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Creative industries and informal economies

Lessons from Nollywood

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ABSTRACT ● Since the emergence of its video industry in the 1990s, Nigeria has pioneered an innovative and highly successful model of film production and distribution. Lagos is now home to the fastest-growing film industry in the world, which releases well over 1000 titles a year without assistance from the government, NGOs or international film festivals. This article analyses the rise of 'Nollywood' through the lens of current debates in creative industries research. The Nigerian video economy offers compelling evidence of the role of informal markets in creating efficient and economically sustainable media industries. Its success also has implications for debates around copyright and media piracy. I conclude that reading Nigerian video as an informal creative industry can be a useful way to rematerialize media studies in the overdeveloped world. ●

KEYWORDS ● copyright ● film distribution ● film policy ● intellectual property ● media regulation ● Nigerian video ● piracy

The creative industries (CIs) project 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 CI thinking into new areas. Two examples of this shift towards transnational CI research are Michael Keane's major study of cultural production in the People's Republic of China, *Created in China* (2007), and the edited collection *Creative Industries and Developing Countries* (Barrowclough and Kozul-Wright, 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. Much energy is now being directed towards case studies and policy advice that will, it is hoped, assist cultural workers and policy makers in developing nations to realize this objective.

This article pursues a related but distinct line of enquiry into the transnational dimensions of creative industries. Integration into the international entertainment economy is one path for cultural producers in developing nations, but it is not the only option. Alternative routes which bypass or ignore these channels also need to be considered. Various efficient and economically sustainable industry models already exist in Second and Third World media, even though many of these are informal in nature and are only minimally connected to circuits of international intellectual property (IP) trade. Creative industries policy seeks to formalize these networks, incorporating them into established circuits of international commerce, but it also needs to acknowledge that informal economies have their own logics and their own potential. It may well be that policy makers 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 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'. References to Nollywood within the CIs literature are rare. Yet this home-grown 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 – without assistance from the state, NGOs, international agencies or film festivals – and is opening up new spaces of popular expression, debate and dissent.

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 have some interesting parallels in digital economies elsewhere. 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, my aim is to use the example of Nollywood to rethink certain aspects

of creative industries theory, and media theory more broadly. Nigerian video has ushered in a new and innovative film culture, based around cheap and accessible non-theatrical distribution rather than theatrical release; it has, in effect, solved many of the distribution problems that plague filmmakers across the globe. This article explores the potential transferability of this release template to other film industries.

To date, the literature on Nigerian video has been produced largely by anthropologists and scholars of African cinema and literature. Onookome Okome (2001, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c), Chukwuma Okoye (2007), Moradewun Adejunmobi (2002, 2007), Chika Anyanwu (1996), Akin Adesokan (2004) and John McCall (2004b, 2007), among others, have all offered compelling accounts of Nigerian video and its aesthetic, social and political contexts. Recent special issues of the journals *Film International* and *Postcolonial Text* also reflect the growing interest in the topic. The work of Jonathan Haynes (1995, 2000) and the pioneering studies of Brian Larkin (1997, 1998, 2002, 2004, 2008), which helped to introduce Nigerian video to a broader readership within the Western academy, have been particularly influential.² However, critical dialogue between this body of video film research and ‘mainstream’ cinema and media studies scholarship remains relatively rare. Most Nigerian video film scholarship has been generated 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, and 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 its output (thousands of films are produced and released annually) and the size of its audience (which reaches well into the hundreds of millions). Creative industries researchers potentially have a great deal to learn from Nollywood, as it 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 organization of the industry and the kinds of experiences it offers its audiences may in fact be a useful way to rematerialize media studies in the overdeveloped world.

A brief history of Nigerian video

In the words of Emmanuel Sama, African films have, until very recently, been ‘foreigners in their own countries’ (1993: 54). By the mid 1990s, African films accounted for less than 0.1 percent of titles screened on the continent (Kabore, 1995). In Nigeria a few features by prominent directors such as Ola Balogun have had some success, but cinema screens have long been dominated by imported American, Indian and Hong Kong movies. Since the 1970s, 35mm production has been largely defunct, and 16mm features number only a handful per year (Haynes, 1995: 97). Furthermore, the

kind of African cinema favoured by film festival programmers in the West has virtually no audience in Africa itself – works by directors like Souleymanne Cissé or Ousmane Sembène are rarely screened outside foreign embassies in Nigeria, and are referred to by the new generation of video directors as ‘embassy films’.

This state of affairs has its roots in a set of historical and economic factors 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 throughout the 20th century as a vehicle for propaganda, a signifier of Western modernity, and a status symbol for elites, but rarely as a means of communication or a driver of social change for and between Africans. Cinema-going has largely disappeared as a social practice in Nigeria, due to the closure of theatres and the deteriorating security situation in urban areas.

This all changed in the 1990s, when video production emerged as a home-grown alternative to celluloid cinema. In the wake of Kenneth Nnebue’s breakthrough low-budget 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 tapes soon began to appear in street markets across Nigeria. Shot quickly and cheaply on VHS, with minimal scripting and post-production, video films resembled home movies and eschewed established norms of cinematography in favour 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 favour of the informal markets which supply most Nigerians with their needs. These circuits, though labyrinthine, were organized and efficient. Part of the reason for this is the fact that they evolved from pre-existing pirate networks otherwise occupied with the illegal distribution of Hollywood and Bollywood bootlegs. In his ground-breaking research on the Hausa video industry in northern Nigeria, Brian 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 (Okome, 2007a: 6). Nollywood has its own star system – video actors like Genevieve Nnaji, Omotola Jalade Ekeinde and Ramsey Nouah are wildly popular in Nigeria and are now veritable superstars throughout the African diaspora as well, attracting large crowds of fans on trips abroad (Adejunmobi, 2007). Nollywood has also generated its own infrastructure of reviewers and commentators, numerous magazines and websites (e.g. naijarules.com, nollywood.net), and emerging international distribution networks. It represents a major 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. Although the video film has many critics, who slam its commercialism, its salaciousness and poor production values, it is now the mainstream of screen entertainment in Nigeria.

The scale of the video economy cannot be overstated. Although it is unevenly regulated and unquantifiable, Nollywood is arguably the largest film industry in the world today. Estimates of its current annual output are around 2000 – much higher than the US (520) and India (1325).⁵ The question here is how to determine what counts as output, and definitional problems inevitably arise. As Nigerian video films are not theatrically released, they are not included in most international tallies of film production, such as those compiled by UNESCO and the trade paper *Screen Digest*. 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. Therefore, if we adjust our criteria 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, and typical sales for the average Nigerian film are around 20,000 [Haynes, 2005].) So, while Nollywood is not the world's largest film industry in terms of revenues or audience, it's likely 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 under-capitalized and over-extended 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 shrinking bodies, eyes that shoot laser beams, and digital 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 minuscule 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 Nigeria 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 neighbourhood (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 advisers 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 languages – Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa – and lower levels of production also take place in some of Nigeria's 500 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' (Adejumobi, 2002: 78). For example, the Hausa industry in the Islamic north is conservative in its content and favours 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 with older genres and formats, 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 communities that cannot afford to go to the movies or surf the internet at home. It employs 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 (Ajibade, 2007; Okome, 2007b).

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 player⁷ 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 Islamic 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 parlours offer those without a VCR/VCD player an opportunity to watch video films. A video parlour 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 parlours tend to be male-dominated venues, where, typically, women are not present (Okome, 2007b).

Finally, the video exhibition network also includes a variety of public sites of film consumption, which are frequented by what Okome (2007b) refers to as 'street corner audiences'. Videos are screened day and night at market stalls, hairdressers, 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 vulnerable to political interference, video now performs important public-sphere functions.

Recent years have also witnessed a curious movement within video distribution back towards theatrical and televisual exhibition. Having established itself entirely outside these circuits, video now seems to have re-appropriated 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 with reference to their equivalents in First World media economies.

The efficiency of informal distribution networks

Distribution has long been the major obstacle for filmmakers around the world. 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. (For empirical data on distribution bottlenecks in film economies, see Epstein, 2005; Scott, 2005; Vogel, 2004; Wasko, 2003).

Nollywood is different. Its industrial organization has been shaped by small-scale entrepreneurial distributors formerly occupied with bootlegs and electronics equipment. Audiovisual content has always been more of an add-on to an existing trade in electronics hardware and black-market media. There has been comparatively little concentration or consolidation of ownership in these networks, which are intricate yet highly efficient in their distributive power. 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 structural features of Nollywood to those of the Australian film industry. Australia is a nation with a per capita GDP 16 times that of Nigeria; its film industry receives close to A\$100 million in government subsidies each year; and it usually puts between 20 and 30 feature films into commercial distribution annually, accounting for around 4 percent of the national box office (*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 movies, are produced in massive quantities, and are sold in every corner of the country. Nollywood is by any definition a film culture with which almost all Nigerians, especially young people, are closely engaged; it is a *popular film culture*. Of course, there are many complicating factors here, and much Australian audiovisual content finds its way to audiences via other channels (especially free-to-air TV).⁸ But if we limit the discussion to feature-length films, and to distributive rather than textual issues, then the contrast is stark: Nollywood produces a huge number of films for a huge audience; the Australian film industry, despite extensive subsidies and support, 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 across the African continent, from Ghana 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. The grey and black markets that facilitate the majority world's everyday media consumption – especially in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe – cannot guarantee the return of revenues to producers, but they are unmatched in their distributive efficiency.

Cultural production under weak copyright

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

As Bettig (1996: 103–6) notes, there has been a persistent strand of economic theory that claims 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 internet age, and in the wake of influential publications by the likes of Lawrence Lessig (2004) and Chris Anderson (2009). Even *The Economist*, which is hardly a bastion of radical sentiment, is now arguing that copyright terms should be stripped back to 14 or 28 years (editorial, 2 July 2005). Most of this discussion has taken place in think-tanks, design studios and universities in Europe, the UK and Australia, where the flouting of IP laws offers a kind of thrill specific to regulated and consolidated media environments.

Nigerian video provides a concrete example which we can use to road-test some of these theoretical propositions. The industry evolved under weak to non-existent IP regulation, 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.⁹ However, attitudes to piracy are now beginning to change 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 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, in fact, 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. But in the Nigerian video industry, this structure of distribution is mainstream, 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 formation of the oligopolistic Motion Picture Patents Company 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

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.¹⁰

Nigerian video films lag a very long way behind in their production values. They are plagued by poor sound and rudimentary camera-work. 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 long-standing practices of pirate tape circulation have shaped the textual expectations of Nigerian audiences. 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 distinctly African mode.

But there is also a lesson here about the nature of media markets. Almost by accident, and certainly in the absence of a coordinated industry policy, 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).¹¹ 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 anyway. If conceived and planned by policy-makers 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 lack of interest in them.

This last point illustrates 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 theorize this film industry which is not one? It goes without saying that cinema studies is 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 art 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 35 mm *auteurs*.

In fact, Nigerian movies have more in common with television than cinema. 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, camera-work 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 also 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).¹² 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 become a creative industry in the conventional sense of the term. Nor can Nigeria threaten the US or India as an economic powerhouse of global cinema. It has a huge regional market and massive output, 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 Nollywood's 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 question 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.

Notes

- 1 The term ‘video-film’ refers to feature-length movies shot on VHS/digital video and distributed through street markets and other informal channels. The Nollywood moniker is a contested one (see Haynes, 2005; Marston et al., 2007), but its use is now common both within and beyond Nigeria. In this article, ‘Nollywood’ refers 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, and to his distinctive brand of media theory, which is at the vanguard of contemporary global media studies.
- 3 The emergence of the video film in the 1990s can be traced further back, 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 Motion Picture Association of America (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; Haynes, 2000, 2005; Larkin, 2004).
- 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. The National 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. The figures for the US and India are for 2008 and have been taken from recently released *Screen Digest* data (cited in Screen Australia, 2009). For more production output data, see European Audiovisual Observatory (2009) and MPAA (2008). Note that the figure for India includes all Indian cinemas, not just Hindi films.

- 6 English-language 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 and sociocultural functions of English within the video market.
- 7 VCD refers to the Video Compact Disc, a pre-DVD disc technology of the early 1990s, which became common in parts of Asia and Africa. For more on VCD cultures, see Hu (2005).
- 8 Of course, market size is an issue – Nigeria has a population of 154 million – but this means little without effective distribution and production infrastructures. Indonesia, for example, has a much larger population but a stagnant film industry. Note also that these comments have little to do with the conservative critique of Australian filmmaking as esoteric, elitist, pretentious and so on – the issue I am addressing here is distribution, not content.
- 9 For further discussion of the politics of IP in Africa, see Rønning et al. (2006).
- 10 For more on Hollywood and Bollywood's presence in Nigeria, see Larkin (1997, 2004), Diawara (1987), Guback (1985), Maïga (1993). A recent paper by Barnard and Tuomi (2008) disagrees on this point, but it is poorly informed about the history of film exhibition and distribution in Nigeria.
- 11 Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out that these strategic frameworks have been analysed by the Harvard business professor Michael Porter (1980).
- 12 A majority of today's video film directors have no formal training, which explains the amateur camera-work and editing found in many of the films.

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