



Research Paper

Films and Social Realities: A Critical Review of Some Selected Nigerian Video Films

¹Tolulope Abayomi Aluko, ² Adejare Samuel Odu

¹The Federal Polytechnic Offa, Kwara State, Nigeria

² Ajayi Crowther University Oyo, Oyo State

Abstract

In the early days of transition from celluloid film format of film production to home video films, obsession for commercialism was a disincentive to representation of social reality. Thematic focus revolved around occultism, fetishism, witchcraft, sexual display, bloodiness, violence, etc. for quick returns on investment. However, democratisation of the medium of exhibition coupled with the quality control of the contents by the regulatory agencies changed the trend. Content analysis of the some selected video films reveal a symbiotic relationship between dramatisation on the screen and unfolding events in social reality. The analysis is anchored on Marxian theory of arts that narrative structure and language must reflect reality to sensitise and edify for change. Among other findings, issues explored in the films in focus that affirmed social realism include, dictatorship, corruption in governance, police and policing, moral decadence at all levels of education and drug trafficking. Foray into this hitherto neglected issues with lasting impressions gives the film an edge over literary works in documentation of social realities. The audio-visual power of the screen makes it the most potent for cultural preservation, promotion and re-orientation.

Keywords: Films, Social Realities, Nigerian Video Films, and Commercialism

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I. Introduction

The relationship between arts of the theatre on stage and screen and the society can be said to be symbiotic, just as the unfolding events in the social reality have been inspiring topical themes, the audience are in turn entertained, enlightened and educated by watching enactment of their lives. On this symbiotic relationship between the theatre and the society, Traore (1972, p. 103) argues that:

Representation cannot be exact reflection of reality at every point, in the traditional theatre in Black Africa, the similarity with social reality is more striking than elsewhere. Of course, there is limit to resemblance. The theatre, while embodying social reality, also affords an escape from it. It stimulates as it entertains; but while stimulating and entertaining, it remains an integral part of society, reflecting society's feelings and even occasionally acting as its guide.

In line with this postulation dramatisation of unfolding events in the social, economic and political spheres of Nigeria in video films are reflection of social realities. Portrayal in these films which are either expository and satirical have been serving the dual purpose of sensitisation and edification. However, reaction of film critics, scholars and enthusiasts to this representation of social realities are diverse and controversial

Unlike literature, the audio visual power of the film makes it the most potent medium of documenting social realities for sensitisation and edification. Access to literature is still limited by level of literacy which justifies the adaptation of some literary works to film. The issues which literary writers may exploit and get away with, filmmaker has to handle with great subtlety and circumspect because of the long lasting impressions.

Also, in cultural preservation, promotion and re-orientation, the film also has an edge over descriptive analysis of literary works. This is typified Epic video films which are essentially costumes and period drama that afford filmmakers, the opportunity to showcase the rich cultural heritage of Nigeria. Most of the films recall precolonial period as depicted in setting and good visual composition that gives nostalgic feeling of unpolluted purity. There is therefore a tinge of African aesthetics in the way in which society and culture is represented in the epic videos (Shaka, 2017, p. 66).

To the film enthusiasts “who need some form of escape entertainment that will make them forget, even if momentarily, the mass poverty and sufferings in the land, such films keep them entertained, provide fantasy route to financial and social liberation” Shaka (2017, p. 59). On the other hand, film scholars and critics who resent the fact that this thematic pre-occupation are not explored with critical perspective to effect a change of mindset by the audience, such films are not a good representation of social realities.

Video films that normally attract these criticisms are of ritual genre which portray Nigerians as people who believe in ritual to acquire wealth and power. The attendant negative perception of the foreign audience is another cause for concern. These criticisms and negative perception does not however negate the fact that rituals of human sacrifice for wealth and power are not part of our social reality.

The focus of this paper is therefore not to join the controversy on the negative perception of some spheres of national life as depicted in Nigerian video films but to explore the relevance of this dramatisation of social realities on the screen to revitalisation of norms and values in the society. As literature and film medium share the similarities of reflecting social reality, our exploration of events dramatised in the films in focus is anchored on Marxian theory of literature and arts as championed by George Lukacs, Lucien Goldman, Ernst Fischer, Walter Benjamin, Terry Eagleton and host of others. “Any interpretation of text or artifice they contend, must stress the social significance of the work as it discusses historical context of the birth of such works” (Bamidele, 2003, p. 14).

Marxist Capitalist Mode of Production Theory

The capitalist mode of production is the system that organises production and distribution within capitalist societies. In a way to define capitalism, Popoola and Ojo (n.d.) aver that it is premised on the private ownership of the means of production, with accumulation of wealth as the central motive. They also see capitalism as free market or free enterprise in a way to describe an economic system where private sector holds sway in Nigeria and undoubtedly dominates the global economic system. This in essence is that capitalism system dominates the economy of most countries of the world and Nigeria is not excluded. The tenets of capitalism as an economic system include: private ownership, free choice, free market, competition, and profit maximization.

What is Business and why do People Engage in it?

In a simple definition, a business is defined as an organization or enterprising entity engaged in commercial, industrial, or professional activities. Feedough (2021, para.1) opines that a business is either an occupation, profession, or trade, or is a commercial activity which involves providing goods or services in exchange for profits. The term “business” therefore refers to the organized efforts and activities of individuals to produce and sell goods and services for profit. This is the traditional definition of a business viewing it from an angle of profit making.

Feedough (2021, para.7) goes further to say that profit which is the aim of any business entity may not be in monetary term alone, it can be a benefit in any form which is acknowledged by a business entity involved in a business activity. This submission falls within the modern view in defining a business entity. The theorists here based their argument on the fact that sometimes a business entity may be in business for customers satisfaction or other none monetary profit. It connotes that a business entity could be established for intrinsic or extrinsic value. But then the question remains “who finances the business?”. Relating to film making as a medium, who pays the workers and how do owners provide expensive equipment for the job?. These questions need to be answered because media production involves a lot of money. Hence, film making could be seen as business and commercial venture oriented. The capitalist orientation of Nigerian economy may continue to erode the social responsibility function of the media now in respect of film making. Social realities that are supposed to be addressed may be a little difficult. To a great extent, every business establishment is primarily a profit oriented venture. However, film producers must work within the social responsibility principle that media are expected to fulfil.

Nigerian Films and Social Realities

Before the advent of video format of film production, Nigerian film makers like their literary counterparts have historically documented the social mentality, fears and desires of the Nigerian society. Celluloid films that typified this trend include Ola Balogun’s works such as, *Cry Freedom*, *Money Power*, Sanya Dosumu’s *Dinner with the Devil*, Jab Adu’s *Bisi Daughter of the River*, the critical realist films of Eddie Ugbomah such as *The Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenusi*, *The Mask*, *Oil Doom*, *Vegeance of the Cult and Death of a Black President*. Others include Moses Olaiya Adejumo a.k.a ‘Baba Sala’s *Orun Mooru* and Mosebolatan, Wole Soyinka’s *Blues for a Prodigal* and Ladi Ladebe’s *Vender*.

However, this critical portrayal of unfolding events in the society was not sustained in the early days of video format of film production which commenced in the 1990s. In a stern memo to film producers in 1999,

James as cited in Jaynes (2006, p. 512), complained that, “the films were dominated by exploitation of negative tendencies’ in Nigerian culture including occultism, cultism, fetishism, witchcraft, devilish spiritualism, uncontrolled tendency for sexual display, bloodliness, incest, violence, poisoning etc” ... while we align with the fact that, this thematic pre-occupation are driven more by excessive commercialism to the detriment of a sense of social responsibility and relevance, they are not created from a vacuum but social reality.

After confining stage productions to the campuses for honing of talents in arts of the theatre, video films established themselves as an essential medium through which Nigeria represented itself from 1990s to date. But while the period that herald the commencement of video format of production was characterised with deep and prolonged political crisis, the films remained resolutely commercial in orientation and generally declined to address burning issues of our time as typified in joblessness, justice, equity, politics, social problems in education, medical services, housing, food, drug addiction and trafficking. This is in striking contrast to literary plays that explore these issues with critical perspective.

Another reason that may be adduced for why films that portray these socio-political themes seem not to have much incentives to producers in Nigeria is the fear that, “foray into the secret or public lives of the political class could be taken as portraying the political leadership in bad light. Thus, care is taken to treat subjects that would be safe in the eye of the ruling class, which means such films may not be of popular appeal to the audience”(Ayakoroma, 2008, p. 274).

Coincidentally, restoration of democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999 did not solve Nigeria’s political problems, but it created a more open political environment in which previously undiscussable topics can be aired. The video industry naturally invaded this new territory (Haynes 2006, p. 526). Subsequently, producers are no longer scared of giving filmic treatment to unfolding events in politics, security, education and culture for sensitisation and edification.

Social Realities in Nigerian Video Films

Emboldened by the freedom of information engendered by democratic governance, film makers were no longer discreet in dramatisation of excesses of military men and abuse of mandate by elected politicians directly and satirically. Subsequently, Sam Onwuka’s two-part *Stubborn Grasshopper* (Loved power, Died in power) takes on the story of the Abacha dictatorship itself, beginning with the annulment of the 12th June, 1993 election and ending with the dictator’s death. The expository nature of film is revealed in closeness of fictitious names to that of the leading characters in reality. Abacha becomes Alba, his wife Maryam becomes Sabina, Mashood Abiola becomes Chief Kash, Wole Soyinka becomes Professor Nobel, NADECO (the National Democratic Coalition) becomes WADECO, and Nigeria becomes Republic of *Wahala* (Trouble).

In general, all the twists and turns of the history of the regime are represented faithfully and in detail, from the bloody suppression of the rioting in Lagos after the annulment to the forced resignation of the head of the Interim National Government, the violated understanding with Abiola, the assassinations of Kudirat Abiola and NADECO leaders, the arrests of Generals Diya and Yar’Adua. The film thus, documents for posterity, dictatorial tendencies of Abacha regime and the resistant of human rights group and the people.

Political buffoonery of the politicians that took over as characterised in obsession for power and corruption in governance is captured in the films *Saworoide* and *Agogo Eewo* by Tunde Kelani. The films, *Saworoide* and *Agogo Eewo* are obviously satire on corruption in governance of Nigeria. Jogbo town represented Nigeria and her complexities, while Onijogbo (the king) represented the presidency which is always attraction of power for the geopolitical zones in Nigeria. The intrigues, struggles and alignments for the Onijogbo throne which culminates in bad government is a reflection of anti-democratic acts by politicians in Nigerian polity (Adeyanju, 2004, p. 307).

The Chieftains on the other hand are perfect replica of the politicians and political loafers who always hang around the corridors of power to sabotage people oriented programmes and policies for pecuniary gains. What lends credence to this observation is the on-going crusade against corruption by the General Muhammadu Buhari (Rtd)’s regime which has caught political dealers and swindlers napping.

In the two films, the crusade against corruption is led by the youths. Their image in the films is that of articulate and aggressive youths striving to resist mortgaging of their future through greed, avarise and exploitation. There is therefore the sensitisation of youths on the role expected of them in corruption ridden society. Closely allied to this, is the need to reawaken them on waning norms and values through portrayal of culture as typified in folktales, riddles and folksongs.

Equally, worrisome from the 1999, when Nigeria returned to democratic rule to date is the high rate of crime occasioned by youth unemployment and mass poverty. This in turn boosted armed robbery, kidnapping and killing for ritual purposes. The failure of the security agencies to arrest the situation made the people to take their destiny in their own hands by setting up neighbourhood watches. It is this scenario that inspired the *Issakaba* series which was another filmportraying crime and punishment.

Directed by Lancelot Oduia Imasuen in 2001, *Issakaba* dramatises the rampant cases of armed robbery, kidnapping and killing for ritual that overwhelmed the Nigerian security agencies in the south Eastern Nigeria. Alternative policing as characterised in *Issakaba* effectively complemented the police by confronting the criminals spiritually and physically. Segmented into four parts what is obvious from the crime scenes enacted in the film is the fact that, the invincibility of some armed robbers, assassins and ritual killers lies more in the spiritual power.

While the conventional police force relies on intelligence report and ammunition, the criminals are, in addition to sophisticated weapon, spiritually fortified against gun shot and detection of their criminal acts. The effectiveness of the *Issakaba* group in confronting them therefore lies in being spiritually fortified for defence and detection of criminals in addition to weapon (Lawal, 2015, p. 44). What this portends for police and policing in Nigeria is that alternative policing of *Issakaba* type to complement them is necessary but with checks and balances to prevent compromise and abuse.

Going further, moral decadence and acts of indiscipline that characterised all levels of education in Nigeria is dramatised in Sunday Soyinka's *Ewe Orun* (Heavenly Youth) (2001). Moral decadence and acts of indiscipline portrayed in the film which apes American film, *Lean On Me* include truancy, sexual harrasment and cultism. While *Lean On Me* focuses in secondary school setting, that of *Ewe Orun* is a typical primary school in Nigeria.

At the home front in the film, the disposition of the new headmaster towards coming to school late compels a pupil to complete the house chores given to him by the parents on time to avoid being late to school. In another household, the refusal of a pupil to go on errand for the mother in order to complete his home assignment affirmed the new attitude of the pupils to studies (Lawal, 2013, p. 294).

Cultism which has been the basis of terrorism and violent attacks at all levels of Nigerian educational system is depicted in the film with a teacher as the arrow head. It was revealed in one of their meetings that, what informed the formation of the group was the need to protect the interest and rights of members. However, with no nonsense stance of the new headmaster, members have a rethink of their membership of the cult.

Sexual harrasment and seduction which is another cankerworm that has eaten deep into fabrics of educational system in Nigeria is enacted in the sexual overtures of a randy teacher to a pupil. However, having got hint of the love advances, the headmaster laid an ambush for the culprit at his house on the appointed day. As he attempted to lure the innocent girl to bed, he was mopped by the headmaster and the pupils who have been eave-dropping.

In the same vein, the film, *Egbogi Oloro* (Hard Drug) parts one and two (2007/2008) documents the true life experience of the popular actress, Yetunde Wumi, when she was caught with hard drugs and subsequently sentenced to three years imprisonment with an option of One Million Naira (₦1,000,000.00) fine. In the narrative, Wumi whose acting career has earned her fame is confronted with the problem of having to refund the money loaned to her dead friend by a bank as guarantor. A confused Wumi in desperate search for the money to avoid prosecution is advised by a friend to try the illicit trade of drug trafficking. Banking on the spiritual fortification, she set out for the journey. The hard drug is detected in her luggage and she is promptly handed over to the law enforcement agents. The traumatic experience of the long trial as captured in the film sensitises her fans and the audience on the implications of inordinate ambition to get rich quick through drug trafficking.

Exploring the same theme of drug trafficking Tade Ogidan's *Family on Fire* (2012) is a campaign against desecration of Nigerian family and social values. Kunle, a single young man lives recklessly and wants to become rich overnight. Being the last child of the family, he enjoys his mother's support all times. At a point, the children decided to invite their mother over for a visit. Mama is quite excited at here sons' invitation to come and spend time with their families in London. Kunle latches on to the situation to play a fast one on the entire family. He uses his illiterate and unsuspecting mother as a drug courier.

II. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper an attempt was made to examine the symbiotic relationship between dramatisation on screen and unfolding events in the social reality. Critical reading of Nigerian films from the days celluloid format to these days of Home video format reveal portrayal of socio-political and cultural trauma Nigerians are passing through. It is also observed that, thematic focus on trending issues are dictated by the socio-political history of Nigeria and economic factors. While in the early days of video film format, the producers are criticised for living issues in political, social and economic spheres of national life for fantasy of ritual for wealth and power restoration of democratic rule with the attendant freedom of information change this trend. Events in the social reality explored in the films in focus attest to this change from fantasising to critical reflection of reality. Military dictatorship, corruption in governance, inadequacy in security, moral decadence in all levels of education and illicit trade of drug trafficking are subsequently giving filmic treatment.

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