

Creative industries and informal economies:

The case of Nigerian video

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Abstract

Since the emergence of its video industry in the 1990s, Nigeria has become the largest film producer in the world by output. Its informal economy now provides around two thousand films a year for a pan-African audience, and the industry has grown rapidly without assistance from the state, NGOs, or the film festival circuit. This article analyses the rise of 'Nollywood' through the lens of current debates in media studies. The Nigerian video economy offers compelling evidence for the role of informal markets in creating efficient and economically sustainable media industries. Its success also has implications for current debates around copyright and media piracy. I conclude that reading Nigerian video as a creative industry represents a useful way to rematerialize media studies in the overdeveloped world.

Keywords

Nigerian video, Nollywood, creative industries, informality, copyright, intellectual property, piracy, regulation

Introduction

As an Anglo-European invention with its roots in the policies of the Blair government, the creative industries (CIs) project – defined variously as an industrial category, a planning template, and a critical pedagogy – has for most its short history been exclusively concerned with urban, service-industry economies in the first world.

However, recent research in cultural studies, media studies and economics, along with policy from UNESCO and UNCTAD, is seeking to extend the creative industries paradigm further. Two examples of this shift towards transnational CIs research are Michael Keane's major study of cultural production in China (2007) and Diana Barrowclough and Zeljka Kozul-Wright's edited collection *Creative Industries and Developing Countries* (2008), both important works which have opened up the debate by repositioning it within a global frame. A recurrent theme across this new body of research has been the need for developing nations and regions to effectively leverage their cultural assets and integrate them into global economic networks, thus providing new sources of revenue, employment, and growth.

Considerable energy is now being directed towards case studies and policy advice that will, it is hoped, assist cultural workers and policymakers in developing nations to realize this aim.

This article pursues a related but distinct line of enquiry into the transnational dimensions of creative industries. Integration into the webs of formal exchange that make up the international entertainment industry is one path for cultural producers in developing nations, but alternative routes which bypass or ignore these channels

can also produce results. Various efficient and economically sustainable industry models already exist in second and third world media. Some of these industries are only minimally connected to circuits of international IP trade, but they still deliver media to audiences with great efficiency and dynamism. While creative industries policy seeks to formalize these economies, incorporating them into established networks of international trade, this is not the only possible response. It may well be that policymakers in the West can learn as much from developing nations about creative industries as 'they' can from 'us'.

In this article, I develop this mode of comparative industry analysis through a case study of the Nigerian video-film industry (Nollywood), with a focus on its distribution sector.¹ Nigerian video is a product of West Africa's informal economy, which plays a vital role in cultural provision for audiences in this region. Based in Lagos, Nollywood is not a creative industry in the conventional sense of the term, defined by Hartley (2005: 5) as 'the conceptual and practical convergence of the creative arts (individual talent) with cultural industries (mass scale), in the context of new media technologies (ICTs) within a new knowledge economy, for the use of newly interactive citizen-consumers'. According to this definition, Nigerian video only partly makes the grade. References to Nollywood within the creative industries literature are extremely rare. Yet this homegrown video industry is achieving via informal means many of the objectives of 'official' CIs planning policies elsewhere: it has created many thousands of jobs and achieved unprecedented levels of growth, all without assistance from the state, NGOs, international agencies, or the global entertainment industry.

This article argues that creative industries research can benefit from attention to informal economies of distribution, such as those upon which Nigerian video has been built, and the alternative frameworks for intellectual property and commodity exchange underpinning them (which, I conclude, have some curious parallels in first-world digital economies). In pursuing this line of inquiry, I explore both Nollywood's points of contact with and its points of departure from film industries based on the Euro-American model. Bearing in mind Jing Wang's (2004: 11) warning regarding 'the developed world's interest in seeking its own mirror image in developing countries', my aim here is not to suggest that this informal economy can or should evolve into a conventionally defined creative industry, nor that it would necessarily benefit from doing so. Instead, I want to use the example of Nollywood to rethink certain aspects of creative industries theory, and media theory more broadly, as they are employed in the West. As I will show, Nigerian video has ushered in a new and innovative kind of film culture, based around cheap and accessible nontheatrical distribution rather than theatrical release; it has in effect solved many of the distribution problems that plague filmmakers and producers all over the world. This article explores the potential transferability of this release template to other film industries.

To date, the scholarly literature on Nigerian video has been authored largely by anthropologists and scholars of African cinema and literature. Onookome Okome (2001, 2007a, 2007b), Chukwuma Okoye (2007), Moradewun Adejunmobi (2002, 2007), Chika Anyanwu (1996), Akin Adesokan (2004), and John McCall (2004b,

2007), among others, have offered compelling accounts of Nigerian video and its aesthetic, social and political contexts. Recent special issues of the journals *Film International* and *Postcolonial Text* have also furthered this project. The work of Jonathan Haynes (1995, 2000) and the pioneering studies of Brian Larkin (1997, 1998, 2002, 2004, 2008), which helped to introduce Nollywood to a broader readership within the Western academy, have been particularly influential.² However, cross-pollination between this body of video-film research and 'mainstream' media, film and cultural studies scholarship remains relatively rare. Most Nigerian video film research has been conducted outside the auspices of film and media studies, in a way that is not the case for research into many other national cinemas. This ghettoization is a function of the obscurity of African cinema within Western media scholarship as well as the fast-and-cheap nature of the video-film medium itself, which means that it is not taken seriously as 'cinema' by cinema scholars.

This is unfortunate, for Nollywood is, in a sense, bigger than Nigeria. By this I mean that it is a film industry of global significance, both in terms of the output of the industry (thousands of feature films are released annually) and the size of its audience (which reaches well into the hundreds of millions). I want to suggest that the insights to be yielded from analysis of this industry for scholars of creative industries are considerable. Nollywood opens up a space through which we can begin to theorize many different kinds of media, not just African cinema, in a new way. Studying the way the industry is organized and the kinds of experiences it

offers its audiences is a useful way to rematerialize media studies in the overdeveloped world.

A brief history of Nigerian video

To borrow a phrase from Emmanuel Sama, African films have long been 'foreigners in their own countries' (1993: 54). By the mid 1990s, African films accounted for less than 0.1 per cent of titles screened on the continent (Kabore 1995). In Nigeria a few features by prominent directors such as Ola Balogun, Adeyenu Afolayan and Eddie Ugombah have had some success, but cinema screens have for decades been dominated by imported American, Indian and Hong Kong movies. 35mm production has been largely defunct since the 1970s, and 16mm features number only a handful per year (Haynes 1995: 97). The kind of African cinema favored by film festival programmers in the West has virtually no audience in Africa itself – films by directors like Souleymanne Cissé or Ousmane Sembène are rarely screened outside foreign embassies, and are referred to by video directors derisively as 'embassy films'.

This state of affairs has its roots in a set of historical and economic forces which rendered celluloid cinema a redundant medium across most of Africa and cleared the way for low-cost video production to emerge. The backdrop to this is the colonial communications policies which regulated the experience of cinema for Nigerians

until the 1960s. In West Africa, film has functioned as a vehicle for propaganda, a signifier of Western modernity, and a status symbol for elites, but rarely has it been a means of communication or a driver of social change for and between Africans. Indeed, cinemagoing has largely disappeared as a social practice, due to the closure of many theatres and the deteriorating security situation in urban areas.

This all changed in the 1990s when a homegrown alternative to celluloid cinema emerged. In the wake of Kenneth Nnebue's breakthrough video film *Living in Bondage* (1992), an engaging moral tale of greed and retribution set in the fast lane of middle-class Lagos, locally made VHS tapes soon began to appear in street markets across Nigeria. Shot quickly and cheaply with minimal scripting and postproduction, video films resembled home movies and eschewed conventional norms of cinematography in favor of a cheap, televisual aesthetic.³

A crucial factor in the success of the video film industry, which by 1997 was producing nearly a film a day (Haynes 2000: xv), was its unique method of distribution. Video films were not made to be shown on the big screen. They were sold and rented cheaply on VHS tapes, bypassing cinemas in favor of the informal markets and street vendors which supply most Nigerians with their needs. These circuits, though labyrinthine and informal, were also organized and efficient. Part of the reason for this is the fact that they evolved from pre-existing pirate circuits otherwise occupied with the illegal distribution of Hollywood and Bollywood bootlegs. In his groundbreaking research on the Hausa video industry in northern

Nigeria, Larkin explains how this system has evolved over time to accommodate legitimate trade in video films and to return revenues to producers:

The everyday practice of piracy in [the Northern regional capital of] Kano was based around the mass distribution of the two most popular drama forms, Indian and Hollywood films, and the reproduction of televised Hausa dramas and Islamic religious cassettes. Nearly all of those who might be described as pirates were at the same time involved in the duplication and sale of legitimate media, and the organization that emerged made Kano the regional distribution center for electronic media in northern Nigeria and the wider Hausaphone area (which covers parts of Chad, Cameroon, Benin, Ghana, and the Sudan). The system is this: the main dealers are based at centers in Kano, like Kofar Wambai market. They then sell to distributors in other northern cities, and these in turn supply smaller urban and rural dealers who provide goods for itinerant peddlers. The system is based on a complex balance of credit and trust; and although it depends, in part, on piracy, it has evolved into a highly organized, extensive distribution system for audio- and videocassettes. (2004: 295)

Today, Nigeria's 'radically horizontal' (McCall 2007) film industry – or rather, the patchwork of different video industries (Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, plus smaller regional industries) that together make up the video economy – is the most energetic in the world. Street markets across the entire African continent overflow with tapes and discs, which are restocked on a weekly basis. Nollywood has its own star system, a critical infrastructure, an array of ancillary industries (magazines, websites, promotions, etc), and emerging international distribution networks. It provides jobs

for many thousands of people and churns out an estimated 2000 films per year. It represents an innovation in African media, one which has created – for the first time in history – a popular, accessible, and economically sustainable film culture, produced by and for Africans.

The scale of the video economy cannot be understated. Although it is largely unregulated⁴ and unquantifiable, Nollywood is by some definitions the largest film industry in the world today. Estimates of its current annual output are around 2000 annually – considerably higher than the US (around 600) and India (around 800-1000).⁵ The question here is how to determine what counts as output, and definitional problems invariably arise. As Nigerian video films are not theatrically released, they are not included in most international tallies of national film industry output, such as those co-ordinated by UNESCO. However, given that video is the dominant distribution medium in Nigeria, video films are for all intents and purposes ‘real’ movies – they are what millions of Nigerians watch, think about, and talk about. Thus, if we adjust our criterion to reflect the number of films commercially circulated through the dominant release platform, then Nigeria shoots to number one. (Admittedly, there are hundreds more amateur and independent films produced annually in the US on budgets comparable to the Nollywood films which are released straight to video or fail to get a distribution deal, but the majority of these have negligible audiences. By contrast, almost all the Nigerian films are commercially distributed – typical sales for the average Nigerian film are around 20,000 [Haynes 2005].) So, while Nigeria is not the largest film industry in terms of

capitalization or audience, it's safe to say that it produces more films that significant numbers of people actually watch than anywhere else in the world.

The video industry operates at a breakneck pace and on a shoestring budget. Films are scripted, shot and released within a matter of weeks. Careers are made and unmade overnight, and the Nollywood star system is constantly accommodating new entrants. Budgets average around US\$20,000-\$40,000, although they can climb well above US\$75,000 (*Good Copy Bad Copy* 2007; Haynes 2007: 3). Many films still suffer from clumsy camerawork, cursory scripting, and, above all, poor sound, which are legacies of the industry's undercapitalized and overextended production base, but technical standards have risen dramatically over the last decade. An increasing number of films now feature home-made special effects, such as disappearing and shrinking bodies, eyes which shoot laser beams, and digitally-created ghosts and spirits.

Media coverage of Nollywood in the West often draws attention to the spectacular dimensions of the industry's informality—the amateur actors, the sensationalism of the films, the cursory scripting, the wherever-whenver filming practices. But we should be careful not to make too much of these aspects, lest we trivialize what is in fact a complex and mature industry. Despite the miniscule budgets, Nollywood is an organized and increasingly professionalized ecology of technicians, thespians, and tradespeople. It is focused on, and quite good at, making money for its participants. As Chukwuma Okoye notes, the video film economy has proven to be one of the very few areas of growth in Nigeri outside the petro-economy:

[T]he video film provides a counter narrative to not only the silencing of the ordinary people but a remapping of the postcolonial social, cultural, and economic landscape by providing both entertainment and employment, by lifting countless [Nigerians] out of debilitating conditions, and offering viable possibilities for many more in other engagements. Without dependence on imperial and local state agencies these films demonstrate their viability through the many unemployed, poor, and hungry people, undoubtedly millions of them—marketers and importers of video cassettes and CDs, the film producers and their production crew, screen writers and actors, score composers, operators of the thousands of video rental outfits all over the country, distributors, visual artists who design the posters, printers, media practitioners, publicity outfits, journalists, even academics, and countless others—whose standards of living have witnessed considerable improvement. A great many of these professionals have attained the enviable status of urban millionaires. (Okoye 2007: 26)

Such benefits are not limited to film personnel. The many film crews that can now be found throughout West Africa are often obliged to contribute in some way to the communities in which they shoot—for example, by repairing a section of road in return for permission from a tribal chief to shoot in a particular village or neighborhood (McCall 2004b: 101). These examples speak to video's function not only as a platform for communication but also as a de facto service provider. In the context of contemporary West Africa, where opportunities for economic advancement are limited, this needs to be taken seriously, as the developmentalist creative-industries position would indeed stress. The point to note, however, is that this social and economic capacity owes little to the international economy into which CIs policy would urge Nollywood to integrate itself. Although video technology

is an imported medium and Nigerian films are transnational generic hybrids, Nollywood has in many senses blossomed precisely because of, rather than in spite of, its disconnection from formal circuits of international film trade.

Other features of Nigerian video are its linguistic and generic diversity. English-language movies are the most mobile and are now consumed widely across and beyond the continent. Video films are also produced in Nigeria's three main ethnic languages—Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa—and lower levels of production also take place in some of Nigeria's 250 other minority languages.⁶ Each industry has its own particular inflection, and the general trend has been towards 'a diversification of style and content motivated by the emerging delineation of audiences for particular types of video film' (Adejunmobi 2002: 78). For example, the Hausa industry in the Islamic north is conservative in its content and favors Bollywood-inspired romances with lengthy music and dance sequences (but no kissing). Action and drama are the strong suits of the Igbo and English films, which tend to have bigger budgets. Other genres include occult/supernatural horror, comedy, melodrama, and religious videos. In all cases, new narrative forms are continually cross-pollinating older genres including television drama, the Yoruba theatre tradition, and popular African literary forms including the so-called Onitsha Market literature and the pulp romances (*soyayya*) common in Northern Nigeria (Larkin 1997).

Nollywood's success hinges on its status as a *popular* film culture. The video film is by definition a mass medium; it represents a relatively cheap leisure activity for populations who cannot afford to go to the movies or surf the internet. It is a

categorically different model of media circulation from theatrical exhibition, and its audience is vastly larger. This is not to say that everyone can afford to buy video films and build up their own personal library—video is consumed across a number of different public and private sites, with one's level of access dependent upon variables including income, class, and gender (Okome 2007a, Ajibade 2007). While the video film has many critics, who slam its commercialism, its salaciousness, its poor quality, it is now the mainstream of screen entertainment in Nigeria.

The primary site of video film consumption is the home. Even though many communities do not have access to electricity and rely on petrol-powered generators, the level of VCR and VCD penetration in Nigeria households is relatively high, and home viewing is seen as a more desirable option than venturing out into the crime-riddled streets to go to the cinema. This is especially the case for women, who in Northern Nigeria may be obliged to stay at home during daylight hours according to the Islamic *kulle* tradition. Video films typically cost around 400 naira (US\$3.5) but can also be rented for about an eighth of this price (Ajibade 2007). Movies are passed around among extensive networks of family and friends, and are commonly viewed in large groups. As a result, the maximum value possible is extracted from each outlay, making participation in video culture less prohibitive than the purchase price itself would suggest.

Thousands of informal video parlors offer those without a VCR/VCD player an opportunity to watch video films. A video parlor is simply a room with a TV screen, some benches and an electric generator, maybe decorated with some movie

posters, where videos are shown to crowds of locals every couple of hours. Entry to these venues costs around 20 to 30 naira, less than US\$0.25 (Ajibade 2007). These spaces are as much about group discussion as film viewing; animated debates over the virtues and vices of particular characters or the quality of the film are common. However, this space is not without its exclusions: video parlors tend to be male-dominated venues where women are not typically present (Okome 2007b).

Finally, the video exhibition network also includes a variety of public sites of film consumption which are frequented by what that Okome (2007a) refers to as 'street corner audiences'. Videos are screened day and night at street stalls, hair dressers, shops, bars, and many other small businesses, and Nigerian fans are known for their willingness to 'stand or sit nearly anywhere and anyhow to see the video film' (Ajibade 2007: 11). This kind of spectatorship is a very important part of the West African mediascape, and in some senses it performs roles in public culture previously assigned to state broadcasting. As Larkin (2008) has argued, video is a 'privatized' medium—the product of a commercial industry which has no interest in the universalist public sphere of African independence movements—but within the context of a dysfunctional state apparatus and a TV system subject to political interference video performs important public-sphere functions.

Recent years have also witnessed a curious movement within video distribution back towards theatrical, televisual and institutional exhibition. Having established itself entirely outside these conventional media circuits, video now seems to have reappropriated them on its own terms. This trajectory can be traced back to

February 1997, when Zeb Ejiro's video film *Domitilla*, a popular drama about prostitution, was released in several Lagos cinemas in conjunction with African Independent Television (Adesanya 2000). Today video films are also broadcast on satellite TV networks such as Multichoice Nigeria and the South Africa-based MNet, which features two 24-hour Nigerian movie channels—Africa Magic and Africa Magic Plus (see Esan 2008).

Having provided some background to Nigerian video film, I now want to turn to some of the lessons that it may offer scholars of other film industries. As I suggested earlier, Nollywood's status as a successful and *sustainable* film industry which has blossomed in an otherwise dire economic context without any official support provides some food for thought for creative industries research. The following section discusses some of the key structural features of Nollywood in comparison to their equivalents in first-world media economies such as Australia.

The efficiency of informal distribution networks

Distribution has long been the key obstacle for filmmakers across the globe. Getting a film made is hard enough, but getting it seen by more than a handful of people is usually impossible without the support of an established distributor. Bottlenecks in distribution are a feature of almost all film industries, resulting in a situation where a large number of films compete for a limited number of slots in the cinema and spaces on the retail shelf. And although digital distribution has opened up new

possibilities for film circulation, it has not yet altered this bottleneck dynamic in any meaningful way, or to the same extent that downloading has reshaped the music industry. (For empirical data on distribution bottlenecks in film economies, see Wasko 2003, Epstein 2005, Vogel 2004, Scott 2005.)

Nollywood is different. Its industrial organization has been shaped by small-scale entrepreneurial distributors formerly occupied with bootlegs and electronics equipment; content, rather than being king, has always been more of an add-on to an existing trade in electronics hardware and black-market media. There has been little concentration or consolidation of ownership in these networks, which are labyrinthine in their informality yet highly efficient in their distributive capacity. The industry is structured in such a way that large numbers of films can circulate without the same capacity constraints that plague theatrical releasing. Premised on distributive accessibility, on abundance rather than scarcity, Nigerian video circulation has more in common with YouTube than Hollywood. It has created, for the first time in Africa, a large-scale film distribution system uniquely suited to the specific needs and preferences of its audiences.

To put this achievement in perspective, let's compare some features of Nollywood to those of the Australian film industry. Australia is a nation with a per-capita GDP sixteen times that of Nigeria. Its film industry receives tens of millions of dollars in state subsidies each year, yet it rarely gets more than twenty or so feature films into commercial distribution annually. In 2008, their share of the domestic box office was a paltry 3.8% (Screen Australia 2009). Comparable statistics are not available

for Nigeria, but no one disputes the level of local demand for Nigerian videos – they are more popular than Hollywood and are sold in every corner of the country.

Nollywood is by any definition a *popular* rather than a marginal film culture, a form of cultural production with which almost all Nigerians, especially young people, are closely engaged.⁷ The contrast here is stark: Nollywood produces a very large number of films that large numbers of people watch; the Australian film industry, despite extensive subsidies and support programmes, produces a small number of films that largely go unseen.

The informal trading networks established by the bootleggers and studied so carefully by Larkin (2004, 2008) have also come to constitute a regional market on their own terms (McCall 2007). Videos are now traded right across Africa, from Cameroon to South Africa, and increasingly throughout the Caribbean as well (Cartelli 2007). Their subterranean routes and the dispersed nature of these networks means that for the most part they circulate freely and at relatively low cost, which was the objective of a previous, unsuccessful policy initiative to create a regional common market for film in the 1970s (the Inter-African Consortium of Cinema Distribution). In effect, subterranean distribution has dissolved many of the circulatory blockages that plague filmmakers and audiences in other parts of the world. The lesson here is that, in some circumstances, informal and semi-formal regional markets based around cheap technology and distributive accessibility can work where state intervention has failed.

Cultural production under weak copyright

Closely connected to this last point is the question of intellectual property regulation and its role in fostering creative industries.

As Bettig (1996: 103-06) notes, there has been a persistent strand of economic research which maintains that greater economic efficiency can be achieved in a liberalized copyright environment where the reduced returns to rights holders would be offset by the productivity gains arising from lower prices and wider availability of cultural goods. This argument is gaining popularity in the post-Napster ubiquitous-broadband age, and in the wake of influential publications by the likes of Lawrence Lessig (2004) and Chris Anderson (2009). An editorial in *The Economist* (July 2, 2005), hardly a bastion of radical sentiment, even suggested that copyright terms should be stripped back to 14 or 28 years. Most of this discussion has taken place in think tanks, design studios and universities in the regulated and consolidated media environments of Europe, the UK and Australia, where the flouting of IP laws offers a kind of thrill which is absent in many developing nations, where piracy may be the only functional distribution system.

Nigerian video provides a concrete example of these theoretical propositions. It has evolved under weak to non-existent IP regulatory frameworks, and this is built into the industry at a structural level. Nollywood owes its existence to pirate infrastructure (Larkin 2004, 2008) – to the bootleg circuits which over time grew into legitimate distribution channels returning revenues to producers, to the

competitive culture of informal streetside commerce which keeps prices down, to the borrowed storylines and soundtracks within the films themselves.⁸ However, attitudes to piracy are now changing as the industry, led by the Nigerian Copyright Commission, moves to shore up copyright protection for producers and recast the widespread piracy upon which Nollywood's success has been founded as a socially unacceptable practice (see, for example, Nwauche 2003). Piracy is increasingly figured as a problem to be overcome, and representatives of the producers' associations monitor street markets to identify violations.

As with most forms of piracy, the issue here is not social deviance but distributive accessibility. As the Nigerian producer Charles Igwe suggests, the task for Nollywood as an industry is to keep its distribution extensive and affordable so that there is no incentive to buy pirate copies:

Piracy has an interesting connotation in Nigeria because people tend to think it's criminals who do this and people would rather buy the counterfeit, cheap copy and all that. The counterfeit copy in Nigeria costs just as much as the genuine copy. So it's not about the money. Whether you're buying the counterfeit or you're buying the genuine one, it's gonna cost you the same... So if we make the effort to put the genuine copy at the time of release in front of the public, and they have all got genuine copies, I wonder who the hell will buy the pirate copies? (*Good Copy Bad Copy* 2007)

This is the core issue in first-world digital economies – the affordable and accessible provision of media goods – and it is on this count that traditional media industries are struggling in the face of the no-cost pirate alternative. The entirely predictable

'debate' about piracy in the West has only recently begun to consider alternative business models built around digital distribution. In first-world digital economies, the proponents of such models are often niche artists appealing to long-tail audiences. In the Nigerian video industry, this structure of distribution is not marginal – it is the norm rather than the exception.

Some fascinating structural parallels emerge here. In the first world, liberal voices in IP/digital economy debates, having emerged from a context of technological, economic and media regulation, are now looking to deregulation as an answer – whether to boost efficiency and entrepreneurialism (the economic-liberal position) or to shore up freedom of speech (the libertarian position). The Nigerian video industry is in many ways the epitome of a prosperous weak-copyright economy, yet it is moving in the other direction by attempting to strengthen copyright legislation and enforcement. On the other hand, it may also be worth asking whether there are structural parallels here between Nollywood and early Hollywood, with its anarchic, competitive, piratical culture, which over time came to be more regulated and consolidated after the oligopolistic Motion Picture Patents Company took control in 1908. Either way, the case of Nollywood can at least help us to rethink certain common-sense assumptions about what constitutes a 'developed' media industry.

Exchange value / cultural value / production value(s)

Questions of demand are also worth considering here. As noted earlier, Nigerian theatrical exhibition has traditionally been dominated by Hollywood, and to a lesser extent India and Hong Kong. Bootleg tapes and VCDs of American movies have also been widely available in market stalls across West Africa for many years. Like virtually everywhere else on earth, audiences in Nigeria are familiar with the pleasures of the Hollywood blockbuster, the gold standard of global film culture.⁹

Video films lag a very long way behind in their production values. They are plagued by poor sound and rudimentary camerawork. The pacing is slow, the performances exaggerated, and the editing crude. Why, then, are Nigerians so happy to settle for this 'degraded' film culture (Larkin 2004)?

There is much that could be said on this topic. As Larkin (2004) and Adejunmobi (2007) note, the longstanding practices of pirate tape circulation have shaped the expectations of Nigerian audiences to some degree. While the gap between Hollywood and Nollywood is clearly evident in the multiplex environment, when 'the viewer encounters the American film in pirated VHS, DVD, or VCD mode on home television, the difference in technical quality between an American and a Nigerian video film may not be quite so flagrant' (Adejunmobi 2007: 5). The high degree of locality in the films is also an important factor in their success. The diegetic world of the video films is not necessarily the world inhabited by most video fans, but the films do engage closely with many aspects of contemporary life in Nigeria,

especially in the cities. The films are vessels of Nigerian modernity, embodying a kind of glamour articulated in a distinctively African mode.

But there is also a lesson here about the sectoral nature of media markets. Almost by accident, and certainly without any coordinated policy programme, Nigerian entrepreneur-producer-directors identified and targeted what became a specific but lucrative niche distinct from 'cinema' as it had been defined up until then. Let's return to Charles Igwe for further explanation:

We can't go to the LA film schools, but we can tell our stories with our own pictures. They look atrocious, the acting is horrible and all that, but it's piecing together the stories... The American market has definitely set the pace for most people. They are probably the most advanced in the world. That's accepted. But my people say: 'You can't be taller than me and shorter than me at the same time. You've got to decide what you want to do.' So we give them the best in the world – yes, you take that, you take the high end of the market, you take the biggest things in the market. But there's a lot of room to play somewhere else, and we occupy that space, quite gladly. (*Good Copy Bad Copy* 2007)

Common strategies for ailing national cinemas include attempts to replicate Hollywood (big-budget blockbusters), disavow Hollywood via art cinema (French auteur cinema, the Australian 'AFC genre'), or indigenize Hollywood (commercial Hindi cinema). As Igwe notes, Nollywood's strategy was to offer something different, in both its textual form and mode of circulation; a 'minor' form of commercial film culture (Adejunmobi 2007). In this sense, we might like to see Nollywood as the structural equivalent of a B-film production sector, rather than a national cinema, and we must also recognize that this strategy was the key to its success. None of the conventional film industry policy directions were employed here, and they would

not have worked in any case. If conceived and planned by policymakers as a flagship 'film industry', a vehicle to 'tell Nigerian stories', Nollywood would almost certainly have failed. Ironically, it is now all these things, but it is so only because of its disinterest in them.

This last point speaks to some of the conceptual short-circuits that Nollywood provokes when we attempt to find space for it in established categories of film studies and media policy studies. How exactly are we to theorise this film industry which is not one? It goes without saying that cinema studies is largely ill-equipped to deal with Nollywood's form or its material structure. Textual analysis can only take us so far, and the existing literature on African cinema will be of little assistance — Nollywood films do not seek to interrogate postcoloniality, or at least that is not their primary aim, nor do they engage in any way with the films of the great African 35mm auteurs.

Nigerian movies may have more in common with television than cinema, for a number of reasons. Aesthetically, films from *Living in Bondage* onwards often resemble TV soap operas, specifically the Latin American telenovelas that are often screened in West Africa. This is reflected in the soundtrack, camerawork, and editing style. Films are commonly split up into multiple parts to make more money for the producers/distributors (e.g. *Royal Tears* parts 1 and 2), building a kind of televisual seriality into the video experience. At an industry level, TV has operated as a personnel feeder for the video industry. Many of the early video film directors were laid-off television professionals rather than film industry types (Esan 2008).¹⁰ Finally,

video now performs some of the public-sphere functions ascribed to TV in other nations, creating a space of debate around current affairs. Video films are turned around so quickly that public scandals and controversies often find themselves represented in movies within weeks (see McCall 2004a on vigilante video films). In this sense, Nigerian video can be thought of as a kind of delayed broadcasting – TV on VCD.

Conclusion

Nigerian video is unlikely to ever be a creative industry in the conventional sense of the term. Nor can it threaten the US or India as an international cinema powerhouse. It has a huge regional market, but revenues and power are spread among a large number of producers and marketers/distributors, rather than concentrated in institutions and corporations as per the Euro-American model. This is its weakness as well as its strength.

However, if we define the creative industries project as not only an instrumental planning template but also a critical intervention in cultural policy, then other issues take centre stage. First among these is the issue of audiences. Much wealthier nations than Nigeria invest many millions of dollars in film industries that have a negligible local audience, let alone social impact. Many, struggling to compete at the multiplexes, address themselves instead to an international cinephile circuit.

(This has been the fate of most films from Francophone Africa.) This bifurcation between the multiplex and the arthouse reflects and reproduces the structural problems which underlie it and which shape global film culture in its own image – problems of distribution.

The way in which the Nigerian industry has sidestepped these obstacles is instructive. By opting instead for a cheap, televisual model of film production, and an innovative model of dispersed, informal distribution, it has broken this gridlock and found its own ‘third way’. Nollywood is now that rarest of things – a viable, popular, and accessible film culture. National film industries in the first world have much to learn from its example.

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¹ "Video-film" refers to feature-length movies shot on VHS/digital video and distributed through street markets and other informal channels. The term Nollywood is a contested one (see Haynes 2005; Marston, Woodward and Jones 2007), but its use is common both within and beyond Nigeria. It will be used throughout this article to refer to the various regional video industries that together make up the Nigerian video economy.

² Larkin's studies of Hausa video are exemplary interdisciplinary works, combining ethnography, cultural/media theory, historical analysis, and spatial analysis (see especially Larkin 2004, 2008). I would like to acknowledge my debt to his work, which is at the vanguard of contemporary global media studies.

³ The emergence of the video film in the 1990s can be traced back further to the private video production industry, which emerged in the late 1970s, and especially to the Yoruba theatre performers who took to videotaping their performances for public consumption in the late 1980s. (Note that at this time there was also a thriving video culture in neighbouring Ghana, which the Nigerian movies have since come to dominate.) Two external factors also contributed to the take-up of video: the IMF-imposed devaluation of the Nigerian naira in the 1980s, which made imported film prints and raw film stock much more expensive; and a 1981 boycott by the MPAA, which led to a drought of Hollywood movies (Larkin 2004). Cinemas across the region were forced to close down, with many being converted into churches. All of these events increased the demand for alternative sources of entertainment and helped to get the video economy rolling (Anyanwu 1996; Larkin 2004; Haynes 2000, 2005; Okome 2007d).

⁴ It is not entirely informal – a national certification and censorship system exists, to which not all producers adhere (see Ugor 2007), and taxes are levied on blank media so there is indirect revenue accruing to government through the video economy (Larkin 2004).

⁵ A precise quantification of Nollywood's output and revenue is impossible, given the informal nature of the industry. The Nigerian Film and Video Censors Board claims to have classified 1588 films in 2007, the most recent year for which figures are available (<http://www.nfvcb.gov.ng/statistics/years.html>); but given that many more films circulate without official approval, many researchers estimate the output to be around 2000. US and India figures referred to above are from MPAA (2008) and UNESCO (http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=7650_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC) respectively; note that the figure for India includes all Indian cinemas, not just Hindi films.

⁶ English titles tend to be released by Igbo producers. Igbo marketers also control the distribution sector. See Adejunmobi (2002) for a fascinating analysis of the commercial functions and the sociocultural signification of English within the video market.

⁷ Of course, market size is an issue — Nigeria has a population of 154 million — but this means little without effective distribution and production infrastructures. Just ask Indonesia, with a much larger population and a stagnant film industry.

⁸ For further discussion of the politics of IP in Africa, see Rønning et al (2006).

⁹ For more on Hollywood and Bollywood's presence in Nigeria, see Larkin (1997, 2004), Diawara (1987), Guback (1985), Maïga (1993). A recent paper by economists Barnard and Toumi (2008) disagrees on this point, but it is poorly informed about the history of film exhibition and distribution in Nigeria.

¹⁰ A majority of today's video film directors have no formal training at all, which explains the amateur camerawork and editing that one finds in many of the films.



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