





BEYOND

THE VIDEO BOOM: NEW TENDENCIES IN THE NIGERIAN FILM INDUSTRY.

by
Alessandro Jedlowski

This essay presents the results of the first part of my research fieldwork in Nigeria; it is rich in ethnographic details and makes an attempt to describe the transformations undergone by the southern Nigerian video industry over the period prior to my arrival in the country. The specific topic of the article (the end of the video-boom era and the emergence of new tendencies within the industry) has somehow imposed itself on me. In fact, while a large part of the literature about the video industry I read before going to Nigeria was celebratory in its tone, the reality of the video industry presented itself as very complex and rich in nuances, and I felt compelled to describe and interpret the complexity of the transformations that I encountered in the field. As a consequence, this is a paper that captures a specific moment of the video industry's history. It focuses mainly on the industry's economic organization and tends to be more descriptive than analytical.

Today, the transformations that the article individuated and underlined have reached a different stage of evolution. Some of the hypotheses formulated in the paper have been confirmed, others have become less relevant. As the paper evidenced, the impact of new media technologies in Nigeria is increasing and transforming very rapidly, and the economic weight of internet, satellite television and digital cinemas on the economy of the video industry has been growing remarkably since this paper was first presented in 2010. If I was to write this paper today, it would probably look quite different. New data have become available and new actors have emerged in the field. My attention would probably focus more on some of the new distribution strategies emerging in relation to video on demand platforms and licit you-tube streaming, and less on the crisis of production, which in the meantime seems to have been partially resolved.

A number of publications have come out since this article was written, and more are about to follow, which could offer further important elements for the analysis of the video industry. Moradewum Adejunmobi's recent publications ("Charting Nollywood's appeal

locally and globally", in *African Literature Today* 28(2010): 106 – 121 and "Nollywood, globalization, and regional media corporations in Africa" in *Popular Communication* 9(2)/2011: 67 – 78) offer an interesting analysis of the reasons behind Nollywood's transnational success and of the role of the South-African satellite television M-Net within this framework. Moreover, the recently published collection of essays, titled *Global Nollywood: Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (eds. Matthias Krings and Onokoome Okome, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013) as well as the forthcoming special issues on the Nigerian video industry of two academic journals (*The Global South* and *Black Camera*, both published by Indiana University Press) will contribute importantly to the debate this article refers to, a debate as fast growing as the industry that it seeks to analyze.

BEYOND THE VIDEO BOOM: NEW TENDENCIES IN THE NIGERIAN FILM INDUSTRY.¹

Abstract

After an initial decade of prosperity, the immense popularity of Nollywood, the Nigerian video industry rated by a recent UNESCO report (2009) as the second most productive cinema industry of the world, began to have a perverse effect on the industry's economy. The market started to saturate, generating a negative spiral which brought the industry to a situation of critical impasse, and the informal structure of production and distribution that determined Nollywood's initial success turned out to be the major threat to the survival of the industry itself. The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the causes of the present crisis and the strategies applied to overcome it, in order to suggest an interpretation of the consequences of these transformations on the industry's future. The analysis presented here is the result of recent fieldwork in Lagos, and its conclusions are thus limited to the English language section of the industry which operates in southern Nigeria.

Keywords: Nollywood, Popular Culture, Piracy, Diaspora, Transnationalism

Introduction

According to a UNESCO Institute of Statistics' survey, released in April 2009, the Nigerian video industry has become the second largest film industry in the world, overtaking Hollywood's position but remaining behind the Indian film industry, Bollywood. Only seventeen years after the release of *Living in Bondage*, the film that is commonly considered as the one that established the industry (Haynes and Okome 1998), Nigeria managed to become the centre of one of the most productive film industries in the world. However, behind the rhetoric of this success, the reality of the phenomenon is complex and rich in nuance. After an initial decade of prosperity, the immense popularity of Nollywood began to have a perverse effect on the industry itself. The market became saturated, generating a negative spiral which brought the industry into a situation of critical impasse. Paradoxically, the international recognition of Nollywood's success, sanctioned by the UNESCO report, arrived at the moment of the worst crisis ever faced by the industry.²

The reasons for this crisis, as well as the strategies that the different economic actors involved in the film industry are adopting to overcome it, are multiple. Ironically, the informal structure of production and distribution that determined the initial success of Nollywood, turned out to be the major threat to the survival of the industry itself. For this reason, some of the strategies that the actors are taking to solve the crisis imply radical transformations that will probably change the face of the Nigerian industry in the coming years. These transformations are emphasizing the internal differentiation of the industry, tracing a deeper demarcation

between the multiple segments that compose the Nollywood puzzle.

The main purpose of this paper is to analyse the causes of the present crisis and the strategies being applied to overcome it, in order to suggest an interpretation of the consequences that these transformations might have for the industry's future. The analysis presented here is the result of recent fieldwork in Lagos which was focused on the English language section of the industry.³ For this reason, the branches producing films in local languages will be only marginally taken into account. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that a radical distinction between English and local language films is becoming inappropriate, since there is a growing number of outstanding directors, such as Izu Ojukwu and Kunle Afolayan, that tends to make multilingual films, which mirror the multicultural environment of most Nigerian cities. As I will discuss in detail below, it is probably more appropriate to make a distinction between the segments of the industry that target the international market and those that focus specifically on producing films for local language audiences.

Nollywood as the second largest film industry in the world: The crisis of production and its paradoxes.

When the above-mentioned UNESCO report was published, the Nigerian press' reaction was ambiguous. Some articles proudly presented the news as an outstanding national achievement, but many others underlined the risk of a premature celebration. The industry was in fact going through a difficult moment of crisis (Nzeh 2009) and, within this context, the publication of the survey sounded almost ironic. For instance, just a few months earlier, a number of Nigerian newspapers were dominated by titles such as "Nollywood is dying" (Njoku 2009a) or "Nollywood: Stuck in the middle of nowhere" (Husseini 2009). These articles were paying witness to the industry's dramatic situation and were denouncing the lack of organized action to counteract the effects of the crisis. The perverse irony of this situation resulted from the problems the industry has traversed over the past few years. In fact, the more the industry became popular, the more its economic structure weakened. In the early days of the video phenomenon, very few people were involved in the business and the profits were surprisingly large. For instance, the Igbo businessman Kenneth Nnebue, who invested no more than N 2000⁴ to shoot *Living in Bondage* (1992), made "hundreds of thousands back" (Haynes and Okome 1998: 109). Even if, as Haynes and Okome underlined as far back as in 1998, piracy was already a serious threat to the industry in that earlier era, the number of copies sold legally on the market was large enough to allow producers and marketers⁵ to continue to invest money in filmmaking. According to Fidelis Duker (in Nzeh 2009), the problems started around 2002, when the popularity that Nollywood established in its

first years of existence, and the common belief that Nollywood was a get-rich-quick system, attracted a large number of people who did not have any prior experience of cinema. As shown by the figures published by the Nigerian Censors Board, the number of videos officially released in Nigeria passed from 389 in 1999 to 1018 in 2002, with a production increase of almost 300%.⁶ Inevitably the market became saturated and the incomes generated by film releases dropped dramatically. While throughout Nollywood's first few years of existence one film could easily sell between 100.000 and 150.000 of official copies, from the beginning of the 2000s producers needed to release at least two or three films to achieve the same results and make the same amount of money. Thus, they began to cut the costs of production and release more films. The industry progressively entered a vicious circle that drove the market to an even more dramatic level of saturation.

The number of films produced increased and their narrative quality decreased, even if the average technical standards were increasing thanks to the introduction of new digital technologies. Despite this situation, Nollywood became a continental phenomenon, even if the profits of its wide popularity were hardly controlled by those producing the films. Nigerian videos' circulation around Africa was in fact largely due to the distribution of pirated copies. As a matter of fact, piracy played a pivotal role in creating Nollywood's popular success around the world, bringing Nigerian films where no official Nigerian marketer had the means to distribute them. At the same time, by eroding producers' and directors' main sources of income, these unofficial distribution channels contributed heavily to the worsening of the production crisis.

The impact of piracy on the video industry's economy, however, seems to be a consequence rather than the cause of Nollywood's troubles. The incidence of piracy is in fact directly proportional to the failure of Nigerian institutions and Nollywood marketers to enforce an efficient distribution framework and an effective copyright regulation in order to make films circulate licitly inside and outside Nigeria. Nollywood emerged and developed thanks to the adoption of a straight-to-video distribution strategy, a mode of operation which adapted extremely well to the widespread informality of Nigerian economy. This strategy had a very important role in the industry's initial success, but it also made Nollywood extremely vulnerable to the structural volatility of the informal economy, an economy in which the boundaries between legality and illegality are blurred and the possibilities of central control are limited. Hence, as I will argue in the next section, the most important attempts to rescue the industry's economy focused precisely on the distribution issue.

However, before analyzing the strategies applied to solve Nollywood's multiple problems, it is necessary to further investigate the reasons for the present crisis. The factors that I have just pointed out are structural problems and they have affected the industry since its early days. The present crisis, on the contrary, owes its existence to a number of contingent elements which

contributed to the worsening of the situation by pushing the already unsteady video economy to the rupture point. The two factors that are regularly mentioned in marketers' and producers' interpretation of the crisis are the creation, in 2003, of the pan-African satellite television channel "Africa Magic" by the South African company M-Net,⁷ and the uncontrolled growth of internet platforms that offer free broadcasting of Nollywood films. The influence of these factors reveals an interesting aspect of the Nigerian video industry's economic structure.

In Nigeria the number of people who have access to a satellite television decoder and the internet is minimal. According to the national statistics on transport and communication published by the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics in 2008, 51% of the national population have access to television sets, with great regional differences (from 94% access in Lagos State to 10% access in Yobe State).⁸ Within this framework, satellite television is a privilege that only a restricted part of the population can afford. Hence, the impact of Africa Magic on the Nigerian video market has not yet been particularly relevant. In fact, most Nollywood fans resident in Nigeria still have to buy or rent a VCD⁹ in order to watch the new releases, and when they do not have the means to do that, they still have to rely on local neighbourhood's video clubs and video-parlours.

A similar argument can be made regarding the internet problem. While, according to recent statistics, Nigeria is regarded as one of the most connected nations in Africa, with up to 11 million of its population with internet access (7.4% of the national population, compared to an average 6.8% connected population in Africa [Aragba-Akpore; Adepotun 2010]), the quality of the connection is still relatively low. Most people access the network through external pen-drives, mobile phones or in cybercafés. In all cases the quality of the connection is hardly good enough to watch or download a film.

Thus, it is possible to argue that what makes the introduction of satellite television channels and internet platforms economically influential is the fact that it dramatically reduced the incomes produced by the sale of Nigerian videos outside Nigeria, and particularly in Europe and in the US. In fact, while the Nigerian market has suffered the impact of piracy since the early days of the industry, diasporic markets tended to be better structured. This does not mean that piracy was not affecting them, but its impact was generally less dramatic than in Nigeria. However, as the Nigerian journalist Fred Jora demonstrates in an attentive reportage conducted among Nigerian video sellers in Europe, the impact of internet streaming and satellite televisions deeply damaged this business, pushing video sellers to consistently reduce the number of videos ordered weekly from Nigeria. Sunday Omobude, a Nigerian businessman who owns a video shop in Amsterdam, for example, is reported to have cut his orders from 8000 films a week to 1500, while the internet site onlinenigeria.com, which broadcasts Nigerian films for free is reported to have up to 700.000



visitors in 45 countries around the world (Jora 2007). With regards to satellite television, the discourse is slightly different. In fact, even if Africa Magic is not accessible in Europe and the US, a number of satellite television channels screening Nollywood films have emerged over the past few years also in non-African countries.¹⁰ Their activity inevitably impacted on the consumption habits of numerous Nollywood spectators in the diaspora, pushing them to reduce the number of films bought per week. To understand the influence of diasporic markets on the video industry's economy is particularly important because it clarifies the reasons behind the marketing choices that a number of producers and directors have taken over the past few years in order to overcome the crisis.¹¹ However, before exploring the new role that diasporic markets and audiences are playing in shaping the development of Nollywood, it is useful to discuss a few other elements that have contributed in determining the actual situation. As mentioned above, the saturation of the market generated an extreme level of economic competition, that ultimately determined a worsening of the films' quality. In only four years, between 2004 and 2007, the Nigerian Censors Board's figures report 5889 films officially released, which is more than the total number of films officially put on the market since the creation of the Censors Board in 1994 (with 4837 films released between 1994 and 2003).¹² According to the interviews I conducted with spectators of the films in Nigeria, many people had the feeling that the taste and the critical capacity of the audience was underestimated. This might be one of the reasons behind the re-affirmation of foreign films on the Nigerian market. One of the many successes that the Nollywood industry was proud of, was the fact that, on the local entertainment market, Nigerian videos had marginalized Hollywood and Bollywood films. The audience excitement for Nollywood films that characterized the first years of the video phenomenon was a reaction to decades of foreign contents' predominance. After the emergence of Nollywood films, no foreign story could compete with a truly "African" drama performed by Nigerian stars. But almost twenty years later, the audience has inevitably become much more sophisticated. Nigerian videos are no more considered as a novelty, and they are watched with increasing criticism. Foreign films, on the contrary, are back in the market, thanks also to the new technologies that pirates use in order to offer the best prices. The so called "combos", DVDs with up to forty films in compressed format, imported mainly from China, are sold on the street for 100 or 200 Naira (which is less than the price of one original Nigerian VCD) and pirated copies of Bollywood films dubbed in Yoruba are distributed in Alaba and Idumota markets (Adelakun 2009). Furthermore, to watch a Nigerian film, and thus support the industry's growth, has become an expensive choice, which not everybody can or wants to afford. As emphasized emphatically by Brian Larkin (2008), the state of infrastructures deeply influences Nigerian everyday life. Hence, to watch a film is not as simple

as it is elsewhere. In Lagos, for instance, the power supply is schizophrenic, and in most popular neighbourhoods it barely lasts for longer than two hours a day. Those who want to watch a film must thus own a generator and must pay for the fuel, which in some periods can be hard to find even in big cities like Lagos, Ibadan and Onitsha. Moreover, the discontinuous electric power can easily damage power alimented systems, such as the television and the VCD reader. This means that, in many cases, in order to watch a film, people have to spend additional money and repair the damaged systems. The worsening of the power supply situation in the past few years is thus making the life of the industry harder. On the one hand, audiences face innumerable problems simply to access the basic conditions needed to watch a film (enough fuel, a working power generator, a working TV set and VCD reader). And on the other hand, producers are obliged to calculate additional costs of production to generate the electricity they need on set during shooting. These problems are particularly critical in a period in which the welfare of the re-emerging Nigerian middle class, one of the main supporters of the industry and specifically of the English language section of it, has been eroded by the economic crisis. During 2009, for instance, a crisis affected the Nigerian bank sector forcing many banks to revise their budgets and the number of employees (Cropley 2009). Much retrenchment ensued, and inevitably a large number of households were affected and people had to revise their lifestyles. The scenario sketched above is undoubtedly dark, but as the following section will show, it also presents unexpectedly exciting aspects. As emphasized by most of the scholarship that traces the history of Nollywood (i.e. Barrot 2005; Haynes 2000), the Nigerian video industry emerged during one of the worst crises that Nigeria has ever experienced, the crisis caused by the application of the Structural Adjustment Program in the mid-1980s. Cinema culture was dying, as well as the long-standing tradition of Yoruba travelling theatre. National television no longer had the money to produce local series and violence was spreading all over the country, making it difficult for people to patronize outdoor entertainment. Paradoxically, the mixture of these elements, together with Nigerian people's strength and creativity, contributed to the birth of the biggest African film industry. According to many, the current crisis was long needed, and it will have a positive effect on the industry's future. Both Steve Ayorinde (2010) and Jahman Anikulapo (2010), two Nigerian journalists that have followed the evolution of the video phenomenon since its beginnings, agreed on this point during the interviews I conducted with them. The Nigerian industry has frequently moved from one crisis to another, each crisis marking the ground for a new important development. Paraphrasing Jahman Anikulapo's words, it is from the ashes of the video boom that a more solid and qualitative film industry will originate.

Out of the ashes of the video boom: New tendencies in the Nigerian video industry.

The most structured and, at the same time, the most controversial intervention made to solve the production crisis is the one proposed by the Nigerian Censors Board with the authorisation of a new distribution framework. After conducting a research on the economic situation of the industry, the Director General of the Censors Board, Emeka Mba, and his staff emphasised the lack of a distribution framework as the central problem affecting the industry. The absence of a structured distribution system affected the economy of the industry in many ways. First of all, it made it impossible for the authorities to pursue pirates. In fact, in an informal system no distributor is officially licensed and no official number of copies released is published. VCDs are not encoded, so they do not have any digital protection, and can easily be duplicated and sold on the market in pirated copies. No video shop or video club is licensed either, so anyone can decide to start to sell videos, without having official permission to do that. This system enabled Nollywood films to circulate all over the country and all over the continent, but it also progressively eroded producers’ and distributors’ incomes, making new investments become highly risky. The lack of a formal structure made the production of official figures impossible. Apart from the Censors Board data on the number of films released each year (which, as I evidenced in the footnote above, are only partly reliable), no other official figures on the industry’s economy are available. For instance, it is impossible to have a reliable idea of the number of copies that each film manage to sell on the market. Thus it becomes extremely hard to know which are the most popular films released in any year and the amount of revenue they generated. The protagonists of the industry (marketers, producers, directors) tend to deliver figures that follow their personal interests. For instance, directors mention higher numbers to promote, and sometimes create, their popular success, while marketers, on the contrary, tend to reduce them in order to protect themselves from fiscal pressure. The lack of official figures makes the economy of the industry deeply unreliable, discouraging external private investment from banks and private corporations. By way of intervention, in 2007 the Censors Board approved a new distribution framework, which imposes the acquisition of a license on all distributors, video shops and video clubs. It also insists on the marking of every VCD put on the market with official stamps delivered by the Censors Board. In this way the Board would be able to have a figure of the number of official copies released and bought. The framework distinguishes five categories

of distributors (national, regional, state, Local Government Area, community) with license fees that range from N 500.000 for the national license to N 15.000 for the community one, and which imposes on distributors an insurance bank bond ranging from N 30 million for the national distributors to N 1 million for the LGA (the community distributors have only to guarantee a N 100.000 operating fund).¹³ When the framework was authorized, a general misunderstanding around the function of the insurance bond emerged,¹⁴ and a violent clash took place between the marketers and the Censors Board, leading to the arrest of some marketers and, in response to that, to a legal procedure against the Censors Board (Akpovi-Asade 2008 and 2009). Even if, during the first half of 2009, a number of distributors and video renters enrolled for the license, today the benefits that the introduction of the framework produced are still very limited and many professionals have begun to complain. Three of the industry’s most influential characters, Amaka Igwe (2010), Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen (2010) and Don Pedro Obaseki (2010) have emphasised during interviews that – after the initial misunderstanding – they supported the framework, but today the lack of results is making them suspicious. The most common complaint relates to the fact that the framework was designed at an institutional level, without consulting the main industry’s economic actors. It thus resulted in top-down action which does not sit easily with a highly informal economic environment such as the Nigerian one. To understand how the Censors Board’s actions were structured and received is vital in order to analyze the new tendencies that have emerged within the English section of the industry over the past few years. The framework’s inability to demonstrate its efficacy in a short period of time oriented the protagonists of the industry toward different economic strategies, that can be schematized in two general tendencies. On the one hand, there is a section of the industry, part of which initially supported the introduction of the framework, that wants the industry to meet international standards of filmmaking. In this way it would be possible to bypass the crisis of the internal market by enlarging the potential market for videos’ circulation and distributing the films through festivals and mainstream cinema releases around the world. For this section of the industry, the model of production to be adopted is very similar to the one that characterizes Hollywood and Bollywood: bigger budgets, fewer films released, and wide organized international distribution networks, via cinemas and DVDs. On the other hand, there is a section of the industry, part of which strongly resisted the enforcement of the framework, that still finds the present situation convenient, because of the freedom and the

economic mobility that it allows. For this section, the local market is still large enough to make the business worthwhile. Production value tends to be a secondary issue because videos are designed for specific shares of the local audience, which have hardly any other products specifically addressed to them. This kind of production system, which emerged from the specificity of the Nigerian social and economic environment, is based on a high number of films produced, targeted to different specific sections of the national audience. This tends to be the model applied by both a section of the English language industry (for instance the one producing religious films) and by the local language segments, which appear to have only marginally suffered the impact of the crisis of production.¹⁵ The two tendencies are opposite because one tends to reduce the number of films, trying to bring them to the largest international audience possible, while the second one tends to increase the number of films produced while addressing very specific segments of the audience. In his analysis of the Nigerian video industry, Biodun Jeyifo defines these two tendencies as a direct opposition between marketers and producers on one side, and directors on the other. “You now have two distinct formations of Nollywood,” he writes, “one is controlled by the marketers and producers, the other one is an independent formation of truly creative people not driven by the profit move or the zeal to win souls for Jesus” (Jeyifo 2009). This distinction may portray part of the situation, but at the same time appears to be misleading. In the debate about Nollywood, the marketer is often considered as an illiterate whose only objective is to make money as quickly as possible. But this portrayal is inevitably partial. Emmanuel Isikaku (2010), who, as head of the Film and Video Producers and Marketers Association of Nigeria (FVPMAN), has represented marketers and producers since the end of the 1990s, underscored the fact that Nollywood’s success is largely due to the role of the marketers, who first saw the economic advantages that investments in video filmmaking could have. As he emphasized, what actually established the difference between Nollywood and other instances of filmmaking in Africa is precisely the fact that local investors became interested in the movie sector, and started investing in it (Isikaku 2010). If Nollywood is so popular throughout Africa, it is largely because it tells stories that sell to an African audience. The marketing element is thus inseparable from the success that made Nollywood the phenomenon that we know today. For this reason, Jeyifo’s opposition between marketers-driven and directors-driven filmmaking risks understating the complexity of the situation. The people who are trying to make films that abide by international standards, like Kunle Afolayan, Mamood Ali Balogun, Izu Ojukwu and many others that I will reference more

extensively later, are “truly creative people”, as Jeyifo says, but they also have a clear business concept in mind. In the same way, even if their main preoccupation is economic, many marketers are well aware of the need to improve the average quality of the films they produce in order to enlarge their potential markets. Hence, the distinction between the two tendencies mentioned above is not only a distinction between a creative side of the industry and its commercial counterpart, but it is a distinction that should be made in terms of economic strategies and targeted markets. While waiting for the new distribution framework to show its efficacy, some directors have undertaken new marketing strategies that will allow them to avoid the problems created by the present structure of the industry. As I emphasized above, these strategies involve bigger production budgets (often obtained through partnerships with private corporations), theatrical release (in Nigeria and within the diasporic context), and the late release of the DVD or VCD (often directly controlled by the director/producer through on-line selling). The marketing concept behind this kind of strategy implies that by improving the film’s quality the product will have access to cinemas and the festival circuit, thus refunding an important percentage of the production budget before being released on DVD and VCD. This tendency was affirmed, for instance, by the marketing strategy adopted by Kunle Afolayan with his first film, *Irapada* (2006), a high-budget Yoruba film made to meet international standards of filmmaking. This film enjoyed a long period of screening in Nigerian cinemas¹⁶ that almost refunded the production expenses, and was also well received internationally. It was screened at The Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles, at the 51st London Film Festival and it also won the Best Indigenous Nigerian Movie award at the African Movie Academy Awards (AMAA). As a result of this success, Afolayan shot a second film, *The Figurine* (2009), that had spectacular local and international success. However the film that most compellingly revealed that cinema release strategy could become the path for the future development of the industry was Stephanie Okereke’s *Through the glass* (2008). This début film by one of the most popular Nollywood stars was shot entirely in the United States while Stephanie Okereke was attending the New York Film Academy. Once released in Nigeria it managed to make more than N 10 million in its first three weeks of cinema release (Akande 2009). Its success demonstrated the potential that theatrical release could have for the restructuring of Nollywood’s economy. Another important event that occurred in the same period was the release of Jeta Amata’s *Amazing Grace* (2006), an historical film about slavery shot in 35 mm. The film did not do particularly well and, at the third AMAA awards in 2007, did not manage to obtain

the expected prize as best Nigerian film. However, Amata’s film reintroduced celluloid in Nigerian cinema, opening a path that a number of directors have since followed.¹⁷ The release, over the past few months, of other Nigerian films in 35 mm (Chinese Anyane’s *Ije, the journey*) and the forthcoming release of Mamood Ali Balogun’s *Tango with me*, a film in 35mm with a budget of more than N 85 million, shows that the trend inaugurated by Amata’s film is becoming influential.

It is interesting to note that the cinema-hall-trend, inaugurated by directors that prefer internationally-oriented film production, is being progressively adopted also by mainstream Nollywood directors such as Teco Benson and Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, two of the most popular directors within the Nigerian video industry’s environment. Both of them are raising the technical quality of their films in order to make the transition from informal distribution to theatrical release possible. Already in 2007, Teco Benson’s *Mission to Nowhere* was blown into 35mm format to be screened in Nigerian cinemas, while Lancelot Imasuen’s most recent film, *Home in Exile*, after a number of premiere screenings in Nigeria, Europe and the US in October and November 2009, was released in Nigerian cinemas in March 2010.

The ongoing transition to cinema halls inevitably determines a switch in terms of the targeted audience. Even if, as mentioned above, over the past few years southern Nigeria has witnessed the return of cinema-going culture, the number of screens available for commercial distribution is still negligible. There are only three modern commercial cinema halls in Lagos (Silverbird Galleria, City Mall and Genesis Deluxe), with two more in Abuja and one in Port Harcourt.¹⁸ Hence, the opportunities for theatrical circulation are hardly large enough to make local box office the only source of income. Only a few very successful films, like *Through the Glass* and *The Figurine*, can count on a considerable economic return from local box offices. This evidence compels us to consider once again the role of the diasporic audience on Nollywood’s economy. Lancelot Imasuen (2010), Femi Odugbemi (2010) and Mamood Ali Balogun (2010) have underscored in recent interviews that the targeted audience of their most recent works is the worldwide black diaspora, an audience that has supported the industry since its beginnings and has shown a clear demand for better quality films. The experience that these directors and many others have had in Europe, United States and Canada made them realize that the diasporic demand for Nollywood films is large and the potential market wide. This is a market that can allow them to invest in bigger projects because it is grounded on structured systems of distribution and exhibition, which guarantee reliable economic returns.

Furthermore, targeting diasporic and international audiences has influenced the storyline of many recent releases. For instance, in Lancelot Imasuen’s *Home in Exile*, Lucky Ejim’s *The Tenant* and Chinese Anyane’s *Ije, the journey* the protagonist is a Nigerian living abroad or coming back to Nigeria after living in a Western

country, and the storyline is centred on the problems related to the clash between different lifestyles, values, cultures and habits. As Jonathan Haynes has underlined (2003; 2009), migration and life in foreign countries have become recurrent themes in Nollywood films, and this might well be read as a consequence of the growing influence diasporic audiences play on the video industry’s economy.

Conclusion

As I have argued throughout this article, at least two main tendencies are emerging within the Nigerian video industry as a consequence of the present production crisis. They apply different economic models and target different audiences: a mainly urban local and diasporic middle class for the films released in the cinema circuit, and a more popular (both urban and rural), local and non-economically-uniform class of people for the straight-to-video releases (especially for those in local languages). This might well be a simplification, but it helps to analyse the directions that the industry is taking. The two markets these branches target can easily overlap, as happened for instance with the release of *Jenifa*, a low-budget Yoruba film which became the most popular Nollywood release in 2008. However, this interpretative scheme gives us a tool to look at the transformations that the industry is currently undergoing. At the same time, probably neither of the two tendencies underlined above will be able to guarantee the kind of popular success Nollywood experienced throughout the first few years of its existence. The success of the first Nigerian videos was the result of their ability to create a film language which cut across social, cultural and economic differences, a film language that managed to touch at the same time the top and the bottom of the Nigerian social pyramid.

The production crisis and the transformations that followed it demonstrated that something had to be done for Nollywood to survive and respond to the challenges imposed by both its global popularity and its unsteady economic organization. But the future development of the industry relies on the ability to keep videos’ local popular success alive. The impact of Nollywood’s transnationalization pushed the industry toward better quality standards and gave the films the opportunity to be released in conventional cinemas. The needs and the tastes of some segments of the local audiences, on the other hand, kept in purview the importance of indigenous languages and local settings. Perhaps, as the experiment undertaken by Tunde Kelani with his last film *Arugba* (2008) has shown, the future of the industry lies in the capacity to make these two tendencies meet, for example reintroducing cinema theatres in Nigeria’s rural centres and in cities’ popular neighbourhoods.¹⁹ The development of digital technologies has reduced the difference between digital and celluloid, making the transition back to cinema possible at affordable costs. Now it is for local actors to understand the economic potential of a widespread reintroduction of cinema theatres in Nigeria.

Acknowledgement

Warm thanks to Lindiwe Dovey, Karin Barber and Jonathan Haynes for their careful reading of this article and for their insightful comments. I would also like to thank Evans and Id for their formidable hospitality in Lagos and the Centre of West African Studies of Birmingham for allowing me to be part of the Cadbury Fellows’ Workshop 2010 “Turning in to African Cities. Popular Culture and Urban Experience in sub-Saharan Africa” during which this article has been written. Finally, I would like to thank Alessandro Triulzi for supporting my research and the University of Naples “L’Orientale” for sponsoring my PhD project.

Filmography

Amazing Grace. Dir. Jeta Amata. Jeta Amata Concepts & Amazing Grace Films (English). Nigeria: 2006. Film.
Arugba. Dir. Tunde Kelani. Mainframe (Yoruba and English). Nigeria: 2008. Video.
Home in Exile. Dir. Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen. Icelidesfilms and Lancewealth Image (English) Nigeria: 2009. Video.
Ije, the journey. Dir. Chinese Anyane Xandria Productions (English). USA/Nigeria: 2010. Film.
Irapada. Dir. Kunle Afolayan. Golden Effects (English, Yoruba and Hausa with English subtitles). Nigeria: 2007. Video.
Jenifa. Dir. Muyhdeen S. Ayinde. Olasco Film Nigeria Ltd (English, Pidgin and Yoruba). Nigeria: 2008. Video.
Living in bondage. Dir. Chris Obi Rapu. NEK videos (Igbo with subtitles in English). Nigeria: 1992. Video.
Mission to Nowhere. Dir. Teco Benson. TFP Global Network (English). Nigeria: 2007. Video.
Tango with me. Dir. Mamood Ali Balogun. Brickwall Communications (English). Nigeria: 2011. Film.
The Figurine. Dir. Kunle Afolayan. Golden Effects (English, Pidgin and Yoruba with English subtitles). Nigeria: 2009. Video.
The Tenant. Dir. Onyekachi Ejim. Broken Manacles Entertainment (English). Canada: 2010. Video.
Through the glass. Dir. Stephanie Okereke. Next Page Productions (English). USA/Nigeria: 2008. Film.

Bibliography

Adelakun, Abimbola. 2009. “It’s Indian, but in Yoruba tongue.” *The Punch*, 11 February 2009: 41.
Adejumobi, Moradewum. 2007. “Nigerian Video Film as Minor Transnational Practice.” In *Postcolonial Text* No. 3.2. <http://journals.sfu.ca/pocol/index.php/pct/article/view/548/405>>. 1-16.
Agbedo, Onyedika. 2009. “We want to create a well-structured film industry in Nigeria – Interview with Emeka Mba.” *The Guardian Nigeria*, 21 March 2009: 39.

Akande, Victor. 2009. “Nollywood and the new factor called premiere.” *The Nation*, 19 December 2009.
Akpovi-Esade, Justin. 2008. “Film marketers seek legal succour against censors board’s policy.” *The Guardian Nigeria*, 7 August 2008: 80.
2009.”Movie marketers shelve picketing, to dialogue with censors’ board.” *The Guardian Nigeria*, 4 February 2009.
Anikulapo, Jahman. 2010. Personal communication. Lagos: 19th of January 2010.
Aragba-Akpore, Sonny; Adepetun, Adeyemi. 2010. “Africa occupies bottom chart of global Internet connectivity. Nigeria shows promises.” *The Guardian Nigeria*, 10 February 2010: 25 – 27.
Ayorinde, Steve. 2010. Personal communication. Lagos: 18th of January 2010.
Balogun, Mamood Ali. 2010. Personal communication. Lagos: 27th of January 2010.
Barrot, Pierre (ed.) 2005. *Nollywood: Le phénomène video au Nigeria*. Paris: L’Harmattan.
Cropley, Ed. 2009. “Nigerian banking crisis echoes across Africa”. *Reuters* 21 August 2009, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKLNE57K00O20090821pageNumber=2&virtualBrandChannel=0&sp=tr ue>
Duker, Fidelis. 2010. Personal communication. Lagos: 26th of January 2010.
Haynes, Jonathan. 2000 (ed.) *Nigerian Video Films*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
2003. “Africans Abroad: A Theme in Film and Video.” In *Africa & Mediterraneo* No. 45: 22-29.
2009. “The Nollywood Diaspora. A Nigerian Video Genre.” Paper presented at the conference “Nollywood and Beyond”, Mainz 13 – 16 May 2009.
Haynes, Jonathan; Okome, Onookome. 1998. “Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video Films” in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Autumn, 1998): 106-128.
Husseini, Shaibu. 2009. “Nollywood 2008: Stuck in the middle of nowhere.” *The Guardian Nigeria*, 23 January 2009: 24 – 25.
Igwe, Amaka. 2010. Personal communication. Lagos: 20th of January 2010.
Imasuen, Lancelot Oduwa. 2010. Personal communication. Lagos: 12th of February 2010.
Iroh, Eddie. 2009. “Nollywood, Nolly What?” *Thisday*. 25 May 2009.
Isikaku, Emmanuel. 2010. Personal communication. Lagos: 19th of February 2010.
Jeyifo, Biodun. 2009. “Will Nollywood get better? Did Hollywood and Bollywood get better? (7).” Talakawa Liberation Courier No. 81, *The Guardian Nigeria*, 22 February 2009.
Jora, Fred. 2007. “The big rip-off. How Nollywood films are shown on net free of charge... Europe based stakeholders cry foul.” *The Vanguard*. 27 October 2007: 20.

Larkin, Brian. 2002. “The Materiality of Cinema Theatres in Northern Nigeria.” In *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, eds. Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin. Berkeley: University of California Press. 319-336.

2004. “Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy.” *Public Culture* No. 16.2: 289-314.

2008. *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Northern Nigeria*. Chapel Hill: Duke University Press.

Nigerian Film and Video Censor Board. 2007. *Comprehensive Policy on the Distribution, Exhibition and Marketing of Films and Video Works in Nigeria*. Abuja: NFVCB.

Njoku, Benjamin. 2008. “Controversy. NFCVB verses Nollywood: Who wins the battle?” *The Vanguard*, 17 August 2008: 48.

2009a. “Nollywood is dying. Interview with Francis Onwochei.” *The Vanguard*. 21 February 2009: 36.

2009b. “Distribution Framework: We made mistakes – Interview with Emeka Mba, DG of Censors Board.” *The Vanguard*. 14 March 2009: 22 – 23.

2009c. ““We are not responsible for Nollywood’s woes’ – Interview with Biola Alabi, M-Net MD.” *The Vanguard*. 15 August 2009: 26

Nzeh, Sam. 2009. “Nollywood: New ranking, persisting challenges.” *Daily Champion*, 16 May 2009: 38.

Obaseki, Pedro. 2010. Personal communication. Lagos: 11th of February 2010.

Odugbemi, Femi. 2010. Personal communication. Lagos: 25th of January 2010.

Okon-Ekong, Nseobong. 2009. “Emeka Nkem Mba: Am not a Poster boy.” *Thisday*, 14 June 2009: 76 – 77.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2009. *International Survey on Feature Film Statistics*. Montreal: UIS.

Notes

¹ A longer version of this article was firstly presented at the ASUK writing workshop in Birmingham (UK), on the 16th of April 2010. The current version was presented for the first time at the AVANCA/CINEMA international conference in Avanca (PT) on the 29th of July 2010 with the title “New tendencies in the Nigerian film industry: Nollywood, global cinema and the impact of the diapo-ra”, and was published with this title in AVANCA/CINEMA 2010 (Avanca [PT]: Edições cine-clube de Avanca, 2010: 437 – 444). In order to facilitate its circulation, the paper is here republished with its original title.

² The crisis affected particularly the section of the industry producing videos in English. The official figures of films released in the last two years have not yet been delivered by the Nigerian Censors Board, but the drastic drop in production is commonly recognized and has also been underlined by the Director General of the Nigerian Censors Board, Emeka Mba in a recent interview (Njoku 2009b).

³ As emphasized by Haynes and Okome, Nigerian filmmaking is organized along ethnic lines in a way that is quite unusual in other regions of the continent (Haynes and Okome 1998: 125). The three main segments that compose the industry, the English/Igbo one, the Yoruba one and the Hausa one, evolved following different lines. They have different cultural references to ground their aesthetics and narratives, and their production systems – even if at times interrelated – are based on different dynamics of social solidarity. The segment producing film in English is the one that experienced the most popular success all over the African continent and within the African diaspora. The success of the English productions brought to this segment of the industry people belonging to all Nigerian ethnic groups, so that today, even if the majority of the producers and marketers is still of Igbo descent, the English sector of the industry results in being the most multicultural.

⁴ In early 1990s this amount corresponded to around 200USD. With the current exchange rate (2010), 1 USD corresponds to about 160 Nigerian Naira.

⁵ The word “marketer” is commonly used in Nigeria to refer to film distributors.

⁶ Figures from the Nigerian Censor Board official website: www.nfvcb.gov.ng/statistics.php (accessed on the 25th of March 2010). Even if the official statistics help to provide a general idea of the industry’s tendencies, they are not completely reliable. In the first years of existence of the Censors Board, only a very small percentage of video production passed through censorship and even today many videos go straight to the market without any control. However, the Censors Board statistics are the only official figures existing and it is useful to consult them as a general reference.

⁷ It must be emphasized that, from a different perspective, the creation of Africa Magic had an important and positive impact on the video industry. It multiplied Nollywood’s popularity around

the continent, and it participated in increasing the videos’ average technical quality by imposing minimum quality standards on the films selected for broadcasting. It also offered a number of training opportunities for Nigerian crews and stimulated co-productions and artistic exchanges between different African countries (Njoku 2009c).

⁸ Data from the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics website: <http://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/> (accessed 20th of March 2010). Unfortunately the Bureau of Statistics does not have a figure for the number of decoders sold in the country. The market for satellite television is getting larger but to own a decoder is still considered a privilege that only the elite and a restricted middle class can afford. However, because of the increase of price competition among the leading satellite providers, the prize of a decoder is quickly decreasing, and there are reasons to believe that the accessibility of satellite television will multiply in the years to come.

⁹ Video Compact Disc. This digital technology, cheaper than the DVD but better quality than the VHS, is extremely diffused in Eastern Asia and has been introduced on the Nigerian market at the beginning of the 2000’s. VCDs are very easy to reproduce and their introduction on the market made the work of pirates easier than it used to be when the films were released in VHS.

¹⁰ The best example of this trend is the channel Sky 194, inaugurated in January 2008, which is entirely dedicated to the screening of Nigerian films for audiences in the UK and Ireland (Esan 2008).

¹¹ Here it is important to underline that, even if I emphasize the influence of the diasporic market on Nollywood’s economic situation, I do not intend to overstress it. Nigerian videos’ main market has been and still is the local one. This is why the video industry succeeded and became the largest popular culture industry in the continent. The diaspora contributed to this success only recently and in a minor percentage.

¹² See footnote number 6.

¹³ Data from the text of the Distribution Framework, National Film and Video Censor Board 2007 (accessible at the Nigerian Censors Board headquarter in Abuja).

¹⁴ Emeka Mba explained this point in a recent interview with the Nigerian paper The Guardian: “If you are going to be in the business of distributing intellectual content across the country, which might have cost the producer N 5 to N 10 million, you must have capacity to do that. So we decided that all those who wished to be distributing films in this country must show the Board that they have the capacity to be able to do that. We said we want to see capacity in terms of offices, equipment and alliances that will amount to about N 30 million. It wasn’t money that the marketer or distributor had to pay to us. It was for him to justify his business by declaring that as a distributor, he is worth N 50 million and with evidence to prove that. But in the absence of that evidence, we advised them to go and take an insurance or bank bond to show that they have ability to do these things” (Agbedo 2009).

¹⁵ As mentioned earlier, my research did not analyze the situation

of the local language sections of the industry. However it is possible to say that these segments enjoyed a stronger loyalty from their audiences which see in them the only available entertainment in their own language.

¹⁶ Cinema halls started to be reintroduced in Nigeria in 2004, firstly in Lagos, and then also in Abuja and Port Harcourt, thanks to the investment of the three Nigerian companies Silverbird, Genesis Deluxe and Ozone.

The situation in northern Nigeria is very different from the one that characterizes the southern part of the country. Cinema-going culture almost never disappeared in cities such as Kano and Kaduna, and the number of available screening halls is still high (see Larkin 2002 and 2008). However this area responds to different market dynamics and only very rarely enters into relationship with Nollywood’s English language productions.

¹⁷ The last Nigerian celluloid film censored by the Nigerian Censors Board before Amata’s Amazing Grace was Bankole Bello’s Oselu, released in 1996.

¹⁸ A well equipped cinema exists also in Jos, at the Nigerian Film Institute, but it usually hosts thematic retrospectives, festivals and premieres, and does not engage with the commercial system of distribution.

¹⁹ Thanks to the support of the Lagos State Government, Tunde Kelani managed to screen his last film in all of the 59 Local government areas of Lagos State. The screenings, organized using Kelani’s traveling cinema equipments, enjoyed wide popular success. The traveling cinema marketing strategy adopted by Kelani reintroduces a commercial practice used by the Traveling Theatres companies in late 1970s and early 1980s, when the shows were filmed and then projected in improvised cinema halls around the country.



Alessandro Jedlowski

Alessandro Jedlowski received his doctorate in African Studies at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”. His PhD research focused on the processes of transnationalization that have affected the southern Nigerian video industry over the past few years. He is the author of *Teatro, violenza e resistenza in Congo Brazzaville. Il percorso di Dieudonné Niangouna* (Torino: L’Harmattan Italia, 2007) and of a number of articles published in Italian and international academic journals.