

NIGERIAN THEATRE JOURNAL

A JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY OF NIGERIA THEATRE ARTISTS (SONTA)

Vol. 23 Issues 1 and 2, 2023

ISSN: 0189-9562 (Print)

ISSN: 2971-6748 (Online)

Editor
Osakue Stevenson Omoera

2023

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The Nigerian Theatre Journal (NTJ) (ISSN: 0189-9562 Print; ISSN: 2971-6748 Online) is published by the Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA), C/O The Editor, NTJ, Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Federal University Otuoke (FUO), Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

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NOLLYWOOD AND THE CHALLENGE OF DIGITAL ARCHIVING AND PRESERVATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract

This paper discusses digital archiving and preservation as a challenge that Nollywood must grapple with in the digital era. The paper argues that, in other climes, filmmakers have since understood archiving and preservation as the last steps in the life of a movie; unlike in Nigeria, where many a filmmaker have no plan beyond marketing and distribution. The methodology adopted for the research is the qualitative method, with use of documents and visual media research instrument utilized. This study is anchored on the theory of functionalism to establish the paper's strong position that, in this era of transition to digital filmmaking, it has become rather pertinent for Nigerian filmmakers to factor in the archiving and preservation of their films as the final phase of the production process, in view of the all-important role it plays in the life of their works. Findings reveal that once the current film is distributed, filmmakers tend to move on with planning for the next big project. Thus, they fail to spend quality time to grapple with the reality of where the product of their hard work will end up in the future. This study concludes that filmmakers should be sensitized to appreciate the gains of the future life of their films that archiving and preservation offer. The National Film, Video and Sound Archive (NFVSA) in Jos should be strengthened and well-positioned to harvest the offerings of Nigerian filmmakers for posterity through digital archiving and preservation is our recommendation.

Keywords: Digital era, Archiving, Preservation, Nollywood, NFVSA, Challenge.

Introduction

Nollywood is a popular epithet for the Nigerian film industry, arguably, the second-largest film industry in the world. Nollywood encompasses Nigerian movies made on the African continent and film sub-industries in the African diaspora. These smaller sectors include industries that focus on Yoruba-, Igbo-, and Hausa-language films (the city of Kano inspired the "Kannywood" moniker). Even English-language films made in the neighbouring West African country of Ghana and Nigerian movies

made in the United States and other countries also fall under the Nollywood umbrella (Master Class n.p). Ekwuazi has identified three schools of thought of Nollywood, namely Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba films. Omoera added the fourth, which is the Benin video film (qtd. in Omoera 12). Today, the Nigerian film culture could be said to be the most variegated in the world with new frontiers in Urhobo, Ebira, Ibibio, Ijaw, Esan, among others (Omoera 12). The industry has traversed through diverse eras of development to assume its present state and status. Unarguably, the Nigerian film industry in the last decade has undergone a period of transformation occasioned by the introduction and application of relatively high-end digital machinery in the filmmaking process and this has created a paradigm shift in its production modes.

Thus, today, the Nigerian film industry or Nollywood as it is more commonly referred to, is recognized as one of the biggest in the world. There are star actors, higher production values and the intensely enthusiastic participation of global audiences in the burgeoning film scene in the country. However, these advancements did not occur until recently, when it went from its direct-to-video hits in the Golden Era to its current state – the new wave, more controversially called “New Nollywood.” New Nollywood refers to films particularly distinguished by their enhanced narrative complexity, aesthetic value, and overall production quality compared to the films made during the video boom. While some films in this wave are still released directly on DVD, most are released theatrically to teeming fans via cinemas or streaming platforms. Talking of New Nollywood, Haynes posits that:

The phrase describes an attempt by independent producer/directors to “take Nollywood to the next level” by making better films with bigger budgets, films that can survive the aesthetic and technical challenge of being projected in cinemas rather than being released immediately as VCDs (video compact discs, the standard medium for movies in Nigeria) or DVDs for home viewing. The economic basis for this strategy depends on theatrical release in the Nigerian multiplex movie theaters that have been built in recent years and on transnational distribution circuits including both African diasporic audiences and international film festivals. (54)

Unarguably, the Nigerian film industry is currently experiencing significant structural transformation stimulated by the use of new technologies in its production, distribution and exhibition modes. The advances in digital technology have enhanced the aesthetic and narratives of screen content producers in Nigeria in their effort to become relevant in the global marketplace (Ebelebe ii). According to Ebelebe:

At the evolving stage of digital cinematic technologies, the cost of procurement was considerably high and the systems were difficult to maintain. But the technology did provide the innovative and creative opportunities for filmmakers to shoot, edit, and animate footage in ways that were once unimaginable and prohibitively expensive. Today the cost of procuring these systems is relatively very low and the technology has improved immensely, making it even more attractive to filmmaking industries like Nollywood. As Tope Oshin observes, in the past when filmmaking was about making films on

celluloid, we had very few filmmakers and we had the difficulty of not being able to project our films in the cinemas. It was one of the biggest problems the Nigerian film industry had at that time. However, the digital revolution has helped us get to that point where we can catch up with the world, we can use the new digital cameras, we can avail ourselves of the new technology, our editing work flow is better and we can work on sound better. (42)

Mauyakufa and Pradhan corroborate Ebelebe and the foregoing discourse on the impact of the advancement in digital technologies on the Nigerian film industry thus:

The advancement of technology has created new opportunities for amateur and auteur in filmmaking. The technological innovation is continuously transforming the film industry, thus enabling the application of re-imaging and re-engineering in the films to enhance the quality of films. Nollywood, a Nigerian film industry, is heavily being impacted by the technological advancement which is using digital technologies and High-Definition cameras. This has led to film studios and film companies mushrooming across the country and its borders. Presently, Nigeria is considered as one of the most competitive film industries in the world, and thus has become an African icon. For Africa, this has greatly resulted in a shared commodified culture. (814)

Nollywood has experienced rapid growth in nearly every facet of its life as an industry as orchestrated by the application of digital technologies in its processes. Yet, it is dicey for one to be lured into the thinking that the industry is therefore at its highest peak, or better still, is functioning at its highest potential. A critical examination will prove otherwise, for contrary to such school of thought, there is still much to be done to have the industry at par with other advanced film cultures. Access to funds for filmmakers remains one of the biggest problems that the industry faces, with a lack of talents and story development coming behind amongst others. Nonetheless, the Nollywood industry in this era of digital revolution is growing massively, and there is room for further development. One of the major areas of focus for a greater level of development for the industry is thus what this paper is premised on—digital archiving and preservation of its offerings for posterity.

It is needless to say that the manner in which digital and/or technological advancements have been made in the last decade has impacted greatly on the development of almost all sectors of the global society. This paper examines this impact with particular emphasis on the creative industry in general, and the Nigerian film industry in particular. Consequently, courtesy of the digital revolution, there are new concepts and terminologies in the sector and industry, like digital production, digital distribution, digital exhibition, marketing and distribution. This is indeed an interesting development, however, it does not end there, as this paper contends, even digital archiving and preservation are to be incorporated for the system to be complete.

The Functionalist Theory and its Application to the Study

Every discipline is grounded by its own set of theories which develop over a particular point of disciplinary history. These theories provide the broad framework or orientation for interpretation of facts. Theories, in simpler terms, are statements that use various concepts and ideas as analytical tools or devices to explain social phenomena of different scale and magnitude. Theories are generally able to explain a wide range of phenomena through a limited set of central and significant thought categories. Theory is thus a body of knowledge that explains a wide range of phenomena from different cultural background. There are a plethora of theoretical propositions that abound across different fields of human endeavour. For the purpose of this study, the theory of functionalism, otherwise referred to as the functionalist theory, has been adapted and situated within the framework of this study, thus undergirding its claims thereof.

Functionalism, in social sciences, is a theory based on the premise that all aspects of a society—institutions, roles, norms, etc.—serve a purpose and that all are indispensable for the long-term survival of the society. The approach gained prominence in the works of 19th-century sociologists, particularly those who viewed societies as organisms (Encyclopaedia Britannica n.p). Relatedly, the Sociology Dictionary defines functionalism as "a theory that views society as a complex but orderly and stable system with interconnected structures and functions or social patterns that operate to meet the needs of individuals in a society" (Sociology Dictionary n.p).

In lieu of a near accurate conceptualization of the theory of functionalism, Gloria Gómez-Diago's exposition in the article "Functionalist Theory" published in *The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Mass Media and Society* passes for the writers. Gómez-Diago in her exposition of the concept avers that:

Functionalism is a theoretical perspective that focuses on the functions performed in society by social structures such as institutions, hierarchies, and norms. Within this theory, function refers to the extent to which a given activity promotes or interferes with the maintenance of a system. (Gómez-Diago 2)

Research shows that functionalism has been considered one of the prominent schools of thought in order to understand various aspects of culture and society. Functionalism looks for the function or part that is played by several aspects of culture in order to maintain a social system. It is a framework that considers society as a system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. This approach of theoretical orientation looks at both social structure and social function. It describes the inter-relationship between several parts of any society. These parts or the constituent elements of a society could be named as norms, traditions, customs, institutions like economy, kinship, religion etc. These parts are interrelated and interdependent.

Functionalism emerged in the early 20th century and is associated with authors such as Émile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, Herbert Spencer, and Robert Merton, who dominated American social theory in the 1950s and 1960s (Gómez-Diago 2). The French sociologist Émile Durkheim argued that it was necessary to understand the "needs" of the social organism to which social phenomena correspond. Other writers

have used the concept of function to mean the interrelationships of parts within a system, the adaptive aspect of a phenomenon, or its observable consequences. In sociology, functionalism met the need for a method of analysis; in anthropology it provided an alternative to evolutionary theory and trait-diffusion analysis (Britannica n.p).

It is worthy of note that criticisms exist about the theory in question. Part of the criticism of the functionalist theory has it that functionalism understates the power imbalances and the role of conflict within society. It further holds that, functionalism is far too conservative and accepting of the status quo, particularly inequality. Equally, that functionalism is a macrosociological perspective. Functionalism along with conflict theory and symbolic interactionism are the typical perspectives studied in sociology, but postmodern perspectives are challenging this tradition (Sociology Dictionary n.p).

In spite of the criticisms of the functionalist theory that have been adduced in the foregoing, the theory is highly suitable and greatly applicable to this study. The basic assumption of functionalism is that all structures, particularly institutions within society, serve a purpose or function, contributing the stability of the social system. In this paper, the role or function that the archives, as an important institution of society, in respect to the preservation of the cultural and historical heritage of the societies, play in preserving filmmakers' productions for posterity has been clearly established.

Digital Archiving and Preservation: A Critical Approach

Over the years of film archival practice, there have occurred several significant developments that have altered the face of archival practices. One of such changes is the introduction of digital technology in modern filmmaking, in laboratory, as well as in access practices, and this is changing the way film archives operate. Digital tools have also been partially introduced in everyday practices of film archives in relation to access and restoration. Given that in the last years, more and more films have been made through digital technologies at one stage or the other, especially since the recent introduction of the digital intermediate process, film archives are confronted with the need of accepting "digital elements" as the "original" masters of new film productions (Fossati 63).

Wengstrom of the Swedish Film Institute in his paper entitled, "Access to Film Heritage in the Digital Era – Challenges and Opportunities" shares a whole lot of facts on the transition from analogue to digital technology in archival practices. Particularly in respect to the new opportunities and of course, possibilities that digitization offers in the world of film archiving, Wengstrom posits that:

The transition from analogue to digital technology has radically changed the potential access to film heritage. In principle, digital copies can be made without damaging originals, and protection, broadcast or any other forms of presentation or transmission will not damage the digital copy in itself. High-quality digital copies can be made for theatrical use, emulating the look of a 35mm original print, as well as rendering copies for various forms of home entertainment media and platforms enjoyed on television or computer screens,

or on tables and mobile phones. Scholars and the general public alike could now, thanks to the shift in technology, get access to treasures in the archives on an unprecedented scale. And by providing access in digital formats, archives can make those parts of the collections hitherto unseen and unheard of, widely known. (127)

One would agree, as Wengstrom reveals in the above quotation, that there is a whole lot that the transition from analogue to digital technology offers to the world of archives. Interestingly, there is more to it, as similarly to Wengstrom's exposition above, Fossati also expounds on the possibilities that digital technology offers for film archiving:

The spread of the digital is also accompanied by an increase in archives' capabilities. Specific digital tools for film restoration are improving by the day and many archivists are changing their views on the digital based on the results of recent digital restorations. For those who accept digital technology as a useful means for restoring archival films, learning how to apply digital tools to film restorations is as important as keeping up with the most advanced photochemical techniques for film duplication. This is also true in the field of access. Digitizing film collections for access purposes is becoming today as urgent as preserving our film originals in the best possible and most sustainable way. Indeed, both users and funding entities expect archives to make use of the possibilities offered by the digital in terms of accessibility. Broadcast archives are especially active in this direction and migration of video originals to digital media is becoming a common practice in most video archives, even on a massive scale. (63)

Film archives preserve materials of significant cultural heritage. While current practice helps ensure 35mm film will last for at least one hundred years, digital technology is creating new challenges for the traditional means of preservation. Digitally produced films can be preserved via film stock; however, digital ancillary materials and assets in many cases cannot be preserved using traditional analog means. Strategy and action for preserving this content needs to be addressed before further content is lost. It is necessary however to try to understand the current perspective of the film archives, especially with regards to the film industry's marked hesitation to embrace digital preservation and equally the current approach to curation and its hesitation to move to digital technologies for preservation. These are important areas for further research hence the focus of this study may be unaccommodating of such dimensions of the discourse.

Wengström, earlier cited, further deepens the discourse on the opportunities and possibilities that digital technology has created particularly in terms of disseminating film heritage. But the author also makes the case for the urgency with which funding is required to exhaustively utilize the potentialities of the new carrier for the archives—digital technology. According to Wengström, digital technology creates unprecedented opportunities and possibilities of disseminating film heritage,

known and unknown, to a much wider audience than at any previous time in history. Instead of having to turn down most requests for giving access to the collections by lending prints, due to the borrower being incapable of handling or projecting the prints in a correct way, digital cinema copies can be made available at almost every cinema. And apart from providing access in a theatrical context, high-quality digitization also means that film heritage can be made available in other windows or from other platforms. But in order to fulfill the potential of digital and to accomplish this vision, funding needs to be made available before it is too late and it is becoming too late very soon (134-135).

The implication of the foregoing is that, the digital era has not come without its attendant challenges that threaten its very effectiveness in the archival experience. Discussing some of the challenges of the digital era of film archiving, Christensen and Kuutti clearly identify them to fall under some broader categorizations to include curatorship, preservation, screening, distribution and programming, access and contextualization, funding and copyright (2-4). However, in spite of these challenges film archives must go digital to be able to serve their clients and users so as to meet the current demands of archive users. In whichever case, traditional film archiving will have to be continued. It must be reiterated at this point on the whole that, digital archiving is a fundamentally different operation from traditional film archiving, and needs new skills, technology and funding.

Digital Archiving and Preservation: The Challenge for Nollywood in the Digital Era

There are so many individuals that contribute immensely to the art and craft of filmmaking, from makeup artists to producers. However, there are those that work behind the scenes to ensure that films, both new and old, last long after the celluloid on which they were captured fade and decays. Such persons can be called “The true unsung heroes of cinema.” These are archivists and preservationists who exert a lot of efforts and energy to restore and preserve some of the most important films in cinematic history. Film archiving and preservation may not be the most popular topic when it comes to cinematic discourses, but it is an important one. Just imagine a situation where great films in the various film cultures across the globe being lost to posterity, never to ever be seen in its original quality or, even worse, at all because someone improperly stored the original copy. It may seem unimaginable, but this has happened countless times before to other films.

This explains why archiving and preservation are now long considered the last steps in the life of a movie against the cycle of production, exhibition and distribution. Archiving and preservation can even, by the estimation of the writers, become the first steps of a new life. Hence proper preservation guarantees that a film can be seen long after its original release. It is sad however to note that, unlike in other climes where filmmakers have since understood archiving and preservation as the last steps in the life of a movie; in Nigeria, many filmmakers have no plan beyond marketing and distribution. Thus, once a film is distributed, its makers tend to move on without reservations whatsoever. Except for few exceptions, the average Nigerian filmmaker

does not spend reasonable amount of time contemplating the reality of where the product of their years of hard work will end up in the next couple of years. This is the situation that Currò decries thus:

The unfortunate reality is that most moviemakers overlook proper planning for the post-exhibition life of their films. Usually the materials that comprise the original exhibition copy are left behind until something new stirs interest in that work again. Then a search for those materials starts. In some lucky cases, the elements were properly taken care of and immediately available. In other cases they are difficult to track down or, worse, either lost or permanently degraded. Film can decay, digital data can get corrupted or become obsolete and then irretrievable. What can be done then? Often, sadly, nothing—it's too late. (Currò n.p)

Currò's observation above necessitates that filmmakers take advantage of the properties and possibilities that digital technology has offered in the world of archiving and preservation. In the most recent times, digitalization has played major parts in the preservation of precious materials. Digitization converts materials from formats that can be read by people (analog) to a format that can be read only by machines (digital), such as read-only scanner, digital cameras, planetary cameras and a number of other devices which can be used to digitize cultural heritage materials (Jones n.p). The transition to digital filmmaking, with its lack of a physical object to rely on, has made preservation issues even more pressing. In the production phase moviemakers are now confronted with storage and data availability issues; that reality is causing them to be proactive about ensuring preservation and long term accessibility to their works. Unfortunately, preservation also requires time for proper planning and financial resources (Currò n.p).

The primary, and usually the most obvious advantage of digitization is that it enables greater access to collections of all types. All manner of materials can be digitized and delivered in electronic formats and the focuses of the contents that are selected for digitization vary across institutions. The conversion into bits and bytes opens up a completely new dimension of reaching traditional and new audiences by providing access to cultural heritage resources in ways unimaginable a decade ago. Thus, Nigerian archives as cultural institutions would have to commit increasing amounts of time and money to digitization in order to improve access to their collections. In the bid to ensuring the development of digitization, several operational structures, systems, facilities and new skills set for the staff are required.

It is glad to note here that, some of this momentum is gathered at the National Film Video and Sound Archive Jos, with the intervention of German institutions resulting to digitization efforts evidenced by the restoration and digitization of two historical Nigerian films, *Shehu Umar* and *Kubla No Barna*. These films were successfully restored and digitalized in line with modern technological advancement, using the expertise of the *Arsenal Institute of Film and Video Archives Berlin*, and have since been screened at different forums locally and internationally especially for the former. To sustain these efforts, an Archival Master Programme has also been

inaugurated to train local personnel to carry on the work of restoration, digital archiving and preservation. This shows that the Nigerian filmmakers have no more excuses; rather they must take advantage of this great opportunity that is now available to digitally archive and preserve their works for posterity.

It can be recalled that, at the beginning of the year 2020, the Minister of Information and Culture, Alhaji Lai Mohammed had issued a directive to the nation's apex federal film agency, the Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC), for the immediate implementation of a set of actions intended to reposition the film industry for maximum benefit to all Nigerians. Meanwhile, the Corporation had proclaimed readiness to accommodate the envisaged increase in the volume of audio-visual materials at its National Film, Video and Sound Archive in line with the ministerial directives. The National Film Archive Policy developed by the NFC was to provide needed guidelines, according to the report. In compliance with the framework of making the corporation the national repository of all Nigerian film archive, it is expected that henceforth, according to directive, copies of all films, video works and music, sound and film posters are to be deposited at the NFVSA in Jos for posterity, and at no cost to the depositor. All such deposits will be protected under extant copyright and exhibition laws of the country. In cases of deteriorated motion pictures, the NFVSA will, with the consent of the depositor undertake restoration and digitization (Nwakunor, *The Guardian Nigerian News*).

The extent to which this directive has been implemented is a subject for another day. But suffice it to say here that, the primary institution that has been mandated to carry out this directive, the NFVSA is not well-positioned yet, to harvest, accommodate and harness the thousands of cinematic offerings churned out of Nollywood on a monthly, if not weekly, basis. The NFVSA is plagued with a number of challenges that must be addressed to position it as a national repository harbor. Amongst these challenges that must be addressed are issues of lack of political will to enact film archival policy, lack of proper funding for the archives, lack of modern archiving technologies, poorly stocked holdings and non-inclusion of industry practitioners in the institutions activities and processes.

Globally, it is an undisputable fact that, the transition from analogue to digital film archiving and preservation is an ongoing effort with a plethora of problems surrounding it. Thus, this is not a case that is peculiar to Nigeria. The writers observe with dismay that, at the National Film, Video and Sound Archive Jos, even the very objectives that necessitated the establishment of the institution have never been fully explored not to talk of exploring the possibilities that the advancement in digital technologies has offered archival institutions elsewhere. To this end, the recent effort at the transition from analogue to digital services at the NFVSA is a commendable development. However, a critical examination of the current, existing realities of the institution leaves one with doubts as to the materialization of the project. This however is not to say that a change is not foreseeable, but the kind of change that is necessary can only come about with a sincere commitment on the part of the relevant government agencies in addressing the challenges of the NFVSA. Otherwise, the plans and efforts aimed at digital archiving and preservation will be thwarted.

This is indeed a great challenge for Nollywood in the digital era. Nevertheless, Nigerian filmmakers must not depend solely on the government institution, the NFVSA, for the actualization of the possibility of digitally archiving and preserving their offerings for posterity. They can as well explore personal and private options; even though we must with all sincerity admit, that this is going to be a difficult task, but howbeit, not impossible. This is exactly where Currò's admonition to filmmakers is apt. He states that in this new paradigm, digital preservation constantly requires filmmakers to be proactive, with fast migration from one format or medium to a newer one. Procrastination and faith in time's forgiveness is not allowed. Instead, in order to avoid catastrophe, planning is essential in the production phase. Filmmakers have to consider data storage and data retrievability in the short term, which means reflecting more than ever on how to guarantee long-term preservation and accessibility to their works.

Conclusion

This study rests on the ground that digital film archiving and preservation are part of the major challenges that Nollywood must grapple with in the digital era, in the midst of all the growth the industry has experienced. As it is obtainable in other climes, Nigerian filmmaker must now begin to perceive archiving and preservation as the last steps in the life of their filmmaking. They must now embrace the production workflow that traverses beyond marketing and distribution of their offerings. In other words, in this era of transition to digital filmmaking, it has become rather pertinent for Nigerian filmmakers to factor in the archiving and preservation of their films as the final phase of the production process, in view of the all-important role it plays in the life of their works. Filmmakers must no longer be prone to moving on with planning for the next big project and failing to spend quality time to grapple with the reality of where the product of their hard work will end up in the future. While this study challenges the Nigerian filmmaker to embrace the new options of digital archiving and preservation, the paper equally calls on the government through its relevant agencies to address the various challenges that digital archiving and preservation in Nigeria is faced with, which are not insurmountable. More than issuing a directive for all audiovisual materials to be deposited at the National Film Video and Sound Archive, the institution should be strengthened and well-positioned for the task of harvesting the offerings of Nigerian filmmakers for posterity through digital film archiving and preservation. The filmmakers on the other hand, should equally be sensitized to appreciate the gains of the future life of their films that archiving and preservation offer them. Stakeholders in the film industry should expedite action to accommodate these concerns. Foreign partners and investors should widen the scope of their intervention activities to incorporate the challenge of digital archiving and preservation of Nigerian films.

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