

Women through the Eye of the Camera: The Aesthetic Challenge of Nigerian Films

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Introduction

A lot of critics at home and in the Diaspora wonder a lot about the creative ingenuity of Nigerian film producers within a harsh economic climate. This industry is acclaimed to be the second largest export after oil, but the representation of women in most of these films and the discourse about them is highly negative. The economic accomplishments made by the producers manage to hide the poverty of the Nigerian viewing masses. The role of popular home video film producers, actors, marketers and every personnel involved in the production of these films is also a challenging one. Staying on in the market by making monetary profit is another challenge. This is due mainly to prohibitive costs of materials and the inflationary trends of the Nigerian economy.

To remain in production, certain aesthetic preferences are often adopted, especially in an age where consumerism is rife. To this end, most home video films produced are done in a hurry, with small budgets, artistes with talent and not with theatre or film training are used, although it remains controversial whether talent or training/craft should be a determining factor in any artistic endeavor, especially of the technical or practical kind. Other options open to the home video film producer may have been forced upon him, not by the harsh financial climate, but by the end users of the films, who also determine production outcomes.

With urbanization, industrialization and globalization, the audience reflects certain uses and gratification requirements, by using the filmic content to meet certain needs and therefore engender catharsis. Some of these are the glamorization of the artiste, fetish practices, fetishization of the female artiste's body, subtle or blatant pornography, crime and violence. There is a fear expressed by this present writer, that with time, these factors may signify the end of most films made without core artistic qualities. As time goes on due to global trends, the Nigerian film audience may themselves prescribe the kind of video films they consume, using artistic and aesthetic judgments that may send many producers out of film engagement. This transience of badly produced home video films, one believes, is a necessary watershed in the development of the industry in Nigeria. This means that with time, we know who the good or inept home video film producers are, the production climate for good and qualitative films, and how, if and when they can attain global competitiveness.

Issues and Challenges

There is a crucial need for authority in any creative medium. The production and consumption ends of the home video industry need some symbiosis and/or hegemony over content, historicity or plot of these films. This control may not be a reality for a major reason - producers constantly graft Euro-Asian, Euro-American filmic modes into purely Nigerian filmic constructs. As a female viewer of these films, one has constantly wondered whether at this stage of our development whether we need sex symbols or role models in the industry. Most of the images found within the Nigerian filmic frame are masculinist and patriarchal.

If you ask many female viewers, they will tell you that half-naked, ill costumed ladies do not excite women. The target of this exposure is the male folk. This concerns the issue of 'scopophilia', the pleasure or joy derived from viewing an object and the similar gratification consequent from being gazed upon or looked at. This is the masculinist or patriarchal link to the sex symbolization of actresses and actors. In terms of patriarchy, the male dominance is often overstretched and made a cliché. At times, there are allegations of 'sex-for-roles' leveled against some male personnel in the home video industry. This is often termed the 'male gaze' and through the eye of the camera, this gaze determines how actors and actresses are viewed. More than ever, the time may have come for a woman-focused and a cultural viewing as well as a transcultural viewing across ethnic divides.

Another issue of concern is whether these films produced in Nigeria or about Nigeria can help to achieve the patriotic spirit. One agrees that Nollywood, as the industry was christened from the outside is a fledgling. However the global attention it has received makes the necessity for nationalistic reach imperative. The lack of patriotic content may make output from the Nigerian home video industry shy when in contact with some films from the traditions it aims to mimic. By this one means films from Europe, Asia or America. One had earlier mentioned the prerequisite of cultural viewing for the home video audience. For a true national spirit to refer, the video producers need to re-determine their goals. Nevertheless, from the side of the producers, certain core aesthetic challenges are mentioned as limiting factors. These are:

- A lack of training for the cast
- The technical crew of most home videos is extemporized
- No options for re-training
- Very few training schools are available
- Makeshift production equipment
- Influx of profiteers into the industry
- Lack of stunt/effects personnel
- The near absence of international competitiveness
- Piracy
- Limited number of financiers of the productions
- Lack of state of the art studios for production and post production
- Non exploitation of ICT routes for design, production and post production
- The postmodernist trend of imitations, fakes and forgeries
- The problem of narration/discourse
- Subjectivity or point of view
- Character projection

One could continue to list factors producers adduce as limiting their cutting edge in video production. One could also consider them to be excuses that have subsisted as long as the phenomenon of the home video has existed.

The grounds which justify our evaluation are simple aesthetic evaluations of these films, the factor of censorship, and other factors. These are moral, economic and cultural. This means that since our focus is the worth of women in Nigerian videos, quality is of essence, so are moral

obligations to the impressionable children and young adults. Art lives long after the producer is out of the production scene. This therefore means that with time, a classification of these productions into 'high Nollywood' and 'low Nollywood' may come to pass. Further aesthetic criteria may be put in place to resolve the dichotomies between the two and to establish whether high video is good or low video is bad, why this is so and if there are any grey areas between them. This brings us to a crucial area of identifying those publics or viewers who may determine the value of these video productions from a woman's perspective.

Women's Bases

Social plots involving how groups and individuals manage to exist in a challenging environment like Nigeria is of essence. No genuine video producer can shut his/her eyes to the germane issues at stake, be they economic, political, cultural, or historical etc. The antecedents of production in the video sector reveal the late entrance of women as producers or directors of the productions. Talking in terms of the gaze, women who are found behind the camera are also few. One may not know if the choice of many women in the medium is determined by the glamour or a shying away from the technical aspects. But in terms of viewership, how do women construct the images that they see in the video productions? The outlook of one woman was sought on some germane woman-centred indices and the questions below were asked. Her responses to each question are also given.

- Do you watch Nigerian home video films as a woman?

When this question was put to her, her response was in the affirmative. She also added that she viewed foreign films as well.

- What do you like in the women you see in these films?

She replied to this question in a strange way. To her, she had no choice as a viewer than to watch what was produced for the market. "These actors have to make a living too", she said. However she countered: "My sister, I usually don't watch these films with my children". Whenever I watch these films in their company, they ask me questions I cannot give answers to. I often lie to them to make them follow the story line. I was amazed one day when my little daughter started to imitate the action in one of the films. This got me worried. When asked to give the title of the film, she declined. The next question gave more clues to what she detested in the films.

- What don't you like in them?

My sister, they are many o, but what do we do? The respondent listed some and these were - violence, crime, near nakedness by women. She said: "Our women expose too much of what they should cover in films. I don't like that. That is what our young girls are copying now. There is too much drinking of alcohol and sex in these films. I don't think I want my daughters to copy the women. I don't like the position that the only thing women adore is money. There are women who stand by their men in times of adversity.

- Are there any suggestions you want to make to film producers?

"Those who make these films should be kind to women. They should also think of our young people because they watch these films elsewhere when we parents do not let them watch them at home".

In another vein, two academic staff were interviewed and their opinions sought as regards these four questions. These two members of faculty were in a drama department and were used as case studies to determine how people with the know-how of the filmic process may help to judge the aesthetic qualities of these home videos. One is female and the other male. When the female member was interviewed on the themes and images she would approve of in these films she said:

I am a theatre artist and I do not like most of the images that assault us women in these films. Nigerian women are often portrayed to be after men, money and mind boggling gratifications. Where do our film makers find these women? Why do our women agree to act these demeaning roles and wear what they wear? I think these films should be rigorously censored and their producers asked to attempt using their relations to act these roles and see how they would feel. Our training schools should do something and fast. With time, those who mean well will stop viewing these films.

The male member had this to say:

Our filmmakers are not doing badly. Theme of violence should be reduced because of children who may copy the acts of violence. However the image of women is not too bad. I believe the film

makers attempt to be faithful to social reality to some extent. These women are with us and we see them every day or at least most times.

It is obvious that male viewership is different from female viewership of films. What one gender ascribes priority to is not what the other considers to be of preference in these films. In terms of the dominance of the male gender in the production process it becomes clear why the female stance is subdued while that of the male is fore grounded.

Challenging the Malestream

In order to adequately proffer solutions to the problems identified by viewers above, the industry should not be operated or hegemonized by a few men who have influence because of the cash they control. Film scripts should be accepted from women too. The opening or closing credits of most films reveal that the writers of the home video scripts are mainly women. The Academy can make a lot of input into the production and marketing processes. This is mainly in the area of research which should be wide and benefit from the multicultural setting of the country. Proper and proactive networking should take place among film makers. The opinion of male film reviewers and critics should be subjected to further scrutiny by female viewers who also bring their authority to bear on the filmic experience.

The female producer may participate in the creation of meaning by becoming part of the investigation into the realities of women as characters in films, rather than being the investigated. These films are considered by the present writer to be a cogent means of framing and challenging the hindrances to the equality of the sexes and the equity needed for social equilibrium. We cannot afford to trivialize or glamorize women on the screen. Producers should be aware of important issues that affect women and bring these to bear on the film narrative. How do we confront patriarchal hemlining of women through the denial of girl children access to education? What options are available to challenge violence against women, some of which these films perpetrate? Can we consider women's rights as human rights? Are there ways and means for Nigerian films to redress the perennial 'inside laying' or relegation of women in Nigeria's political process? How do films bridge the gap between the rural poor and the city elite? The countryside may yet provide answers for us in our bid to industrialize,

