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Nollywood Films' Depiction of the Nigerian Society: A Reflection or Distortion of Reality?

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Abstract

The Nigerian video film industry has been criticized on various bases, one of which is the myth that its cinematic productions insidiously tarnish the image of Nigeria on the international scene. Related to this criticism is the claim that these Nollywood films are over-exaggerated stories that ultimately distort Nigeria's socio-cultural reality and mislead foreign audiences making them to see Nigeria in a bad light. Although true to a category of Nollywood films, this reading must be nuanced for at least two reasons: first, reality is a complex concept that may, in some contexts, even be very elusive; second, films are theoretically speaking a window into their society of origin. Although make-believe, they have elements of reality. All may depend on the Nollywood film critic or audience's definition of reality. In this conceptual paper, a systematic review of secondary sources and critical observations are used to examine how Nigerian films' ability to reflect or distort Nigerian socio-political reality is fueling the social debate on Nollywood's contribution to the Nigerian image crisis. First, the paper discusses the ability of filmic representations to reflect the reality of countries. Second, it examines the extent to which Nollywood films' depictions of Nigeria can be said to be true or false.

Keywords: Nigerian Image Crisis, Nollywood Film Industry, Reality, Media Literacy, Cinematic Representation, Perception

Introduction

Critics and commentators tax Nollywood films with misrepresenting Nigeria and aggravating the Nigerian image crisis (Aluko &Odu, 2022; Davies & Nsereka, 2020; Endong, 2018; Udomisor & Sonuga, 2012). Related to this negative criticism is the claim that Nollywood films are mostly over exaggerated scripts, which ultimately distort Nigerian reality and mislead foreign audiences, particularly those who have never set their feet on Nigerian soil or have low media literacy. Although true to the category of Nollywood films, this criticism must be nuanced for at least two reasons. First, reality is a complex concept that may be elusive in some contexts. Second, films are, theoretically, a window into their respective societies of origin. Despite their being make-believe, they do have elements of reality. All of this may depend on the definition that the beholder gives to reality.

Cinema is popularly considered the most mimetic of all forms of visual culture because it is more representative of reality. In tandem with this, McGregor (2018) notes that films replicate rather than represent reality. By integrating images, motion, and sound, they are a near perfect simulacrum. They internalize reality in certain ways. Gunning (2007) even puts it a more beautiful way. He contends that film's most significant attraction and seduction lie in the fact that "by capturing images in time, it seems not simply to represent things but to make them present. Because of this ability to, in the words of one theorist, 'mummify time,' some early audiences [saw] cinema as a defense against death" (p.119). Thus, although certain schools of thought defend the idea that films are merely make-believe, movies always have some elements of reality.

In line with the above, Nollywood films' ability to reflect Nigerian socio-political and cultural experiences has been subject to controversy. Various schools have sought to pontificate on it, thereby contributing to the social discourse on the role of Nollywood films in the Nigerian image crisis. While some schools

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of thought claim that Nollywood films distort Nigeria's social and political reality, others support the contrary, advancing the idea that Nigerian movies' representation of Nigeria is a vivid reflection of reality.

This paper uses secondary sources to examine how Nigerian films' ability to reflect or distort Nigerian socio-political reality is fueling the social debate on Nollywood's contribution to the Nigerian image crisis. The paper seeks answers to three research questions: How is reality defined in the context of filmmaking? How do film representations reflect reality? To what extent do Nollywood movies reflect Nigerian cultural and political situations? Following the above research questions, this article is divided into two main parts. First, it defines reality in the context of filmmaking and discusses the ability of film representations to reflect the reality of countries. Second, it examines the extent to which Nollywood's depiction of Nigeria could be said to be accurate, false, or close to the country's reality.

This paper describes the nature of Nollywood films as image makers for Nigeria as well as a representation of life in Nigeria, which is subject to controversy. The paper hinges on two principal data collection methods: documentary analysis and critical observations. The documentary analysis consisted of drawing insights from various sources and documents. These sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, working papers, institutional reports, newspaper articles, official government texts, encyclopedias, and online content. Similarly, critical observations (using the senses to collect data) helped gather relevant information for the study. This information was used to buttress different points made in the paper to attain the three main objectives of the paper. These objectives were to 1) define reality in the context of filmmaking, 2) discuss the ability of filmic representations to reflect reality about countries, and 3) examine the extent to which Nollywood's depiction of Nigeria could be said to be true, false, or close to the country's socio-political and economic realities.

Cinema Representation and Reality about Countries: A Conceptual and Theoretical Exploration

This section delves into two things: it defines reality in the context of filmmaking and examines, in theory, a film's ability to represent reality about countries.

Defining Cinematic Realism

From many profane people's perspectives, cinematic narrative reflects society in various complex ways and represents reality to a high degree. This cinematic reality becomes more plausible when it is replicated and propagated by diverse cinematic voices (i.e., films produced both endogenously and exogenously). As Tari (2016) insightfully observes, some of the ideas and knowledge audiences have about different parts of the world and their inhabitants emanate from the cultural formations of representation as they have evolved over the years and are reinforced daily; hence through these cultural representations of the "other," they are "entirely knowable and visible" (Tari, 2016, p.9). According to the adepts of the cultivation theory, heavy exposure to films generally has great potential to shape audiences' perceptions about issues and people/cultures represented in them. Persistent exposure to film makes audiences view cinema's portrayal reality as a perfect representation of the real world. As the famous maxim goes, films have immense power to sway the hearts and minds of people.

Popular myths suggesting an inherent realism in filmic representations/framing of issues are seemingly connected with two facts: the first is the belief that most filmmakers tap to a relatively high degree into popular mythic narratives existing in their society to construct a cinematic text that is realistic. Second, the images that appear within a camera *obscura* are mostly indexical to the nature of the images the audience sees in their quotidian experiences. This position perfectly validates popular imaginations that cinema is a complete representation of reality and the reconstruction of "a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color,

and relief" (Bazin, 2003). Botz-Borstein (2016) further canvasses a link between filmic text and reality. He remarks that:

> Films are similar to dreams and much of what the philosophical tradition has said about the "reality of the outer world" and its sceptical evaluation can be demonstrated through reflections on film. [...] The distinction between appearance (that is, dream and *poiesis*) and reality has been on the agenda of film theory for almost eighty years. The "reality and dream" problem is not limited to the subjectivist approach that perceives film as a manifestation of fantasies and hallucinations. However "realists" [...] have classified film as real, because film is able to capture an authentic reality independent of human subjectivity. [...] Film is not [...] a thesis about the world; rather it *presents* the world. (p.134)

It would, however, be expedient here to signal that the above position only reflects the neo-realist movement's assumptions and approach in cinema. This socio-cultural movement that sprang up in Italy during and after World War I religiously advocates realism as an essential style in cinema. The movement hinges on the assumption that cinema does not reside in action but "in contemplation, in respecting a life lived rather than a plot mechanized, with characters ciphers to it" (McKibbin 2016, p.2). Realism in the context of the neo-realist movement excludes the tradition of relying on phenomena such as heavy plot expositions, suspect sets, and impressive theatrical acting. Instead, realism is defined by variables that are purely naturalistic. As explained by Bazin (2003), "the narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important, for their ontological equality destroys drama at its very basis" (p.236). The popular conceptions of realism in contemporary cinema are, of course, different from those of the neo-realist movement, as highlighted by Bazin.

Contemporary cinema is popularly envisaged as a microcosm of the social, political, economic, and cultural life of a nation and the contested site where meanings are (re) negotiated, traditions (re)made, and identities affirmed or rejected (Bhoopaty,2003). Films restitute a version of reality or a kind of "engineered" reality. However, a film's credibility is often determined by the level to which it is "realistic." This position can be illustrated by the way images are used in the cinematic experience. In effect, cinematic images are often made to depict or "represent realities." However, they are not realities. In line with this, Todd (2003) remarks that with sufficient media literacy, audiences usually know the difference between film reality and social reality. If film images depict an environment we have visited or remind us of an experience we once had or something we could imagine as happening, we describe it as *realistic*. However, this is still not "real" (Todd 2003). Thus, Todd regards film images as constituting an almost real phenomenon. However, despite the almost-real nature of filmic representations, audiences often expect cinematic images to heighten real-life situations. They expect cinematic images/texts "to intensify and focus it [reality] by being better than the real, more vivid, more stark, more *something."* Audiences want "a burst of feeling, a frisson or commiseration, a flash of delight, a moment of recognition" (Todd 2003, p.23). This postulation is ideally in tune with the popular belief that realism in a film should be determined in relation to audience expectations and the scale of judgment.

As online tabloid *TV Tropes* (2015) insightfully argues, cinematic realism is determined or judged according to audiences' standards. This is for three reasons: First, no one can say exactly what is in the mind of a film director (filmmaker).Neither can a person describe the complex process that leads to the generation of his/her ideas (those represented by the filmmaker). Second, there are situations in which the filmmaker has their facts wrong and accidentally/innocuously commits the "sin" of distorting reality. Third, some film scripts are simply hybrids, allowing both positivist/ naturalist and supernatural features to cohabit. Based on the probabilities mentioned above, it

is always more plausible to determine or judge realism in a film in relation to natural laws, general conditions, and real-life possibilities. Therefore, realism is preferably judged by audiences' standards.

Film's Ability to Represent Reality about Countries

As highlighted in the previous sections of this essay, filmmakers have been exploiting film audiences' expectations to "fabricate" a form of social reality through the agency of representation. Their representations of "social" reality – notably about nations, people, countries, cultural identities and the like - have mostly hinged on popular (and sometimes arguable) stereotypes, myths, and archetypes encapsulated in what is commonly called "global truths and realities." Many film producers and directors have thus explored the so-called global truths and realities (general perceptions) in their portrayal of countries and cultures in their constructions of the image of specific countries. Meanwhile, as Crompton (1976) insightfully observed, such "global truths and realities" may not always be factual but pure imaginations and objectionable stereotypes about people or nations that have survived centuries. Therefore, to fairly discuss realism in cinema with respect to representing a country, nation, or person, there is a need to highlight and differentiate three types of movies: iconic films, pastiche films, and tourist poster films.

In the cinematic experience category, iconic films present a global image of a given country or community, capturing its most representative cultural features. Iconic movies are rooted in their makers' profound and fair knowledge of the country, its people, and its core cultural values or features. Undoubtedly, iconic films are generally or ideally produced by endogenous film industries/initiatives; that is, people from the country/community being depicted. This is because exogenous film industries often tend to distort the realities of a country because their producers/makers rely on poorly researched facts and imaginations about the country. In tandem with this, Alawode and Uduakobong (2013) concede that "the people of the milieu" [indigenous film initiatives] are the one better placed to "put forth actual representations and portrayals with defined objectives without bias, exaggerations, misrepresentation and/or under-representation" (p.110).

Tari (2016) shares corollaries in her assessment and censuring Hollywood or Western cinema's representation of Africa and its women. She argues that Western film directors have developed the practice of conveying stereotypical portrayals of Africa and African women. In tandem with this, most Hollywood movies have portrayed Africa as a continent that has been seriously brutalized by civil or inter-state wars, famine, poverty, malaria, HIV/AIDS, and other dreadful/deadly pandemics. Black African women have, in the same process, been mainly represented as the most miserable social force of the Third World. They have mostly been erroneously portrayed by exogenous filmmakers as a marginalized group, who are subjected to over-childbearing, misery, domestic violence, genital mutilation, and intense/crude agricultural activities.

Additionally, Hollywood films have mainly presented Africa as a site of primitivism and sometimes backwardness, not sufficiently focusing on Black African efforts toward reconstruction, modernization, and philosophical and technological advancement. On their part, iconic films depart from the misleading representations and distortions of reality mentioned above by Tari (2016). It is based on this premise that they (the iconic movies) are popularly considered an objective typology of film experiences, capable of presenting a fair image of a destination to tourists desirous of visiting, investing, or doing a related business in a country. As Mestre and Stanishevski (2010) succinctly put it, iconic films give an objective and authentic identity signal that is sufficient to resemble the society, country, or community depicted and inform the viewer who may decide to choose it as a tourist destination.

Pastiche films, on the other hand, are somewhat opposed to iconic films. They are pure and subtle distortions of reality, given that they integrate a false cultural identity and a host of stereotypes (Dyer, 2007; Gunning, 2007). Most commercial movies fall within this category, given their combination of a broad and flexible mix of aesthetic variables, mixed locations, music, scene designs, and montage. Despite the gross distortions, they remain informative to some extent. As Pruseviciute (2014) argues, though not as objective as iconic films, they enable – or are susceptible to help – the audiences to rethink, screen, or triangulate the knowledge and imaginations they have about the country or the people being depicted (in the film), while compelling the viewers to enhance the stereotypes they previously held concerning the country or culture in question. Such films (pastiche films) will naturally influence those who are less informed about the country more significantly. Such uninformed or less informed moviegoers often have their imaginations and curiosity aroused by these overworked and stylized cinematic images.

Tourist poster films are a third category of films that can be examined in relation to realism. These films are conceived to portray the beauty and exotic charm of a tourist destination as well as the daily life touristic experience of specific characters within them (the films) (Cardoso et al., 2017; Sue, 2010). A particularity of this category of film experiences is their emphasis on traveling and discovering a mysterious and legendary city, culture, or community. Tourist poster films hope to serve as a virtual representation of a country for audiences based in foreign lands (potential tourists) to appreciate the beauty of a given country or culture. Thus, they serve as sources of information about some parts of the country that they depict. They equally enable uninformed audiences to familiarize themselves with these locations, which may be potential tourist destinations, thereby reducing the uncertainties associated with traveling to unknown destinations. Therefore, this category of films serves as destination advertisements and can be utilized in national branding campaigns.

Whether iconic, pastiche, or tourist posters, the film experience remains a constructed or "cooked" reality. It is a phenomenon whose truth value lies in the degree to which it is in line with the natural laws and possibilities in real-life situations. It is also important to mention that the truth value of any filmic representation depends on audiences' respective film experiences. As we all know, each person has his/her (personal) film experience. Based on this premise, what is defined as true for one pocket of the general audience may not be true for the others. In effect, experience varies from one person (and perhaps a community) to the other, due to differences in socio-cultural backgrounds, educational, religious, ideological, or professional affiliations, and orientations among other factors. Based on this premise, O'Sulivanet al. (1996) contended that interpreting or reading a (media) text, notably a film, will theoretically depend on the audience or reader's experience. In their language, "we must pay deference to experience, whether our own or that of a group we wish to study and understand. And any arguments about the 'true significance' or 'quality' of a given text (factual or fictional, analytic or 'creative') are centered on whether or not it is 'faithful' to 'authentic' experience" (O'Sullivanet al. 1996, p.87). In tandem with this, it may be safe to argue that one's personal experience and motivation will determine his/her reading and appreciation of a particular media text (notably film).Therefore, the film experience and audiences' reception of cinematic "reality" will vary from one person to the other. Williams, cited by McKibbin (2016) beautifully shares corollaries as he asks the following rhetorical question: "is one man's realism not another man's contrivance?" (p.1).

The lack of sufficient media literacy has caused some audiences to hastily interpret films as a reality. This trend has often been evidenced by the fact that overexcited audiences have often understood actors' performance (in an on-set context) as a true reflection of themselves (in

an off-set context); that is, they – the audiences – tend to see actors as acting their authentic selves. In line with this, some actors have gained the unconditional sympathy and admiration of particular audiences (just because of the positive role they played or used to play in films).At the same time, some of their colleagues have attracted the wanton and pertinacious hostility and despise of audiences (because of their role as antagonists or villains in specific films). This has in some extreme instances, led to violent attacks and molestations of some unloved actors (Alawode 2013; Akande 2012). Alawode (2013) opined that this particular trend illustrates how dramatic and problematic the conception of reality (as perceived by the audience) can be in cinema discourse. Taking Nollywood as a case study, he contends that the fact that certain audiences empathize with positive actors (off set) while putting forth profound antipathy or hostility against their counterparts who play villain roles in films clearly implies that the cinema viewers do not always dissociate the actors' personalities from the real persons. In other words, audiences often find it impossible to dissociate the film reality from real-life situations. And based on this possible reaction from the audience, it appears pertinent to ask several thought-provoking questions: "how would the viewers, especially foreigners and nationals react to Nigeria and its people in view of the portrayals and representations they see in the [Nollywood] home videos? Further questions this brings to bear are – how does the home video serve as the nation's image maker?" (Alawode 2013, p.111). The following sections of this paper address this question.

Nollywood as a Reflection (or Deformation) of Nigeria

This section addresses two concurrent positions related to the debate on the role of Nollywood films in the Nigerian image crisis. These positions include Nollywood films as a true reflection of Nigerian socio-political experience and Nollywood films as a distortion of the true face of Nigeria.

Nollywood as a True Reflection of the Nigerian Socio-Political Experience

A popular axiom stipulates that media (including cinema) theoretically reflects or mirrors the society in which they operate (Igbashangev, 2021; Ogbe et al. 2020; Idowu, 1999). They share a symbiotic relationship with society in many ways as they mutually affect each other. Such an axiom is visibly rooted in the belief that society serves as a source of raw material for media. In a sense, the media taps into society to shape its content in a realistic or plausible manner. They explore, adapt, or borrow ready materials, such as myths, legends, fabrics, folklore, folk dances, rites, folk architecture, folk music, and a whole host of other aspects of culture and nuances of the worldview of people to tailor their productions in a realistic way. According to this axiom, Idowu (1999) has generalized that Nigerian mass media (as corrupt or saint as they may be) reflect Nigeria. He insightfully contends that concern has been raised about the fact that the Nigerian media have been majoring in publishing falsehood, thereby presenting a distorted picture of Nigeria and using an alarmist tone even where there shouldn't be a cause for alarm. While such concerns may be justified, the problem should not be dissociated from "that which has created the country's socio-political setup" (Idowu 1999, p.97). Idowu goes further to explain that, given the fact that Nigeria is dominantly "recognized" as being hypocritical and corrupt, the media, no matter how saintly they try to be, can only reflect the vices of the larger society. As he succinctly writes, "[the media] thus reflects the color of society" (Idowu, 1999, p.97). With specific reference to Nollywood, Onuzubike (2009) corroborates this assumption, noting in a non-equivocal manner that Nollywood films reflect Nigeria's socio-cultural, political, and economic transformation. Based on a content analysis of selected Nollywood films, Davies and Nsereke (2020) share corollaries. The two scholars argue that Nollywood movies really reflect Nigerian social realities and "take their coloration from the Nigerian society" (p.201). This understanding is further shared by Aluko

and Odu (2022) in another study based on a content analysis of selected Nollywood movies. They observed a symbiotic relationship between dramatization on the screen and unfolding events in social reality. Okuyade (2011) makes the remarks mentioned above more pungent, as she concedes:

> If there is any single popular art form that can be considered the most significant in the representation of postcolonial life in Nigeria today, it is, without question, Nollywood. Nollywood has become the most popular medium of entertainment and like Nigerian literature, it plays a vital role in articulating cultural and national consciousness. […] From a depleted economic base, it manages to create local narratives about things that count to people and things that people want to see and hear; it also introduces ideas that give its viewers the opportunity to see themselves as they are or sometimes even to take their existence beyond the realm of the mundane to that of the exotic. (p.1-2)

Determining the extent to which this postulation holds true has been a topical and highly cerebral task for researchers, reviewers, international communication analysts, and Nigerian policymakers. Indeed, the question has interested and divided many Nollywood critics (Aluko & Odu, 2022; Ogbe et al., 2020; Udomisor & Sonuga, 2012). Based on the dogmatism that each school of thought puts forth, it becomes difficult for us to surgically "deliberate" on the issue. The least one can say is that there are two principal opposing camps. On the one hand are the *alarmist critics* who tax Nollywood films with misrepresenting Nigeria and frustrating governmental and well intentioned efforts at country's image building/management.

On the other hand, there is the *uncritical school of thought* that strongly believes the present portrayal of Nigeria in Nollywood is a vivid reflection of the country's moral decay, an eye-opener to the present Nigerian society, and an alarm for Nigerians to wake up from slumber. As can be discerned, the two camps' positions solidly hinge on a personalized and confusing reading of Nollywood narratives: the dominant tropes and themes in the industry. Their concurrent argumentations are equally based on their (subjective) understanding of the actual role of the cinema industry – notably Nollywood – in developing countries such as Nigeria.

The uncritical school of thought is mainly spearheaded by Nigerian filmmakers and their sympathizers. Their arguments are rooted in their belief that a good cinema should first of all thrive for moralization, education, sensitization (against the socio-political cancers that characterize the Nigerian nation), and entertainment. The school believes the objectives mentioned above have, to a large extent, been attained by the Nollywood industry, irrespective of the several cinematic productions that have been wanting. Reformulating the above-mentioned (expected) functions of Nollywood cinema, Osofisa neulogizes that film should:

1. Raise the level of consciousness by liberating the spirit and strengthening the minds of its people.
2. Be political and deal positively with existing conditions of oppression.
3. Educate to bring out that which is already within, 'give knowledge and truth;
4. Clarify issues by enlightening participants as to why so many adverse conditions and images exist in their community in order to eliminate negative conditions and strengthen positive conditions.
5. Finally, it must entertain (cited in Alawode 2013, p.115-116).

Nigerian filmmaker Lancelot Imaseun (cited in Putsh Christian, 2011) purports that Nollywood has followed the above-mentioned lines of orientation to a relatively high degree, depicting Nigeria to the maximum, according to its real self. According to him, Nollywood films realistically depict Nigerian people's hardships, dreams, and sociopolitical ambitions. They tell stories about the upward mobility of power, love, the struggle between good and evil, betrayal, and a whole host of socio-cultural phenomena not farfetched from the Nigerian experience. Its depiction of life in Nigeria is

sometimes shocking and revolting but the truth is that, when we look closer at these portrayals of Nigeria, there is a high degree of truth. As he succinctly puts it, "we tell stories Nigerians can identify with [...] Unlike Hollywood movies, ours don't always have a happy end. The world's not fair, so why should we pretend it is?" (cited in Putsh Christian, 2011,p.23). Imaseun seems to suggest that there is no need to pretend that all is well with Nigeria through cinematic productions that will instead "fool" audiences. It will be pretentious and even pernicious to claim that there is no voodoo, no moral decadence, no wickedness, and no socio-economic injustices in the land, as some rebranding Nigeria campaigns often suggest. Imasuem's position is in a way, in tandem with the principle of country image management, which stipulates that flamboyant media campaigns cannot whitewash bad socio-political and economic policies in a country (Anholt-GMI, 2015; Yang & Zhing, 2015; Adebola et al., 2012; Egwemi, 2010). Wise and effective socioeconomic and political reforms should therefore be seen as inevitable prerequisites for meaningful media campaigns. In concrete terms, the socio-political situation in Nigeria should considerably improve – through suitable socio-political reforms and welcomed behavioral and social revolutions – for it to be reflected in Nollywood. Ademola, et al. (2012) are therefore perfectly right to concede that any attempt at (re)branding Nigeria through public relations, film and advertising exercises that do not sufficiently address "the state of Nigeria as a bad product to market will be fruitless" (p.100).

Also, trying to laud Nollywood films' portrayals of Nigeria and Nigerians are some thought-provoking remarks by Akaoso. Actually, Akaoso (2009). debunks the various condemnations of Nollywood films on account of the industry's presumed poor performance in the domain of Nigeria's image management. He opines that, contrary to the popular imagination, Nollywood played a tremendous role in raising the country's image abroad. At such a supersonic speed, the films placed Nigeria on a map of the global cinema industry. Akaoso further noted that Nollywood films have utterly deconstructed most of the popular stereotypes Westerners associated Nigeria and African nations with. These films showed to the world that Nigerians are creative, ingenious, innovative, and balanced, irrespective of the asphyxiating socio-political conditions in which they are compelled to live. The cinema has progressively corrected the images Westerners used to have of Africans as people who live on the top of baobabs like monkeys, who walk naked, who are brutalized by all manners of pandemics and inter-tribal wars. The films have also deconstructed the image of Africans as people who are in urgent need of Western education and religious-political indoctrination. Nollywood corrected the belief that Africa in general and Nigeria in particular is constituted of people with no history but a bleak future. Nollywood portrayals of the continent and its people show that Nigerians are like all the other nations, "civilized" or "uncivilized." They are good, bad, ugly, and handsome, among other attributes, the same as any other person in the world. Above all, Nollywood has made the world see Nigeria as Africa's "Big Brother," a "giant" in the sub-region.

Much credence can be given to Akaoso's (2009) reflection, given the fact that amidst the perceived "*Nigerianophobia*" prevailing in many countries across the world, good words have been used in different quarters in reference to Nigeria since the debut of the Nollywood mania in Africa and the world. The Nollywood industry epitomizes, to an extent, the creative and entrepreneurial spirit of Nigerians (Omojuwa, 2013; Olanrewaju et al., 2021). Like football and music, it has put Nigeria in the global spotlight.

In the same line of thought, Sydelle (2010) negates the idea that Nollywood has exclusively tarnished the image of Nigeria through films that distort the country's socio-political and economic reality. He argues that morally decadent practices depicted in Nollywood films are mostly approached by directors from a "curative" or corrective perspective. As he succinctly puts it, "for all the criticisms of Nigerian movies, it can at least be said that the

movies try to include redeeming qualities even in the midst of presenting issues that are objectionable" (Sydelle 2010,p.7).

Nollywood as a Distortion of the Nigerian Socio-Political Reality

However, this critical school of thought can challenge the pertinent arguments mentioned above. It must be underscored here that a large number of Nigerian movies are literally spoofed in their exposure to the societal ills plaguing Nigeria as well as their approach toward didacticism. By spoofing their cinematic productions, many Nollywood film directors simply give international audiences the wrong signal, as well as a piteous definition of Nigeria and its culture. Omojowa (2013) captures this observation by saying that exposure to Nollywood films has caused most Kenyans among other Africans to believe that witchcraft and voodoo are parts of the quotidian social reality in Nigeria. He explains, "I have met with diplomats who think that Nollywood is responsible for a large part of the Nigerian society's craze for and worship of money. Are these Nigerian realities? Of course yes. Are they anywhere as pronounced as Nollywood obsessively makes them? Of course no!" (Omojowa 2013,p.3).

It has become a common practice in Nollywood to associate the Nigerian police with felonies, fraud, and counterfeits. The idea that most Nigerian films have sold to the outside world is that this Nigerian institution has missed its vocation or vision. Although mandated to combat (high) crime, it represents one of the worst perpetrators of crime in the country through torture, corruption, murderers, kidnapping, and armed robbery among other abominations (Endong, 2018). In his review of Nollywood films, Obi (cited in Omojowa, 2013) contends that, in view of Nollywood films' portrayal of Nigerian police, one wonders whether filmmakers intend to make a case for better-equipped police or whether they envision ridicule and disgrace Nigeria in the face of the world. Obi bases his puzzle on the fact that nowhere is the depiction of the sociopolitical and cultural situation of the Nigerian police true to the empirical reality. They are a veritable scandal and shame not only to the Nigerian police, but also to the entire Nigerian nation. Neither the police officers' manner of speech, dressing, interrogation, and operation approach nor the logistics they employ are representative of Nigeria.

However, this is not to (blindly) exonerate Nigerian police and pretends that all are well. As insightfully argued by scholars such as Idowu (1999, p.17) and Ademola et al., (2012, p.101), the "Nigerian spirit," the "419" syndrome and other forms of corruption have eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian society. This has been to the extent that even integral parts of the civil service, including the Nigerian police, have not been unaffected. In her thought-provoking articles titled "The Nigerian Factor and Jonathan's Transformation Agenda," Agina (2014) notes for instance that "the Nigerian Factor" otherwise called "the Nigerian way" has engendered a situation where the Nigerian police and other law enforcement services partake in blatant and unrepentant connivances with criminals. As she notes, the "syndrome" "ensures that while the poor chicken thief languishes in prison, the billion-naira rogue and murderer is free, enjoying his stolen billions like a god, with the paraphernalia of truckloads of our police officers for his protection and intimidation of 'ordinary' Nigerians" (Agina 2014, p.7).

Based on this premise, there will be a number of irregularities in the way the Nigerian police functions in the country. However, Nollywood films seem to be too spoofed. Akande (2012,p.23) underlines Nollywood films' tendency to associate the Nigerian police with unprofessionalism and improper use of technical parlance (police jargon). He affirms that Nollywood films make their police officers use the slogan/advice "you have the rights to remain silent" as a restraining order to be silent or be prosecuted for violence. This, of course, accidentally misrepresents the Nigerian police, presenting them as unprofessional and "functional illiterates."

Another Nigerian institution often bashed by the Nollywood industry is the educational sector. In effect school establishments are usually portrayed in Nollywood films as temples of mediocrity, a fertile terrain for cultic and occult activities, the "419" syndrome, "sorting" (cheating/examination malpractices), obscurantism and prostitution. Although such portrayals are grotesquely exaggerated in Nollywood films, it will be incorrect and pretentious to claim that all the ills mentioned above are totally "un-Nigerian." In her exhortation titled "Rebranding of Nigerian Universities," Dora Nkem Akunyili (2010) (former Minister of Information and Communications and the main brain behind the Rebranding Nigeria Campaign) highlighted most of the traditions deplored above as realities in Nigerian schools, before lamenting the fact that such negative indices have scared potential students (local and foreign), motivating them to sleep in embassies and go through hectic/inhuman procedures to gain visa that will allow them go and further their studies abroad. In her examination of the lamentable state of Nigerian universities, she noted the following:

> When you walk into a typical Nigerian university today, you will be embarrassed by the dressing of the students. […] Our young female students are either over-dressed or indecently dressed, looking like call girls going for disco parties. This situation does not help the mind set of randy lecturers. Little wonder sexual harassment is becoming one of the sad stories in our universities today. It appears we no longer have university culture. Students look down on their lecturers because they are not as rich as their parents or boyfriends. Students no longer take their studies seriously, because they feel that they can either buy the marks or use their bodies to secure the marks. (Akunyili 2010,p.9-10)

Obini (2005) shares corollaries in a more pungent tone. He deplores the hyper-devastation of Nigerian school campuses and university culture by the awful phenomena of cultism and occultism, noting that:

> There is a growing concern on the part of every university governing body, polytechnics and other higher institutions of learning, parents, government and well meaning Nigerians on the menace and violence of cultism in our campuses. This concern is born out of the destruction and damage emanating from cult violence over the year.[...] The last two decades going by research, has witnessed a lot of bloodletting, massacre, maiming and killings. Cultism is a social ill that has placed so much debris on its victims. Innocent students suffer humiliations and molestation from cultists. (Obini 2005, p.1)

Akunyili (2010) and Obini (2005) cited above unequivocally highlight a plethora of frightening irregularities that are observable in Nigerian school establishments and the Nigerian police and which are often portrayed in Nollywood films. Thus, the irregularities are an espect of life in Nigeria. However Nollywood film producers have developed a culture of over-emphasizing them while downplaying the other side of the story. In other words, Nigerian film directors have often failed to show that these two sets of institutions (the Nigerian police and educational establishments, for instance) also provide indispensable services for the social, economic, and political advancement of the Nigerian nation.

Most observers adhere to the critical school of thought and tax Nollywood films with two principal sins: film spoofing and one-sided/biased representations of Nigeria. As is usually observed by such critics, a half-truth – what Chimamanda Adichie will call a "single story" – is no truth at all. As Chimamanda (cited in Ekeanyanwu 2015, p.184) insightfully observes, a severe dilemma with a single or partially true story is that it is neither totally incorrect nor wholly true. Therefore, it does not represent all truths. A section of the story has "selfishly" been omitted or totally "effaced" to favor the propagandist intentions of the storyteller. In the case of Nollywood filmmakers, it has often been assumed that most directors deliberately elide the good side of Nigeria in keeping with the maxim that bad news sells films. As critics have variously argued, Nollywood filmmakers are primarily motivated by economic factors: selling their movies at all costs. Nigeria's image management may be secondary, if not absent,

from most film directors' agenda (Omojuwa, 2013; Anunobi,2010; Labouba,2012). One will undoubtedly need empirical studies and authoritative statistics on the visions and motivations of most Nigerian film directors to validate this theory and hypothesis. However, the theory/hypothesis is in line with Croteau and Hoynes' (1997) maxim. This maxim stipulates that media content, notably film content, reflects producers, audience preference, society, and influence on the audience, as well as self-enclosed text. Also, despite the lack of empirical studies on the vision and objectives of Nollywood moviemakers with regards to Nigerian image building, it remains clear that, for a host of critics, Nollywood filmmakers' avid penchant for economic success powers them to major in "bad news" films – which are believed to sell – irrespective of the fact that such films tarnish the image of Nigeria in both the national and the international scenes. Omojuwa (2013) strongly queries this Nollywood filmmakers' penchant for economic success to the detriment of Nigeria's image. He notes that:

> There is no need to deny the primary motive of its primary stakeholders [which is] profit. Profit is a beautiful thing but if we care about creating movies and an industry that'd last the times, we must look beyond competing for profit. It is time to think about the effects of these movies on the psyche of an average Nigerian child. We need to think about how embarrassing these movies make us and our cultures look to the outside world. We need to begin to evolve from having too many poor quality movies to having more qualitative ones (Omojuwa 2013,p.4) .

From the ongoing debate it will be faulty to hastily generalize the Nollywood representation of Nigeria. In concrete terms, it will be inaccurate to associate all Nollywood productions with the misrepresentation of Nigeria and Black Africa. Neither will it be safe to exalt the totality of these films as an exact representation of Nigeria. As this author has argued elsewhere, the good, bad, and ugly peacefully cohabit – or are made to cohabit – in the Nollywood film industry (Endong, 2018; Endong & Vareba, 2018). Some sterling productions have, through powerful representations, successfully impacted the image of Nigeria in a positive way, while others have called for concern. Films like Biyi Bandele's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Tade Ogidan's *Dangerous Twin*, Amaka Igwe's *Rattle Snakes*, Don Pedro-Obaseki's *Igodo*, Tunde Kelani's *Sawaroide*, Obafemi Lasode's *Sango* among others have demonstrated Nigerian directors' tendencies to appropriate Nigerian cultures, through ingenious deployment of costumes, design, props, storytelling, music and language. These films have been lauded by many art critics as veritable textbooks on Nigeria and kinds of glimpses of diverse Nigerian cultures (Alawode, 2013; Effiong,2020; Geiger,2010). Meanwhile, there have also been highly censured movies, such as *False Alarm*, *Chameleon*, *Land II*, *The Benjamins*, *Room 7, I Hate My Village*, and many others. Such films, mentioned above, have great potential to tarnish the image of Nigeria abroad, besides corrupting the youths.

Thus, a number of scholars have preferred to adopt a neutral position on the issue of Nollywood as a reflection of Nigeria (Akpabio, 2007; Endong, 2018). These observers see Nollywood films more as hybrid with regard to the positive versus negative portrayal of Nigeria. A case in point is Olakunle (2012) who opines that apart from the voodoism, occultism, fetishism among other forms of morbidity, it can be argued that Nollywood films tell the audience the actual Nigerian lifestyle. "It indicates that we [Nigerians] are a people with pedestrian instincts, and tendencies riding on a primordial train […] All the same, the movie business has become a template of some unity, a mirror of what is not ideal and also a bad teacher of what is right" (Olakunle, 2012, p.29).

Conclusion

Films are popularly believed to reflect their societies of origin. According to the popular fantasy, a film is theoretically speaking a window into the society from which it originates. It provides valuable information about the people, their country of origin's cultures, level of development, history, or state of the

film industry, among others. However, films remain a complexly constructed media and are susceptible to provide half-truths or misleading data to audiences, particularly those with low media literacy and who know nothing about the reality of the film's society of origin.

Films are the first and foremost made-believe, and filmmakers' subjective take on life issues. Even films that seek to document reality – notably ethnographic and documentary films – are at best hardly perfect depictions of the truth, given the tendency of most of their makers to engage in gate-keeping during production. Given the arguments mentioned above, the popular thesis that film depicts reality is to be taken with a pinch of salt. Perhaps, a careful or safe approach will be to always see films as texts with both elements of reality and make-believe, and to apply critical thinking to any consumption of film to separate truth from exaggeration and fantasy. Using critical thinking is not always easy, partly because the concept of reality may be too elusive.

This paper argues that Nollywood has elements of both realism and falsehood. From the ongoing debate, it may not be possible to generalize the Nollywood representation of Nigeria hastily. In concrete terms, all Nollywood production may not be relegated to the deformation of Nigeria and Black Africa. Neither will it be safe to exalt the totality of these films as an exact representation of Nigeria. As we have argued elsewhere, the good, bad, and ugly peacefully cohabit –or are made to cohabit – in the Nollywood film industry. Some sterling productions have thrived to positively impact the image of Nigeria, while others have been calling for concern. In view of all these, many scholars – reviewed in this paper – have preferred to adopt a neutral position on the issue of Nollywood as a reflection of Nigeria. These observers see Nollywood films more as hybrid with regard to the positive versus negative portrayal of Nigeria.

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