

EDITORIAL

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Reflections on Nollywood: Introduction to the special issue

The phrase 'Nollywood Studies' has begun to be used unselfconsciously to refer to an established body of work and academic field. This special Nollywood issue of the *Journal of African Cinemas* illustrates the maturing of this field in various ways. The bibliography does so simply by marshalling the troops in their parade uniforms – a mighty phalanx, no longer the rag-tag company of volunteers of just a decade ago. The four essays are different in subject matter and framing, but they all address the place of Nollywood in Nigerian society. Three of them work explicitly (and the fourth perhaps implicitly) with the image and theme of Nollywood as providing a 'mirroring' or 'reflection' of that society. The image leads to various kinds of analytical play with modes of seeing, producing more specific and sophisticated accounts than we have had of Nollywood's position, its connection with its primary audience, its self-conception and its ideological functioning.

John McCall's essay begins with some of the themes that arose inevitably at the beginning of Nollywood studies as it attempted to describe the novel and peculiar nature of the video film industry: Nollywood's basis in (or on the borders of) the 'informal economy', its differences from African celluloid

cinema, and its consequent incompatibility with the criticism developed around that cinema. McCall's account of Nollywood's economic formation as non-capitalist (because it is based in undocumented informality) turns into an argument about why and how Nollywood speaks so effectively to and for the masses: its economic and social organization is the same as theirs, and so they mesh. The theme of invisibility links these concerns. The informal economy is invisible to standard economic analysis; Ousmane Sembene wanted an African cinema that could hold the mirror up to African society, but because of distribution problems, Africans cannot see that mirror ("African film" thrives in Paris and New York, but stalls at the boundaries of the formal economy – unable to find its way home'), and African cinema critics, meanwhile, manage to overlook Nollywood, which is what Africans actually watch because that mass audience sees in the video films a reflection of the world they know, understood in the ways they understand it. McCall's own perspective is mobile; the rapid, elegant forays of his essay range over the downtown Lagos business district and find or follow the ramifications of Nollywood's economy deep in the bush, where a film production resurfaces a road as payment in kind for using village land to construct a set for an historical 'epic' film, and a Mami Wata priestess may make money by providing protection to actresses who play the goddess and are thereby in spiritual danger. (John McCall is the author, we might remember at this point, of 'Madness, money, and movies: Watching Nigerian popular videos with the guidance of a native doctor'.)

Mirrors are associated with Mami Wata and her cult. The surfaces of her mirrors reflect this world but are also portals into the supernatural. ('African television' is the popular term for the calabashes full of water in which diviners and sorcerers see visions in Nollywood movies.) Her mirrors symbolize water, the sea that is her element, and therefore commerce with the foreign and riches – she is the goddess of globalization. The priestess is not concerned that the many films about Mami Wata tend to present her as an evil demon; the films represent her as real and powerful and so add to the prestige of both goddess and priestess. It is a startling perspective, following an alien logic, different from the perspective and logic of a film scholar, as McCall dryly observes, adding a hermeneutical dimension to his materialist argument about the informal economy as the basis of Nollywood's culture. Mami Wata's mirror is different from Ousmane Sembene's. The lesson is: stop talking so glibly about the African masses; try to watch what they watch and see what they see. Only in that way will we understand what binds Nollywood and its primary audience together.

Carmen McCain describes not the meshing of the Nigerian film industry with its audience but the film-makers' self-conscious stance as a separate body, facing their society. The film-makers conceive of themselves (and represent themselves, propagandistically) as a respectable and autonomous profession with a vital social role, exposing vices and abuses, teaching lessons, and modelling good behaviour. McCain approaches the topic through a study of self-reflexive formal features in a number of films. These 'metafictions' arise naturally in a media-saturated society where audio, visual and audio-visual recording devices are ubiquitous and so can serve as potent weapons against secret sin, crime and hypocrisy. The recording devices do not just mirror surfaces, they get beneath them. The metafictions also spring from a society where media celebrities – film stars, musicians, journalists, politicians – are prominent in the social landscape, their presence woven into the texture of daily life. The analysis of these metafictions serves brilliantly to display a

whole range of social attitudes towards the film industry and the industry's responses to what is said about it. The film-makers are bearers of a popular ideology whose twin central tenants are 'mirroring' real life (as if it were simply there and you could simply capture an image of it) and 'teaching a (moral) lesson'. Both these tenants flatten out ideological issues of representation. The metafictional open up these issues.

McCain's essay is rare and therefore unusually valuable because it describes, authoritatively, both Nollywood (centred in Lagos and producing films mostly in English) and 'Kannywood' (the Kano-based, Hausa-language film industry of Northern Nigeria), giving equal time to each. Are Nollywood and Kannywood parts of one film industry or two distinct formations? McCain's gesture of taking them together must be repeated much more often if we are to understand them as one. Her analysis, however, points to a difference and an increasing divergence. Kannywood, in spite of its film magazines and the rest of its apparatus of fandom, is closer to the grassroots and more likely to entertain humility as a virtue. Nollywood, built from the beginning on a star system, is increasingly in the grip of celebrity culture. A segment of Nollywood seems to be pulling away from Nollywood's original broad popular base. This segment is seen clearly in the proliferating films about the tumultuous sexual lives of young urban professionals, in the genre of 'campus films', and in the whole culture around the new multiplex cinemas being built in upscale shopping malls of the major Nigerian cities, where so-called 'New Nollywood' film-makers premier their films before they are released into the market on VCDs. Nollywood celebrities themselves, like the characters they play, live in an increasingly self-contained world with strong class, generational and stylistic boundaries.

Both McCain's focus on the specific professional consciousness of film-makers and her point about the upward mobility of a segment of Nollywood complicate and qualify the simple celebration of Nollywood as the voice of the masses that has been a central theme in, and motive for, Nollywood studies.

Lindsey Green-Simms complicates and qualifies that simple celebration in a different way, by bringing a radical gender studies perspective to bear. In the section of her essay entitled 'The mirror effect' she turns from a notion of the films as reflecting their society or the conditions of their production to one in which the issue is how the films act upon their audiences, what ideological work they do. She finds that the ideology that Nollywood carries and enforces is to a large extent normative and conservative. She is speaking of gender ideology in the first place, and in this context her finding is perhaps not startling. Much of the power and interest of her essay comes from the linkages she establishes between repressive gender ideologies and Nollywood's critique of the manifest political and social failures of the Nigerian state. Anxieties caused by those failures are deflected and taken out on women, especially non-conforming ones. Popular culture, she argues, has taken on the work of enforcing heteronormativity and related gender ideologies that the failed (or, as she nicely and more accurately puts it, 'wizened') state should be doing – this in spite of Nollywood's peculiar skewed relationship to official and formal structures.

Green-Simms' essay is centred on *Beautiful Faces* (2004), directed by Kabat Esosa Egbon (who, coincidentally, is also an important figure in John McCall's essay). I believe hers is the most extended analysis yet published of a single Nollywood film – a skilled exploration of the interplay between contextual, formal, generic, thematic and ideological elements, intended to demonstrate

as a matter of principle the complexity of popular cultural artefacts as well as to illuminate a particular ideological formation. (See also a companion piece to this essay, her study of gay-themed Nollywood films written with Unoma Azuah.) She is careful in her claims about how the film affects its audience(s), and she does not pretend to be giving a complete account of Nollywood's ideology. But she has given us a model of close reading and made a significant intervention in the debate over the socio-political meaning of Nollywood films.

Akin Adesokan's wide-ranging and ambitious essay about the relation between the era of Nigerian celluloid film-making and Nollywood extends Green-Simms's argument about ways in which Nollywood has inherited or picked up the ideological project of the Nigerian state. The basis of celluloid film-making was explicitly tied to the nation state though, as Adesokan notices, this was more true of the ideologies surrounding Nigerian celluloid film production than of the actual practice. (Nigerian television embodied the same nationalist ideology more fully and successfully.) The collapse of celluloid film production and the advent of Nollywood was, and was felt to be, a major rupture, but Adesokan points to important aesthetic as well as other continuities between the forms.

Adesokan's subtle contribution to the writing of the history of Nollywood is especially welcome because so little work of this kind has been done. Little academic work on Nollywood has a historical dimension, and the edifice of scholarship has not been provided with a foundation of the simplest and most obvious historical facts. We do not have reliable, easily accessible figures for the number of films produced, broken down by year and language. We do not have chronologies or timelines that would provide a quick overview of the evolution of the industry, let alone a detailed and comprehensive history created piece by piece through the coordinated efforts of many scholars and students.

The enormous difficulty in obtaining copies of canonical films, or indeed any films more than a few years old, is a fundamental, stunting blockage in the establishment and study of Nollywood film culture. Preserving the films themselves, especially the early ones on perishable VHS tape, is an urgent task. As Adesokan demonstrates, Nollywood cannot be understood apart from its antecedents in Nigerian celluloid film-making and Nigerian television, and the situation in those cases is even more urgent, dire and shocking. Apparently most of the classic television programmes are lost because the tapes they were recorded on were recorded over, thrown out or willfully destroyed. The entire celluloid film heritage has utterly disappeared from view in Nigeria. Tunde Kelani, who has done some research on these matters on his own initiative, says that the iconic films of Hubert Ogunde, founder of the Yoruba travelling theatre tradition, are lost – even the Ogunde family, which holds the rights, no longer has copies of any of them. Kelani hopes copies of Ogunde's films and those of other film-makers may still exist, precariously, in the London laboratories where postproduction work was done. No one knows. Someone should find out.

As I compiled my bibliography of the academic work that has been done on Nigerian and Ghanaian video films I thought frequently of Dr Johnson's definition of a lexicographer as a harmless drudge – thought of it finally with envy, as I discovered it is effectively impossible for a bibliographer to do no harm. Words that are overlooked will not complain or feel slighted, but authors will. And, more conspicuously than dictionaries, bibliographies are outdated by the time they appear. In this particular field, things are moving

very swiftly. I have listed a very few forthcoming works but of course there are many more in the pipeline: I know of half a dozen book projects at various stages of completion, which are doubtless only a fraction of what is out there.

There are entries in English, German, Hausa, French, Yoruba, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian. What is most immediately striking about the bibliography – beyond its sheer bulk, with all that the bulk implies – is the preponderance of Nigerian names. Many of the Nigerian scholars are working outside Nigeria, but Nollywood and Hausa film-making have clearly become entrenched as established topics in Nigerian university life and in such organizations as the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists. The size and strength of the Nigerian university system – 100 universities! – are evident, and so are its resilience, in spite of the severe battering it has taken over the last quarter century, and its social relevance, as the apparatus of this very formal social institution has swung around to address the nation's popular culture. Some of its weaknesses are also detectable. The enormous rate of production without reliable quality control parallels Nollywood itself. No university does well at training students to enter the film industry, and no organized centre of Nollywood studies exists, though a great deal of expertise and wisdom could be assembled at the older universities such as Ibadan, Ife and Port Harcourt, and two of the new universities – Pan-African University in Lagos and Kwara State University in Ilorin – are attempting to establish such centres. On the other hand, there is no major Nigerian university where you cannot find people writing about Nigerian films.

The situation in the Ghanaian universities appears to be utterly different.

I got into working on this bibliography innocently enough, with a paper for a 2007 conference at the University of Illinois organized by Mahir Saul and Ralph Austen in which I vented some opinions about how the field of study of the video films was developing. As I revised the paper for publication it grew; Ralph and Mahir wisely ordained it be cut in half; it continued to expand, spawning sequels like a Nollywood film, and now has three parts: 'What is to be done?: Film studies and Nigerian and Ghanaian videos' and 'A literature review: Nigerian and Ghanaian videos', both published in 2010, and this bibliography, the third, last, concluding, final installment of the project.

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Greek Cinema Texts, Histories, Identities

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