

Elo Ibagere, Ph.D
Department of Theatre Arts
Delta State University,
Abraka.

Towards a Theorization of the Nigerian Film: The Realistic and Formative Tendencies in Focus

Abstract

The Nigerian film industry is acclaimed to be the third largest in the world. This recognition relates to the number of films produced annually. Studies in respect of the Nigerian film focus mainly on thematic and historical development or a few critical analyses of some films within stated aesthetic canons. Actual theorization and critical assessment has seldom been done. This paper thus focuses on film theory. The paper acknowledges Kracauer's theory that film, from its inception, developed along two trajectories – the realistic and formative tendencies. There is therefore an attempt to situate the Nigerian film within the aesthetic canons of the trajectories. It is the submission of this paper that the Nigerian film has developed and remains subsumed within the precincts of the realistic tendency. It is concluded that the Nigerian film will likely remain in this position for sometime owing to the slow technological development of the country as well as financial constraints.

Introduction

There is no denying the fact that the film has its built-in aesthetics by which it should be critically analyzed. But non-professionals and most movie goers believe that a film watching activity should consist in the complete immersion of self in the activity without bothering about its aesthetics attributes. This is unlike a visit to a gallery where one is quite detached from the piece of art on display. But for most movie goers, all that should matter in film is not aesthetic but its spontaneity and effect on the individual in terms of behaviour. This

point is noted by Lindgren (1970:195) who opines that there are people otherwise intelligent and sensitive who may even enjoy film as entertainment, are nevertheless more than a little contemptuous of it as a medium and would not seriously entertain any consideration of it as an art in the fullest sense.

This is why other arts are focused upon with much more serious attention than the film art.

But just like other arts, such as sculpture, painting and carving, which experts believe could be seen in terms of art (that is, art for art sake), so should film be contemplated in terms of those aesthetics pertaining to the film art. Film has the capacity to be examined judiciously as an art without prejudice to its resultant spontaneity. This leads to the question of its theorization.

If a film must be theorized, such theorization must be done against the backdrop of its aesthetic specificity – that is its, poetics. The point here is that not only does film inform and influence (as it delights), it also like other arts, has its peculiar form and sense. This submission is strongly supported by Sergei Eisestein in his book *Film Form* (1949) where, in 12 articles, he approaches the issue from different perspectives. Scholars like Lindgren and Eisestein have proved long ago that despite the denigration of film as lacking in quality as an art, it is a complete art form. It is therefore no longer an issue for scholarly argument. The issue is how the process of theorization or rather aesthetic evaluation should be commenced and under what canons or theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework: In theorizing film the focus essentially, should be the aesthetic elements of the art, which should be analyzed to determine the philosophical pantheon within which a film is situated. This could proceed from the trajectory along which the film art develops. One must realize too that there are two components of the film art – the drama and filmic components. And only an adequate focus upon both components can culminate in an aesthetic discussion on film as an art.

It is convenient however, to proceed from the precursor of film. Film grew out of photography. According to Kracauer (1992), this growth was expected to bring photography to an end. Kracauer then posits that film developed along two trajectories – the realistic tendency and the formative tendency – which manifested side by

side immediately following the rise of the film medium. Kracauer explicitly states: as if to encompass the whole range of cinematic endeavours at the outset, each went the limit in exhausting its own possibilities. Their prototype were Lumiere, a strict realist, and Melies who gave free rein to his artistic imagination. The films they made embody, so to speak, thesis and anti-thesis in a Hegelian sense (11).

Kracauer, in analyzing the films of Lumiere and Melies, established the fact that the films of Lumiere were realistic and more of domestic everyday happenings. They represent the realistic tendency. He notes that the popularity of the Lumieres' had subsided by 1897, just two years after their landmark showing of the first film on earth. It was at this point that George Melies took over with his fantastic and artistic scenes which epitomize the formative tendency.

The analysis of the Nigerian film is done here against the backdrop of these two tendencies. Such a critical exercise would obviously reveal the path along which the Nigerian film has proceeded vis-à-vis both tendencies. In this regard, there is a focus on both aesthetic components (drama and filmic), in order to reveal which of the trajectories the Nigerian film has developed along. However, a brief explanation of both tendencies is germane for proper understanding of the discourse. Kracauer analyzes both tendencies with regards to the elements of film such as camera movement, theme, picture as well as the physical properties such as the subjects. Here both tendencies proceed along different directions.

The Realistic Tendency: At first the camera was fixed to a spot like the spectator in the theatre. Cinematic techniques later led to the employment of more movement for the camera. Thus there was now a competition between the objective camera movement and the subjective one. Camera mobility combined with editing became indispensable in message delivery through film. Thus we see a kind of picture movement transcending mere photography. But this movement relates to realistic settings. The later development of camera movement (point of view) now necessitate an invitation to the spectator to execute the movements in competition with the objective movement.

The realistic tendency also focuses on reality using some intermediary procedure – staging. This is where the studio becomes

invaluable, where the reenacted scene is made to appear as a faithful reproduction of the real one. The important thing is that the studio-built settings convey the impression of actuality, so that the spectator feels he is watching events which might have occurred in real life and must have been shot on the spot.

The concern of the realistic tendency is to record the world about us for no other purpose than to present it as it is. The focus then is what the eye sees and not what the brain imagines or what the heart feels. Mesguich, one of the Lumiere brothers' cameramen sums up the issue as follows:

... the Lumiere Brothers had established the true domain of the cinema in the right manner,. The novel, the theatre, suffice for the study of the human heart. The cinema is the dynamism of life, of nature and its manifestations of the crowd and its eddies. All that asserts itself through movement depends on it. Its lens opens on the world. (Cited in Kracauer, 1960:31)

The Formative Tendency: This borders on the imaginative verve of the film maker, and consists in the exploration of the imaginative faculties of the film makers, who now utilizes it to mould or make, or form a particular reality. This far exceeds the reality offered by photography. Here, film goes far beyond the physical reality that unfolds in front of the camera and goes into not just history but fantasy which photography cannot cover. The reality therefore assumes a new meaning created by the film maker, who utilizes his imaginative fecundity to penetrate into realms of fantasy to bring out a new reality. Thus he alters reality by adopting a particular view point. This is exemplified by the films of George Melies in comparison with the Lumieres' films.

The formative tendency itself is expressed in several different forms. These forms are encapsulated in the various philosophical movements in art. Thus we have such films as Dadaist, surrealist or abstract films. These different forms could be referred to as avant-garde – a term Mungyeh (1992:80) believes “encompasses all that is unorthodox and experimental in the arts as a whole”.

Ira Konisberg (1987:20) divides the avant-garde movement in film into three overlapping categories. These, according to him, are

absolute and abstract films, surrealist films and films that are subjective impressions of the outside world. According to him,

- i. Absolute and abstract films seek to explore the film image itself in both the spatial and temporal dimensions through the use of non-representational forms;
- ii. Surrealist films maintain images of the real world to explore the unconscious through dream and fantasy;
- iii. Films that are subjective impressions of the outside world convey internal visions and reactions to actual places through flexible spatial and temporal dimensions of the film.

Example of absolute and abstract films are science fictions which do not express surrealist ideas, such as *Cyborg* and other computer game films. Surrealist films include horror films such as *Evil Dead* and mentally or psychologically engaging films such as *Embalmed*. Films that are subjective impressions of the outside world include didactic films and futuristic films such as *Judge Dredd* or *Matrix*.

Having established the main paths along which film development has proceeded since 1895 when the medium came into existence, the focus of this discourse now shifts necessarily to the crux of the matter-locating the Nigerian film within any of these trajectories.

The Nigerian Film: The Nigerian film has gone through different phases of development. The most significant of these developmental epochs has been the transition from cinema to the video. This has resulted in video production explosion that now makes the Nigerian film industry the third largest in the world. This development has been adequately noted by Afolabi Adesanya (1997). In his treatise which he aptly titles, "From Film to Video", he traces the transition from cinema to the feature film shot on video which he refers to as "movies" (15). According to him, the main factor responsible for the transition to video is the economic downturn of the 1980s and 1990s whereby film makers became unable to sustain celluloid production. In effect then, any reference to the Nigerian film today is a reference to the video film, now popularly referred to as Nollywood.

A lot has been written about the humble beginning of the Nigerian video film – a beginning which predates Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* (1992), that heralded the yearly avalanche of video films. This was the direct sequel to the abrupt demise of the

celluloid film in the late 1980s.

Before the advent of video, different traditions of the Nigerian film had been established. These include the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa film traditions, each with its unique form. These include such films as *Amadi* by Ola Balogun which is an Igbo film. The Yoruba film emerged from the Yoruba travelling theatre tradition. Most of the Yoruba travelling theatre performers like Moses Olaiya Adejumo (Baba Sala) and Ojo Ladipo first went into television before veering into celluloid production. Baba Sala himself like Hubert Ogunde produced some celluloid films. His films include *Mosebolatan* and *Orun Moru*. These were some of the celluloid films made before the economic crunch of the late 1980s forced the transition into video. Incidentally, it was *Living in Bondage* that blazed the trail of regular video production. The classification of these films into Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba is by virtue of their subject matter, not necessarily language. Thus there could be an Igbo film in English or a Yoruba film in English or with English sub-titles.

Nevertheless, while these films continue to entertain in their various respects and appealing to their different audiences, several others have emerged in view of the continuing video explosion. Today, films continue to be churned out into the market, whose aim is neither artistic nor filmic development, but commercial exploitation of a naïve audience. Ekwuazi (2001) notes that the film industry in Nigeria has been organized around the principles of functionalism, "whereby particular practitioners of a particular trade, profession or function, constitute a discrete unit" (VIII). This makes the industry to contract or expand by way of accommodation. Hence more and more people (more or less characters) are into movie making in Nigeria. While then, plots are simple, stories are common, which no doubt fall within the realistic realm of film development. But classification could still be within the formative realm if the filmic component of the film, such as camera movement and other technical properties are employed in the appropriate regard.

An analysis of the Nigerian film would reveal a plethora of themes. However, common themes include romance, rituals, revenge, greed and other domestic themes. There is hardly any adventure or fantastic subject matter capable of appealing to one's

imagination.

In reading the Nigerian film, Ogunsuyi (2007:26) opines that the Yoruba film “combines structural features of both narrative and dramatic texts”. This equally applies to most non-Yoruba films in English language. While most of the ethnic films feature rituals, the English language Nigerian films concentrate on contemporary domestic issues, such as romance, greed and gender issues. The ease of production on video has turned every electronic equipment businessman into a film producer and the country into a cauldron of video film production from which numerous films emerge hourly. The industry is now so large that it is difficult estimating the number of films produced each year. The Nigerian film has even taken over the satellite television channel known as Africa Magic which concentrates on African movies sometimes from Ghana and South Africa . Nigerian movies dominate this channel accounting for not less than 80% of its air time. It is such an uncontrolled production that a good number of films are so similar in themes and subject matter that one could be mistaken for the other. This development stems from the over concentration on contemporary realistic events by the film makers making such films look like a dramatization of news events. An example of this is *Issakaba* which dramatizes the Bakassi phenomenon of the South Eastern part of the country where a vigilante group recognized by the government was formed to combat crime. The group operated with savage brutality as they killed and dismembered apprehended criminals in the full glare of the public. It was a welcome development at the time as it reduced the crime rate drastically in the region. However, their killing of one Eddy Nawgu, a prominent person brought the group into collision with the police force which felt its duty had been taken over by the Bakassi boys. The group was thus disbanded. The initial success of the group led to the production of *Issakaba*. The wide acceptance of this film led to the release of *Issakaba* 2, 3, 4 and 5 all of which treated the same theme of crime fighting from the same perspective.

Apart from these dramatized newsreels, a few history films have emerged. These include *Jaja of Opobo* which dramatizes the life and times of the slave boy Jaja who later became the King of Opobo, a town in Rivers state. There is also *Mary Slessor* which is the story

of the missionary Mary Slessor who stopped the killing of twin babies in Calabar during pre-colonial times. History films are quite few. One wonders why film makers have chosen not to dwell on such relevant areas like the Nigerian civil war which offers an inexhaustible range of creative stories. This may be more difficult to achieve, hence the concentration on common everyday themes and subject matter which the populace can relate to easily, in view of their contemporaneity. Other areas which Nigeria film makers have failed to treat include politics and the political system, governance, espionage and other related themes which may have direct impact on the government. This may be due to the usual intolerance on the part of government and public officials regarding negative views about their activities. The Great Attempt by Eddie Ugboma came out as a great failure due more to censorship when several vital scenes had to be expunged from the film by the Censor's Board. The only way to have a film treat government issues is, perhaps, satire. This may be the reason for the escape of the Yoruba film, Saworoide from the censor's knife. The film, with English subtitles, satirizes the vicious times of the General Sanni Abacha regime between 1993 and 1998.

The analysis of the Nigerian film clearly reveals that the focus of the film is everyday domestic happenings or news events. Most times, there is no attempt at creative embellishment to make it more filmic. In such a situation, there can hardly be any development in the direction of sophistication that usually characterizes films from Hollywood or those from Bollywood. To properly situate the Nigerian film against the backdrop of film theory, it is necessary to critically analyze it within the canons of the tendencies that have so far been discussed.

The Nigerian Film Vis-à-vis the Realistic and Formative Tendencies

From the brief discussion of the Nigerian film, it could be noticed that the film conforms with the demands of the realistic tendency. The Nigerian film merely transcends photography by mere camera mobility which shows the development along the trajectory of the realistic tendency. The tendency has been noted to evolve through two significant epochs. The first was the primitive era when the

camera was fixed to one spot like a spectator in a theatre watching a performance from one position. Later improvement in the tendency indicates that the camera now had the opportunity to move from one position and in-between the action to create a subjective view point. This is aided by non-spatial movement of the camera such as the zoom, tilt or pan, as well as the particular angle of view. Editing has equally been available to strengthen this transition from the first phase of the tendency into the second phase. But film does not lose its original realistic settings which is the focus of the tendency.

The Nigerian film has been a realistic enterprise. Ogunsuyi's reading of the Yoruba film has revealed that it is usually a narration of a story, which tends to make it folkloric – a term Okome (1991) aptly uses to characterize the film. However, Haynes and Okome (1997:26) are quick to add that the Yoruba film has expanded beyond this to treat contemporary issues like other film genres. But production still exhibits the realistic tendency, in terms of total output.

A critical analysis of the cinematic techniques of the Nigerian film would reveal a simplicity of camera movement and editing, as well as a complete avoidance of anything that may compel an intrusion into the realm of the formative tendency. Thus reality in terms of contemporary events as could be seen by society in present times is sustained.

Under the formative tendency, the film maker, in creating a new reality presents dreams, visions or thoughts with the aid of settings which are not realistic. This is at the expense of actual reality. But the realistic tendency presents an unaltered reality and only enhances that presentation using different cinematic techniques. *Issakaba* though features some incredible actions such as immunity to gunshots and disappearance as could be noticed in the action of members of the vigilante group and the wanted criminal, the presentation, aided with editing and camera movement, is not engaging enough to the extent of challenging the spectator's imaginative or psychological faculties. It is not outside what had been reported on the pages of newspapers about the actual vigilante group known as the Bakassi boys. *Issakaba* can therefore be regarded as a dramatized newsreel or at best, a documentary drama.

It is pertinent to state, however, that the submission so far, does not detract from the fact that a documentary film can belong in the domain of the formative tendency. A documentary is, in fact, formative in the sense that it alters reality because the film maker presents the reality from a particular viewpoint – his own. The pertinent point is that the Nigerian film hardly satisfies the demands of the formative tendency to warrant its classification as such.

The Nigerian film also aims at presenting reality by staging. This is an intermediary procedure. Usually, for a film maker to achieve realistic settings, the studio becomes an invaluable receptacle, where the reenacted scene is made to appear as an excellent reproduction of the real one. The Nigerian film maker, taking cognizance of financial constraints, makes do with real domestic settings. This is because no Nigerian film maker has a studio where there could be staging of scenes to make for reality. The film maker thus hires people's sitting rooms, surroundings and hotels which they present as characters' houses or bedrooms. We therefore see exotic sitting rooms, beautiful landscapes and luxury cars which the film maker uses to enhance the film's appeal and improve box office returns. These artificial elements including flashy costumes which are equally hired, become part of what the audience gets attracted to and they become what advertises the film, thereby enhancing patronage. It is therefore commercial considerations that dictate the making of the Nigerian film more than any other factor. This may somewhat create a false reality in the sense of altering the social reality in general, due to the fact that it tends to wrongly depict Nigeria as economically comfortable. But this does not derogate the fact that in all this, the Nigerian film does not present such elements that are mentally or psychologically involving to the extent of situating it within the precincts of the formative realm. The Nigerian film cannot be placed on the same pedestal as such films as *Nightmare on Elms Street*.

Ethnic films, on the other hand, use villages and the abundant forests to actualize reality on the screen. The setting is usually apt in terms of landscape, mud houses and the like. But when they explore the past, Nigerian films do not psychologically or mentally engage the spectator like films such as *Gladiator* and *Homer's Odyssey* do. The setting is usually natural and nothing beyond the

physical world.

A significant factor responsible for this situation as could be gleaned from the Nigerian film itself is technological poverty occasioned by a poor economy. It has been noted that no film maker owns a studio where staging can be done. Shot footages and rushes are taken to editing studios for editing. It should be noted that most of the formative elements are usually effected in a film during editing. But the machines for such editing for the purpose of actuating an avant-garde film is usually of very high technical quality. Avant-garde films today require high caliber computer application. But equipment for this actualization are not available in Nigeria . This situation cannot support any incursion by the Nigerian film into the formative realm. This point seems to be corroborated by Kema Akeh (2008:2) who submits that the Nigerian feature film “seems to have emerged not necessarily due to the evolution of newer technologies, but from the need of the society to develop a film making tradition that suits its socio-economic peculiarities”.

An area which may take a longer time to explore is that of the absolute and abstract as could be seen in the science fiction film. This appears impossible for now. Film depends on technology and Nigeria is a toddler in technology. It is still attempting to adapt the technology available to her. This adaptation is done, at times by foreigners. Until there is adequate internalization of the relevant technology, there can be no real Nigerian film that may be classified under the formative tendency of film development. The prevailing situation makes this quite clear.

Conclusion

Since the theorization of film should be done within its stated aesthetic specificity, this discourse has been confined within the bounds of the two trajectories of film development as enunciated by Kracauer. The Nigerian film has been analyzed and found to have developed and still developing along the trajectory of the realistic tendency. This is the original trajectory along which film developed in its early years until the formative tendency emerged with the entry of Melies. It is also noted that the Nigerian film is likely to remain in this situation for a long time, since the technological

level of the country renders the film incapable of going into the realm of the formative tendency. The contribution of government to film development has been largely with regard to censorship. No substantial financial obligation comes from government towards assisting film makers. This has also kept the film within the meager financial ability of film makers who, in turn, place commercial consideration above aesthetic demands. There are, therefore, no compelling circumstances to induce any change. The Nigerian film will therefore continue to wallow in the realistic tendency for a long time.

Works Cited

- Adesanya, Afolabi (1997). "From Film to Video". In Haynes, Jonathan and Okome, Onookome (eds.) *Nigerian Video Films*. Ibadan: Krapt Books.
- Akeh, Kema (2008). *The Movie Industry in Nigeria*. Ebu, Delta State: Kojac.
- Eisestein, Sergei (1949). *Film Form*. New York: Harcourt Brace and World Inc.
- Ekwuazi, Hyginus (2001). "Preface" in Ekwazi H., Sokomba, J. and Mgbejume, O. (eds.) *Making the Transition from Video to Celluloid*. Jos: National Film Institute.
- Haynes, Jonathan and Okome Onookome (1997). "Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video Films", in Haynes, Jonathan and Okome, Onookome (eds.) *Nigeria Video Films*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd.
- Konisberg, Ira (1987). *The Complete Film Dictionary*. New York: Meridian.
- Kracauer, Siegfried (1960). *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Kracauer, Siegfried (1992). "Basic concepts" in Mast, Gerald, Cohen Marshall and Braudy, Leo (eds). *Film Theory and Criticism* (4th edition). New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lindgren, Ernest (1970). *The Art of the Film*. London : George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
- Mungyeh Valentine A. (1992). "Theatre and Media Studies in an Academic Institution: A Case for Yaounde" Master of Arts degree thesis submitted to the Dept. of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.
- Ogunsuyi, Stephen A. (2007). *African Aesthetics and Television Drama in Nigeria*. Abuja: Root Books and Journal Ltd.
- Okome, Onookome (1991) "The Rise of the Folkloric Cinema in Nigeria." Ph.D Thesis. Dept. Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria