CULTURE, FILM AND THE NIGERIAN VIDEO PRODUCER: SOME PRODUCTION IMPLICATIONS.

PAUL UGOR, BRENDA AKPAN and IBOK EKPENYONG

(Received 17 October 2002; Revision Accepted 2 September 2003)

ABSTRACT

At the very heart of Africa's entertainment ambience is a huge and thriving audio-visual culture popularly referred to as the video films. These are "dramatic features shot on video and marketed on cassettes (and even Cds), and some times also exhibited publicly with video projectors or TV monitors". In Nigeria, this bourgeoning art has become a platform for social debate, a carrier of culture, a means of evangelizing and a veritable means of social entertainment. But this new audio-visual art form suffers from intense critical knocks especially from the academia and the media. Central to the debate about the video is how it misrepresents the people's culture and worldview. Producers/ directors are at the very center of these accusations. This paper examines these debates, casting it against a global canvas of film as a strong means of cultural showcasing. In the process, it provides a panacea for the Nigerian video producer/director as a way of improving his art.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Video Film, Production, Producers, implications.

INTRODUCTION

From its very beginnings, film has been, and remained a veritable medium of culture. Film preserves, transmits and even transform a people's culture. This is because the language barrier of film is very minimal. As Bryant and Black note "film has lent itself to cross-cultural transfer in a way that no other medium has". (Black and Bryant, 1992:242). While the print medium demands language familiarity and the broadcast media such as television and radio are so heavily laden with verbal overtones requiring some linguistic conversance by the listeners, the film medium by its peculiar nature enhances universal comprehension without any written or verbal encumbrances. This distinctive quality makes the film medium a potent medium of cultural transmission.

In a sense therefore, there exist an inextricable link between film, society and culture. This relationship is symbiotic in nature. That is, film influences a people's culture just as culture also influences film. By culture here we refer to what Ekpo Eyo notes as "a vast apparatus partly material, partly spiritual, by which organized into are permanent and recognizable groups" (Arulogun, 1979:31). And. as Adegboyega Arulogun argues "Culture should not be seen in terms of music, dance, drama and art. It should be seen as the intertwining of artistic fibres of nation with the science and religion of its people, the law and moral expectation of the community, the wisdom of their past and education of their present and future" (Arulogun, 1979:31). And film captures all of these aspects of people. This is why in most countries all over the world, their film policies emphasize the need for film to propagate, project and preserve what is best in their traditions and culture by representing these in their proper perspectives as stages in national development and as an inheritance to be cherished with pride and longing by all nationals of such countries.

In this paper therefore, we shall attempt a global survey of the relationship between film and culture. In doing this, we shall indicate how film embraced the history and culture of different people and countries at different times. This global survey shall encompass France, the Americas, Russia, Germany and Africa.

Film And Culture: A Global Survey.

Once the story-telling potentials of film were established, it was to the lore of the people that it turned. Onookome Okome's perspicacious study in this regard is significant. He makes the point that cinema (film) was initially a plebeian art; the core of its content was the common people. And because it was concerned with the life of the people, it soon found ample opportunity in exploring the culture and history of the people. That is, their lore, myths, legends, folktales, folkways and so forth (Okome, 1991). In many respects therefore, this popular media became a point of interest to culture enthusiasts, anthropologists, historians, sociologists and other social scientists. Very early then, film earned for itself a big reputation, what Jay Black and Jennings Bryant refer to as "a carrier of culture and a changing mirror of changing time... "(Black & Bryant, 1995:214).

As this paper aspires to investigate the relationship between the film medium and peoples' culture, it may be expedient to examine how film evolved as a means of projecting and preserving culture right from its beginnings in the later part of the 19th century.

PAUL UGOR, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Calabar, Calabar - Nigeria BRENDA AKPAN, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Calabar, Calabar - Nigeria IBOK EKPENYONG, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Calabar, Calabar - Nigeria

This diachronic survey of the cultural potentials of films will lay an appropriate backdrop against which this study is cast.

In France, the Lumiere brothers - August and Louis, had improved tremendously on the kinescope, which was earlier invented by Thomas Edison and his confederate, William Kennedy Dickson. brothers succeeded in capturing actuality of factory workers leaving their father's photographic plates and film manufacturing factory. This was in 1895 and the film was titled leaving the Lumiere factory. Though the Lumiere brothers were far more intrigued with the mechanical workings of their new technology than its cultural or commercial potentials, they inadvertently inaugurated cultural dimensions to this new art form. This is because according to John Bitner, "They produced films that used the reality of the outdoors and the real lives of the people" (Bitner, 1989:153). It was thus to the very life of the people that film first directed its attention. Inevitably, it was their culture that it embraced.

Before long, itinerant artisans to America introduced this intriguing technology. Popularly referred to as "The New Foundland", it beckoned on a large number of immigrants from Europe. Besides, the nation was already littered with emancipated black slaves. As John Bitner notes, for all of these people "who were mostly illiterate and unfamiliar with English, the "... movies provided a rare escape from the drudgery of daily life". (Bitner, 1989(217). The fascination here was no longer with the magic of the moving image but because the people encountered their faces: their very history and culture in these films.

Edwin porter's The Great Train Robbery and The Life of an American Fireman is significant here. According to Black and Bryant, Porter "was especially impressed with the potentials of film to tell stories" (Black & Bryant, 1989:216). Apart from the tight editing and the violation of normal time sequence in these films, the films were famous for their narrative techniques. At the heels of this, in 1915, was D.W Griffith's film The Birth a Nation. This film traced in dramatic form the history of the United States covering their civil war and reconstruction. It was the first historical account of the United States in film form. This film, which received hard critical knocks from critics was decried for its racist theme with emphasis on the Ku Klux Klan (kkk) and "post-war racial strife" in the United States. The point being made here is that even in the United States, it was to the very life of the people that film turned; their past. present and the future. In fact, their very culture and

In far away Germany, the scenario was not any different. Just before the end of the First World War, there was a conscious effort by the German government to bring film under its partial control. By the end of the war, film was under its firm grip. The German government realized early the subliminal effect of film and explored it for propaganda both locally and internationally. The Germans realized the twin qualities of film which Hyginus Ekwuazi describes as "the dual hybrid nature of film: its synthesis of reality and

magic...". And according to him, "By weaving magic and reality, the film idealizes the real and realizes the ideal" (Ekwuazi, 1999.152). More of a war policy than a creative philosophy, the German directors reflected the solitary and desolate state of the German people owing to the European conflict. The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari which was produced in 1920 is symptomatic of this overall German film philosophy during the war. The film, like most German films, explores the theme of a depressed people enmeshed in hopeless difficulties against "both the real and the surreal". impacted emotionally and stirred international concerns. In fact, the very kernel of German history is better gleaned through their films. Here again, it was to the people's history and cultural existence that film turned its attention.

In Russia, as in Germany, the Soviet Union exercised a meaningful control by state over the film Film in Russia assumed a very strong propaganda and revolutionary role. Though nurturing individual creative talents, most Russian films were a graphic portraiture of post revolutionary Russia of 1925. Sergie Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin is worthy of note here. As John Bittner explains, "This story of revolt and revolution depicts an event from the Russo-Japanese war, the mutiny of the crew of the battle ship potemkin in Odessa habour". From Sergie Eisenstein, through Vsevold Podovkin to Alexander Dovzhenko, the single strain was (or perhaps is), the chronicle of the struggle of the Russian nation against oppression. As ever before, it was the very life of the people, their culture and history that film embraced.

Film had come to Africa in the context of colonialism. The imperialists found it a suitable medium for promoting and propagating their cultural ways and administrative policies. For the imperialists, film was an indispensable tool in their "civilizing mission" to the African continent. But not only was film used to espouse British middle class etiquette; it was also used to present Africa and her people wrongly to the outside world. Before long, there arose an intellectual movement, which aspired to re-image and redefine the African in the face of the world. Cinema and other literary forms of expression became an invaluable tool in this Pan-Africanist aspiration. Indigenous African film, producers and writers turned inwards to the ways of their people for creative materials. African lore, myths, legends and folkways became an inexorable fountain for all of the creative artists. Inevitably, the film medium embraced the people's culture and history.

John Hospers in his introductory note to a book entitled *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics* asserts that "works of literature (for which film is a part) almost always have something to say about life – not an explicit message, but a portrayal of people and their thoughts and feelings whereby we can imaginatively identify ourselves with the persons depicted, thus gaining an insight into their characters, their problems, their world". He further notes that "novels, dramas and poems may also be true to human nature, in that they describe people as there are, with feelings, thoughts, and motives that people in real life outside the novel really have"

(Hosper, 1969:6-9). Hosper's contention is that "characters in a movie or even in painting... are true to human nature in that they reveal some of the characteristics of real people". This we have proved so far with the historical survey of film with particular respect to its relationship with the culture of people at different places and times.

Nigeria video films: Evolution, Producers and the Issue of Culture.

l. Evolution

A potpourri of factors — socio—politica! and economic, stirred the evolution of Video films as a form of entertainment media in Nigeria. Though cinema had made inroads into Nigeria as early as 1903 through private merchants, indigenous cinema, written, produced and acted by Nigerians for Nigerians did not begin until 1970 with Wole Soyinka's adapted stage play *Kongi's Harvest*. And a deluge of other indigenous films followed mostly (though not all) by actor-managers of Yoruba traveling theatres popular during that period. The magic of the moving image was too captivating for the large theatre audience to ignore. So most of the traveling theatres adapted their stage repertory for the screen.

But the entire industry depended heavily in terms of technical hands on Europe (especially France) and America. Cinematographers, cameramen, lighting and sound technicians, and the entire postproduction was done outside the country. And this meant huge foreign exchange for producers in the film industry. Neither production facilities nor qualified indigenous hands were yet available.

As a nation, Nigeria has always been and remained a notorious political laboratory. Since independence in 1960, the Nigerian political ambience has been a medley of political trials with an admixture of both civilian and military rule in its over 40 years of existence. The backlash of this political trials and charlatanism has been the absence of good governance, corruption, a degenerating economy, unemployment, meteoric rise in crime etc. At the later part of the 1980s the above scenario was at its head. With a crippled economy and a crassly devalued Naira. cinema production had become increasingly, (if not completely) impossible for an industry heavily dependent on western technical hands. The last breath of indigenous cinema production was felt in 1986 with Bankole Bello's film Oselu. Tonathan Haynes illuminates this fact when he notes that "The video boom is, paradoxically, a consequence of general economic collapse, and the videos reflect the ambient poverty ..." (Haynes 1997: 09).

A failed economy, an insensitive and irresponsible political class and harsh economic policy environment (such as the Structural Adjustment Program SAP) was likely to breed or ignite more social vices amongst a deprived people virtually barely struggling to survive. Armed robbery, rape, arson, burglary and general violence became the order of the day in Nigeria's cities, cities which were the very nerve centre of cinema production and patronage. So cinema

outings that was popular in the cities had become a dangerous pastime. Spontaneously, patronage ebbed out. The relative safety of the home was preferred to the vulnerability of city streets.

But the people yearned for pleasure and entertainment. If for nothing else to palliate tears of doom that stared them on the face as they negotiate the labyrinth that had become existence in one of Africa's big nation states. "The popular video format then emerged as a crude alternative to the moribund cinema industry. It was a desperate attempt to make-up for the much cherished indigenous cinema whose production was thinning out due to the crashing value of the Nigeria naira" (Ugor, 2002:71).

Today, the video film culture is at the very centre of Nigeria's entertainment industry. It is huge and it is estimated that the industry grosses about 19.5 billion naira annually. (*Thisday Newspaper, November 26th*, 2001.P67). Indeed, Nigerian video films are no

longer limited to the Nigerian audience alone. This creative Nigeria motion picture wares are permeating the markets of the west coast of Africa and southern Africa. Even in Europe and America, the Nigerian videos have an abiding audience class made up of Nigerians abroad and a small fraction of elitist Europeans obsessed with the exotic especially African Art. This latter group is found mostly amongst university scholars and other researchers. In fact two major conferences have already been held at the Institute of African Studies in Germany on various discourses around the issue of the Nigerian video films between 2001 and 2002. Indeed, it is this latter trend that calls attention to the need to scrutinize the contents of the video films. Because the contents of the video films have enormous implications for us as a nation in a world turned into one by media technology.

II: Producers

Presently, looming large and standing firm in the industry are the video producers. And the video producers are in different categories - those who were initially cinema producers but have been constrained by economic straps to produce on video (Tunde Kelani is a good example in this category), those who were producers of soaps for Nigeria TV stations and transited to video (Zeb Ejiro and Amaka Igwe), and those who scurried from other endeavors to the video industry purely for purposes of mercantilism. The other group will include those who are turned out from Nigeria's universities as graduates of theatre arts or mass communication trying their hands out in practical production, and Pentecostal pastors or overseers who fund film as a means of proselytizing. Of whatever group, the producers are indeed influential in the industry because they are the major financiers. In any industry powered and propelled entirely by ghe private sector and devoid of an inkling of support from government, the producers are nothing short of dictators in the video colony. As one scholar succinctly puts it, "A film is what and how it is on account of its financing" (Ekwuazi, 1984: 34). The producers write or buy their scripts, hire directors, lead actors/actresses and crew, in most cases they double as marketers and so on. So an average Nigerian video film is produced at the whims and caprice of the producers.

This trend has great implications for the industry and the nation. When a huge creative enterprise of a nation is left at the mercy and manipulations of a single production unit in the whole of that creative industry, unsavory results are bound to manifest. Presently, the producers who dominate the industry are the multimillion Naira traders in electronics and motor spare parts who put in their money and expect maximum profit from the venture within the shortest possible time. As hardnosed capitalists, their emphasis is on what contents of the videos that bring about high patronage and ultimately generate huge profit. They neither care nor even pay attention to the aesthetics of motion picture making.

Video technology had been invented primarily for gathering news materials for TV and other media outfits. Film production was done mainly on celluloid. But with the invention of digital video equipment, the difference between the video and the celluloid is more or

less minimal. With creativity, professional handling and advanced video technology such as digital video camera (DVC pro), a film produced with video can come close to the visual poetry peculiar with cinema. So a good quality Nigerian film could still be produced using video technology if the producers and other key production forces in the industry can be a little patient and pay attention to average film aesthetics.

III: The Issue Of Culture

Currently, Nigerian video films are at the very centre of intellectual discourses all over the world. Institutes of African studies and other related departments in Europe and America are organizing workshops, seminars and conferences on various aspects of the video films. But at the heart of all these debates is the question of how correct the Nigerian video films depict the true culture of the Nigerian people. By culture here we refer to the totality of a people's ways of life that is learned and transmitted from one generation to another. Film scholars such as onookome okome and Nwachuku Agbada argue that some of the videos represent the worldview of some of Nigeria's ethnic nations. With particular reference to Living in Bondage produced in 1992 by Kenneth Nnebue, Okome argues that the film misrepresents the Igbo culture. Because the film vacillates between the city and the village, he argues, one can rarely assign authoritatively the Igbo ethnic matrix to the film. According to Okome the film Living in Bondage "...is not primarily about an Igbo society. Certainly not as Igbo as the world of umuafia in Chinua Achebe's novel, Things Fall Apart (Okome, 98:50). This diatribe is not from the tiny class of Nigeria film critics domiciled in universities alone. The Nigeria media is awash with charges and lamentations of the preponderance of violence and rituals in the videos (Thisday Newspaper March 23rd, 2001.p38 and March 26th 2001.p52). Popular films such as Ritual, Blood Money I & II, and others have been criticized for their excess ritual and juju elements. And because films

talk about people, it is feared that Nigerian video producers are sending wrong signals about the country through the videos to the world.

But the ritual character of the videos must be traced to the very tradition from which the video dramas emerged. Indigenous cinema emerged straight from the theatre. Before the advent of the notion technology to Nigeria, there existed a vibrant theatre tradition especially around the South-West of Nigeria. And the distinguishing character of most of the plays of the theatre groups was a certain faddish preoccupation with the metaphysical - gods, ritual, juju etc. so when indigenous filming began, these groups merely adapted their plays for the screen medium. A good example is Hubert Ogunde's Aiye and Ajani Ogun which he coproduced with Ola Balogun, pioneer Nigerian trained cinematographer. So when asphyxiating economic constraints forced producers to the video, it was for the same theatre audience who had now switched to the small screen but without the same entertainment taste. It was Kenneth Nnebue's film Living in Bondage produced in 1992 that again incensed this ritual legacy inherited from the theatre.

Further, Pentecostalism which was becoming a vigorous religious movement at the later part of the 20th

century also played a part. Often ascribing secular social problems to some demonic powers, the Pentecostal churches such as Mount Zion Faith Ministries and Liberty Foundation Ministries, wrote narrative plots around this subject in their films. As one film antic puts it "many Christian narratives foreground the conflict between God's forces and Satan's in the affairs of human beings" (Oha 1997: 93). The reason for all of these Oha continues is because "contemporary Christianity in Nigeria, especially the Pentecostal brands, appears to have a point of intersection with indigenous religious system in the idea of the potency and operation of evil forces even though the former still regards the latter as the site and domain of demonic operations". Secular social problems such as poverty, diseases, impotency, bareness were attributed to occult influences especially from the marine world. Inevitably therefore, the films by these churches utilized demonic images to impress their views on its audience. Films such as "The Great Mistake" by Mike Bamiloye of the Mount Zion Faith Ministries or "Declined from the Powers of Darkness" by Helen Ukpabio of the Liberty faith Ministries in Calabar are ready examples.

The implication of this two factors discussed above is that almost the entire features reeled out of the Nigerian video industry, either by secular producers or churches, embody a certain immanence of ritual, violence, juju and the occult generally. Of course, this has stirred caustic remarks from all quarters — the academia, the reviewers, government and even the citizenry.

Hence this paper attempts a suggestion of remedial measures for the video producers which will see them on less scandalous charges and perhaps palliate the fears of Nigerians whose pride is their culture - their very life.

Implications For Nigerian Video Film Producers

From informal chats with Nigerian film producers, random discussions with video patrons, perusal of some existing literature on Nigerian video culture, and preview of some selected video films, it is obvious that little work needs to be done to perfect the Nigerian video film genre. It is these chats, discussions and readings that have influenced the suggestions provided here.

First, the Nigerian video film producers must first recognize film as a cultural medium with high influence on public opinion by outsiders about the Nigerian world, before they see it as a commercial venture. Once high premium is paid on the cultural quality of their films rather than economic interests, then a more culturally fervent picture of Nigeria through film will be ensured.

Second, there is also the need for research. Most video film producers of the video genre leap at almost every material or script for shooting without necessarily investigating for concrete and appropriate cultural information and facts. Once Nigerian film producers cultivate the culture of in dept research, they'll be on their way to achieving a more culturally perfect and qualitative Nigerian world in their films.

Third, is also the need for education and orientation in the basics of film production. Most current Nigerian video film producers lack the basic rudiments of the essential aesthetics in film production. This is worsened by the near lack of formal education that is common amongst most of the film producers. Enrolment in the Nigerian Film Institute for elementary or refresher courses in film production may be expedient.

Furthermore, the Nigerian video film producer should look inwards into their lore. The fountain of a people's culture usually lie in their orature. It is here that wise tales steeped in a people's culture can be found. As Eddy Ugbomah, one of Nigeria's leading cinema producers notes, "I think oral tradition is the only true African identity for African movies because the oral tradition is a critical element in our pattern of communication. It seem that the only identity we have now, to which we should hold tight, is the interpretation of our folklore. African film must have its own identity, and its identity is located in the oral narrative technique...." (Ugbomah, 2000:81). The Nigerian film producer only need to adapt such orature to sooth contemporary social trends and taste.

There is also need for technical improvement in the quality of the Nigerian video films. Though the popular video culture rely heavily on VHS cameras for shooting, the use of better video technology such as DVC PRO cameras could improve picture quality and sound track. Digital cameras for instance will make it possible for the initial shooting which is done with VHS cameras to be blown up to 16mm celluloid format. This way, better quality in picture, sound and other media aesthetics will be enhanced in the videos.

Specialists in ethnic cultures of groups in Nigeria should be incorporated into the Nigeria video censors Board (NFVCB). This way, film with inappropriate cultural depictions of the different ethnic groups would not be granted public screening rights.

REFERENCES

- Afolabi, A., 1997. From Film to Video, Nigerian Video Films. Jonathan Haynes (ed.) Ibadan; Kraft Books
- Arulogun, A., 1979. The Role of Film in Cultural Identity.
 The Development and Growth of Film Industry in Nigeria. Opubor. A. and Nwuneli. O. (eds), Lagos; Third Press International.
- Black, J. and Bryant J., 1995. Introduction to mass communication: Understand the past; experience the present, marvel at the future. 4th (ed.). Madison, USA; Brown and Benchmark Publishers.
- Bittner, J., 1989. Mass Communication. An Introduction. 5th (ed.). Eaglewood Cliff, New Jersey; Prentice Hall.
- Ekwuazi, H., 1984. The Film in Nigeria: The Context of Production. Ph.D Dissertation. University of Ibadan.
- Haynes, J., 1997. Preface, Nigerian Video Film. Ibadan, Kraft Books.
- Hospers, J., 1969. (ed) Introductory Readings in Aesthetics. New York; The Free Press.
- Okoli, B., 2001. Stop This Violence On Our Screen, ThisDay Newspaper, March 26th.
- Orji, O.,. 2001. Videos Of Violence, ThisDay Newspaper, March, 23rd.
- Ogundele, W., 2000. From Folk Opera to Soap Opera; Improvisation and Transformations in Yoruba Popular Theatre, Nigerian Video Films. Jon Haynes (ed.) Ohio; Ohio Centre for International Studies.
- Ugbomah, Eddy., 2000. Eddy Ugbomah. Lagos;. Edifosa Entertainment.
- Ugor, P., 2002. Nigerian Video Films and the Yoruba Continuities in Diaspora, *Theatre Studies Review. Chris Nwamou (ed)*.
- Ugor, P., 2002. For mainframe, No More Boundaries". ThisDay Newspaper, February, 7th.
- * Also Found on the allafrica.Com page on the Google Website.

