

Chukwuma Anyanwu
Department of Mass Communication
Delta State University,
Abraka.
Email: bonnyanyanwu@yahoo.com

Theme and Plot Recycling in Nigerian Home Movies

Abstract

In August 2003, Nigeria witnessed a centenary of film exhibition in the country. It was in August of 1903, (Opubor and Nwuneli, 1979) that the first newsreel was exhibited at the Glover memorial hall in Lagos. Since then Nigeria has progressed in filmmaking especially as the 1970s witnessed a boost in firsts with the making of the controversial *Kongi's Harvest* (1970) as the first feature film of independent Nigeria, from Soyinka's play of the same title; and *Amadi* (1975) as the first film of indigenous language expression. The film culture was beginning to find its footing when the structural adjustment down-turn dealt it a blow with the escalation of the dollar against Naira which ultimately paved the way for the home-video. This paper thus reflects on the journey so far and concludes that the absence of celluloid is in part a catalyst to the over flooding of the industry given that the production of home-video is cheap and requires little or no patience from the producers; and that the growth in the movie industry is merely numerical; thematically and by way of plot development, the words of a critic, "Once you've seen one, you've seen them all." (Osha, 1998; 50), is a pointer to the retrogression in the industry.

Again, since Tragedy is an imitation of persons who are above the common level, the example of good portrait-painters should be followed. They, while reproducing the distinctive form of the original, make a likeness which is true to life and yet more beautiful. So too the poet, in representing men who are irascible or indolent, or have other defects of character, should preserve the type and yet ennoble it.

– Aristotle

The mass media made their incursion into the country through the print medium in 1859. This was followed by the oldest electronic medium of cinema in 1903 and today, Nigeria is heir to nearly all the innovations in communications and information technology. The colonial masters were responsible through their missionaries for this experience. Throughout the period of colonialization 1859 – 1959, and before independence, the colonial masters controlled the media, including the cinema with which they made their incursion into the rural areas with the determined use of the mobile cinema vans. Today, the colonial masters are gone, the mobile cinema vans abandoned, celluloid filmmaking on recess and the home-video holds the reins. To what extent has the home video played the role of projecting the African/Nigerian image to the outside world by positively positioning it video graphically through good plot structuring and thematic relevance of locally made movies?

The Colonial/Pre-independence Period

This was the era when the documentary genre held sway. The documentary was particularly useful as government tool as it lent itself easily to propaganda. Even the few feature films made at this period were not without the propaganda element. However, the main corpus of films of this period was designed to achieve preset objectives of government. These objectives ranged from awareness creation to expounding on the achievements of government, their socio-economic policies and the changes they have brought to bear in the lives of the people. It is through such documentaries that the people were persuaded to join the Second World War against the Germans. The superiority of the British government was shown in the upper hand the British Army and the allies had over the Germans in the films, it was only in the war fronts that the blacks (Africans) learnt for the first time that the white man was not invincible. He, too, could die.

With the phasing out of the colonial film unit in 1951, the Federal Film Unit, still headed by expatriates continued with the production style of its predecessor. Of the one hundred and eighty (180) films which the colonial film unit produced, none was without elements of propaganda (Ekwuazi 1991:8). Thus, when the Federal Film Unit

came on board in 1947, the influence was palpable. Even when the colonial film unit was no longer in the scene, the expatriates who helped both the Federal, and State governments and the independents were still affected by the propaganda influence of the CFU. This can be traced to the rejection of *Kongi's Harvest* (1970) by Soyinka who wrote the script from the adaptation of his play; also the production of *Amadi*, in 1975, etc.

Even though this period falls under the second phase of the film culture – the stage at which indigenous film making staggers into existence, there was no such thing as repetition of themes and or plot. One could however, appreciate foreign influence in films of this period as was noticeable in Ola Balogun's *Ajani Ogun* (1976), which had strong Indian influence.

Any Indian film watcher knows that a typical leitmotif of Indian fiction films is the unfailing presence of snake danger to the damsel in the thick jungle forest and the inevitable timely intervention of the Good Samaritan who is often loved out of gratitude. This hat trick has proved to have successful mass appeal guaranteeing huge box office returns in Indian fiction films. Guru music and overt sex appeal helped, too. Balogun found this Indian film commercial appeal to popular taste necessary in *Ajani Ogun*.

–(Opubor, Nwuneli and Oreh 1979:7)

Imitation, according to Aristotle, as cited in Dukore (1974: 34) is a natural instinct. In effect, there is nothing wrong with it. An imitated work is expected to be better or worse than the original. It could do a third thing also, and that is, preserving the original. The quotation at the beginning of this discourse is germane here. Artistic imitation is not necessarily the preserve of amateurs and, or, mediocre artists nor yet, a sign of creative barrenness, but it is also a test of ingenuity and perceptive alertness of the imitator since he has the arduous task of bettering, if possible the original. This is what separates the genius from the slavish imitator, the professional from the amateur. After all, which artist did not start by imitating the work of nature?

But the contention here goes beyond mere influence since works inevitably engender other works. The argument here is about those

imitators who refuse to acknowledge other influence(s) and who make a mess of the imitated work which they pass on as original thereby insulting the sensibilities of the viewer. In literature, the term for this is plagiarism. This is also the main difference between the Nigerian filmmakers of the seventies and eighties and their counterparts in the video format of the nineties onwards. That whereas the early filmmakers (celluloid) of this period were prone to foreign influence, their videographer counterparts of the younger generation are victims of slavish imitation. And on this hinges the void in the Nigerian film industry or rather, the absence of its existence. For where the celluloid is regarded as the reference point in filmmaking, more expensive, more enduring, requiring the highest qualities of an artist, patience, carefulness, attention to detail, etc; the video is an industry in its own right and cannot be regarded or measured in the same scale with celluloid. Even with the new found recognition accorded the video industry in Nigeria, a recognition in a name which is also an imitation, if not a recycling, too, the trend in copy-cat imitation of themes and titles has still not abated. And in Nigeria, the videographers are simply promiscuous!

After twenty-seven years of hard pioneering labour filmmakers brought a combined harvest of less than two hundred titles to the altar, while videographers, for a sweet-song labour of about three years, garnered a harvest of 454 titles (according to the register of the Censors Board, and there are a lot of uncensored titles in the market, particularly up north:

– (Afolabi Adesanya 1997:16)

Adesanya's bitterness is quite understandable. The efforts it took to produce a celluloid film, even in reversal stock cannot be equated with that of video production. Even the qualities are not comparable but we are concentrating mainly on the content and plot. Films of the celluloid period *Amadi* (1975), *Bound for Lagos*, (1962), *Ajani Ogun* (1976), etc and the various state government documentaries all had something to offer the viewer by way of hope and cultural icons and values. *Amadi* for instance discusses the dignity of labour. Notwithstanding its propaganda aspects, it offers hope to the viewer.

The others all had one good thing about our culture or the other. The effect of media imperialism is not lost on the African and so the African cinema was evolved to right the wrongs of media imperialism. The power of the cinema and or the television in this regard has been noted through their fares.

These media products penetrated individual and collective domains of African lives; impregnated their tastes, their modes of thought, even their decisions, manipulating them to conform to capitalist requirements and to superfluous or illusory needs.

– (David Kerr 1995: 173)

This also indicates another contrast between the early filmmakers and the video producers. That whereas the former came to fight and correct such notions as “It’s a stupid notion that there’s a black aesthetic, black experience”, (Keyan G. Tomaselli; 1995:120), the latter actually emerged to corroborate such misconceptions. This is evidenced not only in the violent, sex and witchcraft stories that are the fare of video films but also in their theme and plot recycling of western films. They thus create a multiplier effect like pharaoh’s magicians. As Okome (2008:6), has noted:

Indeed, a lot of the ordinary people who are curious about Nollywood in North America and Europe do so because it appeals to the sense of the noble savage – that picture of the African running around in circles in the jungle or beside the river waving frantically at Europe’s steamer on the river banks.

Although, Okome admits that such reading of Nollywood is deliberate and that Nollywood is much more than juju, magic and witchcraft, the fact remains that such impression has been created. These cultural ways of life cannot be avoided however we may argue it, but the fact also remains that deliberate efforts/attempts ought to be made to avoid them especially where they are not necessary to the story.

Theme and Plot Recycling in Nigerian Home Movies

It has been noted earlier that imitation is inevitable even necessary, as it enlarges the scope of the original. It also diminishes it especially where the imitation is an apology. But where the imitated work is good, it can easily pass for the original as all artistes are aware of. But the nature of the imitation found in the Nigerian home video industry is such that provokes and insults the sensibilities and sensitivities of the viewer. This is because of the poor and unsuccessful attempt by the makers to pass such works out as original. This they do by going into western archives as it were, to exhume old films which they probably thought the viewer would no longer remember. But rather than forget the viewer's memory is jogged and soon, he begins an inevitable critical comparative review of both works. Invariably, the 'new' work is found wanting and he loses interest. He not only loses interest but he also feels, cheated of his money, time and is angry at having gone through an intellectual blackmail. This was the experience this writer had when he bought a home video with the title *Aba Riot*. Attracted by such title, he had hoped to see how the filmmaker was able to represent history, only to discover to his chagrin that there was not a shred of connection between the movie and the historical event of 1929. The feeling of impotent rage at having been fooled was not unlike what obtains, when an intelligent man sits back to reappraise how he came to be cheated by the cheap logic of a lesser but clever mortal.

The negative impact of this cheap prank tells on the commercial performance of the movie as people trade information and advertisement via word of mouth. Initially, the movies may appear to be doing well, until their 'past' catches up with them. This is closely related to why home-movies hardly do well when released through the cinema.

The underlisted are a random selection from local films re-cycled from Hollywood films.

<i>Game of Death</i>	—	<i>Basic Instinct</i>
<i>Not Man Enough</i>	—	<i>Last American Virgin</i>
<i>Silent Night</i>	—	<i>Silent Night</i>
<i>Romeo Must Die</i>	—	<i>Juliet Must Die</i>

<i>World Apart</i>	–	<i>Coming to America</i>
<i>Naked Weapon</i>	–	<i>Lethal Weapon</i>
<i>State of Emergency</i>	–	<i>State of Emergency, etc.</i>

A close study of these movies will reveal the fact that as the musicians sang (Peter Tosh/Bob Marley); “you can fool some people some time; but never all the people all the time”.

In the local scene, such films as *The Price* replicates *Out of Bounds*, *One Dollar*, is the same as *My Girl*, etc. The rather disturbing issue about these movies and their makers, even cast, is the fact that the same actor or actress plays the same role in both films. A good case in point is *The Price* and *Out of bounds* where Richard Mofe-Damijo played the lead in both films. It makes one wonder if actors do not make any input in the movies they take part in, especially experienced actors in the class of Mofe Damijo. Again, the titles of some of our movies are an apology to creativity. The message and or subject need not necessarily be part of the title. But to display their ignorance you see such titles as *My Mother's Pregnancy*, *Not Man Enough*, *Adulteress*, *My Son*, etc. titles that they forcefully reflect in the content as in *Not Man Enough* etc.

Perhaps, it is in recognition of the need for a change in direction that led “the operators of the Nigerian movie industry, in an unprecedented act of rage and protest to down tools completely and further asserted that it would be so for ninety days”. (*This Day* June 7, 2002:4). The idea was to sanitize the industry by trying to create a distribution outlet for those already produced. But this move, laudable as it was, was also not as successful, as several attempts were made to scuttle it.

The National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), whose duty it is to certify movies for acceptance by the society has not been helping matters. A catalogue of the inadequacies of Nigerian movies can be seen in Ademola James (1997:21 ff). These movies still get approval even when the Board is aware of such similarities. The reference to Ademola James is to a paper he wrote while still the Board's Director. He noted that “such mundane stories about witchcraft, wife or husband snatching, infertility or childlessness, disputes over legacy or inheritance have seemingly been over flogged.”

Nigerian filmmakers should use their genius to analyze and dissect the various urgent social issues facing the nation today and proffer possible solutions via the screen if necessary. It is not an impossible task. It is part of their social responsibility (22).

It is equally the social responsibility of NFVCB to ensure that recycled subjects/themes have merit before they can issue it an approval license. So, while they censor overtly indecent or films with obvious negative content and perceived impact, they should also be mindful of such movies that are likely to have subtle negative effect. All such movies which portray every house-wife as a potential poison giver, murderess, every girl as a mother-in-law hater and every mother as a daughter-in-law hater should be censored since they do the image of the nation a terrible harm. It is not enough to claim that the movie makers are portraying reality. The reality of film is not natural reality. Again, films are public relations tools. They speak international language and are usually the viewer's first point of contact with foreign countries. The reality of the screen is therefore more intense, more appealing and fascinating than that of nature. Unfortunately, and fortunately, too if the opportunity is utilized, it is more plausible.

In effect, both filmmakers and film censors should be mindful of the responsibility which they owe the nation and its people in doing their jobs. In other words, they should mind how their business affects the business of others. This was obviously why the marketers had to put the embargo on production to enable them decongest the market of excess commodity. And part of this excess commodity is caused partly by this recycling and the ratio of churning out the movies into the market without well defined distribution outlets. It is not enough to celebrate Nollywood's numerical production strength as the third highest in the world, coming closely behind America's Hollywood and India's Bollywood (*The Classifier*, 2008:4). What is instructive here is that quality and not quantity is what matters. It behooves Nigeria and Nigerian filmmakers to use the medium to try to achieve this much touted re-branding, realizing that film is an international product as well as a ready weapon for both image laundry and smearing.

The role of the Censors Board in helping to regulate and control

the spate of production of films cannot be overemphasized. Lots of socially irrelevant movies enter the country and at the end of the day the competition is stiff and naturally, for obvious reasons, the locally made ones are worsted. The result is a numerical growth since viewers usually are apathetic to repetition. Having watched one film, it will amount to a waste of time and money to spend on the imitation when you have already seen a better version of it.

There is no doubt that the Censors Board is trying but it is not enough. The Board should have a legal bite to enable it deal with dissidents because some producers try to go behind the Board to screen and sell unapproved films. Speaking on the films *Raptures I* and *II* which were banned by the Board, the then Director of the Board, Roseline Odeh observes:

... Allowing the movies to go "uncensored", would amount to the Board" not being proactive and sensitive, whereas we owe the Nigerian public the duty of ensuring that films produced here and those brought into the country do not disrupt the social order or violate social, moral code or harm the sensibilities of the populace.

—**The Guardian* Fri March 21, 2003:33)

If the films "which are brought into the country" are not only disruptive to the social well-being of the nation, as they have the tendency to affect the youths negatively, why should those produced here play the magicians of Pharaoh to foreign films' Moses? Nkrumah who was quite conscious of the effect of foreign cultural imperialism through the weapon of film says in David Kerr (1995: 181), that:

One has only to listen to the cheers of an African audience as Hollywood's heroes shoot red Indians or Asiatics to understand the effectiveness of this weapon... The trade union man, the revolutionary or the man of dark skin is generally cast as the Villain, while the policeman, the gum-shoe, the Federal Agent, - in a word the CIA type spy - is ever the hero.

To recycle or transmogrify foreign films in Nigeria on the basis of their box office success in their home country is not enough to

justify approval. The contentious issue is their relevance in our cultural and social milieu. A film like *Basic Instinct*, which was transmogrified into *Game of Death* in Nigeria, has nothing good to introduce into our social lives. Thus, imitation must be meaningful to be appreciated. According to Professor Elo Amucheazi (N/D. 23) a one time boss of the National Orientation Agency:

Now, again, the unfortunate thing is that most of the video films being produced today by our own film makers are not helping matters There is no reason why a Nigerian or an African film maker should want to copy these American stereotypes. We should be original in our approach and not be imitative...

All over the world, film is seen as a purveyor of authentic information. Its audio-visual power gives it a credibility that other media – radio and print lack. For a faithful depiction of actuality, film is incomparable. That is also why it has the power to generate its own reality. And for a generation that is ignorant of history, film holds the key to “authentic and verifiable” information. After all, the evidence of one’s eyes cannot be false. Moreover, when using film as a witness, the greater tendency is to ignore mediation.

Authenticity”, Segun Olusola once stressed, “is the foundation stone for cultural development and it is from the bedrock of a true and authentic culture that our creative contemporaries can evolve new patterns of art and culture. The modern choreographer of A.D. 2000 would require faithful film and TV recordings of the ceremonial dances of this year for him to create and teach...”

–(Arulogun 1979: 32)

The relevance of the above citation is all too clear. The said modern choreographer who would need authentic and faithful film and TV recordings would do so on the proviso that they exist. But you cannot call a witness if that witness has the remotest tendency of being false. One would want to revisit the home-movie scene to have an idea of the available information in the future. He would notice that every Nigerian house-wife has poison in her kitchen. Every Nigerian husband has the potentials of killing a faithful, loving

and caring wife for money. The girls are no better than prostitutes and witches; the boys are all fraudsters and no do-gooders. That is the society he would be confronted with. But is that authentic? Does that constitute faithful depiction of actuality especially when no attempt is made to make the film acquire the status of art.

It is also too appalling because the Nigerian Nation teaches its youth history with negative analogies: Through fuel/kerosene scarcity, they learn that the nation once walked, travelled long distances on foot, cooked with wood and charcoal; through ethnic crises, they learn the crude weapons of war of inter tribal era; through political wrangling, they learn that the country is a multi-ethnic conglomerate, and through media fares, they learn of outlandish costumes, crude ways of life, cannibalism, abhorable socio-cultural practices, and all the negative images that their uncreative minds can conjure, and which sadly, bear no relevance to actuality. But then, what if they reflect reality? Must actuality be the same in life as in art? Where is the joy of creativity to make the society better? In the early days when we still had cinema going culture, most of us young ones then could swear that there are no ugly people in India, let alone disabled ones!

Thus, the NFVCB is forced to make do with the one eyed man in the land of the blind. Among the provisions of the *Film Policy*, two are of particular relevance here. It was noted in section 4.4 (d) and (f) that there is the need to:

(d) encourage the use of film potentials to counter prejudices and misconceptions of the international community about the black race; (f) encourage the deliberate exploitation of film potentials for the advancement of national unity, social co-existence, education, science and technology and the peaceful resolution of social problems and conflicts in our society.

– (*Film Policy*: 6)

One wonders how these laudable provisions can be actualized if we continue in this head long imitation and running around in circles. Thus, the need arises and it is now that the industry is gaining recognition for our movie makers to strike while the iron is hot. Agreed, the film industry here is entrepreneur oriented and with its

limited resources one can empathize with their need to do what will appeal to their audience. But who said the audience is allergic to good taste? Thus, they should do better and make us more proud than they have so far done by selling the country to the outside world, but the products they are selling must be authentic and of high quality to make us proud.

Conclusion

That the present influx of films in the industry is attributable to its sporadic production there can be no doubt. This is easily traceable to the recycling of movies that had been successful in the box office either locally or internationally without recourse to their social relevance, or whether they too would be successful in the box office.

After one hundred years of film in Nigeria, the industry could hardly boast of a celluloid film production in the last two decades of the industry. The economic down-turn had paved the way for video recordings in view of the foreign exchange performance of the Naira against the Dollar. The home-video no doubt held the forte admirably but the novelty of hearing and seeing familiar faces on the screen has waned. So has the lure of profit. It is once again time to embrace the opportunities offered by the new technology in the industry to make a change in the next one hundred years. The government should stir up and recognize the economic viabilities of film and encourage it. The nation needs the cinema to right the wrongs it has suffered from the outside world and from itself. And this can only be done with painstaking effort in research and creativity. What is more, Nigeria has a rich literature that has been largely neglected may be because the movie makers do not feel comfortable in discussing copyright ownership since they would rather plagiarize given the chance and adaptation would eat into their profit when the owners of adapted works would expect something in return. It is also for this reason of economy that film production is a family business – it runs in the family syndrome!

Finally, that the Nigerian movie makers are trying, there can be no doubt, but given the patronage they get from their audience, they should reciprocate by providing the audience with better, satisfactory and altogether fares which do not abuse both their sensitivities and sensibilities. To whom much is given, much is

expected. They should capitalize on the shift in patronage from foreign to locally made films and the time is now!

Works Cited

- ADESANYA, Afolabi (1997) "From Film to Video", in Haynes, Jonathan (ed.) *Nigeria Video Films* Jos, NFC.
- ARISTOTLE (1974) "Poetics" in Dukore, B. E. *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks To Grotowski*. New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc.
- ARULOGUN, Adeboyeyea (1979) "The Role of the Film in Cultural Identity" in Opubor, A. E. and NWUNELI, O. E. (ed.) *The Development and Growth of the Film Industry in Nigeria*, Lagos, Third Press International.
- EKWUAZI, Hyginus (1991) *Film in Nigeria 2nd ed.* Jos, NFC.
- FILM POLICY FOR NIGERIA.
- FILM AND VIDEO JOURNAL, Vol. 4, no. 2, p. 23.
- JAMES, Ademola (1997) *The Need For a New Direction In The Nigerian Film and Video Industry: A Blue Print for Progress*, Lagos, NFVCB.
- KERR, David (1995) *African Popular Theatre*, Portsmouth, Heinemann.
- OKOME, Onookome (2008) "It is difficult to ignore Nollywood" *Film Nigeria*, Vol. 1, No.1 pp.6-7.
- OPUBOR, E. A., ONUORA, E. N. and OREH, O. (1979) "The Status, Role and Future of The Film Industry in Nigeria", in Opubor, E. A. and ONUORA E. N. (ed.) *The Development and Growth of The Film Industry in Nigeria*, Lagos, Third Press International.
- OSHA, Sanya (1998) "The Search for Art and Prominence: An Assessment of the Nigerian Home Video Scene", in IFRA, July/August No.2, p.
- THE CLASSIFIER (2008), VOL.2 NO.3.
- THIS DAY, June 7, 2002, p. 47.
- THE GUARDIAN, March 21, 2003, p. 33.
- TOMASELI, G. Keyan (1995) "Some Theoretical Perspectives on African Cinema: Culture, Identity and Diaspora" in KABORE, G. (ed.) *Africa and The Centenary of Cinema*.