

NIGERIAN LITERATURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NIGERIAN FILM INDUSTRY*

Hyginus Ekwuazi

Introduction

Let us begin by immediately disposing of some red herrings. Literature is not film; film is not literature. Their differing economics and technology, with their equally differing modes and relations of production, ensure a substantial difference between these two modes of narrativity. We are here dealing with two different entities as far apart as Mars and Venus. Literature often expresses a purely personal universe, presented from the individual author's viewpoint. Film does not, and cannot. For, it takes some 253 different trades and professions to accomplish the move from script to screen. Critics may single out a predominating signature in any film and go on to assert the auteur theory principle – but this privileging of one professional in a long chain of trades and professions does not in any way shrink the universe expressed in the film. Conversely, no film industry anywhere in the world has had the likes of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Van Gough, etc. – writers/artists whose works are ahead of their time. By its very nature, and the topicality of issues often treated, a film is normally made for immediate consumption, unlike literature, which can afford to wait on the shelf for the right audience to emerge. Hence, the film classic is differently defined from literary classic. Also, in copyright terms, the film comes much quicker into the public domain than does literature.

In terms of potential impact, the film tends to attract greater official attention or publicity than literature. For instance, slightly over a decade ago, the present writer did the film script for Eddie Ugbomah's *The Great Attempt*, and also did a novel of the same title, based on the film. Three days after the launch of the film and the novel at the National Theatre, the film was banned by the government of General Ibrahim Babangida, while the novel, based on the film, and bearing the same title as the film, was totally ignored. A more relevant illustration is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. The moment Francis Oladele set out to make them into a film, all hell broke loose. Security agents

insisted that nothing was falling apart in Nigeria, and so no one should make a film of that title. The only way out for Oladele was to resort to an innocuous working title, *Bullfrog in the Sun*. By implication, film has a much higher potential for social impact, and naturally attracts to itself all manner of censorship. The reason is obvious: by its compositional code (the *visual* image), it appeals to that sense data on which we place the most trust (White & Averson, 1969:127) – that is, our bare eyes, which gives the film something of a universal language. Literature, on the other hand, is scribal, and, in McLuhan terms, it is cold, and quite distinct from the film.

Nevertheless, literature and film are also remarkably similar – if only in the sense that the one, like the other, is a narrative medium. For both media, the narrativity is sourced, inevitably, from the universe of the human mind and the vast dimensions of human life. Both are active collaborators in nation-building, always engaged in

- Interrogating governance and citizenship/the polity and the dialectics of social contract;
- Encoding debates on institutional orders and the apparatus of domination; and
- Scripting social positions for the viewer/reader.

In consequence, literature, like film, can be moved to that end of the social engagement spectrum where it can be used as 'a medium for dictating the views and prescriptions of the dominant class; legitimizing the system and controlling people's participation in it; shifting the blame for poverty from the oppressive structures to the "self-improverishing" poor, and anesthetizing people so that they participate uncritically in reproducing the apparatus of domination' (Schieffelin, 1985).

On the other hand, film, like literature, can equally be moved to that other end of the social engagement spectrum, where it can be used as part of a social transformation process in which the oppressed express their problems and grievances, deepen their understanding of exploitative social structures, and build confidence, class consciousness and power through organizing and struggling against oppression' (Schieffelin, 1985). By far, the greatest feature that film and literature have in common is narrativity – in all its malleable forms.

Historical insight

The foetal stirrings of what has become today the Nigerian film industry must be traced to the frenetic documentary activities of the British Colonial Film Unit, which, at its demise, had succeeded in bequeathing to the Federal and Regional Film Units a strong tradition of the *narrative* documentary. Inevitably, the pioneer corps of Nigerian filmmakers (Adamu Halilu, etc.) came from this background.

It is highly conceivable that the industry would have been stillborn, but for the timely arrival of the independents. The first independent film, the adaptation of Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*, was made in 1970. Other adaptations (Achebe, Abubakar Imam, Ogunde, etc.) followed, giving us the classic pattern of a new medium (the feature film) seeking legitimacy/status and exploring its possibilities and limitations in the light of older media/art forms (literature, drama, etc.). As the industry grew in Nigeria, the video film was virtually unknown.

With the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), however, things fell apart and the centre of the industry (the cine film) could no longer hold. For, with the lame-duck performance of the Nigerian currency, the Naira, at the international marketplace, films, raw stock, etc. could no longer come into the country, and, like a pack of cards, cinema theatres started tumbling into closure, a yawning gap was thus created – which the practitioners of the Yoruba travelling theatre, who had made the transition with the adaptations of their plays, *via* television to film, rushed to fill with the *reversal* film. The subsequent movement from the reversal film to the home video was unobtrusive, almost in a kind of natural progression.

However, the home video did not become a commercial proposition till *Living in Bondage* and *Circle of Doom* were released. Each of these two films was instantly reduced to a basic formula and recycled *ad nauseam*. All manner of entrepreneurs and artists, anyone with a nose for quick money, made a bee line for the industry: the Nigerian 'gold rush' was on course! The consequence was an industry with an inherent capacity to overheat; an industry with a peculiar paradigm of power: the emergence of the marketer-producer-(casting)director potentate.

The enduring irony is that the Nigerian home video has spawned an industry that turns out one thousand films every year,

generates three hundred thousand jobs annually, and has a turnover of well over five billion Naira per annum. With a growth rate in the very high index category, the industry is virtually bursting at the seams! Festivals on the continent, *Sithengi*, for example, draw their very sustenance from the Nigerian home video. Without it, there would obviously have been no Africa Magic channel on DSTV. Truly, against all expectations, the Nigerian home video has marginalized even the American film at the home entertainment circuit, not only in Nigeria, but all over the West Coast and South of the Sahara. Although it continues to wax stronger, the Nigerian home video industry is confronted with some intractable problems, which will now be briefly examined.

Present problems

There is, perhaps, no better way to understand the state of the industry today than through the inherent stresses within it, which have, over the years, been bred by the peculiarity of infrastructural developments in the industry, as well as that palpable disconnect between the policy/legal environment and the actual context of production. Five of these structural stresses are considered below:

Structural stress 1:

For sustainable development, all the sub-sectors of the film industry should develop harmoniously. In Nigeria, however, the development has been skewed, with a much higher rate of activities concentrated in the production sub-sector. This has, inevitably, created the downstream effect of a bottleneck in the distribution and exhibition sub-sectors. Video has merely worsened matters by creating or introducing two new paradigms of power into the industry: the video club operators, and the producer-marketers – those almighty carpetbaggers that, in the crudest and most unprofessional manner imaginable, determine the story, the talents, the crew and, even the production values! The industry is plundered for the most sterile of story-themes and endlessly recycled for the sake of crass commercialism.

Structural stress 2:

The recycling syndrome is an acceptable practice in the movie industry the world over. The peculiar problem here is that, with our

penchant for standing magic on its head, the practice is creatively sterile – and increasingly so, as every ‘successful’ home video is reduced to a sterile formula. No wonder virtually every new Nigerian home video is like an exercise in the repetition of old mistakes and/or the compounding of old mistakes with new ones. Against this background, ten of the common pitfalls in Nigerian home videos are hereunder highlighted:

- The excessive display of bloodletting through murder and ritual killing, violence, sex, witchcraft, occultism, all woven into an endlessly long plot, which runs against Hitchcock’s humorous remark that ‘the length of a film should be directly related to the endurance of the human bladder’;
- The tendency to shoot the *whole* of an action, rather than using a part of the action to represent the whole. Thus, with so much redundant action, a story that can be told in less than 45 minutes takes four times as long;
- The duration of a shot on the screen being determined by other factors, rather than the interest it creates;
- The frequent occurrence of chaotic sequencing of shots, arising from poor editing;
- The avoidance of the use of the re-establishing shot, arising from lack of awareness of its value;
- The tendency to emphasize the two-dimensionality of the screen by failing to shoot at an angle of 45 degrees to the subject;
- Camera movement usually has no bearing on the logic of the story;
- The tendency to treat the story as being more important than the technique, resulting in the lack of artistic use of sound and no attempt to structure the lighting field;
- Mode of transition is not often determined by the story construction; and
- Obvious lack of suspense and the glaring absence of the use of reaction close-ups or cut-in shots.

In the light of the foregoing, the Nigerian home video leaves much to be desired as a means of artistic expression. All it has succeeded

in doing is branding the country as a land of occultists, drug barons, swindlers and go-go girls.

Structural stress 3:

The Nigerian film industry has an unusually high rate of debutants, with a correspondingly high attrition rate. Easily 85% of the films released every season are by debutants (i.e. first timers). Only 15% of the old timers (i.e. those who have made more than one film) are able to go from film to film, while the balance of 85% are casualties – i.e. victims of the maladjusted infrastructure (invariably marketing/distribution) in the industry. The dire consequences here are legion, including the negligible pool/reservoir of experience in the industry, in the face of the recycling syndrome. In the hands of a debutant, a formula all too easily degenerates into a cliché.

Structural stress 4:

If the experience of the more advanced film cultures is anything to go by, television is expected to contribute to the growth of the film industry. Film may go on to become central to the mass mediated culture, but television will continue to contribute to the development of film, either as a ready source of distribution/exhibition and/or an inimitable source of production of capital resources. Nigerian television, taking due advantage of the porous policy environment, has continued to deploy its vast resources in many directions, other than to the direct advantage of the film industry. Except that the Yoruba travelling theatre practitioners went *via* television to film, television, on the whole, cannot be said to have contributed to the growth of film in Nigeria. Even the AIT-Zeb Ejiro Domitila collaboration has apparently hit a dead end.

Structural stress 5:

The creative collaboration between the industry and Nigerian literature obviously died with the cine. The industry, as it is at present configured, does not appear to have any need for the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) and its members. They are, more or less, regarded as part of the cognoscenti, *in spite of whom* its films are made. The membership of ANA, on its part, also appears to look down on our so-called filmmakers. To paraphrase Scott Fitzgerald in a different context: ANA cannot be honest without

admitting that its contribution to the Nigerian home video is exactly minus zero. And so, we search the Nigerian film in vain for those distinguishing features that have given Nigerian literature its bite: the endless creative experimentation with form and technique; the creative extension of the borders of narrativity; and that voice empowered by indignation and sympathy.

These stresses have all colluded to ensure that there is growth without development in the Nigerian film industry. Eliot's haunting lines sound like a prophecy of doom here fulfilled: 'That the wheel may turn and still be for ever still!'

The film/literature dichotomy in relation to ANA

A familiar indigenous Igbo proverb says that in the home of the lazy man, the cutlass which is sharp has no handle; and the one with a handle is not sharp. The sharp knife without a handle is a metaphor for the Nigerian film industry, while the blunt knife with a handle is the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). From a purely utilitarian point of view, the sharp knife, even without a handle, can be said to be preferable to a blunt knife, and this makes the drift of our argument quite clear.

By way of analogy, it is pertinent, at this point, to look at Hollywood and the privileged position of the movies in the *mass media mix* of the modern society. In other words, the movies' 'connections with the other facets of mass culture – such as publishing, television and recorded music' (Jowett & Linton, 1981:19). These connections work in an overt manner as glimpsed from the following quotes:

- (a) 'Movies have drawn very heavily on literary works as source material – more specifically, on the novel's narrative fiction approach, and on stage plays, novellas, short stories, and non-fiction, to a lesser extent. So strong is this link that film production companies are willing to pay huge sums for the movie rights for best selling novels – or even for prospective best-sellers' (p.20).
- (b) 'Conversely, movies that are produced from original screen plays are often novelized for the book market...Movies also spawn screen plays, books describing the making of the movies, comic book adaptations, and the latest development in movie publishing – the fotonovel' (p.20).

- (c) 'Documentaries and two- to six-minute "features" are often made about the production of movies...Movies also recycle themselves in the form of sequels...remakes...and most recently as the "prequel"...Television series are often based on some reworking of a successful movie..."Translations" from television series to movies are much less frequent' (p.22).
- (d) 'Movies and comic books have shown a great affinity for one another' (p.22).
- (e) 'More rarely, movies are translated into radio series...The increased spending of records in recent years has caused movie marketers to put increased emphasis on selling sound track albums' (p.23).

The above excerpts reveal remarkable collaboration in the American mass media scene, with Hollywood at its centre. This, unfortunately, is still far from being replicated in the contemporary Nigerian situation. The truth is that, since the movies are at the centre of 'the economic and industrial complex that produces our mass mediated culture' (p.23), any aspect of our modern mass mediated culture that distances itself from the film industry does so at its own peril.

The heavy reliance of the Association of Nigerian Authors on prizes is surely indicative of this peril. The view has been expressed in different circles that if, for any reason, these prizes are no longer there, the whole gamut of literature, at least as practised by ANA members, will go out with a whimper. In those cultures where film and literature creatively and economically rub off on each other, prizes are regarded, more or less, as the icing on the cake – and not the cake itself.

Against the foregoing, the following statistics, *derived from this writer's personal observation over the years*, give cause for concern:

- Percentage of ANA members resident in the country who live on their works – 0%.
- Percentage of ANA members resident outside the country (i.e. in those countries where the movies are central to the mass media mix) who live comfortably, partly on account of their works – 90%.
- Percentage of ANA members whose works are vanity publications – 95%.
- Percentage of screen credits earned by ANA members – 2%.
- Percentage of works by ANA members adapted to the screen – 0%.
- Percentage of prize-winning works by ANA members adapted to the screen – 0%.

- Percentage of works by ANA members written with half an eye on the screen – 0%.

These, indeed, are dismal statistics, and sufficiently harrowing to make one wonder if ANA's executive should not begin to think of declaring a state of emergency over the state of Nigerian scribal literature, and take decisive measures to move the Association out of the darkness that is fast engulfing it.

Future prospects

What are the choices before ANA? First and foremost, the Association must thoroughly understand the Nigerian film industry: its dynamics and peculiarities. The theme of ANA's 24th International Convention – *Literature and the Developing Film Industry* – does look like an attempt at examining the industry at close range, in order to gain a better understanding of it. This is a timely move towards correcting the gross misunderstanding of the industry by ANA and its membership. However, none of the sub-themes is *specific* to the Nigerian film industry; nothing here centres attention on that peculiar feature of the industry – its peculiar paradigm of power – which has made it possible (and even desirable) for the industry to ignore ANA successfully over the years. Also, in an age that hysterically asserts the auteur theory, there is nothing in the sub-themes on the film director who is very central to this paradigm of power. Could there possibly emerge, from within the ranks of ANA, a Sembene Ousmane, an artist at home both with the written word and the calling of shots behind the camera? The present situation gives a lot of room for doubts in this regard.

Another vital step ANA should take to guarantee its future, is tapping into the home video audience. The need for this becomes even more pressing against the background of production activities in ANA. The yearly offerings from members of the Association suggest the following figures: Novels = + 100; Short Stories = + 100; Plays = - 50; and Poetry = + 100. Match these figures against the one thousand films turned out by the screen industry annually, and it should be quite clear where ANA stands in relation to the industry. Considering that one film alone gets seen by many more people than the total readership of ANA's works in a single year, then the need to tap into this viewership becomes as meaningful as it is both urgent and imperative.

This *pouching* of film audiences by writers has become institutionalized in those countries with a vibrant film culture. In India, for instance, Indian novelists, to increase readership and appeal to producers, go all out to make their novels read like *fleshed out screen stories*. The present writer has found Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight Children*, a valuable text in teaching scriptwriting for the feature film. The Nigerian novel, pulsating with the nuances of visual story-telling, does not seem to have emerged. For modern Nigerian literature, many roads lead out of the woods, with unambiguous signs all along, pointing the way to survival through a fruitful collaboration with the vibrant home video industry.

NOTE

*This article is a modified version of the paper "To the movies go – everything good will come", the Keynote Address at the 24th International Convention of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) on the theme: *Literature and the Developing Film Industry*, held in Kano, November 10-13, 2005.

WORKS CITED

- Jowett, Garth & Linton, James (1980) *Movies as Mass Communication*. Vol. 4. The Sage Comm. Text Series. Beverly Hills: Sage publications.
- Schieffelin, Edward (1985) "Performance and the Cultural Construction of Reality" *American Ethnologist* 12:707 – 24
- White, David Manning & Averson, Richard (1969) (eds) *Sight, Sound and Society: Motion Pictures and Television in America*. Boston: Beacon Press.
