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What Is to Be Done?

Film Studies and Nigerian and Ghanaian Videos

JONATHAN HAYNES

A specter is haunting African film studies—the specter of the West
African video revolution. The production of low-budget feature films on video, which began some twenty years ago in both Ghana and Nigeria, has transformed the audiovisual environment in Africa. The Nigerian video film industry has reached colossal proportions, its films and its example spreading across the African continent and far beyond. Arising as a popular art, the video films at first attracted little attention and less respect from the educated classes, but as their significance has become undeniable, a considerable academic literature about them has come into being. They are the subject of a number of books,¹ and a major focus of others,² with several more books in the works. Special issues of four journals have been wholly or partly devoted to them,³ as well as over three hundred articles in scholarly journals.⁴

In spite of the Leninist title of this chapter, I am not trying to establish a party line—my purpose is to make a few comments on the shape and state of this field of study,⁵ suggest some tasks, and deliver some warnings. The academic literature has been produced on three continents and out of a number of academic disciplines. This double dispersion is responsible for a certain lack of cohesion, a scattering that has impeded its constitution as a field of study with the normal specialization, internal debates, and sharpening of purposes; most of the published articles, for instance, contain only two or three references to other works on the videos. (In the case of studies carried out in West Africa,
the very poor state of research libraries is of course also a major cause of this paucity of references.)

A remarkable, even unique aspect of the emerging study of this emerging major world film culture is the extent to which the foundational work, establishing the phenomenon's overall shape and character, has been done by ethnographers working in the field of anthropology of media. But the most rapidly proliferating articles about the videos are of two overlapping kinds. One has an eclectic, humanities-oriented disciplinary character: it discusses a few films or the general Nollywood phenomenon in light of theoretical concepts or thematic concerns emanating principally from postcolonial and gender studies. The other reads the videos in terms of their representation of, or supposed effects upon, African culture and society. These are the easiest sorts of analysis to produce, in the sense that they do not depend on extensive prior background, the ability to travel to do fieldwork, access to a comprehensive selection of films, and so on. Such are the conditions under which most of us work, and as the collectively generated description of the video phenomenon becomes more extensive, solid, and dependable, the need for direct personal experience is lessened.

The quality of this sort of article ranges from brilliantly illuminating to perfectly useless. The less satisfactory cases usually suffer from lack of context: there is little reference to the body of work that has been done in this field of study, as I have already complained, and such an article deals with only a couple of films, plucked as if at random from the flood. There is no attempt to situate the films, explaining and justifying their selection and their representative character. Little or nothing is done to define the relevant mediations, in order to give a sense of the history, shape, and texture of the immediate situation from which they come. I find it particularly disappointing when West African academics write this sort of thing, failing to bring their local knowledge into play. We need many more studies of the videos as prolongations, or possibly betrayals, of specific cultural traditions, as interventions in specific local debates or histories.

Film studies, as a discipline, has not yet been brought to bear with full force on the videos. One reason for this is that film studies has shallow roots in the Nigerian and Ghanaian university systems and has suffered perhaps disproportionately from the severe erosion of the universities since the 1980s (or earlier, in the case of Ghana). Another is that the video films, because of their format and their low budgets, have been shut out of the institutions of (celluloid) "international cinema," as constituted by the international festival circuit, international art cinema houses, and international film distributors, and even shut out of the "African cinema" subset of those institutions, as constituted by FESPACO, ArtMatran, California Newsreel, and so on.
What Is to Be Done?

In the introduction to the American edition of *Nigerian Video Films*, I pointed out that the videos did not mesh well with the desires and ideologies that underlie the constituted study of African cinema. I do not want to repeat myself, though I think my points remain largely true. Lately some notice has been taken of Nollywood in these institutional contexts, but still only in marginal forms: there are screenings at festivals, but outside of competition, festival audiences or students are treated to documentaries about Nollywood made by foreigners, but not to Nollywood films themselves. The consequence of all this is that the African videos have only recently begun to appear on the horizons of the international community of film scholars, who are in general bemused at how to approach these films that are so different from what they are used to.

It is time to roll out the full disciplinary apparatus of film studies and apply it to the video films. We have made a good start on the project of defining the particular and peculiar mode of existence of the video films, that which makes them different from other film cultures. But we have hardly begun the work of describing them in the normal ways applied to other film cultures. Naturally our apparatus must be scrutinized critically and adjusted to the object of knowledge—I do not mean we should impose some foreign normality. I mean simply that the videos have, for instance, formal properties, and people who know how to talk about such things should get to work on them. The development of three standard categories of film studies is discussed here: auteurism, film history, and genre.

Auteurism

In the academic literature on celluloid African cinema, the primary method of categorization is by individual director, with numerous studies devoted to the work—let’s say it in French, the *œuvre*—of various major figures, defining the shape of their imaginations through an analysis of their characteristic themes, styles, forms, and ideologies. Almost no such academic studies have been written about Nigerian or Ghanaian filmmakers, though some interviews with directors have been published in academic contexts. Studies of production structures often feature a single filmmaker, but the intent is normally to take him or her as typical rather than as a unique creative individual. Most articles discuss several films by different hands, with no accretion of meaning around the filmmaker’s name.

In the video industry itself and its attendant journalism, on the other hand, directors are important as brand names, secondary only to the star system and perhaps the brand names of major marketers in selling films. The more important directors enjoy celebrity status, and some of them carry honorific
nicknames, as Nigerian popular musicians often do: Chico “Mr. Prolific” Ejio, Lancelot “De Guv’nor” Imasuen, and so on. The processes of canon formation are well under way, with considerable agreement about who the major figures are, a consensus mirrored in the academic literature. In some cases (Wil-lie Akuffo in Ghana, Kenneth Nnebue in Nigeria), full recognition of their historical importance continues to be accorded to people who are no longer dominant forces in the marketplace.

The dearth of academic studies of individual filmmakers is partly to be explained by the relative aesthetic weakness of the videos in general in the eyes of those who are used to thinking about international cinema. There is no immediate realistic prospect of establishing a canon of video masterpieces and canonical directors that will command the world’s aesthetic admiration and take their places alongside Bergman, Fellini, and Sembene. Tunde Kelani is the one serious contender for such status, as the number of retrospectives of his work at international film festivals suggests.¹¹

In Western humanities circles, attacks on the notion of authorship over the last decades have reduced the prestige of auteurist film criticism. On the other hand, as James Naremore points out, poststructuralist theory has not eliminated the importance of directors in American cinema, where they are major commercial forces in Hollywood and are the organizing category in the American independent film world, as they are in European art cinema. Naremore makes two other relevant points: that recent theories that stress the rich complexity of the concrete are an invitation to see individual filmmakers in that light, as sites where multiple contingencies meet; and that the passion of French male intellectuals to destroy the figure of the author will likely not be shared by those who have not historically had privileges that they are now eager to shed, such as women and people from submerged cultures, who need to have and to celebrate their champions.¹²

This last point intersects the movement in the African art world to recover and emphasize the individual agency of African artists, who have tended to be relegated to the anonymity of the “folk” by Western collectors.¹³ I am afraid that the academic literature on the videos risks being accused of perpetuating such condescending methods, attitudes, and assumptions, as it typically identifies films by bare title alone, as if the films’ creators had no intellectual property rights that need to be recognized and respected, and as if other scholars were not owed the information that would help them find the films and verify the claims made about them. One elementary step we can take to get on the right side of this issue is to decide collectively not to accept any critical work that does not cite films adequately, in accordance with normal professional protocols.
I am not suggesting that we simply and uncritically import Western bourgeois notions of individualism and individual creativity, either in general or in the form of the figure of the film artist as developed by European or American auteurist critics. (But maybe it is worth pointing out that until the French auteurist critics came along, in the 1950s, the situation in Hollywood was much like it is in Nigeria and Ghana today: a few top directors had celebrity status, but most labored in relative anonymity, submerged in the production line of the studios, and no one thought to attribute a distinctive vision or sensibility to them.) The creative agency of African popular artists depend on their particular situations, which need to be described from the ground up in many case studies. The point of individual case studies is not only to differentiate African popular artists from their foreign, un-"popular" counterparts, but also to produce a more differentiated notion of what it means to be an African popular artist. That phrase may in fact have declining utility after it prevents us from importing improper paradigms. We will not know what can be said about the video directors—and, I may add, producers, whose shaping role also needs to be studied—until we try.

I tried, writing a recently published formal and thematic analysis of the films of Kenneth Nnebue. I thought this would be easy, as I was working from a large mound of accumulated notes. But it was surprisingly difficult. I constantly felt myself to be on spongy ground as I tried to make claims about Nnebue's originality and his personal accomplishments, because those claims depended on a reliable, detailed general history that does not exist.

**Film History and Preservation**

Preserving and writing the history of the videos is the most urgent task before us. Nollywood is too big to ever die: it is the third biggest film industry in the world, as we like to keep repeating, and it will eventually be seen as one of the world's major film cultures. The story of its beginnings ought to be told with an appropriate level of depth, detail, and accuracy. One hopes that Nollywood will evolve into dazzling glory impossible to imagine at present, but the remarkable extent to which it holds on to and repeats themes, stories, and aesthetics suggests that a lot that will remain fundamental was laid down at or near the very beginning, that some of the early works will remain as classics, and that whatever the future of film in Nigeria turns out to be, it will be recognizable as an extension of what has already been created. To an extraordinary degree, Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* (1992), the film that started the Nigerian video boom, contains the seeds of almost everything that followed.

The early films were shot and distributed on videotape, and all this videotape from the early 1990s is due to disintegrate. *Living in Bondage* and a few other
classic early films have been digitized and released in Nigeria on VCDs by
the South African media company Nu Metro, where they continue to sell—a
touching measure of respect. Online retailers carry a smattering of older films.
Film star Emeka Ani has a shop in Lagos with a few shelves of old films, sold
at premium prices.

But these are feeble efforts to counter the inexorable chemical processes of
destruction, the weekly flood of new films that washes almost all the previous
week’s releases into oblivion, and the structure of this huge industry as an ag-
gregation of myriad tiny, relatively impoverished, and in many cases fleeting
producers, who often do not have the resources or perhaps even the interest to
preserve their own histories. The Nigerian Film Corporation opened an archi-
val facility for celluloid films in 1992 but has never built up a collection of videos.
The one comprehensive archive of Nigerian videos is that of Nigeria’s National
Film and Video Censors Board, which keeps a copy of every film submitted
to it for classification. The Censors Board has begun a project to digitalize the
older films now on VHS tape; the director general, Emeka Mba, envisions ult-
imately putting the whole archive of films online so they would be available
to researchers, with appropriate royalties paid to the producers. This would be
the perfect solution, and we must fervently hope it is brought to fruition.

In the meantime, as far as I know, Northwestern University’s library has the
largest academic holding of Nigerian films in its Africana Video Collection,
some properly catalogued, some listed as television, with bare titles, but the
films seem selected more or less at random. It would certainly not be possible
to write a history of Nollywood on this basis. Nigerian fans in North America
and Europe as well as in Nigeria sometimes have caches of hundreds of films,
but it takes foraging to find them. Sylvester Ogbechie has been setting up
linkages to acquire new films for a collection that will be under the auspices of
the Nollywood Foundation in Los Angeles. Academic institutions should set
up such mechanisms and acquire copies of essential older films from producers
in order to build up usable study collections. Obviously, it would make sense if
these tasks were taken on by a consortium of research libraries.

As for written records, the Nigerian National Film and Video Censors
Board’s Directory is an indispensable, nearly complete index of the films that are
produced in Nigeria. Unfortunately there is no such thing for Ghana, where
the censors board has lapsed into inactivity and other records are fragmentary.
For the early period of Ghanaian video production, the surveys by Africamus
Aveh and Esi Sutherland-Addy are very useful resources, as they provide an
indication of major themes. There are substantial archives of newspaper
accounts and undergraduate and graduate theses produced in Nigerian and
Ghanaian universities to be mined.
Those archives, however, are not an adequate basis for producing careful, synthetic accounts of the early days of the industry and its development. Extensive interviewing is obviously necessary, and the time for it is now. Memories decay, people disperse, and they die. Nollywood is a young person's business: almost everyone is under the age of forty (a fact that is obscured by the canonization of major figures, many of whom were founders of the industry fifteen years ago), and this pervasive youth and rapid turnover of personnel weakens institutional memory. There are ethnic rivalries on top of the normal sources of distortion and tendentiousness in a business where it is difficult to function without an enormous ego, so every fact and interpretation needs to be triple sourced. We need many specialized studies; it is probably not yet possible to produce one definitive history of the whole phenomenon with all its branches (Nigerian video production includes not only English-language “Nollywood” films, but also important Yoruba and Hausa industries). It is difficult to swoop in to write history. People on the ground, particularly graduate students and journalists, will doubtless do much of the necessary work. They should be encouraged with grants and scholarships.

When trying to write about Nnebue as a founder of the video boom, I was frustrated by the lack of accounts of the antecedent forms that shaped the videos. The great exception is the Yoruba traveling-theater tradition, which is perhaps the most brilliantly researched and interpreted of all topics in African popular culture; the Yoruba theater tradition has been followed into its reincarnations on television and film, and on video film. But the English-language television serials of the 1970s and 1980s, which are even more important to the development of Nollywood, are much less well documented, and have not been extensively discussed in the thematic, formal, and social dimensions that are crucial to the study of the videos. There are obstacles to doing the necessary research: Tunde Kelani comments that he himself does not have access to all the television programs and early celluloid films he shot, because the structures supporting those media have disappeared. Similar practical reasons are doubtless responsible for the fact that, for instance, in a book that tries to give a full picture of the manifold dimensions of Ken Saro-Wiwa's life, there is a chapter on his Basi books for children, but nothing at all on the 150 episodes Saro-Wiwa wrote for the television serial Basi and Company, which was much better known and more influential, indeed the major contribution to Nigerian culture by which Saro-Wiwa was known to his countrymen. I am not sure what materials are available for constructing the needed histories, but one important element is people's memories, and these certainly still exist. But they are not immortal.

When asked where the stories of Living in Bondage and his other films came from, Nnebue says he was listening to the stories that people around him
were telling and he was reading the newspapers. Rumor, particularly rumors of witchcraft and the way they spill over into the press, have become topics of very interesting research, but we need studies of urban oral traditions (and of their reciprocal relationships with print and other media) focused where they will do us the most good.

Parallels also can and should be drawn with popular fiction. Comparisons between the videos and the Onitsha market literature—the only comparable explosion of African popular narrative culture—have been made fairly frequently but not in the substantial form needed. A closer model is the fiction of Cyprian Ekwensi, whose relationship to the videos would be a fine topic for a PhD dissertation. Ekwensi’s work is only one example of a very large corpus of popular fiction published in Nigeria. The academic dramatic tradition has also become relevant since many of the creative people involved in the film industry now are graduates of university theater arts departments.

**Genre**

Genre is an indispensable tool for dealing with the staggering number of films being produced. As everyone notices, there is an enormous amount of repetition in the videos, and a general straightforwardness about meeting generic expectations. There is not time, in the process of script development or the rehearsing of actors, for anything else, and anything else makes a film harder to sell to the marketers. At the same time, genres are mixed together promiscuously. In Bollywood, an enormous percentage of films are direct remakes of specific Hollywood or previous Bollywood films, and the Hausa film industry also has this habit. Such direct imitation happens in the Nollywood and the Ghanaian film industries, but it is not their common practice. Instead, they have their own characteristic procedures for exhaustively ringing the changes on any new theme or genre that is introduced, procedures that need better critical definition.

Genre is a particularly messy branch of the critical arts. Generative models of genre are doubtless better than the attempt to erect a stable taxonomy, a set of pigeonholes into which any given film can be stuck. But it is hard to function without a working taxonomy. An obvious project would be to create an annotated list of genre terms in use in Nigeria and Ghana, in all languages, and an analysis of implicit and explicit genre concepts at work. But that will carry us only so far. Strangely, genre systems seem to work fine even if people do not think of them in a conscious, let alone theoretical, way. In the case of Hollywood, the western and gangster film genres were established early in the twentieth century, but film criticism did not begin to turn its attention toward genre until the 1970s. A few pioneering earlier essays were written by people, such as André Bazin and Susan Sontag, who were removed about as far as it is
conceivable to be from the actual original mechanisms and mentalities of the
film industry."

Certainly the people setting out films on the shelves of African street stalls
seem comfortable with jumble. The people selling Nigerian and Ghanaian
videos on the Internet for the most part simply adopt Blockbuster's categories—
drama, romance, horror, and the rest—with a few additions such as Christian,
cultural, and Yoruba. They then shovel films into these categories with remark-
able carelessness. I do not have space here for commentary on each of these
terms and the extent to which the foreign categories fit the films listed under
them, and I am not going to propose a better system of generic categorization
either. I simply want to warn against letting imported generic categories leak
into academic criticism without proper vetting. Partial or apparent familiarity
can be especially treacherous.

Elsewhere I have made use of Wendy Griswold's observation that Nigerian
crime fiction is not built on the standard basis of Western crime fiction, which
is the process of rational, deductive inquiry by a detective.32 In Nigerian novels,
reason is routinely baffled.32 Equally, or even more strikingly, while crime is a
major element in Nollywood films, the police procedural—the staple of Ameri-
can prime-time television—has hardly taken root at all. Nollywood predomin-
antly presents crime in two other lights, often in both simultaneously: in the
light of melodrama, as the extreme form of emotional conflict among intimates,
and therefore as something to be resolved through emotional means; and in the
light of the supernatural. Criminals are often armed with spiritual powers, as in
the vigilante films, or are engaged in money rituals, and must be countered on
that level. Even when the criminals are not active on the spiritual level, there is a
deep tendency to seek insight into and relief from painful catastrophes through
spiritual means, whether through a diviner or a Christian pastor.

The horror film genre is one of the Blockbuster categories used on Nigerian
movie Web sites and has also been employed by some academic critics, particu-
larly Tobias Wendt.34 The prevalence of the supernatural in the videos, as well
as much of its phenomenology, makes this a natural idea, further encouraged by
the more general affinities of the West African videos with the American horror
genre's traditional low-budget trashiness, low status, and exploitative, sensa-
tionalistic camerawork. There is an undeniable influence: Willy Akuffo told
Wendt, and repeated to me, that his Diabolo, one of the founding films of the
Ghanaian video boom, was inspired by American Werewolf in London (1981).35
But the relationship can be overstated and misleading, as Onookome Okome
has pointed out.36 The money ritual theme, which provides the horrific element
in Diabolo (1991), has deep roots in West African culture and in antecedent
popular cultural forms.37 Again, the premise of reason underlies the American
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genre but is largely absent in the West African films. The horror genre is one of the few contemporary Western genres that give refuge to the uncanny/occult/supernatural (or at least this was true until recently, when these elements have washed right across network television’s prime-time lineups as well as Hollywood films), whereas the supernatural is everywhere in West African films.

In American occult horror films, the opening up of the occult realm, the conquering by Black Magic of the ordinary reality underwritten by White Science, is a long and dramatic process and this process is fundamental to their structure, as Carol Clover points out; and “the portals of occult horror are almost invariably women” because of women’s alleged association with the irrational.88 Neither of these things is true of Ghanaian and Nigerian videos, where access to the occult is generally rather easy, natural, and constant, or at least unsurprising, and a majority (though by no means all) of the professionals involved are men. The Yoruba cosmos, to take just one example, is full of supernatural beings and forces that constantly penetrate the human world, but it makes no sense to describe the classic, hieratic celluloid films of Hubert Ogunde (Aiye, Jaiyesimi, Aropin N’Tenia, and Ayanmo), from which so many videos stem, as horror films, in spite of all their witches. This is not to deny that there are many videos that convey terror of the occult, and many that are more interested in exploiting gruesomeness than in conveying a religious world view—there certainly are. But we need to tease out the mixture of elements in particular films and be careful with our labeling.

John McCall reports,

At the last ASA [African Studies Association meeting] I was told by a seasoned cinema scholar that it had “already been well established” (based on studies of American popular film) that “action films” representing vigilante (or rogue cop) resistance to corruption are merely epiphenomenal engines of false consciousness that reinforce rather than challenge the status quo. This scholar was convinced that this “truth” was universal enough to dismiss the political import of Hollywood action films without having to consider particular examples or take into account political differences in the USA and Nigeria or, for that matter, Hollywood and Nollywood.89

My general point is to call for cultural humility and inductive procedures in approaching video film genres. We need to establish what they mean and what to call them; we cannot assume we already know.

∗

You will have noticed, dear readers, that most of what I am calling for is hard work. It may also be underrewarded work, at least in the short term, in that
What Is to Be Done?

what the field needs in order to develop and solidify—patient, detailed, specialized work, coordinated with that of others in our field, as well as freewheeling theory—may seem obscure to decision makers at university presses and on thesis and tenure committees.

However, we can suffer such slights—those of us with tenure can even remain cheerful—in the certainty that history is on our side. Eight years ago I began the introduction to the American edition of Nigerian Video Films by remarking that while in Nigeria one could get into a conversation about the videos on any bus, upon deplaning in New York they became an extraordinarily obscure academic specialization. Now when I walk from my office in Brooklyn to the train station, I pass five shops selling Nollywood films. When I asked my students, at the first meeting of an African film course, what African films if any they had seen, it was Blood Sister (2003) that was the subject of excited discussion. Some knew of its star, Genevieve Nnaji; no one had heard of Souleymane Cissé. This is where we are today. There is a very high level of curiosity about the videos in academic circles and beyond, which will eventually—soon, I expect—translate itself into appropriate institutional support for serious study. The videos are so fundamental to Africa’s self-representation that it is impossible to understand contemporary Africa and its place in the world without taking them into account.

Notes


What Is to Be Done?


8. For example, Adamu, Transglobal Media Flows.


11. Kelani’s films that have received significant international exposure include Saworoide (Yoruba, Nigeria, Mainframe, 1999); Thunderbolt (English, Nigeria, Mainframe, 2000, distr. in United States by California Newsreel); Ajobe Eruow (Yoruba, Nigeria, Mainframe, 2002); The Campus Queen (English, Nigeria, Mainframe, 2003). For a brilliantly developed contrast between Kelani’s auteurist control of the film medium and the collective improvisational acting style in films that descend from the Yoruba traveling theater tradition, see Akin Adesokan, “Practicing ‘Democracy’ in Nigerian Films,” African Affairs 108, no. 433 (2009): 599–619.


33. Griswold, Bearing Witness.


37. Barber, “Popular Reactions.”
