Nigerian Video Films as Effective Tool for Social Transformation: A Critical Appraisal of *Fola-Toro*

Uchechukwu C. Ajiwe[1, *], Sylvia Okwuosa[1], Samuel O. Chukwu-Okoronkwo[2]

[1]Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

[2]Department of Mass Communication, Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria

Abstract

As an essential means of societal transformation, the film medium readily volunteers itself as a platform for the investigation of human conflicts that recur in various societies. Unarguably, the operators of the Nigerian video film industry – Nollywood – have assiduously worked to adjust certain social orientations through their portrayal in video films of the social, political, economic and cultural specifics that define the Nigerian people's existence. Therefore, this paper adopts a sociological approach of methodology to examine the effects of these efforts on the Nigerian audience; and offers an exhaustive interpretation of the artistic use of visual elements employed in the video films under study.

1. Introduction

The Video film medium in Nigeria has been illuminating Africa's identity and as well wielding social change to its society. Film was one of the most devices utilized by the Colonial masters in compelling Africans to the European ideology. Emelobe [1 p.426] asserts that:

> Early Colonialist filmmakers intertwined fun and spectacle, with serious Eurocentric ethics meant to condition the lives of the populace. Several film production outfits established by the imperialists acted in this capacity in both Anglo-and francophone African countries. As a result of this, the African became compelled to see himself and his development in terms of European values and ideology.

The foregoing does not only accentuate the social impact of the film medium, but also reinforces the fact that the Nigerian video film has proven very influential on its people towards propagating social change. Thus, film is a powerful man-made instrument used for shaping and re-shaping individuals and the society at large leading to what has become the "Nigerian popular culture" of today. It has grown very influential. Being a visual medium, the audience's interest is primarily sustained by what they see in the film and not necessarily the story. Film makes us desire things that we may not ordinarily like, but with the appropriate application of visual elements and components by the disparate artists for a film production, the audience are entices and willfully involved in the film as they watch it unfold. In this light the audience identify themselves with the visual images as codes assembled by the filmmaker, he/she perceives it based on his/her understanding with the cultural codes. The understanding of the different codes assembled by the film-maker as a unified entity depends on the viewer's level of interpretation of the image seen and his/her familiarity with the cultural codes. For film is a creative medium that exposes extracts of the human endeavour and his environs which uses visual elements to initiate social change.

* Corresponding author

E-mail address: ajiweuchechukwu@yahoo.com (U. C. Ajiwe)

According to Onuzulike [2 p.231]:

> The Nigerian movie industry "Nollywood" has had a profound influence on African culture. The Nigerian accents, style of dress, and behavioral idiosyncrasies, all of which are distinctly Nigeria, are now being transmitted as images around the globe. The medium of film has come to be directly associated with the culture industry. In Nigeria such a role for the film industry is still evolving. However, certain factors are altering the profile of what could be regarded as the country's culture, while the film industry itself is undergoing a crucial transition.

In the same vein, the Nigerian video film industry, christened Nollywood, has undergone changes, expansion and advancement in issues, costume, character type, setting, speeches and actions, and all the processes of production. This notwithstanding, the Nollywood has been showcasing the richness of the Nigerian nay African culture as a whole with the view of an undertone exposition of the problems, corrupt practices and atrocities committed in this country, making the audience reason along with filmmakers' views which stir up revolutionary thoughts or stimulates remorseful thoughts. These actions depend on the point of view of filmmaker and how the audience perceived the filmmaker's views. Undoubtedly, the industry is now more technologically and creatively enhanced to catalyze social change. This recent development in the Nigerian video film industry to align with the moving trends makes its stories much more effective for social transformation. Considering the kind of tropical issues treated in these films which permeate the thoughts of its audience, propelling them to reason alongside the filmmakers' views of their environment and behavior, social change is unarguably catalyzed. Considering the technologies and techniques which globalization now affords today's societies, African arts cannot but become dynamical and eclectic with materials to appropriate for enhanced productions. In the above regard, Ajibade and Williams [3 p.203, citing Barber] posit that in terms of technologies and techniques that globalization does afford to today's societies, "African arts are not static because they are very eclectic and ambiguous in terms of the materials they can appropriate unto themselves". They further observe that:

> For the transfer of knowledge, African visual arts have responded by appropriating media and technologies in new and exciting ways. One of the new visual art forms ubiquitous in Africa today is the video film shot and distributed in cheap video format across the post colony and among its diasporas around the world. As a new visual art form, what is *new* about the video film is not the technology itself but the fact of its use outside of its original broadcast context for the production and release of

motion pictures. (3 p.203)

This implies that since the evolvement of the Nigerian video films, it has been developing, improving and moving on with the trend in its society and the world at large. For through these visual stories, it conveys a lot of information to its audience. Also, it conveys great images of the Nigerian society and Africa as a whole. Nigerian video films are deeply rooted in Nigerian cultural traditions and social texts that focus on Nigerian community life. The visual stories the industry produce are told using African idioms, proverbs, costumes, artifacts, cultural display, and the imagery of Africa. The common Nigerian video-film genres include horror, comedy, urban legend, mythic parable, love and romance, juju, witchcraft, melodrama, and historical epic. Movie production helps to determine the differences and transformations that have occurred in Nigeria. It is apt, therefore, to state that every society changes over time. Some change rapidly; others seem to stay virtually unchanged for generations. However slowly, change does occur. Some basic questions were raised in a conference about the place of the Nigerian video film in African Cinema and where it is going now. Several speakers pointed out that *the conceptual frame that constituted African cinema refers to an art-based cinematic practice designed to promote African cultural traditions and develop authentically African film forms that stand in alterity to Hollywood and that are both aesthetically and politically vanguardist* [4 p.110]. Thus, Nigerian Video film utilizes the foreign film medium with the view to depicting the African world-view. In parallel with this depiction, video film becomes a tool used by filmmakers to delineate social, political, economic and cultural status of our country Nigeria and human follies. With the developments in the production of video films in this country, there is a parallel difference in the production of film in all ramifications.

The question now is, how is this representations of the modern Nigeria depicted with recent developments and expansions in Video-film industry? How also does the audience perceive these depictions by the filmmakers? The Nigerian Video-films have been geared to the greater good of the society at large and its ennobling virtue which the society covets through the ensemble artistic creation of the film designer. Thus, the filmmakers tell the viewer what he or she is going to see through the title, and then expound themes in the film by highlighting issues that concerns the society through imagery, with actions, and filmic elements. The reflection of reality in the video film is on the visual language. Ekwuazi [5 p.168] highlights that:

> On the screen, the image is assertive: it is supreme- in every which way. This assertiveness/supremacy of the image, must, to a significant extent, be traced to the fact

that it is invariably an image in the process of becoming. We are not given an account or report of image; we are given the image in the act or process of appearing, of being, of communicating – we become witnesses to incarnation. There are three implications of this, and they bear directly on every compositional technique on T.V. The first of these implications: The screen has only on tense: … event may be from the past or project into the future – but the image exists in the present; it unfolds s the viewer is watching. Because the viewer and the event exist in a time frame which is contemporaneously in the present, there is no past tense and no future tense on the screen. The second of these implications: The screen as a world of perpetual emotion, mirrors a world that is in perpetual motion. On the screen, stasis/inertia is anathema: being, appearing, communicating – none of these can be without motion, without movement. And movement is created by: the editing, and even by sound (Including music and effects).

It is therefore comprehensible from the foregoing that the presentation of stories in a video-film medium creates its assertiveness based on the narrative form which makes the audience witnesses of the actions going on in the visual experience. Thus, the images presented are mostly present and with motivational teachings that stimulate social change. Nigerians know the difference between right and wrong. Every film story has a motive which sympathizes with or persecutes a person and a situation in order to uphold a good moral virtue. The treatments of issues such as greed, corruption, deceit are being espoused in Nigeria films. These issues are achieved through the characters in the film story as it unfolds. Thus the end result of what happens to the character concerned is where and how the lessons in the stories are being drawn from by the audience. Therefore, Nollywood films take a revolutionary stand against conflicts in social standards. Nollywood films are committed to highlighting the social vices and ideologies that call for change. Albeit, the impact of the messages encoded in the films is dependent on the audience perception and judges what is absorbed from the story. Therefore, the impact of a visual story on the audience is not only dependent on the significations encoded by the filmmaker, but also on audience cognitive judgment of what is perceived in the visual story that conditions the individual audience's good or bad behaviour.

Nowadays, The Nigerian video films have created visual stories in different vernacular languages that go with visual lettering for interpreting what is seen and heard on screen. This medium enhances communication for both illiterates and average literate Nigerians. This intervention of the filmmaker cannot be viewed as a limitation, rather, as a

potent catalyst of social change. This invariably, brings us to the nature of audience targeted for these films produced. According to Shaka [6 p.140]:

> Going by the obligatory special effects enforced by the merchant/Marketers, it is clear that they have in their minds an imaginary lower working class/teenage target audience, the types that was nurtured in the staple of Onitsha Market Literature with its romances, thrillers and melodramatic stories. To this class of audience one may add the women because of the romantic slant of most of the video's narratives.

Thus, these groups of audiences mentioned get grossly involved in these films, for what they (audience) see in them appeals to them. This shows that they identify with what is created out of their own environment and culture. Shaka reiterates that youths or teenage ones tend to criticize some of the imagery and narrative pattern of these films as they watch. This is because many of them are in school, and so, easily see through several of the narrative contrivances in the films. The case of women is slightly different. The majority of the womenfolk are so hooked on the romantic angle of the stories, and the fantasy world of opulence represented in them. Therefore, Nigerian audiences have the capability of understanding the filmmaker's ideas presented to them. This is as a result of the audience being familiar with what they see on screen that also exist in their society as they reason along side with the filmmaker's idea in a visual story. They equally judge the social vices projected in these video films. For the audience to understand and criticize any social issue x-rayed in a film, he/she must have seen or experienced it. Thus, the audience identifies the visual codes in its entirety based on his/her level of understanding with the cultural codes.

2. Mode of Visual Interpretation for Effective Communication

Most times, audiences respond to film stories due to the sequential visual projection of the story which replicates the happenings identifiable in their environment. Thus, they get emotionally charged with what they see on screen, due to the careful manipulation of images with aid of scenic elements to give convincing representations. As a result, certain expressive measures are used to convey messages in film which can be termed as codes, signs, and so on. The challenge of the filmmaker is to make use of scenic elements and appropriate visual elements. Thus, costumes, sets, shots, sound effects, music are at the disposal of the filmmaker. Thus, Ekwuazi opines that: "visual image is made of all or

some of the following nine intra-structure: persons, object ideas, filmic space, filmic time, visual composition, audio composition editing; and conflict and resolution" (p.168). This implies that visual elements and other intra-structures are vital to the credit of the filmmaker. On this note, the filmmaker makes use of appropriate materials and visual techniques for the story.

Communication is effective with the use of appropriate visual elements harnessed with sound effects, actors and shots. It is based on the total ensemble elements of film that given meaning or message is gotten. To this effect film is an arbitrary or an abstract usage of sign which Metz [7] and other scholars describe as a language. According to Stam's analysis of Bordwell and Carroll's view; "connoticisim cannot be seen as a theory but as a stance which tends to relate human thoughts, emotion and an action to the human environment is a mental representation" [8 p.266]. This implies that film is a representation of reality which informs the viewers about their environment, which the filmmaker does from a semiotic eye. Thus, film is a medium through which filmmakers tend to express the views and ideas of what their environment is or their view about the world. Therefore, video-film uses carefully selected shots to generate tension, manipulate emotion with the synchronization of appropriate sound. As a result, all technicalities (sound) and visual features used connote or denote meaning in relation to the story.

Danesi, in defining what semiotics does notes that "its central aim is to investigate, decipher, document, and explain the *what*, *how*, and *why* of signs, no matter how simple or complex they are" (9 p.5). Thus, Semiotics is a theoretical tool dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society. As such, it is equally concerned with process of signification and with those of communication; that is, the means whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged. Nevertheless, Harman (10 p.90) narrowed the definition of semiotics in relation to film by stating that, "the semiotics of the cinema is, similarly, the theory of film-as-a-system-of-signs. The idea is that we are to think of film as a kind of language and are to try to develop linguistics of this language of film. Conversely, however, Christian Metz argues that film is not a language system but it has a language of its own in which it uses arbitrary meaning in relating issues or communication (8 p.238). The significant understanding to draw from the foregoing is the fact that the two schools of thought see film as a language. Therefore, it has its own modes of communication, eliciting random choice of meanings through visual and auditory elements. Since film makes use of visual and sound to stimulate human emotion, the poor application of the visual and sound interpretation creates a disconnection of the viewer's understanding and

flow of the film story. Thus, Visual and auditory elements are carefully placed as subjects on screen largely through the manipulation of space with the lens of the camera This implies that every object used for signification in film which includes sound enhancing the visual world has been deliberately placed to amplify the power moving image. Thus, Nigerian video films capture the attentions of its viewers through visual representations of their culture and environment, of which they equally complement the visuals with sounds.

3. Synopsis of *Fola- Toro*

This story is a contemporary issue that centers on Odegbenle. He is a hunter that sells bush meat such as squirrels, porcupines and antelopes along a roadside. He has this customer who patronizes him. On this very occasion he is paid a very huge amount of money in order to get more bush meat the next day. Odegbenle seeing that his age mate commands much wealth thinks of getting rich through ritual means. He goes out in the night to see a native doctor who assures him that it will be possible for him to get rich if he will agree to serve a god. All that is required of him to do for the god is that he will be sacrificing female human beings. He agrees and did it for a period of time before the god refuses two young beautiful ladies he brought to his house, inside his bedroom where the god normally takes their life. He runs to the native doctor who has given him his source of wealth for help. He is told that the oracle demands for his fiancé. He feels pity for his fiancé and asks for an alternative, the native doctor tells him that there is no alternative and he leaves his shrine.

Prior to this time, Odegbenle's father asked him about his source of wealth and he (Odegbenle) could not convince his father of the kind of business he does for him to have such wealth that nobody could the source. Odegbenle's father voices that such persons are hardened armed robbers or ritualists. In anger, Odengbenle accepts that he is a ritualist and the father in anger throws the envelope containing a huge sum of money given to him by his son and disowns him for not wanting to hear his admonitions. Odegbenle not having any remorse asks his guards to send his father out of his compound. After much consideration he obeys the deity due to the threat of taking his own life as a replacement sacrifice on the life of his fiancé by inviting her to sleep over the night. Few years later, the deity demands that his life is needed. Odegbenle sought for a solution from the Baba (native doctor) who now narrates to him his friend's source of wealth and equally narrates how he died without enjoying his wealth for a long time. Odegbenle decides to travel abroad to avoid his life being taken; but before he leaves the

house he is struck dead by the deity, and his guards take him to his father who does not accept his corpse for he had already disowned him. Then, Odegbenle wakes up from sleep, seeing that it was all a dream he prays that nothing should make him go seek for wealth through ritual means.

4. *Fola-Toro*: Methodological Analysis

The film *Fola-Toro,* is a contemporary film which portrays that making money through ritual means is evil. The filmmaker explored good use of his visual and auditory elements including shots to convey his message: that acquiring wealth through ritual means is very bad. The visual elements which are costumes, makeup sets, locations, were employed to distinguish poverty and the affluence of the main character in the film. The shots of the film created sequential flow, of which some shots were used to emphasize on the actions of the protagonist (Odegbenle). Sound design in this film sometimes gives a pre-information of some actions and events in the film. For example, the theme song describes Odegbenle's character by admonishing the audience through its lyrics and it was also played whenever odegbenle was about to be seen in any scene of the film.

Table 1. The theme music starts with continuous rolling of drums as a cultural song is sung:

Song	Meaning
Chorus: *koye ni to o…o, nibo l'aiye n'lo ara mi*	We don't know, where are we going to my people?
Aiye n' sare lainibi lo, Ewi fun mi lo nibo la n'lo gan	We are running but we don't know where we are running to, please tell me people where are we going to?
Mofe dogun, Mofe dogbo, nile aiye ,Aye eyi nlo mo. (repeat 2X)	I want to be this and that, but it all end here in this life. (repeat chorus 2X)

This song poses a question of 'where are we going after death?' The wordings of the song alone make the audience ponder on their own way of life and then compare it to Odegbenle's wayward life. While the cultural instruments used in rhythm with the lyrics of the song are identified by the audience and sometimes the talking drum makes open their minds as they ponder on the story they are watching. Moreover, the entire songs used in this film relate to the theme of the film which treats wealth and tends to admonish the audience as well as inform them of the events and the main character in the film.

At the end of the film, we see the same native doctor advising him of the negative effect of making bad choices of acquiring riches or wealth which has no way out. The filmmaker deploys good filmic elements to project the theme to the audience understanding that greed and making money through ritual means is bad. Thus, the message of the film story is embedded in both the visual and auditory elements.

5. Conclusion

In as much as the researchers acknowledge the gallant achievements that Nollywood producers have made so far, it must not be forgotten in a hurry that they have, over the years, neglected the importance of good sound production in video films. Proffering financial insufficiency is their usual excuse, but most video film producers record revenue in excess compared to their expenditure. If output of the professionalism and quality is considered a priority therefore, it becomes indefensible for concerned parties to tender lack of fund as an excuse for wishy-washy sound production in video films. Hence this research recommends that filmmakers must begin to adopt appropriate quality sound as an important aspect of film design. This, according to the researchers, would enable them create better film designs and thus, develop good sound communications using semiotic approach, be it music or sound effects, that will make the film have much effect; the reason being that the synchronization of sound and visual images is capable of enhancing the intended mood or scenario.

Films have the potential to aid – and in moments create – instrumental social change. However, there are many lessons to be learned from the mode of visual interpretation of film. Specifically, what are the communicative potentials of the Nigerian video films? How do they function in a larger political program for social change? Culture plays an important role in visual stories; and if well employed artistically, evokes all moral virtue that instigates social change. In the case of video film, the texts have the potential to contribute to the process of solidification and promulgation. The ability for video film to reach significant audiences through such a powerful medium makes it a natural and necessary tool for social change, one that can no longer be overlooked in the study of rhetoric and social change. In practice, the affordability and access to new video technology allows filmmakers express their view of the issues that concern our society, with little difficulty and expense.

Filmography

Eyiwunmi, M. R. (Producer), & Eyiwunmi, L. R. (Director). (2012). *Fola-Toro* (fiction) Nigeria, Epsalm Movie Productions Ltd.

References

[1]   Emelobe, 'D. E. (2008). "Reinventing the Canon: The Role of African Films in Postcolonial Discourse". In Izuu N. *et al.* (eds.) *Professor Femi Osofisan International Conference on Performance*: *Proceedings*. Ibadan: Joytal Press. (2008): 426 – 433.

[2]   Onuzulike, U. (2007). "Nollywood: The influence of the Nigerian movie industry on African culture". *The Journal of Human Communication*: *A Journal of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association, 10*(3): 231-242.

[3]   Ajibade, B. & Williams, B. (2012). "Producing Cheaply, Selling Quickly: the Un-Hollywood Production Paradigm of Nollywood Video Films". In *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 2 No. 5: 203 – 209.

[4]   Larkin, B. (2007). "The Nollywood Rising Conference", *Film International*, 5: 4: 109 – 11.

[5]   Ekwuazi, H. O. (*2007) Advertising* on *television*: the *TV commercial* from *premise through concept copy* to *storyboard & production*. Ibadan: Sterlin Hordens.

[6]   Shaka, F. O. (2007). "Introduction to film/television studies", in Henry L. Bell-Gam (ed.) *Theater in Theory and Practice for Beginners.* Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press: 124-145.

[7]   Metz, C. (2004). "Aural Objects". In Braudy, L. & Cohen, M. (eds.) *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Reading*. New York: Oxford University Press: 366-309.

[8]   Stam, R. (2000). *Film Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

[9]   Danesi, M. (2007). *The Quest for Meaning: A Guide to Semiotic Theory and Practice*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

[10]   Harman, G. (1999). "Semiotics and the cinema: Metz and Wollen," In Braudy, L. & Cohen, M. (eds.) *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings, fifth edition*. New York: Oxford University Press: 90-98.