



Current Contents

Past Issues

□ Esan, Oluyinka:

'Appreciating Nollywood: Audiences and Nigerian 'Films''

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Appreciating Nollywood: Audiences and Nigerian 'Films'

Abstract

This paper is an ethnographic study of the Nigerian movies industry, Nollywood. It begins by considering the antecedents to this industry, in an attempt to identify factors that structure production practices and audience responses to the films. It notes that practices in Nollywood differ sharply from the established patterns within wider film industry. These new trends in the production and distribution have been facilitated by new media technologies. The paper goes on to analyse the responses from a sample of UK based Nollywood audiences and others, through the online communities of Nollywood fans. It observes how the social context of audiences shapes their reception. The study discovers peculiar reasons why audiences patronise film, which call for a renegotiation of the concept of film.

Keywords: Nollywood, Nigerian films, film audiences, identity, audience pleasures, new technology

Introduction

This paper attempts to examine audiences from an ethnographic perspective in order to identify how their use of film can assist us in finding the new meanings of 'film'. The aim is to document and explain the success witnessed in the Nigerian film/video industry and to find transferable lessons from this phenomenon. It is premised on the assumption that the audiences are critical to the success of any film industry. To place this in proper perspective, the antecedents to the growth of the industry in Nigeria will be examined, and other factors that account for Nollywood's success will be highlighted. These are the factors that structure the observed patterns in audience responses. The study examined how audience consumption patterns were facilitated by new trends in production and distribution within this "film industry". It observed that new media technologies and the social context of audiences has shaped patterns of reception. It is through audience negotiations of the meaning of Nollywood, that the study provokes a reconsideration of the concept of 'film'.

The ethnographic approach adopted here was necessary for two key reasons. One is the fact that there is so much yet unknown about film audiences and this is to be expected. One can argue that since routine film audience research is tied into the promotional systems (awards, fan clubs, film festivals), such efforts can only offer information that is compromised. The audience factor remains a crucial part of the business in the film industry because audience action, custom and preference patterns, loyalty and good will, determine commercial success. The link to the profit motive which characterises much of conventional audience research therefore tends to narrow attention to box office hits. This invariably means that research tends to neglect audiences on the fringes whilst focussing on the mainstream (Hollywood audiences). (Klinger, 2006; Allison, 2006; Hoskins, McFadyen & Finn, 1997)

Box office reports and such studies which offer panoramic views are compromised on another score. They are not as informative as they initially appear to be as they merely present aggregates. A different research approach is required for the many unanswered questions in the summaries and demographics of cinema attendance. In any case, as argued by Downing, (2003) such studies are expensive, and the more interesting aspects of the approximations (details of the results) are usually restricted to subscribers, people with vested interests in the industry. It is understandable that the concern in industry, especially one which enjoys such dominance in the global market has been to monitor what it has come to regard as its winning formula; what are the usual actions that guarantee profit. Little wonder therefore that an industry which has such a stranglehold on the market pays little attention to explanations of audience behaviour. This study has sought to look beyond the usual model, by focusing on a success story that has defied the Hollywood formula.

Nollywood is a new player that has crept into the market unannounced. It is the Nigerian “movie industry” whose acclaim was initially restricted to Nigerian and African audiences, but is progressively making inroads on the global scene. It is a regular feature on channels which specialise in the black and African audiences via satellite or cable (Multichoice Nigeria, BEN TV - Sky channel 194). Since January 2008, Nollywood has a dedicated channel offering 24 hour movies service on Sky digital platform to audiences in the UK and Ireland. There are a range of websites which also support the circulation of Nollywood. In spite of these developments its incursion into the mainstream is still debateable.

Reputed to be the third most prolific industry, after Hollywood and Bollywood, (Onishi: 2002) it has achieved this feat by virtue of the volume of production. By conventional wisdom, high volume of trade is evidence of audience approval of the products and evidence of success in any industry. Therefore if one would go by the patronage from its audiences, Nollywood success would be very clear, but this simple explanation of success is inadequate. It is shallow, even reckless to equate audience patronage with success until a clearer understanding of what inspires audience action is obtained. Nollywood audiences offer this opportunity, and being a novel area of inquiry this is a chance for a fresh appreciation of film audiences, and a chance to understand the peculiarities of this film culture.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, the views of Nollywood audiences in the diaspora have been sampled. This was done through a combination of observations and interviews conducted in outlets in London including interviews with distributors and customers of a couple of video shops in Camberwell (South London) and Barking (East London). These are typical locations for such services as they are within convenient reach of the large ethnic population either due to their residence or their patronage of ethnic markets / stores (for foodstuff and other specialist services such as money transfer, fashion supplies, Nigerian news magazines and so on). There was also a home visit facilitated by a distributor to a customer who has direct subscription. This was an exceptional case worthy of the closer scrutiny as the results showed.

To supplement these, there were sessions of observations conducted at the premiere of two Nollywood movies in London.^[1] The observations were also accompanied by two focus group discussions conducted at one of the events. This reflects the main distribution network for Nollywood in the U.K. In addition, a sample of discussions on weblogs devoted to Nollywood fans was analysed. The blogs had postings mainly from the U.S.A, and Nigeria. These and other news reports give insight into global and domestic Nollywood audiences. The reported viewing patterns were considered in light of findings from an earlier ethnographic study of Nigerian television industry and audiences (Esan 1993).

Television Industry & Nollywood Practices

Nollywood practices are rooted in the television industry where drama is the most important element of programming for much of the audience. Whilst news was important to the station and some elite members of the audience, the appeal for drama was quite universal amongst viewers. These drama productions were often in the local languages. The productions which were in English, the unifying language in a multi lingual society, were usually those produced for network transmission. These were often the better resourced routine productions. The drama specials which were produced in the local stations were also quite akin to what passes for Nollywood today. They were often longer features, in the local language and aired during festive seasons. These reflected the culture of the people and were usually the high point of their viewing experiences. Since these were not routine productions, they can be likened to the occasional trip to the cinema, except that in this case, the audience does not incur the extra costs; one may remain in a home environment to experience the pleasure. The subject matter of these included historical epics, love stories, comedies, and aspirational tales.

Nollywood productions have expanded the range of subject matter featured in such television specials. To reflect the times, and the (Western) fare which Nollywood may now be replacing, the industry now features thrillers, and gangster genres. On the whole there is a preponderance of morality tales, and a glaring attention to the prevalence of occult practices in society. Lines of classification are difficult to draw, as many genres are easily conflated in the effort to create a wide appeal and guarantee quick returns on investment. There are evangelical (usually Christian but also Islamic) movies which bestride genres whilst retaining their religious sensibilities. These video / films are known to explore the conflicts between the traditional ways and the challenges of contemporary living. They feature variations in lifestyles to be found in urban and rural areas. In all, they offer contrasting sets of values that the viewer may have to choose from in the attempt to correct societal ills.

As was the case in television, Nollywood uses language to bring programming closer to the grassroots audiences. Films were made in the local languages. Some of these were subtitled. The use of subtitles helps to transcend ethnic and cultural barriers that local languages imposed within the multilingual Nigerian market. Subtitles are increasingly a feature in Nollywood. They have the potential to expand the markets, when illiteracy does not constitute a barrier. The facility is invaluable to draw in audiences from other ethnic groups who would otherwise be disadvantaged.

Music is an integral communication element of Nollywood productions, as songs were to the traditional folk tales. Music helps to convey the intended meaning; it underscores the significant points in the plot and indicates the mood and emotions of the characters. It heightens the dramatic tension, and viewers are forewarned of looming danger. Music and songs are crucial for continuity and for bringing closure as audiences contemplate the meanings to draw from texts. It is usual to have songs specially commissioned for the productions. These may be used as non diegetic elements of the production, to add colour and serve as narrative links. Productions also relied on electronic soundtracks and at times commercial music. In these practices, Nollywood has given, as it has taken. It has helped to sustain an ancillary service from which the television (and music) industry now benefit.

The political tensions evident in society which could not be directly addressed on mainstream television may have contributed to the opportunities available for the video/film industry. In the early to mid 90s, when the industry began to thrive, Nigeria was under a defiant military regime that was intolerant of the news media. This (Abacha) was the regime in power when Nigeria was suspended from the

Commonwealth in 1995, for its anti democratic practices and its infringements of human rights. Nollywood was largely ignored then. At the time, neither its political nor its economic potential had been acknowledged. Then most videos were not overtly political in spite of the political upheavals that framed the regime. Though the Nigerian nation was a pariah state, Nollywood did not overtly address such issues. The prevalent assumptions of Nollywood were of its benign nature. As with much of popular culture, it was perceived as the opiate of the masses because of its wide appeal. But Nollywood is by no means apolitical even if it does not adopt the militant style of some popular music. Some productions like Mainframe's *Saworoide (Brass Bells*, dir. Tunde Kelani, 1999) were clever satires, which were tolerated or ignored by the authorities.^[2]

The videos are often social commentaries, reflecting social reality. In so doing, they take swipes at those in authority, be it in the dialogue or by inferences in the subtext. They may not rock the boat by avoiding direct confrontation with those in authority, but they were still potentially subversive in the relationships presented, and the strategies they explored for living under the prevalent harsh conditions. This orientation to reflecting developments in society may have led to the premature conclusion that Nollywood was benign or unable to shape society; a conclusion which ignores the hegemonic struggles that occur with cultural artefacts. Unless we understand how audiences negotiate the meaning of the viewing experiences we may not fully appreciate the contribution of the industry in this regard.

It can be argued that in more ways than is readily evident, the economic and political instability experienced in Nigeria since the 80s contributed to the development of Nollywood. The austerity measures and the perils of night life in the 80s was a sharp contrast from the 70s when life was easier; then there was a bubbling night life and cinema attendance was usual. The prevalent need for caution and security consciousness meant changes in lifestyles that led to the preference for home based entertainment. This was when 24 hour TV transmission began in Nigeria first as a weekend service on Lagos Television.^[3] As stations had a demand for local productions to put on the airwaves independent production became viable. Dwindling public funds had led to cutbacks in the funding of the arts and government owned television stations. In this context independent production thrived though television production as a whole was quite challenging at that time. Independent producers were forging through uncharted paths as television funding had been secure under the public service stations till then. For survival they needed direct access to audiences, hence their foray into production of home movies. It is in deed ironic that the same instability which contributed to the decline in cinema attendance contributed to the growth of the Nigerian movies industry.

Nollywood evolved with its own production disciplines as it relied on video technology and performers many of whom cut their teeth as (street) theatre practitioners. The business was risky, the financial sector was not supportive, production costs were high, and quality was clearly compromised. Funds for the video films were sourced locally, and production was hurried to reduce costs and minimise the risks of piracy.

As well as funding and artistic orientations, productions also had to contend with the limitations imposed by the quality of available wider social infrastructure such as transport and electricity. The production routines in Nollywood are therefore quite peculiar; a novel approach borne out of the prevalent circumstances in the production context.

In the early days, there were often no scripts and performers were not always fully briefed on creative ideas for security reasons. Much of the dialogue especially in the Yoruba language productions was ad-libbed. Performers had to be well versed in the culture to do this successfully. This further engrained the ethnic divisions that were conspicuous in the industry. As Kunzler notes, in Nollywood, ad libbing was

facilitated by the focus on everyday life. He wrote that “word play and verbal skills are very important and appreciated” (Kunzler, 2006: 3). This is corroborated by accounts of television audiences (Esan 1993).

The sum total of these was that Nollywood in its early days was characterised by its predictable story lines, slow pace, questionable sequels, lengthy and noisy dialogues; this style was deemed incompatible with the medium of film. Consequently the industry elicited sharp criticism from those who sought to defend the canonical standards of film. Yet the industry flourished as the audience’s patronage was certain.

Other antecedents to viewing practices

There is a class divide that had been apparent in the film market in Nigeria even before Nollywood. This is separate from the ethnic/language classification of the industry. The evidence for this is to be found in the exhibition patterns that characterised the film industry in the 1950s and 60s when no restrictions had been placed on imported films. As is consistent with the patterns in other parts of the world, the market was dominated by Hollywood films, particularly the Westerns and action films. These were also regular features on television schedules in TV’s early days.^[4] Indian films and Hong Kong cinema were also popular amongst audiences but each had its niche (Hoskins, McFadyen & Finn 1997; Ikhime 1979). The stratification of the market was evident in the exhibition spaces. These included large multi national cinema theatre franchises such as Roxy and Odeon, at the higher end of the market, with Pen, Scala, Rex at the other. These were features of Nigerian social life, particularly in urban areas until the introduction of Nigeria’s policy of indigenisation in 1979^[5].

The cinema theatres were stratified by their location and their fare. Those within (or in close proximity of) high density residential areas were expected to serve the low income groups. They were reputed for being run down, crowded, more likely to show action, romance, and pornographic texts. They tended to show Westerns, Indian and Hong Kong movies. They also exhibited some of the initial domestic efforts which were celluloid film productions. With time these venues were regarded as dens for pickpockets, robbers, prostitutes, drug dealers and drunkards. (see Abdullai Musa’s posting on ‘Is the big Screen Still Big in Africa?’, *BBC News Africa* ‘Have Your Say’ Forum: 2)

These audiences were less pretentious in their reception practices; they were more likely to respond loudly to elements within the film, shouting at characters, applauding their prowess, cheering, jeering, and expressing their disapproval to the projectionist if the reel change was not to their satisfaction. They did not exercise restraint nor did they exhibit the airs and graces apparent at the other end of the spectrum where the audiences sat in comfortable and air-conditioned cinema halls. Their reception practices were quite comparable to what obtains in any standard cinemas in Western society. Cinema for the middle and more privileged classes featured more polished Western (Hollywood) fare. Their behaviour likewise was more polished. These were the more educated, more travelled, possibly more *aspirational* and certainly more critical audiences.

Cinema for the low income strata was regarded as low brow because of the context of viewing, the texts that they viewed and the manners of the audiences. Yet these audiences were apparently less critical of the films that they viewed. By viewing films made in languages that they did not understand, they had cultivated the skills for extra-linguistic decoding. They thus demonstrated that audiences were able to deduce storylines from the visuals and sound tracks even when there was no knowledge of the language in which dialogue was set. This experience was instructive for identifying Nollywood’s market potential. If

audiences had learnt to do this with foreign films that they had to pay for, it seemed reasonable to expect them to do the same with local productions for which they had a greater semblance of cultural affinity. Irrespective of how their taste or appreciation of film is classified, Nigerian audiences had become aware of film as a medium for storytelling, there was clearly an appetite for films. There was recognition of how cinematic codes can be employed to create new spaces for messages.

Aspirations of Nollywood

Viewed from a national perspective, there are two key motivations for Nollywood. One is to do with the issue of cultural identity, and the other relates to economic independence. On both counts, Nollywood continues to be seen as contributing to the fight against *cultural imperialism* in tangible ways.

In the days following Nigeria's hosting of the Festival of African Arts and Culture in 1977, there was political goodwill and financial support for promoting the arts and cultural heritage in Nigeria. The question of distinctiveness and identity has been firmly placed on the national agenda since that time. Although the goodwill may have been short-lived, the rhetoric did last, and it has continued to influence production in the creative industries. Video was not widely available then, but it has since become the prevalent medium for message dissemination.

In the rationale for indigenisation (of the culture industries in particular) is evidence of official assumptions regarding the impact of engagement with films. These continue to underpin the expectations of the industry in Nigeria. Whilst much of this is cultural, the economic concerns to the society and the individual practitioners should not be discounted. The concern for cultural preservation suggested that cinema which portrayed the Nigerian society and its realities were to be preferred. Implicit in this position are concerns for the political, social and economic consequences of cross cultural media. For example, that continued exposure to foreign films would lead to changes in consumption patterns whereby foreign fashions, food, home furnishings, cars and general lifestyle would be preferred, and the consumption of these would constitute a drain on the economy. The migration pattern and the brain drain which was observed in the mid 80s was deemed to be further tangible evidence of this logic. Evidently Nollywood made good business sense in that it helped to conserve precious foreign exchange. Savings would be made on the costs of importing films, and further savings on expenditure that would otherwise occur if different tastes were cultivated - when foreign values are promoted.

In recent times there have been aspirations for Nollywood to be a revenue earner as it promotes local travel and the tourism industry (Odugbemi, 2004). To do this, it aims to showcase positive aspects of the local cultures, beautiful landscapes, spectacular practices and attractive ways of life. The industry has potential to project positive national identities and foster mutual understanding of different ethnic groups. If it does this, it demonstrates its capacity to promote national integration. As with its precursors in the media, the cultural expectation is that Nollywood will promote positive behaviour patterns and social development. This expectation finds its roots in the didactic nature of the traditional storytelling. It also explains the emphasis on the morality tales. As it finds support in the international market, the industry now helps to champion the African identity to those in the Diaspora. This is consistent with the nation's foreign policy in which its leadership role in Africa is well spelt out.

Though the indigenisation decree meant the death of the fledgling, foreign dominated, celluloid film industry at the time, it has opened up opportunities for the local industry but the full potential could only be

realised with the democratisation of technology. The industry has now made its marks through the use of familiar locations, local talent and indigenous storylines.

Defining Nollywood's Success

There is ample evidence in the critical review of Nollywood that by professional standards all is not well in the industry, even to those who are key players within it. The formula for film making in Nigeria defies those patterns familiar elsewhere, especially in the west. For failing to produce in 35 mm format, Nollywood is not acknowledged as film, even at the largest African film festival, the Pan-African Film and Television Festival (FESPACO) in Ouagadougou (Fofana 2007). The orientation to scripting, the themes, narrative style, the duration of (production) projects, and its marketing may appear alien. Nick Moran (2004) in his BBC sponsored participant observation of the industry was bewildered at these and the fact that a film project could be completed in a week to 10 days.

As mentioned, the industry has evolved on the back of Nigeria's rich heritage in the arts; the talent from street theatres, traditional story telling cultures and early attempts at indigenous television programming. In building on the precepts of the television industry, Nollywood evolved around a dominant language structure which also reflects the original geopolitical structure of Nigeria. The industry thus has 3 distinct sectors; Yoruba movies, Igbo movies and Hausa movies. The movies tend to reflect the cultures in these areas and are often produced and distributed from the commercial nerve centres in these regions and Lagos - the nation's commercial capital. This structure has been inherited by the Nigerian Film and Video Censors Board as a basis of classifying the video / films. There are also English language productions and what has evolved as a distinct category - the *Engligbo*, so labelled because of the tendency to use both Igbo and English languages. Engligbo also reflect tensions between modern and traditional Igbo cultures. The ethnic affiliation around the industry is very clear in the story lines, shooting location, and sometimes even in the cast. To this end, it becomes easier for audiences to relate to and identify with Nollywood.

The attempt to adapt the skill of artistes (writers, actors) and performances from other media forms (theatre, radio, television) for cinema was initially a challenge both in terms of the aesthetics and the fiscal costs required. When there was an insistence on appropriate standards for celluloid film, there was little local technological support and the costs of projects were astronomical. Much of the local talent was excluded as there were no arrangements for corporate financing for most of the 'filmmakers'. The challenge of raising funds locally was taken head on but this meant there were compromises to the aesthetic and technical quality of film. This was made possible with the arrival of video technology. It was McCall who noted that:

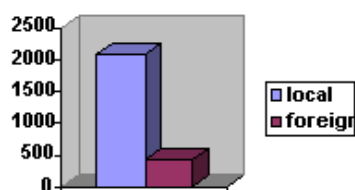
Nigerian popular videos are nothing like films canonized in African cinema studies. Common video genres include comedy, horror, mythic parables, romance, witchcraft, melodrama, Christian morality tales, and historical epics. While Africa's celluloid cinema has depended largely on foreign funding, schooling and inspiration, Nigeria's video industry is profitable and self sufficient. It is now one of the fastest growing sectors of the Nigerian economy. (McCall, 2004: 103)

The progress of the industry may never have occurred without the flexibility of the new media technology. The lower costs of video production kits has democratised the chances of participation in the industry and more producers, without the yoke of large mainstream corporations, are able to translate their ideas into the appropriate format for dissemination in the market. Such an army of talent was available especially

with the deregulation of the television industry. The pioneering government stations had rationalised their staff and many trained personnel had been made redundant. These, along with the amateur theatre practitioners, and graduates of the new theatre arts, and mass communication departments from higher institutions had formed a nucleus of the independent production force that served the industry. Without the democratised access facilitated by the video technology, many of these could have remained on the unemployment queues and their talent undiscovered.

The flexibility of distribution occasioned by the use of VHS and more recently Video CDs (VCD) and Digital Videos (DVD) has contributed in no small measure to the development of the industry. It is on record that the production which marked the actual debut of Nollywood ^[6] was due to an importer of blank VHS tapes who found that by adding value to the blank tapes, recording and selling copies of popular TV dramas, he had found a more profitable, more efficient way of distributing his stock of tapes. The success of the initial effort was clear evidence that taking 'cinema' into the private (personal or group) spaces was a viable venture.

Besides releasing the titles for VHS / VCD / DVD sales, Nollywood is also in the television syndication business. This market has been enhanced by the demand for programming by terrestrial and satellite Nigerian television stations^[7] and those transmitting outside the African continent to Nigerians in the diaspora. Newer stations have the challenge of sourcing more affordable and more culturally appropriate content rather than Western (to be precise Hollywood) fare that had dominated the airwaves and Nollywood fills the gap. Such arrangements constitute alternative streams of income for Nollywood producers. It also meant that audiences other than the ardent followers could be courted. For example the AfricaMagic channel on South Africa's satellite television company Multichoice has a fare that is largely devoted to Nigerian movies and this helped to broaden the base of those exposed to Nollywood.^[8] This is just a glimpse into Nollywood's success story. As at 2006, it was reputed to release as many as 54 titles per month. The statistics available on the website of the Nigerian Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) shows that by 2006, as many as 2069 local films had been classified compared with 429 foreign film. (see also Kunzler, 2006; also National film and Video Censors Board www.nfvcb.gov.ng)



Nigerian Film and Video Censors Board List

Clearly there is a high volume of business in this market. According to Aderinokun (2004) who quoted figures from Film Makers Cooperative of Nigeria, there is a potential audience of 15 million people for each film. This estimation is for the domestic Nigerian market alone. It is reckoned that another 5 million regular customers can be drawn from the foreign market which spans the West African sub region crossing over into East and Central Africa and the Southern African markets. This is remarkable, considering the fact that it is a relatively young industry.

Nollywood's growth has been meteoric in comparison with Hollywood and Bollywood to which it is inadvertently likened. A Guardian special report in March 2006 claims that the industry "in just 13 years,

has gone from nothing to an estimated earnings of US\$200 million (£114 m) a year.” By 2006, Kunzler was already projecting a possible conservative estimate of £52 billion that could be made from sales of videos alone. Perhaps these figures can be explained by the fact that Nigeria is the most populous African nation. The latest census figures (March 2006) estimates Nigeria’s population as being about 140 million^[9]; and World Bank estimates suggest that there are 7 million Nigerians all over the world. These are dispersed across Britain, U.S.A., Canada and mainland Europe amongst others; an apparent ready made market for Nollywood, but also a potential challenge.

Key amongst the challenges faced by the industry is the task of satisfying such a large heterogeneous market. Its sheer size alone may explain how the market could accommodate such a high proliferation of titles; so high that there were real anxieties about the market becoming saturated. Concerns about how the glut of titles would undermine profitability suggest that market size is not sufficient explanation of the success of Nollywood; if success is measured by high demand. This suggests that a successful industry must manage supply and demand and Nollywood has begun to do so. Since 2002, some voluntary regulatory measures have been taken within the industry to reverse the glut in supply and manage other elements of the industry. Sectors within the industry, (the Yoruba and the English / Igbo) went on self imposed recess. For instance a year’s ban was placed on certain star performers, to make room for new talent in markets that had become dominated by the stars. This suggests how important the star system is, and the need for fresh faces for success in this industry. McCall (2006b, 2004) reckons that the recess allowed participants in the industry to improve their organisation and introduce measures of professionalism into their practice.

Along with these regulatory efforts, the industry had to devise means of addressing the interests, needs and preferences of its diverse audiences. The diversity of interests is rooted in the range of ethnic, linguistic, religious and other social factors within Nigeria (and other parts of Africa) that constitute the primary market.^[10] These factors inform the values and preferences which inform the cultural regulation of the industry. The language and culture of the people are central to their identity and aspirations for self determination. There is recognition of this within the industry in the story lines and the use of language - the use of Nigerian vernaculars within the domestic and foreign markets. Though the language of the productions is an important element in the success of Nollywood as will later be discussed, one can argue that it is the cultural fit of the stories that is more important. The verbal language is a pathway into the cultures, but it is not always the primary means of communicating as has been explained. Indeed the use of English language is no barrier to the success of Nollywood business in Franco – phone countries. This means that there is more to be uncovered in the explanation of Nollywood’s success and the key to this is in the audience response to Nollywood.

Nollywood Audience Pleasures

This section is primarily a report of the empirical inquiry with audiences in London. In the interviews with the patrons of video clubs, the most frequently mentioned pleasure identified by the viewers interviewed is the need to relax or pass the time. This was a typical initial response given by the respondents when they were asked why they watched Nollywood. This pattern is indicative of audiences’ reluctance to critically reflect on their use of this (popular) medium; an attitude that reflects the low cultural value attached to relaxation. The audiences assumed that viewing, whether by going to the cinema or by watching television, is self explanatory. Because this act is classified as entertainment it needs no further

discussion. An attempt to study the phenomenon thus seemed ridiculous in the first instance. It is akin to the guilty pleasures referred to by Morley (1986) and Radway, (1987).

I just want to while away the time.

It keeps me company when I come back from the market.

If you are busy, no time [to watch but it is good for] people who are jobless at the moment [sic]

I play them in my restaurant and the customers enjoy their food.

I just want to enjoy myself, just something to make me laugh; nothing controversial or evangelistic.

This pattern of response masked the thoughtful consideration that goes into the selection of what to watch. At the two video clubs where Nollywood fans were observed, it was usual for customers to deliberate over the options to select from. This was more pronounced when they had company to discuss their choice with or when there were special deals or discounted stock. The interviews with vendors and customers show that purchases are based largely on the stars in the movies. For them, the stars are indicative of the nature of the story and the dexterity in the use of language. The cover of the videos and other promotional materials are very important in this regard.

The collage of images on the cover of the videos, and posters which adorned the shops as well as the montage of promotional clips embedded in the video/films or transmitted on TV, give an insight into the storyline. Regular viewers are aware of how misleading these can sometimes be. Ultimately the audience recognises that choosing a film is a gamble especially if they do not have the word of mouth recommendation from those of like mind and taste. Yet the gamble was not an issue as a video/ film rental cost was easily affordable (as little as £2.50 or less).

The visual elements in the videos were also attractive. For one customer, the age and dressing of the performers helps her ascertain if the story is set in modern times. She likes to see the “[modern] houses, dressing, cars and ladies . . . just to while away the time”. It may be that these are models with which she is able to compare her existence. For this respondent her husband is not so keen on Nollywood, but will stop a while to watch when she is watching.

He likes the one with beautiful women. Not the one with juju. He looks at the ladies and runs away.

Indeed, the observations at the video centres suggest that affinity for Nollywood is skewed towards the female gender. Men may engage with it only incidentally or professionally. This was still the case even at the cinema, though this experience of Nollywood is somewhat unique.

Since September 2006, Film Africa U.K. has begun to exhibit films at the Odeon cinemas. These were heavily marketed (using promotions on BEN television for examples). The premieres which were billed to start at 11.00 p.m. may not be regarded as typical family oriented cinema going practice.^[11] The events were more costly than usual. In the case of *The Successor*, tickets cost £30 (Lucky Joe cost £10).



The focus groups constituted at these events insisted that the pleasure of being on a social outing with good company and for a good cause far outweighed the cost or inconvenience that went with the experience. For many of them the act was reminiscent of the better days gone by, when Nigerian families could go to the cinema. However what seemed to be most important in this particular instance was the pleasure of the affirmation of one's identity.

The responses from these audiences show that being able to reconstitute time and space is another pleasure got from Nollywood. They were pleased that Nollywood had found its way to the mainstream cinema theatre in the U.K. and were willing to support it. It was like an act of defiance, choosing to watch *Lucky Joe* at the Odeon instead of *Casino Royale*; it was the breaking of boundaries - an achievement. But it was also an expression of resistance to the mainstream culture that threatened to engulf them. This is similar to the acclaim accorded *The Cosby Show* for its representation of the black people (Jhally & Lewis 2003; Havens, 2000). There are indications that this may be a short lived or occasional pleasure when compared to the convenience, cost, routine and force of habit of home videos. Thus defiance alone may not be sustainable basis for Nollywood's business at the cinema.

Closer analysis of the respondents from the video club, reveals what may be the typical viewing scenario; a lone woman with a bit of time to spare. Some of these watch as many as 5 – 10 films a week. The rate of consumption is justified by the fact that nursing mothers, shift workers and students on holidays have large disposable time, albeit temporary. To them, viewing Nollywood film is an act to be engaged in when it can be regarded as an extension of work or 'productive' activity. Recreation was not very important unless there was evidence it had merit. This attitude comes from cultural views of leisure. As one of the subjects explained there were no other avenues for recreation that were open to her because of the restrictions imposed by her upbringing.

My course takes [requires] a lot of reading [studying]. I don't go out, I don't go clubbing, this is the only thing I do to relax. I learn from it. Just watch it.

This is a female, postgraduate Law student whose concept of leisure does not include clubbing, drinking or partying. She had learnt that as a female, night crawling was not an option for her. She would therefore rather settle at home with a good Nollywood film from which she can learn some life skills.

Settling with a film creates the impression that audiences watch with rapt attention, but this is not always the case. The mothers interviewed found that the presence of the children (or indeed husbands) was a potential distraction. In this we see that the classic struggle for the remote control (Morley 1986) remains, even when the other party was a child under-five who wants to watch CBeebies.

In such cases the replication or similarity in storylines helped, though such replicas were tiresome as many of the respondents suggested. That the stories were predictable helps Nollywood become 'easily put down', like women's magazines (Hermes 1995). Though they did not seem to mind the predictable stories, they were aggrieved when stories were drawn out unduly as is the case with plots that have sequels. This is evidence that the proliferation of titles does take its toll, and that the act of viewing was also quite 'productive' after all. The audience preferred to be in a position where they could work at the construction of meaning.

The quality of the story was crucial to the audience as the stories were important for keeping in touch with the home culture. Nollywood as a basis for moral instruction ranked high amongst audience responses of what they regarded as viewing pleasure. Viewers expected to learn from the stories, as is typical with traditional story telling. In this way the aspiration of transmitting cultural heritage is achieved but people also watched to learn contemporary life skills. In reconciling the two, the question of identity becomes apparent. People wanted to learn culturally appropriate positions to adopt or negotiate. This may be a universal pleasure, but it appears to be more central to audiences in Diasporas who seek assistance for instructing the younger generation – those who have greater need to be realigned with the home cultures lest they become subsumed in the culture of their host community, as they adopt less appropriate aspects of the Western culture. In this regard, the audiences were mostly concerned about cultural definitions regarding respect for age, relationships, priorities within social values, problem – resolution strategies, and self pride.

Another pleasure which could only be deduced from most responses, is the fact that Nollywood provides talking points on various aspects of social life. It helps people engage with the Nigerian society if only by proxy. In this regard Nollywood was a medium for discussing current affairs both by the subjects it covered and the pattern of viewing that it tends to generate in certain quarters. As one respondent explained, Nollywood facilitates social interaction. Though she was very busy and hardly had the time to watch on her own, she was still in the habit of renting films in order to have something to entertain her guests with and to keep up with new releases.^[12]

The communal viewing of films appeared to have its own pleasures. This is consistent with television viewing practices observed by Esan (1993) amongst women audiences in Nigeria where audiences huddled together to view and chat. Viewing Nollywood in the diaspora thus appears to serve a dual (social and mental) purpose of re-creating the feel of home.

News reports show that the popularity of such communal viewing practices has presented another business model. It has paved way for the video parlours that have been observed in other African countries where Nollywood is shown. (Kunzler, 2006; *BBC News* 'Have Your Say' Forum, February 2007) In this case, distributors cash in on existing cultural practices and the flexibility afforded by technology to establish less conventional exhibition centres. This is further evidence of the democratic potential of the video technology enhancing access for viewers, and contributing to the success of Nollywood.

The appreciation of the skilful use of language was identified as a pleasure by the audience especially some of the ardent Nigerian fans who aimed to appreciate and teach culture through films. As discussed earlier loyalties in the market are divided along ethnic and linguistic lines. With the economies of scale in

production, the dominant ethnic groups were niche markets. This made economic sense. However, there is evidence to suggest that there are other ethnic groups who, in the absence of their preferred options, simply aligned with the established niches in the market. Their real preference would have been for productions in their own languages, as was the case with certain Edo speaking respondents (Edo is one of the other minority Nigerian languages). So as much as the language of production constitutes a pleasure for many, for others limited command of the language hinders access and pleasures.

The exception to this pattern was seen in the case of a French speaking Congolese viewer for whom incompetence in the language was no barrier to the viewing pleasure. She was truly exceptional in the volume of titles that she bought and watched. As the carer of a severely disabled child she was often house bound and the videos offered relief from the Western fare that the UK based mass media offered.

Her viewing was not the social kind as she did not have the network of Nigerians who watched with her. Even her husband would not usually watch with her. For her, the films helped her overcome her nostalgia as she was able to relate the presented stories and situations with her experiences from the Congo. On a practical level, she used the films to help her learn the English language. According to her, the African accent in the Nigerian video / films was much easier for her to comprehend as her proficiency in English was still quite poor. It is not clear how widespread this pattern is, but the popularity of Nollywood amongst other African audiences has been documented (Gray, 2003; Muchimba 2004).

There is a certain measure of fantasy in the pleasures audiences derived from Nollywood. Irrespective of what boundaries that audiences cross through the polarities within the storylines (urban – rural; rich – poor; modern – traditional; present – past) viewers are drawn in to imagine what life is like on the other side. The pleasures derived from the stars, their costumes and set pieces and furniture, other cultural artefacts on display (cars, houses, location) attests to this. It is useful to note that these and gossip about the performers are usual talking points in the Nollywood related web-logs, and it is similar to what Hermes (1995) describes as a repertoire of connected knowing. The pleasure here is more than an obsession with celebrity gossip; it shows the importance of being connected, albeit in a virtual community. It also offers an opportunity for participants to form opinions about their personal situations (whether as Nigerians or as Africans).

The following example shows how a comment about a seemingly innocuous element of the *mise en scene* can generate more serious comment. What began as an appreciation for Nigerians' flair for fashion, ends as a criticism of the poor state of infrastructural facilities within the educational system:

Naija people dey dress

They need to “dress” their uni infrastructure a bit more and decently as well. . . I mean look at the building of a higher institution”

(Meaning)

Nigerians are trendy in their dressing

Yes, but they also need to maintain decent infrastructure in their universities

This evidence illustrates how audiences process information; it shows that there may be no uniformity in the way they make sense of the media, but through discussions they can arrive at some consensus of what the video / films mean. They are selective in what they attend to, and they are able to negotiate the meaning of these according to their contexts, reference groups, and critical concerns. In this is an

example of how pleasures are socially constructed but more to the point, an indication of how Nollywood contributes to the world views.

Conclusion

This paper set out to understand the reasons for Nollywood's success and, to appreciate why its audiences support the industry. Nollywood was presented as an example of a marginalised industry that has accomplished so much in such a short space of time due to social and technological factors. These have been examined in this paper.

The study found that in spite of the proliferation of titles and high volume of sales, there are still lapses in the industry. A number of regulatory mechanisms which should bring some order to Nollywood's operations and help foster professional standards in the industry were discussed. It can be argued that these were inspired by consideration for the audience.

Nollywood audiences are aware of the deficiencies in the industry, yet they remain loyal. The love - hate affair with the industry is very evident in the online communities where stars are cut down to size for their poor acting and social misdemeanours yet they continue to patronise these stories about their land – their people and their issues.

By far the most striking of the pleasures discussed by the audiences was their ability to support Nollywood. This was most evident in the respondents at the film premieres, who paid so much to see Nollywood at an Odeon in London. They were clearly thrilled by this. They demonstrated more visibly the sense of duty which Nollywood fans had as captured in the rhetorical question with which one of the persons in a focus group ended the discussion, "If we do not support them how will they improve?"

In their defiance of mainstream (western) entertainment and their willingness to overlook the finer aesthetic and stylistic qualities of film, the audience response is consistent with patterns of audiences of alternative media (Downing, 2003) who were more interested in particular concerns that they championed. Perhaps Nollywood should be read in this frame. Nigerian films give a voice to the stories that are not likely to be found in the mainstream media, especially Hollywood. Studying industries that are marginalised within a multi cultural society or amongst communities in Diaspora, will show the alternative world views which citizens subscribe to or at least contemplate. Thus film consumption patterns have the potential of illuminating complex relationships and aspirations.

The study has shown that pleasures of Nollywood are complex but logical. It is clear that audience behaviour can be deeply political and closely linked to personal and group identities. The popularity of Nollywood across Africa suggests that there are affinities in experiences of African populations, and Nollywood is able to speak to many beyond Nigeria's borders. For this it has earned its leadership position. Possible cultural differences in the concept of leisure and the types of stories that African audiences find engaging must continue to arouse scholarly interest if we are to understand the performance of a film industry within those communities whether in their home base or where they reside as migrants.

The issues of identity, preservation of cultural heritage and resistance of dominant western influence are clear factors contributing to the success of this industry, and these deserve further attention. How distinct must Nollywood be from Western fare for it to remain appreciated by the audiences? Given the dynamic nature of identity, it will be useful to study how widespread are the sentiments that require Nollywood to be

distinct. Will these cut across class, gender and even location of viewers? Are Nigerian based Nollywood fans likely to respond differently? The small sample size and the qualitative nature of the study suggest that, without further research, there are limits to the extent that these findings can be generalised.

In the meantime, practitioners remain optimistic that if given the space, the Nigerian industry will evolve what is acceptable practice for its market. In an interview with the press Amaka Igwe, one of Nollywood's producers, noted that each industry has had its own difficult path to success.

In Nigeria who says the technique we develop is not really good, it does not have to meet their [Western] standards but it meets our own standards and the people are watching it, no matter how bad they are, and *it is speaking to the people*. [my emphasis] (Igwe, 2007)

This study has attempted to clarify what the people are hearing; what do audiences want to hear; what gives them pleasure, what will keep them coming for more? Nollywood has acquired its ranking as one of the big three film industries globally and this is largely because its audiences accept its products. That its status as film is still a matter of contention, even within the African continent, in spite of all its accomplishments, raises some issues about what constitutes film. Presently it appears that film is defined by the technology of production, production aesthetics, the exhibition practices and Nollywood marks a radical departure from the norm on all scores. The flexibility of the video format which allows audiences to reconstitute time, space and pleasures has made this possible. In its use of this format Nollywood exemplifies democratisation of the media and film industries. Film is now no longer the exclusive product of expensive processes. Its reception is no longer restricted to purpose built venues. With the complicity of audiences and producers, films are now consumed in the privacy, comfort and security of homes. Nollywood has shown that the film viewer is no longer just the lone figure, watching with rapt attention in a dark space. Rather it shows that film viewing is more about the social experience, the company and the stories that are shared. These practices are not restricted to Nollywood as home entertainment and consumption of DVD are popular in western societies as well. These trends beckon to researchers and industry practitioners alike to review the canons of film as is fitting in contemporary times. When this is done, Nollywood may at last get its dues in the film industry.

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Notes

[1] The Successor premiered at the Odeon in Surrey Quays in September 2006; it also showed in Odeon Swiss Cottage, and Lee Valley, Streatham. Lucky Joe premiered in November 2006 at Odeon Surrey Quays; and thereafter in Odeon West Thurrock, and Manchester Trafford Centre, in Cineworld Staples

Corner, Woodgreen and Wandsworth. Warrior's Heart has since been shown in February 2006. by Film Africa.

[2] This was unlike those performances which were banned in earlier years for the alleged seditious content. Two prominent cases come to mind, both were theatre performances; Yoruba Ronu by Hubert Ogunde (1964) banned in the first republic; and Opera Wonyosi (1977) by Wole Soyinka banned by one of the military regimes.

[3] This was on Lagos Television (LTV). The service was known as Lagos Weekend Television (LWT) began around 1982.

[4] Television transmission began in 1959; the first station Western Nigerian Television Service (WNTV) had regional coverage. By 1979 television coverage was virtually national through the network of the Nigerian Television Authority.

[5] The Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree (1972) also known as the indigenisation decree, was the first phase of a protectionist policy which aimed to give to Nigerians exclusive rights of ownership in particular enterprises, and increase their equity ownership in others. Cinema business, along with textiles and transport which had been configured as 'small' Lebanese concerns were amongst those sold outright.

[6] Prior to Kenneth Nnebue's Living Bondage (1992) regarded as the turning point for Nigeria's film industry there had been a number of notable efforts on celluloid film by veteran theatre and literary artistes.

[7] In addition to the extensive network of government owned stations, Nigeria now boasts of a number independent television stations meaning that Nigeria has the largest and oldest television industry in Africa – see note iv above.

[8] Multichoice is reputed to have about 1.5 million subscribers across Africa, Europe and the Middle East.

[9] UN (2005) estimates this as 130.2 million.

[10] In Nigeria alone, there are more than 250 languages spoken. There are 36 states in the federation and 774 local government authorities with a history of incessant clamour for more.

[11] Some cinema theatres have matinees, but attendance tended to be poor.

[12] She was seen paying a £242 fine for late return of films.

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