Jurnal Komunikasi:
Malaysian Journal of Communication
Jilid 40(4) 2024: 361-377

Romantic Disillusionment and Environmental Catastrophe in Nigerian Petrocinema Film - *Blood Vessel*

ABDULHAMID BADRU
JAMALUDDIN AZIZ
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Cinema, particularly petrocinema, has explored the socio-political and environmental consequences of oil extraction globally. The representation of oil and its socio-political impacts have not been sufficiently analysed, particularly within Nigerian cinema. The problem lies in the lack of critical analysis of how Nigerian films anthropomorphically depict petro-narratives, reflecting corporate influence and exposing the environmental and social injustices tied to oil exploitation. The study aims to investigate how Nigerian petrocinema functions as both a medium that conceals and challenges hegemonic power structures linked to oil extraction, with a particular focus on the intersection of oil, politics, and environmental degradation. Drawing on Ivakhiv's concept of anthropomorphism, this study textually analyses the postcolonial film *Blood Vessel* (Inwang, 2023) to uncover the environmental subjective ideological and symbolic meanings. Our findings reveal that Nigerian petrocinema critiques the marginalisation of local communities exposing the liminality space between tradition and modernity, highlighting the profound cultural and spiritual connections these populations maintain with their environment. The film exposes the environmental degradation caused by multinational corporations and government neglect, while emphasising community resilience and resistance. This finding demonstrates that Nigerian petrocinema uses anthropomorphism to humanise environmental issues, fostering a deeper understanding of the cultural and ecological impacts of oil exploitation. By challenging dominant narratives, the film advocate for environmental justice and the preservation of cultural identity and traditional ecological knowledge. This study contributes to broader discussions of petrocinema as a tool for cultural resistance and advocacy, providing insights into the complex interplay between petro, power, and identity in postcolonial societies.

Keywords: *Nigerian cinema, ecocinema, postcolonialism, petroculture, anthropomorphy.*

INTRODUCTION

Cinema, as a product of modernism, has a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of progress and modern life brought about by industries. As a “perception technology” (Jackson, 2019), contemporarily, due to climate change awareness, cinema pays particular attention to putting the oil industry, which is usually blamed for the current climate crises, under the public view and scrutiny. World Cinema that belongs to oil-producing countries, however, rarely depicts the oil industry's dominance through environmental narratives, in contrast to Hollywood's constant attempt at exposing environmental disaster and its link to the industry. Films such as *The Story of Petroleum* (U.S Bureau of Mines, 1923), *Station 307* (Malle, 1954), and *The New Explorers* (Hill, 1955) are emblematic of this alignment with the oil industry, influencing how audiences view the relationship between modernity and industrial development as a symbiosis. Dahlquist and Vonderau (2021), claimed that cinema operates as an "open system,"i.e., a flexible system where

*Corresponding author: jaywalk@ukm.edu.my
E-ISSN: 2289-1528
https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2024-4004-20

instead of promoting oil through political propaganda, it supported the rise of oil culture indirectly supporting the prevailing view of the "oil regime" by informing, educating, and entertaining viewers. These narratives, often backed by corporate entities like British Petroleum (henceforth BP) and Dutch Shell (henceforth Shell), present oil as an essential resource underpinning modern life. In this way, cinema has been instrumental in framing environmental issues within the context of global power structures, using oil as a focal point to reflect on modern identities and the forces that continue to drive global politics and economics (Wilson et al., 2017).

The relationship between petrol and cinema has been significantly shaped by multinational corporate sponsorship, which is often subtly incorporated in film narratives. Corporations, such as BP, invest in film productions like *Planet Water* (William, 1978) to frame the portrayal of the oil industry for their own benefits of oil extraction while downplaying environmental and social costs (Walker, 2018). There is a shift, however, as Szeman (n.d.) argues that oil narratives are central to contemporary capitalism and its environmental impacts, identifying "petro-cinema" as a genre exploring the socio-political and environmental implications of oil extraction, often focusing on the human costs of this industry. Szeman (2017) introduces "petro-narratives" to describe films that examine oil's relationship with power and the environment, often depicting its contradictory values, both as a source of wealth and environmental harm, especially in Africa and the Middle East (Damluji, 2016). Films like *There Will Be Blood* (Anderson, 2008) and *Syriana* (Gaghan, 2005) use oil as a metaphor for the interplay between wealth and ecological destruction, aligning with corporate aims to legitimise and normalise the industry's operations (LeMenager, 2014). *There Will Be Blood* is an example of how Hollywood projects such environmental guilt on the sociopathic protagonist, modulating industrial greed to personal American dream gone awry: *"I don't want anyone else to succeed".* This ameliorates the corporations from the blames associated with environmental degradation.

This is a potent example of political-economic oligarchy that provides financial backing and ensures films convey messages favourable to corporate interests. Oligarchy often ignores issues like environmental degradation and exploitation of indigenous communities (Pitt Scott, 2022), by shaping film content and tone. For instance, in Mexico, Fornoff (2021) noted that Mexican cinema can be read from petrocinema perspective because of its energy system, laying emphasis on the funding materiality, which obscures its exploitation link. As such, films were used by these oil corporations as a palimpsest for something else, and in the case of *An English Oilfield* (Searle, 1942), the something else is "drilling oil successfully for the war effort and described by Winston Churchill as 'England's best kept secret'' (*BP*, n.d.). Indeed, oil corporations like BP have influenced public perception, embedding oil within cultural frameworks as indispensable while obscuring its complex environmental and social impacts. In 1932, BP cooperated with Shell to form Shell-Mex BP Limited and in 1965 the new company produced an Oscar nominated documentary entitled *Forth Road Bridge* (Lang, 1965) (*BP*, n.d.). The messages of these films are clear, that is, oil industry is a catalyst for the modernization project. Petro-cinema, however, sees this convergence of corporate influence and cinematic representation as an opportunity to critically analyse how petro-cinema perpetuates certain dominant ideologies and marginalises others, exposing the structure of exploitation that makes dependency on global oil as inevitable.

However, few studies on petrocinema have explored the intersection of petrochemical narrative and the media focusing on oil rhetoric (Damluji, 2021; Groskopf, 2021), and advertising and sponsorship (Dahlquist, 2021; Ohmer, 2021). Oil rhetoric is used in shaping public understanding of oil's socio-political and environmental dimensions. For instance, Damluji (2021) highlights significant challenges in preserving and accessing oil-related media archives, noting that sponsored oil films have been largely neglected in favour of fiction films in cinematic research. Through corporate communications, Groskopf (2021) explores how the oil industry strategically influences public opinion and justify expansionist agendas. For example, in *The World Struggle for Oil* (1923), the industry's activities were framed as indispensable to global progress, blurring the lines between education and propaganda. Additionally, some scholars have documented the advertising and sponsorship strategic use of media by oil corporations in shaping public perception. For instance, Ohmer (2021) explores the collaboration between Walt Disney Studios and Standard Oil of California during a 1939 national marketing campaign to promote the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco. The partnership exemplified how entertainment media could be leveraged to merge consumer culture with the burgeoning automobile industry, effectively intertwining oil consumption with notions of leisure and travel. Dahlquist (2021) examines Mobil's 1930s advertising strategy, which capitalized on the era's fascination with automobile culture and Hollywood glamour.

Furthermore, cinema as an open system is used as an influence on oil extraction and politics to reinforce Western dominance in oil-rich regions has been a subject of research interests. For example, Canjels (2021) examines two Shell's films produced in Nigeria *In the search for Oil in Nigeria* (Nesbitt & Ozoude, 1960) and *Oilman's Move* (Nesbitt & Ozoude, 1961), which highlight colonial hierarchies and Shell's adaptability to Nigeria's changing landscape while maintaining influence and obscuring environmental and social damage from oil extraction. Similarly, Damluji (2016) discusses how the British-controlled Iraqi Petroleum Company (IRPC) used films to reshape Baghdad's image, supporting imperial ambitions and disguising foreign exploitation as modernization. In similar vein, Vasudevan (2021) highlights the socio-political effects of documentary practices in India, where the Burmah Shell Oil Company's audiovisual media aligned with corporate and state interests. These cinematic representations critically examine the environmental and social consequences of oil extraction, offering a counter-narrative to dominant development and progress discourses in postcolonial contexts. This counter-narrative exposes the power dynamics within petroculture (Abba, 2023).

Nevertheless, African cinema has been instrumental in this discourse, with filmmakers using the medium to address the devastating effects of oil extraction on both the environment and the lives of ordinary people. Films such as *Blood and Oil* (Attwood, 2010) explore themes of environmental degradation, corruption, and the clash between tradition and modernity (Ojo & Olakojo, 2019), reflecting the complex realities of life in postcolonial oil-producing regions (Haynes, 2016). These films not only expose the environmental consequences of oil extraction but also delve into the social and cultural impacts, highlighting how oil has transformed local economies, social structures, and even identities. In the Nigerian context, petrocinema such as *Black November* (Amata, 2012) highlights the causes and ecological impacts of oil spill crises in the Niger Delta, deeply rooted in the imperialist-driven oil business paradigm (Okpadah, 2022; Simon, 2020). Conterminous with that, Iheka's (2021) examination of Timaya's music video *Dem*

Mama (Wudi, 2007) claimed it to be a protest against the commodification and exploitation of nature in the Niger Delta. This demonstrates how entertainment media also serve as a potent tool of resistance against environmental injustice.

Despite extensive discussions on oil rhetoric, sponsorship on multinational corporations, politics, and Western dominance in petrocinema, there remains a significant gap in cinematic narratives that critically examine oil institutions and its cultural impacts, particularly the socio-political effects of petroculture in postcolonial settings. We argue that postcolonial cinema is instrumental in critiquing the ideological frameworks perpetuated by colonial cinema, challenging Western hegemonic narratives (Alaklook et al., 2016; Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012). While the global cinema has addressed oil representation, the portrayal of the oil industry as part of petro-cinema culture in Nigeria is underexplored, despite its prominent role as a major oil producer facing environmental exhaustion (Miapyen & Bozkurt, 2020). Additionally, the role of corporations in shaping ecological narratives in Nigerian films has not been sufficiently studied (Dahlquist & Vonderau, 2021). Hence, the influence of corporate interest in cinematic depictions of environmental and social injustices warrants critical investigation, as it plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions, reinforcing cultural biases, and environmental discourse framing. Understanding this dynamic is essential for evaluating the broader societal implications of how oil-related environmental issues are represented in petronarrative. Therefore, we aim to explore the critical ways petro-narrative is used to expose the workings of western hegemony in Nigeria, asking the question of how petrocinema can help us make sense of Nigeria's beleaguered environmental degradation. To answer this question, we propose employing one of the "three registers of cinematic world" (2013, 26), conceptualised by Ivakhiv (2013), that is, "anthropomorphism" as a critical tool to demonstrate the potential of petro-cinema in being a site of ideological contestation.

METHODOLOGY

For this research, we use convenience sampling in the selection of our film, which according to Obilor, is based on the sample being "close to hand, readily available or convenient" (2023, p.4). This sampling technique is used as it helps to answer the research question. Based on this sampling technique, we selected the film *Blood Vessel* (henceforth *Vessel*) (Moses Inwang, 2023) which we categorise as a romance genre. The decision to focus on a film is grounded in its interpretive depth (Bordwell et al., 2024; Denzin, 2014). By selecting one film, the study gains the capacity for a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of its narrative structure, aesthetic dimensions, and thematic elements. This depth is critical for understanding the intersections of narrative and socio-cultural contexts, which may be diluted when comparing multiple films (Denzin, 2014). Indeed, Bordwell et al. (2024) assert that analyzing a single film enables researchers to investigate its formal cinematic elements - such as mise-en-scène, editing, sound, and cinematography - within broader socio-cultural and historical frameworks. In the context of this study, *Vessel* extends on the socio-cultural serving as a lens to examine Nigeria's postcolonial experience, particularly environmental degradation stemming from oil spillage and ecological exploitation. This postcolonial experience as argued by Breheton (2013) and Iheka (2021) is Nigeria's colonial history under British rule that provides a foundation for analyzing its contemporary environmental challenges, including oil-related devastation. The methodological

choice of a single-film analysis is further justified by its use of textual close reading, which allows for an in-depth exploration through the conceptual framework of anthropomorphism.

Anthropomorphism in Cinema

Adrian Ivakhiv, in his "process-relational model", avers that "film becomes a tool *for seeing* and for learning *how to see* a moving-image world [original italic]" (2013, 8). With three registers of the cinematic world - geomorphic, anthropomorphic and biomorphic-, he posits that anthropomorphic provides a unique perspective to examine the representation of environmental subjectivity in cinema. Ivakhiv argues that anthropomorphism is constructed through "subjectivity" where "human capacity and relationship do not only act far from the environment, but act with the environment" (255). As part of an onto-epistemological model, anthrophomorphic's main concern is about "certain qualities that are normatively human, and thereby creates the human" (10). This cements the stance of subjectivity, considering human relations that underscore the notion of fluidity and malleability of individual human experience centred around "personal account" or personal truth of the environment (Ivakhiv, 2013: 256), the "what makes us human", so to speak.

This approach apotheosizes the unique individual experience with the environment while debunking the myth of the universal truth - a crucial trope in colonial discourses. With a film's ability to turn material reality into a subjective reality - what Ivakhiv terms as "subjectomorphic" (ibid. 11), for example, the pipe, oil, the environment, and carbon emission, becomes a film's subjects. Subjectification is a modulation of objective to subjective truth. In petrocinema, oil becomes a notion of a cultural intrusion and erosion of an idealised landscape that reinforces land exploitation and ideals surrounding sustainable development. As a "notion", oil as an object or material reality is merely a product of a perception - which is what Ivakhiv's process-relational model categorizes as an "approach to cinema *is* that a film is what a film *does*" [original italic] (48). In this case, the oil industry in the film is "simply there for us to act upon" (11). Indeed, anthropomorphism "involves a recognition of one's own and other's capacities to act towards the actualization of potential [...] to become" (11) human through perceptions provided by cinema. In effect, anthropomorphism teaches us how to "perceive" cinema.

Therefore, anthropomorphism encapsulates the thought about humanity and connections across human activity with the environment. This study uncovers the activity in two folds; cultural and power dynamics intertwined, as suggested by Ivakhiv. The examination of power dynamic serves as a lens to scrutinise the political relations and agency embedded in the subjectivity within cinematic narratives. Focusing on how power is manifested helps to unravel the dynamics of influence, control, and the capacity to act concerning the environment. Meanwhile, cultural dynamic pertains to how character's actions are distributed, and their engagement is impacting the environment throughout the films (Ivakhiv, 2013). This distribution is determined by the characters' capacity for analytical thought and judgement in interacting in the form of 'doings' which helps us in analysing the ways they interact and adapt to their environments.

Considering our interpretative depth, textual analysis is used in this research. The two folds of anthropomorphism (cultural and political) are analysed through the close reading of the film as stated earlier, to embody the anthropomorphy narratives and ecological reading. At first,

we watched the film to capture the overall narrative. On the second watch, we paid attention to the relevant scenes that are environmentally linked to the narrative either through dialogue or visuals. For emphasis, close attention was given to the film visuals where we interpreted the cinematographic techniques such as camera angles, lighting, and movement to determine how human and non-human subjects are anthropomorphized. For instance, the use of a camera's perspective to simulate the "gaze" of a non-human character like Adumu - the goddess python in the film - can evoke empathy and emotional turbulence towards the environment challenging the human-centric worldviews. Likewise, the auditory cues, we paid keen attention to the diegetic and non-diegetic sounds exploring how non-human entities are vocalized or given agency through auditory representation. Lastly, the narrative style was observed to assess how the plotlines and character arcs assign intentionality and moral significance to non-human elements, aligning with broader ecological narratives. Hence, by unpacking this process of subjectification - or anthropomorphism, we uncover the diverse ideological underpinnings that influence societal perceptions related to the way Africans experience their environment.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Our contention here is that the film *Vessel* explores the notion of petrocinema as a site of ideological contestation by problematising the relationship between culture (tradition) and multi corporations (modernity), revealing that this partnership is neither inevitable nor uncontested. In doing so, our analysis employs the concept of anthropomorphism as a postcolonial ecocriticism concept to demonstrate how petrocinema is able to expose hegemony as a process - an ideological construct. We argue that the film uses a forbidden love story as a narrative doubling to curate a Nigerian ethos about environmental degradation, exposing hegemony as a process of continuous ideological struggle. In effect, the investigation delves into the film's portrayal of environmental degradation as a site of liminal space i.e., 'an in-between' (Ashcroft et al., 2013), reflecting the community's continuous negotiation to reclaim identity and sovereignty from ongoing neo-colonial pressures. This liminal space highlights the tension between cultural survival and modernity's transformation as the main characters negotiate the cultural and environmental changes brought about by external forces.

For starters, we propose that to understand *Vessel*'s critical exploration of the environmental degradation by the relentless commodification of environments and communities, it is crucial for us to comprehend the theme of romantic disillusionment that the two central characters, Abbey and Oyin, embody. This theme of romantic disillusionment is drawn from their tragic love story, adroitly made parallel by the film's portrayal of the environment as a victim of human greed. Indeed, the forbidden love story, although told from Abbey's point of view and despite his refusal to be part of, is embroiled within the larger socio-environmental "catastrophe": "This is my love story". His declaration is freight with a sense of irony, knowing full well that both the environment and the narrative positioning they occupy are transient, and therefore total happiness - a happy ending - is not ideologically possible. The tragic love story is then a strategy used by the film to invest on the emotional aspect of the narrative. In effect, the failure of their romance is ideologically determined, and the petro-film narrative anthropomorphizes their romance to help us make sense of the environmental catastrophe brought about by western hegemony.

In embryo, the narrative anthropomorphizes the entanglement between Abbey's romance and the environment they are in by making it visually and aurally explicit in the film's opening scene. The film begins with a depiction of an idyllic, aesthetically rich Nigerian landscape. As the camera captures the green rainforest pathed with water, a resonant male baritone narrates the unfolding scenes, evoking a sense of myth that entranced the audience into a seemingly magical realm. Therefore, when the narrator, Abbey, declares: "Wayingi gave us a beautiful planet, Earth," he bridges mythological past and material present. The Nigerian myth of Wayingi is "a river goddess that produces us - humans". As the goddess is known to the Kalabari people of Nigeria, the camera provides an aerial shot of the lushful landscape to show her greatness. Abbey continues: "Wayingi's earth is indeed a masterpiece of unparalleled beauty", and this narration is an act of appraising her benevolence. His narration of Nigeria's beauty and the river Goddess' potency not only foreshadows his preoccupation with Oyin's beauty, and her relationship to the river Goddess but also foregrounds his existential despair that characterizes his romantic disillusionment. This is the point in which the film makes apparent the anthropomorphism of Abbey and Oyin's characters, which become the narrative doubling of this film. Only by showing them occupy the liminal space - the inbetween of the environment and the film's narrative - the film's *raison d'etre* or petrocinema-ness can reveal itself as a site of ideological contestation.

We would like to argue that the first critical way petro-narrative can help us make sense of Nigerian environmental catastrophe is via character and characterisation. Abbey, as the main protagonist, is portrayed as occupying this liminal space, which is amplified by his emotional detachment and blasé attitude towards his environment. This is due to his constant exposure to environmental catastrophe, which can be explained as a coping mechanism. His indifference transforms ecological devastation into an accepted norm, numbing his perception of its impact. This detachment, coupled with his idealized love for Oyin, reveals a form of unconscious escapism that blinds him to the suffering around him. He is therefore ambivalent to the greasy, colourful water with men holding dead fish, and a woman mourning her dead child, praying in despair. This sense of ambivalence characterizes his character as the Other. Him being blasé about the environmental issue and his love for Oyin thus occludes a deeper question about his relationship with his surroundings, embodying the film's ideological contradictions. For in his romance with Oyin lies some ideological contradictions using the anthropomorphized landscape as a mirror to the narrator's emotional disconnection and the socio-environmental crises of postcolonial Nigeria.

Oyin's character as the river goddess incarnation, therefore, is crucial in understanding Abbey's identity, functioning both as a mirror and a foil to his actions. In a sense, she embodies Abbey's displacement, reflecting his fears and desires about the nation's fractured state. Her call to elope is rooted in her "mythical self"; her pregnancy turns her goddess status to an abomination, modulating her into a hybridised figure. Oyin's "origin" story, deeply rooted in Nigeria's environmental mythology, frames her sanctity as a reflection of nature's inviolability. In this film, Abbey violates her sanctity through their sexual relationship and her resulting pregnancy signifies the transgression against both cultural and ecological orders. Her forbidden pregnancy, which defies the myth of childbearing disrupts the ecological harmony paralleling modernity's commodification of the environment. This anthropomorphic representation

highlights how her identity transcends human characteristics, aligning with Ivakhiv's (2013) notion of identity where non-human entities such as landscapes or mythical figures are imbued with human-like agency and cultural significance. The film matches Abbey's liminality with that of the othering of Oyin's character creating a layered dynamic where her anthropomorphised representation as a foil, in which Abbey's actions are defined. Like Abbey, her character is defined as an Other, an ambivalence that occupies the liminal space. As a foil character, Oyin's presence is to help define Abbey.

Another critical way the film uses petronarrative is to help make sense of the Nigerian environment by anthropomorphizing the narrative itself. The anthropomorphising of the characters and narrative creates a narrative doubling in *Vessel*, which emerges in the tension between tradition and modernity—symbolized by the forbidden romance and Oyin's father's refusal to accept their relationship. Her father's disapproving declaration, "Don't you know I am trying to save you?" highlights the conflict's ambivalence, where cultural preservation and personal freedom collide. From ecocinema perspective, her father's strict adherence to traditional values, complicates the dynamics of agency and control in postcolonial ecological spaces. Oyin's response to him: "I can't leave him, his child is growing inside me. And all I want is love" reflects the granular nature of her conflict. This reveals her emotional turmoil and inability to reconcile her agency in ways ecological and cultural identities are co-opted by modernity, commodification, and neo-colonial pressures, anthropomorphizing her character as a result.

In the anthropomorphising of the narrative, Oyin's pregnancy becomes a cataphor, in which her purpose in the narrative can be understood. One may argue that her pregnancy encapsulates renewal akin to the natural cycles of life. While on the other, it's a burden of exploitation, paralleling the environmental degradation under modernity. In ecocinema, this dual role highlights how the environment (like Oyin) is often romanticized while simultaneously burdened with the expectations of cultural and ecological survival fusing human desires with the symbolic role of tradition and nature. Framed as a "victim of circumstances," Oyin is trapped within a socio-cultural and ecological narrative that she cannot escape, her plea— "Why do they seek to apprehend us?"— shackled her within the narrative about herself on the fragility of cultural and ecological balance, urging viewers in their secondness, as Ivakhiv stated in film experience to question their role in environmental exploitation. This entanglement of Oyin parallels Abbey's liminality, as he occupies the in-between space of tradition and modernity.

As the narrative doubling develops, the film changes to entangling the couple's romance with the state's oppressive response to protesting youth, revealing the entrenched power relations within colonial hegemony. This shift is marked by the military officer's command after a youth-led attack on an oil refinery: "I don't care if you have to burn the village to the ground." The officer's command underscores the dual internalized colonial representation of Africa in petro-narratives as both "civilized" and a "tamed space," (Mushonga & Ogude, 2022) subjected to a site of domination to serve global oil economies. This portrayal grants the landscape a form of political agency, symbolizing the broader ecological and cultural crises resulting from resource extraction and systemic violence of oil capitalism. By entangling Abbey and Oyin's relationship with the broader narrative of state control and ecological degradation, *Vessel* critiques the uneven power dynamics that govern the exploitation of natural resources, exposing how hegemony operates as a form of "false consciousness" (Femia, 1975) exposing oil as both a material and ideological force, driving ecological and systemic oppression.

One way for Vessel to expose colonial hegemony as an ongoing process of negotiation is by revealing the weakness of Nigerian patriarchy in protecting the country and its usurpation by colonial ideology. For example, the film uses Oyin's father as a symbol of Nigerian patriarchy, whose commitment to his culture and tradition is gradually revealed as suppressing doctrine. His anger and frustration at his daughter's situation outweigh his concern for the country itself, exposing the nature of the preoccupied view of Nigeria's patriarchy. *Vessel* shows this weakness through the symbolic use of cutlass - a phallic representation of masculinity during his "manhunting" Abbey. The film shows this as a practice in futility as he fails to find Abbey despite the fact that they did cross paths. Anthropomorphically, the cutlass as a marker of patriarchal authority, highlights its ineffectiveness in asserting control. His inability to "protect" Oyin, despite his performance of masculinity through aggression, aligns with the broader narrative of patriarchal inadequacy under colonial pressures. This dynamic anthropomorphizes Nigerian patriarchy in the film, portraying it as a fractured entity unable to resist the encroachments of colonial hegemony.

The film uses money as a recurring motif to comment on the socio-economic class and its entanglement with petroculture, highlighting how capitalism perpetuates exploitation and survival in postcolonial contexts. During the "manhunting" scene, Abbey escaped Oyin's father's eyes by bending to pick-up money that he accidently dropped. Here, money becomes an anthropomorphic force offering salvation to Abbey while simultaneously undermining the cultural authority Oyin's father represents. This dynamic mirrors the imperialist ideology where money, as a tool of capitalism, facilitates exploitation, particularly through resource extraction. Abbey's character, embodying the romanticized aspect of modernity, becomes intertwined with this economic framework. Similarly, the money motif reappears during the nighttime escape scene where they have to pay to be allowed to stowaway in an oil vessel. Here, money determines not only socio-economic survival but also the pervasive reach of petroleum-driven economies, which commodify lives and landscapes alike. The film therefore shows money for what it is and what it does, which constitute anthropomorphism.

Another way petro-narrative helps us make sense of Nigerian environmental issue is via the use of symbol. In the nighttime escape scene, the film anthropomorphizes eco-spirituality to expose the stark petrocultural differences between traditional ecological values and the exploitative logic of oil capitalism. Following the military raid, six youths - Abbey, Oyin, Boma, Degbe, Tekena, and Olotu - flee from state oppression fuelled by Axil Oil's environmental exploitation. On approaching a military search site, they went into hiding as they encountered Tekena stepping out with Adumu, the sacred python believed to embody the water-god spirit, around his neck. In Kalabari mythology, Adumu symbolizes the sanctity of water as both a life-giver and life-taker, mirroring the Wayingi belief system. This anthropomorphism of Adumu, an indigenous petroculture rooted in sustainability and reverence for nature is contrasted with modern oil-driven petroculture, which prioritizes economic gain over ecological balance. However, the cultural differences in valuing traditional ecological knowledge emerge starkly when Boma and Degbe express a desire to kill and consume Adumu; referencing Ivakhiv 's maxim "we're okay", and Oyin's shock and warnings about Adumu, rooted in her grandmother's teachings about maintaining environmental balance, is referenced as "they're not okay". The

killing of Adumu symbolizes the disruption of indigenous ecological order by oil-centric petroculture, setting the stage for the group's unraveling.

Apart from symbolism, petro-narrative is also understood by the use of metaphor. The six characters symbolically stowaway into the belly of the ship, a metaphor for their entrapment in a liminal space. During this transition, Tekena and Olotu from a neighbouring community reveal plans to meet someone facilitating their migration to another country. Their collective decision to flee and pool their resources reflects the broader consequences of petroculture and situates the characters into a liminal space, caught between government complicity and modernity. This tension is captured when the captain questions Olotu: "Are you sure the money is complete?" As the group gathers by the sea in a medium shot, the looming oil vessel in the background, a symbol of modernity serves as a visual reminder of their displacement anthropomorphized as a symbol of global power. The vessel is a metaphor for the systemic exploitation of African resources, linking ecological destruction with modern capitalism.

As the six characters descend into the vessel's "belly", the act is captured in a claustrophobic low-angle shot, emphasizing their descent into desperation. The vessel's "belly" becomes a living entity of modernity, entrapping both oil and humans, intertwining their fates in a narrative of neocolonial exploitation driven by global corporations. This descent symbolizes a liminal journey, where the characters are neither fully enslaved nor free, caught between the promises of modernity and the harsh realities of petro-capitalism. However, the character's upward gaze in an enclosed rectangular space at the captain reflects this liminality, as they seek freedom but remain bound to a system of minimal sustenance. The vessel, anthropomorphized as both a container and consumer of lives and resources, encapsulates the cyclical nature of petrocinema: a space where modernity promises progress but offers no escape from suffering. Trapped within the confined vessel, tensions escalate between Abbey and Degbe, as Abbey suggests "To sustain us, let's gather our food together" only to face Degbe's defiance: "Who made you a leader over us?" Degbe's insult, calling Abbey a "half-man," reveals the deep-seated resentment tied to Abbey's biracial identity as an outcast, neither fully accepted by the Kalabari tradition nor aligned with modernity. Abbey's journey of romance, initially tied to his indifference to ecological degradation, reflects his broader attempt to escape the unwelcoming world shaped by resource exploitation. However, the entrapment within the vessel forces him to confront not only the environmental degradation he sought to avoid but also the cultural alienation that defines his existence. This confrontation within the confined space encapsulates the characters' dual entrapment: physically by the oppressive environment of the ship and emotionally by the weight of their unresolved histories.

The emotional history anthropomorphized the ship, becoming a haunting stage for Oyin's tale of resistance and survival, suspended in a liminal space between past and present. Prompted by Tekena, Oyin begins to sing a sorrowful, defiant melody, evoking the ancestral memories of European slavery. Her voice carries the echoes of the Igbo ethnicity ancestors in 1803 who, faced with enslavement, chose the ocean over submission, reclaiming dignity through their final act of defiance. As she sings, the camera shifts to a medium shot, showing shackled men and women, bound and naked, plunging into the ocean while forming a circle as they drown in a final act of resistance against dehumanisation. The ocean becomes anthropomorphized as both a consuming and liberating force, embodying the liminal space where life, death, freedom, and oppression converge. Like the sea in the film *Timbuktu* (2014), which symbolizes the boundary

between tradition and modernity, the ocean in this narrative transcends its geographical identity, becoming a symbol of exploitation and resistance.

This historical narrative seamlessly intertwines with petrocinema, linking the modern exploitation of African resources by multi-corporations as a continuation of colonial and neocolonial systems. The oil vessel, which entraps the characters, mirrors the duality of wealth and environmental destruction, connecting present-day resource extraction to the historical suffering of African ancestors. Multinational corporations dominating African oil fields function as modern counterparts to colonial powers, perpetuating displacement, ecological devastation, and systemic exploitation. The visual portrayal of bodies sinking into the sea echoes the struggles of contemporary African communities trapped by globalization. Like the colonial powers before them, these corporations profit from the destruction of African lands and lives, forcing the continent into a perpetual liminal state—neither free from its past nor in control of its future. In this way, the film positions the ocean and the oil vessel as anthropomorphic symbols of both resistance and oppression within the petrocinema narrative.

Furthermore, the ship's claustrophobic confines morph into a volatile microcosm of global exploitation, where the scarcity of food ignites tensions and blurs the lines between survival, control, and commodification. Degbe ventures to find food on top of the ship, symbolizing the plight of marginalized communities struggling under neocolonial systems. His capture by the Caucasian shipowner, personifying colonial dominance and capitalist greed reflects ecocinema's critique of systemic exploitation in global capitalism (Ivakhiv, 2013). As Abbey, alarmed by Degbe's prolonged absence and Oyin's worsening health, goes in search of Degbe and medicine, the film heightens the tension anthropomorphizing the ship as a living entity tied to the fates of its human occupants, amplifying the sense of entrapment and exploitation. In a brutal interrogation scene, the shipowner looms over Degbe framed under harsh lighting to accentuate the power imbalance, revealing how ecological degradation and human commodification intersect. While eating, Degbe is accused of espionage, resulting in execution without hesitation, an act embodying the global disregard for human life within extractive systems driven by capitalist gain (Rust et al., 2016). This violent act becomes a reminder of how resistance—or merely being seen as an obstacle to profit—is met with ruthless erasure in petroculture's exploitative systems. Such moments highlight ecocinema's focus on power dynamics between humanity and nature, exposing how the global economy commodifies both landscapes and marginalized populations (LeMenager, 2014).

As fear ripples through the remaining captives, the ship's oppressive environment parallels the ecological and human exploitation in oil-producing regions like Nigeria, where both lives and land are reduced to disposable commodities. In a climactic scene of captivity, Boma, desperate and cornered, uses the Caucasian woman as a shield, pleading, "My brother, white man, let us go" - a means of escape from the shackles of commodification. The shipowner's reply: "If my men won't kill you, the ocean will" transforms the sea into an anthropomorphic force of death, reflecting nature's entanglement with human suffering under global capitalism. When the woman unexpectedly stabs Boma, causing him to accidentally slit her throat, strips away any illusion of morality within the system; thus, reinforcing ecocinema's call for critical reflection on the human and ecological costs of extractive economies.

The shipowner's declaration "If my men won't kill you, the ocean will" reinforces the dehumanisation of lives and environment in neocolonial systems. This assertion anthropomorphised the ocean as a complicit force, transformed from a life-sustenance entity into a vast graveyard consuming both human bodies and ecological debris. The ocean's duality—a source of sustenance, now a site of death—underscores the environmental and social costs of resource extraction within petroculture, aligning with ecocinema's critique of anthropogenic impacts on ecosystems embedded in global capitalist practices (Rust et al., 2016). In *Vessel*, this transformation reimagines the ocean as a symbol of the exploitation and neglect suffered by both its inhabitants and its environment, serving as a haunting reminder of global capitalist greed.

Amid this turmoil on the ship, Abbey becomes a modernist allegory, immersing himself in resistance against dehumanisation of his mates, orchestrating a clandestine attack against the ship's crew to undermine the shipowner's authority. His journey into modernity is fraught with sacrifice, an "in-betweenness" that exposes the fragile promises of Western-oriented modernism. Abbey's resistance to this western-oriented modernism mirrors the broader struggles of African communities resisting the domination of multinational corporations. His resistance reveals the precarious balance where survival demands submission within the neocolonial system. However, his resistance is shattered when a megaphone announcement threatens Oyin's life, forcing him to abandon his covert mission. In a heart-stopping moment revealing the film's climax, Abbey emerges in the sailors' control room, only to be captured and taken offshore to witness Oyin's execution. Her lifeless body cast into the ocean, merging her fate with the exploited environment, a grim reflection of neocolonial practices. This climax reveals how Oyin's death becomes inseparable from the ecological degradation wrought by petroculture. Moreover, Abbey's romantic endeavour to embrace modernity becomes ridiculed, as the traditions which Oyin embodies are reduced to resources to be negotiated upon. Thus, vessel eco-cinematically situates the ocean as a postcolonial site of conflict in an in-between space where systemic violence inherent in extractive economies, persist in the form of resource extraction, ecological destruction (Cubitt, 2005).

The final moment of the film intensifies the clash between love, survival, and the violence of neocolonial exploitation, with Abbey's final confrontation serving as a symbol of resistance against both personal and systemic forces. In this scene of confrontation, Abbey is dragged to the abattoir by the shipowner laid on the grim table where animals are typically slaughtered now a space for human destruction. As the shipowner prepares to skin Abbey in retaliation for his attack on his men, the camera lingers on Abbey's face, capturing his desperate struggle for consciousness. In a flashback, Boma words echo in his mind "Abbey fight", making him summon his strength, managing to escape, and engaging in a tense confrontation with the shipowner. The film cuts to a close-up of their faces, as Abbey gains the upper hand, shooting the shipowner in the leg. In a moment of poetic justice, Abbey holds the gun to the shipowner's head and whispers, "And this one is for the love of my life." The abattoir, a space for mechanised death of animals, becomes a metaphor for the disposable nature of life in the petrocinema world.

With his newfound freedom, Abbey descends to the belly of the ship, his return to the place of entrapment is a final nod to the liminal space that defined his journey. In a sombre flashback, we see him once again with his colleagues in the ship's hold, their lives suspended in a state of uncertainty, caught between the promise of survival and the looming threats of death. However, the film shifts to the money motif as a tool of survival and a symbol of exploitation.

Abbey packed the money on the ship, blood stained and tainted by violence and began distributing to each family of his colleagues. In a montage sequence, we see him visiting a household, narrating the tragic event. Money in this context becomes a liminal object caught between the promise of modernity and the cultural loss it perpetuates.

In the final heartbreaking scene, Abbey arrives at Oyin's fathers house to deliver the news, the camera lingers on the father's face, capturing the shift from anger to devastation signifying the price his daughter paid for her love and for modernity intrusion into their lives. A confrontation ensues muted in grief with Oyin father no longer wielding a cutlass but a gun symbolising his reluctant submission to the tools of modernity, even as he seeks to reject its destructive forces. The gun in his hand becomes a liminal position, torn between his desire to uphold cultural values and the violent reality that modernity imposed on him. The film closes with Abbey carrying his bag walking towards a car leaving for another land, while Oyin's father, still haunted by the destruction brought by modernity, searches for Abbey in a final futile attempt at revenge. The image of the father frozen on the screen with the gun in his hand, his anger and grief palpable, becomes a haunting symbol of the continuous struggle against neo colonial modernity. The camera lingers in this moment reflecting the unresolved tension between cultural resistance and the unstoppable march of modern exploitation. Abbey's departure, juxtaposed with the frozen image of the father highlights the film's message of the fight against multi-corporation and their insidious destruction of both environment and culture is ongoing, a battle that leaves no one untouched.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown the pivotal role of Nigerian Petro-cinema in exposing the sociopolitical and ecological ramifications of oil exploitation within postcolonial contexts. The selected film critically engaged with the cultural and ideological foundations of petro-culture while simultaneously challenging the dominant narratives propagated by multinational corporations and neocolonial powers. Using anthropomorphism and environmental subjectivity, the analysis reveals the intricate relationships between humans and their environment, highlighting the profound effect of oil extraction on indigenous communities and ecosystems. By assigning agency to the natural elements such as land, water, and oil, *Vessel* portrays the environment as an active participant within the narrative, reflecting the exploitation of African resources but also humanizes these spaces to reveal the interconnected struggles of nature and marginalized communities. These findings build upon Ivakhiv (2013) anthropomorphism embedding it with postcolonial ecocinema framework, where the environment becomes both a victim and a witness to the ongoing colonial legacies perpetuated by global oil economies. Unlike prior studies that focus primarily on Western depictions of oil (LeMenager, 2014; Szeman, 2017), this research echoes how Nigerian cinema uniquely integrates indigenous cultural mythologies and ecological consciousness to resist hegemonic narratives.

Vessel's use of a male narrator's voice weaves together cultural myth, spirituality, and modernity to create a cinematic texture that is borne out of the community's spiritual bonds. These bonds critique the commodification of nature under neo-colonial regimes, while concurrently providing a space for the human community to be understood. The film's climactic scenes of violence suppression and tragic loss starkly depicts the brutal realities of exploitation

in oil-producing regions. With anthropomorphism, we found that the film teaches us how to perceive environmental degradation, state-corporation partnership and human struggles as an ideological construct. Petrocinema, as seen in *Vessel*, amplifies marginalized voices, creating an urgent ideological platform for environmental justice and indigenous rights reverberating across time and space in petro-rich regions of Nigeria. *Vessel* warns that like the main character Abbey's romance, Nigerian environmental catastrophe can culminate in a disillusionment if the deracinated people of Nigerian are not shown by the power of cinema, as who they are. Therefore, we would suggest that a comparative study about other types of film genres like political drama and romantic thriller needs a critical exploration within the petrocinema narrative tropes. In the same vein, an extensive compilation of film produced on oil needs further research to explore the irrevocable impact of oil spillage on rural communities to identify the pattern of environmental devastation suffered by affected communities.

BIODATA

Abdulhamid Badru is a PhD candidate at the Center for Research in Media and Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). His research interest includes Media and Culture, African Cinema studies, Decolonial Criticism, Environmental Humanities. Email: p113293@siswa.ukm.edu.my

Jamaluddin Bin Aziz (Ph.D.) is an Associate Professor in Critical Media Studies at the Center for Research in Media and Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). His areas of research interest include media and culture, critical theories, gender, screen studies, discourse analysis, digital and environmental humanities. Email: jaywalk@ukm.edu.my

E-ISSN: 2289-1528
https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2024-4004-20

REFERENCES

Abba, A. A. (2023). Petroculture: Ecological precarity and eco-activism in Niger Delta poetry. *Green Letters*, *27*(3), 287–302. https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2023.2224353

Alaklook, H., Aziz, J., & Ahmad, F. (2016). Exploitation and new orientalism in Sam Kadi's The citizen. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, *32*(2), 453–470. https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2016-3202-23

Amata, J. (Director). (2012). *Black November* [Film]. Wells & Jeta Entertainment.

Anderson, P. T. (Director). (2007). *There will be blood* [Film]. Paramount Vantage; Miramax; Ghoulardi Film Company.

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., Tiffin, H., & Ashcroft, B. (2013). *Postcolonial studies: The key concepts* (3rd ed.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Attwood, D. (Director). (2010). *Blood and Oil* [Film]. Film Afrika Worldwide; Tiger Aspect Productions.

Bordwell, D., Thompson, K., & Smith, J. (2024). *Film art: An introduction* (13th ed.). McGraw Hill LLC.

Brereton, P. (2013). Eco-cinema, sustainability and Africa: A reading of Out of Africa (1985), The Constant Gardener (2005) and District 9 (2010). *Journal of African Cinemas*, *5*(2), 219–235. https://doi.org/10.1386/jac.5.2.219_1

BP. (n.d.). *A history of film in BP*. https://www.bpvideolibrary.com/a_history_of_film_in_bp

Canjels, R. (2021). Creating partners in progress shell communicating oil during Nigeria's independence. In M. Dahlquist & P. Vonderau (Eds.), *Petrocinema: Sponsored film and the oil industry* (pp. 208–224). Bloomsbury Academic.

Cubitt, S. (2005). *Eco media*. Rodopi.

Dahlquist, M. (2021). Petroleum and Hollywood stardom: Making way for oil consumption through visual culture. In M. Dahlquist & P. Vonderau (Eds.), *Petrocinema: Sponsored film and the oil industry*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Dahlquist, M., & Vonderau, P. (Eds.). (2021). *Petrocinema: Sponsored film and the oil industry*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Damluji, M. (2016). Visualizing Iraq: Oil, cinema, and the modern city. *Urban History*, *43*(4), 641–641.

Damluji, M. (2021). Oil media archives. In M. Dahlquist & P. Vonderau (Eds.), *Petrocinema: Sponsored film and the oil industry* (pp. 15-32). Bloomsbury Academic.

Denzin, N. K. (2014). *Interpretive autoethnography*. SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/nx4s

Femia, J. (1975). Hegemony and consciousness in the thought of Antonio Gramsci. *Political Studies*, *23*(1), 29–48. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1975.tb00044.x

Fornoff, C. (2021). Mexican cinema as petrocinema. *Studies in Spanish & Latin American Cinemas*, *18*(3), 377–387.

Gaghan, S. (Director). (2005). *Syriana* [Film]. Warner Bros.; Participant; 4M.

Groskopf, J. (2021). "All the Earmarks of Propaganda" Teapot Dome, The world struggle for oil, and defining corporate rhetoric. In M. Dahlquist & P. Vonderau (Eds.), *Petrocinema: Sponsored film and the oil industry* (pp. 33–50). Bloomsbury Academic.

Haynes, J. (2016). *Nollywood: The creation of Nigerian film genres*. University of Chicago Press.

Hill, J. (Director). (1955). *The new explorers* [Film]. British Petroleum (BP); Worldwide.

Iheka, C. N. (2021). *African ecomedia: Network forms, planetary politics*. Duke University Press.
Inwang, M. (Director). (2023). *Blood Vessel* [Film]. Netflix.
Ivakhiv, A. J. (2013). *Ecologies of the moving image: Cinema, affect, nature*. Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press.
Jackson, C. (2019). Petrification and petroleum: Affect, the gas pump and US horror films (1956–73). *Film Studies*, *21*(1), 38–52.
Lang, G. (Director). (1965). *The Forth Road Bridge* [Film]. BP Film Library; Films of Scotland; Shell-Mex.
LeMenager, S. (2014). The environmental humanities and public writing: An interview with Rob Nixon. *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, *1*(2). https://doi.org/nx4t
Malle, L. (Director). (1954). *Station 307* [Film]. Jacques-Yves Cousteau Films; General Petroleum Oil Company.
Miapyen, B. S., & Bozkurt, U. (2020). Capital, the State, and environmental pollution in Nigeria. *SAGE Open*, *10*(4), 215824402097501.
Mushonga, T., & Ogude, J. (2022). Introduction: The intractable problem: Africa and the pitfalls of resource exploitation in a globalising world. In Ogude, J., & Mushonga, T. (Eds.), *Environmental Humanities of Extraction in Africa* (pp. 1–22). Routledge.
Nesbitt, F., & Ozoude, A. (Director). (1961). *Oilman's Move* [Film].
Nesbitt, F., & Ozoude, A. (Director). (1960). *The Search for Oil in Nigeria* [Film]. Film Centre International; Shell.
Obilor, E. I. (2023). Convenience and purposive sampling techniques: Are they the same. *International Journal of Innovative Social & Science Education Research*, *11*(1), 1–7.
Ohmer, S. (2021). On the Road with Mickey and Donald: Walt Disney, Standard Oil, and the Golden Gate International Exposition of 1939. In M. Dahlquist & P. Vonderau (Eds.), *Petrocinema: Sponsored film and the oil industry* (pp. 81-116). Bloomsbury Academic.
Ojo, A. C., & Olakojo, O. O. (2019). Terrors and horrors of struggle for resource control in the Niger delta: A study of Hibbert's Blood and Oil and Amata's Black November. *Nigerian Theatre Journal*, *19*(2). https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ntj/article/view/242788
Okpadah, S. O. (2022). Engaging cinema in environmental crisis: A paradigm of documentary films of the Niger Delta. *Colloquia Humanistica*, *11*. https://doi.org/10.11649/ch.2717
Pitt Scott, H. (2022). *Energy futures: Finance and petroculture* [Phd, University of Warwick]. http://webcat.warwick.ac.uk/record=b3883983
Ponzanesi, S., & Waller, M. R. (Eds.). (2012). *Postcolonial cinema studies*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203181478
Rust, S., Monani, S., & Cubitt, S. (2015). *Ecomedia: Key issues*. Routledge.
Searle, F. (Director). (1942). *An English Oilfield* [Film]. G.B Screen Services Production.
Simon, T. T. (2020). Mirroring the conflict situation of the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria on the screen: A thematic analysis of the film-black November. *Galactica Media: Journal of Media Studies*, *2*, 123–146.
Sissako, A. (Director). (2015). *Timbuktu* [Film]. Les Films du Worso; Dune Vision; Arches Films.
Szeman, I. (n.d.). On Energopolitics. *Anthropological Quarterly*, *87*, 457–468.
Szeman, I. (2017). Conjectures on world energy literature: Or what is petroculture? *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *53*(3), 277–288. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2017.1337672
The Story of Petroleum. (1923). Department of the Interior - Bureau of Mines.

Vasudevan, R. (2021). "In India's Life and Part of It" film and visual publicity at Burmah Shell from the 1920s to the 1950s. In M. Dahlquist & P. Vonderau (Eds.), *Petrocinema: Sponsored film and the oil industry* (pp. 183–207). Bloomsbury Academic.

Walker, J. (2018). Media mapping and oil extraction: A Louisiana story. *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies, 7*(2), 229-251. https://doi.org/10.25969/MEDIAREP/3448

Williams, D. (Director). (1978). *Planet Water* [Film]. Balfour Films; British Petroleum (BP).

Wilson, S., Carslon, A., & Szeman, I. (2017). *Petrocultures. oil, politics, culture.* McGills Queen University Press.

Wudi, A. (Director). (2007). Music video *Dem Mama* [Film]. Wudland Productions.