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The Romance Genre and Nollywood: A Critical Reading of *Passions* and *True Romance*

Abstract

This paper is an examination of the romance genre in the burgeoning video film industry in Nigeria. Using two Nigerian video films namely: *Passions* and *True Romance* as paradigm, the position of this research effort is that romance genre is one of the popular genres in the video film industry in Nigeria and that these films command mass appeal on both the literate and illiterate audiences. The methodology of this research is highly literary and sociological. What we find in this study is the fact that actors in the romance genre have become icons and paragons of sexual attraction, beauty, and love. There is the need therefore, for filmmakers to continuously carry out research on the audience in order to sustain their interest and also break new grounds in film productions and categorization. This is because genres depend on the audiences' competences and experiences on the skill they have developed in understanding films and a body of similar experiences they can draw upon.

Introduction

Video films, like other forms of popular arts, have been committed to certain themes and subject matters. This is possibly because over the years, film producers in Nigeria have been vacillating between political discourse and issues bothering on the cultural lives of Nigerians. Understandably, every society has its film culture and as a work of artistic creation, these films derive their themes from society. The filmmaker is a product of society and as such cannot be blind to happenings around him. In going about the business of

genre categorization, film scholars have posed such questions as; what, precisely, is a documentary film or screwball comedy? Are films to be classified by their physical properties (silent, color), or their subject matter (gangster, western), or by their purposes or effects (comic, educational?). Some scholars have gone deeper still to question the rationale behind arranging the works of art in classes, viewing them as instances of types.

Although writing about the movies has been a familiar aspect of popular culture since the beginning of the twentieth century, it is only recently that journals and magazines which deal with films on an academic level have been established. Predictably, with growth in film scholarship and publishing companies, the gradual encroachment of academic institutions upon the study of films and ultimately into teaching it's practice have become the mainstay of the twenty-first century. It is in this light that this paper will examine two Nigerian video films namely; *Passions* and *True Romance* in a bid to document the fact that there exists in the video film industry a robust tradition of genre categorization especially the romance genre.

Evolution of Video Film Industry in Nigeria

There is no gainsaying that the involvement of the Yoruba travelling theatre practitioners in motion picture production was the most auspicious single factor in the evolution of an indigenous cinema in Nigeria. However, since the evolution, the economics of celluloid film production and marketing had been the bane of Nigerian film makers. Adesanya notes that since the commencement of commercial film production in the country, and prior to the establishment of the Nigerian film corporation's lab and sound dubbing studio facilities, production and post-production overheads had to be paid for in either British pounds sterling or US dollars. According to him:

The resultant effects were two-fold: an inflated budget and a drain on the country's external reserves. This burden was further increased by the unsympathetic entertainment tax collected on indigenous films, and the lack of native or resident distributors with the financial clout to purchase the theatrical release rights of these feature films (1997, p.15).

As a consequence of the scenario above, the filmmaker was unable to recoup enough money to cover production costs and pay back his investors, financiers or bankers. This lack of profitable returns on the investments in feature films was what turned sour the relationship between producers and investors and financial institutions. Adesanya argues that parallel to the demise of feature film production was the emergence of feature films shot on video (p.15).

Shaka (2003, p. 41) corroborates Adesanya's position when he informs that the use of the video equipment as a narrative medium of popular entertainment in Nigeria and other third world societies grew out of two impulses: the fascination with modern technology and the creative adaptation of such technology to solving pressing domestic problems, often in manners the original producer of such technological equipment never envisaged. According to him:

The term "video camera", "video coverage" and 'video man' entered the vocabulary of most Nigerians as from the 1970s when Igbo electronics merchants who ply the Asian Import/Export trade beat introduced the equipment into the Nigerian market. The Commercial profitability, coupled with the novelty of the equipment would have been the strongest selling pointing for the merchants (Shaka, 2003, p. 42).

He informs further that the recruitment of the equipment for the public domain as an equipment for the production of narrative films was as a result of the national economic depression which set in by the 1980s after the bubble of the oil boom decade of the 1970s. He submits that having experimented with several belt- tightening economic policies, the military regime headed by Ibrahim Babangida decided to implement an International Monetary Fund (IMF) inspired fiscal policy tagged Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). Yeseibo extends the scope of Shaka's analogy when he informs that the advent of the video genre did not become a commercial practice until *Living in Bondage* (1992) and *Circle of Doom* (1993) established their marks as the truly commercial precursors to the video film industry in Nigeria (2005, p.18). Since the production of these films, there has been an avalanche of video films produced by both amateurs and professionals.

Overview of Genre Criticism

In film theory, a genre generally refers to films that share similarities in the narrative elements from which they are constructed. The three main criteria often used to categorize film genres are: setting, mood and format. The film's location is defined as the setting. The emotional charge carried throughout the film is known as its mood. The film may also have been shot using particular equipment or presented in specific manner or format (*Wikipedia*). Braudy (1999,p.613) notes that no part of the film experience has been more consistently cited as a barrier to serious critical interest than the existence of forms and conventions, whether in such details as the stereotyped character, the familiar setting, and the happy ending, or in those films that share common characteristics- westerns, musicals, detective films, horror films, escape films, spy films etc.

Schatz (1999, p.642) attempts as distinction of film genre from genre film. He notes that because it is essentially a narrative system, a film genre can be examined in terms of its fundamental structural components; plot, character, setting, thematic, style and so on. It is worthy to note also that such film theorists as Chandler, Turner and Neale see the concept of genre as being conventional, based on the position that genres are not definitive. For instance, Chandler argues that it is difficult to make clear cut distinction between one genre and another. According to him:

Genres overlap, and there are mixed genres (such as comedy thrillers). Specific genres tend to be easy to recognize intuitively but difficult (if not impossible) to define particular features which are characteristics of a genre and not normally unique to it; it is their relative prominence, combination and functions which are distinctive (1997, p.3)

For Tudor (1976, p.122) the crucial factors which distinguish a genre are not only characteristics inherent to the films themselves, they also depend on the particular culture which we are operating. According to him:

—unless there is a world consensus on the subject (which is an empirical question) there is no basis for assuming that a “Western” will be conceived in the same way in every culture (Tudor, 1976, p.122).

The thrust of Tudor's argument is that the way in which the genre term is applied can quite conceivably vary from one case to another and also that genre notions except the special case of arbitrary definition, are not critic's classifications made for special purpose rather they are sets of cultural conventions. As he puts it, "Genre is what we collectively believe it to be" (p.122). Griffith (1976, p.112) also lends his voice to this discourse when he informs that the advent of the gangster cycle of films has shed a lot of light on how a cycle of film emerge. According to him, it begins when a story "theme" becomes popular enough with the general audience to warrant a cycle of films to be built around it. Drawing from his categorization of films into gangster, confessional tale and topical, Griffith posits that genres are products of specific historical contexts, predicted on social, cultural, religious and economic factors.

The kernel of this review is that the understanding of given genres depends on the audience's competence and field of experience with respect to the skills they have developed in understanding films and the body of similar experiences they can draw upon. From a purely Nigerian experience, Yeseibo (2005, p.86) identifies four predominant genres in the video film industry. They include: the ritual genre (rag to riches), the epic genre, the Pentecostal genre and the comic genre. Ayakoroma (2006) extends the list to accommodate such emerging genres as love and romance genre, prostitution and ghetto life genre, crime/gangster genre, thrillers (suspense/drama), gender films, adventure films, political genre and recently, horror genre.

Synopses of *Passions* and *True Romance*

The story of *Passions* revolves around the agony, psychological trauma, frustration and tragedy that underlie emotional relationship. Rola (Genevieve Nnaji) is a girl in her early twenties who gets entangled in a romance with Frank (Richard Mofe Damijo) a married man in his late thirties. Expectedly, Rola's mother, Ebimo (Florence Onuna) is seriously opposed to the relationship because she does not envisage any future in it considering that Frank is married. Ebimo prefers her daughter to marry Toju, Frank's business associate. As a result of consistent threat from Enoch (Stella Damascus), Frank's wife, Rola's romance with Frank begins to

wobble and Rola becomes heart broken. Her unstable emotion triggers a total breakdown since she is a patient of cancer of the heart. At the end, Rola dies and Frank resigns to fate even after divorcing his wife. The story ends on this sad note.

Similarly, *True Romance* showcases the intrigues, infatuation and pain associated with extra-marital relationship. In this video film, Jim (Richard Mofe Damijo) is in a romance with his secretary, Franca (Rita Dominic) at the expense of his wife Angela (Lilian Bach) on one hand, and Stanley (Desmond Elliot) Franca's fiancé, on the other. The romance between Jim and Franca grows to the point of threatening Angela's marriage since Jim now prefers Franca's company to that of his wife. As a way of putting an end to this ungodly romance, Stanley conspires with Angela as they feign a romance which attracts the jealousy of Jim and Franca respectively. At the end Jim returns to his wife and pleads for forgiveness having abandoned her for sometime. Similarly, Franca sues for a reunion between herself and Stanley, both relationships become reconciled.

A Critical Reading of *Passions* and *True Romance*

The plot of *Passions* is simple. However, the scenarios are complicated. This complication is as a result of the emotional dilemma which the characters have been thrust. The film opens with an argument between Frank and his wife over infidelity. This argument degenerates into Frank threatening to divorce his wife. Unable to cope with a difficult wife, Frank leaves his home and finds comfort in the cuddles of Rola, his girl friend. Yet, he does not achieve the comfort as Ebimo barges into her daughter's room and interrupts the blissful romance between the love birds. The drama in *Passions* lies in the fact that though, Frank and Rola are passionately attached to each other, they cannot have their way because of socio-cultural considerations. Ebimo cannot afford to let her only daughter get married to Frank because the latter is married. Similarly, Enoch, Frank's wife, cannot fold her hands and watch her fellow woman snatch her husband from her.

Also, there is the application of planting technique in *Passions*. From the beginning of the play, Ebimo forewarns Rola of an impending doom that surrounds her romance with Frank but Rola ignores her warnings. However, Rola realizes much later that Frank

is married to a cantankerous and rebellious woman who breathes down her neck all in a bid to put asunder to her romance with Frank.

The same application of complicated plot is found in *True Romance*. In order to bring their spouses back to their senses, Stanley and Angela feign a romance and this romance appears more realistic and amiable than the one that was initiated by Jim and Franca. At a peripheral glance, one would conclude that Stanley and Angela are made for each other. It is the same feeling that drives Jim (Angela's Husband) crazy such that he begins to appreciate the worth of his wife. Similarly, Stanley's disguised romance with Angela shocks Franca out of the complacency of her illicit affair with her boss (Jim). The complication in the plot of *True Romance* is made manifest in the form of misunderstood motive which is characteristic of the comedy of errors. Jim misconstrues his wife's genuine friendship with Stanley, his girl friend's fiancé. Franca frowns at Stanley's preference for Angela, a married woman and wife of her boss and lover. The complications are resolved through the medium of realization and confession from the characters. Jim realizes his foolery over time and confesses to his wife, who forgives him, having considered her love for him. Franca retraces her steps back to Stanley's apartment and pleads for forgiveness. Stanley accepts her apologies and both are reconciled. Together, they begin to plan their wedding.

Passions and True Romance as Romance Genre

It has been established earlier in this paper that a film's genre can be examined in terms of such structural components as plot, character, setting, thematic, and style (Schatz, 1999, p. 642). The above shall form the model for our analysis. Love and romance genre apply to films which are targeted at the youths (especially female audience). The thematic thrusts of such films are on love, sex, romance, intrigues, betrayal and passion. The genre became prominent in the late 20th century following the release of the Hollywood masterpiece *Titanic* as directed by James Cameron. Apart from the use of characters that quickly appeal to the fancy of the audience in the mold of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, films in the sphere of romance use complicated plot structure and

highly emotional characters. It is at the level of characterization that the video film *Passions* is better located within the confines of the romance genre. Rola and Frank are driven by Passion – a kind of Passion that propels them to ignore established social norms of the society. Frank conceals his marital status from Rola because he does not want to loose her. Even when Rola finally discovers him as a married man, she finds it practically difficult to walk out of the relationship. She turns deaf ears to her mother's admonition that she should stay clear from Frank. When it dawns on Rola that her relationship with Frank has collapsed, she resigns to fate thereby complicating her terminal disease. Consequently, she dies in the process.

In *True Romance*, a similar doze of emotional attachment is observed. Angela is attached to Jim, who has little or no time for her because he is entangled in a web of illicit romance with his secretary (Franca). Similarly, Stanley finds it difficult to forge on in life because Franca, the love of his life prefers hanging out with her boss (Jim). On the other hand, Jim and Franca are driven by passion for each other such that they begin to trample upon social values. Jim begins to misconceive Angela for Franca in his marital home. In a bid to please Franca also, Jim refrains his wife from visiting him in the office. Similarly, Franca denies Stanley all in a bid to please Jim.

Both films are set in contemporary times-amidst the bubbles and hustles characteristic of city life. In both films, the characters always yearn for a conducive environment for them to profess their love for each other. In *Passions* Frank and Rola always meet at the beach side at the cool of the day where there is no interference as they flourish in their bliss. In *True Romance*, Jim and Franca prefer hotel rooms that are remote from their respective residences to avoid distractions from a third party. The rational for the preferences for isolated meeting points is to guarantee the secrecy, safety and security that every romantic relationship clamours for. Also, these environments are tastefully furnished to the extent that we begin to fantasize and dream to be part of it. This is synonymous with the settings of most Shakespearean comedies of romance.

Another outstanding element of the romance genre in both films is the mood. Both films convey the mood of pity and fear for the

love birds. In *Passions*, we begin to feel for Rola from the moment we discover that she suffers a heart disease that is terminal in nature. One would wish that she stays away from pre-marital relationship in order to avoid heart break. Her mother foresees this tragedy and warns her but she refuses to listen and she walks straight into her death. In *True Romance*, we feel for Angela who suffers utter neglect and abandonment from her husband. We also feel for Franca, who prefers a sugar-daddy to her fiancée. In both films, the characters thread a dangerous path unconsciously because they are overwhelmed by lust, infatuation and passion.

It is pertinent to mention at this juncture that the mode of presentation of the scenes also underscores the romantic coloration of the video films. There is the preponderance of extreme close-up shots to register the facial expressions of the characters and then shot reverse shot to depict the intimacy of the characters. We find these shots in the scenes where Jim and Franca (*True Romance*) and Frank and Rola (*Passions*) confess their love and affection for each other. In both films, long shots are scarcely used except for the purposes of establishing the romantic environment that the characters have been thrust.

Considering, the fact that we live in times when the songs of love, dating and romance, are to be heard from the lips of adolescents and youths, video films in the romance genre, readily gain acceptance and embrace from the audience. Like the characters of Mark (Leonardo Di Caprio) and Rose (Kate Winslett) in Cameron's *Titanic*, most Nigerian actors and actresses (Ramsey Noah, Emeka Ike, Genevieve Nnaji, Ini Edo, Rita Dominic etc) have been idolized as romantic characters while such video films as *My Love* (2001), *My Girl* (2002), *Power of Love* (2003), *True Love* (2004), *Only Love* (2005) and *Disguise I and II* (2002) form perfect examples of video films in the romance genre in Nigeria.

Conclusion

It has been established in this study that there exists in the Nigerian video film industry, a robust categorization of films based on their theme, mood and format. Prominent among these genres is that of love stories and romance. It has also been documented in the study that the love/romance genre appeals more to the youths and women

because of the emotional, passionate and romantic features that they carry. Drawing from the video films under study, it becomes pertinent to state that in terms of content and form, video films in the love and romance tradition thrive on complicated plot, melodramatic characters driven by passion, romantic setting, somber mood and camera angles and shots that suggest proximity. The appeal of the romance genre to the audience rests on the fact that they feature young handsome actors and actresses who epitomize beauty, seduction and romance.

In the course of this research, the researchers observe that no much scholarly has been carried out in the area of genre criticism in the emergent Nigerian video film industry. It is observed that genre criticism of the Nigerian video films have not been adequately explored. This inadequacy has been occasioned by the fact that the Nigerian video film industry is undergoing an evolutionary process, and as such, there is very little orientation toward genre culture among Nigerians. This paucity in awareness of genre culture makes it practically impossible for the exploration of genres that are workable in the industry. This research effort, therefore, is one of the very few attempts at documenting genre categorization in the Nigerian video films industry.

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Select Filmography

Title: *Passions* (2003)
 Screenplay: Ego Boyo
 D. O. P.: Solomon Nwoko
 Producer: Ego Boyo
 Director: Steve Gukacs
 Stars: Richard-Mofe Daijo, Genevieve Nnaji, Emeka Ike, Srella Damascus, Florence Onuma
 Company: Hallmark Films Ltd

Title: *True Romance* (2003)
 Screenplay: Chico Ejiro
 D. O. P.: Jonathan Agbebuo
 Producer: Ephraim Arinze
 Director: Chico Ejiro
 Stars: Richard Mofe Damijo, Rita Dominic, Desmond Elliot and Lillian Bach.
 Company: Hallmark Films Ltd.