

## BOOK REVIEW

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The Development and Growth of the Film Industry in Nigeria. Alfred E. Opubor and Onuora E. Nwuneli, Eds., New York: Third Press International, 1979. 119 pp.

At long last, here is a text in English focusing primarily on film in Nigeria. This pioneering book is a collection of eight articles which were presented at a seminar on film and its relationship to cultural identity in Nigeria held at the University of Lagos last year and sponsored by the Nigerian National Council for Arts and Culture.

This book examines the problems, the challenges, the frustrations and the possibilities of filmmaking and of film in Nigeria, in general. It diagnoses an artistic problem which has serious political, socio-cultural as well as economic dimensions, and it prescribes possible remedies to the problems identified. The contributors focus on five broad areas: history, production, distribution, exhibition and the role that film should play in Nigerian cultural and economic development. Each author also gives a list of recommendations for enhancing the development of film activities in Nigeria by Nigerians.

Historically, the films (documentary as well as fiction) that dominated, and still dominate, the vast majority of screens in Nigerian theaters, in particular, and Third World theaters, in general, tended to be of the most alienating type: colonial propaganda films that extol and attempt to justify and glorify the virtues of the so-called European "civilizing" (or should we agree with Okot p'Bitek and call it by its proper label "si-philizing") mission; American 'B' movies of gangsters, cops 'n' robbers, cowboys 'n' Indians; escapist James Bond 007 movies; spaghetti westerns; and lately, the Bruce Lee karate films and the so-called "blaxploitation" films. In short, foreign language films whose end result is chiefly cultural mystification and instilling of cultural self-hate in the mass of movie-going Nigerians, the majority of whom do not speak or understand English, Hindi or Italian. This, in turn, produces the clumsy yet dangerous American movie star caricatures such as the types that used to hang out at Ekotodo theater in Ibadan which, according to Adeboyega Arulogun, "was infested with young men dressed in jeans and hats with scarves tied around their necks like the cowboys in American western films, like the John Wayne type or the Wild, Wild West series on television.... In fact, Ekotodo soon became a den of robbers, streetfighters and rascals." (p. 29). These films also provide and perpetuate escapism as they constitute a visual as well as mental beam that blinds the masses of movie-going Nigerians from coming to grips with the real sources and nature of their

political, social and economic conditions. These films uphold false models and they propagate values that are not in the interest and welfare of the average Nigerian. Hence, the relentless effort by those that profit from such films to propagate the idea of film as merely pure entertainment, and thereby masking the truly negative and alienating dimensions of these foreign language films whose cultural reference points are not only nonAfrican, but also patently anti-black, in general.

The contributors to this volume, all Nigerian academics as well as practicing filmmakers, to a man, decry and lament this deplorable state of foreign domination of commercial film in Nigeria at the same time that they attempt to alter the popularly accepted one-dimensional view of film as merely pure entertainment and nothing else. Dr. Onuora Nwuneli, one of the editors, observes that "the Nigerian Government...probably sees films as a form of lightweight entertainment and devoid of political and economic components, contrary to what is known about the dexterous potential of films in other parts of the world." (preface).

The explanation for this view, which is by no means confined to government only, and for the continued domination of foreign films is to be found in the discussions focusing on production and distribution. Perhaps Frank Aig-Imoukhuede best sums it up when he points out that "the African is an inconsequential force in production, distribution and exhibition." (p. 40). All three areas are effectively in the hands of foreigners who pretty much decide what Nigerians see and do not see in the theater. This form of tyranny is made all the more effective by the fact that distribution of feature films in Nigeria is, in spite of the Indigenization Decree of 1972, still the exclusive monopoly of two foreign groupings: 1) the American Motion Pictures Exporters and Cinema Association (AMPECA) which controls films from the U.S. and Europe, and 2) the Lebanese-owned NDO Films and Cine Films which have the rights to films from India and other parts of Asia. The vast majority of the exhibition theaters also belong to nonNigerians who do business primarily with these nonNigerian distributors.

The implications are obvious as far as the Nigerian entrepreneur and filmmaker are concerned. Their production efforts are frustrated and go largely unrewarded, and their works stand very little chance of being seen by a large number of Nigerians. Opubor, Oreh and Nwuneli give an example:

*...Kongi's Harvest, produced and released in 1970 by Calpenny Films Nigeria Ltd., failed partly because the non-Nigerians who hold the monopoly on the distribution of films refused to handle the film. Francis Oladele, the producer of Kongi's Harvest, later expressed*

*deep concern for the attitude of film distributors in Nigeria whom he described as 'trying to discourage our pioneering spirit by deliberately offering far less money for films than the standards of the industry demands.'* (p. 9).

A similar fate befell Ola Balogun's first feature film in a Nigerian language (Igbo), Amadi (1976), but he tried to circumvent this problem by taking the film himself "to Nigerian college circuit in addition to screening it in any night club, auditorium or anywhere he felt the audience was large enough to warrant a screening." (p. 10). Worthy echoes of Ousmane Sembene and Haile Gerima.

If nonNigerians dominate the distribution and exhibition of feature films in Nigeria, it is the Nigerian federal government, through the film division of the Ministry of Information, that controls the distribution and exhibition of documentaries, both at the federal and state level. The first three chapters of the book (Chapter 1, in particular) provide a broad and useful outline and discussion of the structure and history of the Nigerian film industry, especially government involvement in production, distribution and exhibition. This government and private industry (mainly petroleum) support, which dates back to colonial days, is responsible, these contributors argue, for the comparatively more developed state of the documentary film in Nigeria, from the point of view of both quantity and quality. It is perhaps with this in mind and also the awareness of the kind of capital involved in any kind of film venture in Nigeria that all of the contributors to this text advocate a heavy government involvement in the establishment of the infrastructure necessary to support a viable film industry in Nigeria at all levels. Apart from lowering the level of dependency on nonNigerian productions through increased Nigerian productions under the auspices of indigenous production companies such as Calpenny Films Nigeria Ltd., Afro-Cult Films Nigeria Ltd. and Starline Films Nigeria Ltd., this infrastructure will also go a long way in helping break up the foreign octopus-hold on distribution and exhibition, thereby affording Nigerians the opportunity to see more Nigerian and black-made films that talk to them directly about things that are directly relevant to their everyday lives, and in a language that they can understand.

The recommendations made by the various contributors pretty much mirror the kinds of problems, frustrations and challenges facing Nigerian filmmakers. Three presentations stand out in this respect. Chapter 1, "The status, Role and Future of the Film Industry in Nigeria" by Opubor, Nwuneli and Oreh; Chapter 3, "A National Film Industry: Assessment of Problems and Suggested Solutions" by Frank Aig-Imoukhuede, and Chapter 4,

"The Shortcomings of Film Production in Nigeria" by the filmmaker Sanya Dosumu. Their recommendations and those of others could be summarized thus:

- \* creation of a National Film Institute.
- \* creation of a National Film Corporation to finance production--the average cost of producing a film in Nigeria is put at N300,000 by Sanya Dosumu--build theaters, set up training programs to ensure a constant supply of trained personnel both in front of and behind the camera.
- \* empower the Bank for Commerce and Industry and the Nigerian Industrial Development Bank to create a special fund for motion picture production.
- \* create a quasi-governmental corporation to take over existing facilities such as processing labs and pre- and post-production studios.
- \* acquisition and up-dating of necessary equipment to be hired out to individual filmmakers.
- \* impose a quota system to control the number of foreign films entering Nigeria.
- \* explore and encourage reciprocity and co-production arrangements with other countries and film concerns.

Wole Soyinka draws attention to the examples of the Swedish film set-up and the Canadian Film Board which, he says, "rescued the poor filmmaker from the capitalist clutches and mandate which...oppress a lot of genuine creative work today." (p. 102). Soyinka also advocates a "move away, though not exclusively, from the concept of film as something which must be financed on very heavy terms," for he believes that one does not need a million naira to make a good product, especially if filmmakers try to avoid what he terms "opulent illusionism." Here again, it is pertinent to single out the example of the Ethiopian filmmaker, Haile Gerima, whose highly acclaimed and well-made Harvest: 3000 Years (1976) and Wilmington 10: U.S.A. 10,000 (1978) were made on fairly modest budgets.

As for the role of film in Nigeria, the consensus is that Nigerian film should be an instrument of education and analysis, in addition to entertainment. Nigerian film should capture, analyze, help shape and promote Nigerian culture. Soyinka speaks in favor of a "proletarian art as opposed to elitist bourgeois art" in film. (p. 101). He admonishes his fellow artists to get away from "the idea of cinema as image, capital 'I', and back to cinema as images, relevant related images found in society." (p. 102). He also informs them that "this society, its culture, is in fact one of the most cinematic films that I know of and we should not forget that fact." (p. 103).

Other aspects of the text include an interesting, well-

intentioned but at times confusing chapter entitled "The Language of Films: Its Application to the Nigerian Cultural Environment" by Edison Egbe, who bombards us with a battery of vague labels and concepts--"Hollywood-to-be," "Hollywood-not-to-be," "RFI-Diegesis," "ideology exterior," "ideology interior," "ideo-audience," etc.--which only compound the confusion brought about by his overly ambitious attempt to be meaninglessly theoretical. However, Mr. Egbe's concluding remarks capture, perhaps more graphically than any other in the text, what many progressive filmmakers and scholars would regard as the fundamental mission of film in a developing society. He states that his

*Theoretical work rests on the feeling that the cinema ought to raise the consciousness of the spectator, demystify and instruct him about the political reality and ideological function of the cinema itself. In one sense, this is a discussion about cinema as an institution within an under-developed society, but it also involves another issue--and both are important--about how art, and in particular the cinema, relates to society and individual consciousness via the aesthetic processes themselves. How closely, in other words, are aesthetic developments tied to social ones, how do their structures interact with and determine each other, and more specifically, in what way, if any, can or should aesthetic processes serve non-aesthetic ends." (p.96).*

A Sembene and a Gerima would no doubt applaud such perceptive observations and questions. I would too, but I also frown at Mr. Egbe's failure to convincingly discuss and demonstrate the relevance and applicability of what he dubs "universal film code"--i.e., "image, sound, style, form, narrative, montage, etc., etc." (p. 90)--to any Nigerian film.

Laz Ekwueme's discussion of "The Music Composer, Film and Nigerian Cultural Identity" smacks of a good measure of professional chauvinism in his belief that scoring the music of a film ought to be the fief of only the professionally trained musician and composer. He does, however, raise some good questions regarding the role (both historical and contemporary) of the musician in the process of filmmaking.

The lack of up-dated data base and statistics on, say, the number of movie theaters in the country, the number of films shown in any given period, the number of tickets sold, etc., has frustrated many a film student and scholar doing research in the area. Some of the contributors to this text do testify to that.

Appendixed are the texts of the opening addresses delivered by Chief H.J.P. Dappa-Biriye, chairman of the National Council for Arts and Culture, and by Prof. J.F. Ade Ajayi, vice-chancellor of the University of Lagos. There are also photographs of shots from various Nigerian films and of participants interspersed throughout the text. One that hits the eye immediately is the very first photograph in the text of a charismatically imposing and elegantly young-looking "Pa" Orlando Williams, "the doyen of Nigerian screen actors."

The Development and Growth of the Film Industry in Nigeria is indeed an important and valuable contribution to the cause and study of Nigerian film, in particular, and African and Third World film, in general. It raises some pertinent questions about continued artistic and cultural imperialism in Nigeria and Africa today. Reactionary and escapist foreign films and commercial film concerns continue to inundate and dominate the film market in Nigeria in spite of political independence. This text points out this contradiction and offers itself as a blueprint for the struggle against foreign monopoly and for the construction of a Nigerian-dominated and a Nigerian- and African-oriented film industry in Nigeria.

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