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Film Makers and Film Making in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects

by Augustine-Ufua Enahora:

Abstract

This paper presents the problems of film makers and film making in Nigeria and points out how the problems are militating against the prospects of the Nigerian film industry. It proposes a radical restructuring of the film industry in Nigeria in order to facilitate its indigenous development. To this end, it suggests the nationalization of the film distribution and exhibition sections so as to achieve a viable integration of the whole industry and to promote it as a vehicle for cultural and socio-economic development of the people of Nigeria.

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Cinéastes et Cinématographie au Nigéria: Problèmes et perspectives d'avenir

RÉSUMÉ

Ce document retrace les problèmes des cinéastes et de la cinématographie au Nigéria et propose des solutions aux problèmes qui se posent à l'industrie du film au Nigéria. Il propose une restructuration radicale de l'industrie du film au Nigéria en vue de faciliter son développement indigène. A cette fin, il suggère que soient nationalisés la distribution du film et les secteurs d'exhibition afin de réaliser une intégration viable de toute l'industrie et de la promouvoir comme un instrument de développement culturel et socio-économique de toute la population nigériane.

Introduction

Cinema is one of the most important public issues over which successive Federal governments have exhibited inexplicable indifference, may be, borne out of ignorance of the significance and the functions of the film industry. Cinema is the least developed of the mass media in Nigeria. The country inherited the colonial structure of film industry and, despite her political independence in 1960, the system has not changed. Nigeria is a cinematographic province of India and America while its colonial masters are the Indians and Lebanese.

One of the driving forces for struggling for the independence of Nigeria was the belief that development would obviously follow independence. That is, as soon as the citizens were allowed to manage their own affairs, they would attain the level of development reached by the developed countries, and, if the resources were properly utilized for the benefit of the nation by the people themselves, the nation would develop. But political independence has not automatically ushered in economic independence. Film distribution and exhibition in Nigeria are in foreign hands and foreigners decide the films to be screened in Nigerian theatres. They screen very old films that they bought at give-away prices and the core of their politics is to discourage indigenous film production. These films are of Western and Indian cultures and styles. The Nigerian film audience is conditioned by these styles and they find it difficult to appreciate Nigerian films.

This perpetual presence of Western aesthetics has influenced not only the film goers, but has adverse effects on the film makers. We are not arguing that it is bad to watch foreign films, but there is need that these films should treat related problems.

Films screened in Nigerian theatres today have neglected our educational philosophy, its goals and objectives, our institutional framework and cultural background. They have created social and psychological problems.

Cinema and Culture

Film is a means of socialization, i.e. the process and experience that help the individual to become sensitive to the expectation of other members of the society, their values and culture. Cinema is an important tool in building cultural institutions, and reinforcing cultural pride. The cinema could be used to heal the psychological wounds created by slavery and colonialism and to provide moral upliftment. Cinema is like photography; it is not an accident but a concept. That is, cinema is a manipulation of the viewer through its language of images; it is the recycling of reality through the way it is presented. We cannot afford to go to Rex Cinema, Jos, and be passive to the political assumptions that the film is built on. Cinema is a means of information, education and cultural development of the masses. It is a means of communication and comprehension.

Culture is the unifying force among Nigerians. It kept their spirits alive and gave them the impetus and courage to organize for their so-called independence during the British domination. In Indian, European, and Hollywood films, the general approach is to present the best of their cultures to the audience. Cinema itself is a culture and is also the most effective vehicle of propagating culture.

The cultural background of the film maker functions as the frame of reference for his cinematic languages. The film is a reflection of self-consciousness and self-expression of the people. Cinema is like any other arts, it is employed in the people's reflection of freedom, justice, life, etc. Cinema takes root in the realities of society. It is a means of documenting culture and people's way of life. Vieyra (1969) remarks that 'The cinema is one of the most efficient ambassadors providing information on inter-state because cinema carries with it bits and pieces of its country of birth'.

In Nigeria, where we have many illiterate people, cinema could be used as a means of communication, comprehension and information. We have failed to use the cinema to motivate

our people. The uses of cinema for cultural projection are very important because 'the functioning of every human body is moulded by the culture within which the individual has been reared but also by the way he was born into society with a definite culture he has been fed, and disciplined, fondled and put to sleep, punished and rewarded' (Mead 1953:377—8).

Culture plays a vital role in the physical and mental development of an individual in any society. If it is required of the members of the Nigerian society to develop the basic physical, intellectual, social and emotional capabilities, then Nigerian films could be very helpful in this respect.

Our experience of slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism, coupled with economic and cultural domination has led us to self-alienation. In the present state of cultural invasion, the invader does not need to go personally to the invaded land, but the action is carried out by technological instruments. It is almost impossible for the Nigerian film makers and film audiences in the present situation to grow above the models established by their invaders. Cultural invasion leads to manipulation, which in turn leads to conquest and conquest leads to domination. The Lebanese and the Indians are manipulating the situation which is indispensable for their domination. Cinema is a cultural action which operates in and upon the social structure; it either maintains the structure or transforms it. We need a cultural revolution to transform our mentality and cinema could be used to restore the lost confidence.

Nigerian cinema halls are polluted with films of oriental martial arts, thrillers, Indian melodrama and American action-adventures. Nigerians have been over-fed with these cinedrugs. Nigerian cultural forms are being devalued everyday and we fold our hands and look on; sometimes we applaud to encourage the situation. These cinedrugs are used to anaesthetize the people so that they do not think of their situation. As early as 1910, a French Colonel noted that the cinema could help us to conquer Africa' (Opubor *et al* 1979). And it is still effectively used to conquer us today.

The cinema industry in a neocolonial country is a reflection of that system. Cinema is the result of an economic practice, technology and aesthetics which is enveloped by a dominant ideology. It is a public art, a collaborative creation which is aimed at the audience. Cinematography is a profession of public utility and the Nigerian government should stop neglecting this industry.

The Federal Military Government promulgated the Nigerian enterprise decree in 1972 to limit the involvement of foreign interests in a number of economic activities and to reserve some of these exclusively for Nigerians. Foreign enterprises operating in Nigeria were forced to sell a stipulated percentage of their capital to Nigerians. This decree gave exclusive monopoly for the distribution and exhibition of feature films to Nigerians. But, as cited in Hennebele Guy (1972),

Even though this law of exclusive monopoly of the distribution and exhibition of feature films by Nigerians is still in force today, the government made no major attempt to enforce it, hence the business is still almost completely controlled by foreigners.

The NDO Films and ACINE Films are Lebanese companies which control the importation and distribution of Indian films and the films from other Asian countries. The Lebanese interpreted this decree to mean more opportunities since they naturalized and obtained Nigerian citizenship. Some even went further to marry Nigerian women to buttress their security for exploitation.

This monopoly of distribution and exhibition by foreigners in Nigeria is creating marketing difficulties for Nigerian films made by Nigerians. The government is not only helpless in checking the situation, but seems to have been willingly aiding and abetting their perpetuation. We have all failed to tackle the problems created by these alien companies which dictate the pattern and pace of our film industry.

The Federal Military Government has the power to exercise both direct and indirect controls, but has failed to play that role effectively. The state governments, through the states ministries of information, have also failed to effectively control

the distribution and exhibition of feature films through the entertainment tax.

No matter what may be the official pronouncement by the Nigerian government or the Nigerian Film Corporation on films in Nigeria, the observed attitude towards problems of the film industry constitute, in reality, the cinematographic policy. The policy denies the existence or capabilities of Nigerian filmmakers, because if you cannot find the products there will be no need to look for the producers.

The structure of Nigerian film industry is the same now as it was during the colonial period. The late Professor Cheikh Anta Diop lamented the fact that Africans would leave others to do what they could do for themselves. The Nigerian government failed to recognize that the film industry is as fundamental as agriculture for Nigeria. We have all failed to recognize that the development of film industry in Nigeria is very important to the development of cinema in Africa. This is not only because other African countries look up to Nigeria as the giant of Africa, but the area now called Nigeria has, from historic times, been one of the major crossroads of Africa, culturally and economically. Politics is based on the economy. Those who control the economy of the film industry also control its politics. And, as such, they influence and control the lives of the citizens.

The Cinema in National Development

For one to play a responsible role in community development, he must be well informed to select appropriate courses of action. We have failed to use the cinema to create awareness and interest in our development programmes. Cultural development is an integral part of any nation's development. Film represents cultural forms which play an important role in the social development of the citizens. We have always stressed technological development, but then how do we think of technological progress if the technology is not rooted in our culture? National development should be man-oriented not institution-oriented, that is, individuality in collectiveness not individualism.

We agree with Claude Ake (1972) who stresses that we should reject the concept of development in the present situation and think in terms of liberation. Liberation here means disengagement from imperialist countries, freedom from the tyranny of material wealth. He says that:

If we think in terms of liberation we can accept that we are not all that we ought to be without necessarily feeling inferior to someone else. If we think in terms of liberation, we will open the question of the path of our social evolution instead of committing ourselves blindly to the path someone else has taken

The cinema as a means of education could play a great role in the development of the nation. One naira invested in the intellectual development of a Nigerian could augment the national revenue more than one naira invested in a steel company or an automobile industry. The cinema could be used to contribute to a feeling of nationness, as a voice of national planning, to help teach necessary skills, to extend the effective market, to help people look to the future and to prepare people to play their role as a nation among nations' (Schramm 1964). The cinema can be used either as a national stimulant or tranquilizer. We should note that the cinema would not necessarily contribute to the development of any nation; this will develop on its use and content. The cinema in Nigeria today has diverted our attention from our national development problems so that whereas we could use it to explain the policy, aim, objectives, plans, etc., of the government to the general populace, bypassing the imposing barriers of illiteracy, we now use it to lull the people to stupefaction.

Film Makers and the Art of Film Making in Nigeria

The Nigerian film maker is subjected to many measures in order to halt his work and to place obstacles in his path so as to prevent him from carrying out his mission. The constraints are directed against Nigerian film makers in order to silence and undermine the great role he could play in reflecting and expressing the efforts and endeavours of the people. The Nigerian film makers lack adequate supplies of film stocks and support services such as credit to produce films. The absence

of financial support is one of the major problems inhibiting the development of the art of film making in Nigeria. Majority of the film makers do not have enough assets to satisfy the collateral requirements of the banks. Problems of inadequate infrastructural facilities, like power, transportation, telecommunication, etc. help to make the film business unfeasible. The alien film companies pose multidimensional problems to indigenous film makers and the art of film making in Nigeria with their monopoly of distribution and exhibition channels. These companies do not only fail to produce films in Nigeria, but also discourage local productions.

Film equipments and film processing facilities are not available. Even when the shooting of a film is done in Nigeria, the processing is done in America and Europe. There is no opportunity to see the rushes immediately after the day's shooting. If the films are over-exposed or under-exposed, there is no immediate opportunity to reshoot.

It should be noted that there is a shortage of qualified manpower in key areas. The peculiar economic, ideological and political problems of Nigeria have also constituted obstacles for film makers and the industry. The Nigerian film maker is in most cases the producer, director, scriptwriter, distributor and exhibitor. It is impossible for one person to assume all these responsibilities successfully. Even when Nigerian films are released, the aliens who are the owners of the theatres would not agree to screen the films. These theatres are extensions of the neocolonial establishments with the aim of exploiting and perpetuating the same kind of negativity.

With all these problems facing the film industry in Nigeria, when the Nigerian film makers ask how responsible and responsive to the people the leaders are, the leaders respond by confiscating part or the full length of the film. But when Lebanese and the Indians screen the cinedrugs in Nigeria, nothing happens to their films because these films have been 'innoculated against the so-called censorship'.

There are two types of censorship facing Nigerian films. They are the bureaucratic governmental censor and the industrial

editor. The bureaucratic censor decides what is to be shown to the public. But the industrial censorship is more effective in Nigeria. It is carried out by the alien theatre owners. After the film has been made, it must pass through the distributors and exhibitors. The distribution and exhibition components of the Nigerian film industry are in the hands of those who are not interested in films made in Nigeria. Since the industrial censorship is in foreign hands, the determination of the type of films to be screened is also in foreign hands. The government policy discourages and alienates a potential filmmaker. Dr. Ola Balogun, after a degree in French and postgraduate certificate in film technique, was offered a salary much lower than that offered to a new graduate in administration because he opted to work as a filmmaker (Opubor *et al* 1979:9).

A professor of history, who was a member of the interview panel that interviewed the author to teach cinematography in a department of theatre arts, under the Faculty of Arts where she was the Dean, told the author before the other members of the interview panel that 'Films are no publications and can never be equated with publication of a paper in a journal'. It is worth stressing here that this expatriate professor invited the author to produce a documentary film on the circumcision ceremony of the Anaguta people of plateau State of Nigeria six months after the interview. The documentary film was to be used to teach African history in New Zealand. This film was not produced because the professor never thought that there could be any significant financial involvement in the art of film production.

The Filmmakers Association of Nigeria (FAN) is still in its formative stage. It is not yet a strong organization for social action aimed at social policy. The lack of militancy on the part of FAN to exert pressure on the government and to promote collective criticism of the contradictions of exploitative film companies is an impediment to the revolution of the film industry in Nigeria.

Conclusions

If the Nigerian film industry is to develop, there is need for a

fundamental and total examination of the errors we have made in the past. We should think of cinema in terms of history and culture. The cinema must deal with reality and must not help to perpetuate exploitation and deepen the misery of our people. There is need for Nigerian film makers to be artists rather than mere technicians. Their strength and power should come from the people and not from financial profit. Lack of community support is one of the reasons Nigerian film makers have not been able to expose their products to the general public. Nigerian film makers must reply to the negative imagery supplied by foreign films screened in the country by creating counter-images.

The film question in Nigeria requires a radical restructuring that will bring about the true development of the industry. We know that there are bound to be problems in any attempt to revolutionize the film industry because of its conservative and exploitative distribution and exhibition models. If the revolution is well managed, the results would be very progressive and profitable in many ways. The goal of self-reliance can only be achieved by a break with the past. For the desired change to come, the government should co-operate with film makers who have foresight, courage and determination. The problem is a complex one and there is need for a systematic approach in order to enable reason to prevail. To think that cinema can be separated from politics in the Nigerian situation means losing sense of the reality.

Nationalization of the film distribution and exhibition industry in Nigeria would contribute greatly to the development of film industry. This method has worked in Algeria, Brazil, and Burkina Faso and if this is correctly interpreted, it would create the same favourable conditions in Nigeria. Dialogue cannot exist in the absence of the exploiter's interest and faith in the development of film industry in Nigeria. Dialogue is not a vertical relationship but a horizontal relationship in which equality and mutual trust between the participants is the logical consequence. The answer to the question is not negotiation but nationalization because the culture of domination can only be confronted through action.

There is the need to establish a Nigerian national film school, film processing laboratory, and the need for inter-relationship and inter-dependence. The producer must co-operate with the distributor because the distributor needs the product (film) from the producer to distribute to the exhibitor. The Nigerian film censorship board should develop audiences for Nigerian film by artistic control of films and their promotion. Between the spiritual conception and the realization of film, the film must pass through many stages. We have failed to give the necessary opportunity to the Nigerian film maker for self-discovery, self-development and of serving his society as a whole. We have made mistakes and, if we forget these mistakes, then we are bound to make even more mistakes, for film is not a question of profit and maximization of profit but a simple question of life.

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