

MARKET FORCES AND FILMMAKERS: BUILDING A NATIONAL IMAGE THROUGH PRODUCTION QUALITY

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Abstract

*The Nigerian Video Film Industry popularly known as Nollywood in the recent past has come under harsh criticism centred basically on modes of production, quality, and professionalism. This has affected our storytelling abilities and restricted them to occult, witchcraft and other stories that have to do with these vices thereby creating a wrong impression on the country's image. These criticisms have however arisen as a result of the fact that directors of these films who are supposed to be the storytellers are faced with the commercial approach employed in such productions and most times do not have a say in what kind of production is churned out but must bow to market forces as dictated by the marketers. In what may seem a quick response to these negative reports, there has been a revolution in the industry with what is now termed as cinema 'movies' which have now turned out to be the viewers' delight, a perfect example of which is the Africa Magic Viewers' Choice Awards (AMVCA). Film directors who have found themselves in this area are known to take their time in giving attention to details from pre-production to post-production, no matter how long it takes and then let their movies tour cinemas around the globe before they let it into the market. A comparative analysis of Kunle Afolayan's *The Figurine* (2009) and Mac-Collins Chidebe's *He Lives in Me* (2004) will be used to advance the need for attention to details in productions as a means of checking the quality of film productions, which will in turn help to launder the Nigerian image in terms of film production quality.*

Introduction

Nollywood, in spite of cultural influences has remained unique. Haynes agrees that: "the industry is not homologous with

foreign traditions in terms of personnel, administrative structure, production techniques, and narrative elements."(123). The industry is defined and sustained by Nigerians. The commercial success and popularity of Nigerian films stem from their stories, which the audience finds fascinating and in consonant with their expectations. According to Alamu:

The thematic and aesthetic choices of Nollywood are determined to a large extent by the preferences of its appeal. These themes are based on subjects such as infidelity, treachery, lust, hypocrisy, armed robbery, marital problems, murder, cultism and occultism, witchcraft, polygamy and so on. The themes are indeed broad and mirror the Nigerian society. To the filmmakers therefore, Nigeria is a narrative entity and their (the filmmakers) films are the agents in this narrative act (166).

He goes further to identify stylistics and narrative as two related organizational principles that operate in film. According to him;

whereas stylistics are concerned with various film techniques such as *mise-en-scene*, editing, camera movement, colour patterns, sounds, music and so on, narrative is the actual representation of the story and form in which the spectator encounters it (164).

In every story, there is a set of narrative elements, which represents the story. The filmmaker is therefore expected to consider the various film techniques and cinematic choices in order to present his or her story in such a way that the viewer's mind and

emotions are engaged while realizing the underlying vision of the film. This goes a long way in creating a paradigm shift in the way our films are perceived at home and abroad.

Nollywood and the Image Question

Due to their status among the society's primary mass media, Nigerian films are stabilizing forces that contribute to the maintenance of social order. They reinforce the collective mentality of the Nigerian society, educating large audiences along certain established lines: developing collective memories of the past, maintaining distance from the threatening present, and projecting life in the future. For these reasons, films display a range of ideological and cultural positions that are consciously portrayed by filmmakers in their stories. Nigerian films are therefore responses to the transformational needs of the Nigerian society offered through the aesthetics possibilities of film technology. Although critics have condemned several recurrent themes such as witchcraft and the proliferation of black magic, which they find rather repulsive, it is also true that these themes have roots in popular cosmology. It is imperative to note that such themes are only employed for didactic purposes to show that good always overcomes evil. The use of this approach by Nigerian filmmakers underlies the creation of films conveying the intense feeling that urbanization and industrialization have created an excessively volatile and unstable Nigerian society. Films present the crimes and tragic incidents that have resulted from these changes and that should be repressed through the power of the medium of film. According to the perspective of filmmakers, they must use their films to rescue contemporary Nigerian society from the erosion of its value systems caused by decadence; hence, they employ ethnographic and cultural relativism as a framework.

Several technical deficiencies have been noted in some films produced in Nigeria. These can be partially attributable to a lack of competence and the absence of the sort of sophisticated equipment required for quality production. Indeed, the industry lacks certain equipment, especially cameras, which could provide sharper images, better resolution, more efficient lighting, low-light situations and improved sound technology. Post-production laboratories for editing are also not generally well-equipped. One might also agree that the use of video cameras, which some producers still employ for recording, and the attendant technical limitations, contribute to these problems. Apart from the inability of producers to procure good equipment for filming, modest budgets have also led to the production of films lacking in special effects. It is common knowledge that good equipment including computers and software can be used to generate many special effects, produce high-resolution images, enhance colour fidelity and range, and produce digital sounds that enhance the quality of films. Low budgets cannot guarantee the purchase or rental of such equipment for the number of days required for production, let alone enable paying members of the cast. This problem has also affected how supernatural characters are depicted and presented. Due to obsolete equipment, directors of photography cannot employ a great variety of optical or special effects in presenting the supernatural. Thus, we have been witnessing amateurish presentations. Given that the esoteric world of the supernatural is a common theme in Nigerian films, filmmakers should create a unique way of presenting these phenomena to enhance their realism, perhaps by following the example of Hollywood films that deal with the same themes, or with science fiction. Mastering high-level Computer-Generated Images (CGI), which enables technicians to create characters, objects and settings that are composites of real images, can provide additional assistance.

Nigerian filmmakers should look into the production of animated (cartoon) films, which has become a popular genre among children in many countries of the world.

The Nigerian film industry is however, controlled by the market. Without funding from the government and corporate bodies, producers have had to rely on marketers for the funding of film projects. Though the Federal Government of Nigeria as part of its effort to give support to the industry had announced an endowment fund of \$200m (Two Hundred Million Dollars), which is an equivalent of #32bn (Thirty Two Billion Naira Only) at the 30th anniversary of the Silverbird Group in 2010, not many filmmakers have been able to access the facility as a result of bottlenecks. According to a Newspaper report;

It is generally agreed that for the industry to realize its potentials, the Federal Government must offer some stimulus. So, it was a good news when in November 2010, President Goodluck Jonathan announced his administration's decision to offer a \$200 million revolving loan scheme for the industry. In about two months, it will be two years since the scheme was announced. But, players in the industry are raising concerns over access to the fund. Only one producer, Tony Abulu, has been able to access the fund from the Nigerian Export and Import Bank (NEXIM), one of the managers of the fund, for his film, *Doctor Bello*.

(Akande, www.thenationnews.com).

The President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan during a stakeholders' dinner in March 2013, to unveil another package of #3bn (Three Billion Naira Only) for the

industry which he tagged 'Project Nollywood' lamented that only #766m (Seven Hundred and Sixty Six Million Naira Only) has been accessed from the initial grant (www.premiumtimesng.com, March 3). As a result of the above stated many marketers still dictate to producers and contribute to production decisions. The practice of producers influencing casting and story is now rampant in the industry because he who pays the piper dictates the tune. Many directors do not have the courage to challenge this undue influence. Indeed, the production of films in Nigeria is driven primarily by the goal of marketers to recover their investments, and little consideration is given to the thematic or structural quality of the products. This accounts for the many indifferent, mediocre, poor or uneven films in circulation. However, not all Nigerian films are of poor quality. Although many films are not thoughtfully constructed or are haphazardly produced, a few with good story lines, impressive character development, and sophisticated film techniques that enhance their quality are also available. It is noteworthy that films associated with names of directors like Lancelot Imasuen, Izu Ojukwu, Tunde Kelani, Kunle Afolayan, Tony Abulu, Tade Ogidan, Teco Benson to mention a few always tend to have a good quality to offer both in form and content.

In the absence of film studios such as those in Hollywood save for the one at Tinapa but rarely used as a result of lack of technological know-how, Nigerian films are shot at different locations. Cities such as Lagos, Enugu, Asaba and Abuja are used most frequently. Haynes, however, observes that Lagos stands out for many reasons:

Lagos is where Nollywood is primarily located and, for budgetary reasons, its films are always shot on location, most often in Lagos, which serves

as the ground of the films, not just in the immediate sense that when cameras are turned on, they capture images of Lagos (or one might even say, Lagos imposes its images on them), but also that the films are a means for Nigerians to come to terms—visually, dramatically, emotionally, morally, socially, politically and spiritually—with the city and everything it embodies (133).

Alamu is clear when he expressed that; the city of Lagos and its striking landscape, which is dominated by flyovers, buildings with towers, the Lagoon, and the Atlantic Ocean, appear to be a favorite location for film directors (79). The orchestration of actions, which occur in tandem with the themes emphasized by the producers, also leads to the selection of Lagos for filming. As the commercial hub of Nigeria and the seat of the film industry, it also allows producers to be close to “where the action is” to market their products. It is imperative to note that today; Nollywood has started collaborations with Hollywood in film productions as a result of this attempt at radically departing from the conventional marketer-influenced film production as can be found in Lagos, Asaba, Enugu, etc. A typical example is Tony Abulu’s *Dr. Bello*, written and directed by Tony Abulu and starring Vivica Fox, Isaiah Washington, Jimmy Jean Louis etc. from Hollywood and Genevieve Nnaji, Stephanie Okereke, Charles Inojie, Jide Kosoko, to mention a few from Nollywood. The film enjoyed sponsorship from several corporate bodies which include MTN, DSTV, Tarika Group etc. Other films from the stable of The Royal Arts Academy and other independent producers have come to show that we can indeed produce movies with good production quality in Nollywood.

About Kunle Afolayan and Mac-Collins Chidebe

Kunle Afolayan is a Nigerian actor and director. He is the son of Adeyemi Josiah Afolayan (Ade-Love) was a renowned Nigerian artist of the second half of the 20th century. He worked in traveling theater and turned to the film making industry. Kunle is of Yoruba descent from Kwara State. He started out working in a bank while doing some casual acting, before deciding to move into full-time filmmaking and taking a course at the New York Film Academy.

Since 2005 he has been active in the Nigerian film industry. He has made several extremely popular titles including: *The Figurine: Araromire* (2009) which was in the Yoruba and English languages and *Phone Swap* (2012) which featured Nse Ikpe Etim and the legendary Chika Okpala. *The Figurine* won five major awards in the African Film Academy and experienced tremendous success in the Nigerian movie theatres. Kunle Afolayan appeared at the Subversive Film Festival in 2011 where he represented the second largest film industry in the world, the Nigerian film industry, with his colleague Zeb Ejiro. In May 2013, *Phone Swap* premiered in France at the first edition of Nollywood Week Paris and won the Public Choice Award. He also made the blockbuster *October 1* (2014), currently touring movie theatres all over the world. Studies have shown that the filmmakers who fall in this category do not care about quantity but quality. Others include, Tunde Kelani, Izu ojukwu, Amaka Igwe (Late), and a few others.

Mac-Collins Chidebe popularly known as 'China' hails from Imo State. He is the CEO of West Coast Entertainment. The businessman turned filmmaker has over 200 films to his credit which include but not limited to, *The Rain Makers* (2009), *Across the Bridge* (2005), *The Strippers* (2009), *Across the River* (2006), *Before*

Ordination (2006), *Be my Val* (2006), *Boys from Holland* (2006), *Brainwash* (2006), *He Lives in Me* (2006), etc.

The Figurine: Araromire: Production Analysis

The above mentioned movie by Kunle Afolayan is a Nigerian thriller which narrates the story of two friends who find a mystical sculpture in an abandoned shrine in the forest while serving at a National Youth Service Corps camp, and one of them decides to take the sculpture home. Unknown to them, the sculpture is from a goddess 'Araromire' which bestows seven years of good luck on anyone who encounters it, and after the seven years have expired, seven years of bad luck follow. The story is based on an old folktale about a goddess Araromire who asked a priest to invoke her spirit into a figurine carved out of the bark of a cursed tree. When villagers touched the figurine, Araromire would grant them wealth and prosperity in all their endeavours. This good fortune however lasted for only seven years, after which everything deteriorated and became worse than it was seven years ago. The script was written by Kemi Adesoye. I believe strongly that Afolayan succeeded as a director largely because he was the producer too and could afford to take his time to develop the production design which according to him took five years. This may not have been possible for a director who has been given a deadline by a marketer to deliver the rushes or risk losing the job to another ready director, competent or not. It also took three months to shoot the movie in locations in Lagos and Osun states; this was enough time to pay attention to details. For instance the shots displayed a careful and professional cinematography. Sets were built for specific purposes especially the beach house and the cave. The characters were well built that a touch of reality shows especially in their dialogues.

Producing *The Figurine* gulped a whopping ₦70, 000,000.00 (Seventy Million Naira Only) and has since hit a box office mark of ₦30, 000,000.00 (Thirty Million Naira Only) and counting.

He Lives in Me: Production Analysis

Sheila (Genevieve Nnaji) is with her family during a break from school. On her return things are different at home. She constantly feels the presence of someone else around despite not being able to see anyone. It is when she begins to notice that her things are being moved around that she becomes really concerned. David Martins (Emeka Enyiocha) becomes friendly with the family and begins dating Sheila. He turns out to be the person that they bought their dream house from. Through him they learn about how both his parents were murdered in the house. A ghost Greg (Muna Obiekwe) finally reveals himself to Sheila. It turns out that he is trying to keep David from getting close to Sheila.

The production of this movie would have been better, given the theme of greed and revenge that it sought to explore but as is typical of Chidebe's films, the hurried approach to productions have a way of affecting the entire quality of work that it turned out. The scenes in this movie are quite patchy and character development is poor. Given his experience, Chidebe could pass as a good filmmaker if he is given a free hand and opportunity to take time in paying attention to details in his movies. A typical example of this setback is the scene where the boom mic was visible to the viewer. It is also appalling to see a ghost crossing the road with so much care and avoiding being hit by oncoming vehicles. These technical inadequacies which are evident in most of his films cannot be divorced from the fact that he works within a specified time limit within which he must deliver the rushes to the marketer who is waiting eagerly to distribute for consumption. Chidebe falls within the category of filmmakers known as 'marketer's director.'

Professionalism and Quality Assurance

Dannenbaum, Hodge and Mayer have posited that filmmakers must be convinced about a film in order to have the passion to make it and also point out the dangers associated with making films in order to pay bills. Such dangers include cutting corners without paying attention to details. At such points, filmmakers are concerned with how many movies they are able to deliver to marketers irrespective of the quality of production. The marketers on the other hand prefer these set of filmmakers since they are only interested in the turnover. As far as they are concerned, the faces of the stars in the movie can make up for any technical inadequacies that may arise as a result. This may just be in allusion to the position of Judith Mayne in her book *Cinema and Spectatorship* where she asserts that “no matter how significant the textual details of films or the scope of a director’s vision, for instance, the role of the star is the most visible and popular reference point for the pleasures of the cinema” (126). However, relying on the above position may not be the best option for the filmmaker whose job is to deliver movies with such production quality that can compete favourably in the international scene. According to Dannenbaum *et al*:

For those for whom a film is strictly a commercial venture, pleasing the largest possible audience is going to be the ultimate goal. However, if we as filmmakers set out to make such a film, it is far more likely to end up being simplistic, formulaic, puerile, and unsatisfying to work on (129).

Based on the above assertion, the image of Nigeria as being the second largest film industry in terms of production should not be seen as a compliment but rather be considered an aberration if

there can't be a reasonable quantity of quality in the quantity. It is therefore imperative to begin to address technical details in film productions so as to redeem the image of the industry bearing in mind that as the second giant in the industry, no Nigerian film has been to the Oscar.

A field research conducted by Innocent Uwah in his book *The Rhetoric of Culture in Nollywood* showed that though a lot of Nigerians love Nigerian films and appreciate the efforts of these filmmakers, a great percentage of them always point to poor technical details in the productions especially in areas of graphic and sound effects as was earlier pointed out in *He Lives in Me*. He further states:

The idea of audiences' responses here is not to see no good in Nollywood productions but to interrogate the industry as it interrogates the Nigerian society and cultures. The films as products of the country extend her public image construction across boards and borders which is the reason why viewers in this study are interrogating them and calling for quality productions in the art works. Film productions should not just be for private money making exercises done in a hurry with well packaged jackets but must be seen as an industry that carries within it the integrity of the filmmakers and the ideological worldview of the society that produces it (331-2).

The issues raised above by Uwah are quite evident in the films of Mac-Collins Chidebe who incidentally has more films to his credit than Afolayan. In as much as these productions make

our actors popular all over the world, the question of quality and quantity still lingers.

It is worthy of note however that Chidebe is not alone in this. There are several other marketers' directors who share the same fate with him. The worst offenders are the Yoruba filmmakers who have thrown caution to the wind especially in the area of post-production and subtitling. A few examples are shown below.







Recommendations

As the saying goes, 'dress as you wish to be addressed'. This must be a guiding principle for filmmakers in Nigeria as they must begin to look beyond the market woman and school children whose views about societal development are in a way shaped by the films they watch. Regulatory bodies such as Nigeria Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) must live up to their duties by insisting on quality before making any approvals for release.

Conclusion

Production of films in Nigeria is driven primarily by the goal of marketers to recover their investments, and little consideration is given to the thematic or structural/technical quality of the products. This accounts for the many indifferent, mediocre, poor or uneven films in circulation. It is important for filmmakers to rethink production approaches with respect to giving attention to technical details. The industry has undoubtedly grown in leaps and bounds and has provided jobs for many in the country. This paper is therefore a clarion call for filmmakers to cash in on the various ongoing capacity building programs in the industry that are geared towards reengineering the process, which will in turn strategize filmmakers to compete favorably in the international scene.

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