. I was also well aware that these video houses are business entities and require payment to gain entrance. Each time I visited the video viewing houses, I made sure that I paid the low entrance fee (0.50 Ethiopian cents) though there were occasions when the owners refused to accept the payment. However, I insisted on paying the entrance fee in order to avoid over-familiarity with the owners.

There was also the question of deciding how to present myself during the course of the study. Fontana and Frey (1994: 367) argue that researchers have to make decisions how to present themselves to the researched. Given that the video viewing-houses were spaces where the unemployed and not highly educated youth frequent, it would be considered inappropriate to present myself as a “representative from academia” (367). Hence, I decided to “dress down to look like the respondents” (Fontana, 1977; Thompson 1985), but I combined this approach by clearly stating to the respondents the purpose of the study.

Based on the observation research and my interviews with the owners of the video viewing-houses, I proceeded to conduct the focus group discussions with the respondents. From the responses I gained from the ten participants, I selected three respondents to conduct the individual in-depth interviews in order to clarify and gain

more insight into their viewing practices. This way I was able to obtain most of the information I required.

It was not necessary to set up an appointment for the group discussions beforehand, since I was acting in a capacity of a customer, thus my position was that of participant observer. Instead, I went directly to the viewers after the movie screening sessions and asked their permission to conducting the group discussions. I also combined this technique of participatory observation with what Deacon *et al.* (1999: 250) call a ‘fly on the wall’ approach or simple observation method so that I appeared simply to be ‘hanging around’ in a public space (Deacon *et al.* 1999: 251) like the video houses.

During the course of the study, there were some ethical questions to consider. Fontana and Frey (1994: 378) observe that traditional ethical concerns have revolved around the topics of ‘informed consent’ (consent received from the subject after he or she has been carefully and truthfully informed about the research), ‘right to privacy’ and ‘protection from harm’. I have adhered to all three. At the beginning of each interview, I explained the purpose of the study to the respondents and their consent was obtained in all cases. However, a problem arose with this study, since the video viewing-houses are ‘informal’ and some of the activities undertaken within the houses (like chewing chat<sup>8</sup>, showing pornographic contents) are illegal. Therefore, in the beginning some youths viewed my purpose with suspicion, fearing that I might cause them trouble with the country’s law. Therefore, I assured the respondents that their privacy was intact. However, once I established rapport and gained their trust, all of the respondents were keen to have their identity known. Nevertheless I have used pseudonyms in this study<sup>9</sup>. The exceptions were the names of the General Manager of the Addis Ababa City Films’ Administration and the owners of the three video houses since they were interviewed in their official capacity. The duration of the interview ranged from 45 minutes to one hour, while the duration of the focus group discussions lasted from one to one-and-half hours. The length of the discussions and interviews depended on the information provided by the interviews.

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<sup>8</sup> Chat or Khat are fresh leaves found in the shrub *catha edulis*, native to the horn of Africa and the southern Arabian Peninsula. Chat seems to produce feelings of euphoria, stimulation, increased confidence, alertness and energy

<sup>9</sup> The decision to use pseudonyms followed a discussion with my supervisor who drew my attention to the legal and ethical implications that might arise in Ethiopia as the result of the disclosure of the real identities of the said respondents.

#### **4.9 Data Processing and Analysis**

By making use of the thematic questions to guide the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, the respondents were able to generate information on the topics chosen for my research. I asked each of my respondents' permission to record the proceedings on tape recorder beforehand. I also asked each of the respondents to identify themselves at the start of the group discussions or interviews. Since, all the interviews and the group discussions were conducted in Amharic, Ethiopia's official language, I took shorthand notes in English to remind me of the theoretical topics I needed to address. It is important to take note here, however, of what Deutscher (1968), cited in Fontana and Frey (1994: 366), has to say about problems of language and meaning. Though I was interviewing the respondents in mother tongue, Amharic, and I was not confronted with the "difficult task of asking questions cross-culturally" (Fontana and Frey 1994: 366), it was clear that there was a problem of capturing the exact meaning of their statements from Amharic into English. Some of the respondents are good English speakers (the General Manager of the Films Administration and Lemma, one of the youth respondents) but I made the decision to communicate in Amharic because "there are different ways of saying things, and, indeed, certain things should not be said at all, linking language and cultural manifestations" (Fontana and Frey 1994: 366). Moreover, the interviews and group discussions were flowed naturally in Amharic which would not have been possible had they been conducted in English, a language foreign to most of the respondents. Each interview and group discussion was transcribed and translated into English. While translating the information from Amharic to English, I tried to keep the sense of the meaning rather than the literal translation so that the cultural vigour of the conversations was not lost.

I used thematic coding as the mode of analysis. Jensen succinctly explains this approach as:

[a] loosely inductive categorisation of interview or observational extracts with reference to various concepts, headings, or themes. The process comprises the comparing, contrasting, and abstracting of the constitutive elements of meaning. (1982: 247)

After they were categorised and labelled the responses were analysed. In most cases, the responses fell under the categories that were spelled out in the thematic questions. However, the focus group discussions and individual interviews generated some unexpected responses and I categorised and crosschecked them accordingly. In cases where I could not establish the most frequently occurring response and the answers generated different statements, they were used in the analysis and interpretation of data. The information was then written in narrative form and pertinent quotations were selected to illustrate the major findings of the study presented in Chapter Five. When I used quotations, I used them verbatim so that they could be used as representative illustrations. Thus my analysis of the data followed the model noted by Lindloff:

[i]n the final analysis, qualitative reports are all about perspectives of lived experience. The researcher must decide what kind of author he or she will be, and what sort of story to construct of the 'facts' of the case...Qualitative research involves the production of knowledge, not its discovery. (1995: 24–25)

#### **4.10 Limitations of the Study**

As stated earlier, my gender has caused some difficulty in accessing the research sites. Though this difficulty was overcome, I felt that some of the male youths would have been more comfortable had I been a man. Often, the beginning of the interviews were characterised by one-word responses. However, after repeatedly explaining the importance of the study to the respondents, their responses became more animated and informative. The other practical limitation encountered during the course of the study was the location of the research site itself. *Merkato*, as the biggest open-air market in Africa, is infamous for its crime. It is one of the few places in Addis Ababa where people do not feel safe. Hence, some of the group discussions had to be interrupted mid-way to check upon my vehicle parked outside and this might have broken the flow of some of the conversations.

#### **4.11 Conclusion**

In this Chapter, I have discussed the three stages of my research process as well as the sampling procedures and modes of data analysis employed. The Chapter also presented the research procedure, the physical location of the study and the limitations encountered in the course of the study. I have shown that the choice of group

discussions, unstructured interviews and observational study were best suited to the purpose of the study.

In the next Chapter, by drawing on observation, the focus group discussions and interviews with the respondents, I will examine the way Ethiopian youth use the global media in their everyday contexts. The next Chapter presents and discusses the findings of the study according to the theoretical assumptions addressed in Chapter Two.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS:

#### Informal Video Houses as Counter Hegemonic Space for Ethiopian Youth

##### 5.0 Introduction

The study focused on how Ethiopian youths, mainly unemployed, at the informal video viewing-houses in Addis Ababa currently make meanings out of global media messages. More specifically, it investigated the popularity of American action movies among the youth and how the media messages are appropriated in their everyday lived reality. It attempts to contribute to perspectives presented by Africans, particularly Ethiopians, on the subject matter using the media imperialism thesis and the ethnographic critique of media imperialism thesis on global media/local audience encounters. In order to do this, the study investigated the factors which underlie the distinctive nature of the consumption practices of the young people in a Third World country like Ethiopia by looking at socio-economic conditions such as youth unemployment, poor access to home TVs, the relatively expensive cinema theatres' entrance fees, lack of local film content. As such, the study considered the multi-vocal story examined throughout the research which was shaped by the wider context of Ethiopia.

In this Chapter, I present and discuss the first part of the findings of the study under the heading: informal video houses as counter hegemonic space for the Ethiopian youth. Three of the seven major themes highlighted in Chapter Two, namely video-viewing houses as shared male cultural space, traditional film viewing houses (cinema theatres and home videos) and the creation of marginal youth identity will be explored in this Chapter. It will begin with a description of the video houses as presented by one of the respondents as all the thematic issues of this study are found in it. Chapter Six will provide the findings with regards to the differentiated meanings the Ethiopian unemployed youth appropriate under the heading: how Ethiopian youth negotiate the global media. This Chapter will address the four thematic issues raised by audience research theorists on subjects like masculinity in Ethiopian youth culture, global media as 'carrier of modernity', global media as mode of 'symbolic distancing' and 'escapism', and the Americanisation/Westernisation of Ethiopian youth culture.



The interpretation and discussion will be dictated by the objectives of the study and informed by the theoretical considerations and literature review. I will combine findings from the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and observation. The findings will be presented, illustrated and corroborated by quotations arising from the extensive period of observation in the video houses and semi-structured interviews, as well as the focus group discussions with the following male interviewees:

- The General Manager of Addis Ababa City Film Administration: Yilma Regassa
- The owner of *Sky Film House*: Redwan Shafie
- The owner of *Daniel Video Centre*: Daniel Mekonnen
- The owner of *Anwar Video House*: Anwar Abdu
- The owner of *Wabe Video Rentals*: Wasihun Belehu
- Ethiopian youth: Lemma
- Ethiopian youth: SHEMELES
- Ethiopian youth: Tessema
- Ethiopian youth: Aregawi
- Ethiopian youth: Bekele
- Ethiopian youth: Hussein
- Ethiopian youth: Sebsebe
- Ethiopian youth: Alemu
- Ethiopian youth: Bahru
- Ethiopian youth: Asseged

Since the significance and power of the interviewees' stories can best be appreciated in the context of the complexities and dynamics of the Ethiopian youth identity discourse within the video houses, this Chapter opens with a description of the video houses as told by one of the respondents. Twenty-four-year-old Asseged's description of the video houses is translated verbatim from Amharic into English in order to grasp the houses' unique features and understand the functions they play in the youth's lived reality.

Let me tell you a bit about some of the video houses. Young city boys frequent these houses that are found in shanty and unsanitary parts of Addis Ababa. Many of us young boys, who do not have much opportunity, go to these

houses by paying 0.50 Ethiopian cents. We do that to satisfy our film interest and also to hide from the outside world. We come here to escape from our numerous social problems, and because we are slave to various addictions. In these places, we can smoke, drink, or/and chew *chat* without any restriction. There is no age or sex barrier as long as you pay 0.50 Ethiopian cents. There is full democracy. Many young guys come regularly; some often miss their work or school to watch films. Both action movies and pornography are shown. Often in these houses funny, interesting and tragic incidents happen. There is no respect among the customers. A professor could be called stupid or get ill treated by a drug addict. If you do not take this insult you might get a kick or two. There are many things that could affect your health in these houses. In the congested environment you could get bad smell from shoes, armpit or cigarette smoke. Clean and fresh air is as precious as mercury. When you try to watch a movie, a person next to you might have been chewing *chat* and is high on the drug and is hallucinating. Sometimes you could observe a person expressing his frustrations in the films he watches. At one time, I remember one person, after watching a movie character taking a shower, making the remark: “Don’t make us envious; we only take bath in a bucket of water”. The audience roared with laughter to sarcastic comment because it is the same for everyone. These houses will make us face our reality. Most of the audience feels saddened after seeing the life styles of the movie actors of American movies. Some of them are often heard saying: “It is better to be a grass there [in America] than being born as human being here”. To comment on the reality of this feeling, one has to watch the long queue at post offices whenever the DV lottery<sup>10</sup> comes along.

The other thing is in these video houses Indian films are shown. These films are very popular because they take three hours to finish. Nobody cares much about what the story is like. Do not forget we are here to hide. Some of the video houses have translators. The problem with these people is that it costs us an extra 0.50 Ethiopian cents. The person, who translates, does it by experience. Often it is quite different from the original sense but it is done according to the translator’s perception of the event. These ad lib translators are very popular and employed by the owners of the video houses. They get around 5 Ethiopian birr and a bundle of *chat* as their payment. The other facet of these houses is the exchanges of jokes. Jokes first told in these houses are later consumed like wildfire by the whole society. The houses literally become a factory for jokes. The jokes make everyone laugh. There is the darker side of these video houses too. Ample *chat*, cigarettes and drugs are made available. Pornographic movies are also shown without any restriction. So pornography creates an unwanted culture in the youth. But on good side, the houses provide us with an opportunity to find out about the technological advances made in the outside world. At one particular place, I heard the youth argue: “We are very backward because we have not been colonised”. It shows how much the youth are frustrated and have accepted their situation. We have reached an unfortunate stage where we believe development comes by being colonised or migrating to other countries.

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<sup>10</sup> DV Lottery or Green Card Lottery: Every year the United States Government issues 50,000 Green Cards through the Diversity Immigrant Visa Programme, the Green Card Lottery. A computer-generated drawing chooses applicants randomly.

The above extract provides a rich description of how these video houses have become shared cultural spaces for the Ethiopian unemployed youth. Asseged first started by pointing out that these houses are found in shanty parts of Addis Ababa, signifying that they represent places that are frequented by the urban poor and later described the grimy conditions the houses are associated with. Asseged's use of terms like "mercury" to describe the houses' ventilation resonates with the Ethiopian youth subculture. Taking advantage of the total lack of law and disorder immediately after the change of government in 1991, several youth gangs raided armament camps and stolen mercury used for making bullets, which they sold on the streets and many of them became rich quickly<sup>11</sup>. The statement construes a marginal youth identity for the youths visiting the houses signifying their identification with the dispossessed in the dominant culture of the Ethiopian society.

As discussed in the literature review, the notion of escape these houses represent to these unemployed youth who lack 'opportunity' is repeatedly reiterated by Asseged's views that the video houses are 'a hiding place from outside world'. As such the love of watching movies becomes secondary. The attraction of Indian movies has little to do with their story lines, but more with that they take three hours to finish, thereby representing a period of longer respite and escape from the outside world. The houses also signify as a place where marginal youth identities are formed and constructed. They are places where anything addictive, such as *chat* and drugs, is consumed construing a marginal identity. Asseged repeatedly used the phrase "without restriction" in conjunction with the phrase "there is democracy". This becomes a 'semiotic resistance' (Fiske 1989) to the hegemonic Western ideology where democracy is viewed as something else. It is ironic that lack of law and order is translated and transformed into a 'democracy' where the youth can do whatever suits them. Moreover, the video houses become a kind of levelling field where the unemployed and dispossessed youth are on equal footing with a 'professor' who does not receive the respect he would normally get in the outside world. Here, he is equal to the 'drug addict', once again a total reversal or refraction of equality in the hegemonic ideology of a democratic society. If by chance, the professor demanded

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<sup>11</sup> The story is part of the repertoire of the youths' urban legends in the early 1990s. Others include the mushrooming of mafia-like gangs to raid abandoned homes of former leaders of the Mengistu regime.

respect in these houses, he would get ‘a kick or two’, hinting at the violent nature these marginal youth inhabit.

Asseged also spoke of there being no ‘sex or age barrier’ as long as they pay 0.50 Ethiopian cents to gain entrance into these houses. Totally absent from his consideration was that women are not present in these houses. His description of there not being any restriction is unintended but represents his agency to the patriarchal discourse in Ethiopia where the absence of women in these houses is taken for granted, is part of the ‘natural’ order of things and is seen as ‘unchangeable’ (Hall 1982: 65).

Asseged’s discussion about the long queues to submit application for the DV Lottery at the post office constructs America as the land of opportunity (which is a view widely held by most of the youth in this study), an issue which I will explore in Chapter Six. This theme was further elaborated when Asseged associated ‘development’ with colonisation and migrating to other countries. Frustration and acceptance of their lot seems to filter these youths’ consciousness and there is a sense of despondency echoed in the statement: “We are very backward because we have not been colonised”. He seemed to have internalised the argument that colonisation had brought progress to Africa, or what Ashcroft (1989) calls “mimicry of the centre” in which those from the periphery “immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins” (cited in Balcomb 1999: 7). Progress and modernity are achievable by, and associated with, being colonised.

These houses are transformed into ‘a factory of jokes’ constituted by their movie consumption practices where the jokes first told there are retold in the society, but they also become a means to deal with the impoverished conditions of the youth visiting the houses as they can be laughed about. For example, Asseged’s storytelling on taking baths in buckets is linked to his identification with the lower class of the Ethiopian society where owning a shower at home is considered a luxury.

In these houses pornographic movies are shown and here Asseged seems to be subject to the dominant ideology in Ethiopian society which views the houses with disapproval when he says: “Pornography creates unwanted culture in the youth”.

Further the notions of symbolic distancing and modernity are touched upon when the youth describes how the movies provide him “with an opportunity to find out about technological advances” made elsewhere.

Moreover, the houses are places where translation of American and Indian movies is provided. Though the uneducated youth’s attraction to watching action movies in these houses could be traced back to Gerbner’s (2000) observation that “violence travels globally as it does not need translation”, most of the time they refuse to watch translated movies since the entrance fee then gets hiked up to 1 Ethiopian birr.

His descriptions of the houses and the main themes highlighted above are echoed throughout the stories told by the interviewees and focus groups. Although the narrative building blocks are many and varied, stories related to youth self-definition tend to aggregate around a number of themes: masculinity stories, marginal youth identity characterisations, modernity, escapism through global media consumption and America as an antidote. The stories themselves are presented as the aforementioned themes take shape and reverberate in the different voices of the storytellers, including my own, in a narrative form under seven major themes in this Chapter and Chapter Six:

- **Video-viewing houses as shared, male, cultural space;**
- **Traditional film viewing houses (cinema theatres and home videos);**
- **Creation of marginal youth identity;**
- **Masculinity in Ethiopian youth culture;**
- **Global media as ‘carrier of modernity’;**
- **Global media as means of ‘symbolic distancing’ and ‘escapism’;**
- **Americanisation/Westernisation of Ethiopian youth culture.**

These themes are all present in the opening interview. Moreover, although in practice these themes are intertwined, for analytical reasons it is useful to treat them separately.

### **5.1 Video Houses as Shared Male Cultural Space**

In line with the focus of the study, I investigated how the three selected video houses, namely *Sky Film House*, *Daniel Video Centre* and *Anwar Video Centre* function as a

shared male cultural space where local meanings of global media content are consumed, shared, discussed and appropriated by a group of male youth in Addis Ababa. The movie consumption practices are shaped by the cultural and socio-economic contexts as advanced by the ethnographic critique of the media imperialism thesis. Drawing from Schiller's (1976) and Boyd-Barrett's (1977) discussion of the media imperialism thesis as it applies to global media/local audience encounters as well as the importance of going to the field, as noted by Murphy and Karidy (2003) and Ang (1990), this section will look at the nature of the video houses under investigation and the routines and unique space they provide to young Ethiopian men.

As Morley and Robins (1995: 7) have aptly put it, if we want to understand the powers of cultural imperialism, our conceptual models of the absorption and indigenisation of 'foreign' influences will need to be more subtle than those of traditional models of media effects such as the media imperialism thesis (cf. Morley 1992: ch. 1). This is further argued by Strelitz's (2003) discussion of South African youth responses to texts produced internationally and distributed locally. Strelitz argues: "The notion that cultural imperialism is a penetrating, monolithic force that wipes out diversity and homogenises all cultures must be abandoned" (2003: 234). At the same time, following Appadurai (1988: 39), we can also argue: "native... people confined to and by the places to which they belong, groups unsullied by contact with a larger world, have probably never existed". As such, though Ethiopia's long history discussed in Chapter Three might be regarded as fascinating because of its limited contact with the outside world<sup>12</sup>, the stories told by youths visiting the video houses in Addis Ababa over the past two decades provide examples of the "uneven penetration" (Strelitz 2002) of global media on local audiences. Within the intimacy afforded by in-depth interviews and focus groups, the stories told by the respondents are a key point of access to personal experiences not readily accessible through other means.

### *5.1.1 An Alternative Space*

Speaking of the attraction of American action movies to the youth and asked why they prefer watching movies in these video houses, all said that it was a matter of cost and

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<sup>12</sup> See for example how Ethiopia was in isolation from outside world after the 7th century from the demise of Aksum Empire up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and from 1974 to 1991 behind the Iron Curtain.

access, and because the houses provide them with a space which they do not normally find elsewhere. The video houses offer an alternative, a comforting space for the unemployed youth. They help to bolster a particular world-view amongst the video houses' viewers. To offer some examples, here is what Lemma, 26, a college dropout who started visiting video houses when he was 10 years old and has no TV or VCR at home "because we are poor" had to say:

I visit video houses so that I can watch movies. I don't like to go to my friend's house next door [who has TV] because I like choosing the movie I watch and that choice is not there at other people's place.

For SHEMELES, 25, a single father and unemployed, TESSEMA, 26, currently unemployed machinist and AREGAWI, 18 and unemployed, the houses provide them with a space to "hang around" while not working.

SHEMELES: I come here because I prefer watching good as well as bad movies, such as pornographic and action movies. I can't watch those bad movies at home. There are times I come here to just pass time, where I can sit and relax, even though I have already watched the movie before. It is just to go somewhere and because these houses have a cheap entrance fee. I just hang around here.

TESSEMA: The reason why I come to the video houses is just to get out of my boredom, to kill time and at times because it gives me satisfaction to watch movies. I like action movies because they are action filled. I like watching how the action heroes take control of the situations.

AREGAWI: I come here since I don't have a job now. I hang around the video house all day long. If I have a job I would not be here.

Moreover, the attraction of the American action movies in this particular cultural space is constituted as the result of them becoming more than just places to watch movies:

TESSEMA: Sometimes when I want to be with friends and when I don't want to meet them for coffee at the café I fix the video house as a meeting place. I like watching action movies and the movies are transformed into something interesting to talk about later on. Whenever I don't understand the dialogues, I ask my friend next to me to explain their meanings. I can follow their actors' action even though I might not understand what they are exactly saying.

These discussions reflect the Ethiopian unemployed youth's distance from mainstream culture.

### 5.1.2 'For Men Only' Space

As stated earlier in the previous chapters, the video houses are a shared male cultural space. Women rarely attend these movie-watching sessions. Testimonies from interviewees give an indication that girls who visit these video houses are considered 'bad' or *duruye*<sup>13</sup> (a term which is normally used to describe boys and therefore is very unflattering to women). Asked if they had ever brought a girl to these establishments, the youth's responses ranged from shock to downright disgust that such a question could be asked. The following exchanges during one of the focus group discussions show that though the youth are resistant to society because of their low class status, they still accept the dominant ideology of patriarchal society in their gender relations.

Tessema: Oh no, I can't bring my girlfriend here. Are you crazy? She will be automatically labelled as easy and cheap girl, a *duruye*. It does not matter if she is a decent girl; just by the fact that she is here, she is seen as being a bad person and in our culture Ethiopian women are raised to be shy; so if the movie has sex scenes she gets embarrassed watching it with all the other boys, so she will not come. The culture looks down on such girls.

Lemma: Of course I won't allow my girlfriend to come to this kind of place. If I have the money, I would rather take her to a cinema theatre. It is just unacceptable. The kind of girls who come here, they are very few in number, are immoral girls. You can see it from the way they walk, dress, and talk rudely and that they are bar ladies, prostitutes. If I find you inside the house I would automatically label you as a bar lady. I am sure you have found out that when you sit in the hall no one wanted to talk to you or get to know you. Moreover many untoward things happen in these houses: people smoke, chew *chat* and watch pornographic movies. It is not a healthy place and if you find a girl here, there is something terribly wrong with her. Even as a guy, even for me, there are times when I feel ashamed to be seen here.

My presence as a woman in these houses by itself was considered out of ordinary by the youths there. For example, there was one occasion when I entered *Daniel Viedo House* after the screening of a movie had already begun and the hall was dark. I was dressed in black with short hair. I suddenly heard this guy rudely shouting: "Hey man, sit down; you are covering the screen." He automatically assumed that I was a man.

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<sup>13</sup> The term *duruye* has a specific Ethiopian connotation which indicates of someone who has no job, a misfit, a wanderer and who does not respect authority. This term will be further explored in the section on the creation of marginal youth identity.



However, there is more to why girls do not visit these video houses and this has to do with the stereotypical role women play in the Ethiopian patriarchal society as carers and givers.

Lemma: Unlike us boys, girls are expected to take care of their families. They have neither the time nor the money to watch movies. Unlike us they don't even have spare time to hang around. If they don't have a job they have to help in the chores. Because she is a girl, if she has money, she is expected to pay the bills, but as a young, unmarried man we are not expected to provide for the house<sup>14</sup>. You just live your life and your parents just hope that you don't bring in trouble. It is the expected thing.

Tessema: It is because of our culture. However much the girl might be forward, modern or stubborn, there is no way she can come in by herself to these houses unless she is a *duruye*. Even then she comes in a group of girls. And in case she comes in by herself, she is considered a cheap girl, a prostitute. I don't agree with him [Lemma]. It has nothing to do with lacking money.

Bekele: Video houses don't have good reputation and a girl will be afraid to come here. My girlfriend will refuse to come even if I invite her. If she were a cheap girl, bold and a *duruye*, she might come, but if I respect her as a good girlfriend I would never bring her here. The thing I would do instead is to take her to the cinema. The girls who come here are the ones with no hope, who are not from a good family or decent. It goes against our culture for a girl to visit this kind of place. In sharp contrast, for a guy who comes here, whether he is bad or good, it does not matter.

### 5.1.3 A Space for Rethinking of Stereotypical Roles

Hussein, 24, comes from a traditional Muslim family, and was fasting for Ramadan when this interview took place. Interesting in the following extract is his oscillation between his traditional Muslim upbringing and the notion of modernity (which I will explore further in Chapter Six) he seems to appropriate from watching movies in the video houses.

Girls don't come here because it isn't something a girl could do in our country; watch a movie among bad guys. We are boys and because we are boys it is the expected thing, we are watching what is happening in the world. But still, I don't understand why people think that women should not come here. If people get used to it, they would have come and learn how the world is doing.

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<sup>14</sup> All the respondents, though older than 18 years, live with their parents.

At glance, the above narratives presented in the earlier section and in this one seem to indicate that exposure and even resistance to the dominant patriarchal society that looks down at the unemployed status of these youths have not yet transformed their relationship with their own “women”. As Nair (1997: 17) observes, in line with popular American action heroes, who have become cultural icons and role models in films produced in very different social and political conditions, the male identity constructed in these houses is based on the rebel-soldier figure. However, this rebellion does not include the inclusion of women as equals, which is in line with legitimate, patriarchal ideology. It is acceptable for the males to visit these houses because the kind of male identity constructed is still mainly framed by the patriarchal society.

Nevertheless, generally, the construction of male identity among Ethiopian youths at these video-viewing houses includes the reshaping of narratives and the reshaping of stories, fashioning them into social strategies oriented towards the new reality. In this vein, one finds not only Scott’s (1990) cited in Salamon (2000: 4) “public scripts”, but also other strategies discussed by Scott, including “hidden transcripts” of resistance and subversion. The present study suggests that dominant discourses on youth and women today in Ethiopia – themselves in constant flux and dialogue with modern Western images – contribute to the group’s patriarchal rhetoric regarding both past and present. The above statements are just few of the striking examples of the rejection, as well as acceptance, of social terms that constitute the restructuring of patriarchal alignments by Ethiopian youth, who retell their stories in a manner that transports the arena outwards into the conservatism that characterises Ethiopian society.

This question of masculinity, on which I elaborate later, is pertinent to understanding Ethiopian, male youths’ identities that are constituted by their exposure to Western cultures through global media messages in these shared male spaces. For example, in an in-depth interview, Semeles (who has a five-year-old son currently being raised by his mother) said that one of the reasons he could not take his girlfriend (who is his son’s mother) to cinema theatres was because he could not afford it and it “touches my man’s pride”. He explains:

As I don't have a job most of the time, I can't keep asking my girl to pay whenever we go out. It touches my man's pride. If I can't take care of my girl once in a while, then I am not man enough and she starts looking elsewhere.

In those times when I feel not asking for money I can watch movies by myself in these video houses. I can watch here two films just by paying 50 Ethiopian cents, but I can't bring my girlfriend to such a terrible place and expect her to enjoy herself and my company. That would be too disrespectful. If I want her to join me, I had to take her to the cinema where the cost is too high.

However, because of his habit of watching movies, Semeles has begun to question the dominant patriarchal discourse that looks down on relating to the opposite sex more openly, particularly having a child outside of marriage.

In the developed world as seen in the movies I watch, it is normal for a boy to invite his girl to his home, but in my country if I dared to think of bringing in my girl to my parents house, I can't be able to stand the angry looks I receive. I might even be thrown out of the house. But soon we started doing it anyway because I am the kind of a guy who likes to shock people. I have a five-year-old son with this girl and I still have not married her. People are angry with me but I don't care. I took this stance because, you know, things like that happens everyday in the movies.

As can be seen from the above testimonials, this aversion to finding girls in video houses is in sharp contrast to girls visiting traditional viewing houses such as the cinema theatres. This is the subject matter of the next section where I discuss the attraction of the video houses as compared with the cinema theatres in Addis Ababa.

## **5.2 Traditional Film-Viewing Houses (Cinema Theatres and Home Videos)**

### *5.2.1 Cinema Theatres as an Alien Environment*

Except for taking their girlfriends out to cinema theatres, these Ethiopian male youth rarely visit cinema theatres or watch movies at home. The attraction of American action movies for Ethiopian male youth is a specific phenomenon that only occurs in the video houses. In other words, the attraction is not evident in other traditional film viewing places like cinema theatres and home videos. This study has established that the unemployed youths' attraction to action movies is specific to the video houses rather than the traditional viewing houses. This attraction is intertwined with, and can only be understood when looking at, the factors that shape their lived experiences.

As such, this study has found out that the youth's impoverished lived reality, on top of the inability to afford cinema theatres, has prevented them from enjoying their rare outings to cinema houses. Moreover, their poverty has constituted a consciousness of their marginal identity which is put into sharp relief within the genteel and comfortable space of the cinema theatres.

Lemma: Once, I heard that there was a movie starring Denziel Washington in one of the cinema theatres and I just went without planning. I sat and midway in the movie I started smelling dirty socks in the hall and I got worried that it might be mine. Remember I was not clean and I was still wearing my dirty clothes. So I had to leave right at the middle of the movie. Ever since, I never go to cinema theatres. I am still embarrassed and scared of being the butt of jokes again.

SHEMELES had an uncannily similar experience eight years earlier:

I did not know anything about the proper etiquette of being inside cinema halls. The first day I went to watch at the cinema theatre, I went by myself and I did not know that I was supposed to unfold the seat in order to sit down<sup>15</sup>. And I stood at the aisle and waited to get a seat. It was then a person told me that I was preventing him from watching the screen. I told him: 'I am waiting till I find an empty seat'. He laughed at me and told me to unfold the seat and sit. But after that I could not concentrate; I was so embarrassed. That was eight years ago. I am too tired of being told how to dress, how well I look and where to sit in these places. So I stayed away from that.

Moreover, the video houses represent a place of "democracy" and "a place to hide" as noted by Aregawi and SHEMELES, as a space where no restrictions are enforced and where the youth come in any manner they like and expect no judgement. Note the following excerpts:

Aregawi: Most of us spend money on *chat*, cigarettes, sometimes, drugs while we watch movies in the video houses the whole day. Unlike in the cinema theatres, at these houses no one judges you. It does not matter how well dressed you are, what kind of job you have, you can be yourself with all your crap and just enjoy yourself. For many it is even difficult to reach the cinema theatres; they don't even know how to enter there.

SHEMELES: The reason why I prefer the video houses to cinema theatres is because it is a place where I have this sense of freedom to do whatever I want. We are allowed to smoke, chew *chat*. I can break all the rules and get away with it. But in cinema theatres they would throw me out. Also only in

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<sup>15</sup> There is no reserved seating system in cinema theatres in Ethiopia. A ticket is purchased without seat numbers on the basis of the seating capacity of the cinema theatre's hall. Any one can sit in any place he or she wants to as long as there are empty seats available.

video houses and never in the cinema theatres can we have a choice on what kind of movies we want to watch.

### 5.2.2 *The Economic Factor*

Furthermore, the socio-economic factor of the lived reality of the unemployed youth is a reason why the cinema theatres become a closed ground. The youth feel estranged from people belonging to the dominant well-off section of the Ethiopian society that can afford to visit cinema theatres or watch home videos since the youth do not own television sets and VCRs in their homes.

Bekele: In cinema theatres you have to pay a minimum of 3 Ethiopian birr and maximum of 20 Ethiopian birr. I don't have the economy capacity. If I am lucky, I might earn 8 Ethiopian birr per day as a daily labourer.

However, the youth's preference for the video houses is not just a condition of poverty and socio-economic dispossession. The video houses are also a shared cultural space that is linked to the creation of marginal youth identity, which I will explore below in the next section.

## 5.3 **Creation of Marginal Youth Identity**

### 5.3.1 *Consumption Practices as Means of Resistance of 'Social Control'*

In order to understand the formation of marginal youth identity among the youths investigated in this study, it is pertinent to revisit what media theorists say about popular culture. Popular culture is structured within what Stuart Hall (1981) calls the opposition between the power-bloc and the people. The power-bloc consists of a relatively unified, relatively stable alliance of social forces – economic, legal, moral, aesthetic; the people on the other hand, constitute a diverse and dispersed set of social allegiances constantly formed and reformed among the formations of the subordinate. As Fiske (1989: 8) has argued, the opposition can also be thought of as one between the *homogeneity*, as the power bloc attempts to control, structure and minimise social differences so that they serve its interests, and *heterogeneity*, as the formations of the people intransigently maintain their sense of difference that is also a difference of interest. It can be thought of as the opposition between the centre and the circumference, between the centripetal and centrifugal forces. “But the relationship is always one of conflict or confrontation; the hegemonic force's homogeneity is always met by the resistance of the heterogeneity” (Fiske 1989: 8).

The least politically active resistance, which is taken by the Ethiopian youths, is the bodily pleasures of evasion, the dogged refusal of the dominant ideology and its discipline, and the ability to construct a set of experiences beyond its reaches in the act of watching action movies in these houses. It can be argued that Ethiopian youths “lose” their socially constructed identities and therefore the structure of domination-subordination in their moments of pleasure (Fiske 1989: 8).

It is in following this line of argument that I chose the informal video viewing houses in *Merkato* in Addis Ababa as a site of research. *Merkato* becomes appealing because it is one of the few areas in Addis Ababa where crime and petty thefts are rife. The fact that the youth choose to watch movies in video houses located in *Merkato* area identifies them as a marginal or resistant subculture group in Ethiopia. This is vividly illustrated in a popular, contemporary Ethiopian joke which was told by Sebsebe, 23:

There was the president of America, president of Russia, and Meles Zenawi on a plane together. They each bet that they could tell when the plane flew over their country. The president of America put his hand out the plane: “Oh, I know we are in my country.” Every body else asked how. “Because I touched the Empire State Building.” The Russian president moved him out the way and put his hand out the plane: “I know we are in my country.” “How?” they asked. “Because it's really cold out there.” Meles Zenawi tried; he stuck his hand out the plane and laughed, “Oh yeah, I know we are in my country.” How? “Because my watch is gone”.

The humour in this joke, for the Ethiopian audience, lies partly in the fact that the Ethiopians were perceived as among equals with the Americans and Russians. The fact that the Ethiopian leader was travelling with two of the most powerful leaders in the world was Sebsebe’s parody of Ethiopians’ position in the world. But the joke also illustrates the construction of *Merkato* as site where thefts happen to the extent that the country’s leader jokes about it. As such, the video houses seem to cause worry among authority figures because of their location in the most crime-infested part of Addis Ababa. As Fiske has argued in relation to the video arcades (which I will discuss in detail below), the houses were transformed as a “focus of vandalism and hooliganism” (1989: 77). An incident that happened during the course of my research when the vehicle I used was vandalised during a focus group discussion session, seems to substantiate this fear as outlined in Chapter Four.

The investigation into the youths' attraction to action movies in the video houses relates to findings about whether or not the youths were resisting the dominant ideology in the Ethiopian society. This study looked at the claims made by Ethiopian authority figures about the harmful effect of the video houses on Ethiopian youths' identity formation and Ethiopian culture. In regard to this, Fiske (1989: 77) speaks of a study of the press in Western Australia in 1983 and 1984, which voiced concern about video arcades on the formation of youth identity. The study revealed that social dislike of video arcades is widespread and that objections to them could be grouped in five categories:

1. They are addictive for, and thus harmful to, the young.
2. They cause truancy and divert children's attention away from schoolwork.
3. They cause petty crime – to pay for their “addiction”.
4. They are a waste of money – particularly money provided by parents for “better” purchases, such as lunch money and pocket money.
5. They are a focus of vandalism and hooliganism. (Fiske 1989: 77)

Fiske's (1989) focus here is video games/arcades, but his ideas seem applicable to the attraction of action movies to the young Ethiopian males visiting the video houses. Fiske (1989: 78) argues that these spaces lead the young to waste of time and money, divert them from school, home and work and are addictive (which probably means that they offer a welcome means of evading the social control exercised by the home-school-work nexus). The situation in Ethiopia seems to present us with similar aversions to video houses by authority figures such as parents and government officials. Lemma for example spoke of his parents' dislike of his habit of going to the video houses and watching movies. At first, this indisposition to the video houses seem to be a condition of the economic status of Lemma's family as he sometimes asks his parents to give him money to watch movies.

When I go to my family to ask for money so I watch movies, they give me reasons why I should not do so. Maybe I should listen to them. They don't like the fact that I spend money, which I normally take from them, on movies. My parents are not rich; they are not the kind from whom I take money when I am not working. They expect something from me, to support them. They can't afford to see me spend money on recreation. They are too poor.

However, there is more reason for his parents' aversion to the video houses. As noted by Fiske with regard to the video arcades, for the

[s]ocially central, whom we characterise as adults in the positions of responsibility, there is a widespread concern about the arcades' believed antisocial effect. For the subordinate, the younger user of the action movies, they offer opportunities of resisting social control and adopting an alternative cultural stance. Society's disapproval of them is an important part of their meaning and the pleasures they offer. (1989: 78)

For Lemma, the video houses allow him to escape the disapproval, and the 'preying and worried eyes', of his parents:

When I watch movies, I don't plan it; I am not programmed. It is because I have nothing else to do or nowhere else to go. But my parents say that if I were not to watch movies, I would be looking for jobs instead and doing something constructive with my life. But I know I don't have chance of getting a job and in the houses I don't need to see those prying and worried eyes [his parents].

### 5.3.2 'Polluters of Ethiopian Culture'

Moreover, the cinema theatres construe an environment that is objectionable to the marginal youth identity being continually constituted in the video houses. One reason why cinemas theatres are not attractive for the youth is because they screen movies that are edited and as such constitute the society's need to control their movie consumption practices. Lemma said: "In cinema theatres, most of the movies are edited, cut and censored". Bekele expresses his frustration thus:

It is actually frustrating to watch movies in cinema theatres because those people cut or edit the film to the extent that the storyline does not make sense. They cut it right in the middle while you are following the story. It is a major problem: who would like to watch an edited version of a movie? I don't understand why they interfere so?

Yilma Regassa, the General Manager of the Addis Ababa City Films' Administration, the government body that run three of the major cinema theatres in Addis Ababa<sup>16</sup>, admitted that one of the reasons the youth prefer the video houses was because most of the movies the cinema theatres show are edited.

It is true. After watching the uncut version of a movie in their homes or at the video houses, when they come here to see the same movie they get angry, make noises because it is totally different from what they have seen already. But we cannot do anything about it; we have to take out the

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<sup>16</sup> The three cinema theatres are *Ambassador Theatre*, *Cinema Ethiopia* and *Cinema Empire*.



unnecessary and harmful elements so they adhere to our society and our culture. As a governmental institution we have the responsibility to protect our society. We just can't show those movies in their original forms. Things just don't work that way in Ethiopia.

This testimonial speaks to the counter-hegemonic space the youth inhabit since, unlike the Ethiopia Yilma described, “things like that do work” in the video houses. Yilma retells one anecdote in which the Administration, as the vanguard of Ethiopian culture, was in a quandary. He describes an occurrence in which members of the Films' Administration's Editing Board showed a “reluctance” to screen the unedited version of a movie called *Damage* because some of its contents, particularly its explicit sex scenes, were “unacceptable to our society”. He states that in the end the Board made the decision to show the movie after cutting it nearly in half. As such, the youth audience's angry response to authority by making noises in the cinema theatres relates to their resistance to what is acceptable in the Ethiopian dominant patriarchal discourse, and has led to the creation of marginal youth.

Yilma discerningly captured the disapproval of authority figures of the video houses which he saw as “polluting Ethiopian culture”:

What worries us has nothing to do with the video house competing with us. They are a good phenomenon in so far as we don't have many cinema outlets in the country. A person comes and watches movies in our cinema theatres even after watching the same movie at home. What worries us more is the cultural pollution these video houses are creating in our society. They show for the most part pornographic and violent movies. The customers are young Ethiopians and have no parental guidance when they watch those movies. There is this sense of *laissez faire* in the houses where the kids get to watch anything they want...therefore, the danger they are causing to our society can be enormous.

### 5.3.3 *The Alleged Role of Video Houses as Sanctuary from Law*

Moreover, these video houses literally become a space not only to ‘hide from the outside world’, as noted by Asseged, but also allegedly from the law. 32-year-old Daniel Mekonnen, owner of *Daniel Video Centre*, in an interview, noted of the way the authorities look down on the video houses as sanctuary for those who commit petty crime and hooliganism.

Government authorities say in the media that criminals have made the video houses their sanctuary from the law. The police regularly visit these

video houses at least three to four times a year so that they could arrest the suspects.

Further, disapproval of the video houses is a symptom of the recognition that they lie beyond the reach of the social control that a “reasonable” society knows it “ought” to exercise over the young (Fiske 1989: 78) and that the youth are “beating the system” (Fiske 1989: 81). In the video houses, as observed by Tessema, there is no one to shush or disapprove.

In the cinema theatres people who are serious and who are great achievers are all over the place and they look down on me because I am different from them, or because I was not well dressed as they are. I am not good enough but I don't give them a chance to control or judge me. Movie theatres are also boring. People are always shushing you in case you don't understand the dialogue and want to ask my friend about the meaning. Heck, who needs the hassle?

In addition, the fact that the Ethiopian authorities construct the video houses against the respectability of work, of school and home is important here, for this dominant construction provides the space for the ‘oppositional semiosis’ Fiske (1989: 83–4) observes as being at the heart of the movie watching activity. The work of popular culture, then, provides the means both for the generation of oppositional meanings and for their articulation with that dominant ideology to which they are opposed. Though the action movies shown at the informal video houses in *Merkato* are bearers of the dominant ideology of Western societies, they offer the unemployed youth “the means to articulate their resistance” (Fiske 1989: 91–2) to the dominant ideology within the Ethiopian society.

#### *5.3.4 Marginal Identities: The Duruyes and the Findatas*

Moreover, the attraction of Ethiopian youth to action/violent movies is explored in this study so as to establish how American action movies speak to the male marginal identities of Ethiopian youth. This study has established that action movies and the focus on fighting are not just a show of masculinity, but also counter-resistance to oppression and powerlessness. Following Walkerdine's (1990: 352) argument, the urban unemployed male youth in Addis Ababa view fighting as representing a triumph over, repression of, defence against, the terror of powerlessness.

From the stories told by the Ethiopian youth, the marginal youth identities that are constituted in these houses with their unique specificity to Ethiopian youth culture, as explained in Chapter Three, are fascinating. As will be highlighted in the following narratives, what emerges is an ongoing grappling, through stories, with the changing experience of the urban poor youths' identification with action movie heroes that is born out of desperation over their unfortunate lot.

As indicated earlier, most of the male youths in these houses, known as *duruyees*, constitute a separate, well-defined group. The term *duruyee* simultaneously denotes employment, status and origin and is juxtaposed against the term *chewa*, which designates a person from a good family background assumed to be educated, respectful and law-abiding. In 2000, Meles Zenawi said in a televised speech that his government would hunt down the *duruyees* and *findatas* and put them in prisons.

Sebsebe: They [the government] are always chasing us. Where else can we go? There are no soccer fields to play in; cinema theatres are too expensive...we are not even allowed to have peace here [video houses]. They [the police] think we are stupid. Why should a criminal hide in these houses after being told in the media that this is his hiding place? Just because we like action and violent movies and these houses show pornographic movies sometimes, it does not make us automatically *findatas*. Why? It makes me so angry!

Likewise in the hegemonic Western ideology (imbued as it is with Western cultural perceptions), systems of youth in Ethiopia especially those who are poor ("other") are rendered invisible (see Winant 1994; Snowden 1983; Eze 1997; Rigby 1996 as cited in Salamon 2000). The youth visiting the video houses are in a kind of 'hiding' as they are considered petty criminals and get hunted down by police. Nevertheless, this group of youth, which I found in the video houses, remained a *de facto* part of the Addis Ababa youth scene.

SHEMELES: Of course one finds many angry boys in these houses. They want to dominate others and they would shush and normally stop others from talking. They are called *findatas*, young men who are on a verge of exploding. These are the guys who are feared in the vicinity and they mostly demand the film be changed when action movies are not shown. Fortunately, the majority want the same kind of movies so they don't need to make a racket. So in a way, democracy happens here [laughs].

For example Lemma, who has a lean physique, spoke of the *hardegnas* who visit the video houses:

When we watch action movies everyone is engrossed. You won't find anyone talking, or making noise. If by chance any one sneezes, we would tell him to shut his big mouth. We also have guys whom we call *hardegnas*. They are the body builders, not so bright and educated, who have a nasty behaviour with a short fuse. So when they tell you to shut up, you shut up. They can be pretty intimidating.

As indicated earlier in this study, voices of both *duruye* and *chewa/keleme* interviewees are presented, the *chewa/keleme* stories are prominent because they seem to be more lucid or eloquent in presenting their interpretation of the action movies they watch. The *kelemes'* unique insider/outsider position within the audience visiting the video houses, with the pain and difficulty of their marginality, affords their stories unparalleled insight and sensitivity. The interviewees' frequent use of the Amharic word *chewa/keleme* in their attempts to link the well-off part of society to that of their own - young poor men - who managed to remain *chewa/keleme* despite the poor economic condition of their upbringing, becomes a fascinating intellectual terrain. This can be seen in the description of Semeles who spoke of his friend Lemma as *keleme/chewa*.

Look at Lemma. He came from the same background as me; his parents are so poor they don't even own a TV. But he is a *chewa*, a *keleme*. He understands the English language, and translate me the words [of the movies]. Unlike me, he sometimes watches suspense. Not me. I only like action movies. I like guys beating the hell of each other.

### 5.3.5 Reflection of the 'Dispossessed' in American Action Movies

The attraction of violent movies for the Ethiopian unemployed youth under study also lies in the perception amongst the researched that physical might is the only means to surmount or deal with the dispossessions that characterise their lived situation. For example, Aregawi, 18, the youngest respondent who left school in eighth grade because his parents could no longer afford to pay his school fees, envied and at the same time felt distanced from Lemma whom he also perceived as *keleme*. (I was also told terms such as *chewa* and *keleme* are unflattering in these houses). Aregawi shares his views on the subject:

I told you that *chewa* is a word that makes fun of the rich people in Ethiopia. But for us poor people to be called *chewa* is like being a pretender. The same when you are called *keleme*; it is like trying to be

something else you are not. Have you seen any one of the action heroes being smart in the head? No. They all depend on their muscle. And for me it makes sense. I cannot get education so I have to depend on my muscle!

For Aregawi, 'being a pretender' is to deny their marginal identity. This is his and his friends' perception of the *kelemes*. Moreover, Aregawi's realisation that his only means to fight back the system is through physical might is in line with Walkerdine's (1990: 342–3) argument:

For the majority of women and men, the escape-route open, that of the mind, of being clever, is closed. It is the body which represents itself either as the appropriate vehicle for bourgeois wardship...or for the conquering champion who has beaten the opponents into submission.

This attention to the muscle is further argued by Nair (1999: 17) who observes that the attraction of action heroes for the dispossessed is the making of "a *meaningful* life of killing ...from watching a violent movie". Action movies "become the means of negotiating a powerful new identity through an appealing masculine identity on screen – a situation of life imitating art" (1999: 17).

Moreover, the interweaving of the Amharic and English languages in these interviews, no mere technical matter, encapsulates the youths' present hierarchies of identity. The term *chewa* which used to connote historically those from good family background, especially the royal families of Ethiopian kingdom, is now used among the subordinate youth culture to differentiate those who have no hope (the *duruyees* and *findatas*) and those with the hope for changing their current predicament of unemployment and being poor through work and education (the *chewas/kelemes*). As such, the differentiated meanings the young men make from watching action movies, when channelled through the Ethiopian youth culture terminology, creates a semblance of the lived reality within which they operate. Anwar Abdu, the owner of the *Anwar Video House* spoke of the types of youth that visit his house as follows:

Mostly it is the *duruyees* who visit my House, and those who are known as *adegna bozenewoch* (dangerously unemployed). There are also the *kelemes* who translate the dialogues of a movie to their friends. We also have children visiting our house because we rarely show 'romance' movies.

Here, Anwar's use of the term 'romance' in Ethiopian context is quite interesting because he spoke the term in English though he was interviewed in Amharic. He used 'romance', as a euphemism for pornography, but he said it with no premeditated

innocence. The construction of a pornographic movie into a genre of romance is something of an anomaly among Ethiopian popular youth culture and was shared by all the Ethiopian youth respondents. To give some examples, the same term ‘romance’ was used by Tessema to talk about pornographic movies and Sebsebe uses it as well in Chapter Six. Moreover, the fact that Anwar’s video house does not show ‘romance’ films indicate the legal status and relative respectability of his establishment among other video houses operating in Addis Ababa. (Related to this blurred line between what is considered ‘romance’ and ‘pornography’ is the readings the youth make out of the action movies in terms of masculine identities. This is a topic I will elaborate on in Chapter Six).

When looking at the Ethiopian construction of marginal identities in the act of watching American action movies at these houses, it appears that the concern of media imperialism thesis theorists seems justified. As can be seen in the narrative excerpts that follow, action heroes as role models persist to this day within the youth community in Addis Ababa and continue to have apparently deleterious and far-reaching effects on Ethiopian youth identity. Anwar discussed the role action heroes/villains play in the youths visiting the Houses:

It is because they see something of their own lives in the characters that they watch action movies. The action heroes use their muscle and physical might to deal with the problems in their lives. I believe the behaviours of the characters are reflected in their own lives and they see themselves mirrored in the action heroes. There are many occasions when my House becomes quite lively with the audience applauding when the action hero beats the villain. But what I find funny is when they do the same for the villain; I am talking here about the bad man who is actually pretty nasty. They seem to enjoy watching this bad guy beat the hell out of the good guy. It is at the moment like this I feel like getting up and shouting: ‘Hey you are clapping for the wrong guy’. But it is not my place; I am just the owner and those guys might think of my intrusion uncalled for. I definitely don’t want to be in their bad books!

In a similar manner as the youth Walkerdine describes watching *Rocky*, the Ethiopian youths watching action movies in these houses gain a pleasure that is ‘red hot’ which is what “makes the youths in cinema audiences cheer and scream for *Rocky* to win the match – including many black youths, even though the Mr. Big of boxing, whom he defeats is black” (Walkerdine 1990: 342–3). Anwar’s surprised reaction here provides textual evidence of the youths forming what Fiske (1987; 1989) speaks of as

an oppositional reading to the hegemonic discourses legitimised by the American action movies.

More fascinating details creep in as the differentiated and at times oppositional meanings are appropriated from the text of the action movie *John Q*<sup>17</sup>. Twenty-six-year-old Tessema's discussion about *John Q* is an example of this oscillation between the unhappy, lived reality and the mediated reality of the movies in which the power of the mind combined with the muscle attract the youth in Ethiopia.

The character in *John Q* shows how through smart thinking one could save one's child from imminent death. I see this as good. But to ever think of doing a similar thing, to pull a stunt like that here in Ethiopia, is unthinkable. They will shoot you and your son too if you dare to hold anyone hostage here...I know that he used his intelligence and the American system as well as armament to achieve a success. He was able to overcome all the obstacles to save his son. He was free to do what he wanted as he had the money and the power.

Tessema's reading here is what forms part of the preferred reading, which accepts the dominant discourse legitimised by the global message. But there is a more complex process to his reading. On one hand, he formed a negotiated reading of the global message by only appropriating the message that suits his lived reality. Through his realisation that it was 'unthinkable' to do the same in Ethiopia, Tessema is not fully internalising the message disseminated by the media. This is indicative of what Ang's argues when she speaks of "the capability of audience groups to construct their own meanings and thus their own local cultures and identities, even in the face of their virtually complete dependence on the image flows distributed by the transnational culture industries" (1990: 250–1). On the other hand, as reflected in the narrative material presented above, it indicates these youths' conviction that taking action through the power of guns and the mind can change one's life. It has been said earlier that the dominant Ethiopian culture regards an individual's position in society as a direct outcome of having good family/connections and education rather than a result of hard work, as conveyed by this movie. Tessema's account of the meaning he took

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<sup>17</sup> John Quincy Archibald's son Michael collapses while playing baseball as a result of a heart failure. Immediately, John Q. rushes Michael to the hospital's emergency room for a transplant. Unfortunately, the insurance would not cover his son's transplant. So in order for Michael's quick and complete recovery, John takes the emergency room hostage until the doctors agree to do the transplant successfully.

from *John Q* challenges the basic legitimacy of the view that only an individual from a good family background and money can change his lot in Ethiopia.

The question of what is legally acceptable in the Ethiopian lived reality and the mediated reality in the movie was quickly taken up in one of the focus group discussions where Lemma (the *keleme*) begged to differ from the opinion advanced by Tessema.

I don't like the movie *John Q*. It is only in American movies that I find a person who kills is seen as a hero. John Q committed a big crime; he took people as hostage. His action would be considered criminal in any country let alone in America. True, the police later controlled the situation, but he harmed the society. Just because his cause was justifiable they [the movie makers] made him the hero. So the message I got from this movie was that as long as I have a good cause I have the right to solve it by using any means including committing a crime. His triumph is great, but what am I learning from it: nothing. His action can push people to commit crime just because they have good reason for it. He has killed many people in order to save his son's life. But can that justify his action? What do you think?

This manner of telling, however, assigns the listener the task of confronting the official narrative, the narrative in which she herself still participates. Though Lemma reads the movie in an oppositional way, the protest expressed in his account accepts the Ethiopian value system that a crime leads to punishment.

### 5.3.6 *The Contradictory Nature of the Youth's Subjectivities*

As indicated in the previous sections, the consumption of American action movies constitutes differentiated meanings among the Ethiopian youth when it influences their perception of identity as Ethiopian and Africans. There were many occasions when the youth were able to decode the American action movies oppositionally. In a similar manner to Strelitz's (2002: 130) discussion on South African black students' perception on racial oppression, the Ethiopian youth's locally situated knowledge of their economic and educational dispossessions has provided the framework for their decoding of American action movies. For instance, Lemma's views on two different American action movies (*Black Hawk Down*<sup>18</sup> and *Tears of the Sun*<sup>19</sup>, both of which

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<sup>18</sup> *Black Hawk Down* is Action/war drama based on the best-selling book detailing a near-disastrous mission in Somalia on October 3, 1993 where nearly 100 U.S were killed by Somali warlords.

<sup>19</sup> *Tears of the Sun* deals with the gritty realism of human conflict as Lt. Waters travels to war-torn Nigeria to rescue Dr. Lena Kendricks, a U.S. citizen who runs a mission in the countryside.



are about events that occurred in Africa) highlight the oppositional reading he gets from the dominant ideology of American movies:

*Black Hawk Down* only shows an exaggeration of how African brothers do evil things on their African brothers. It is the same way when I watched *Tears of the Sun*. Even though there are guns all over the place I only see Africans killing each other with knives and machetes. I don't know if this has truly occurred in Nigeria among my African brothers, but while watching the movie, it has made me disrespect them and be disgusted by their behaviour. The message put across is that Nigerians, during their tribal war, were behaving savagely and it was the whites who came to their rescue. With American action movies I always know beforehand how it is going to end, with Americans succeeding against all odds. It is all propaganda. I have seen it during the Mengistu era and I am sick and tired of it. I have grown too savvy for that kind of shit.

Although Lemma 'disrespects' the Nigerians because of the representation legitimised by the Hollywood action movies, he still makes the oppositional reading to the dominant ideology implicit in it by labelling the same representation as "propaganda". Moreover, it has to be noted that though Lemma and his friends realise that the global messages might be part of propaganda, this did not stop them from watching, and enjoying, the American action movies. In explaining this seeming contradiction, the youth make the distinction that they go to watch movies because they enjoy them, for their entertainment value while the cultural values they espoused conflict with their lived reality. Lemma's reading on the movies resonates with Tomlinson's (1991: 74) argument that Western cultural influence does not constitute an indivisible package that is simply adopted by local cultures. Rather, some aspects of Western culture are adopted while others are found irrelevant and resisted. This study has shown that the youths' appropriation of global media messages follows this line of argument according to which Western values are rejected, accepted or combined to form polysemic meanings.

While the above testimony is an oppositional reading to the intended meaning of the global text, in contrast, the narrative material presented in the following extract examines why the watching of action movies in the video houses becomes a form of resistance and therefore 'control' for the youth in their Ethiopian context.

Shemeles: I am one of the guys who come to the video houses to chew chat first and watch movie second. Some of my friends are students and they cut classes to be here. Because we smoke cigarettes so much, people complain

that they are being prevented from watching the screen clearly. I sometimes cause others to leave the hall because they cannot stand the smoke but I don't give a damn. This is the only space that allows me to be whatever I want to be. They can go out if they can't stand the smoke, it is a free country. Why should I stand outside to smoke and miss all the action in the movie? Nowadays because of government restriction on *chat*, business has gone down at the video houses. But I still do it.

Thus, as has been argued by Fiske (1987; 1989), the youths' actions during the process of media consumption in this study constitute part of a 'semiotic resistance'. This resistance results from the desire of the subordinate to exert control over the meanings of their lives, a control that is typically denied them on their material social conditions (Fiske 1989: 10). The activity of watching movies is significant since by watching action movies they are deviating from the hegemonic discourse that revolves around the institutions that are vested with authority and order such as the work place, schools and home. They are the tactics of the subordinate in making do within and against the system, rather than of opposing it directly (Fiske 1989: 11).

As such, the popularity of the video houses is greatest among the subordinate, including the unemployed and the truanting student. Also, a larger proportion of unemployed may be observed in these houses than in many other places of entertainment and a remarkably small proportion of girls. The most noticeable common factor among the visitors to the video houses appears to be that they are the masculine subordinates in a relatively well-off patriarchal, capitalist society. We may deduce from this that their subjectivities are the site of potentially disabling contradictions between the socially determined subordination, with its lack of access to power in any form and the equally powerful, but different, socially constructed sense of masculinity, with its ideology of dominance. The issue of negotiating masculinity within the video houses is the topic I will explore in the first section of Chapter Six.

## **5.8 Conclusion**

In this Chapter, I have presented the findings of the research under three different themes, namely video houses as shared male cultural space, traditional film viewing houses (cinema houses and home videos) and the creation of marginal youth identity. The Chapter has demonstrated that the attraction of the video houses and the action

movies they watch in them constitute a means of resistance to the hegemonic culture in Ethiopia. Moreover, as a male cultural space, women rarely visit these houses while the disapproval of authority figures regarding the houses lends to their attraction for the counter-hegemonic and dispossessed youth.

The Chapter has also demonstrated how marginal-youth identities are constituted through the action movies they watch in these houses. The use of the video houses and the practice of consuming American action movies are framed by factors such as poor access to and non-availability of local content on national TV and the impoverished condition of the youths' lived reality exacerbated by their unemployed status. The next Chapter presents the findings on the four major themes: masculinity in Ethiopian youth culture, global media as 'carrier of modernity', global media as a means of 'symbolic distancing' and as a means of 'escape'.

**CHAPTER SIX**  
**PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS**  
**How Ethiopian Youth Negotiate the Global Media**

**6.0 Introduction**

This Chapter presents the four major theories advanced to critique the media imperialism thesis with assumptions that underlie the active audience theory under the heading of how Ethiopian youth negotiate the global media. Divided into five sections, the first section discusses the findings with regards to masculinity in Ethiopian youth culture and how the notion is constituted among the Ethiopian youth watching American movies in the video houses. Section two discusses the perception of global media as ‘carrier of modernity’. In section three, the themes of ‘symbolic distancing’ and ‘escape’ will be examined. Section four discusses the Americanisation/Westernisation of the Ethiopian youth culture. Section five concludes the Chapter.

**6.1 Masculinity in Ethiopian Youth Culture**

*6.1.1 Fighting as Winning*

The investigation into how Ethiopian male youths negotiate their male identities within their shared male cultural space through watching American movies is informed by Walkerdine’s (1990) discussion on masculinity. The construction of Ethiopian youths’ male identity is related to their fascination for watching movies that contain action and fighting which are read through the notion of ‘winning’. Walkerdine argues the attraction of the action movie *Rocky* for the youth as: “Masculinity as winning is constantly played across by the possibility of humiliation and cowardice (that he is ‘chicken’)... physical violence is presented as the only way open to those whose lot is manual and not intellectual labour” (1990: 344).

Important to note at the outset is that when talking of masculinity issues with the youth under study, the thought of a 45-minute interview perplexed some of them, but I found in most of the interviews a shift in conversation from the first five minutes when most people responded with summaries of their overall assessment of the film loaded with current popular discourses (“he is a rock”, “he is *hardeгна*” etc. which I

have described in-depth in the previous Chapter) to the rest of the interview when they began to talk in depth about issues like relationships, marriage, tradition and poverty in the Ethiopian society.

### 6.1.2 Action Heroes as Role Models

For the youth under study, in sitting down to watch the action movies the vital act is the transportation into an imagined world where action results in change. As observed by Nair in his discussion of *Rambo*, the American action movie hero has become “their cultural icon and role model” (1997: 17). According to SHEMELES, he looks towards American action heroes as his role models as they seem to take control of the situation and as such behave like ‘men’.

I like these silent action heroes. They don't talk. They just use their guns to speak for themselves. Look at Schwarzenegger, he only says ‘I will be back’ and he would only be definitely back, only this time with a big gun to silence all the troublemakers. He is a man.

Redwan Shafie, 26, the owner of the *Sky Film House*, tells in this manner the following anecdote to testify to the attraction of the action heroes for the Ethiopian youth visiting his house.

We, owners of video houses, employ many ways to draw customers to our houses. I, for example, provide my customers raffles on their entrance fees so that the winner can get a prize. On one occasion, I gave away a poster of the action hero Claude Van Damme as the 1<sup>st</sup> prize. The second prize was a poster of another action hero, Chuck Norris and the third prize was a poster of Jesus Christ. When I was asked why I put Jesus in the third prize, I jokingly responded: “He [Jesus] is not as well muscled as Van Damme or Chuck Norris for my audience's liking!” Indeed, the person who got the third prize left the poster at the House. He did not take it with him.

But this fortuitous fascination with muscles, guns and physical control was not fully appreciated by Lemma, the *keleme/chewa*, who managed to get a one-year college education. He says American action movies have alerted him to the power of words. Lemma has begun to question the assumptions that are associated with being a man in a patriarchal society like Ethiopia.

Films opened my eyes to how to be more communicative to people around me. They taught me how to be a good communicator, to talk reasonably instead of resorting to force when things go wrong. I learned that there is nothing wrong in saying ‘sorry’ to women. There is nothing unmanly about it. In the background I come from, however much a man might be wrong, he doesn't need to say sorry because it was considered unmanly. I have

seen how my father relates to my mother. Whatever he says goes in the house even when he is acting foolish.

After watching movies, Lemma claimed that his perception on women has changed. He saw how some women in films don't cook, and are good fighters, and would not be ordered around by their men. Consider his narrative on the interaction between his mother and father and how he is now in process of resisting the gender relations that characterise the patriarchal society he inhabits:

My father married my mother in arranged marriage. And as a criterion, his parents had to find out whether or not she can cook all the traditional Ethiopian dishes like *doro wot* [chicken gravy] and *injera* [Ethiopian bread made from a thin batter and baked on a sizzling pan]. But I know now that I shouldn't automatically assume that my future wife would be good at that. She could be good at something else. I think I am going to marry a fighter. She would look sexy.

However, the above statement is also packed with conflicting subjectivities Lemma is subject to, all relating to patriarchal discourse. Though Lemma would like to marry a 'fighter', in the final analysis, his adherence to the patriarchal discourse that views women as sexual objects is articulated when he fantasised about his future wife looking 'sexy'.

### 6.1.3 *The Educative role of Sexual Contents in American Action Movies*

Speaking of sexual relationships in the contexts of the pornographic contents in movies he watches, Lemma says he is concerned about the negative effect they are having on his social relations while at the same time being liberated by the educational aspect they have on pleasuring his partner.

Concentrating too much on sex scenes in action movies could go straight to my head; they can drive me to [pause, he hesitates] masturbate if I continually watch them only. This habit could even be harmful to my health and my social life. May be I am watching these kind of movies to learn how to satisfy my wife or girlfriend or to go after girls. But then I would find myself one day infected by HIV/AIDS. But if there are erotic scenes within a normal movie, I enjoy watching them. I like watching Sharon Stone in the action movie *Sliver*<sup>20</sup>. Instead of the erotic and sexy scenes it is the killings and criminal activities that dominate the movie.

Sebsebe also sees the educational value of watching movies, interestingly pornographic movies.

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<sup>20</sup> In *Sliver*, Sharon Stone stars as resident at Sliver Heights where everything a girl could want is made available. Panoramic views of the city, a fully functional gym and a voyeuristic landlord with a minor oedipal complex and psychotic tendencies. One day, one of the tenants has an accident.

Films have positive impact here, for example, when it comes to marriage. If I were action actor who performs well in the sexual scenes, I can feel that I have a chance to make my wife happy. Do you get me? But if I watch extreme pornography, perhaps my wife has no experience in watching this kind of movie because of the traditional and cultural restriction on women. They don't watch much of movies let alone these kinds of movies. So if I start kissing her on her neck or somewhere else other than her lips, it can create misunderstanding between us and be embarrassed in the end.

The above narratives remind us of Strelitz's (2002) observation of the educative role pornographic films have on South African youth. Strelitz (2002: 141–2) argues that we need to examine the ways in which these products are understood and used by the individuals who receive them and how the use of these products is interwoven into local forms of power. Both Lemma and Sebsebe are describing the “progressive” role played by pornographic films in a strongly patriarchal society.

Moreover these testimonials are filled with silences and occurred after much of probing. As argued by Juluri (2003: 225), these silences may constitute the boundaries of not only what people would like to say, but perhaps what they are capable of saying as well. In other words, what is not said points out the “limits of intelligibility” of certain discourses (Juluri 2003: 225). Lemma, through his silences and pauses is hinting at the grey line the youth are treading in a strongly patriarchal society.

Note the following exchange I had with Sebsebe when I asked him what he thinks of female action movie stars. We were discussing the actress called the T-X or Terminatrix who starred along Schwarzenegger in *Terminator III* screened at the video house. T-X was sent to not only kill John Conner, but his future wife as well.

[Long pause] I don't know what you mean.... [Silence] why are you asking me this question?

Interviewer: What do you think of her role in the movie?

A woman acting that way is her business... but don't expect me to like her... she is too physical for me. She should know her place, not go out fighting. It is so unwomanly.

But Bahru, 23, who began watching action movies when he was 11 years old, seemed in awe of her:

She was amazing. She was full of energy and she gave Schwarzenegger a hard time. I like such kind of girls; they are strong and independent. I wish there are more girls like her here in Addis.

As can be seen from the above testimonies, and as mentioned in the methodology Chapter, what came to the fore was that in both selecting what is said and speculating about what is unsaid, the role of the researcher becomes all the more important – including the question of how he or she negotiates questions of authority and representation in the interview and later in the academic institutional context (Juluri 2003: 225). Tensions relating to this heterogeneity, perhaps due to their potential to undermine the dominant homogeneity, were never explicitly expressed in concrete terms.

Moreover, these responses show that the contradictions between insubordination and masculinity become experientially real for the subject as his experience of power(lessness) is shaped by the discourses of economics and gender. What the viewing subject is doing is gaining power to control not just watching action movies, but his own meanings, and these meanings are intimately connected with masculinity and its relationship to power/subordination (Fiske 1989: 85). In the similar manner the video arcades functioned, the ideological affectivity of the video houses resides in their ability to provide “a space where an opposing subject can generate oppositional meanings and resistances without denying that dominant frame against which the resistance necessarily defines itself” (Fiske 1989: 92).

In the next section, views expressed by the Ethiopian youth resonate with how American popular culture, as disseminated by its action movies, becomes a tool for “mental transformation” and an instrument “in bringing about their mental modernisation” (Schou 1992: 157).

## **6.2 Global Media as ‘Carrier of Modernity’**

### *6.2.1 Global Media as Means for ‘Keeping up to Date’*

It has been argued in the literature review Chapter that local audiences actively make meanings that best suit their lived experiences. Theorists argue that part of the



attraction for local audiences consuming global media messages is drawn from the perception that these messages are a ‘carrier of modernity’ (Berger *et al.* 1976; Schou 1992). Schou (1992: 24) points to, for example, the role played by mass-mediated, popular culture as being a ‘carrier of modernity’ in post-Second World War Denmark. This study has established that American movies, specifically action movies, are influential in the Ethiopian youths’ ‘mental modernisation’ (Schou 1992: 24) by providing them with “new senses of possibility – new options, new desires, new freedoms” (Tomlinson 1991: 41, also see Berman 1982; 1992). For example, it is instructive that the participants in this study were attracted by action movies because they provide them with opportunities to be modern and a means to ‘progress’. The following extracts from a focus group discussion illustrate this point:

Bekele: In these movies, I get to see how the other world lives; learn about new things, about technology. For example, I have seen in movies what a cell phone looks like long before it entered Ethiopia. So movies keep me up to date with progress and make me feel that I am well equipped and therefore ready to change.

Hussein: I get to know about the outside world through films. I learn about the technological advancement made, what cities look like in the developed world. Because of this, when new gadgets enter the Ethiopian market, I don’t get surprised or be seen as stupid. I have seen it all. Films make you well prepared for new things and it becomes easy to adopt and accept it later.

Bahru: Because I watch movies everyday, when I was told on the news of something extraordinary, it is not something new to me. I am watching about countries which are richer and more advanced than us. Films educate me.

Tessema: I see the technological advancement made in America and the world as a whole which I don’t get to see in my own country. This alone is enough; it gives me satisfaction because I am keeping pace with the time, I can learn a lot by watching films regularly.

### *6.2.2 Patriarchal Traditional Culture versus Modernity*

However, the nexus between tradition and modernity is a contested site in the Ethiopian youth identity. Ethiopia, a patriarchal society with a long history, has a clearly entrenched value system on how men relate to each other and to their women. Therefore the subject of relationships of men with their women becomes a fascinating terrain in this study. A case in point was the question of who pays the bill when a

young man takes a girl takes out on date, an interesting subject fraught with ambiguity in the current Ethiopian youth culture. This was the topic taken up by Semeles who, according to him, has become modern in his treatment of his girlfriend, because of watching movies.

I consider myself a modern man. There are some instances when I get money from my girlfriend. In fact I learned that from the movies. In our culture, it is always the guy who pays for a dinner, or for clubbing. The girl just sits and looks pretty. She does not share the bill. That is why many of us can't afford going out on a date with a girl. You have to have your pocket full. But after watching how couples in movies behave towards each other, I don't get embarrassed if my girlfriend pays for me. I even ask for money when I am broke. But I have seen many of my friends hiding from their girlfriends when they are broke. They give them excuses not to meet. But now things are changing. More and more girls are sharing the bill. That was unimaginable just ten years ago.

In traditionally patriarchal Ethiopian society, it is taken for granted that the man, as the breadwinner, will take care of his wife/girlfriend both economically and emotionally. The immediate reaction these young boys have when it relates to their women is predominately characteristic of Ethiopian patriarchy. For example, Sebsebe says he cannot bring his girlfriend to the video houses because she might be corrupted by the 'untoward happenings'.

I can't bring my girlfriend to video houses because there are times when I don't know what will be on show. The poster can say it is 'romance' but once inside, we might find out it was pornography. Of course, I would not like my girl to see that. She will lose respect for me and it might well mean that I don't respect her. There are also times when the title of the film is not posted outside and we might end up quarrelling over it.

What was fascinating as the focus group discussions unfolded was the realisation that the Ethiopian youth consider how well they treat their women as a measure of modernity. It was their consumption of global messages that contributed to the change in their perception of women as equals. This perception can be illustrated in the following extracts:

Bekele: What I see in the movies is that the rights of American women are greater than that of a man. In Addis, we boys were used to teasing girls on the streets. Not anymore. Nowadays a girl will not keep quiet but turn around and tell us off. No chance we are going to hit her. This is something new. Before, had she dared to talk back she would have gotten beaten for it. Maybe because we watch movies nowadays it has influenced us to accept such behaviour from our girls. Women can fight back and ensure their rights and be independent. Now a guy speaks to girls rudely and they return

with a retort. They don't go away quietly.

Sebsebe: I have reached the stage where I see women are equal to me. I try to treat them the same way women get treated in America. I just can't get away with everything with my girlfriend; she will answer me back.

Bahru: I see that a woman is superior to men in the movies. In the olden days a girl was inferior and lived under her man, she was submissive. But now we are getting a little bit modern and sophisticated. We have seen that a girl has rights too. When I see a guy hitting a girl in the streets, I don't walk away assuming that he had the right. Maybe it was because she was misbehaving and that it was no business of mine. Not now, I would automatically fight the guy. I respect women.

But Hussein, 24, a Muslim, resisted the 'extreme' way women treat their men in the movies such as *Kill Bill II*<sup>21</sup> and was adamant that though he conceded women might be equal to him, they would never be superior to him. He contended it would not be considered natural within the Ethiopian culture while it could be accepted in a foreign or *ferenji* (white) culture. As such, he is resisting the gender relations that characterise most Western societies as imparted by this movie.

I sometimes think that the movies go too far. For example in *Kill Bill II*, I feel that the men are being exploited by women and living under their feet. Here the way things were in the old days our forefathers exploited women, treated them badly because they did not know better or because they were not educated. Unlike in rural Ethiopia, there is no abduction<sup>22</sup> in Addis because people are getting educated. I now believe that she is equal to me but never superior to me. That I won't accept, there is a limit. That is a white people's thing. I have to draw the line there.

Hussein's use of the statement "That is a white people's thing" echoes in Semeles's testimonial which retells the clash of Ethiopian tradition as represented in his parents' fear that he is 'photocopying' Western cultures with that of his own perception of modernity as imparted by global media messages:

There are so many things that are considered unacceptable in our tradition or culture, so many things. My parents are unhappy when I watch

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<sup>21</sup> *Kill Bill* is a story about a bride who continues her quest for vengeance against her ex-boss, Bill, and his associates.

<sup>22</sup> Abduction is one of the harmful traditional practices practised in rural Ethiopia. A young man along with his friends abducts a girl and forcibly has sex with her, literally keeping her captive for days in secret place. After sometime, he sends an *almalge* (a go between) to her family to ask for her hand in marriage. Her parents, in order not to be looked down by the community, accept the proposal unwillingly and the 'bridegroom' pays a dowry as peace offering. This tradition is currently illegal and the government and NGOs are taking action to prevent its practice.

American movies. They tell me I am trying to become a ‘photocopy’ of the *ferenjis* (whites). Even to kiss on the streets, if people see you they would say: “Why are you acting like the *ferenjis*?”

### 6.2.3 Individualism and the Western Work Ethic

Moreover, Strelitz (2002: 144) quoting Reimer (1995) observes that modernity is an attempt to combine the diverse, apparently disparate processes of industrialisation, urbanisation, secularisation and mediasation and to try to see these processes as expressions of a common intrinsic logic. Moreover, Nielsen (1993: 2) argues that the essence of cultural modernisation is to be sought in the process “individualisation”, the expanding degree of separation of the individual from his or her traditional ties and restrictions. For example, Sebsebe’s view on how Ethiopian culture and religion tends to create a sense of acceptance for suffering is opposed and in its place the importance of individual work and a secular way of life was seen as attractive:

Our culture does not push you to work hard. We don’t have a culture that makes us hard workers. If one wants, each day of the month can be a holiday. There are 44 saints dedicated to the 30 days of the month in our religion, Coptic Orthodox<sup>23</sup>. The priest orders his followers to go to church everyday, he tells you not to work on certain days, and this is not only during the Sabbath, Saturdays and Sundays. On weekdays too he orders you not to work. For me, this creates a sense that I don’t need to work, as long as I make God happy by praying and fasting. But this is not so in the Western world, they are not even religious and look where it has gotten them: very advanced.

Sebsebe sees something positive coming from Western cultures when he watches the work ethic sustained in the Western value system and compares it to his own culture which he considers as being too religious and as a result leading to an acceptance of the youths’ impoverished status quo.

A similar view is expressed by Lemma who prefers the work ethic of industrialisation and secular life that the American films propagate instead of the acceptance of suffering as a value in the religious teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Thanks to films I started thinking about tomorrow. In our culture, we all think how to eat for the day and leave everything else to God. We say: “For tomorrow, only God knows. Thank you God for giving me something to eat today.” And I do that; go to Church every Sunday. But people you see on films, while surviving today, they think about tomorrow, about their future. Because they think about tomorrow, that is why New York is so beautiful

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<sup>23</sup> The majority of Ethiopians, some 25 million people, follow the Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox Church.

for the next generation. This is the value you don't see in our culture. There is this thing about saving, to think long-term, to think about their children, to save for tomorrow. In Ethiopia, the longest you work in a day is eight hours. But what I read and see in the movies is that in the United States people work for more than 16 hours.

But also fascinating in the above narrative is that, although these youths identify with their marginal identities, they still have a strong religious background and, as Lemma indicated, are regular churchgoers. Alemu, 24, who has had no permanent job since he left school seven years ago, told me this joke which captures how Christianity affects, and is intertwined with, the values these marginal youths have in regard to their relation to God. In a way, when these youths carry out illegal jobs to survive, they become what are called "moral thieves."

A man stole an ox one Friday and was caught with it the next day. He was asked why he did not slaughter the ox if he were for real, and he said, he couldn't, for he was fasting on Friday!

On the other hand, as can be seen in the following statement, Lemma also resisted some aspects of Western popular culture, such as not sharing. His subjectivity was in a site of contestation between affection for the old ways (Ethiopian tradition) and the irresistible lure of the new (Western values):

But I don't want one thing to change. We share things here. That is part of our culture. People come over at lunch unannounced, uninvited and it is taken for granted that they join you for lunch. That is something you never see happening in the movies, even when they plan for it.

Western media carry these modern values and, as we saw in the case of Sebsebe and Lemma, these values can be highly attractive to individuals still living according to traditional social values, although their appropriation is characterised by conflicting emotions which resist as well as accept these values. As has been argued by Nielsen (1993: 2), modernity allows them to enter a process of individualisation in which they are offered new ways of understanding the relationship between self and community.

For example, Semeles' explanation of the meaning he got out of the action hero in *John Q* seems to imply that if an Ethiopian youth is a *keleme*, he has a chance to come out of his present impoverished state by using his brain and muscle. However, at the same time, his insistence that a poor black man (Denziel Washington) can win against

all odds to save his son from impending death suggests an internalisation of poverty as a legitimate divider:

[Laughing bitterly]. But what is money, really? What, if I have the gun and the brain, would I be different from John Q? Tell me? It's bullshit, all that I cannot come out of my poverty because I am born in it. It's just a story, just nonsense. Really, sometimes I say that we the youth are too lazy and that is why we never change. Look at John Q. He did not have money; he is black in a white society; but his gun and his brain, he came out victorious. Maybe someone learned could help . . . could tell me how it is, how I, a poor guy, cannot do the same. I simply don't understand. Believe me, I think that they themselves, the ones who tell me a poor man born will die poor, don't know.

The above testimony gives an indication of the youth chafing at the limited opportunities afforded to them by the society in which they exist. The resentment voiced by SHEMELES stemmed from his contact with the media world where he realised there is “new possibility – new options, new desires, new freedoms,” as argued by Schou (1992: 24) for people like him who are situated in poverty and unemployment.

In the next section, I draw on focus group and individual in-depth interviews with the youth in order to examine the role played by the media in enabling local audiences to put a symbolic and imaginative distance between themselves and the conditions of their day-to-day lives. They do this by the ways of ‘symbolic distancing’ (Thompson 1995) and ‘escapism’ (Walkerdine 1999; Radway 1988).

### **6.3 Global Media as Modes of ‘Symbolic Distancing’ and ‘Escapism’**

#### *6.3.1 Symbolic Distancing*

Several theorists, in rejecting the media imperialism thesis, have put forward ways in which active local audiences resist or appropriate global messages attuned to their social contexts. One such theorist is Thompson (1995) who argues that local audiences, particularly in the Third World countries, actually gain meaning in the process of appropriation of global media messages. He argues that it provides them with what he calls “symbolic distancing” from the plight of their everyday lives.

In his critique of the media imperialism thesis, Thompson points out that part of the attraction of global media for local audiences is that their consumption often provides

meanings which enable "...the accentuation of symbolic distancing from the special-temporal contexts of everyday life" (1995: 175). Through this process, he writes: "[I]ndividuals are able to gain some conception, however partial, of ways of life and life conditions which differ significantly from their own" (1995: 175). Thus, global media images can provide a resource for individuals to think critically about their own lives and life conditions (1995: 175).

Although my earlier discussion indicates the video houses are a shared male cultural space where young men would never ask their girlfriends to share the cost of dating, at the same time Semeles had stopped being reluctant about asking for money after witnessing in American movies that men take money from their girlfriends. He is now in a position to share the cost of paying for leisure time. As a result of watching movies, Semeles achieved 'symbolic distancing' where he was offered a new way to relate to his girlfriend.

There was one time I was doing my disappearing act with my girlfriend because I was so broke. I even stood her up once at the movies; and she then took things in her hand and came searching for me. She found me in the video house, and she asked me why I was avoiding her, and I told her it is because I was broke. She then said she had money and paid for the movie. She explained how in the movies most men had their girlfriends pay for their outings when they are broke, so what is wrong with me doing the same, she asked. Had we not seen that in the films she would have never made the offer and I would not have accepted.

Semeles's current action resonates with Davis and Davis's (1995: 578) observation: "including a desire for more autonomy, for more variety in heterosexual interactions, and for more choice of job and of a mate", his movie consumption practice has made it possible for him "to re-imagine many aspects" of his life. Semeles attains a symbolic distancing through watching action movies as it allowed him to reflect on his own lived situation.

Thus, with regard to this study, it has been established that Ethiopian youth's exposures to American action movies have offered them a 'symbolic distancing' from their impoverished lived-experience. For example, both Sebsebe and Hussein view watching action movies as a means of distancing themselves from their everyday lived reality.

Sebsebe: It is because we don't have jobs that we watch movies. For

example today I did not have any job the whole day. It is because I don't work that I come here. But if I hang around here and go home, it is like going to work, the feeling is that I have done something and not wasted another day of doing nothing. I have somewhere where I can hang around. If I stay in my area, I know I will end up in trouble, my parents will start to nag me why I am not working, may be I might enter into a fight with another guy because of some old grudge. But I know I have a place to go for three hours a day.

Hussein: I find a job once in a blue moon. I only get that job if I am very lucky. There is no point in just loitering around, waiting for a job to happen to me. It would be meaningless. So I come to a video house. If I stand, everyone will look at me and feel pity; my parents would be saddened by it. So I stay away from all those prying eyes by coming here. Instead of just standing and being frustrated, at least I get away from it all by putting myself inside in the movie world. If there were employment, no one would come here.

But Semeles' reaction to American action movies is modified by the realisation that the texts have mostly nothing to do with his lived experience though at the same time he extracts something out of them. In a way, since the action movies originated outside of the Ethiopian context, he used them symbolically that transcended their denotative representation of American society.

No, of course I know that these movies have nothing to do with my life, but I like the fact that the action heroes acted well under the tough circumstances they were in. I see myself in them and see that I fail; it would be impossible for me to do the same thing in my circumstances.

Of the vast body of critique of media imperialism thesis studies, it is the focus on specific cases of identity formulation that demonstrates that actual global/audience relations are far more complex than any text can reflect and that they are hardly unequivocal or even coherent. The readings Ethiopian youths make of global, primarily American, action movies shows to what extent power relations, as articulated in the tension between their subordinate culture and the dominant patriarchal culture of the Ethiopian society, are negotiated by the different sides in shifting arenas. The power dynamic is projected through multiple subjectivities in the form of intertwining, sometimes competing, male stories which resist the Ethiopian traditions. Look, for example, at Anwar's story<sup>24</sup>:

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<sup>24</sup> All the owners of the video houses were observed occasionally watching action movies along with customers.



As a Muslim, I am forbidden to watch movies at home which show uncovered bodies of women. But because of the video houses, I have seen a lot of naked bodies. At first I was shocked and excited. But after sometime, I thought: what is the big deal? Now I know that women can be dressed in any way and that alone doesn't indicate whether or not she is a good girl. Well, look at all the girls in the action movies. They are dressed skimpily, but in the end what they fight for are for things we men fight for: to protect their family, children, home, country. They are no different than I am.

The resultant reading of the global media text by Anwar's is at odds with his shared Muslim faith. Moreover, as can be seen in the following narrative, Semeles' relations with his parents have changed since he started watching movies. He rejected a value of the Ethiopian patriarchal society where the relationship between father and child is formal and distant. He said he would behave differently with his son and not as his own father related to him.

It has changed the way I relate to my family. The way my parents are to me is different from the way I now relate to my five-year-old son. And this is thanks to the movie world; my relationship with my son is close. For example, my parents are not interested in watching movies. But if my son comes and says lets rent a movie and watch it together, I would be happy. If I asked my parents to give me cents to rent a video, they refuse, they tell me it is enough I watch Ethiopian TV programmes. The way we watch movie and the way they do it in America is different. It is the result of our ignorance. When it comes to culture, we are left far behind. Although our culture is kept intact, it is very backward.

His parents' disapproval of watching movies is a result of the belief that Western cultures have a detrimental effect, but his exposure to Western culture has led him to question his parents' decision and his own tradition and value system which he calls 'ignorant'. Ethiopian youth in these houses are located precisely along the boundary through which Ethiopian culture discovers, in a constant back-and-forth of verification and negation, its "border-text" or oppositional reading to the hegemonic media meanings provided by global media messages. By presenting a multidirectional dynamic, the subordinate youth reading of these action heroes makes room for a subject who is not merely passively present, but actively negotiate the meaning that best suits their lived reality.

Watching these American action movies, the youth have also an opportunity to critically "re-imagine" (Davis and Davis 1995: 578) their perceptions of women in relation to the male/female position legitimised by the patriarchal society they inhabit.

Anwar for example, speaking of his customers watching the action movie *Kill Bill*, has this to say:

My audience seems to enjoy watching movies that have girls fighting. In *Kill Bill*, when the actress went on a killing spree avenging her past, there were a lot of times when the boys clapped their hands loud. It is not something they normally see in their own lives; a girl beating the hell out of a guy. But whenever she is weak they blame her and view her predicament as being her fault. They blame her for being out in the first place; in dark places where as a girl she has no business to be. They actually like a girl who fights and is independent.

Anwar's reading of his customers' reaction to women in action movies should be read in conjunction with the patriarchal culture of Ethiopia where women's place is mostly limited to household chores and homemaking. The youths' appropriation of the media messages therefore becomes an oppositional reading to the dominant patriarchal discourse and points to the involvement of media with social change, especially changing gender roles pointed out by Davis and Davis (1995: 591). They cite Belarbi, who investigated print media read by Morrocans in schools to explain changing male-female dynamics. Belarbi argues that media can limit change in gender roles:

One can say that the school actively participates in maintaining "traditional images" of the woman, an image which deprives her most of the time of an active participation in political, economic and cultural life. (Belarbi 1987 cited in Davis and Davis 1995: 591)

### 6.3.2 *Escapism*

Related to this argument for 'symbolic distancing' is the notion of 'escape' that Walkerdine (1989; 1990) advances to explain how global media texts are appropriated by people in differentiated contexts and in differentiated manners than explained by the cultural homogenisations feared by the media imperialism thesis. Walkerdine's (1990) discussion on *The Rocky* films investigates the appeal of Hollywood blockbuster movies like *Rocky* to audiences. She argues that one aspect of the popularity of action films like the *Rocky* series is that "they *are* escapist fantasies: the imaginary fulfilment of the working-class dream for bourgeois order" (1990: 342, emphasis in the original). The movies reveal an escape route, one which is all the more enticing given the realistic mode of its presentation, despite the very impossibility of its realism. Walkerdine observes the reason for the popularity of these films is "not because violence or sex-role stereotyping is part of the pathology

of working-class life, but because escape is what we are set up to want, whatever way we can get it” (1990: 342). Walkerdine observes that action movies like the *Rocky* Series are not just “illusory tropes of an oppressive ideology”, but also “fantasy spaces as places for hope and escape from oppression as well” (1990: 353–4). In line with this observation, SHEMELES says of video houses:

They are not really that terrible, not unlike other places opened for only smoking weed and drinking, for addiction. At least here you get to watch movies and be able to forget our reality for an hour or two and escape into another world and be in touch with new things.

For Tessema, watching action movies provides him with an escape from the boredom of his life. For SHEMELES, it was this fantasy of the movie world that allows action heroes to take control over their environment when they carry a gun that was fascinating. This is of course in sharp contrast to both of their lived reality which is characterised by having “nothing else to do”.

Tessema: Most of the time, I don’t want to go at my parents’ house at six o’clock. At least I can kill two to three hours at the video house. I know I have nothing to do at home and it is boring. My mom would be cooking and doing house chores and my father comes in late and when he does he goes right to sleep.

SHEMELES: I like watching action movies for the sole reason that I see the action hero standing tall holding a gun, in control of his surrounding and his destiny. It does not matter whether he is a good or bad character. I then consider it a brilliant film. In the video houses you find action movies are in demand; and those who fail to show such movies will lose customers. Also the *hardegnas* would make sure that the movie gets changed when it is not an action movie.

Similarly, Bekele, who has no job for the past three years, says: “When I come here and watch movies I feel free from all my worries, even though I don’t have a job or know where my next job is coming from. I forget about it all” take to escape.

In a similar manner, Lemma sees the action movies such as the ones discussed above (*Terminator*, *Bad Boys* etc.) as an escape from his lived reality:

I feel that I cannot do all those things [in the movies] here in Addis. Instead I eke out a living as day labourer for 7 Ethiopian birr a day. So I start escaping into this fabulous world of the rich and famous in the movies. I relax and pretend for an hour or two that I am part of that world. I can get rich quick. So in a way this creates in me a sense that I don’t want to work,

what is the point? You see this poor person getting a job easily while I get paid 7 Ethiopian birr a day if I am lucky. You see him again and he is rich.

But Lemma is at the same time is critical of the negative impact global media in creating a sense of dissatisfaction within the Third World youth, especially those living in urban areas who have a relatively easy access to global media messages.

When you look at the famous people in my country most of them come from rural Ethiopia. I sometimes believe that because they have not been exposed to the media, they were able to achieve so much. Look at our runner Haile Gebreselassie. He is not from the city; he came from the poor countryside. No distraction and look what he has been able to achieve.

This sense of angst constituted by the consumption of American movies is intertwined with the youth's fascination with America, which I will explore in the next section.

## **6.4 Americanisation/Westernisation of Ethiopian Youth Culture**

### *6.4.1 America as the Land of Opportunity*

As stated earlier in the literature review chapter, one of the enduring concerns that media imperialism theorists advance is how global media have constituted an "Americanisation/Westernisation" of the global culture. A cursory glance at the consumption practices of the Ethiopian youth under study seems to suggest that the concerns of media imperialism thesis theorists hold true. The respondents increasingly felt that they would prefer living in the United States and identify with African-Americans there. For example, while watching an American film entitled *The Pelican Brief*, which features a black actor (Denzil Washington) and a white actress (Julia Roberts) who play side by side, one of the interviewees, Semeles, pointed at the screen and said: "I'm dying to go to America. There, there is so much more work there than here."

The frequent references to America as a dreamland, where every wish of the youth could be realised were supplemented by stories referring to other indices, most specifically America being a safer and richer country than any country in Africa. Sebsebe jokingly said that there would not be any shortage of jobs in America because the country is always fighting other countries and is therefore in desperate need of soldiers.

In American action movies, when the storyline has something to do with people in Third World countries, a handful of Americans wipe out

thousands of Arabs, Somalis... just like that. So when I see America doing all this by itself, I feel that if I live there I can be safe and be free from danger. I begin to think that it is the only safe country in the world, so I reach the conclusion that I'd rather go there if I don't get job here. At least I know I can become a soldier there with all these fancy and highly sophisticated guns and armaments at my beck and call. Heck, look at Schwarzenegger or Stallone. Their machine guns have a mind of their own; they are smart; they even pick out which person to kill.

Sebsebe's certainty of not getting killed in action in America or in American wars is linked to Ethiopia's recent history where during the border dispute with Eritrea, tens of thousands of people were killed on both sides due to trench fighting reminiscent of WWI.

#### 6.4.2 Implications of Replicating American Culture

Indeed, according to observations made during my visit to the video houses, the influence of America on their perception is clearly pronounced. Most of the youth were dressed in T-shirts, their jeans are sagging just low enough for their boxers to show, and they wear big dangling necklaces favoured by American youths.

SHEMELES: Look at me. I am different from the *yebet lij* (youth who are respectful and come from a good family background). They might have more money to buy expensive clothes. But really, it does not matter. I look more like my American black brothers than these people. Whether it's in dress, or how I walk, or how I stand. Have you noticed that now we've already a uniform walking style? Most of us you see here – whether it's the haircut, or the earring, or the songs. We don't like Ethiopian songs at all. We identify more with the blacks in the US. That's how it is in recent years – we identify with them because we're looking for a certain identity...we aren't finding our place, in the Ethiopian society, because in our society people favour the rich, the adults don't understand us.

SEBSEBE: We look for a certain identity in the blacks in America in order to imitate it, because in American movies they are also the downtrodden. They get no respect, no attention by others. So we dress their way so that the adults and the authorities notice us and also fear us. We think that in the US everything is fine and dandy. Because we see the singers – on MTV there are tons of singers – we see the television, the football players, the movies and we say: hey, let's go to America. We think that there's no such thing as not finding a job, being poor.

The attachment to African Americans circumvents the limitations of the local, without ignoring or resisting the stamp of being modern. Due to a subjectivity that is unwilling to assume the youth's marginal position in the Ethiopian society, a revised

alternative narrative emerges, identifying and allying with being modern in the controlling Western culture.

Lemma: I have a desire to go to America and at the same time I don't. When I see the conflict, the poverty here, it makes me want to pack up my bags and leave, it does not matter where I go as long as it is out of the country. Especially when I watch in the American movies how they live, their standard of living, they have cars, wear nice and expensive clothes. It could be propaganda, but any American, even if he was poor, can easily buy a car, buy expensive goods. He can go anywhere and enjoy.

However, as has been argued by the authors in the ethnographic study tradition, local audiences do not automatically imbue global messages, but appropriate them in the context of their lived reality. Look, for example, at Lemma's story in which he points out how his earlier desire to imitate another culture had cost him.

Will Smith in *Bad Boys* is always dressed well. I wanted to look like him. To dress like him cost a lot but I didn't care. I went out of my mind to get the money. I went shopping and spent some thousand birr on the clothing. It was at a time when I didn't even have a job. So you can imagine what I did to get my hands on such big money.

Interviewer: How?

[Laughter] ...It made sense then; may be I was too young. But now when I come to think of it, I saw how naïve I was. I am sure the way he dressed in the movie and the way he dresses normally are two completely different things. But I had been through times when I used to wear fishnet T-shirt during the freezing weather in July<sup>25</sup>. I thought that was how Will Smith dresses everyday. Schwarzenegger might need to wear a tight and transparent t-shirt to show off his muscle. You saw how the *hardegnas* dress the same during the coldest night. Now I find that very funny!

When Lemma spoke of the means through which he got the money, it was clear that he did not get it legally, hinting at the marginal identity these youths inhabit in the Ethiopian society. Moreover, Lemma's implicit petty criminal actions outside the video houses are further indicated by Sisay's comments about how the Houses keep him out of trouble from the authorities. He says: "Of course I can always find 50 Ethiopian cents or 1birr from anywhere. Because I am here I am not doing illegal things and or stealing or fighting entering into quarrel or argument. I am able to stay way from those things". (This relates to the authorities' concern that the Houses

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<sup>25</sup> The cold and rainy season in Addis Ababa falls between June and mid September.

harbour petty thieves and the construction of marginal identity as discussed in the previous Chapter).

The idealised identification with America as the Dreamland and as a powerful country that draws the youths' imagination also renders a change in the definition of what it is to be poor in Ethiopia and what it is to be poor in America.

Hussein: Look at America. That is the land of credit. Even without money in the bank, you can buy stuff. All American action heroes have good cars and beautiful women on their arms. I am sure they don't carry that kind of life style because of the cash they have.

As such, though there is this fascination with America and the urge to live there, at the same time, the Ethiopian youth found oppositional meanings in the media message, which resist the hegemonic view of the country as being a land of opportunity. There were occasions when the young resisted the dominant ideology innate in the text, as can be seen in the following extract from an interview with Lemma:

But most of the time when we watch action movies, it is to show the power and might of America over other countries. There are many occasions when I see behaviours and actions that I know deep down it is not possible to do the same here in my country, or even in New York. On the whole I know it has something to do with propaganda, but all these things create a sense of incompetence, lack of self-confidence and fear in my capacity and my life.

#### *6.4.3 The Coexistence of Western and Traditional Values*

It has to be noted here that the Ethiopian youth's adoption of certain Western values, singled out from the American action movies, did not lead to a complete denial or obliteration of their Ethiopian identity<sup>26</sup>. In the action movie called *Bad Boys II*, the two black action heroes are idealised by the youth watching them. It is one of their most favourite movies, but what is more revealing is the reading they make of one of the rastas in the movie, a villain who attempted to kill the heroine, the lovely girlfriend of Mark (Will Smith). Sisay, one of the respondents who sported dreadlocks and wore a t-shirt with images of Emperor Haile Selassie and Bob Marley, had an oppositional reading to the dominant ideology that positioned the rasta as the

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<sup>26</sup> As discussed earlier in this Chapter, a similar stance was adopted by Lemma when he spoke of wanting to maintain the Ethiopian traditional culture of 'sharing'. (See also Strelitz 2002: 140).

‘villain’. He clearly identifies himself with the rasta as he also follows Rastafarianism<sup>27</sup>.

He [the character playing rasta] was just trying to survive. The movie just shows how people are prejudiced. Just because he is a rasta and wears dreadlocks, he is automatically branded as the bad guy.

The abovementioned findings of this study are indicative of the uneven penetration of American media as a tool in the Westernisation of the youth culture. Though at glance it can be argued that there is evidence that the movies have become a tool in homogenising and bringing standardised, commoditised culture, nevertheless the appropriation of the media messages were negotiated and depended on the value systems, cultural beliefs and lived reality of the Ethiopian youth. Further, though the American global messages appear to be threatening to obliterate Ethiopia’s cultural diversity and have introduced Ethiopia to the various cultural ills of the West (such as its obsession with consumption practices, the fragmentation of cultural identity, its loss of consensual cultural values), this Western cultural influence does not constitute an indivisible package that is simply adopted by local cultures. Rather, this study has established that some aspects of Western culture are adopted while others are found irrelevant and resisted.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

In this Chapter, I have highlighted the salient points of the study’s findings on unemployed, Ethiopian youths’ attraction to American action movies in three selected video houses in Addis Ababa: *Sky Film House*, *Daniel Video House* and *Anwar Video House*. The general discussion of the study findings was guided by the theoretical frameworks informing it. While the media imperialism thesis emphasises the homogenisation of Third World countries’ cultures by global media, the findings of this study in this regard reveal a different picture. In line with the ethnographic critique of the media imperialism thesis and the active audience theory that underlies it, this chapter has highlighted how global media unevenly penetrates the cultures of the Third World countries like Ethiopia. It has shown that though the dominant

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<sup>27</sup> Rastafarianism credits Ethiopia with paving the way to freedom for blacks. For Ethiopian youths, reggae and its symbolism create a double link as blacks, in the Western sense, and as young Ethiopians proud of their country’s long history.



reading of the global media messages in American action movies might be possible, the meanings gained from them are differentiated according to the Ethiopian youths' lived reality. As such this study took the position of neither rejecting nor totally accepting the media imperialism theorists' arguments. Instead, it accepts that the meanings should be understood within the context of the Ethiopian socio-economic environment. The next Chapter gives a broad conclusion to the whole study.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

### 7.1 Introduction

This Chapter sums up the key issues that arose out of the study. This study explores the popularity of American action movies shown in video-viewing houses in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It examines the attraction of American-produced action movies among the urban youth in Addis Ababa, particularly how the meanings produced by and embedded in the cultural industries of the West are appropriated by Ethiopian youth in the context of their day-to-day lives. The study finds that the attraction of the action movies for the Ethiopian youth is rooted in their everyday lived reality. I have examined firstly the complex ways that Ethiopian youth, embedded in the Ethiopian lower class economic formation, use media texts as part of their own ongoing attempts to make sense of their lives. Secondly, I have examined how the video houses as a shared male cultural space and the attraction of action movies in such a space have played a part in creating a marginal youth identity that places emphasis on the notion of masculinity. In this way, I have highlighted how the attraction of American action movies has created a youth culture with differentiated meanings for different social categories in the Ethiopian society.

In order to explore the interpretation of the media constructed by consumers in their everyday lives, I have used qualitative research methods such as observation, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. These interviews have led me to appreciate the complex manner in which the Ethiopian youth are attracted to action movies and how the meanings they appropriate depended on their lived reality. The methods used have allowed me to understand reasons why local audiences are either attracted to, or reject, global media.

Moreover, this study establishes that it is possible to explore how the complexity of meanings made by local audiences makes it difficult to take a position that is entirely in favour or opposed to the penetration of global media into local cultures. Whether or not the popularity of action movies among unemployed Ethiopian urban youth can be seen as evidence of global messages as ‘carriers of modernity’, providing ‘symbolic distancing’, or the images contribute to cultural homogenisation in areas

such as Ethiopian youths' notion of masculinity are the main questions this study attempts to answer.

I have emphasised the rapid and dramatic transformation of Ethiopian youth subjectivity to the global messages they consume which is a tale spun in a multi-vocal, local context. One of the voices is that of the researcher. My understanding of the existence of internal Ethiopian youth differentiations that are aligned to the patriarchal discourse of the upwardly mobile sector of the Ethiopian society is the major justification for conducting a research on these youths. Listening to the voices of the poor who were both the *kelemes* and *duruyes* was an appealing process. Finally, I have attempted to root my discussion in the media imperialism thesis and the ethnographic critique of media imperialism thesis to frame my study. The narratives reveal that there are no certain terms in the never-ending stories of self-definition. I hope my study has offered a narrative of how particular sections of Ethiopian youth, namely the unemployed or 'the between-jobs' youth, have drawn on American action movies to understand their lived reality and as a response to the conditions of their lives.

The resistance of these youths is pitted against the adult world and the bleak reality that challenges the most familiar conventions of control and patriarchal ideology. The effects of this investigation may very well extend beyond my internal world, including my belonging to the larger Ethiopian/African and academic culture, once the topic enters the public realm. The confusing and contradictory feelings that I experienced support the veracity of the power relations that exist in any given society and which come into sharp relief when it comes into contact with an alien culture such as that espoused by the American action movies. It is with these mixed feelings that I hope that this study will contribute to understanding Ethiopian perspectives of the role global media play in the identity formation of Ethiopian youth in Addis Ababa.

Many people from the various groups that comprise the Ethiopian youth visiting the video houses, unparalleled in their honesty and courage, come to mind. These people shared their memories, fond and painful alike. It is my hope that my research efforts will lead to other similar endeavours.

## **7.2 Summary**

While this research was exploratory in many ways, it led to some useful areas for further inquiry on how the global media, primarily American action movies, are used by Ethiopian unemployed youth to seek an understanding of their lives through the meanings they negotiate from the media messages. The study undertook a contextual approach in investigating the meanings they make of global media through the shared cultural space of video houses. It addressed such factors as lack of English language skills, poor access to domestic TVs, VCRs and traditional viewing houses due to economic conditions and lack of local film content. This research has investigated the resultant construction of the video houses as the only available means through which the unemployed Ethiopian youth contact the outside world through their consumption of, and their attraction to, the American action movies. Their attractions were discussed through the seven major thematic issues of the ethnographic critique of media imperialism thesis in order to understand the ways the youth negotiate meanings from the global media. The thematic issues highlighted included the video houses as shared male cultural space; the alienation of these youth from traditional film viewing houses; the creation of marginal youth identity; the notion of masculinity in Ethiopian youth; global media as the ‘carrier of modernity’; global media as a means for ‘symbolic distancing’ and ‘escapism’; and the Americanisation/Westernisation of the Ethiopian youth culture.

## **7.3 Scope for Further Research**

Further research should take a micro approach and look at the seven major thematic issues individually in order to provide a deeper insight into how they construct the Ethiopian youth in the mode of resistance or acceptance of the global media messages in the context of their day-to-day experience and as people inhabiting a Third World country. It could also focus on the meanings youth appropriate not only from American action movies, but also other regional film industries such as Bollywood and the Nigerian film industry, or the popularity of African-American sitcom comedies shown on Ethiopian national TV.

Clearly, the appropriation of global media points to the realisation that the video houses have legal implications and it can be argued that this is one of the facets that

attract the dispossessed youth to visit them. One issue of the video houses that needs further research is how some of them secretly show pornographic movies, which has become one of the reasons for the disapproval of the society on the whole. The data shows that the video houses are a target for the government's crackdowns which in turn has created a sense of resentment among the respondents to declare that outsiders should 'leave them alone'. The adoption of marginal youth identity by the individuals could have been influenced by their impoverished lived reality, but there are likely to be other factors and additional research is necessary for a better understanding.

**APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX I: LETTER OF INTRODUCTION**

## **APPENDIX II: THEMATIC QUESTIONS**

### **I. Informal Video-Viewing Houses as Shared Male Cultural Space**

1. How do these video houses work?
2. Are the visitors largely the youth and male?
3. Are they a cultural space? What is actually going on within these houses?
4. Is it the same people coming or is it fairly anonymous?
5. A ritual like going to the pub? More than just for drinking?
6. Why do they come to these houses? To meet friends?
7. Are the visitors a transient group, or a core group?
8. Are female viewers welcomed here?

### **II. Traditional Film-Viewing Houses (Cinema Theatres and Home Videos)**

1. From the youth, how do they find these houses in relations to the movie houses? Is it only the cost, or it is a comforting space, they are not there only to watch?
2. How do the youth's consumption practice relate to other form of watching movies, how does it compare to other forms of consumption such as TVs, cinema theatres?
3. Can the youth describe the space compared to traditional viewing spaces?
4. Why don't the youth go to cinema houses or watch movies at home?

### **III. Creation of Marginal Youth Identity**

1. What kind of identities is being confirmed in these houses? In the construction and confirmation of identity, why do the youth come to a particular perception of their identity, what do they think of their identity?
2. How do the youth view themselves? As part of the poor section of the Ethiopian society?
3. Like the Homeland, do the houses perform a cultural production on how they view the world?
4. Is there a construction of outlaw identity in the video houses by and through the movies the youth watch?
5. What do the issue of illegal video houses and the consumption of pirated video houses mean, or gets translate to, to these youths?



6. If the films are pirated videos and the houses illegal, are the youth aware of the breaking the law? If they are, is it because they feel they are the dispossessed part of the society? – Is there an outlaw culture being constructed in their consumption practices?
7. Does outlaw culture form part of a ritual to confirm black identity?
8. The roles of consumption in identity formulation – we seldom consume in isolation – are there shared identities?

#### **IV. The Notion of Masculinity among the Ethiopian Youth**

1. What are the youth's preferences in watching of movies?
2. Why do the youth like these particular movies, American action movies?
3. Do the youth like watching movies with fighting and action, and what meanings do they take from the violence and fighting in the action movies?
4. How does the view of masculinity in Ethiopian society differ from the one disseminated by the global media messages especially American action movies?
5. How do the youth relate to their women and family members after watching these American action movies?
6. How do the youth perceive men-women relations in the context of watching American action movies?

#### **V. Global Media as 'Carrier of Modernity'**

1. Has the watching of American action movies changed the way the youth perceive their Ethiopian culture and tradition?
2. What are the roles played by the watching of American action movies in changing the youth's perception of the outside world and their lived reality?
3. How do the youth view modernity after watching movies?
4. By watching American action movies, do the youth view their perception of modernity as a move against conservatism?

#### **VI. Global Media as a Mode for 'Symbolic Distancing' and 'Escape'**

1. What kind of stance do the youth take when they watch action movies?
2. Do the movies provide any tool to reflect on their youth's impoverished lived reality?

3. Do the movies provide a way out from the youth's lived reality?
4. Why the youth like watching American action movies? Does it have something to do with their lived reality?

#### **VII. Westernisation/Americanisation of Ethiopian Youth Culture**

1. Why do the youth think things happen in certain way and not other ways in American action movies?
2. Has watching the American action movies changed the youth's attitude to American culture and Ethiopian culture?
3. How does America seem to the youth as a place to live? In relations to Muslims – anti-American – how do they view America's role in the world?
4. What is the youth's image of America? Do these images signify of choice, consumerism – spread of capitalism promotes consumerism?
5. Do the youth believe that Western's obsession with consumption practices, the fragmentation of cultural identity, and its loss of consensual cultural values is constituted by watching these American action movies?

### **APPENDIX III: INTERVIEW GUIDES**

#### **Interview Guide for the Owners of Video-Viewing Houses:**

1. Kindly give me your name and your daily responsibilities at this video-viewing house.
2. When was this house established and why?
3. Who are your most regular customers? How many of them are women?
4. On average, how many people visit your establishment per day?
5. On average, how many movies do you screen per day?
6. Do you have policy regarding underage youth viewing movies (i.e. below eighteen years)?
7. What facilities do you provide for your regular customers?
8. From your own assessment, do the youth have the relevant language (English) skills to effectively make them understand the content of they are watching?
9. What are the most popular movies that are shown in your establishment?
10. Do you, if at all, show Ethiopian produced movies at your establishment?
11. Next to American movies, what kind of movies do you show in your establishment? In terms of Indian, Nigerian, Chinese?
12. What is your overall assessment of the influence the watching of American produced action movies on the youth's perceptions of world and their own locality?
13. Have you noticed any changes of behaviour in the perception youth have after they have watched movies in your video-viewing houses?
14. Are there any issues not raised in this interview that you would like to comment on?

Thank you very much for your time.

#### **Interview Guide for Owners of Video-rental Shops:**

1. Kindly give me your name and spell out your daily activities at this shop.
2. For how long have you been working at this shop?
3. Roughly, what is the percentage of youth visiting your shop per day?
4. What kind of movies do the youth take on loan from your shop?

5. Do you have policy regarding underage youth viewing movies (i.e. below eighteen years)?
6. Are there any issues not raised in this interview that you would like to comment on?

Thank you very much for your time.

**Interview Guide for an Official from the Addis Ababa City Films' Administration:**

1. Kindly give me your name and your responsibilities at the Addis Ababa City Films' Administration.
2. How do you rate the development of the local film industry in Ethiopia?
3. How many Ethiopian films have been produced so far?
4. On average how many movies do you import from abroad in a year?
5. From which country do you import most of the movies (the United States, India, China, Nigeria, South Africa, etc)?
6. Has there been any film locally produced that specifically cater to youth's needs?
7. What are the major constraints you face in producing local content?
8. In your opinion, does the lack of locally produced movies affect the worldviews of the Ethiopian youth?
9. Have you found African or Ethiopian alternatives to US and European movie production?
10. To the extent that most of the movies you provide to customers are foreign, how do you adopt and interpret it for the local viewers? In other words, do you provide any kind of subtitling of foreign movies?
11. Are there any issues not raised in this interview that you would like to comment on?

Thank you very much for your time.

**Interview Guide for the Youths Visiting the Video-viewing Houses:**

1. Kindly give me your name and what you do.
2. When did you start visiting video-viewing houses?

3. Do you have access to TV and VCRs in your home?
4. Why and how often do you visit these houses?
5. What is your most favourite movie?
6. Which kind of movies do you prefer to watch? (American action movies, romance, suspense, horror, comedy, etc.)
7. Do you like watching American action movies? If so, why?
8. Who is your favourite hero, heroine? What do you like about them?
9. Have you ever come to these video viewing houses with your girlfriend, sister, etc? If not, why not?
10. What has these action movies meant to you in your view of the world?
11. Do you speak/understand English? If not, how do you manage to follow the dialogue in the movie?
12. Do the movie-viewing houses provide you with any translation service?
13. When you don't understand the dialogue, how do you surmount the problem?
14. Do you get opportunity to watch Indian, Chinese, Nigerian, South African or Ethiopian movies in these houses? If so, how often?
15. To the extent that most of the movies you watch in these video-viewing houses are foreign, how do you adopt and interpret it for the local lived experience?
16. Do you like watching Ethiopian produced movies?
17. What is your perception of America after watching American action movies?
18. Has your watching of American action movies changed the way you perceive Ethiopian culture and traditions?
19. Are there any issues not raised in this interview that you would like to comment on?

Thank you very much for your time.

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