

Motion Picture and the Nigerian Image

By

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A motion picture is a reflection of the society from which it comes, and sometimes the first example of that society's culture a foreign viewer may have. This reflection is projected by key motion picture elements such as production value, plot, and characterization. Nollywood is akin to an adolescent superhero who is aware of her newly found superpowers, but has not yet matured and obtained proficiency in them. With support, training, and more experience, Nollywood can become an entity we all can look up to, be proud of, and that can represent the best of what Nigeria and Nigerians are about.

All movies, regardless of origin, reveal the filmmakers' societal background and influences. They show the culture, ideology, and nationalism (or lack of it) of the filmmakers. Like frames in a motion picture, one Nollywood movie by itself leaves an unsubstantiated impression of Nigerian society. However, the more Nollywood movies the viewer sees, the more data he or she has to analyze. Through this analysis, experiential patterns emerge where the viewer can compare and contrast different elements across the movies. I've watched enough Nollywood movies to make the following thematic observations: Nigerians can be very melodramatic, the occult is like a car chase in an action movie; the story doesn't seem complete without at least one occurrence, and philandering and powerful older men are at the mercy of beguiling, younger women. One can argue that there are more themes than these, and I'm inclined to agree. However, the aforementioned themes are either part of what are true about Nigeria and Nigerians, or they are what Nollywood would like us to believe are true. If the former is correct, it is

acceptable as long as Nollywood has other stories to tell. The latter, if correct, means that for Nollywood to mature, she will need to tell a greater breadth of stories.

The first key element, the lack of which is the main stumbling block to be overcome, is production value. This refers to the technical aspects of a movie, such as shooting, lighting, sound, transitions, continuity, and acting. Unless a viewer has been watching only Nollywood movies, he or she will have a difficult time getting through a one. Nigerians in the Diaspora fall into two general categories. They either cannot bring themselves to suffer through Nollywood movies because the movies do not compare quality-wise to what they would normally see in a theater for example, or they hang on to their suspension-of-disbelief, suffering through a bad movie because they're happy to see a "Nigerian" movie. The poor production value in most Nollywood movies I've seen, shooting on digital video notwithstanding, have to do with the technical aspect of the filmmaking. Characters and scenes are not properly blocked, so actors are inappropriately cut off or scenes are lopsided. Another big problem is bad lighting. Thank God the filmmakers are working with video and not film or the costs would be astronomical. Scenes and actors are usually too dark, and on occasion too bright. The sound in a lot of these Nollywood movies I've seen, "it get as it be," to quote a friend. Sometimes the sound is too low, other times choppy, or filled with noise. The acting in Nollywood is improving, but actors are still overacting and using quasi-Westernized phonetics instead of just being themselves and speaking their Nigerian English. The production value is made even worse when movies are pirated and re-pirated unto videocassette, which results in exponential degradation of picture, lighting, and sound quality with each pirated copy. A remedy for this post-production degradation of movies, in

addition to enacting enforceable anti-piracy laws, is copying from digital video to digital videodisk (VCD or DVD) instead of videocassette, which is already occurring, and using next-generation copy-protection technology to deter pirates.

If the viewer can manage to get past the issues with the Nollywood movie's production value, the next element that can make following a Nollywood movie very difficult for a viewer is continuity. Like this essay, every movie should have an identifiable structure that includes a beginning, middle, and end. For movies, this all starts with a script. Not only does the script provide the blueprint from which the movie can be built, it also allows the fixing of any plot or technical issues *before* production begins. The script is a tool that is very under-utilized in the Nollywood judging from the finished products in the marketplace.

Part of the problem is that the "marketers" (a.k.a. distributors) run Nollywood. Because the marketers know what will pass as a movie to consumers, commerce defeats quality more often than not. The marketers cannot necessarily see a problem with shooting a four-hour movie in one weekend without a proper script, as long as they get a return on their investment. From a business standpoint, this makes sense. Furthermore, instead of selling the viewer one good movie that compels him or her to comeback for more, movies are made in such a manner that the viewer is punished with a bad story for two hours only to have to go back out to the shop for *part two*! It seems to me to be a marketing trick just to get the viewer to part with his or her naira.

A resolution for this would be for Nollywood producers to make sure they have a script that tells the story they want to tell in an appropriate timeframe. And then from there, work with the appropriate members of the cast and crew to develop a shooting script where all

the technical issues can be resolved, so the director knows what can be shot and how to shoot it. A full-length movie is typically one hour and thirty minutes to two hours; this means the script should be 100 to 120 pages. If a movie warrants a sequel then a separate 100 to 120 pages should be written.

Nollywood movies are getting better when it comes to plots. However, the plots still fall mostly under one of three themes: Nigerians can be very melodramatic (e.g. *Taxi Driver*), the occult is omnipresent in daily Nigerian life (e.g. *Blood Sisters*), and powerful older men are victims of younger women (e.g. *Osofia in London*). Again, if Nollywood can think beyond the bank, it can show the world what great storytellers it has.

Then we come to characterization. Even with a good script, the actors cast may not have the skills to portray the characters as they were written. For example, most of the Nollywood actors are portraying Nigerians, yet most of the English speaking movies feature speech partners inconsistent with the way Nigerians really speak English. Instead you hear the actors speaking with a fake British accent or some other kind of quasi-Western phonetics. Nigerians should be proud to speak Nigerian English, accent and all. Viewers, especially in the Diaspora, prefer authenticity in dialog (e.g. Nigerian English) because it supports the movie's characterization as well as reflects who Nigerians really are. Nigerian actors speaking *phoneh*, as it is affectionately referred to, destroy the suspension-of-disbelief (i.e. what keeps a viewer believing in a fictional world) for the viewer.

Nollywood needs to put the *show* back into show business, because increased production value will increase market share and revenue. The first Nigerian movie I remember seeing was *Bisi Daughter of the River*, produced by Oladipupo Ladebo, at (I believe) the Roxy

in Surelere (Lagos State) in 1978. The production value was much better than most of what I see in Nollywood movies today. The last Nigerian movie I saw in a Nigerian theater was *Mosebolatan*, directed by Moses Adejumo, in 1986 at National Theater (Lagos State). It was in Yoruba and the production value and acting were exceptional.

For Nollywood to mature, everyone in the filmmaking process needs to become more technically proficient in his or her craft. From screenwriting, to directing, to lighting, all artists involved need to take the time to learn and develop their craft. The Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC) could sponsor scriptwriting contests that provide feedback to the entrants, conferences that provide workshops or seminars for directors, as well as industry professionals in Nigeria and in the Diaspora who could mentor new and rising filmmakers. The industry guilds also have a role to play in helping to educate writers, directors, and other film artists on how to negotiate for what's monetarily and artistically important to them. The good news is that as Nollywood get more mature and continues to receive more global exposure its members will be forced to improve the production value of their movies and to polish their craft in order to rise to the highest level of the art.