

Beyond the video boom.

New tendencies in the Nigerian video industry.¹

Alessandro Jedlowski, University of Naples “L'Orientale”

According to a UNESCO Institute of Statistics' survey, released in April 2009, the Nigerian video industry has become the second largest film industry in the world, overtaking Hollywood's position but remaining behind the Indian film industry, Bollywood. Only seventeen years after the release of *Living in Bondage*, the film that is commonly considered the one that made the industry (Haynes and Okome 1998), Nigeria has managed to become the centre of one of the most influential film industries in the world. However, behind the rhetoric of this success, the reality of the phenomenon is complex and rich in nuance. After an initial decade of prosperity, the immense popularity of Nollywood began to have a perverse effect on the industry itself. The market became saturated, generating a negative spiral which brought the industry into a situation of critical impasse. Paradoxically, the international recognition of Nollywood's success, sanctioned by the UNESCO report, arrived at the moment of the worst crisis ever faced by the industry.¹

The reasons for this crisis, as well as the strategies that the different economic actors involved in the film industry are adopting to overcome it, are multiple. Ironically, the informal structure of production and distribution that determined the initial success of Nollywood, turned out to be the major threat to the survival of the industry itself. For this reason, some of the strategies that the actors are taking to solve the crisis imply radical transformations that will probably change the face of the Nigerian industry in the coming years. These transformations are emphasizing the internal differentiation of the industry, tracing a deeper demarcation between the multiple segments that compose the Nollywood puzzle.

The main purpose of this paper is to analyse the causes of the present crisis and the strategies being applied to overcome it, suggesting some possible interpretations of the consequences that these transformations could have for the future developments of the industry. The analysis presented is the result of recent fieldwork in Lagos which was focused on the English language section of the industry.² For this reason, the results discussed here relate mainly to this segment of the industry, while the segments producing film in local languages are only marginally taken into account. However it is important to underline that a radical distinction between English language and local language films is inappropriate, since there are several outstanding directors, like Izu Ojukwu and Kunle Afolayan, who tend to make multilingual films that mirror the multicultural environment of many Nigerian cities. As I will show in detail below, it is probably more appropriate to make a

¹ This article was presented for the first time at the at ASAUK writing workshop in Birmingham (UK), April 16th 2010.

distinction between the segment of the industry geared toward an international market and the segment which focuses specifically on providing films to the ethnically oriented local markets.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first two have the aim of describing the present situation of the English language area of the industry and the different strategies that its protagonists are engaging, while the third section extends the analysis to the debate existing around the representation of the Nollywood phenomenon outside Nigeria.

Nollywood as the second largest film industry in the world: The crisis of production and its paradoxes.

When the above-mentioned UNESCO report was published, the reactions expressed in the Nigerian press were contradictory. Some articles presented the news with a sentiment of pride in the achievement of this result, but at the same time, the majority of the articles also underlined the risk of a premature celebration. To many, the publication of the survey sounded ironic, considering that the industry was going through a difficult period of crisis (Awoinfa 2009; Nzeh 2009). For instance, just few months earlier, the newspapers were dominated by articles such as ‘Nollywood is dying’ (Njoku 2009a) or ‘Nollywood: Stuck in the middle of nowhere’ (Husseini 2009), paying witness to the dramatic situation in which the industry was enveloped and denouncing the lack of organized action to rescue the fate of the Nigerian video phenomenon. The perverse irony of this situation is the result of the problems that the industry traversed in these last few years. In fact, the more the industry became popular, the more its economic structure weakened.

When the video phenomenon began, very few people were in the market and the profits were surprisingly large. For instance, the Igbo businessman Kenneth Nnebue, who invested no more than N 2000³ to shoot *Living in Bondage* (1992), made ‘hundreds of thousands back’ (Haynes and Okome 1998: 109). Amaka Igwe and Fidelis Duker, two of the most established directors of the Nollywood system, reported the same thing in recent interviews (Duker 2010; Igwe 2010), underscoring the fact that in the first five to ten years of the industry the producers could invest more money in films because they were certain of high profits. Even if, as Haynes and Okome emphasized as far back as in 1998, piracy was already a serious threat to the industry in that earlier era, the number of copies sold legally on the market was large enough to allow producers and marketers continue to invest money in filmmaking.

According to Fidelis Duker's, the problems started around 2002 (Nzeh 2009), when the popularity that Nollywood managed to establish in its first years of existence, and the common belief that Nollywood was a get-rich-quick system, attracted to the industry a large number of people who did not have any experience of cinema. As the figures published by the Nigerian

Censors Board attest, the number of videos officially released in Nigeria passed from 389 in 1999 to 1018 in 2002, with a production increase of almost 300%.⁴ Inevitably the market became saturated and the incomes generated by film releases dropped dramatically. If in the first few years of the industry one film could easily sell between 100.000 and 150.000 official copies, from the beginning of the 2000's producers needed to release at least two or three films to sell the same total number of copies and make the same amount of money. Consequentially they had to cut the costs and the time of production to release more films. The industry progressively entered a vicious circle in which the producers had to produce more films to maintain the same level of incomes, participating in an even more dramatic saturation of the market.

The narrative quality of the films thus decreased, even if the technical quality was increasing thanks to the introduction of new digital technologies. Both Amaka Igwe and Fidelis Duker, underscored in interviews that from the beginning of the 2000's, as a consequence of the overproduction and excess of competition in the market, the quality of the scripts as well as the quality of the shooting became poorer. The level of success that some of the early films enjoyed thanks to the quality of their storyline and the level of the acting was rarely repeated.⁵ However, while the number of films produced was increasing, and the average quality decreasing, Nollywood was progressively becoming a continental phenomenon. Unfortunately for the marketers and producers of the Nigerian videos, the profits of Nollywood continental popularity did not end up in their pockets, for the popularity of Nigerian videos around Africa was largely due to the distribution of pirated copies. As reported in many articles, Nigerian videos became extremely successful in countries as different as Zambia, DRC, Uganda, Namibia and South Africa (Becker 2009; Dipio 2008; Katsuva 2003; Muchimba 2004). Furthermore, the films also did extremely well outside the continent, in the Caribbean, as well as in the United States and in Europe, following the network created by the African diaspora (Cartelli 2007; Esan 2008; Ogundimu 2009). As underlined by John McCall (2007), Nollywood contributed to creating a new sort of Pan-africanism, grounded on a transnational popular culture whose success was determined by the informal and illegal nature of its circulation. Thus piracy has been largely responsible for the popular success of Nollywood around the world, because it brought Nigerian films where no official distributor could have ever brought them. At the same time, these unofficial distribution channels contributed heavily to the worsening of Nollywood's crisis, by eroding producers' and directors' main sources of income.⁶

However, the extremely influential impact of piracy on the Nigerian video industry appears to be more a consequence than a cause of the Nollywood's problems. The success of piracy is directly proportional to the failure of Nigerian institutions and Nollywood marketers to organize a coherent distribution framework and an effective system of copyright regulation that could enable the films to circulate regularly inside and outside Nigeria, with profits ending up in the right hands. Piracy

affects all media industries in the world, and with the evolution of internet technologies it is becoming even harder to control it. Its impact on the Nigerian industry seems to be stronger due to the absence of a regulatory structure that could follow the expansion of the industry and respond to its widespread popularity. Nollywood developed thanks to a straight-to-video distribution strategy, which was appropriate to the informal structure of most African economies. This strategy was largely responsible for Nollywood's initial success, but it also determined Nollywood's high vulnerability to the constitutive dangers of the informal economy itself, an economy in which the boundaries between legality and illegality are blurred and the possibilities of central control are limited. As I will argue in the next section, the most important attempts made in the last few years to rescue the industry were focused on the distribution issue, and tried to give the industry a more established structure to regulate its economy. Before moving to the analysis of the strategies applied to solve Nollywood's multiple problems, it is necessary to explore in more depth the present crisis. The factors that I have underlined are structural problems that affected the industry from the beginning of its existence, but the present crisis also owes its existence to several contingent elements which contributed to the worsening of the situation.

Two of the factors often mentioned by marketers and producers to explain the recent crisis of the industry are the creation, in 2003, of the Pan-African satellite television channel "Africa Magic" by the South African company M-Net, and the uncontrolled growth of internet platforms that offer free broadcasting of Nollywood films. The influence of these two factors reveals an interesting aspect of the economic structure of the Nigerian video industry.

In Nigeria the number of people who have access to a satellite television decoder and the internet is minimal. According to the national statistics on transport and communication published by the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics in 2008 (<http://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/>), 51% of the national population have access to television, with great regional differences (from 94% access in Lagos State to 10% access in Yobe State). Satellite television is thus a privilege that only a restricted part of the population can afford.⁷ This means that the impact of the Africa Magic channel on the national market of Nigerian videos cannot be very high.⁸ Most of the people still have to buy or rent a VCD⁹ if they want to watch a film, or otherwise watch it in a video club. A similar argument can be made regarding the internet problem. Even if, according to recent statistics, Nigeria is regarded as one of the most connected nations in Africa, with up to 11 million of its population with internet access (7.4% of the national population, compared to an average 6.8% connected population in Africa [Aragba-Akpore; Adepetun 2010]), the kind of internet access available to many, mainly through cybercafés and mobile phone with weak connections, does not allow people to easily watch Nollywood films on line.

Thus, what makes these two factors so influential is the fact that they are cutting the incomes

coming from the foreign markets, the markets that nourish the diasporic audience. If the internal local market has been corrupted by piracy from the early days of the industry, the diasporic market was still working on a more regular basis. This does not mean that piracy was not also affecting the diasporic context, but that the impact of it was less dramatic. Original copies did circulate among Nigerians in the UK and the US, as well as in other European countries and these copies used to sell partly as a result of a nationalistic commitment of the audience toward the growing national video industry.¹⁰ As Jora emphasizes through a number of interviews with Nigerian video sellers in Europe, the impact of internet streaming and satellite televisions has deeply damaged their business, obliging them to cut the number of videos ordered weekly from Nigeria. Sunday Omobude, a Nigerian businessman who owns a video store in Amsterdam, for example, is reported to have cut his orders from 8000 films a week to 1500, while the internet site onlinenigeria.com, which broadcasts Nigerian films for free, is reported to have up to 700.000 visitors in 45 countries around the world (Jora 2007).¹¹ With regards to satellite television, then, it must be said that, even if Africa Magic is not accessible in Europe or the US, many satellite television channels have followed its example and started broadcasting Nollywood films around the world,¹² delivering Nigerian films to the audience that once had to buy or rent a copy to watch them. To understand the influence of the diasporic market on Nollywood's economy is particularly important, because it makes possible an interpretation of the choices that a number of producers and directors are taking in the recent years to overcome the crisis.¹³ However, before exploring the new role that the diasporic market and audiences are playing in shaping the development of Nollywood, it is necessary to discuss a few other elements that helped determine the current situation.

As mentioned above, the saturation of the market implied an extreme level of economic competition, one that has ultimately caused a worsening of the average quality of the films. In only four years, between 2004 and 2007, the Nigerian Censors Board's figures report 5889 films officially released, which is more than the total number of films officially released since the creation of the Censors Board in 1994 (with 4837 films released between 1994 and 2003)¹⁴ According to the interviews I conducted with spectators of the films in Nigeria, many people had the feeling that the taste and the critical capacity of the audience was underestimated. This could be a reason for the re-emergence of foreign films on the Nigerian market. One of the many successes that the Nollywood industry was proud of, was the fact that it had pushed Hollywood and Bollywood films in a marginal position in the Nigerian market. The audience's excitement that characterized the first era of Nollywood was a reaction to years of colonization of local screens by foreign products. Thus, after the emergence of Nollywood films, no foreign story could compete with a truly "African" drama performed by Nigerian stars. But after many years, the audience has become more sophisticated, Nollywood has stopped being a novelty, and foreign films have come

back into the market, thanks also to the new technologies used by pirates to offer very cheap collections of films. The so called “combos”, CDs with up to forty films in compressed format, imported mainly from China, are sold on the street for N 100 or 200 (which is less than the price of one original Nigerian VCD) and pirated copies of Bollywood films dubbed in Yoruba are distributed in Alaba and Idumota markets (Adelakun 2009a).

Furthermore, to watch a Nigerian film and support the industry has become an expensive choice, which not everybody can or wants to afford. As emphasized emphatically by Brian Larkin (2008), the infrastructure of the state and the state of infrastructures deeply influences Nigerian life. Thus, to watch a film is not as simple as it would seem. In Lagos, for instance, the power supply is schizophrenic, and in most of the densely populated neighbourhoods of Lagos mainland it does not last longer than two hours a day.¹⁵ Those who want to watch a film must own a generator, and must pay for the fuel, which in some periods can be hard to find.¹⁶ The discontinuous electric power can easily damage electronic systems, such as television, the VCD player, and the stereo, so that to watch a film often also means to spend some additional money to repair the damages to these systems. As pointed out by Ibitola in his essay (2008), and confirmed in a number of newspaper articles (Bumah 2009; Nzeh 2009), the worsening of the power supply situation in the past few years is making the life of the industry harder. On the one hand, the audience faces innumerable problems just to be able to watch a film, and on the other hand, the producers must calculate additional costs of production to have the electrical supply needed for shooting.

These problems are particularly critical in a period in which the welfare of the re-emerging Nigerian middle class, which is one of the main supporters of the industry and specifically of the English language section of it, has been eroded by the economic crisis. During 2009 a crisis affected the Nigerian bank sector forcing many banks to revise their budgets and the number of employees (Cropley 2009; Odunfa 2009). Many retrenchments ensued, and inevitably a large number of households were affected and people had to revise their lifestyles.

The scenario sketched above seems a very dark portrayal of the situation of the Nigerian industry, but as the following section will show, the present moment that the industry is living through is particularly exciting. As most of the published work that traces the history of Nollywood testify to (Barrot 2005; Haynes 2000), the Nigerian video industry came out of one of the worst crises that Nigeria has ever experienced, the crisis due to the application of the Structural Adjustment Program in the 80's. Cinema culture was dying, as well as the long-standing tradition of Yoruba travelling theatre. The national television no longer had the money to produce local series and violence was spreading all over the country, making it difficult for people to participate in any kind of outdoor entertainment. Paradoxically, the mixture of these elements, together with the strength and the creativity of the Nigerian people contributed to the birth of the biggest African

video film industry.

According to many observers, the current crisis was long needed, and it will have a positive effect on the future of the industry. Odia Ofeimum, Steve Ayorinde and Jahman Anikulapo, in the interviews I conducted with them,¹⁷ all agreed on this point. The Nigerian industry has frequently moved from one crisis to another, each crisis marking the ground for a new important development. Paraphrasing Jahman Anikulapo's words, it is from the ashes of the video boom that a more solid and qualitative film industry will originate.

Out of the ashes of the video boom: New tendencies in the Nigerian video industry.

The most structured and, at the same time, the most controversial intervention made to solve the crisis is the one proposed by the Nigerian Censors Board with the authorisation of a new distribution framework. After a deep analysis of the situation of the industry, the Director General of the Censors Board, Emeka Mba,¹⁸ and his staff emphasised the lack of a distribution framework as the central problem affecting the industry. As stressed above, the informal structure of the distribution system contributed to the initial success of the industry, but it is no longer adequate to support a film industry which is considered to be the second largest in the world.

The absence of a structured distribution system affected the economy of the industry in many ways. First of all, it made it impossible for the authorities to pursue pirates, because in an informal system no distributor is officially licensed and no official number of copies released is published. VCDs are not encoded, so they do not have any digital protection, and can easily be duplicated and sold on the market in pirated copies. No video shop or video club is licensed either, so anyone can decide to start to sell videos without regulation.¹⁹ This system made Nollywood films circulate all over the country and all over the continent, but it also progressively eroded any sort of income for producers and distributors who invested in making the films.

The lack of an organized structure made it impossible to produce official figures about the industry. Apart from the figures of films released each year delivered by the Censors Board, which are only partly reliable, no other official figures about the industry are available. It is impossible to know the official number of how many copies of a film sells, so it is also hard to know which are the most popular films released in any year and the amount of money they have generated. The protagonists of the industry (marketers, producers, directors) tend to deliver figures that follow their personal interests. Thus directors mention larger figures to promote, and sometimes create, their popular success, while marketers on the contrary tend to reduce the figures to escape the fiscal control. This lack of official numbers makes the economy of the industry deeply unreliable, discouraging any sort of external private investment from banks or other private corporations.

By way of intervention, the Censors Board approved a new distribution framework in 2007, which imposes the acquisition of a license on all distributors, video shops and video clubs. It also insists on the marking of every VCD put on the market with official stamps delivered by the Censors Board. In this way the Board would be able to have a figure of the number of official copies released and bought. The framework distinguishes five categories of distributors (national, regional, state, Local Government Area, community) with license fees that range from N 500.000 for the national license to N 15.000 for the community one, and which imposes on distributors an insurance bank bond ranging from N 30 million for the national distributors to N 1 million for the LGA one (the community distributors have only to guarantee a N 100.000 operating fund).²⁰

This last point is the one that created most of the controversy. When the framework was authorized, there was a general misunderstanding about what this insurance bond was for and why it was so onerous.²¹ In the first months after the framework was approved a violent clash took place between the marketers and the Censors Board, leading to the arrest of some marketers and, in response to that, to a legal procedure against the Censors Board (Akpovi-Asade 2008 and 2009).²² During the first half of 2009 the framework seemed to be progressively accepted and many distributors and video renters enrolled for the license, but today the benefits of the application of the framework are still far from visible and many professionals have started to complain. Three of the most influential figures of the industry, Amaka Igwe, Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen and Don Pedro Obaseki have emphasised during interviews ²³ that – after the initial misunderstanding – they supported the framework, but now the lack of results is making them suspicious. The most common complaint is that the framework has been designed at an institutional level, without consulting the protagonists of the industry. Thus it resulted in top-down action which does not sit easily with a very complex and informal context like the Nigerian one.

To understand how the Censors Board's actions were structured and received is vital to analysing the tendencies that the English section of the industry has shown in the past few years. The framework's inability to demonstrate its efficacy in a short period of time oriented the protagonists of the industry toward different strategies that can be schematized in two general tendencies. On the one hand, there is a section of the industry, part of which initially supported the introduction of the framework, that wants the industry to meet international standards of filmmaking. In this way it would be possible to enlarge the market and distribute the films through Festivals and mainstream cinema releases around the world, bypassing the crisis of the internal market. For this section of the industry, the model of production to be adopted is very similar to the one adopted in Hollywood or Bollywood, which is grounded on bigger budgets, fewer films released, and wide organized international distribution via cinemas and DVDs.

On the other hand, there is a section of the industry, part of which strongly resisted the

enforcement of the framework, that still finds the present situation convenient, because of the freedom and the economic mobility that it allows. For this second section, the local market is still large enough to make the business worthwhile, and the quality of the products tends to be a secondary issue, with video production designed very specifically for local audiences. This kind of production system, which emerged from the peculiar characteristics of the Nigerian environment, is based on a high number of films produced, targeted to different specific sections of the national audience. This tends to be the model applied by both a section of the English language industry (for instance the one producing religious films) and by the local language segments, which appear to have only marginally suffered the impact of the crisis of production.²⁴ The two tendencies are opposite because one tends to reduce the number of films, trying to bring them to the largest international audience possible, while the second one tends to increase the number of films produced while addressing very specific audiences.

In his analysis of the Nigerian video industry, Biodun Jeyifo defines these two tendencies as a direct opposition between marketers and producers on one side and directors on the other. ‘You now have two distinct formations of Nollywood,’ he writes, ‘one is controlled by the marketers and producers, the other one is an independent formation of truly creative people not driven by the profit move or the zeal to win souls for Jesus’ (Jeyifo 2009). This distinction may portray part of the situation, but at the same time appears to be radical. In the debate about Nollywood, the marketer (the distributor) is often considered as an illiterate whose only objective is to make money, but this portrayal is inevitably partial. Emmanuel Isikaku, the president of the Film and Video Producers and Marketers Association of Nigeria (FVPMAN), in a recent interview, underscored the fact that Nollywood's success is largely due to the role of the marketers, who first saw the economic advantages that investments in video filmmaking could have. As Isikaku emphasised, what actually established the difference between Nollywood and other instances of filmmaking in Africa is precisely the fact that local investors became interested in the movie sector, and started investing in it (Isikaku 2010). If Nollywood is so popular throughout Africa today is because it tells stories that sell to an African audience. Thus the marketing element is inseparable from the success that made Nollywood what it is today.

For this reason, Jeyifo's opposition between marketer-driven and director-driven filmmaking does not capture the complexity of the situation. The people who are trying to make films that abide by international standard, like Kunle Afolayan, Mamood Ali Balogun, Izu Ojukwu and many others that I will reference more extensively later, are “truly creative people”, as Jeyifo says, but they also have a clear business concept in mind. In the same way, even if their main preoccupation is economic, many marketers are well aware of the need to improve the quality of the filmmaking to enlarge their potential markets. Thus the distinction between the two tendencies mentioned above is

not only a distinction between a creative side of the industry and its commercial counterpart, but it is a distinction that should be made in terms of economic strategies and targeted markets.

While waiting for the new distribution framework to show its efficacy, some directors have undertaken new marketing strategies that will allow them to avoid the problems created by the present structure of the industry. In general, these strategies involve bigger production budgets obtained through partnerships with private corporations,²⁵ cinema screenings in theatres in Nigeria and within the diasporic context, and the late release of the DVD or VCD, often directly controlled by the director/producer through on-line selling. The marketing concept behind this kind of strategy is that by improving the film's quality the product will have access to cinemas and the festival circuit and will generate incomes in this way before being released on DVD or VCD.

This tendency was affirmed, for instance, by the marketing strategy adopted by Kunle Afolayan with his film *Irapada* (2007), a high-budget Yoruba film made to meet international standards of filmmaking, which enjoyed a long period of screening in Nigerian cinemas²⁶ that almost refunded the production expenses. The film was also well received internationally. It was screened at The Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles, at the 51st London Film Festival and it also won the Best Indigenous Nigerian Movie award at the African Movie Academy Awards (AMAA). As a result of this success, Afolayan shot a second film, *The Figurine* (2009), with a larger budget (around N 80 million) that is having spectacular local and international success (Nwanne 2009). However the film that most compellingly revealed that cinema release strategy could become the path for the future development of the industry was Stephanie Okereke's *Through the glass* (2008). This début film by one of the most popular Nollywood stars was shot entirely in the United States while Stephanie Okereke was attending the New York Film Academy. Once released in Nigeria it managed to make more than N 10 million in its first three weeks of cinema release (Akande 2009). Thanks to these examples many marketers, producers and directors now understand the potential of this strategy to restructure the Nollywood business.

Another important event that occurred in the same period was the release of Jeta Amata's *Amazing Grace* (2006), an historical film about slavery shot in 35 mm. It was the intention of the director and producer to establish Nollywood on the international scene through the release of this film. The film did not do particularly well and at the third African Movie Academy Awards (AMAA) in 2007, it did not manage to obtain the expected prize as best Nigerian film, which went to Izu Ojukwu's *Sitanda* (2006). However, Amata's film reintroduced celluloid in Nigerian cinema, opening a path that a number of directors have since followed.²⁷ The release in the last few months of two Nigerian films in 35 mm (Chineze Anyane's *Ije, the journey* and Lucky Ejim's *The tenant*) and the forthcoming release of Mamood Ali Balogun's *Tango with me*, a film in 35mm with a budget of more than N 85 million, shows that the trend inaugurated by Amata's film is becoming

established.

It is interesting to note that the cinema-hall-trend, inaugurated by directors who have always supported a more internationally oriented film production, is progressively becoming a common attitude of mainstream Nollywood directors such as Tecu Benson and Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, two of the most popular directors of the Nollywood system. Both of them are raising the technical quality of their films to make the transition from informal to cinema theatres distribution possible. Already in 2007, Tecu Benson's *Mission to Nowhere* was blown into 35mm format to be screened in Nigerian cinemas, while Lancelot Imasuen's most recent film, *Home in Exile*, after a number of premiere screenings in Nigeria, Europe and the US in October and November 2009, was released in Nigerian cinemas in March 2010.

The Nollywood transition toward cinema halls inevitably means a switch in terms of the targeted audience. Even if, as mentioned above, attending cinema theatres is coming back into fashion in Nigeria, the number of the screens available in the country is still very small. There are only four modern commercial cinema halls in Lagos (Silverbird Galleria, City Mall, Ozone and Genesis Deluxe), with two more in Abuja and one in Port Harcourt.²⁸ Thus, as made evident by these numbers, the opportunities for cinematic circulation for any Nigerian film are not large enough to make local box office the only source of income. Only a few very successful films, like *Through the Glass* or *The Figurine*, can count on a considerable economic return from the local box office. This evidence compels us to consider once again the role of the diasporic audience on Nollywood's economy.

Lancelot Imasuen, Femi Odugbemi and Mamood Ali Balogun have said in recent interviews²⁹ that the targeted audience of their most recent works is the worldwide black diaspora, which has supported the industry since its beginnings and has shown a clear demand for better quality films. The experience that these directors and many others have had in Europe, United States and Canada has revealed to them that the demand for Nollywood films is large and the potential market wide. This market is the one that can allow them to invest in bigger projects because it relies on a structured system of distribution and exhibition which guarantees potentially large economic returns (particularly when one takes exchange rates into account).³⁰

The intention of targeting diasporic and international audiences has influenced the storyline of many recent releases. For instance, in Lancelot Imasuen's *Home in Exile* and Lucky Ejim's *The Tenant* the protagonist of the film is a person coming back to Nigeria from a foreign country, and the story is centred on the problems related to the clash between different life styles, values, cultures and habits. As Jonathan Haynes has underlined (2003; 2009), migration and life in foreign countries have become recurrent themes in Nollywood films, and this tendency can be read also as a reaction to the growing influence of diasporic audiences on the Nollywood economy.

The application of the above-mentioned marketing strategies is contributing to the demarcation of the two branches of the industry mentioned above. These branches apply different economic models and target different audiences, a mainly urban local and diasporic middle class for the films released in the cinema circuit, and a more popular, both urban and rural, local and non-economically-uniform class of people for the straight-to-video films, and especially for those in local languages. This may be a simplification of the situation, but it helps to analyse the directions that the industry is taking. The two markets can easily overlap, as happened for instance with the film *Jenifa*, a low-budget Yoruba film which became the biggest popular Nollywood success in 2008, cutting across all social and cultural divisions. However this interpretative scheme offers a tool to look at the transformations that the industry is currently undergoing. These transformations are also a reaction to the way in which Nollywood has been represented in relationship to other cinematic traditions, and implies the need for a reconfiguration of view on Nollywood cinema within the landscape of world cinema production.

Nollywood, global cinema and the impact of the diaspora.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, when the UNESCO report was published hailing Nollywood as the second largest film industry in the world, the reactions within the industry were somewhat contradictory. To some the report was a premature and unmerited celebration,³¹ while to others it was considered evidence that Nollywood reached a level of quality worthy of true international recognition.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the Nollywood phenomenon started to become popular in the West beyond the diasporic audience. Nollywood directors and producers started to be invited to film festivals around the world to tell the intriguing story of a video industry that in just a few years had managed to make it on to the screens of an entire continent. However, at many of these festivals Western audiences were invited to meet a protagonist of the industry and then to watch one of the many documentary films about the video phenomenon produced in the past few years.³² As Jahman Anikulapo points out, some of those films have contributed to creating a fake image of Nollywood, the image of a completely unstructured industry, in which films are shot in a few days on an extremely low budget. ‘Those people – says Anikulapo – saw Nollywood the way they wanted to see it.’³³ That image has inevitably portrayed only part of the reality of the industry which has been constituted, from its beginnings, by both professionals and adventurers, people who have long experience in the show business and people who are only interested in making money quickly.

However, as Jonathan Haynes puts it, Nigerian films are often ‘familiar in the wrong ways and strange in the wrong ways’ and they do not respond to the exoticism of Western expectations

(Haynes 2000: 2), while many of the documentaries about Nollywood manage to establish that sort of 'postcolonial exotic' that achieves a 'commodification of the difference', through an 'aesthetic of decontextualization' (Huggan 2001: 16 and 22). The representation conveyed by some of these documentaries has contributed to creating a Nollywood label that can easily be fed to audience which are not familiar with the Nigerian context. Through this representation, "Nollywood" is exoticised as a cinema of adventurers, a sort of "Wild West" of filmmaking that might appeal to film professionals and audiences, tired of the heavy structures that usually characterize cinema industries in other parts of the world.

As Graham Huggan has emphasised, 'exoticism effectively hides the power relations behind these labels, allowing the dominant culture to attribute value to the margins while continuing to define them in its own self-privileging terms' (2001: 24). The resistance shown by many Nigerian directors toward their inclusion within the common definition of "Nollywood" can be interpreted via this point. As Kunle Afolayan has suggested 'if they are celebrating the fact that Nigeria has managed to find its space in the history of cinema creating its own way of doing it, then it's cool! But if they are trying to say that this is the best thing that could happen for a cinema industry in Africa, then I think they are wrong' (Afolayan 2010). The mentioned definition of "Nollywood" tends to objectify the Nigerian video phenomenon within a static category which works as a symmetrical opposition to, for instance, Hollywood's definition of cinema. Nollywood has become the "other" of Western cinema, an "other" which is strange and peculiar because in its content and aesthetics, but at the same time fascinating and attractive because of the structure of its production system and the dimension of its popular success.

The relation between the international affirmation of this definition of Nollywood and the new tendencies emphasised above is important. On the one hand the label "Nollywood" has helped to glamorise the Nigerian phenomenon, creating an international interest in what is happening in Nigeria. Thanks to its peculiar exoticism, Nollywood has become a successful brand which sells around the world and many Nigerians within the diaspora have exploited it to create for themselves an avenue into the cinema world. On the other hand, a significant part of the industry, and especially of the section producing film in English, has refused to accept such a delimiting definition of the industry, a definition which inevitably implies an inferior rank for Nigerian filmmaking. This segment of the industry is responsible for the production of the increasing number of high quality films mentioned above and that could change the international profile of the industry.

Analyzing the interactions between Bollywood and the international audience, Kaushik Bhaumik writes that 'the greatest influence that 'Bollywood' in world cinema has had, is on Bombay cinema itself. Entry into the club of world cinema has reconfigured the economic framework of the industry' (2006: 197). This interpretation can be applied also to the Nollywood case. The entry of

Nollywood into the global circuit of film festivals and its success with diasporic audiences around the world has had an important effect in pushing part of the industry toward new economic and marketing strategies. Thus the impact of the representation of Nollywood on the development of Nollywood itself is becoming a major factor to consider when analyzing the transformations that the industry is undertaking in the recent years.

The Nigerian video industry has always evolved very quickly and it is very difficult to predict the directions of its development. It has managed to find a place on the global cinema scene, and its interactions with the global cinema market are likely to play an important role in its future. At the same time, neither of the two tendencies schematized throughout this article seems to be able to guarantee Nollywood the kind of success it obtained in the first few years of its existence. The success of the first Nollywood, the Nollywood of the video boom, was the result of its ability to create a cinematic formula which cut across all social, cultural and economic differences and managed to touch at the same time the top and the bottom of the Nigerian social pyramid. The emergence of the two tendencies shows that something has to be done for Nollywood to move forward and survive the challenges imposed by the production crisis. But the future development of the industry relies on the ability to keep its local popular success alive.

The impact of the internationalization of Nollywood has pushed it toward better quality standards and has secured the films' mainstream release in conventional cinema. The needs and the tastes of some segments of the local audiences, on the other hand, have kept in view the importance of native languages and local settings. Perhaps, as the experiment undertaken by Tunde Kelani with his last film *Arugba* (2008) has shown, the future of the industry lies in the capacity of making these two tendencies unify, reintroducing cinema theatres in popular and rural neighbourhoods.³⁴ The development of digital technologies has reduced the difference between digital and celluloid, making the transition back to cinema possible at affordable costs. Now it is the turn of the local economic actors to understand the economic potential of a widespread reintroduction of cinema theatres in Nigeria.

Acknowledgements

This article was written during a residence as a visiting student at the Centre of West African Studies of the University of Birmingham, as part of the Cadbury Fellows' workshop "Turning in to African Cities. Popular Culture and Urban Experience in sub-Saharan Africa". I thank Karin Barber, the staff of the CWAS, the Cadbury Fellows Patrick Oloko, Shani Omari, Leon Tsambu and Anne Shumann, my supervisors Alessandro Triulzi and Cristina Ercolessi for their support and their advices. I am grateful to Lindiwe Dovey and Jonathan Haynes for their insightful comments and important suggestions. My research was entirely funded by the University of Naples "L'Orientale".

Filmography

Amazing Grace, produced and directed by Jetta Amata, Nigeria 2006.

Arugba, produced by Mainframe, directed by Tunde Kelani, Nigeria 2008.

Cindy's Note, produced by Amstel Malta Box Office and Digital Jungle, directed by Izu Ojukwu, Nigeria 2007.

Caught in the middle, produced by Project Nollywood, directed by Charles Novia, Nigeria 2007.

Home in Exile, produced and directed by Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, Nigeria 2009.

Ije, the journey, produced by Paola Moreno, directed by Chineze Anyane, United States-Nigeria 2009

Irapada, produced by Golden Effects, directed by Kunle Afolayan, Nigeria 2007.

Jenifa, produced by Olasco Film Nigeria Ltd, directed by Muyhdeen S. Ayinde, Nigeria 2008

Letter to a stranger, produced by Project Nollywood, directed by Fred Amata, Nigeria 2007.

Living in Bondage, produced by Kenneth Nnebue, directed by Chris Obi Rapu, Nigeria 1992.

Mission to Nowhere, produced and directed by Tecu Benson, Nigeria 2007.

Senseless, produced by Project Nollywood, directed by Fidelis Duker, Nigeria 2007.

Sitanda, produced by Amstel Malta Box Office and Digital Jungle, directed by Izu Ojukwu, Nigeria 2006.

100 days in the jungle, produced by Project Nollywood, directed by Chico Ejiro, Nigeria 2007.

Tango with me, produced and directed by Mamood Ali Balogun, Nigeria 2011.

The child, produced by Amstel Malta Box Office and Digital Jungle, directed by Izu Ojukwu, Nigeria 2010.

The Figurine, produced by Golden Effects, directed by Kunle Afolayan, Nigeria 2009.

The Tenant, produced by Jude Idada, directed by Lucky Ejim, Nigeria 2009.

Through the glass, produced and directed by Stephanie Okereke, United States-Nigeria, 2008.

White Waters, produced by Amstel Malta Box Office and Digital Jungle, directed by Izu Ojukwu, Nigeria 2008.

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¹ The crisis has affected particularly the section of the video industry producing videos in English. The official figures of films released in the last two years have not yet been delivered by the Nigerian Censor Board, but the drastic drop in production is commonly recognized and has also been underlined by the Director General of the Nigerian Censors Board, Emeka Mba in a recent interview (Njoku 2009b).

It is important to underline that the informal economy of the video industry has been affected by subsequent cycles of saturation and partial collapse since its early stages. However, as this article will try to demonstrate, the current crisis has reached a particularly dramatic level and is provoking a number of profound transformations. I thank Jonathan Haynes for his comments on this point.

² As underlined by Haynes and Okome, Nigerian filmmaking is organized along ethnic lines in a way that is quite unusual in other part of the continent (Haynes and Okome 1998: 125). The three main segments of the industry, the English/Igbo one, the Yoruba one and the Hausa one, evolved following different lines. They have different cultural references to ground their aesthetics and narratives, and their production systems – even if at times interrelated – are based on different dynamics of social solidarity. The segment producing film in English is the one that experienced the most popular success all over the African continent and within the African diaspora. The success of the English productions brought to this segment of the industry people belonging to all Nigerian ethnic groups, so that today, even if the majority of the producers and marketers is still of Igbo descent, the English sector of the industry is the most multicultural one.

³ With the current exchange rate, 1 Euro corresponds to about 200 Nigerian Naira.

⁴ Figures from the Nigerian Censor Board official website: www.nfvcb.gov.ng/statistics.php Even if the official statistics help to provide a general idea of the industry's tendencies, they cannot be completely reliable. In the first years of existence of the Censors Board, only a very small percentage of video production passed through censorship. This explains the small number of films censored in 1994 (only 3) at a time at which the industry was already burgeoning. It is also necessary to consider that even today several films go straight to the market, without passing through the official control. However, the Censors Board statistics are the only official figures existing and it is useful to consult them as a general reference.

⁵ Examples of these early films are Amaka Igwe's *Rattlesnake* (1995) and *Violated* (1996), Zeb Ejiro's *Domitilla* (1997), and Andy Amenechi's *Mortal Inheritance* (1996), which all became “classics” of Nollywood.

⁶ The role of piracy in the development of the Nigerian video industry is particularly influential also in the creation of its specific aesthetic language. The first Nollywood directors and audiences were deeply influenced by the consumption of pirated copies of foreign films (mainly from Hong Kong, India and the United States). Besides, the quality of these films was often altered in the burning

process, making the difference with the local produced films less evident and thus making the audience more tolerant towards the technical problems of Nigerian productions (Adejumobi 2007; Larkin 2004).

⁷ Unfortunately the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics does not have a figure for the number of decoders sold in the country. The market for satellite television is getting larger but to own a decoder is still considered a privilege that only the restricted middle class can afford.

⁸ It must be emphasized that, from a different perspective, the creation of Africa Magic had a very important positive impact on Nollywood. It multiplied Nollywood's popularity around the continent, and it participated in increasing the average technical quality of the films by imposing a technical standard on the films selected for broadcasting. It also offered a number of training opportunities for Nigerian crews and stimulated co-productions and artistic exchanges between different African countries (Njoku 2009c). The main problem that directors and producers seem to have is the lack of a common agreement on the contract policies to protect the interests of the category. By now every director, producer or marketer has a different deal with Africa Magic, which usually pays an average \$ 1000 for unlimited, but not exclusive, rights on the film (Njoku 2009c).

⁹ Video Compact Disc. This digital technology, cheaper than the DVD but better quality than the VHS, is extremely diffused in Eastern Asia and was introduced on the Nigerian market at the end of the 1990s. VCDs are very easy to reproduce and their introduction on the market made the work of pirates easier than it used to be when the films were released in VHS.

¹⁰ For instance, during my research I could monitor more than 10 video shops in the city of Turin, in Italy, all of them selling original copies.

¹¹ As Tony Abulu (2010) reported in a recent article, the internet site onlinenigeria.com is owned by Mr. Chucks Naemeka and his company Devace Inc. based in the United States. Mr. Naemeka declared to have an authorization to distribute all Nollywood films issued by the Nigerian Censors Board, but when contacted by the Filmmakers Association of Nigeria (FAN), an American association of Nigerian directors, the director of the Nigerian Censor Board “vehemently denied ever issuing such a license” (Abulu 2010). Mr. Naemeka has forged a fake license and until now his company is still illegally screening Nigerian films online, receiving millions of dollars for advertising on his internet site. Recently FAN denounced Mr. Naemeka and Devace Inc. to the US department of Justice and lawsuit is being prepared.

¹² The best example of this trend is the channel Sky 194, inaugurated in January 2008, which is entirely dedicated to the screening of Nigerian films for audiences in the UK and Ireland (Esan 2008).

¹³ It is important to underline that by stating the influence of the diasporic market on Nollywood economic situation I do not want to overstress it. The main market of Nigerian videos has been and

still is the local market. This has been one of the main reason for the large popular success of Nigerian videos, to which the diaspora contributed only lately and in a minor percentage.

¹⁴ See footnote number 4.

¹⁵ During my stay in Ojuda, Lagos, during January and February 2010 the power supplied by the Nigerian Electric Production Authority (NEPA) lasted rarely more than two hours a day, and came at different parts of the day, very rarely during the evening, when the people are most likely to want to watch a film at home.

¹⁶ During my stay in Lagos fuel scarcity, partly due to the absence of the Nigerian Federal President from his office and the political instability related to it, deeply affected the life of the Lagosians. Fuel prices increased more than 30% and interminable queues could be witnessed in front of most of the fuel stations around the city.

¹⁷ Anikulapo 2010; Ayrinde 2010; Ofeimum 2010.

¹⁸ Emeka Mba has emerged as a particularly influential character in relation to the industry over the past few years. Before starting his mandate at the Censors Board in 2005, he worked as Head of Content for MultiChoice Nigeria (the company that runs the satellite television DsTV) from 1995 to 2003, and he was one of the people who contributed to the creation of the Africa Magic channel.

¹⁹ As Emeka Mba says “we don't know who is distributing for you [...] so you can't come and say they've pirated my movie. Who do I chase?” (Ajeluorou 2009).

²⁰ Data from the text of the Distribution Framework, National Film and Video Censor Board 2007 (accessible at the Nigerian Censors Board headquarter in Abuja).

²¹ Emeka Mba explained this point in a recent interview with the Nigerian paper *The Guardian*: “If you are going to be in the business of distributing intellectual content across the country, which might have cost the producer N 5 to N 10 million, you must have capacity to do that. So we decided that all those who wished to be distributing films in this country must show the Board that they have the capacity to be able to do that. We said we want to see capacity in terms of offices, equipment and alliances that will amount to about N 30 million. It wasn't money that the marketer or distributor had to pay to us. It was for him to justify his business by declaring that as a distributor, he is worth N 30 million and with evidence to prove that. But in the absence of that evidence, we advised them to go and take an insurance or bank bond to show that they have ability to do these things” (Agbedo 2009).

²² The violence of the clash was extreme. Two members of the Censors Board staff were killed, one in Makurdi and the other one in Niger State, and others were stabbed and injured (Ajeluorou 2009).

²³ Igwe 2010; Imasuen 2010; Obaseki 2010.

²⁴ My research did not analyze the situation of the local language sections of the industry. However it is possible to say that these segments enjoyed a larger loyalty from their audiences which see in

them the only available entertainment in their own language. While the English language films had to compete with the film production of the Anglophone world (such as Hollywood, and the Anglophone Bollywood films), local language films were the only available product of this genre on the market. Besides, local language films tend to be shown less on satellite television channels. However this interpretation may need to be revised after the introduction by M-Net in March 2010 of two thematic channels, one broadcasting only Yoruba films and the other only Hausa films. The impact of these two channels on the market of local language films could further modify the situation within the industry.

²⁵ Even if the level of economic engagement of private corporations in Nollywood productions is still very low, some examples can be found. For instance, Izu Ojukwu has directed four films financed by Amstel Malta (*Sitanda*, *White Waters*, *Cindy's Note* and *The Child*) and Fidelis Duker, Charles Novia, Chico Ejiro and Fred Amata created the association "Project Nollywood" which has produced four films thanks to the sponsorship of Ecobank (Fidelis Duker's *Senseless*, Charles Novia's *Caught in the middle*, Chico Ejiro's *100 days in the jungle* and Fred Amata's *Letter to a stranger*).

²⁶ Cinema halls started to be reintroduced in Nigeria in 2005, firstly in Lagos, and then also in Abuja and Port Harcourt, thanks to the investment of the Nigerian company Silverbird and the South African Nu-Metro (Adelakun 2009b).

²⁷ The last Nigerian celluloid film censored by the Nigerian Censors Board before Amata's *Amazing Grace* was Bankole Bello's *Oselu*, released in 1996.

²⁸ The history of Northern Nigerian cinema culture has been extensively documented by Brian Larkin (2002; 2008). The situation here is very different from the one in the Southern part of Nigeria. Cinema theatre culture almost never disappeared here and in cities such as Kano the number of available screening halls is high. However this area responds to different market dynamics and only very rarely enters into relationship with Nollywood's English language productions. A well equipped cinema exists in Jos, at the Nigerian Film Institute, but it usually hosts thematic retrospectives, festivals and premieres, and does not engage with the commercial system of distribution.

²⁹ Balogun 2010; Imasuen 2010; Odugbemi 2010.

³⁰ It must be pointed out that, even if the diasporic market has become more influential than it used to be, no structured initiative to distribute Nigerian films in international cinemas has yet been created by any Nollywood protagonists. The circulation of Nollywood films in foreign cinemas is still the result of private initiatives of directors and producers, and is often limited to festivals and premiere screenings. However, as Tony Abulu (2010) reported in a recent article, the Filmmaker Association of Nigeria (FAN) based in the United States has recently undertaken an initiative to

structure the distribution of Nigerian films in the US, but it is too early to evaluate the results of this action.

³¹ As reported by Juliet Bumah (2009a), Eddie Ugbomah, one of the father of Nigerian celluloid cinema, commented the UNESCO report saying that “they are acknowledging us for shooting nonsense” and Ola Balogun, another of Nigerian cinema's ancestors, added ironically that “this is like comparing apples to potatoes.”

³² I counted at least 12 documentaries on Nollywood produced in the past few years: *Mission Nollywood – Peace Mission*, directed by Dorothee Wenner (Germany 2008), *Nick Goes to Nollywood* directed by Alicia Arce and Brenda Goldblatt (Great Britain 2004), *Nollywood Abroad* directed by Saartje Geerts (Belgium 2008), *Nollywood Babylon* directed by Ben Addelman e Samir Mallal (Canada 2009), *Nollywood, Just Doing It* and *Nollywood 2: doing it right* directed by Jane Thorburn (Great Britain 2008 and 2009), *Nollywood, le Nigéria fait son cinéma* directed by Julien Hamelin (France 2008), *The Strength of Africa* directed by Belinda Van de Graff (Holland 2008), *This is Nollywood* directed by Franco Sacchi (USA 2007), *A Very Very Short Story of Nollywood* directed by Awam Amkpa e Manthia Diawara (USA 2008), *Welcome to Nollywood* directed by Jemie Meltzer (USA 2008).

³³ In a recent interview, Anikulapo was particularly critical of one of the first documentaries shot about Nollywood, Franco Sacchi's *This is Nollywood* (2007). Even if the film contributed to make the Nollywood phenomenon popular in the United States, Anikulapo argues that “that film was telling a bunch of lies. That guy came in Nigeria, spoke with people who told him some lies and then he never came back to check [...] He saw Nollywood the way he wanted to see it” (Anikulapo 2010).

³⁴ Thanks to the support of the Lagos State Government, Tunde Kelani managed to screen his last film in all of the 59 Local government areas of Lagos State. The screenings, organized using Kelani's traveling cinema equipments, enjoyed wide popular success. The traveling cinema marketing strategy adopted by Kelani reintroduces a commercial practice used by the Traveling Theatres companies in the last years of their existence, when the shows were filmed and then projected around the country in improvised cinema halls.