

**Nollywood Cinema: A Disputed Taxonomy  
And the Analogy to Black American Cinema.**

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*This PhD thesis is dedicated to the memory of Linus O. Emelonye and Chinda Emelonye, two of the brightest minds I know whom time denied the opportunity to write their own.*

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Nollywood is the homogenizing metonym for the Nigerian film industry that emerged from the vestiges of a cinema-based celluloid tradition championed by the Yoruba traveling theatre, and on the back of Okey Ogunjiofor's 1992 film, *Living in Bondage*. It attained notoriety for its speed of production, low budgets and the informality of its distribution systems. However, by 2009, it had surpassed Hollywood to become the world's second largest producer of feature films, behind India's Bollywood. Since then, it has grown exponentially, overcoming the limitations of the Video Home Systems (VHS) and Video Compact Disk (VCD) formats. It has benefited from international training for its technicians and midwived the emergence of a 'New Nollywood' wave which has created a solid local cinema infrastructure, as well as global online streaming frameworks to show Nollywood films alongside international blockbusters. Hollywood studios and the world's biggest streaming platforms- such as Netflix, Paramount and Amazon Prime have also set up Nigerian operations which offer bouquets of entirely Nollywood contents and staking enormous investment on the future of the industry. Yet, a reluctance persists, on the part of critics, scholars and some practitioners to accord Nollywood 'cinema' status. It has been variously called an 'empire', a 'phenomenon', a 'home video industry'; anything else but cinema.

Using a cinema theoretical framework, this study explores the conceptual and philosophical characterisation of the term 'cinema', through the lens of film theories by philosophers such as Andre Bazin, Dudley Andrew and Trevor Ponech. It enquires into the constitutive elements for cinema taxonomy and weighs them, using a sceptical and postcolonial critical framework, against the elastic Nollywood paradigm. The finding that "what counts as cinema is up to us", reinforces this study's position that the boundaries of cinema should be drawn at the site of consumption as much as the site of production of films, and that Nollywood

should be analysed in its own positivity, through a wider, more complex lens which does not ignore the desires of its passionate audience.

This study also attempts a comprehensive historization of the Nigerian film industry, taking a contemporary snapshot of the state of Nollywood, particularly as it concerns the infiltration of Hollywood studios like Netflix, Paramount and Amazon Prime into the Nigerian cultural space. The aim is to juxtapose a similar Hollywood studios' penetration of two other fiercely independent Black film practices in the world, the politically charged race films of the 1920s and the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. This allows for the exploration of similarities and divergences which will be utilised in conjecturing, to what extent, Hollywood studio's encounter with Nollywood in the present dispensation will differ from their unpleasant involvement with the African American film movements of the last century.

Finally, although lessons should be learnt from the experience of African American film movements of the last century, this study believes that the relative difference in Nollywood's make up and in the present information age in which the industry operates may offer more scope for its survival than the race films and blaxploitation films could afford. However, Nollywood's biggest asset has been its audience and as long as it retains the support of that audience, the industry will survive powerful external interests and rise above its own contradictory quest to fit into western paradigms, to continue adapting, evolving and thriving.

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## INTRODUCTION

### 0:01      **Aim and Scope of Study**

The first aim of this study is to critically examine the widely held scholarly assessment that Nollywood, the contemporary Nigerian film industry, is not high art and therefore cannot be classified as cinema (Barber, 2004, p.181; Adesokan, 2004, p.190; Miller, 2016. p.3). Even the Yoruba traveling theatre era of the industry in the 1970s which made films on celluloid and showed in cinemas was also denied unanimous cinema classification. Its practitioners were accused of placing cinema under the domination of theatre and with what has been termed aesthetic blockage, they made it a servant of theatre (Haynes, 1995. p.102). The contemporary Nigerian film industry has evolved to become one of the biggest cultural industries in the world (Nzekwe, 2023); the second largest film industry, according to UNESCO, behind India's Bollywood and ahead of Hollywood (Jedlowski 2013: p.25; Haynes, 2011: p.68). Yet, the industry's cinema credentials remain hotly disputed. Therefore, this study emerged, in part, from contemplating the reasons for this repeated cinematic alterity.

While this study conducts a comprehensive historization of the entirety of the post-independence Nigerian film industry, the granular focus of its major discussions, findings and conclusions will be confined within the temporal margins of the Yoruba traveling theatre, Nollywood and New Nollywood epochs; from circa 1972 to the end of this study in July 2024. When used, the term Nollywood will be referring to the entire post Yoruba traveling theatre Nigerian film industry, starting from the 1992 VHS film *Living in Bondage* and inclusive of New Nollywood, while the import of New Nollywood's term will be restricted to the post-2010 sophisticated film practice that extends to the cinema and streaming strands of the industry as at the conclusion of this study in 2024.

This study attempts to interrogate, for the first time, Nollywood's cinema credentials; starting with the constituents of cinema, and whether the term is prescriptive, has some putative

ideological structure, or is simply an arbitrary, descriptive stamp used at the whim of scholars and critics. Predicated on the theories of renowned film philosophers like Andre Bazin, Dudley Andrew, Noel Carroll and Trevor Ponech, and with unprecedented contributions from a sizeable cohort of often-overlooked Nollywood practitioners, this study will deconstruct cinema from a simultaneously semantic, etymological, conceptual, philosophical and practical standpoint to pose a second major research questions: what is cinema?

According to extensive research, no published study has gone down this seemingly obvious route of scholarly enquiry to dispassionately examine Nollywood's claim to cinemanness (Okagbue, 2024) based, not just on the subjective opinion of a scholar or a critic, but grounded in established and verifiable film theories. (Please note the use of the word "cinemanness" here. It will be contextualised in Chapter One below). Motivated by this paucity or indeed a complete absence of academic research in this regard, this study makes a novel and unique contribution to knowledge by elevating, with empirical vigour and focus, the complex arguments surrounding Nollywood's cinemanness. To achieve this, it will unequivocally establish the conceptual margins of the cinema taxonomy and determine objectively, if the contemporary Nigerian film industry, in any of its incarnations, can be deemed to fit into them. Such critical certainty will not only have application for Nollywood scholarship, and implication for the industry's cinema inclusion debate, it will also provide a systematic and standardised paradigm for determining the cinema identity of any other minority film practice in the world.

The second major aim of this study juxtaposes the currently-celebrated infiltration of major Hollywood studios into the Nollywood cultural economy with what looks like a symmetrical penetration that undermined and eventually ended the fiercely independent African American film movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This analytical equivalence is intended to examine the current online commodification of New Nollywood (Nwigwe, 2023); to seek

out similarities and fashion out divergences with the experience of the race films and the blaxploitation film movements of the last century, in order to deduce how far New Nollywood's fate under the spectre of Hollywood studios will differ from theirs. In other words, in their perpetual quest for more fertile terrains, when, and not if, the Hollywood studios like Netflix and Amazon Prime leave Nigeria's media space; just as the likes of Warner Bros, MGM (Now owned by Amazon) and United Artistes left the African American 20<sup>th</sup> century film cosmos, would Nollywood simply implode like the race film and blaxploitation film movements? Or will New Nollywood, its current incarnation, have enough in its inchoate structure, intrepid informality, multiplicity of monetisation options and audience loyalty to enforce a more positive prognostication?

The thematic emphasis of this study on African American film movements from the last century and their equivocation with New Nollywood, while recognising that there are many African American film movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, will be focused on only two of them. The first is the race films of the 1920s championed by Oscar Micheaux and Emmett J. Scott, and exemplified by films like *The Birth of a Race* (1918) and *Body and Soul* (1924). And secondly, the blaxploitation films of the 1970s; pioneered by Melvin Van Peebles and Gordon Parks Jr and epitomised by *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, (1970) and *Shaft* (1971).

As will be revealed shortly in this introduction, this study has conducted a broad exploration of theoretical frameworks to answer its research questions. All of them, from the critical historization of Nollywood to the deconstruction of cinema; from the sceptre of postcolonial rage to the intermittent surge of Black American cinema culture, all have provided the foundational postulations to ground this study's analyses and generalisations in established ideas. However, this study's overarching theoretical framework is an amalgam of two theories- the concept of cinema and the disruptive impact of the contemporary Nigerian film industry; understood as an illustration of postcolonialism. Although not often combined, these two

varying vistas offer an opportunity for the evolution of Nollywood and its claim to the cinema taxonomy to be explored simultaneously. Furthermore, this dual perspective will utilise the experience of the African American film movements of the last century to predict a future for New Nollywood as it engages in a comparable encounter with hegemonic influences from Hollywood studios; all against the backdrop of New Nollywood's existential struggle to maintain its cultural identity. While a clutch of other theories will inevitably deepen understanding and provide further context, it is primarily on the basis of the theories of cinema and postcolonialism that this study's assumptions, analyses, examinations and indeed conclusions will be predicated.

## **0:02            Research Questions**

In a bid to place this study within a specific purview and in tandem with its aims, the following research questions will guide the study's confines of analysis.

1. How did the term Nollywood and the industry associated with it evolve and how have its aesthetics, conventions, classifications, production, distribution and consumption specificities defined its identity and perception as cinema?
2. What is cinema and what are the constituents of the taxonomy which a film practice has to exemplify in order to be classified as such?
3. With particular focus on Hollywood's infiltration of the industry, what is the present state of Nollywood and how does it chime with the rise, peaking and fall of independent Black American film movements of the last century?
4. And to what extent can these comparisons be used to envisage a future for Nollywood?

The answers to these questions constitute the gap in learning which this study must cultivate. They will also aid the critical understanding of how Nollywood's history has come to shape its identity and its present hegemonic cultural position in Africa. The research questions will also

allow this study to embark on an exercise in futurism to preview Nollywood's ensuing loss of editorial and distributive control to global streaming platforms and its effects on the ideology, identity and sustainability of the industry as it enters the fourth decade of its existence. As, still, the largest independent Black film industry in the world (Okhai, 2022), comparisons with the only other two similar practices from the last century provide a much-needed critical vista through which practitioners, administrators and academics can project Nollywood's evolution. Such appraisals will also contextualize Nollywood's commercial engagement with the very territorial Hollywood, vis-a-vis its aspiration to, without compromising on the ideals that engendered its emergence, be accepted and recognized as a veritable global cinema industry.

### **0:03            Justification for Study**

This study initially anticipated that the eventual exit of Hollywood studios from Nigeria may occur in a distant future. However, recent events have brought forward the resulting impasse from such withdrawal and pulled it into sharp contemporary focus; thereby uplifting the projection to an uncanny case of academic prophecy (Babatope, 2024). Suddenly on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 2024, Amazon Prime announced an end to its speculation in Africa (Nigeria and South Africa) and the Middle East, and its immediate withdrawal from the regions so that it can focus on European originals to prioritise their "resources on what matters most to customers". In a terse statement, Amazon Prime Video vice-president for Europe, Barry Furlong, said that the closure of African operations was to "rebalance and pivot...resources to focus on areas that drive the highest impact and long-term success" (Yossman, 2024). This can be interpreted as meaning that Amazon Prime had come to the sudden conclusion that Nigeria and South Africa are no longer focus areas for its long-term success, so much so as to warrant, not a systematic, phased withdrawal as is customary in these matters, but an abrupt and decisive departure that has taken even senior Amazon Prime staff by surprise.

Under this impulsive policy change, which goes against the grains of the bold claims to back African storytelling made by Ned Mitchell, Amazon Prime's former Head of Originals for Africa and the Middle East, when Amazon Prime launched formally in Nigeria less than two years ago, Amazon Prime immediately stopped investment in and cut the entire human resources team for Africa and the Middle East (Yossman, 2024). There was no transitional period; just an instantaneous end. Like the egress of the Hollywood studios from the blaxploitation film movement in circa 1975, in which they did not seek to reassign displaced projects and African American professionals to other areas (Walker et al, 2009), Amazon Prime has neither introduced any bridging arrangements to wean off collaborators nor have they reallocated staff to alternative assignments. The announcement of the termination of its Africa operations and the dismissal of its various teams were with immediate effect. While within its rights to make business decisions on the location and duration of its operations, this shocking change in direction has underlined Nollywood's vulnerability (Erinugha, 2024) and shocked the entire Nigerian film industry into bewilderment.

Filmmakers have started scrambling to find a means to plug the gaping blackhole that this abrupt exit has blown in their confidence and in New Nollywood's financial structure and mindset. Some Nollywood practitioners fear that this move will strengthen Netflix' hand, as the only remaining operational streamer in the Nigeria ecosystem and lead to a worsening of their valuation of Nollywood content (Ugwu, 2024); that is until the "wheels of the Hollywood train fall off completely to bring this phase of cultural imperialism to a shuddering stop" (Munis, 2024). Whatever happens going forward, this study's analogy of the Nollywood situation to African American film movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and indeed the recommendations it will proffer to forestall similar unsavoury outcomes from "Hollywood's profit-driven, self-seeking engagement" (Novia, 2014) have been thrown into sharp relief by

the seismic occurrence on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2024, thereby accentuating the timeliness and relevance of this study.

This study found a complete absence of any scholarly work or article, published in journals or books that makes the achingly obvious correlation between the originally independent African American film movements of the last century and Nollywood's contemporary version of black independent practice; both of which attracted the attention of Hollywood studios operating on the notorious dispersed production model. By making this neglected analogy and drawing inferences, where suitable, from the fate of the race films and blaxploitation film movements, this study opens up different research vistas that can project into the future in some kind of academic prognostication for New Nollywood, as well as examine how New Nollywood's cultural specificity and its quest for global acceptance coalesce to forge its syncretic, hybrid identity (Oluyinka, 2008). The various outcomes have the potential of providing researchers, policymakers, Nollywood practitioners and indeed the Hollywood studios themselves with a dispassionate scrutiny of the impact of the studios' incursion and actions taken so far in the course of it; both intended and inadvertent.

Teaching, writing and research in global academia are dominated by a small white elite whose narrow perspective on everything disenfranchises more culturally diverse people from minority backgrounds like Africans or African Americans and threatens the humanistic values upon which modern education is founded (Day et al, 2022. p. 1). Since Euro American knowledge is prioritised, those whose interests fall outside of its core are ostracised in what has been aptly termed "epistemicide" (p.2)- the minimisation or the complete destruction of intrinsic knowledge of colonised or suppressed people - "to maintain the illusion of Euro-American intellectual superiority" (ibid). Accordingly, most studies on the Nollywood film industry, even from some of its foremost scholars like Jonathan Haynes have frequently ignored voices from the industry, only paying lip service to input from Nollywood practitioners

by eking out the perfunctory participation of a few of the academically disinterested Nollywood professional and, then using same as basis for drawing far-reaching conclusions on their opaque industry (Nwigwe, 2023).

Recently, inclusivity, diversity and decolonisation of research have been bandied about as buzz titles in academia. There is a willingness, even if that is not matched by commensurate action, in academia to confront the harmful legacy of colonisation (Batty, 2020) with the aim of redressing systemic inequalities, allowing consideration of equity, culture and identity in educational conversations (Dei, 2016); critiquing forms of elitism and the inclusion of previously marginalised people in academic research in order to decolonise it (Day *et al*, 2022. p. 3). What better way to decolonise a research field like Nollywood than by allowing its practitioners, a previously excluded demographic at the core of that field, to contribute to conversations that go to the very essence of their identity and their livelihood, even if that means adopting flexible methodologies which allow some informal data through from under the academic high walls.

This study attempts to challenge the inequality and unfairness inherent in the tendency for ostensible and nominal representation of Nollywood practitioners in research, by proactively adopting a methodology that transcends the clerically intensive data collection style prevalent in humanities research which has been proven to be unsuccessful with busy Nollywood professionals (Ezepue, 2023). Implementing a flexible blend of quantitative and qualitative data collection mechanism, including the use of oral interviews, voice notes, WhatsApp and text messages, has allowed this study to raise the response rate from Nollywood practitioners from an initial 8%, to a respectable 42% of those canvassed. This methodology became imperative because the process of relinquishing the power and privilege obtained from colonisation is usually complex (Day *et al*, 2022. p.9) and may sometimes demand some



affirmative action in the form of an inclusive methodology. This circles the approach back to the concept of postcolonialism that pervades nearly every aspect of this study.

To attenuate the impact of this approach and to prevent follow-on research from carrying those flaws forward, the data generated has been subjected to a transcription and validation process under the rigorous scrutiny of Goldsmiths research ethics provisions so as to formalise them and make them valid, if not totally reliable. This included choosing appropriate samples, careful weighting of findings, prolonged engagement with cohorts and finally a process of triangulation using multiple methods and theories to cross-check data. Despite such remedial action, this study accepts that an innate risk still exists that the data collected through these somewhat casual methods may be susceptible to contamination by bias, personal relationships, power dynamics or by their sheer informality, and may therefore become untrustworthy. Indeed, all data collection methodologies possess the same inherent risks in varying proportions. However, while this informal methodology is not recommended as a perpetual strategy, this study has employed its catalytic potential to decolonise Nollywood research and kickstart a diverse and inclusive scholarly engagement with Nollywood practitioners. Its use in this case, coupled with the exploitation of the writer's extensive contacts within the industry, based on over twenty years of practice, has resulted in what has been described as the largest cohort of Nollywood practitioners in any academic study on the industry (Babatope, 2023). Against the backdrop of the elitist exclusion of Nollywood practitioners from scholarly research affecting them and the legendary difficulty to engage them in significant numbers (Ezepue, 2023), the overall value of extensively capturing the voices of this unique and elusive research demographic in this manner, may more than compensate for the plausible potential for its unreliability and data corruption.

In other words, capturing the voices of the practitioners in such numbers validate the findings and postulations of this study more than the informality of the data collection method

devalues their worth. Furthermore, there is evidence that Nollywood practitioners have been inspired by the fact that one of their own had conducted the study and it is written in a language that does not exclude them (Okpue, 2023). Both of these factors have served to demystify the elitism of academic research and it is further hoped that the power of hearing their own voices loudly in matters concerning them, may become additional motivation for the scholarly reclusive practitioners to willingly participate in and enrich other academic research, such that this apparent lowering of the methodology fence may not have to be repeated for future studies.

#### **0:04            Literature Review**

As this dissertation will not be utilising a separate literature review chapter, it will instead intricately incorporate detailed textual references to existing literature into the discussions in the various chapters. Meanwhile, the ensuing exploratory evaluation of published works on the major concepts of this study will offer a suggestive but sufficient conceptual foundation for the study.

As a practitioner in Nollywood for over 20 years, this researcher has had a hands-on and practical understanding of the industry, albeit, without a scholarly clarity. Based on that long association and an oeuvre that is remarkable in its depth and critical acclaim, this study was advised to adopt a practice-based research methodology. In its place, and to ensure a rigorous research endeavour that is not predicated on any narcissistic assumptions, this study chose a grounded theoretical model with a postcolonial and ethnographic undertone. This has allowed for a broad-based review of the theories and concepts that impact this study's many issues while exploring scholarship that dialectically contextualises them. The resulting bibliography has taken nearly two years to fully deconstruct and analyse, providing this study with a panoramic analytical standpoint, as well as the introductory and somewhat corrective material for this study's de facto defensive viewpoint on all things pertaining to Nollywood.

Four main theoretical settings provide the assumptions and research architecture that validate and lend meaning to this study. Firstly, Nollywood Genealogy and Ontology offers a representative review of the Nollywood scholarship, mapping and scoping the subject to demonstrate a cogent dearth of literature that go to the root of Nollywood's cinema status denial amongst scholars and critics. The intention is to provide a rationalisation for this study and to underline its relevance, urgency and imperative. Secondly, the Concept of Cinema deconstructs the cinema framework; digging into the body of filmic philosophy to establish what cinema is and determine the criteria, if any, for its taxonomy. The objective will be to, for the first time, contrast Nollywood against whatever inclusion parameters that the literature recommends. Thirdly, the Intermittent Surge of Black American Cinema will further investigate the sparse literature on Black American cinema movements of the last century to highlight ontological correlation with Nollywood. And finally, Postcolonial Rage, Hybridity and Identity will dredge the contested waters of postcolonial theory to discover how the concepts such as writing back to the centre, identity and hybridity come together to define Nollywood's quiet resistance, as well as the postcolonial implications of its new alliance with Hollywood studios.

#### **0:04:01 Nollywood: Genealogy and Ontology**

This study conducted an extensive research of Nollywood scholarship and discovered that it has exponentially increased from what it was in the early days when Jonathan Haynes, Onookome Okome and Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike pioneered it in the late 1990s. A glut of academic books, journals and essays have been published to date on Nollywood, looking at many aspects of the eclectic industry, such as its generic configuration, aesthetics, transnational dimension, and even its sub-cinema characteristics.

When the writer shared his ambition of embarking on doctoral research on Nollywood with more established African cultural scholars, he was advised that the first stop should be

Ukadike's *Black African Cinema* (1998). Taking their advice, it was one of the first books that was devoured in preparation for this study, and it provided an extensive historical and theoretical underpinning for this exploration. *Black African Cinema* deserves its high reputation as a foundational, seminal text in African cinema discourse. Its historical chronicling of African cinema is authoritative and foretold the formula that finally established Nollywood.

...African cinema has not been able to exploit the continent's economic potential. An attempt to pull African film practice out of its current form of marginality can only be achieved if genuine development of the audience and reception patterns are refocused. (p.253)

Having said that, *Black African Cinema* was written at a time when African film studies and indeed, African cinema were in their embryonic stages and written for an audience of sceptics who saw the practice as mediocre and its discourse as rather perfunctory. This criticism may appear harsh on the book that became the touchstone for African cinema scholarship. However, with the benefit of hindsight and nearly three decades of African cinema practice and academy behind it, this study will pivot more towards a deeper ideological and theoretical inquisition of Nollywood and its controversial "cinema" taxonomy, as the perfect exemplar of the Black African Cinema of Ukadike's dreams.

Jonathan Haynes in 2016 crystallised over 15 years of research and organic studies on Nollywood into *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* and it has become one of the most important reference materials in Nollywood discourse. Before this book, it had been difficult for most scholars of Nollywood to digest the industry in an articulated, scholarly manner due to its multiple facets, its informality and certainly its scale. In choosing to look at Nollywood through a generic vista, Haynes is able to present a coherent study on Nollywood's many genres as a means of exploring its genealogy, identity, aesthetics and canons. Published in 2016, *Nigerian Film Genres* is unable to capture neither Nollywood's "platformisation" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018;) nor the arrival of the Hollywood studios threatening to dominate New Nollywood. And by the time this study is completed in late 2024, *Nigerian Film Genres* would

be about 8 years old. For an industry at the cutting edge of a restlessly fluid technology, that may be enough time to render some of its position and postulations, no matter how initially compelling, somewhat anachronistic. Furthermore, despite its vociferous support for Nollywood, *Nigerian Film Genres*, in line with other global studies at the time, still refuses to describe Nollywood as cinema; choosing to call it a ‘phenomenon’ instead (Haynes, 2016. p. 25).

Babson Ajibade’s contribution to the book- *Global Nollywood: The transnational dimensions of an African video film industry* titled “Nigerian Videos and Their Imagined Western Audiences: The Limits of Nollywood’s Transnationality” (2013)- resonates with this study by dint of its farsighted hypothesis that Nollywood’s attempts to pander to western technical demands could take the “Nolly” out of the “wood”, thereby eliminating its essence and sacrificing what might have been important for African audiences (Ajibade, 2013. p.281). In some kind of fulfilment of that prediction, Nollywood today appears to be in the throes of an ideological impasse at the intersection between bold artistic identity and unashamed conformism, between upholding the “nolly” in defiance of the “wood” and embracing the “wood” at the expense of the “nolly”. This study will analytically stretch that paradox to yield further illuminating epistemic and socio-political insights as to emergence, impact and future outlook of the industry.

*African Experiences in Cinema* (1996), edited by Imru Bakari and Mbye B. Cham, presents a detailed historical survey of cinema in Africa and features elucidating studies, including an article from iconic African filmmaker, Med Hondo. In Hondo’s “What Cinema is for Us”, the characteristic ideological militancy of the firebrand filmmaker is evident in his rant against western hegemonies for

throwing a cloak of fraternal paternalism over our filmmakers, ignoring and discrediting their works, blaming them, in the short term forcing them to comply with a formal and ethical mimesis- imitating precisely those cinemas we denounce- in order to become known and be admitted

into international cinema, in the end forcing them into submission, into renouncing their own lives, their creativity and their militancy. (p.40)

Hondo was speaking in 1979; however, his projections reverberate prophetically with the present circumstances for New Nollywood as it searches for relevance under the spectre of Hollywood studios that is forcing the industry to yield elements of its core identity in an unequal embrace. Hondo continues to warn that “this will continue until we grasp the crucial importance of this cultural and economic strategy, and create our own networks of film production and distribution, liberating ourselves from all foreign monopolies” (Hondo, 1996. p.41). Nollywood was fashioned in apparent adherence to this counsel. However, as the industry enters its fourth decade, most of its achievements in forging a certain level of artistic and commercial independence in distribution and production are being threatened by the concessions it is being compelled to make in order to be admitted into the global cinema fraternity. A contemporary elaboration of this identity riddle is offered in this study.

Jedlowski became one of the few international researchers to remotely associate the word cinema with Nollywood. In his 2012 article titled “Small Screen Cinema: Informality and Remediation in Nollywood” (2012), he excoriates the Nollywood industry.

The films that the industry produces are often referred to as cinema but, compared to the output of other film industries around the world, Nollywood produces something that can be located in-between cinema and television...something that I would like to call “small screen cinema” (Jedlowski, 2012).

By diluting his flattering cinema association with the phrase “small screen”, Jedlowski argues in favour of rebranding Nollywood by inextricably binding the informality of its production and distribution systems to a hybrid identity that is inferior to cinema. Paradoxically, this article was written in a period when many Nollywood films (such as *Ije* (2010), *The Mirror Boy* (2011), *The Figurine* (2009) and *Anchor Baby* (2010) had transcended the TV screen and were battling Hollywood blockbusters for box office supremacy in multiplexes across in Nigeria and West Africa. This research will not make the error of capriciously deciding, one way or the

other, Nollywood's entitlement to cinema classification without, first, investigating what conditions-precident, if any, are required for such categorisation, and then juxtaposing Nollywood against same to arrive at a taxonomy that is based on first-hand , quantifiable and verifiable criteria.

#### **0:04:02      Deconstructing the Cinema Framework**

The dictionary definition of cinema sees the concept as either the uncountable noun relating to “the business and art of making films” or the countable noun that is suggestive of “a place where people go to watch films for entertainment” (Collins, n.d.). While this categorisation, shared by many Nollywood practitioners (Okadigwe, 2023; Obi-Rapu, 2023) may be broadly correct, it provides a rather simplistic explanation to a very complex concept. Besides, this study predominantly channels its scope towards the narrower “film industry” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) element of this binary definition; only straying fleetingly into the “infrastructural” (Gukas, 2023; Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023) fundamentals of cinema in briefly considering issues such as cinema count and cinema-to-population ratio calculations.

With the difficulty inherent in attempting to reductively define cinema, theorists have disagreed over the real meaning of the term. Andre Bazin's *What Is Cinema?* (2004) is still regarded as one of the most significant essays ever written on the moving image (Bazin, 2004. p. xiv) since its first publication in 1967. Bazin illuminates the concept with eloquence and intellect, isolating three features that differentiate cinema from other art forms- pictorial imagery, produced by photographic means and displayed so as to produce the impression of movement (ibid. p.58). He also identifies cinema's unique ability to satisfy our “appetite for illusion by the mechanical reproduction in the making of which no man plays a part” (p.12). However, despite their declaratory titles and the exceptional intellectual clarity with which they were written, the two volumes were unable to answer the question that they posed in the title

(Ponech, 2009: p.56): what is cinema? This study, while admiring Bazin's undeniable and uncommon imagination, will go further than his books, with the benefit of more recent research, to not only attempt a concise delineation of cinema's essence, but to also fragment it into its constituent parts so that parallels can be drawn between them and marginal film practices like Nollywood.

*The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film* (2011) edited by Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga is a compendium of critical studies on the philosophy of film. Amongst the specially commissioned contributions from international scholars to the book, Trevor Ponech's chapter titled "Definition of Cinema" offers a pertinent and summary deconstruction of cinema as something that is photographically produced, pictorially represented and delivered onto a surface, so as to produce impression of movement (Ponech, 2011. p.56). This definition which proposes five precepts for cinema taxonomy with a broader scope than Bazin's has tended to lower the bar for the cinema taxonomy so that most video productions can fit into its loose paradigm. Although some of these precepts have been eroded by technological advances, they represented the first attempt to itemize the constituents of cinema. In a paradoxical statement which will be explored further in chapter four, Ponech conceded that due to its close connection with technology and culture, cinema may be an impossible phenomenon to capture in a definition (Ponech, 2008. p.57).

### **0:04:03                      Postcolonial Rage, Hybridity and Identity**

The attraction of this study which incidentally doubles as its biggest challenge is that it is located at the intersection between humanities and politics; between film studies and postcolonial scholarship. Apart from the theoretical lens of cinema discussed above, the study has chosen to see the issue of Nollywood's identity and indeed its classification as cinema from a postcolonial discursive perspective. The simple justification for this choice could be the



political notion that Nigeria is a previous colony of the British and the need for historical accuracy makes this postcolonial perspective essential. However,

...beyond postcolonialism as a historical event and desire, there lies a realm where a dialectical interplay takes place between the present and past, myth and history, widening the frame within which the identity of a new postcolonial formation can be figured as a *multiple political ontology* (Mpalive-Hangson, 2007. p.6).

Accordingly, Nollywood's reluctant role of answering back to the empire, its agenda of appropriating the imperial language and the filmmaking apparatus, and its obligation to challenge the cultural supremacy of the west through a complex interplay of power, alterity, identity and resistance, all combine to provide more profound rationale for the adoption of the fluid subject area of postcolonialism.

Leela Gandhi's book *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (2019) is an influential source on postcolonial theory. With a writing style that is sometimes opaque, the book explores subalternity, Marxism, Orientalism and the anti-colonial identity. Though erudite, the book favours literary criticism over film theory, and the Indian sub-continent enjoys a preponderance in its textual and thematic references. However, it deserves its place by virtue of providing a certain theoretical authority which this study has appropriated to elucidate its initial appreciation and eventual interrogation of the heavily contested postcolonial subject matter.

*Beginning Postcolonialism* (2010) by John McLeod is a relatively more diluted take on the concept. Of consequence to this research, the book analyses hybridity, using a broader discursive context. It opines that when the native identity of the colony collides with that of the coloniser, what is produced is a hybrid. However, Mpalive-Hangson Msiska provides a new idiom for understanding that postcolonial identity in his book, *Postcolonial Identity in Wole Soyinka* (2007). Although it was predicated on the literary works of renowned Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, its postulations can be adapted for Nollywood. Written in an obscure language

that is reminiscent of Soyinka's cryptic writing style, the book, among other things, presents hybridity as a comparative frame which can be used to remodel an authentic postcolonial identity, in a manner that opens it up to "ethnic, national and international inclusiveness" (Mpalive-Hangson, 2007. p.14).

#### **0:04:04      The Intermittent Surge of African American Cinema.**

An African American film is "any film whose central narrative explores the life and experience of the African Diaspora in the United States" (Reid, 2005. p.1). *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s* (2007) by N. Lawrence is one of the few books that attempt a historical recollection of the African American film movements; starting from the race films in the 1920s to the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Although somewhat lacking in literary profundity, the book offers a welcome introduction and chronological detail to some of the African American film movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, helping to situate and illuminate this study's exploration of ideological parallels with Nollywood. Its value to this study has been further amplified by the surprising absence of an abundance of scholarly literature on these important film movements.

*Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (2015) by Allyson Nadia Field continues the tradition of anecdotal narration of the movements. It traces the genealogy of the race films as an offshoot of Booker T. Washington's uplift movement (Field, 2015. p.3) which employed the "bootstrap mentality" to engender a shift from the critiquing of Hollywood's misrepresentation of African Americans to a passionate call for Black self-representation, deploying film as "both a mechanism for the misrepresentation of Black humanity and a tool for asserting it" (Field, 2015. p.1). The role that this heightened and overt political stance played in the race film movement's longevity or

lack of, allows this study to contrast Nollywood's more nuanced political disposition as it prognosticates the industry's future.

*Black American Cinema* (2012), edited by Manthia Diawara, provides a slightly more critical perspective on the African American film movements. It explores the relationship between Oscar Micheaux and the Hollywood race films of the 1920s and Melvin Van Peebles and the blaxploitation films of the 1970s, extending its enquiry to Spike Lee and the re-thematisation of urban life films like *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) [p.4]. *Black American Cinema* provides a robust defence for the quality of African American films against the "formulaic verisimilitude of Hollywood" (p.11), calling them imperfect cinema and

a metaphor for the way in which African Americans survived and continue to survive within a hostile economic and racist system, and used the elements of that survival as raw materials to humanise and improve upon American modernism (p.8).

Diawara's arguments in this book to vindicate the quality of African American cinema which appeared inferior to Hollywood's sophistication. They also find equivocation in the postcolonial concepts of resistance and hybridity, upon which this study partially relies, to explicate African American cinema's notoriety for quality.

## **0:05            Potential Limitations**

This study anticipates a few challenges in the collection and analysis of its data. Some of these include the unorthodox data gathering using informal methods that are susceptible to bias and corruption. Additionally, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, while not that unusual in humanities research, presents a further challenge of coalescing open-ended, informally obtained qualitative data into easily-understandable information. A textual analysis technique affords this research a combination of exhaustive subjective probe, as well as objective numerical measurements that open it up to wider appreciation. The writer believes

that the set of multi-faceted research questions proposed in this study demand this adaptable and slightly variegated approach in order to fully exploit the writer's invaluable access to the Nollywood participants and by so doing, elicit fresh understanding of the Nollywood phenomenon from the academically withdrawn industry practitioners. The qualitative methodology has an added flaw with being merely interpretative. This imbues it with an inherent risk from the writer's subjectivity. In view of this, the writer takes an evaluative and reflective approach in considering how his long involvement in the industry, power dynamics, ethnic origin (being of Igbo extraction) and personal views can contaminate the research findings.

This study makes no effort to conceal this unique perspective from the inside of the Nollywood film industry as it may lead to a certain subjectivity in viewing the main arguments of this study, including the Nollywood's cinema taxonomy and the impact of the ingress of Hollywood studios into New Nollywood. The bias inherent in this insider position is acknowledged and its prejudicial influence appropriately weighted in this study's postulations. Nevertheless, the unfettered access, frank engagement, mutual trust and the in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions that accrue from this study's rather insular standpoint outweigh some of these limitations and therefore rationalise their use. For the survey aspect of the data, this study adopts a quantitative research approach and claims a neutral position.

There was a paucity of literature in the African American film research field which imposed severe limits on how deep the analysis of this study can go. Therefore, it cannot claim an encyclopaedic coverage of the subject but must humbly admit that its proclivity for narratives validating a certain hypothesized position may have skewed the focus of its research methodology to veer discoveries away from more generic intellectual literature on the African American film movements. That said, this study has proceeded to aggregate a mass of rather

inconsistent records on the subject of African American film movements into an inferential argument that it hopes is persuasive, but which it agrees certainly falls short of being conclusive.

This study fleetingly takes a gendered view of the development of the Nigerian film industry, distinguishing the male-dominated, phallogocentric character of the Yoruba traveling theatre era from the profusion of gendered stories and domination by female practitioners in the New Nollywood era. Although further elaboration of that gender dynamic would have taken this study outside of its thematic limits, contemplating more female representation in the selection of the contributors and philosophers examined under the different theories of this study's enquiry would have been a welcome opportunity to achieve gender parity. However, exigency, time constraints and the sheer pragmatism of it have resulted in this study carefully avoiding such tangents.

## **0:06            Dissertation outline**

The introduction segment of this thesis presents some preliminary background information to define the research problem, underline the major research questions, clarify the aims and objectives of the study and place the study in an epistemic context through a suggestive review and elucidation of relevant literature on the multi-faceted concepts on which this study is grounded: the concept of cinema, Nollywood and African American cinema as well as their association with catalytic Hollywood. The introduction additionally discusses the unique significance and usefulness of this study, drawing attention to its timeliness and relevance by elaborating its advancement potential for the Nollywood academy, the complex debates surrounding cinemanness, as well as improving on the sparse literature available on the African American film movements of the last century. The introduction concludes with an

outline of the rest of the dissertation which is divided into seven chapters and a conclusion that includes the study's recommendations and suggestions of areas for further research.

Chapter One looks at the concept of cinema and its classification, tracing the etymology of the word and historization of the concept since its invention in the late 1800s. It explores several attempts to define the term semantically, climaxing with what is cinema; a philosophical characterisation of cinema and its constituent parts through the writings of film scholars like Bazin, Andrew, Ponch, Currie and Carroll. The chapter ends with an attempt by this study to enumerate its own principles of cinema in an effort to delineate the term based on the premise of the foregoing.

Chapter Two, firstly foregrounds the study by revealing the meaning of celluloid and tracing Africa's journey in film from its accidental discovery in the late 1800s, through colonial times to the post-independence cultural struggles. Narrowing down to Nigeria, it discusses a colonial news documentary practice as the harbinger for the present film practice. While acknowledging the disagreement amongst historians, this chapter traces the start of film production in Nigeria to Francis Oladele's *Kongi's Harvest* (1970). It also recognises Ola Balogun's catalytic influence through works like *Ajani Ogun* (1975) and *Ija Ominira* (1977) which forged the emergence of the Yoruba traveling theatre that was to epitomise that era. The chapter briefly examines the love-hate relationship that existed between that celluloid film practice and critics and scholars at the time. The chapter also underlined that era's almost-umbilical connection with television. It concludes with a historization of the set of socio-political circumstances that led to the decline and demise of the industry at the turn of the 1990s.

Chapter Three uses curated references to a selection of films, personality interviews and literature to explore the early Nollywood era, in order to appreciate how mode of production, infrastructural pressures and the expectations of an audience hungry for self-

representation merged with basic technology to create an industry that became greater than the sum of its parts. Why were the films successful locally and what were the explanations for their transnational success? The chapter charts the ontology of Nollywood from the socio-economic and political climate that ended the Yoruba traveling theatre and its emergence from *Living in Bondage* (1992); an experimental vernacular film created on (Video Home System) VHS by a jobless film graduate- Okechukwu Ogunjiofor. *Bondage* was to be hugely successful and provided the impetus for the advent of a new film practice that was based on an inferior technology and informal business relations. In an attempt to fully appreciate the inner workings of this industry which grew exponentially, peaking circa 1997, this chapter looks at the contributions of its executive producers, fondly called marketers; the industry's low-entry-barriers and the origins of the name "Nollywood" which has become its universally accepted moniker. The chapter also explores the close and sometimes contradictory relationship between Nollywood and television. The chapter ends with a look at Nollywood's unusual start as a business before it became art, and the circumstances which led to its decline; a decline that paradoxically affirmed the industry's invincibility by birthing another new incarnation.

Using selected texts and film references, Chapter Four traces the genesis of New Nollywood following the release of Stephanie Okereke's *Through the Glass* (2008). It chronicles developments in the areas of innovation, film technology, distribution, cinema infrastructure, international reach and growing global acceptance, through the analysis of a representative film sample, interview of practitioners in the movement and available literature. The chapter further investigates the commodification and datafication of New Nollywood and more importantly, chronicles the gradual introduction of streaming into New Nollywood structure and the insidious ingress of major Hollywood studios into the Nigerian media space. Through interviews of major players of this Hollywood synergy, as well as a critical review of the films that have emerged from it, this chapter evaluates the impact of the Hollywood dollar

on the identity, style, editorial content, revenue structure, tastes and ultimately the future of Nollywood and its audience. The chapter concludes with a detailed analysis of the critical indifference towards New Nollywood and the continued refusal to see it as worthy of the cinema taxonomy despite the palpable evidence of major strides in quality and distributive innovations.

Chapter Five juxtaposes the different eras of the Nigerian film industry – the celluloid, the Nollywood and the New Nollywood eras - against the concepts of cinema from Chapter One. This is to conduct a near-empirical analysis to determine the validity of each era's claim to cinemanness. The chapter also considers New Nollywood's credentials as a politically conscious postcolonial cultural endeavour and concludes with a commentary on Nigeria's now contested second position on UNESCO's list of filmmaking nations.

Chapter Six investigates the African American film movements of the last century like the race films of the 1920s and the blaxploitation films of the 1970s; all against the context of the unsolicited influx of Hollywood studios into their various cultural economies. Using a selection of films, historical elaboration and textual references, it traces the political and social milieu that catalysed the movements, their leading lights and finally a conceptual reading of the films that epitomises the eras. The chapter sketches the journey of these movements from independence to their infiltration by Hollywood studios. These movements were also undermined by acerbic criticism for their quality and politics, and overcome by saturation and a loss of its mainly African American audiences. The chapter then concludes by exploring the gradual erosion of the movements, and their eventual consignment to history once the Hollywood studios found new interests and left with their finance. The subsequent apparent abandonment of the industries and their practitioners by the fleeing Hollywood studios, coupled with the scholarly apathy towards them, in spite of their undoubted relevance, also receives dialectic analysis.



Hollywood and its role in the three comparative film practices under review - race films, blaxploitation films and Nollywood films - are at the core of Chapter Seven. What really is Hollywood? Can our understanding of the origins and spread of influence of this regional practice illuminate our appreciation of its impact on New Nollywood and the African American film practices of the last century? The seventh and final chapter studies the etiology of Hollywood, attempting to understand its origins and evolution from a satellite film location for New York to the epicentre of global filmmaking for over a century. It looks at Hollywood's dispersed production influence that allows it to operate in regions without entrenchment but through the control of resources using local independent filmmakers. With no Hollywood roots or boots on the ground in Nigeria, this chapter explores if what's happening in New Nollywood really constitutes the ingress of Hollywood and gauges the impact of such permeation on the New Nollywood industry's identity, growth, financial structure and future survival. Finally, the chapter contrasts the experience of the African American film movements of the twentieth century and Hollywood studios with that of New Nollywood and the marauding western monoliths such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. It draws on similarities and disparities, and extensively incorporates the voices of contemporary Nollywood practitioners to decipher what the future holds for New Nollywood. An attempt is made at the end to, for the first time, wholesomely characterise the terms Hollywood and Nollywood to arrive at some kind of basic delineation.

The conclusion segment will collate and synthesise the deductions of this study to see how they meet the aims set out in this introduction for the study. It will provide an opportunity to analyse and reflect on the research to see how well this study's findings chime with its objectives. The conclusion will also underline the contributions that this study has made to Nollywood research and the often-neglected African American film research. This study will proffer a series of recommendations for the benefit of the industry, policymakers, practitioners

and even Hollywood studios themselves. It will wrap up the study with suggestions for areas of future research and academic study.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Concept of Cinema and its Classification

#### 1:01 The Cinema Framework

In search of a theoretical framework to underpin this study, the concept of cinema or the 7<sup>th</sup> art (Sorlin, 1992. p. 1) offered the most inescapably obvious option. For what use is an investigation into the cinema classification of a film industry without an ideological, conceptual, etymological, analytical and chronological characterisation of the term? Through a positivist approach, it has become imperative therefore to scour through the earliest texts, interview the widest range of Nollywood practitioners of any study to rationalise intellectual efforts thus far (Babatope, 2023) and dig into some of the most authoritative research conducted on the moving image, in order to situate this study's analysis and conclusions in a robust, verifiable theoretical context.

Having said that, theorists have since the invention of cinema disagreed over its conceptual content and academic discourses that reductively define cinema are not readily available. That is why nearly sixty years after its first publication in 1967, Andre Bazin's treatise translated as *What Is Cinema?* (2004) still represents one of the most influential, canonical and foundational essays written on cinema (Morgan, 2006, p. 443). However, as this study reveals, despite their declaratory titles and the exceptional intellectual clarity with which they were written, the two volumes could not yield a succinct characterisation of what cinema is, and in the end were unable to answer the question that they posed with titular emphasis: what is cinema? This study, while admiring Bazin's undeniable intellect and uncommon imagination, will attempt to go further, with the benefit of more recent research and the context provided by Nollywood practitioners and their praxis, in not only attempting a concise deconstruction of cinema's essence, but also by fragmenting it down into constituent parts to see how Nollywood or indeed any other film practice measures up against them.

In order to summon sufficient epistemic underpinning for cinema, our study has to start from the historical origins of the concept and the many innovations that wrought it. It may seem an oversimplification of history to credit one person with the commencement of cinema as each inventor added to the discovery of others before them. That said, August and Louise Lumiere are officially recognised as showing the first film to be projected on a large screen to a paying audience on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 1895, building as stated earlier, on the sometimes crude research and development in late 19<sup>th</sup> century of people like Eadweard Muybridge, Hermann Casler, George Demeny, Robert W. Paul and Thomas Edison (Manley, 2011. p. 8). Through scientific experimentation in their studio which represented the culmination of these earlier photographic discoveries, the Lumieres built a lightweight, hand-cranked camera that could record motion photography as well as project onto a large screen. They called this invention the cinematographe (p.7).

Etymologically, it was from this term, coined from two Greek words: *kinema*, meaning movement, and *grapho*, meaning to record or write (Wiktionary, n.d.), that the word “cinema” emerged. The advent of cinema was confirmed when the brothers made their debut, in what was seen as the first commercial public screening of a film, at the Grand Café in Paris, exhibiting ten films, including the “Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory” and the very popular “Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station” (ibid). These earlier short films were called actualities, a name that is suggestive of their realism and their objective of capturing of quotidian events, unspoiled as they occurred.

As the popularity of the viewing culture grew, the Lumiere brothers opened theatres across Europe and America where they showed over two thousand short films in their catalogue. In April 1896, Thomas Edison launched his updated Vitascope - in partnership with Thomas Armat and Charles Francis Jenkins (Manley, 2011. p. 8) - and started making actualities similar to the Lumiere brothers. Gradually, the many pioneering technological

breakthroughs, tentative creative steps and the resulting experimental films were beginning to coalesce into an explosive new commercial art with New York as the centre of its innovation (p.9). It is to this new art, immersed in science, that cinema's heritage can be traced.

At the outset, these films were simply un-staged, spontaneous pieces of real life captured by a static camera which acted as the eye of the passive observer. Thus, early cinema was called into the service of physical reality, exploiting cinema's naked mechanical, or more specifically, photographic power to record daily occurrences (Andrew, 1972, p. 1). However, audiences were drawn to these films and were willing to pay to watch them by virtue of their sheer novelty and scientific significance (Manley, 2011. p.10). The documentary, news-gathering cinema paradigm that arose was devoid of any significant artistic input from anyone in the production process that would corrupt the objectivity of the images recorded. Technically, these actualities consisted of rather mechanical single shots from a stationary camera with the subject in front of it (p. 7). The infusion of human imaginative impulse or creativity to shape or build those occurrences into "powerful expressions of man's inner world" (Andrew, 1972, p. 1) did not occur until much later.

The earliest traces of inspired artistic contribution to the making of actualities can be found in the "Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station", in which the ingenious camera angle employed by the Lumiere brothers allowed the train to drive past a stationary camera. Consequently, the train seemed to be driving off the screen, into the audience who were reported to have ducked, ran or fainted (Manley, 2011. p. 7). The import of the artistic choice to place the camera so that the action is not just in front of it was that, for the first time, instead of being passive images, the action on the screen was curated to interact with the spectators in a manner that elicited heightened emotion and engendered spatial connection. This first ever deliberate manipulation of the camera angle or directing of the camera maximised the

storytelling imperative of parallax, optical illusions, wide shots and close up shots. And in doing so, it historically symbolised a new way of presenting the un-staged.

Furthermore, the actualities that were made at the time simply recorded truths of real-life events- a train arriving at a station, workers leaving a factory etc. That direct reflection of reality approach was to change when the Lumiere brothers recorded and projected “The Sprinkler Sprinkled”. The piece dramatized a well-known newspaper cartoon of the time and heralded cinema’s progress beyond its initial mechanical reliance on naturally-occurring events for subject matter. Through its imaginary fictionalisation of what was recorded, it achieved a “sensible configuration of the truth of the world” (Badiou, 2013, Foreword) by becoming the first contrived film which introduced the notions of creative writing and comedy into cinema.

However, one of the most influential creative advances of early cinema was the emergence of editing and special effects. With its origins in “The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots” in which the director, Alfred Clarke simulated the beheading scene by stopping the tape to allow a dummy to be substituted in order to achieve realism in the beheading. French magician Georges Melies took a cue from this ingenious manipulation of the image, and incorporating his own magical stage illusions, he perfected the trick of stopping the camera and substituting objects, like a skeleton for a woman in “The Vanishing Lady”.

Melies’ contributions became historically significant for consolidating the idea of writing imaginative skits for actors to follow instead of shooting actualities. He is also well-known for reinforcing the use of splicing and editing to achieve fantastic visual effects. He has been celebrated for being the first filmmaker to use features like dissolve and time lapse photography, and for introducing fantasy and science fiction into cinema. But he guaranteed his place in the history of cinema for creating the first film that consisted of more than one scene when he made “The Dreyfus Affair” in 1899 (Manley, 2011. p. 10-11). Beyond the nominal multiplicity of scene number, “The Dreyfus Affair”, more importantly, introduced

continuity editing into cinema by showing that a film's narrative could continue from one scene to the other in a manner that maintains continuity (ibid). "A Trip to the Moon" became the epitome of this new artistic movement as Melies used its 30 scenes to achieve unprecedented levels of visual tricks and coherent storytelling (p.11).

Another film of note in this period is "The Great Train Robbery" released in 1903 by Edwin Porter. Apart from introducing the cowboy genre, this film considered the first blockbuster film employed the cross-cutting of multiple shots with varying shot sizes and camera angles from the same scene to deepen audience engagement. It created an unprecedented visual immediacy by utilising the moving camera with the action and through its fast and violent actions, it confirmed a change in taste of the viewers from actualities to contrived films of the action ilk (p.12). Following that in 1904, Williamson and George Albert Smith of the Brighton School in the UK began trialling techniques such as point-of-view, close-up shots and tracking shots. Their experiments would culminate in the outstanding technical profile of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which we shall deal with extensively later in Chapter Six.

With Melies, Clarke, Porter, Griffiths and their contemporaries, a new revolution in film style started to emerge that will elevate the mundane filmmaking machine to a flair affair with a semblance of high art (ibid). It is the subjectivity of the director of the camera, the creativity to tell fictionalized stories, the manipulation of recording to simulate visual tricks and the linking up of different scenes in a continuous, logical narrative that led to a radical perspective which undermined the "truth" of the photographic image and prompted a conundrum in which, to be pure, cinema felt a need to destroy itself (Wollen, 1998. p. 89). We shall delve into this concept of pure cinema in more detail shortly in this Chapter.

For now, it should be noted that with each of these advancements, style was gradually introduced into an endeavour which previously relied on science for its much-heralded affinity

to reality. For if films had simply remained the passive recording of real-life events, then the editorial decision to choose one subject over another may become one of the few differences between one film and another. Style will have little or no significance to the value of the film as the depth of the filmmaker's creativity will then be calibrated, not on the fancifulness of its artistic flight, but on the basis of more objective scientific indices like picture quality in pixels and sound quality in decibels. It becomes evident that cinema's penchant for ostentatious ingenuity which started so early in its history did force an elevation in the creative effort from filmmakers and accordingly instigated a heightening of their film's overall excellence. On the other hand, it has also subsumed cinema in a realm of subjectivity where undefined, indeterminate style personifies a bias that can be weaponized to castigate some films or co-opted to artificially create margins of taxonomy that unjustly preclude others. In other words, if it wasn't for the pioneering role that Melies and Clarke and indeed the Lumiere brothers played in forcing filmmaking into narrow stylistic corridors, the need for a cinema taxonomy that discriminates against film practices like Nollywood on the basis of intangible and potentially prejudicial quality and style considerations will not exist. In that fanciful world, a film will simply be a film, eliminating the apartheid system of classification that, as we shall see in later Chapters, favours the global west.

Having said that, this study recognises that it may not be possible to completely divorce style or quality concerns from cinema. Proof of this is apparent even in the era of actualities when Edison's films could not elicit the same impact or emotions from spectators as the similarly made films of the Lumiere brothers, even with the former's aggressive marketing and financial success. The difference in audience engagement with these various films is likely not going to be traced to a mechanical superiority, nor can it be measured empirically. Instead, it may be that it was a palpable difference in artistic style as well as other intangible indicators



such as the quality of storytelling and creative packaging which gave the Lumiere brothers the audience advantage.

## **1:02 Cinema Defined**

By virtue of its myriad symbolism, connotations, subtexts and inferential meanings, the cinema term has proved difficult to be succinctly defined. And because an all-embracing definition that captures every nuance of the term may become too convoluted, most attempts at a summary description of cinema have tended to over-simplify it. In a rather basic characterisation, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* sees cinema as “...the film industry” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). A further attempt to deepen the definition of the term through recognising its artistic and commercial dimensions constrains the *Collins Dictionary* to describe cinema as “the business and art of making films” (Collins, n.d.). These surprisingly simplistic definitions do not suggest or portend any exclusive taxonomy nor do they imbue the term with any quality or style imperative of the type we have seen above, with which cinema has been encrusted since the days of the Lumiere brothers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The position of this study is that taking these streamlined definitions at face value in the discourse surrounding cinema taxonomy will be a misleading assumption. Therefore, a dialectical approach in analysing the term has to be adopted, beginning with the invaluable and sometimes ignored voices from within the Nollywood industry.

Rightly or wrongly, many practitioners in Nollywood see the term through a similarly narrow outlook as the above dictionary definitions. Obi-Rapu, the director of Nollywood’s designative film, *Living in Bondage* (1992) defines cinema similarly as “the art and industry of making films and relying on visual elements to tell the stories” (Obi-Rapu, 2023). Correspondingly, Nwakalor-Akukwe, the founder of Eastern Nigeria Film Festival in Enugu, simply describes cinema as “the art of creating and producing films for public exhibition.

Period!” (Nwakalor-Akukwe, 2023). Nollywood director, Andy Boyo, just like Obi-Rapu, engages cinema’s artistic and business significance in perceiving it as the “production of films as an art or an industry” (Boyo, 2023). Jalade-Ekeinde, fondly called the queen of Nollywood, affirms the binary school of thought which sees cinema through the perspective of a place where movies are shown, as well as the photographic artform for the production of the movies themselves. She defines cinema as “a theatre where movies are shown for public entertainment or the production of movies as an art or an industry” (Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023). Although Gukas, one of the filmmakers at the forefront of the New Nollywood movement, shares in the infrastructural characterization of cinema, he also achieves a heightening of the term by identifying cinema’s constituent artforms and highlighting their intertwined relationship with the art of filmmaking.

...anything that is made in the artform of film, has the ability to capture a story in a particular nuanced way and is made to entertain an audience using moving images, sound and effects qualifies as cinema. Hence for me, cinema is an art form that seeks to capture, store, portray, create and ensure transformation for those experiencing that piece of cinema (Gukas, 2023)

By recognizing cinema’s interchangeability with other related terms like films, celluloid, movies, motion picture and the many colloquial synonyms used as proxies for the term, film scholar, Mary Okadigwe, initiates the argument about the hierarchical weight of meaning attached to each term as well as the comparative significance they afford projects to which they are ascribed (Okadigwe, 2023). Does the use of film in describing an industry or project carry as much inherent import as the deployment of alternative terms like movie or cinema or even motion picture? The relative significance of the various terms will be analysed later in this Chapter.

Exploring Nollywood insider’s perception of cinema further, Joseph Benjamin, one of the industry’s best-known leading men, leans towards a different perspective and although his conceptualization broadly continues the over-simplification of the cinema term, he additionally

acknowledges cinema's ability to use moving pictures to connect with audiences and affect their moods. For him, it is this immersive attribute that stands cinema apart from other artforms (Benjamin, 2023). Lonzo Nzekwe escalates the conversation with his novel engagement of the projection and movement principles intrinsic to cinema. For the director and producer of *Orah*, (2023), cinema is the production and presentation of films on screens, large or small (Nzekwe, 2023). With this depiction, Nzekwe additionally wedges a small-screen and large-screen discourse into the cinema debate, bringing to the fore the identity or value implications of such classifications on the filmic content being reviewed. The impact of the screen size on which a video content is viewed, its perceived quality and indeed its classification are further explored later in the course of this Chapter.

Nollywood scholar, Don Omope delves beyond these hackneyed characterisations and philosophically envisions cinema through three key metrics:

- the artists experience or intuition clearly recognisable in the product
- the expression of this intuition in an artistic form
- the enjoyment by and ideally the kindling of similar experience in an audience (Omope, 2023).

This description nuances the conversation with the idea of intuition or artistic instinct in line with the stylistic layering of cinema that incrementally occurred with each innovation the Lumieres, Melies, Clarke and Griffiths made at the tail end of the 1800s. It also chimes with Badiou's notion of cinema as "...a witness, the vector of human experience, in its immediacy" (Badiou, 2013). On his own part, actor Enyinna Nwigwe goes on to implicate, in his assessment, the constituent elements of cinema "...such as storytelling, cinematography, editing, sound design, and visual effects- to create a cohesive audio-visual experience" (Nwigwe, 2023). As we shall see imminently, Nwigwe's deconstruction of cinema's essential

parts resonates with the constitutive approach followed by renowned film philosophers like Andre Bazin and Trevor Ponech.

These Nollywood practitioners speak not from the perspective of experts in film philosophy but have offered their thoughts in an attempt to articulate the meaning of the term cinema because it matters to them. Behind all of their simple characterisations can be glimpsed a silhouette of local interpretation which endeavours to domesticate the cinema term in Nollywood. So, while they may not have consistently illuminated the field with their intellect and diligence, they have offered localised views which have alluded to the complexity of the cinema term and underlined the difficulty inherent in succinctly capturing its essence in a definition. In order to expound the concept further, a deeper epistemic excavation is required to reveal its philosophical underpinnings.

### **1:03            What is Cinema?**

This study recognises the existence of numerous foundational philosophies of cinema, from notable scholars like Alain Badiou, Siegfried Kracauer, Jean Luc Goddard, Sergei Eisenstein and Gilles Deleuze to mention but a few. However, it elected to stake its epistemic confidence on the eclectic film philosophy of Andre Bazin, as espoused in the two volumes of *What is Cinema?* (2004). Although lacking the step-by-step progression and coherence of a textbook (Andrew, 1972. p. 8), these compendiums of stand-alone essays have served to deconstruct film, prescribe cinema's unique defining features and unleash cinema's foundational philosophy (Basin, 2004: xiv). While other film philosophers like Galvano Della Volpe and Gilles Deleuze analysed cinema concepts with similar levels of intellectual clarity as the *What is Cinema?* books, this study was swayed from equally headlining their outstanding literature by the coincidental convergence of Bazin's pure cinema hypothesis with this study's

counter-intuitive contention that to be more cinema, Nollywood may need to be less cinematic. The availability of a rich body of follow-on studies elaborating on some of his philosophies from the likes of Dudley Andrew, Noel Carrol and Trevor Ponech has also been contributory to the choice of Bazin.

In his most iconic essay- “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”- Bazin provides the theoretical foundations for his analysis of film (Morgan, 2006. p. 445) and counters all putative notions (of cinema) while proposing “a radical change of perspective” (Basin, 2004: p.5)

Today the making of images no longer shares an anthropocentric, utilitarian purpose...but...a larger concept, the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny. (p.11)

This statement eulogises cinema’s ability to mimic realism with a likeness of the real. Therefore, realism or truth became the hallmark of cinema so much so that Jean Luc Goddard once commented that cinema is “truth twenty-four times a second” (Morgan, 2006. p. 443). Bazin decries the ‘inescapable subjectivity’ of the painter and lauds photography’s ability to satisfy our ‘appetite for illusion by the mechanical reproduction in the making of which no man plays a part’ (p.12)

For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving (sic) agent. For the first time, the image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence (Bazin, 2004. 1.13)

Cinema, therefore, has become “the art that finally succeeded in creating a convincing illusion of dynamic reality” (Manovich, 1995. p.23).

And for over half a century, Bazin’s dictum of the incorruptible nature of photography, and by extension cinema, had broad acceptance and respect. However, cinema’s purportedly exclusive ability to eliminate human interference during the creation of images which Bazin

extols, have been threatened by the advent of animation, Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) and creative innovations facilitated by Artificial Intelligence (AI). Through these innovations, the image of the world is no longer singularly formed automatically through photography- still or moving. As creators and animators can, through binary coding, create virtual characters and even virtual worlds which can sometimes be curated to interact seamlessly with the real, the Bazinian notion of the incorruptibility of photography has been rendered practically obsolete.

The two volumes of Bazin's book further explore concepts like the montage as a language of cinema, the limits of filmed theatre and the myth of Charlie Chaplin. They also offer a broad spectrum of Bazin's edifying essays on several cinema concerns (Ellipsis, neorealism, Western films, Pin-up girls), iconic films (*The Bicycle Thief*, *Umberto D*, *Limelight*), and standout filmmakers of his time (De Sica, Rossellini, Moliere, Chaplin). It is through these assorted prisms that we glimpse Bazin's impressive psyche, including his rather paradoxical notion of "pure cinema", which as "the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality" culminates in the demise of cinema itself (Bazin, Vol. 2. p.60). In other words, the need for pure cinema which achieves the semblance of truth necessitates the elimination of every art and creative input from cinema as to literally destroy it. Further simplified, cinema has to be less cinema or no cinema at all in order to be true cinema.

Using three features, Bazin additionally demarcates the conceptual margins of cinema. In his reasoned opinion, to be cinema, a work needs to be:

- a) A pictorial imagery
- b) Produced by photographic means
- c) Able to produce the impression of movement (Bazin, 1967. p.14-15)

In retrospect, the above recommendation made in 1967 may appear simplistic or limited in its scope to truly capture what cinema has become today. However, it represented the first attempt to account for and articulate the features which truly constitute cinema, including that which,

according to Bazin, is ultimately answerable for cinema's difference from other art forms- impression of movement.

After writing the foreword to the two English translations of Bazin's "*What is Cinema?*", and also drawing from their foundational philosophy, Dudley Andrew, in his book, *What Cinema Is!* (2010), attempts to define cinema by condensing it into three assets: the recording, with its dedicated apparatus: the camera; the composing, facilitated by the movieola (editing bench); and the screening, enabled by the projector (Andrew, 2010: p. xxvi). Once again, this prescription limits cinema to an occurrence recorded by a camera, edited using the movieola or its recent technological reincarnation and then presented on a screen through a projector.

Parenthetically, evolutions in cinema have once again rendered the above premise precarious. Innovations like 3-D animation and Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) have eroded the supremacy of the camera in the recording process, while algorithmic editing (which means automatically editing footage to a schema) has undermined the primacy of the manual movieola as a means of manipulating recorded footage. And as we shall see imminently, the movie projector has also lost its exclusivity as a condition precedent for determining cinema status with the advent of other image presentation techniques. There is huge uncertainty about what is real as these innovations have rendered somewhat inadequate and irrelevant these guidelines by classical theorists for the "approximations of visible (or perceptual) reality" (Morgan, 2006. p. 443).

Despite the insularity of his cinema definition, Andrew plots animation and non-narrative modes like the documentary, avant-garde and the short film into concentric circles at different distances from a common centre that is the feature film. This centripetal force field allows for a degree of tolerance that broadens cinema's conceptual domain by allowing film

practices to connect to cinema at the joint centre from varying distances along the geometric rings.

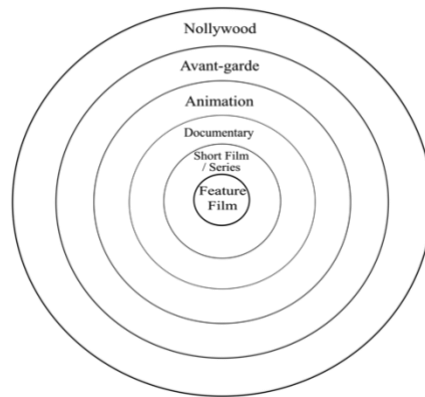


Fig. 1. Andrew's cinema hierarchy

It also mirrors Bazin's promotion of animation, the western and archival compilations (*Paris 1900*), as well as copiously quoting Charlie Chaplin, Preston Sturges (Screwball comedy), Jean Painleve (nature and underwater documentaries) and William Wyler (record of twelve nominations for the Academy Award for Best Director) in his writings (Andrew, 2010. p xvi).

*What Cinema Is* falls short of proposing accepted criteria for cinema but it inches us closer to those elusive constituents of what cinema really is. It endorses Bazin's simple, tripartite structure that deepens our understanding of cinema's traditional components- camera, editing and projection. However, as Andrew himself acknowledged, the supremacy and indeed significance of these components, in the face of the erosive technological innovations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, cannot be taken for granted (p. xiv). He hypothesised that the recent challenges in cinema can be traced to the adjustment or modernising of the camera, the movieola and the projector apparatuses, as nineteenth century equipment is replaced by twenty-first century digital innovations.

Such a technological revolution nudges us to return to cinema's fundamental operations, one phase at a time, to see what remains of the phenomenon of cinema after the sweeping changes of the past two decades' (ibid).



This study digs deeper into literature to transcend the simple characterisation of cinema based on mode of production, manipulation or projection which could have applied to the earliest actualities before the artistic innovations that introduced style into films were brought forth. For, unless some further criteria are discovered, analysed and factored into the definition of the cinema that has developed over more than a century of artistic novelties, the simplification implied by Andrew's description above would afford every single moving image a legitimate claim to the cinema taxonomy. This study does not subscribe to such vulgarisation.

On his part, while contributing to a compendium of critical studies on the philosophy of film titled *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film* (2008), Trevor Ponech used his chapter- "Definition of Cinema"- to present one of the most pertinent and summary deconstructions of cinema into its constituent parts. Firstly, Ponech sees "CINEMA" different from the word "cinema" and construes the definition of CINEMA as controversial

because people dispute both the nature of cinema and how, if at all, a definition (...) could illuminate and unambiguously determine once and forever, the reference of cinema. Whether cinema has an essence is the debate's crux. (Ponech, 2008. p. 57)

He argues that classic attempts to identify cinema's unique, distinguishing archetypes should start from a quintet of precepts (p.54).

- 1 - pictorial images
- 2 - made photographically with a camera
- 3 - said images being recorded, stored and exhibited using flexible film strips
- 4 - their public exhibition using a projector casting light through a film strip and onto a screen
- 5 - so as to produce the impression of movement.

Jointly, the concept of movement and Bazin's absence of human interference distinguish cinema from other creative artforms like painting and sculpture; both of which may involve artistic verisimilitude predicated on direct human involvement that is incapable of recreating the appearance of movement. Therefore, at their very core, Ponech's precepts are

synonymous with Bazin's original cinema constituents and represented a mere granular expansion of them. Nevertheless, the precepts do not embody any "aesthetic recommendations for maintaining cinema's artistic purity" (p.56-7). In other words, in spite of his five precepts for cinema, Ponech does not prescribe a minimum quality requirement for the cinema classification to attach. When viewed from a non-essentialist perspective, Ponech sees cinema as complex because it "derives from so many technological, cultural, and artistic sources, and is so open to technological and stylistic change that it is implausible to ascribe to it a single, immutable essence" (p.57). He therefore holds cinema as "a strikingly mixed and impure semiotic system" and "not about medium-specifying material parts and properties" (ibid).

Put in simpler terms, Ponech views cinema as a diverse system of signs and meanings which do not have to be universally accepted, so long as the specific audiences can connect and understand their cognitive, cultural or visual interpretations. Furthermore, even though he attempted to deconstruct cinema into its constituent parts, Ponech opines that cinema does not necessarily inhere with the presence of specific components or indeed the manifestation of certain quality characteristics (p.69). He agrees that cinema is susceptible to change due to its high-tech, cultural, and imaginative character. Therefore, encapsulating it in a single, unassailable quintessence is virtually impossible (Ponech, 2009: p.57).

One could deduce that this series of arguments by Ponech against offering a definitive definition of cinema are somewhat defeatist, especially when considered against the backdrop of his titular quest to define cinema. In spite of that, his prevarications may help to explain why the words "film", "movie", "motion picture", celluloid and "cinema" are still used interchangeably (Ponech, 2011. p.54) as they are essentially conveying the same meaning, with varying degrees of emphasis on quality and informality. As no benchmarks exist for the weighting of these various terms, their relative use is simply predicated on conviction, convention, or even unmoderated subjectivity. This means that each commentator infuses the

term chosen to describe a work with an unscientific connotation of value, quality and style. However, this permissiveness devalues such labelling and makes it vulnerable to bias or prejudice. So, somewhat contradictory to the stated objective of his study- to define cinema- Ponech goes on to assert that “a nuclear definition of cinema does not reduce cinema as we know it to some putative essence” (p.62). Although his precepts did still provide the clearest indications yet of that uncommon checklist for evaluating, whether or not, a film endeavour deserves the celebrated “cinema” classification.

Furthermore, in “Defining the Moving Image”: Theorising the Moving Image (1996), Noel Carroll also stipulates his own combination of the five, not-jointly-sufficient archetypes for cinema taxonomy. The models, similar to Ponech’s, are that the work must be:

- 1) Two dimensional (to differentiate cinema from sculpture)
- 2) Presented in a detached display (to show spatial dislocation unlike mirrors/windows)
- 3) Mechanically generated (recorded previously) from
- 4) A template (any storage or recording format- DVDs, film prints and mpeg files)
- 5) Produced by such means as to give the impression of movement [defining feature of cinema] (Carrol, 1996. p. 62)

By this detailed and broader definition, Carrol introduces, for the first time, the concept of spatial dislocation in order to exclude any proscenium, mirror or window live framings from cinema consideration. He also varies the fourth condition precedent, expanding it to include, not just images from a projector, but also recognising other display devices like television, whether with Cathode Ray Tube (CRT), Plasma or Flat Panel Display (FPD) technologies (Mentley, 2002). Other than the above, Carrol’s list essentially represents a slightly differentiated reiteration of the same inventory suggested by Bazin and Ponech, which emphasises two-dimensionality (a requirement that has itself been challenged by the emergence of 3-D and augmented-reality innovations), the recording and the semblance of

movement. And once again, Carroll's definition of cinema does not impose any conditionality as regards medium, process or stylistic features (Ponech, 2008. p.72), a notion which has become a common feature of the definitions by these philosophers. Instead, just like Ponech and Andrew, he desists from valuing one style of imagery over another. He also does not impose restrictions on how the five condition precedents he recommends for cinema are to be met, rendering the definition of cinema simply vast and continuously evolving. Though ostensibly unintentional, this vastness that Carroll ascribes to cinema makes its definition so inclusive as to, against this study's desires, impede any form of exclusivity.

Finally, Gregory Currie, in his book *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (1995), also concurs with the necessary and sufficient stereotypes for cinema, acquiescing that to be cinema, something must be a photographically produced, pictorially represented and rendered on a surface as to produce or be able to produce the semblance of movement (Currie, 1995. pp.2, 4). In an apparent conspiratorial nod in solidarity with other philosophers, there is also the absence of quality suggestions for cinema classification in Currie's characterisation and this study's opposition to such liberal approach is also reiterated.

Having said that, Peter Wollen, in expanding Bazin's judgement, contrary to common-sense expectations, goes as far as stating that the realism of cinema constitutes some sort of an anti-aesthetic negation of cinematic style and artifice, so that cinema could only obtain radical purity through its own annihilation (Wollen, 1998. p. 89). This concept of pure cinema, together with the repeated absence of a style imperative in all these descriptions of cinema by distinguished film philosophers paradoxically support this study's hypothesis that Nollywood's initial low video quality and its evolving unique aesthetics cannot continue to be cited credibly and fittingly against its cinema taxonomy. This is so because even with these exhaustive attempts by different scholars to delineate it, the term cinema has proved a slippery concept to condense into a definition or within a theoretical structure. This intractable quality has

intensified the disagreement within the debate for cinemahood (Ponech, 2008. p. 53) and consequently exacerbated the contempt on the side of minority film practices like Nollywood pertaining to their exclusion from the exalted cinema comity of practices.

Mired in such ambiguity, this study is quick to recognise that, in the fervent quest to open up eligibility to the cinema taxonomy, there may be a parallel but unintentional relaxation of the cinema paradigm so that it embraces every filmic production, no matter their quality or form. This permissiveness may undermine the artistic integrity of cinema and trivialise the classification (Elliott, 2023), outcomes against which this study recommends a cautious approach.

Taking everything into account in attempting a summary characterisation of cinema, this study postulates its own principles, appropriating elements of Carroll's precepts which have been moderated with notions of state-of-the-art technological innovations to add a future-proof dimension to their application and relevance, as well as incorporating significant postcolonial strands to achieve equity, inclusivity and equality. This study posits as cinema, any filmic production:

1. made up of a two, three or other multi-dimensional audio-visual content of an appreciable length, (Graphic Interchange Format (GIF), short films, feature length films, television series etc)
2. set in a real natural environment, augmented or mixed reality environments
3. created and imbued with the semblance of movement by using a form of camera to record live action or digitally formed through Computer Generated Imagery (CGI), Artificial Intelligence (AI), animation, 2D-animation, 3-D animation, cut-out animation, rotoscoping, flipbook animation, motion graphics, claymation, typographic animation or any form of animation, including those yet to be devised

4. manipulated with various forms of editing or digital enhancement so that its video and audio, whatever the format in which they are rendered, do not inordinately and negatively interfere with its appreciation
5. offered in a detached display through the various playback forms- from a mobile phone to a large screen cinema and everything in between, no matter their method of storage and display
6. to a potential audience whose connection with its narrative, motifs, messages and style must be devoid of cultural prejudice or a sense of aesthetic entitlement based on any form of inequality.

Simply put, this study's first principle takes Bazin's two-dimensional requirement for cinema and stretches it past recent three-dimensional experimentations, to include the futuristic 4-D which sees a synchronisation of physical effects like fog, smoke and rain into the cinematic world of the viewer. In an era where television series are challenging the feature for production quality and glamour, it also opens up the classification to filmic content of various lengths instead of the almighty feature which many Euro-American scholars have put at the centre of cinema.

The second principle recognises the various worlds in which a filmic content can be set, derogating Bazin's absence of human interference characteristic attributed to film and embracing both real world photography and the emergence of digital cosmos which can stand alone or interact with photography for fantastic results. Furthering the proposition that technological innovations have offered many alternatives to the production of images from a camera, the third principle acknowledges the contributions of the many iterations of AI, animation and CGI in forging images infused with the impression of movement, thereby breaking the monopoly which existed for the camera at the time of Bazin's pronouncements.

The fourth principle prescribed by this study admits the role of editing in the creation of cinema without limiting the scope of the editing apparatus to the movieola, just like Andrew did in his characterisation. This opens up the classification to novel editing concepts like algorithmic editing and also takes a median position as it concerns overall film quality by insinuating that while a certain technical quality should not be mandatory for cinema classification, quality should not adversely interfere with the audiences' appreciation of filmic production. Although somewhat more subjective than most other principles proposed here, it is important for this study to include this commentary to emphasise that cinema demands undeniable finesse in video and sound that goes beyond the very basic for the term to attach. Although the present quality demand on films is elitist, discriminatory and centred on the global West, completely expunging some minor style imperative from cinema classification will open it up to any and every filmic content produced.

The fifth principle is an acknowledgement by this study that the projector has lost the supremacy that Bazin, Ponech and Andrew imbued it with, by paying homage to the existence of myriad sizes of screens for viewing filmic content (mobile phones, computer screens, television, home cinema and theatre screens). The principle creates a further extension of Carroll's amendment to the Bazinian precepts by admitting a plethora of techniques for storing filmic content (celluloid, tapes, computer drives, Digital Cinema Packages [DCP]); different codecs for reproducing them (MOV, AVCHD, AVI, MP4, MPEG); and different models for displaying filmic content on the screening surfaces (projection, LED, LCD, OLED, Plasma, Cathode Ray Tube [CRT]).

Finally, the sixth principle infuses some postcolonial resistance against, as is the present case, using the hegemony of Euro-American cultural norms as the de facto gauge for the acceptance or repudiation of the style, unique narrative techniques and aesthetics of a minority filmic content. Such decolonisation is essential for a more nuanced reading of cinema in order

to subvert the structures for dominant knowledge production, to diversify scholarship and include minority voices (Dei, 2019. p. 19). This postcolonial principle, recommended as a cinema principle for the first time, takes an intermediate position in which some style in the filmic content is valued. However, the delineation of that style and its imports should be decolonised so that national practices like Nollywood, together with their audiences can determine for themselves where the margins lie, instead of attempting to impose, as is the present practice, a one-size-fits-all mandatory paradigm based on the conventions and cultural pallet of the global north. Ponech made it clear that “Cinema's content is up to us. What counts as cinema is up to us too. Objects so counted are our conception and making” (Ponech, 2011:60).

When the above conditions are met and the filmic production communicates its message to its viewer, irrespective of whether they love it or hate it, this study believes that cinema has occurred. These hypothetical principles as recommended by this study may sound rather convoluted in their attempt to encapsulate many of the philosophical and practical dimensions of cinema so far revealed in this Chapter. However, their reasoning and exhaustive nature make them a valiant effort and therefore many of their elements will be deployed in evaluating cinemanness in the next Chapters.

#### **1:04            Cinemanness**

As is evident from the foregoing, commendable attempts have been made by film philosophers such as Bazin and Ponech to investigate the conceptual meaning of cinema. Yet this study discovered a failure, in both colloquial English and scholarship, to imbue the word cinema with a connotation that rises above mere description to an exploration of the ingredients of being cinema. Even dictionaries parochially view the word as merely a theatre where films are viewed or the art and technique of making motion picture (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Collins



Dictionary, n.d.). So, in its search for the constituent parts that could elevate a film practice to cinema status, this study found a limited vocabulary to describe the characteristics or property of being cinema. The interchangeable alternatives to cinema such as motion picture, film, celluloid were explored but found to be incomplete in encompassing and projecting the granular pieces of the complex pre-eminent art that is cinema. This study also considered previously used coinage such as “cinemahood” (Chan, 2011; Ponech, 2008. p. 53). Once again, while the dictionary description of appending of the “hood” suffix to an adjective denotes state and nature (Dictionary, n.d.), this study feels that the colloquial use of the coinage, in words such as adulthood and childhood, speaks more to the state of being than the attributes of the root words., To communicate the elements of being cinema, it became necessary that a word had to be invented and Osi Okagbue came up with it by adding the suffix: “ness” to the root word “cinema”, thereby making it a constitutive noun which signifies the condition or quality of being cinema. Despite its imperfection and novelty, for the purpose of this study, cinemanness will be adopted as the essential word to refer to the constitutive essence of being cinema.

## **1:05            Film, Video and Digital Media**

Having exhausted the search for the conceptual meaning of cinema above, this segment offers this study an opportunity to theoretically and technically differentiate film from video as well as to espouse the concept of digitalisation as an adjunct of the video medium. Before the invention of cameras, humans saw objects and observed events directly with their eyes and without mediation. Both video and film represent different forms of the mediated vision that cameras capture which allows us as humans to see representations of objects or events but not the actual objects or events themselves. So, the question we ask is not what do we see but how do we see it? In other words, what is the medium? (Kim, 2016. p.ix-x).

Accordingly, film is defined as an artform of moving images that bears a photographic impression of reality (p.5). Conversely, Noel Carroll argues that analogue video is an image capturing medium just like film. He sees it as a medium of film with overlapping as well as divergent elements which is open to stylistic variation in having a different aesthetic approach to the materiality of the instrument of its recording, for instance, the VHS camera. He contends further that film and video are different mediums of the same entity and that it is not the medium that determines its use but the use we have for the medium that dictates its relevant aspects (ibid).

Technically speaking, analogue video differs from film on two main levels. The first is what has been described as fluid pictoriality - in which the form of the image generated by video depends on a series of technical processes that emanate from the instant and continuous flow of electronic signals to create it (p.28). This can be contrasted with film, which simply captures, stand-alone and disparate frames of the image whose only relationship is continuity of movement. Emanating closely from that is the second major technical difference which underlines analogue video's engagement with contemporality, summarised as simultaneity which manifests in video's live feedback, and instantaneity expressed through the existence of a monitor (ibid). These features distinguish analogue video from film which is marked by a delay between the time of inscription of an image on the celluloid strip and the time of its viewing.

These qualities of analogue video make it a more simplified medium to work with than film. So, video became traditionally associated with recording events or gathering news, events that maximise video's relative advantage of instantaneity, flexibility and speed. Film, on the other hand, was conventionally reserved for storytelling and movie-making which require a certain level of deliberate industry and creative application. While the difference in quality

between analogue video and film can sometimes be indiscernible to the untrained eye, logically, the somewhat higher valuation that stories told on film enjoy in the eyes of critics and scholars over those told on video is directly linked to the comparative endeavour, time and cost that its processes demand of the maker.

Digital video was first introduced in 1986 with the invention of the Sony D1 format. It essentially constituted an addition to video which involved recording of video on a digital, non-linear device. The Nigerian film industry lays credible claim to the first instance of appropriating digital media in filmmaking with the release of *Living in Bondage* in 1992 (Ogunjiofor, 2023). However, its use in mainstream filmmaking was pioneered by George Lucas in 2002 on the film *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* (Foster, 2019). Since then, Digital media has abandoned the transformation imagery of the video, to embrace digital manipulation (p.29). Therefore, instead of simply transcribing the image captured on video and recording it homogeneously on the magnetic tape, digitisation converts the image captured into a pattern of abstract relationships using software algorithms (ibid). This allows for a wider control over the source image and their manipulation through seamless interaction with other sources and materials – 3-D animation, computer generated imagery - to produce better, bespoke hybrid images. Today, digital media has overtaken film or celluloid as the choice medium for making quality films throughout the world and even in Nollywood (Ogunjiofor, 2023; Manovich, 1995:26).

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Genealogy of Nigerian Film

#### 2:01 The Colonial Era

Nearly all of sub-Saharan African countries, from Senegal to Somalia and from Angola to Mozambique, were under the colonial yoke of Europeans for the best part of a century (Tawiah *et al*, 2022), beginning from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Cogneau, 2003. p. 5). This invidious regime saw the systematic imposition of European governance and their values on indigenous peoples of this region. The aim was to plunder resources, eclipse African ethnic, cultural and national histories (Bakari & Cham, 1996. p. 18) using coercion, brute force, oppression and ideological distortions (Ukadike, 1998, p.93). In addition to untold economic and political gains, these predominantly French, British and Portuguese colonisers succeeded in simultaneously achieving deculturation and acculturation. Through deculturation, they attempted and, indeed succeeded, in dehumanising Africans, demeaning their culture as inferior and mutilating their histories. The cultural vacuum consequently created amongst Africans was then filled with a calculated endeavour to legitimise colonial domination by deploying European way of life as a common cultural denominator in a process of acculturation. (Bakari & Cham, 1996. p. 18).

The initial vehicles for this multi-pronged assault on African ideology were oral tradition and written texts. But these media had many limitations. The use of oral tradition in the dissemination of colonial information and directives was slow and unreliable. The printed word was faster, but illiteracy of the local populace reduced its efficacy (Ukadike, 1998. p. 202). Conversely, film transcended these restrictions by allowing for wider coverage and easier comprehension through its simultaneous and more impactful production of audio and visual images (Ayakoroma, 2014 p.35). This became the principle behind the widespread imperial

adoption of film. Its multidimensional and instantaneous impact on the minds and emotions of the viewers made it dangerously persuasive, going to some extent in explaining why TV and film were banned in apartheid South Africa (ibid).

So, once the series of crude experimentations that we have seen in the last Chapter led to the invention of the cinema in 1895 (Manley, 2011. P.1), its emotional significance and potential for influencing behaviour of people was quickly identified by the European colonisers who started seeing it as an important signifier of European superiority (Ukadike, 1998. p. 31). Unlike other discoveries of the dawning industrial age like mechanisation and the steam engine (Sullivan, 1989), cinema did not take long to get to Africa. The first film to show “with the vividness of life” in Nigeria, as early as August 1903 in Glover Hall in Lagos, was footage of a steamer moving through water (Aduku, 2018; Haynes, 2016. p.3). However, it took a few more years for the colonisers to completely appreciate and perfect the mass communication and effective capabilities of the film medium before cinema arrived in Africa around 1925 (Ukadike, 1998. p. 31).

The plague in the Lagos protectorate in 1929, provided the Chief Health Officer, William Sellers, a veritable litmus test for the “initiative to use film as a medium of public enlightenment” (Ayakoroma, 2014. p. 28). That test was hugely successful as film was employed to change hygiene attitudes and procure public co-operation in eliminating plague-bearing rats. Most of the occupants of the fledgling Lagos city were blissfully unaware that with the arrival of this “magic medium” (ibid), the forces of imperialism were once again “adopting new and more subtle and diversified ways, forms and themes to disseminate its ideology” (Ukadike, 1998. pp.28). But African visionaries like Med Hondo were acutely aware.

Cinema is the mechanism par excellence for penetrating the minds of our peoples, influencing their everyday social behaviour, directing them, diverting them from their historic national responsibilities. It imposes alien and insidious models and references, and without apparent constraints enforces the adoption of modes of behaviour and communication of the dominating ideologies. (Hondo, 1996. p. 40)

In recognition of the influence of the film medium, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, in 1930, argued that “the use of film as an instrument of culture and education merited the closest attention especially with primitive peoples” (Smyth, 1988. p.285). Following that realisation, the British and the French colonisers devised means to exploit cinema’s powerful visual medium in order to exceedingly influence the behaviour of Africans in their colonies (Ayakoroma, 2014 p.35). The British Colonial Film Unit was subsequently established in 1939 to tap into that potential power of film as an instrument of “mass persuasion’ (Ogunjiofor, 2023; Smyth, 1988. p.285). It was used to indoctrinate Nigerians into accepting British culture, including Christianity, as desirable, and seeing everything native as malevolent (Ukadike, 1998. p.43), thereby creating an inferiority complex in Nigerians about themselves. Nigerians were also introduced to a carefully curated bouquet of films, mainly educational documentaries. However, for fear of putting such a powerful medium in the hands of locals, Nigerians were deliberately not allowed to participate in the process of making films (Haynes, 1995, p. 98; Gukas, 2023; Haynes, 2016. p.3).

Nevertheless, towards the end of the 1950s, most of the colonised African countries started gaining political independence from their British, French and Portuguese colonisers (Pfaff, 2004). In addition to self-determination and political administration, these new countries had the chance to take authority over cultural matters like the film within their territories (Thackway, 2018. p.59). Disappointingly, the euphoria of independence was not followed by economic, political or even ideological liberation as films were instead conscripted into becoming mere instruments of propaganda to perpetuate the self-serving agenda of the

emergent African elite (Ukadike, 1998, p.1). Consequently, the majority of filmic output of the immediate post-independence era was distorted documentaries celebrating the nationhood and the purported success of its leaders, like Francis Oladele's *One Nigeria* (1969) [Novia, 2022].

Even then, an aesthetic and ideological dichotomy was discernible in the filmic experiences of the countries colonised by the French and the British imperialists. Firstly, colonies like Senegal, Mali and Ivory Coast benefited from the French colonial policy of integration to forge an elitist (Adesokan, 2004. p.191), well-funded, French-controlled, qualitative film industry (Bisschoff, 2009). Francophone black Africans started sub-Saharan African filmmaking in 1955 when a group of students in Paris made a short film titled *Afrique sur Saine* (Africa on the Seine, 1955). That group, including Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, Mamadou Saar, Robert Cristan and Jacques Melo Kane (Ukadike, 1998. p.68), were buoyed by French financing, French training and non-commercial distribution channels to create a small body of feature films but no real filmmaking infrastructure in their various countries (Haynes, 2016. p.4). The resulting film industry has been aptly described as a biological anomaly; consisting of heads (filmmakers) but no bodies [audience, distribution or exhibition structures] (Cheriaa, 1996. p. 42). So, with neither their country's support nor a conducive local environment, these politically-driven filmmakers made 'national consciousness' films that concerned themselves with the denunciation of colonialism and the fight against the profligacy of the African elite (Ayakoroma, 2014 p.35). In other words, they used their films to achieve what Fanon called "a new revolutionary humanism" through social, political and artistic enlightenment (Ukadike, 1998. p.5).

Meanwhile, the British had a more pragmatic and almost transactional filmic relationship with their colonies (Gukas, 2023; Mofe-Damijo, 2023). The intention was not to teach their colonies the process of making films, rather film was consciously discouraged as

an artistic or commercial endeavour and only deployed as an instrument for amplifying colonial messages (Ukadike, 1998. p.33). So, while the French gave feature films to their colonies, the British did nothing to encourage feature film production (Haynes, 2016. p.4); instead they privileged the documentary film in Nigeria, Ghana and other Anglophone sub-Saharan African countries (Aduku, 2018). The resulting instructional films were purportedly made to educate natives, but inherent in their structure and messaging was the presentation of under-developed African characters deliberately stunted to drive the false narrative that Africa needed the British to survive (Ukadike, 1998. p.44).

So, in 1947, a Federal Film Unit was established in Lagos to curate these documentary films coming from London and to produce newsreels (Aduku, 2018). No film school in Britain offered admissions to Nigerian students because the British were neither willing to engender a meaningful transfer of technology (Obi-Rapu, 2023; Aduku, 2018) nor were they interested in training the natives beyond the skills required to run its propaganda machine and achieve its imperial objectives (Ukadike, 1998. p.68). It was from this barren bedrock of colonial prevarication and stifling local creative and economic ecosystem that a populist Nigerian film industry (Adesokan, 2004. p.191) grew its first fledgeling shoots. But it was not without growing pains.

For the next 20 years or so, Nigeria's relationship with film became one of a hapless consumer of film products (Haynes, 2011:68; Haynes, 2016:3). Throughout this period, even after independence in 1960, Nigeria, with no control over production or distribution (Ukadike, 1994:62, 305), was made to binge on a diet of foreign films including, but not limited to, propagandist ethnographic documentaries, Hollywood B films in their final theatrical cycle, Chinese films with gaping synch issues and family melodramas with no subtitles from the



Indian subcontinent. (Lobato, 2010. p.339; Iwuh, 2015; Haynes, 2011:67; Ukadike, 1994. p.62).

## **2:02 Classification of the Nigerian Film Industry**

There have been several attempts to classify the Nigerian film industry into epochs or phases for analytical ease. Fidelis Duker, the former President of the Directors Guild of Nigeria, simply divides the industry into what he calls the pre-Nollywood era and the Nollywood era. To him, the pre-Nollywood era encapsulates the colonial period, through to the post-independence plethora of celluloid films produced under the Yoruba traveling theatre tradition in the 1970s and 1980s. The champions of this era included Hubert Ogunde, Ola Balogun, Ladi Ladebo, Ade (Love) Afolayan and Eddie Ugbomah. On the other hand, he traces the Nollywood era from the successful commercial and artistic experiment that was Okey Ogunjiofor's *Living in Bondage* (1992), to the present-day digital practice, including the industry's currently explosive streaming re-embodiment (Duker, 2023). Actor and producer, Enyinna Nwigwe shares this binary historical classification of Nollywood, although in his own instance, he discountenances the colonial period as "inconsequential due to the triviality of the actual roles played by Nigerians in the films of that era". He believes that the confines of a historical review of the Nigerian film industry should be defined by Nigerians' hands-on participation in the making of films and not just observing films being made by the British Colonial Film Unit (Nwigwe, 2023). Instead of the term pre-Nollywood era, Nwigwe also chooses a different nomenclature for the first part of the two periods; calling it the celluloid era.

Other classifications have splintered the industry into multiple chronological segments. Andy Boyo, veteran director and patron of the Nigerian film guilds believes that the industry should be classed into five periods:

- The colonial era- 1903 to 1960- when the Colonial Film Unit made documentary films as tools of indoctrination and control.
- The independence era- 1960 to 1972- when the Nigeria Film Unit replaced the Colonial Film Unit but still focused on documentaries and news reels.
- The Indigenisation Decree era- 1972 to 1992 – a period dominated by the Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners who made films to compete with Lebanese and Indian domination of the film distribution circuits.
- The Nollywood era- 1992 to the present- with *Living in Bondage* (1992) serving as catalyst, this is a period of innovation to subvert the supremacy of celluloid and democratise filmmaking (Boyo, 2023).
- New Nollywood era- 2010 to the present- a period which witnessed improvements across all areas of Nigerian filmmaking with distribution in cinemas and streaming in addition to traditional modes.

While Boyo’s breakdown is detailed, this study’s focus will not benefit from its intricate approach to cataloguing Nigeria’s journey in film. This study therefore partially adopts Nwigwe’s simplified approach by viewing the history of the Nigeria film industry through three distinct, multifarious historical vistas-

- the celluloid era,
- the Nollywood era
- and the New Nollywood era.

This tri-focal approach while streamlining the grouping of Nigerian filmmaking, acknowledges that such categorisation cannot be clinical as to eliminate overlaps between different eras in which one era dips into another and vice versa. In other words, it is not possible to clearly define the period in which the clean break occurred between the celluloid and the Nollywood era as some films such as Ade Ajiboye’s *Soso Meji* (1988) and Moses Olaiya’s *Agba*

*Man* (1992) were made in video during the celluloid era (Ezepue, 2020). Accordingly, in a transition period symptomatic of the filmic crossfade effect, films continued to be made on celluloid in Nigeria during the Nollywood era. Examples of such films include Ali Mahmoud Balogun's *Tango with Me* (2009), Jet Amata's *Black November* (2008) and Izu Ojukwu's "76 (2017) [Ogunjiofor, 2023].

## **2:03            The Celluloid Era**

The history of celluloid began in 1846 when a German-Swiss chemist Christian Friedrich Schobain discovered cellulose nitrate also known as nitrocellulose or gun cotton (McQueen, 2018). Combining cotton cellulose fibres with nitric and sulfuric acid, he made a malleable, transparent material like glass with pigmenting qualities, but which could also be rolled like steel (Del Amo, 2000). At first, it was dangerously flammable and highly unstable. But in 1897, other researchers worked to reduce the risk of fires and made it the very thing that "made cinema possible" (McQueen, 2018).

For nearly a century after that, although still inherently precarious and expensive, movies were available only as physical film because film stock was the only way major movies were filmed and distributed (ibid). Celluloid's era of dominance was ended by digital technology whose disruptive but disputed introduction in 1992 with *Living in Bondage*, according to Nollywood practitioners (Ogunjiofor, 2023), or ten years later with *Star Wars: Episode II- Attack of the Clones* (2002), in the eyes of western critics (Chibber, 2015). Although the advent of digital technology ultimately simplified and democratised filmmaking (ibid), the contribution of celluloid to the history and development of film and cinema has been invaluable, earning the term perpetual synonymity with film or cinema (Abreu, 2020).

Out of historical necessity, filmmaking in Nigeria started on the celluloid format because there were no other ways of making film in those days other than using that somewhat

expensive technology. The identity of the earliest celluloid film made in Nigeria is subject to dispute and much academic conjecture. This is as a result of the absence of adequate recordkeeping and a lack of depth in earlier research on the subject, leaving behind a terrain in which the loudest voices resonated despite the veracity, or lack of, in their claims. Accordingly, the history books have ignored the ‘racist’ film titled *Palaver* (1926), which was produced by the Colonial Film Unit. It has been said that the only thing Nigerian about the film was its location in the northern part of Nigeria and its hapless local actors (Akande, 2017), whom the director, Geoffrey Barkas, described as “cannibal, pagan tribes” (Ekenyerengozi, 1997). The apathy towards *Palaver* has been informed by the film’s proud racist overtone, its inclination to highlight the beneficial influence of slavery and its attempt at justifying the colonising presence of the white man in Africa (Akande, 2017; Nwigwe, 2023).

Aside from the controversial *Palaver*, some contemporary film practitioners in Nigeria, such as Ogunjiofor, contend that John Ifoghale Amata made Nigeria’s first feature film-*Freedom* in 1956. Although John Amata and his brothers went on to create a Nigerian filmmaking dynasty some decades later, this contention is corroborated by very little literature. The farthest that feature-length filmmaking in Nigeria can be verifiably traced is 1957, when *Fincho* became the first Nigerian film shot in colour (Obi-Rapu, 2023). Directed by Sam Zebba, the 16mm celluloid film was in pidgin English and dealt with the clash between colonial innovation and the native Nigerian cultures. It starred Nigerian actors like Patrick Akponu in the titular role, Adebayo Fuwa and Comfort Ajilo. Although its primacy is not unanimously affirmed by literature, *Fincho* is available to watch for free online and in this study’s view, its claim is merited both in terms of chronology and meaningful participation of Nigerians, at least in front of the camera.

Alternative historical records and research also support a clutch of early films for the honour of being the first celluloid film made in Nigeria. A little-known film titled *Bound for*

*Lagos* (1962) is one of them (Ekwuazi, 2019). After a period dominated by documentaries, another film in contention is *Culture in Transition* (1962), sponsored by the Shell oil company (Gukas, 2023; Aduku, 2018). Whichever of the two films was indeed the first, the year of production is incontrovertible- 1962. One needs to contrast that with India which is credited with its first production (*Phalke's Harishchanfra*) in 1913 to appreciate how recent a phenomenon filmmaking in Nigeria is (Ekwuazi, 1991, p.97) and to contextualise the tremendous strides the industry has made to arrive where it is today. Equally, African Americans like Micheaux were already making films in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, birthing their own veritable film movement- the race films – treated in greater detail later in this study.

Further aggravating this late start, indigenous filmmaking (by Nigerians or people living in Nigeria) did not begin in Nigeria until the next decade. *Son of Africa* (1970), directed by Helmy Rafla, stakes a claim for the first indigenous film in Nigeria (Ukadike, 1998. p.144). Produced by a Lebanese company and starring a mainly Lebanese cast, with Funsho Adeolu, Fonzo Adiolu as some of the few Nigerians in speaking roles, it was heavily criticised at the time of release for its lack of meaningful participation from Nigerians. It was also condemned for its preoccupation with Lebanese belly dancers and a lack of a Nigerian dimension to the treatment of its currency counterfeiting narrative. Perhaps on the basis of the above condemnations that were summed up in “a lack of a certain Nigeria-ness” (Erinugha, 2023), critics and historians have denied *Son of Africa* its chronological place as the first indigenous feature film production by an independent filmmaker in Nigeria.

That special honour has been usurped by Francis Oladele's *Kongi's Harvest* (1970), a political satire based on Wole Soyinka's play of the same title. Unlike *Son*, *Kongi* was produced by a Nigerian company- Calpenny Nigeria Films Limited (in collaboration with American and Swedish companies) and shot exclusively on location in Abeokuta, Ibadan and Oyo. Although

it was directed by American actor and director Ossie Davis (Ukadike, 1998. p. 144), it was produced by Francis Oladele, written by Wole Soyinka and the entire cast was Nigerian. The film told the allegorical political story in which a group of common people faced a conundrum in the tussle for power between an evil dictator and a corrupt old king.

Aesthetically, *Kongi* was shot in a near-documentary style that was accompanied by the core oral traditional element of a narrator. Its mise en scene was distinctly proscenium, its actors' spoke in an elaborate declaratory style matched by an overzealous narrator's voice. In summary, the film adaptation struggled to convert the poetic flair of the source play into the sparse dialogue that a filmic reiteration of the story required, for both pace and cadence. So, the film became littered with chunks of monologues that sounded more literary than cinematic. Such was the unease that greeted the release of *Kongi* that the playwright, lead actor and writer of the screenplay, Wole Soyinka, distanced himself from the final product (p.145). However, for the times and as the foremost effort in indigenous feature film production, *Kongi* represents a solid attempt and deserves its historical place at the incipience of Nigerian film production.

The following year, Oladele once again adapted two novels- *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer At ease*- from another prominent Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe. The feature film project that emerged was initially titled *Bullfrog in the Sun* (1971) and just like Soyinka in *Kongi's Harvest*, Achebe was also not happy with the cinematic amalgam of his two novels (Obi-Rapu, 2023). Nonetheless, *Things Fall Apart*, as it was subsequently titled, was better produced than its predecessor but still struggled with commercial success at home or abroad. Incidentally, it became the last commercially-released feature-length film by Nigeria's pioneer filmmaker, Francis Oladele (Ukadike, 1998. p.146).

Cue the arrival on the scene of Ola Balogun, then a young Nigerian scholar trained at the iconic Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinematographiques (IDHEC) Paris. Before his feature film epiphany, Balogun directed a few documentary short films, including *One Nigeria* (1969)

and *Nupe Masquerade* (1972). But in 1973, he formed his own production company (Afrocult Foundation Limited) whose first film, *Amadi* (1975), is generally considered Nigeria's first film in a native language (Aduku, 2018). Although Ekwuazi (1987) posits, in what is a minority but influential view, that *Mama Learns a Lesson* (1963), produced in Hausa by the Northern Nigerian Film Unit, was indeed the first film production in a Nigerian language, *Amadi* remains undoubtedly the first film in a native Nigerian language by an independent, non-state entity. It tells the story of a young man who returns to his village after a misadventure in the city. Although the film suffered from typical sloppy technical standards, *Amadi* put the Igbo language on the screen to the excitement of both Igbo and non-Igbo audiences (Aduku, 2018, Duker, 2023).

#### **2:04            The Dawn of Yoruba Traveling Theatre**

Ola Balogun's next film, *Ajani-Ogun* (1975), was to be one of the most important films in the evolution of Nigeria cinema (Duker, 2023; Haynes, 2016. p. 5). Firstly, it was Black Africa's first musical (Haynes, 2016. p.147), shot on celluloid in collaboration with Duro Ladipo, one of Yoruba travelling theatre's stalwarts. *Ajani-Ogun* exploited the popularity, spirituality, visual splendour, infectious songs and flamboyant dance elements of the itinerant theatre, to tell the story of a hunter's tenacious quest for the recovery of his late father's land from a corrupt politician. Secondly, *Ajani-Ogun's* phenomenal commercial success became the catalyst for the first golden era of Nigerian cinema in the period between the middle of the 1970s and late 1980s (Omope, 2023; Okpechi, 2023; Adesokan, 2004 p.190). Its sold-out screenings from Yoruba city to Yoruba city nurtured a copycat proliferation of the filmic style Ukadike describes as "theatre on screen" (Ukadike, 1998. p.149) amongst many adherents of the Yoruba traveling theatre tradition (Ayakoroma, 2014. p.33).

For context, the traveling theatre, which became one of the most auspicious single factors in the emergence of indigenous filmmaking in Nigeria (Olayiwola, 2011, p. 185), was really a syncretic stage tradition that started in the 1940s in Western Nigeria. Pioneered by Hubert Ogunde in 1945 and epitomised by his productions, it incorporated traditional drumming, singing, mime, dancing and witchcraft into spectacular narrative performances that explored mythology, historical and religious themes (Oloketuyi, 2023; Haynes, 2016. p.5). Though rich in historical and artistic significance and in spite of being shot on celluloid, *Ajani-Ogun*, was far from being a perfect project.

Critics excoriated it for its continuity issues, amateurish over-acting and a palpable saturation with music; issues that were later appropriated and domesticated into the hallmarks of the “escapist entertainment cinema” of the Yoruba traveling theatre (Ukadike, 1998. p.104). Ekwuazi believes that, perhaps, the greatest flaw in *Ajani Ogun* and the many films that followed its formula was in their form. He supposes that “they have yet to work out an authentic cinematic form for their folklorism; they have yet to marry content to structure” (Ekwuazi, 1991. p. 102). In their defence, shooting in celluloid film was tedious and expensive (Duker, 2023; Haynes, 1995. p.97). Frankly, most of the technical work to make the films was done by foreigners abroad and the entire blame for the flawed films that emerged should not be borne by the Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners alone (Enete, 2023).

Nonetheless, other Yoruba travelling theatre practitioners borrowed *Ajani-Ogun*’s apparent handicap and honed its dubious artistic style into something that was different from any western methods (Ukadike, 1998. p.6). And in so doing, they created a film practice that could not be divorced from the unique contexts of its creators; in language, perspective, intent, content and execution (Ekwuazi, 1991. p.103). Having said that, this era of filmed theatre neither had the elevated arty aspirations of Ousmane Sembene and Paulin Soumanou Vieyra’s Francophone west African productions, nor was it founded on an authentic filmmaking



tradition for Nigeria. Instead, as we shall see shortly, the industry had emerged predominantly from the commercial covetousness of creative entrepreneurs seeking to outdo one another (Nwoba, 2023) and “characterised by a purveyance of mediocrity as genial art” (Ukadike, p.149).

In the stampede that followed *Ajani-Ogun*, many of the Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners established film companies by merely printing letter headed papers, with no filmmaking knowhow, experience or equipment (Adesokan, 2004. p.190; Mofe-Damijo, 2023). While many historians hold a similar patronising view as above, it may be pertinent to note that many Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners like Hubert Ogunde and Moses Olaiya (Baba Sala) were reported to have commenced efforts to produce films as early as the late 1940s, long before fully immersing their practice into film (Ayakoroma, 2014 p.30). Ogunde was known to have inserted film elements into his plays to achieve visual effects that the limitations of the stage would not allow (Adesokan, 2004. p.191; Olayiwola, 2011. p. 187). In the case of Olaiya, he was also alleged to have started using filmic prologues in the opening of some of his stage plays decades before his leap into filmmaking in the late 1970s. Although both men did not succeed in making films until after 1979, it was the persistent experimentation of these pioneers of the stage and their contemporaries with the film medium to enhance visual effects for their stage productions that engendered the easy transition into filmmaking (Ayakoroma, 2014. p. 33).

So, when Duro Ladipo kicked open the commercial floodgates for the film medium with *Ajani Ogun*, the rest of the Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners of his generation were ready to jump on the bandwagon by exploiting stock cultural references and signifiers to create a third cinema (Ekwuazi, 1991. P. 103). Ade (Love) Folayan, who played the lead role in *Ajani-Ogun*, fluidly became the proprietor of the film production company, Ade Love Theatre Company and the distribution company, Friendship Motion Pictures Limited. Just like the rest

of his contemporaries, he was looking for an experienced filmmaker to convert some of his stage plays into film. Having worked previously together, he was able to lure Balogun back to Yoruba traveling theatre tradition after the latter's failed attempt to make films that sought appeal from a national audience with *Musik-Man* (1976).

The result of that tense collaboration, marred by artistic differences and personality clashes between Balogun and Folayan, was the very successful *Ija Ominira* (Fight for Freedom, 1977). It was adapted from a novel by Adebayo Faleti and its commercial triumph helped to consolidate the Yoruba traveling theatre filmmaking model (Ukadike, 1998. p.149). Other practitioners like Kola Ogunmola and Olaiya were all drawn into this “commodification of popular artistic and cultural expression” (Adesokan, 2004. p. 189) and started using film as an extension of their boisterous theatre practice, to reduce the logistics of their bloated entourage and increase their profitability (Ayakoroma, 2014. p.33).

In 1979, Balogun finally teamed up with the “biggest of them all” (Duker, 2023)- Ogunde, to make a film adaptation of one of his popular stage plays, *Aiye* (Life). *Aiye*'s production and distribution leveraged on the remarkable following of its stage version to record unparalleled commercial success on the screen. Artistically, it also helped to confirm a stubborn witchcraft-horror reputation for the new filmic reincarnation of the Yoruba traveling theatre (Olayiwola, 2011, p. 185). *Aiye*'s remarkable success birthed the sequel *Jaiyesinmi* (Let the World Rest, 1981) which Ogunde co-directed with Freddie Goode. It also started the profit-driven predilection for sequels, prequels, “seasons' ' or “parts” that would become an abiding feature of Nigeria filmmaking to this day (Okhai, 2022). Ogunde's next two films were shot in Ososa, a dedicated film village in his hometown. *Aropin N'tenia* (1982) and *Ayanmo* (1982 - dedicated to his late wife) were also very lucrative ventures as Ogunde pressed home his advantage of having the largest following of any Yoruba traveling theatre practitioner of his time (Aduku, 2018).

It is important to understand the process of making theatre on screen films, as this would be invaluable subsequently in appreciating the failure of that format. Yoruba travelling theatre troupes traditionally consisted of performers, comedians, stage hands, dancers, drummers and magicians, and in most cases, wives and children (Oloketuyi, 2023; Ayakoroma, 2014. p.38; Haynes, 1995. p.100) totalling sometimes over a hundred in number. As they went from town to town to perform, logging their staging and lights in multiple trucks, the cost of such an entourage became too high to make their practice profitable. Filming their performances with this new medium offered the practitioners an opportunity to perform only once in front of cameras and to now exhibit these recordings in subsequent towns, thereby removing the need for paying a top-heavy cast and crew list and the logistics to transport and feed them. That said, the recording of the performances was not without its own cost implications, critically in foreign exchange. The film crew had to be paid and celluloid film stock, cameras, lights and grip equipment had to be rented. And more importantly, laboratory and sound-dubbing components which represent the most expensive part of the process had to be covered in British pounds or American dollars (Nzekwe, 2023; Adesanya, 2000. p.39).

## **2:05            The Celluloid Era and the Critics**

Even at the zenith of its popularity, Nigeria celluloid film production under the Yoruba traveling theatre tradition was ignored by the local and international film institutions, festivals and markets. None of the films, despite their acceptance in Western Nigeria and in spite of being shot on celluloid (Omoefe, 2023; Haynes, 1995. p.97), could make official selection at African cinema's premier festival, Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) [Haynes, 2016. p.5]. The films also did not enjoy European support- technical or financial- as was the case for Francophone African cinema in neighbouring West African countries. Haynes describes what he then called "Nigerian cinema" as autonomous and

isolated (Haynes, 1995, p. 98). Despite the nationalist rhetoric of the Nigeria Film Commission that was purportedly set up in 1979 (Haynes, 2016. p. 143) to support and propagate the national image and African values (p.4), the Nigerian government continued the colonial legacy of not supporting the creative industry beyond the “flash-in-a-pan ostentatious display of culture that was FESTAC 77” (Novia, 2023). So, with little supportive government policy and action, film production in Nigeria stayed in the hands of private individuals in a sector that cannot fairly be described as organised.

Despite these encumbrances, the Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners continued to make films; attempting to conservatively thematise Nigeria’s realities aesthetically on the screen. However, critics accused them of unashamedly appropriating the structure and elements of the traveling theatre’s stage tradition (Adesokan, 2004. p.190)- like narration, voiceover, native Yoruba language (Ukadike, 1998. p.215), repetition, song and dance (pp.216 - 218). The performances of the mainly untrained actors were not really adapted or nuanced for the screen and they were accused of remaining over-the-top as they did their usual stage routines, the only difference being that a camera recorded them. This imposed a proscenium perspective on the films that emerged, ensuring that they lacked the panoramic viewpoint of traditional cinema- hence their tag “theatre on screen” (p.149). Moreover, most of the productions incorporated the folkloric narrative style and its “cumulative associative storytelling technique” (Okagbue, 2024) that was inherited from the Alarinjo traveling theatre tradition (Gukas, 2023). These may have manifested in and informed the curious slapdash editing style for which *Ajani-Ogun* has been unfairly criticised, in which singing and dancing served as the narrative glue to hold together seemingly chaotic elements (Olayiwola, 2011. p.215). Such harsh criticisms somewhat ignore the cultural specificity of these performance traditions with which their audiences are familiar and which the practitioners have attempted to import into the foreign medium of film.

Accordingly, film scholars have advocated that any attempt to analyse these films must take into account their alternative structures which merge “oral tradition with the modern cinematic representation” (Ukadike, 1998. p.6). Put in simpler terms, Ukadike posits that the concept of the Yoruba travelling theatre practice, beyond the mechanics of the filmmaking process and the currency of their methods, reflected a belief system, cultural and ideological symbols which defy the critical methods used to explore western cinema (p.11). Therefore, the films should be viewed through a postcolonial vista that is embedded in African culture and a social value system which underscore the interconnectedness between community and representation (ibid). It was because these not-so-perfect films relied on the potential of African oral traditions as the essence of their creative autonomy (p.92), and were set in a supportive cultural atmosphere, with patient audiences, that they could to thrive commercially (p.19) to demystify the “global filmmaking cult” (Okhai, 2023).

## **2:06            Distribution in the Celluloid Era**

European and Lebanese companies controlled the distribution of films in Africa and strategically suppressed the emergence of African cinema in order to maintain their stranglehold on distribution and exhibition (Gukas, 2023). This was so even for Francophone African countries where African films were not made available locally for the natives but instead screened at foreign embassies and international film festivals (Inwang, 2023). Correspondingly, in spite of its arty and relatively better quality, the Francophone African film industry, by its inability to achieve sustainability through making films from the profit from previous films, failed to become a real film industry (Haynes, 2016. p.4).

In Nigeria, despite the promulgation of the Indigenisation Decree in 1972 which was to put industries like cinema into the hands of Nigerians and in spite of a flurry of regulatory policies, film distribution and ownership of the few existing cinema houses remained in the

hands of British and Lebanese companies (Aduku, 2018), creating a situation which observers have called “cultural enslavement” (Ekwuazi, 1991, p. 99). Contrary to its declared remit, the implementation of the Indigenisation Decree led to numerous unintended negative consequences as many of the foreign film companies left Nigeria and short-circuited Nigeria in the supply of Hollywood films in their distribution chain.

The business of film distribution was left mainly in the hands of locals with limited resources, skills and products. The Lebanese companies that found stooges to bypass the requirement of the decree did not have any interest in improving film distribution. Their aim was to find films to exhibit- any film. So Indian and Chinese films dominated Nigerian cinema screens in the 1970s and 1980s. (Ogunjiofor, 2023).

This started the decay that ruined the sector, culminating in the takeover of many of the cinemas by churches within 10 years of the decree’s promulgation (ibid). Consequently, the Nigerian populace was denied access to Hollywood films and also prevented from seeing local films like *Kongi’s Harvest*. They were also deliberately prohibited from knowing of the existence of another form of cinema other than the cheap, trashy foreign films that celebrated foreign cultures, sex and violence (Ukadike 1998. pp. 64; Haynes, J., 1995. p 97).

The major reason that the Nigerian film industry was able to achieve sustainability in spite of this reality lies in the ability of practitioners of the Yoruba traveling theatre, unlike their Francophone counterparts, to find a way to circumvent being shut out of the cinema distribution system by

...continuing to travel as they had always done, setting up in schools, city halls, and hotel courtyards as usual; but now they showed their films rather than put on live performances. They have been accused of simply pointing a camera on a stage play but they have demonstrated their ability to adapt to one medium after another, reorganising themselves each time, taking their audiences along with them (Haynes, 2016. p.6).

This resilience meant that, against the odds, the Yoruba traveling theatre forged a commercially vibrant film practice that lasted over a decade (Gukas, 2023) before social, political and economic upheavals conspired to undermine its very foundations by 1992.

## **2:07 The Celluloid Era and Television**

The overlapping and interconnected relationship between film and television is incontrovertible even in the global west such as in the United Kingdom, France and the United States, (Onwochei, 2023). Usually in this association, cinema emerges as the cultural progenitor of television, providing the technical foundations upon which television thrives. For example, cinema filmmaking had existed for over 30 years in the United States before the development of the cameras and picture tubes that made commercial television possible in the mid 1940s (Abramson, 2003). Although historically-speaking, film arrived in Nigeria before television, the former was suppressed by the colonial British until the later emerged to unleash it. So, while film production birthed television production in most countries of the world, in the case of Nigeria, television was a harbinger for film, providing the impetus for its flowering (Haynes, 2016. p.9; Gukas, 2023), supplying its early directors and producers, and forging an aesthetic relationship that became deeply connected (Nwigwe, 2023). Such was the maternal relationship between Nigeria's film industry and television that Haynes calls the film industry "a child of television" (Haynes, 2016. p. 15). That said, the historization of the emergence of television in Nigeria is outside the scope of this study. Therefore, the focus here is geared towards appreciating television's influence on the advent of the Nigerian film industry and the emergence of its aesthetics.

Prior to adapting their stage plays into theatre on screens, most of the Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners, in addition to working on stage, also appeared on television on Western Nigeria Television (WNTV) based in Ibadan. With this multifaceted and syncretic practice,

they drew television into a somewhat paradoxical embrace with film, by blurring the margins between filmmaking and television (Mazdon, 1999. p.74). This feature has had an enduring televisual impression on the aesthetics of the Nigeria film industry.

The Western Nigeria Television (WNTV) was the first television station in Africa. It was controversially set up in 1959 by the then Yoruba leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo (Haynes, 2016. p.8). The circumstances of its establishment have been described as accidental or at best politically motivated (Umeh, 1989. p.57). Anecdotally, the Yoruba contingent to the cross regional negotiations for Nigerian independence had walked out on the proceedings. But when the central Nigeria establishment criticised that action over the airwaves of the Federal All-Nigeria Broadcasting Service and at the same time denied the region's representatives an opportunity to state their side of the argument, Awolowo established a television station with the hope that it would be a source of regional pride and help to increase both the pace and the standard of education in the western region (p.56). The other two regions of Nigeria- the eastern region and northern region- and even the federal government in Lagos, followed with their individual iteration of "sectional" and "divisive" television stations (p.57).

In addition to their focus on news and propagandist documentaries, WNTV also provided a televisual canvas for the burgeoning Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners to bludgeon themselves into the exigencies of screen production and reach new audiences while doing that (Haynes, 2016. p.6; Munis, 2023; Haynes, 1995, p. 100). The establishment of the television station exposed a dire need for local content; a need which the traveling theatre companies met by adapting their successful stage plays for television (Olayiwola, 2011. p. 187). This early contact with television became a spur for the theatre practitioners to attempt the shedding of their operatic format for a more articulated style (Haynes, 1995, p. 100). It also laid the foundations for the film industry that emerged and explains why it extensively



borrowed its production style and aesthetics from television's drama conventions (Ayakoroma, 2014. p.39).

WNTV was subsequently taken over by the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) when the latter was set up with decree 24 in 1976 (p.58; p.60). And by 1985, there were 34 television stations in Nigeria, making it the fourth largest in the world at the time (p.59). This proliferation of television stations across Nigeria led to the establishment of a crop of trained and untrained manpower that the fledgling film industry could draw on: scriptwriters, cinematographers, gaffers, costumiers, makeup artistes, directors and editors (Esosa-Egbon, 2023). This meant that when the many theatre companies morphed into film production companies at the height of the theatre on screen era, there was a steady supply of acceptably competent technical crew to ensure multiple productions at the same time. The television apparatus further provided a technical playground for the traveling theatre stage directors who imminently made the blind leap into screen directing.

Another remarkable feature of the early establishment of WNTV and indeed the exponential growth of television in Nigeria in that era, was the acceptance and use of television media by Nigerians. Many families, basking from the oil wealth of Nigeria, procured television sets and viewed multiple hours of television daily (p.62). For the first time in the nation's history, many citizens who had never seen the moving image were exposed to its power, influence and unrivalled enjoyment. For the few citizens that were used to watching filmic content in cinema or on TV, Nigerian television soap operas allowed them to access and appreciate local content. This ability and appetite for consuming local visual entertainment and obtaining information beyond the ubiquitous radio, provided a veritable touchpaper in the 1990s for the subsequent explosion of a more democratised filmmaking in Nigeria that we shall come to in the next Chapter.

Additionally, many Nigerian literary writers had their works adapted for television. The first ever television play, transmitted as early as the mid-1960s, was Soyinka's *My Father's Burden*. In the absence of experienced creative writers to supply the stories and screenplays for film productions, such literary adaptations facilitated an alternative textual and narrative bedrock for film and television beyond reimagined traveling theatre stage plays. The writers whose works got this special treatment included Cyprian Ekwensi, J. P. Clarke and Chinua Achebe (Haynes, 2016. p.9).

A new phase of television's intimate association with Nigerian film occurred in the 1970s and 1980s when NTA, with help from sponsors, started creating local soap operas and situation comedies. The shows which grew in popularity and reach included *The Village HeadMaster* (1968), *New Masquerade* (1980), *Cock Crow at Dawn* (1980), *Mirror in the Sun* (1984) and later on *Ripples* (1988) and *Checkmate* (1990) [Haynes, 2016. p. 9]. At a time when the celluloid sector of the Nigerian film industry was on the wane in the 1980s and 1990s, these television soaps provided cheaper alternative entertainment that reflected the social realities and aspirations of the viewers. This new confluence with television was to further erode the celluloid era's grip on its audience and on its own existence.

## **2:08            The Celluloid Era and the Nigerian Regions**

If it seems like the blossoming of the Nigerian film industry in the celluloid era had a regional bias in favour of the western region, it is because it is. Several reasons have been adduced to explain this fact. Historically, the Yoruba people's early contact with European missionaries gave them a head start over other regions of Nigeria (eastern and northern Nigeria) in terms of education. The Egba people of Lagos, by virtue of their location near the port of Lagos, were the first people in Nigeria to make contact with Europeans. The establishment of Western education was to follow, making the people of the region, during that period, highly

educated compared to other Nigerian regions. Furthermore, the Yoruba people exploited their early trade with Europeans to appreciate and eventually commercialize art and culture. This inclination to value art, music and literature was boosted by the cultural and linguistic homogeneity of the Yoruba people and the diasporic contributions from returning slaves (Uche, 1989. p. 12).

Nevertheless, a more direct explanation for the dominant role of the Yoruba region in the emergence of Nigerian cinema can be found in the exclusive existence of the traveling theatre practice in the region since the 1940s. At that time when cultural performances in other regions of Nigeria were for traditional and religious rites which attracted no paying audiences, the Yoruba region had the privilege of owning a professional theatre tradition that evolved from the Alarinjo masquerades of the old Oyo empire (Olayiwola, 2011, p. 185; Haynes, 2016. p.16; Gukas, 2023). This meant that they had an already-made and loyal audience who were willing to pay for entertainment and who faithfully followed the intrepid creative entrepreneurs as they hopped from format to format in search of a commercial edge (Haynes, 1995, p. 102; Adesokan, 2004. p.190).

Although the Yoruba travelling theatre became the stimulus for the development of film, that era of filmmaking in Nigeria also had participation from other regions and other demographics. The northern Nigeria region had a filmmaking practice in Hausa language whose song and dance aesthetics resembled Indian Bollywood films (Nuhu, 2023; Haynes, 2016. p. xxiii). Film production in the northern region started before independence with documentaries on Hausa culture (Aduku, 2018). Contrary to Ekwuazi's earlier claim about *Mama Learns a Lesson* (1963), most historians agree that the first feature from northern Nigeria and in the Hausa language was Adamu Halilu's production of *Shehu Umar* (1977), based on an adaptation of a novel by the then Nigerian Prime Minister Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (ibid). Despite contributions from other filmmakers like Ramalan Nuhu and Mallam

Sadiq Tafawa Balewa, film production in northern Nigeria did not grow as rapidly as it did in the south because its development was constrained by Islamic hermitism (Aduku, 2018) and a conservative ethos that frowned at secular revelry (Nuhu, 2023).

The Igbo films of eastern Nigeria did not play a vital role in the beginning of filmmaking in Nigeria, although, as we will see in the coming Chapters, they go on to take centre stage two decades later. It has been generally accepted that the first film in native Nigerian language was *Amadi* (1975), made in Igbo language by Ola Balogun who was fluent in Igbo despite his Yoruba heritage (having been born in Aba, eastern Nigeria). However, there is a little-mentioned Hollywood film partially shot in Enugu, featuring the smattering use of the Igbo language and starring Sydney Poitier. The film, titled *The Mark of the Hawk* (1957), is about the struggles of the local people in Enugu, eastern Nigeria to get back land grabbed by colonial powers. It has a legitimate claim to be tagged the first feature-length film to be produced in Nigeria (Onwanibe, 2023). But once again, that honour has eluded it due to the negligible roles played by Nigerians on screen and behind it. The major cast list did not recognise a single Nigerian and no Nigerian entity, personal or corporate is listed in its production credits, except for a perfunctory acknowledgment in favour of the Cinema Corporation of Nigeria, an organisation that has not been mentioned anywhere else in the history books (ibid). And what an excellent Nigerian first film it would have been, had it been recognised. This is because its quality could compete with anything made anywhere in the world at the time.

Following that early flurry, there was a very insignificant Igbo or eastern Nigerian involvement during the first decade of Nigerian filmmaking (Aduku, 2018). Pundits have put this down to the commercial savviness of the Igbo person who was risk averse to the unstructured, ad hoc nature of the Nigerian film industry at the time ((Ekwuazi, 2000, pp.131). Also acknowledging the commercial disposition of the Igbo, Nwigwe believes that, in addition

to entertainment not being commercialised in Igbo land at the time but instead carried on as communal and pseudo-religious celebrations, Igbo creatives and businesspeople were further discouraged by the huge expense to make film (Nwigwe, 2023). Ugbomah championed the meagre Igbo involvement with films like *The Rise and Fall of Dr. Onyenusi* (1977), *Death of a Black President* (1984) and *America or Die* (1996). But of the 12 feature films he made, 9 were in English, like *The Mask* (1979), *Oil Doom* (1981) and *The Boy is Good* (1982). The rest were in Yoruba (*Apalara, Omiran, Tori Ade*) and none was in Igbo language (Ekwuazi, 2000. p.133). Although berated for his uncouth and over commercialised aesthetics (Haynes, 2018. P. 163), Eddie Ugbomah's contributions to Nigerian cinema in the 1980s, as the isolated voice from the eastern Nigerian region, were remarkable.

## **2:09            The Decline of the Celluloid Era**

The Nigerian celluloid film industry produced in excess of 100 films between 1970 and 1992 (Haynes, 2016. p. xxii). However, that golden era reached its peak in the early 1980s and after that, a series of inauspicious circumstances coalesced to erode its essence and commercial viability and set it on a path of terminal decline. The flurry of productions cooled off to a single film release by 1992- Brendan Shehu's *Kulba Na Barna* (1992)- the first film produced by the Nigeria Film Corporation. By 1993, there was no celluloid release at all in Nigeria for the first time in nearly 23 years, as the impoverished practice capitulated under the weight of many socio-economic and political forces (Adesanya, 2000. p. 40).

The first of these, in historical order, was the fact that the Nigerian film industry had inherited no veritable filmmaking infrastructure from the British beyond what was required to run their imperial propaganda (Obi-Rapu, 2023). Nigerian filmmakers were not admitted into British film schools like their Francophone counterparts and Nigerian technicians and creatives were only allowed in supportive roles that could not engender wholesome technological or

knowledge transfer (Okhai, 2023). Furthermore, the British did not build local facilities in Nigeria to support celluloid filmmaking, like dubbing houses and photography laboratories (Onwochei, 2023). This grim colonial legacy set the industry up on a precarious footing and bred an over-reliance on British companies and expatriates, with its resultant strain on the Nigerian foreign exchange mechanism. Had there been a systematic establishment of filmmaking infrastructure in Nigeria and a wholehearted training of Nigerians in filmmaking, the industry may have been more resilient in the face of the many challenges that it subsequently succumbed to.

Secondly, the Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners enjoyed outstanding success with some of their filmed theatre works, so much so that they were resistant to the efforts of trained filmmakers like Ola Balogun to get them to embrace truly cinematic filmmaking. This obstinacy that Haynes refers to as “aesthetic blockage” manifested in a refusal by the practitioners to heed creative advice and technical counsel (Haynes, 1995, p. 102). The result was that over time, instead of growing, quality fell as the skillset of practitioners depreciated. Once on that trajectory of diminishing quality, it was only a matter of time before the Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners ran out of luck or their audience ran out of patience (Esosa-Egbon, 2023).

Thirdly, and ranking very high in significance to the decline of the celluloid epoch of the Nigerian film industry was the decision of the government of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and The World Bank, to introduce the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in July 1986 (Anyanwu, 1992. p.6). This much-maligned scheme, intended as an austerity policy to rescue the Nigerian economy, instigated the removal of subsidies from petroleum and fertilizers; the liberalisation of the foreign exchange mechanism; the privatization and commercialisation of public corporations, and, most critically the devaluation of the national currency- the naira (ibid; Haynes, 2016. p

5; Novia, 2022). What followed was a chaotic implosion of the economy into double digit inflation, staggering external debt, unprecedented unemployment, untold general hardship and a tanking of the naira, against the US dollar and the British pound (Adesokan, 2004. p.191). The ensuing steep economic downturn affected the celluloid film industry in several ways.

Inflation rose from 5.4% in 1986 to an unprecedented 40.9% in 1989 (Anyanwu, 1992. p.7) and with the replacement of a previous control system with a market-based auction (Obaseki, 1991), the exchange rate between the naira and major global currencies rose from 0.89 in 1985 naira to 17.30 naira to the US dollar in 1992 (Obadan, 2006, p. 5). Therefore, filmmakers that were dependent on foreign exchange to pay for film stock, photographic processing and editing facilities in London could not sustain these expensive filmmaking necessities with the dwindling and increasingly worthless revenue from their film exhibitions. The establishment of a colour film processing facility in 1992 by the Nigerian Film Corporation in Jos came a bit too late to really make a difference (Haynes, 1995, p. 97).

Therefore, at first in a desperate bid to continue their craft, the filmmakers resorted to recycling used film stock from NTA - known as reversal stock- to shore up supplies (Adesanya, 2000. p. 40; Abulu, 2023; Olayiwola, 2011. p. 189). This intrepid adaptability afforded the filmmakers some time but only delayed the inevitable. And by the time the NTA reversal stock ran out, the depreciation of the naira had made it impossible to contemplate buying original film stock with foreign exchange. And even if they could get deals for film stock, there was no local infrastructure for film processing and editing; which had to be paid for with the now scarce and astronomically expensive foreign exchange (Nzekwe, 2023).

As the economic downturn bit harder, prices rose and an unprecedented number of Nigerians became unemployed, the filmmakers were also confronted with a marked reduction in the disposable income available to urban Nigerians, which had previously fuelled social activities like visiting restaurants and cinemas. The filmmakers were dealt a double body blow

as punters had less money to spend on film shows and the value of whatever revenue the filmmakers obtained had been eroded by out-of-control inflation. Survivalist desperation among unemployed citizens, prized out of basic existence, resulted in unparalleled rise in crime- armed robbery, rape and ritual killing (Ayakoroma, 2014. p.37). It became unadvisable for people, particularly families which formed the core of cinema goers, to go out at night in urban areas. For this hitherto commercially independent and sustainable film practice with no benefactors, in which filmmakers made profit from their earlier films to make new films, this era of hardship was certainly uncharted territory which posed an existential threat.

While local Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners could morph into their own local film distributors, the ability to garner any sort of international market for these films was not within their capability; a phenomenon that Haynes refers to as “commercial blockade” (Haynes, 1995, p. 102). So, despite their local popularity, the films were simply placed at the service of local theatres and not watched or sold internationally. Even locally, they also encountered distribution capacity issues, including facing limitations imposed by the un-subtitled *lingua franca* of the films being the Yoruba language (Okadigwe, 2023; Haynes, 1995, p. 101). Therefore, when the fall in number of people going to cinemas in nocturnal hours further diminished the revenue of the filmmakers, there was no international respite available.

The fourth socio-political phenomenon that contributed to the demise of early Nigerian cinema was religion. In the same period of the late 1980s, Nigeria was going through a wave of religious intransigence with an upsurge in the popularity of Pentecostal Christianity in the south and Islamic fundamentalism in the north. To both orthodox doctrines, going to the cinema represented unacceptable social and moral decadence, as cinema invoked close associations with drinking of alcohol, smoking, fighting, drug use and prostitution which were frowned upon under the obdurate versions of both faiths (Haynes, 2016. p. 7). This gradually engrained puritan mindset further shrank the numbers going to the cinemas.



Additionally, as this study revealed earlier, many definitions of cinema have aligned the concept very closely to the physical space where films are communally watched (Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023; Gukas, 2023). Hence the cinema infrastructure provides an important litmus test through which to gauge the health of a film practice. Although the Yoruba traveling theatre films were screened in unconventional venues- churches, town halls and schools- the physical cinema space remained the home of film screenings in Nigeria, particularly in urban areas (Haynes, 1995, p. 101). This important cinema infrastructure, in spite of the pretensions of Nigeria's 1972 Indigenisation Act, was predominantly owned by Lebanese businessmen (Ogunjiofor, 2023). Under their expatriate stranglehold, cinema development in Nigeria was stunted because they refused to invest in the improvement of the dingy spaces crammed with broken seats and no air conditioning (Odiete, 2022; Babatope, 2022). With no indigenous films being made, little in the form of foreign films coming in and more importantly no one showing up to watch them, the cinema buildings quickly fell into disuse and closed down one after another. As the economy plummeted further, the Lebanese operators were forced to sell off the mostly strategically located properties to be reimagined as churches (Ekwuazi, 2001. p.vii; Gukas, 2023) by pentecostal pastors who, ironically, were preaching prosperity in the face of Nigeria's bleak economic realities (Babatope, 2022). So, with falling numbers, dwindling fortunes and no home for exhibition, Nigerian cinema was in its final throes.

Even television, which was such an important affiliate in the evolution of the film industry, would betray it and work against its progress. Incidentally, the emergence of local TV soaps and a veritable star system which it had wrought fulfilled a mass desire for power and wealth, taking those middleclass values and glamour that were fast disappearing from the daily lives of Nigerians and putting them on the television screen (Adesokan, 2004. p.191). The rise to national prominence of stylish soap operas like *Mirror in the Sun* (1984) and *Ripples* (1988) meant a profound change in the idiom of Nigerian filmic performance. And instead of

staying a faithful ally to the Nigerian film industry, television broke ranks and became its biggest rival for Nigerian eyeballs, scarce resources and limited talent pool (Erinugha, 2022; Okpechi, 2023).

Under the spectre of these social, economic and political challenges, the Nigerian celluloid film era went into decline and within a few years pattered off (Ekwuazi, 2001. p.vii). The demise of this era of the Nigeria film industry was officially confirmed in 1996 (Adesanya, 2000. p. 40) when it became clear that no film was made on celluloid anywhere in the country and none was being planned. As stated earlier, this end cannot be said to have been final or immediate as a handful of films continued to be made sporadically on celluloid in Nigeria into the 2000s. It simply meant that from 1996, celluloid filmmaking ceased to be a dominant artistic medium and commercial force in the Nigerian film industry, driving the end of the Yoruba traveling theatre era which relied on the format and which had become synonymous with it.

Ironically, the same conditions that impoverished the celluloid era and hastened its demise would conspire to accelerate a transition from film to video (Ogunjiofor, 2023; Ayakoroma, 2014. p.39; Adosokan, 2004. p. 190; Benjamin, 2023), thereby engendering the reincarnation of the industry as a simpler, more robust, more resilient and unapologetically brash filmic practice that was eventually called Nollywood (Gukas, 2023; Nwakalor-Akukwe, 2023; Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023).

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Ontology of Nollywood

#### 3.01 A Convergence of Circumstances

The Nigerian celluloid film industry reached a critical impasse in the period between the late 1980s and the first few years of the 1990s. The naira had lost 1844% of its value to the US dollar (Anyanwu, 1992. p.7), reducing the worth of the naira to impractical levels for all Nigerians and particularly those with business reliant on foreign exchange. The Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners who, at the time, provided the impetus for the emergence and growth of the film industry could no longer afford to buy film stock or to pay overseas photo laboratory costs inherent in the celluloid format. There was widespread unemployment, exacerbated by a spate of retrenchments from the private and public sectors, including the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA). Nigerians could not find the residual income for personal entertainment and had started adopting television and watching films on Video Home System (VHS) as convenient substitutes for visiting cinemas. Armed robbery, muggings, street crime and insecurity were the order of the day and people locked themselves indoors to escape the scourge (Haynes, 2016: p.7). With attendances falling to untenable numbers and in the face of drastically diminished real value for their meagre box office takings, most of the cinemas had shut down; many of them were converted into Pentecostal churches (Ogunjiofor, 2023). Even the Nigerian television soaps that were recently thriving alongside films were threatened by the withdrawal of sponsorship from struggling corporate entities and an influx of bargain telenovelas from Mexico into Nigeria (Mba, 2023). Nigeria was going through a torturous socio-economic and political epoch that would challenge the legendary Nigerian resilience and adaptability.

The initial response of the Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners to the drying up of their audiences, the dwindling of their revenues and the unaffordability of the celluloid format

for their projects, was to start experimenting with video (Mofe-Damijo, 2023; Omope, 2023). There was an abundance of television video cameras from NTA and a good supply of technicians to operate them (Omoefe, 2023). As video did not require the exorbitant film stock and its expensive overseas processes, the filmmakers were able to considerably reduce their production costs without the untrained eyes of the audience being able to tell the difference on the screen. But as the audience numbers fell even further due to the worsening economy and security situation, they started rendering these video performances onto VHS tapes to sell to people to view at home (Gukas, 2023). Some of the earliest known examples of this were Muideen Aromire's *Ekun* (1986) [Olayiwola, 2011. p.193], Ade Ajiboye's *Soso Meji* (1988) and Moses Olaiya's *Agba Man* (1992) [Ezepue, 2020]. This development that started and progressed through the 1980s became the genesis of committing original filmic content to a portable medium like VHS for home entertainment (Nzekwe, 2023). However, the idea of watching general entertainment, whether it was sports or film on VHS was not new to city dwellers at the time. The availability of VHS players and television sets in many urban homes, powered by an already thriving black market for pirated Chinese and Hollywood films in Lagos and some urban cities, had mooted the idea of video-on-demand film entertainment to Nigerians (Nzekwe, 2023; Ogunjiofor, 2023).

So, the same convergence of economic and technical vagaries that soured the romance between the Yoruba traveling theatre and the big screen (Adosokan, 2004. p. 192) was to brew a seismic change at the dawn of the 990s. And as matter of necessity, the lavish celluloid film production system disbanded, over a short period of time, and seamlessly morphed into a sloppy video practice (Okhai, 2023). The stage was set for a socio-political event that would construct a cultural phenomenon of global significance, ultimately named Nollywood. However, in lieu of exploring the origins and significance of the Nollywood term, this study will refer to this era as the contemporary Nigeria film industry.

### 3:02            **The VHS: New Ways of Doing Old Things**

The Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners started experimentation with the video format when celluloid became inordinately expensive. *Ekun* (1986) is credited by some historians as being the first documented video film in Nigeria (Olayiwola, 2011, p.193). While this is not a consensual view, the film by the Yoruba dramatist Muideen Aromire, beyond its chronological claim to primacy, did not make any artistic or commercial impact on the industry. Another school of thought believes that there was some early trialling of the video format in other regions of Nigeria. In Onitsha, eastern Nigeria, Solomon Eze also known as Mike Orihedinma toyed with video film production in his slapstick, improvised scenarios in the mid 1980s. He produced skits like *Otaaki* (1984), *Ka Uwa Si Aga* (1985) and *Okpuru Anyanwu* (1986). In Enugu, Chiwetalu Agu was known to have recorded local dramas on VHS for sale. And in Port Harcourt, Innocent Ohiri and his posse packaged the “Willy-Willy” skits on video (Ayakoroma, 2014. pp. 49-50). All of these minor strides added to the already inflammable socio-economic milieu and although they represented commendable attempts at mainstreaming the video format as a medium of production and distribution (Nzekwe, 2023), they failed to create much commercial impact beyond their immediate geographical area.

However, the real tinder for the explosion of the contemporary Nigeria film industry was the release of *Living in Bondage* in 1992, written and produced by Okey Ogunjiofor, and distributed by a Lagos-based businessman, Kenneth Nnebue of NEK Video Link (Gukas, 2023; Adosokan, 2004. p. 192; Haynes, 2016. p. 8). There are varying accounts of the *Living in Bondage* story, majority of which is told from the perspective of Ken Nnebue, who was its executive producer and distributor. The anecdotes sustained by film historians and scholars posit that in continuation of his several years of experimentation with contents and film formats in Yoruba language (Adosokan, 2004. p. 192; Haynes, 2016. p. 8), Nnebue hired some freshly retrenched NTA producers (Chowdhury, *et al.*, 2008; Haynes, 2016: p.13) and television soap

actors to reprise a moralistic, tragic story about a young man hounded by greed into a fetish cult with disastrous consequences (Bright, 2015; Lobato, 2012: p.56). The account continues that the film was produced by Okey Ogunjiofor and directed by Chris Obi-Rapu, an NTA producer who was forced to use a pseudonym (Vic Mordi), to circumvent NTA's ban on its staff getting involved in independent projects (Jedlowski, 1993, Obi-Rapu, 2023). Unsure of what to do with a huge consignment of VHS tapes from Taiwan (Okome, 2019. p. 74), the narrative maintains that Nnebue put the melodramatic piece on the VHS tapes, packaged it with a colourful poster and wrapped it in cellophane (Nwigwe, 2023; Haynes, 2016. p. 14) like the pirated Chinese and Hollywood films he previously sold (Boyo, 2023). Then he put them up for sale to the entertainment-hungry Nigerian public, without any official distribution channels, without a PR budget or strategy. Exploiting the ubiquity of street sellers and informal networks of tiny stalls selling electronics deep inside crowded, mazy markets (Haynes, 2016. p. 28; Novia, 2023), *Living in Bondage* became a resounding bestseller (Chowdhury, *et al.*, 2008; Ogunjiofor, 2023; Obi-Rapu, 2023; Haynes, 2016: p.28). Such was the success that Nnebue was forced to recycle his stock of VHS tapes containing pirated foreign films (Schnell, 2017) to meet the demand for this new vernacular film made in Igbo language.

However, based on international film convention, the vision of the film's director (who is its artistic head) and the perspectives from its producer (who essentially owns the film) should be privileged. In this regard, this study valorises Chris Obi-Rapu (director) and Okey Ogunjiofor (writer and producer) and their somewhat nuanced account of that seminal project. Obi-Rapu started his directing career in shows like *Bar Beach Show* and *New Masquerade* on NTA channel 10 in Lagos in the early 1970s (Obi-Rapu, 2023). That was before Ola Balogun engaged him as an assistant producer/director on the set of *Music Man* in 1976. Obi-Rapu's account of the emergence of the contemporary Nigeria film industry tilts towards the

prominence of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and the technical and creative personnel that it provided to fashion out the practice.

Kenneth Nnebue, a video cassette marketer, contacted me, through Okey Ogunjiofor to direct *Living in Bondage*...I brought together some of the stars of NTA soaps and with a tiny budget, made the film using a Super VHS camera that were introduced in the late 1980s. With the commercial success of *Living in Bondage*, most of the people we trained at NTA like Zeb Ejiro, Andi Amenechi, carried the baton and replicated what I did with *Living in Bondage* and an industry was born (Obi-Rapu, 2023).

On the other hand, Ogunjiofor, whose credit for producing the film has been, somehow, usurped by the executive producer, Kenneth Nnebue, sees his own contributions to the emergence of the industry through the façade of a sheer guts, persistence and stubborn optimism (Ogunjiofor, 2023). He graduated in film and television production from the Nigeria Television College, Jos in 1987, and arrived in Lagos at a period of employment embargoes and retrenchment which meant that he could not find work in television.

So, most of us who really wanted to make a living out of film knew we had to find new ways to do old things. What if I used an ordinary hand-held VHS camera to tell my story and then take the cinema to the people instead of taking people to the cinemas? (Ogunjiofor, 2023)

So, Ogunjiofor calculated that if he could find a VHS camera, he could make a film with a N150,000 budget (less than \$15,000 US dollars at the time). And if he printed the film on 1000 VHS tapes, he could turn a profit of N90,000 (about \$9000 US dollars) by selling them for N300 each (ibid). He had written several stories but having been unemployed since graduation, he could not raise the meagre budget to make them. He searched for investors but nobody was ready to invest in the idea mainly because it had not been done before. Banks were not interested, especially since he could provide no collateral. Frustrated by the many refusals, Ogunjiofor decided to engage in street hawking in order to raise the budget. For four years, he sold whatever he could lay his hands on in Lagos traffic- bread, toys, children's clothes, snacks and drinks. He was still unable to raise anything close to the N150,000 he needed.

His luck changed when Ruth Osu referred him to an electronic merchant in Oshodi market in Lagos called Kenneth Nnebue. Nnebue was the first person who shared Ogunjiofor's vision and believed in its potential. Nnebue had been experimenting with selling Yoruba films on VHS even though he is of Igbo extraction. So, Ogunjiofor invited Chris Obi-Rapu, then an NTA staff, to direct the film. Nnebue provided the budget and distributed the product on VHS. The date of release was 12<sup>th</sup> September 1992 (Ogunjiofor, 2023). Within one month, it was a breakaway success, selling thousands of copies and capturing the imagination of Nigerians. By Christmas of 1992, nearly every home in Nigeria with a VCR player had a copy of *Living in Bondage*. Such was its exponential success.

Chief Kenneth Nnebue sponsored the film, marketed the film and carried the promotional campaigns of the film in his (Nek Video Links) company's name, so it became so easy to associate him with the idea more than the street boy whom God used to make it all happen. But this has got to change (ibid)

While Ogunjiofor battles entrenched narratives in order to claw back his deserved veneration for bludgeoning contemporary Nigeria film industry into existence through his will, vision and persistence, his tangible contributions are undeniable. By taking his story straight to an unregulated VHS technology (Haynes 2016: p.14) on a meagre budget of \$15,000, Ogunjiofor managed to demystify and circumvent the prohibitive costs of celluloid production. In the same breath, he succeeded in evading the challenges of distribution through the crumbling Nigerian cinema infrastructure to kindle an informal industry that was more inclusive and more pocket-friendly (Gukas, 2023; Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023; Haynes, 2016: pp.5-6; Jedlowski 2013; Schnell, 2017).

In the *Living in Bondage* film itself, Kenneth Okonkwo plays Andy Okeke, a greedy young man whose covetous behaviour towards his affluent friend, Paulo (Okechukwu Ogunjiofor) leads him to into a devilish cult where he is asked to present his wife (Merit) to the sacrificial altar in order to become rich and successful. Having failed to trick the cult with



a prostitute, Andy has the choice to present his wife for sacrifice or perish himself. In a selfish choice symptomatic of his Machiavellian character, he chooses the former and Merit's blood is drunk by the cult members in a macabre orgy. Andy eventually finds the success that had eluded him: fancy clothes, big business deals, expensive cars, opulent parties and a new wife. But Merit's ghost starts to haunt him at the turn of every new success and he ultimately loses his mind. In an archetypal fall from grace, Andy starts to walk the streets in rags, feeding from waste dumps. That was until an old acquaintance takes him to a Pentecostal church where, a literal *deus ex machina* prayer intervention sees him exorcised and miraculously healed.

The commercial success of *Living in Bondage* has been the subject of critical conjecture as scholars contemplate the pertinent reasons for it. Nigeria's pioneer film scholar, Hyginus Ekwuazi credits *Living in Bondage's* "imaginative intensity and its high emotional appeal" to the supremacy of the individual and their achievements in the "particularistic achievement patterns" of the Igbo cosmos (Ekwuazi, 2000. p.133). Ogunjiofor, the writer and producer of the film puts it down to an uncanny alignment with the mood of the country at the time when people questioned the source of the dubious wealth of the affluent (Ogunjiofor, 2023). Similarly, Okome Onookome, one of the foremost scholars of the Nigerian film industry, believes that *Living in Bondage* forged and enjoyed an intimate relationship with its audience by framing its narrative from their perspective, and feeding into the swirling rumours of human sacrifices and occultic secret societies which rewarded their obedient members with untold riches (Okome, 2019. p. 75). Azubuike Erinugha is less willing to give all the credit to *Living in Bondage*, suggesting that the industry would have happened, with or without the 1992 film because everything was primed for a creative revolution to happen. He believes that with Nigerians being at home with VHS players and television, television soaps waning and people getting tired of watching pirated Chinese films, all that was required was a spark to ignite a new movement. Ogunjiofor's first film provided it (Erinugha, 2022).

Another international scholar, Alessandra Jedlowski, partially attributes the success of *Living in Bondage* to what he describes as “contingent realism” which makes the film feel like a documentary of Andy’s journey, captured in a way that is so inseparable from the lived reality of the audience (Jedlowski, 1992. P. 204). Nigerian film director, Teco Benson, on the other hand, believes that the religious transcendence in the *Living in Bondage* narrative fell into sync with the wave of Pentecostal Christianity and Islamic fundamentalism pervading the nation at the time and tapped into its Manichean moral opposition (Benson, 2023).

Whatever the reason for it, one thing is sure: that *Living in Bondage* was spectacularly successful (Haynes, 2016. p.55; Okpechi, 2023). Built on an infrastructure of piracy (Lobato, 2012: 340; Larkin, 2004), the film went on to define the contemporary Nigeria film industry’s melodramatic imagination which evolved from the acknowledgment of the partial failure of the modern Nigerian project for a new society (Jedlowski, 1992, p. 205). Its adoption of video technology tapped into a demand for locally produced video content and democratized filmmaking by connecting filmmakers with audiences (Nzekwe, 2023).

And just like *Ajani Ogun* in 1975, it became the catalyst for the proliferation of the video industry; proving that there was money to be made in video film production and inspiring Nnebue’s fellow pirates of foreign films in Lagos, and Ogunjiofor’s unemployed creative compatriots, just like Duro Ladipo and Ola Balogun motivated the Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners in the 1970s, into following suit and replicating their formula. The clarion call was answered as folks started

matching a simple, relatable story in Igbo with a retrenched NTA producer or director, casting some known television soap stars alongside complete novices in a quick turn-around video production cycle that is rendered onto VHS tapes, publicised with loud, colourful posters and distributed widely through informal networks (Erinugha, 2023).

The result of that mimicry was an avalanche of Pentecostal-infused and occult films reprising the *Living in Bondage* formula and hemmed by NTA trained producers/directors like Chika

Onu, Amaka Igwe, Andy Amenechi, Tunde Kelani, Tade Ogidan and Bolaji Dawodu (Ayakoroma, 2014. pp. 51-52). Films like *Evil Passion* (1993), *Taboo* (1993), *Circle of Doom* (1993) and *Living in Bondage 2* (1993) followed. And in 1994, *Nneka the Pretty Serpent*, *Glamour Girls* and *Sorrows of Ken* confirmed the arrival of the formula and the acceptance of its curious production methods and aesthetics.

### **3:03            The Executive Producers / Marketers**

Despite the creative endeavour of people like Obi-Rapu and Ogunjiofor, the business of Nigerian video film production of that era rested in the hands of its early investors like Kenneth Nnebue, who served as Executive Producers of the films but were fondly referred to as marketers. It was the ideas, world view and business philosophy of these principally electronics traders that came to define that era. Initially, the marketers simply provided the funds for the films' budget, and maybe dictated casting choices. But soon their influence grew after visits to film sets demystified the filmmaking process to them (Munis, 2023). Gradually, to stem prevalent corruption and to reduce their costs, the marketers started producing, taking up acting roles and ultimately even directing (Esosa-Egbon, 2023). They had stumbled on a lucrative formula that required little business acumen or artistic endeavour and were reluctant to allow bigger investors into the industry, who would have helped to usher it into the league of the organised private sector, for fear of losing their grip on the industry (Ogunjiofor, 2023). To this end, they ring-fenced the industry with anti-competitive practices that would have a telling effect on the development of the industry, as well as impinge on the aesthetics of its products.

Firstly, the marketers demanded the shortest possible cycle for the films, from idea to VHS tapes in the markets (Munis, 2023). This was to reduce costs to manageable levels but this pressured directors and producers to rush through the filmmaking process, sacrificing art

and quality at the altar of speed, a penchant which helped to force the films' characteristic "aesthetics of outrage" (Larkin, 2004). Secondly, the marketers created a monopoly by ensuring that only members of their exclusive cabal called the Marketers' Union had the right to release films into their informal but very effective networks (Okpechi, 2023). As there were no alternative distribution networks, this mandated the exclusion of more experienced and more educated entrants into the industry from other sectors of the Nigerian economy. In the absence of fresh ideas that could have lifted the industry beyond the "pedestrian world view of these mainly partially-educated school dropouts" (Inwang, 2023), their linear storytelling and its thematic preoccupation with the ritual genre were sustained.

The cabal also controlled the scheduling of film releases and determined the ceiling of the fees paid to artistes. They abrogated the power to ban certain actors from appearing in their members' films, which was tantamount to a total ban on appearing in all films; without the right to a fair hearing or appeal. They exercised that discretion in 2004 on the leading actors of that period who were accused of charging very high fees, showing sheer arrogance towards marketers and holding up productions with multiple bookings (Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023). Some of the affected actors include Richard Mofe-Damijo, Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde, Genevieve Nnaji and Pete Edochie (Benson, 2023).

Executive producers still exist in the Nigerian film industry to finance or procure finance for films, whatever their classification or budget. However, once the successful Nollywood VHS/VCD era ended in about 2014, as we shall later discover, the relevance of the marketers in the various markets across Nigeria waned and the influence of their industry-wide oligopolistic practices dissipated. This allowed the industry to develop in more splintered, individualistic patterns without any person or group of persons, even the guilds, having any overarching or controlling authority. This study believes that despite the excesses of the marketers, the contemporary Nigerian film industry misses their superintending unified voice,

the void of which absence has been filled by an unbridled unscrupulous ecosystem where there is no leadership, collective industry strategy or consequences for wrongdoing.

### **3:04            The VCD Explosion**

Following the spectacular audience approval for *Living in Bondage* and titles like *Glamour Girls* (1994) that followed it (Obi-Rapu, 2023; Ogunjiofor, 2023), this informal video film industry grew exponentially in the years following its inception (Haynes, 2016:55; Oluyinka, 2008). As the VHS medium was being phased out globally, and in its place, the digital format was gaining grounds predominantly in the form of the Digital Versatile Disk (DVD), Taiwanese exporters had dumped several container loads of VHS on Nigerian pirates like Kenneth Nnebue. Ogunjiofor identified VHS tapes as the core ingredient of his unwritten business plan because many Nigerian homes were already equipped with televisions and VHS players (Omoefe, 2023; Benjamin, 2023). So, the VHS became the vehicle for phenomenal growth of the contemporary Nigeria film industry. Driven by the portability of the VHS technology and the mobile character of Nigerian travellers, the consumption base of this cultural practice was expanded, in the early phase of the industry, across Africa and the global west. The growth and spread of the industry were further energised by illegal distribution, piracy, and unauthorised public exhibitions in street corners, video parlours, and long-haul buses (Benson, 2023; Okome, 2019. P.75).

For some of the sub-Saharan Africans, this encounter with Nollywood on VHS was the first time that they were seeing a black person, particularly an African, in a leading role in a film. They were also experiencing characters in a film with attributes and mannerisms that they could relate to: a nagging conservative uncle, a jealous wife, a covetous brother etc. Therefore, despite its reputation for poor artistic and technical quality, the films were relatable thus becoming ubiquitous and popular all over Africa (Okhai, 2023; Nzekwe, 2023).

Ultimately, the unwieldiness inherent in the VHS format- its turgidity and vulnerability (tapes being caught in machines) and the fact that production of new VHS players had almost stopped globally (Okpue, 2023), all combined to force the industry to abandon VHS as the medium for carrying filmic content. And towards the turn of the last millennium, the Nigeria video industry finally embraced the digital format. However, the industry chose the Video Compact Disc (VCD) format over its superior cousin: Digital Versatile Disk (DVD). This was in order, once again, to keep costs down, and to segue into the opportunity provided by the availability of cheaper (VCD) players imported by electronic dealers some of whom were film EPs (Ejiro, 2023; Munis, 2023). So, without breaking sweat, the medium of the industry evolved from VHS to VCD (Witt, 2017: p.23) and their audience migrated faithfully with them, adopting the new medium which offered less storage and technical problems.

At its peak around 2007, there were over 6000 registered video parlours and probably 500,000 unregistered ones. 700,000 VCDs were purportedly sold on a daily basis from Alaba market, generating a total revenue in excess of three billion US dollars per annum (Mba, 2023). So, by 2009, the video film industry had become the second largest film industry in the world according to UNESCO; behind India's Bollywood and ahead of Hollywood (Jedlowski 2013: p.25; Schnell, 2017; Haynes, 2011: p.68; Pratt, 2015). Also in 2013, the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics had put the value of the industry at about 3.1% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), based on over eighteen hundred films produced that year (Abulu, 2023; Bright, 2015; Schnell, 2017), making it the second-fastest growing sector of the Nigerian economy at the time (Bright 2014; Oluyinka, 2008). By 2021, that valuation had reached \$6.4 billion US dollars and an unprecedented 5.4% of Nigeria's GDP (Ogunjiofor, 2023). Consequently, what started out as a local artisanal video practice had become Africa's most significant culture industry (Menakaya, 2023; Abulu, 2023; Schnell, 2017), dominating the African continent and gaining

a transnational dimension by exploiting diaspora audiences (Munis, 2023; Benson, 2023; Ajibade, 2013).

One of the early achievements of the film industry that was emerging at that time was the creation of a star system which elevated former television soap actors and actresses into film “selling faces” commanding huge artiste fees and whose involvement in a project guaranteed its commercial success, whatever the quality or narrative. The likes of Saint Obi, Genevieve Nnaji, Jide Kosoko, Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde, Richard Mofe-Damijo and Kanayo O. Kanayo emerged as some of those influential performers whose mere appearance on a film poster guaranteed hundreds of thousands in VCD sales. In recognition of their commercial power, EPs insisted on having them in their films, leading to an over-subscription for their services and a corresponding hike in fees based on demand and supply. It also resulted in a watering down of the quality of films when EPs exploited audiences’ emotional connection with certain actors by simply using these actors to rubberstamp what would have been trashy films, thereby duping the audience whose reliance on the presence of stars on the poster had sometimes become a misplaced measure of quality (Benson, 2023; Omope, 2023).

### **3:05 The Scramble for Nollywood**

Although filmmaking is not a regulated sector and practitioners do not have to meet minimum entry requirements in most other countries in the world, working in the film industry is usually predicated on a period of formal education, vocational training or apprenticeship (Okpechi, 2023). For example, in the UK, behind the scene practitioners emerge from such pupillage and work on the fringes of the industry making tea, before they get the chance to actually practise their craft. When they eventually do, years after, they are more than ready with the requisite skills and knowledge of the conventions of the industry to make their impact. For actors, most would have to thread boards in theatres and act in television and student shorts

before getting substantive roles in film (Okpue, 2023). Many of the Franco-phone African filmmakers were formally trained in France (Ousmane Sembene and Paulin Soumanou Vieyra), and even the homegrown ones emerged from years of pupillage in the industry (Gukas, 2023). It can then be argued therefore that a period of formal or informal training is generally accepted as an unwritten criterion for involvement in the film industry in many countries of the world.

But in the Nigerian video film industry, the ad-hoc nature of the industry and its impatience with process (Omope, 2023) meant that practitioners did not see the need and therefore had no desire to bide their time in honing their craft (Mofe-Damijo, 2023). The “can-do attitude” of the average Nigerian coalesced into the complete absence of entry barriers into this VCD phase of the contemporary Nigeria film industry. It will be unconscionable for a film practice that was started by semi-illiterate market traders to require any formidable entry requirement (Mofe-Damijo, 2023). Therefore, apart from the early entrants, like Ogunjiofor, Tade Ogidan and Amaka Igwe with television experience, most people joined the industry, armed with nothing more than a dream (Nzekwe, 2023). The take-off of the industry was so unexpectedly swift that the government was also taken unawares and was therefore left unprepared as to ways to encourage or regulate it. The various levels of Nigerian government stood by and watched as the industry, under the Machiavellian control of the EPs, took whatever turn suited it.

So, without government interest, regulation and policy, the industry attracted the bright and not so bright; affording every Nigerian with a creative passion the platform to fulfil their dreams irrespective of their level of education, looks, age or language spoken (Abulu, 2023). This pedestrian threshold meant that the early years of the industry constituted “a mass apprenticeship” programme in which nearly 70% of participants in the film industry were still learning their craft, still searching for their artistic essence, still looking for their voices



(Nzekwe, 2023). This unique feature of the industry at that early stage has gone on to affect it in two major ways. Firstly, it has meant that the numbers flocking into the industry grew exponentially to become the fourth largest employer of labour in Nigeria, after oil, agriculture and the civil service (Munis, 2023). In fact, folks who were previously engaged in unsavoury professions such as armed robbery and prostitution found equally exciting ways of making a living on the right side of the law.

Secondly, the ease of joining the industry meant that skill or talent were not prerequisites as everyone came into the industry to try their luck (Erinugha, 2022). Caught as such in this state of professional ambiguity, the practitioners, when artistically challenged, resorted to hyperbole, outrage and melodrama. The writers looked to shock tactics instead of credibly resolving plot issues (Omope, 2023). Actors, unable to find nuanced range in their performances, opted for shouting, histrionics and exaggerated movements (Mofe-Damijo, 2023). Music composers who were unable to differentiate between score and songs plastered films with wall-to-wall music, without regard for relevance, tone and mood (Godson, 2021). The directors were simply more interested in calling “action” and “cut”, and enjoying the elevated status on set; than in providing an over-arching interpretation of the narrative through *mise en scene* (Benson, 2023; Abulu, 2023). Every member of the creative process tried too hard for their voice to be heard, leading to a cacophony of ideas which the audience forgave and accepted, but which insidiously irritated delicate western and sophisticated local palettes. It is this pupillage paradigm and its rag-tag artistic signature involving trial and error, and an uncommon sense of creative bravado that culminated in what Brian Larkin has described as the “aesthetics of outrage” (Larkin, 2004).

As we shall see later in this study, this was only the beginning and things would change drastically. Having said that, even in those early years, the industry boasted of a robust number of graduates, compared to other major film industries in the world (Okhai, 2022). The likes of

Lancelot Imasuen, Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde, Richard Mofe-Damijo, Bob Manuel Udokwu and Genevieve Nnaji who were part of the early success stories of the industry were all graduates of theatre arts. Other people involved with the industry, like Kunle Afolayan, Funke Akindele and Kanayo. O. Kanayo were graduates of other disciplines for whom the industry represented an escape from unemployment or a route to realising their creative ambitions (Okhai, 2023).

### **3:06            The Christening of Nollywood**

Nearly ten years into its existence and at the turn of the millennium, the contemporary Nigerian film industry acquired a new name for describing it and the films that emerged from it. That term, Nollywood, has been said to represent a kind of naming anxiety (Tsaaior, 2017) and its etymology has a convenient but contested significance (Akudinobi, 2019: p.138; Agba, 2014).

In one of Jonathan Haynes' earlier studies on the Nigerian film industry, titled "Nollywood: What's in a Name?", published in *Film International* 5.4 in 2007, Haynes, in trying to grapple with the early shoots of Nollywood on the world stage, muddled up the origins of the term, attributing it to Matt Steinglass of *The New York Times* in 2002. This May 2002 article titled "Film: When There's Too Much of a Not-Very Good Thing" was about the Nigerian movie industry, chronicling its struggles in a downturn. However, it made no mention of the term Nollywood. Although Haynes went on to correct this error in his 2016 acclaimed book (Haynes, 2016. p. xxiii), this tardiness speaks to the insufficiency of his methodology and the lax academic attitude towards Nollywood at that time. Even the producer of *Living in Bondage*, Ogunjiofor, ascribes to that erroneous attribution of the name to Matt Steinglass (Ogunjiofor, 2023). The reductionistic term with undefined boundaries (Ezepue, 2020) has been principally credited to Norimitsu Onishi in his article of September 16, 2002 titled "Step

Aside, L.A. and Bombay, for Nollywood" published in *The New York Times* (Nwigwe, 2023; Schnell, 2017; Onishi, 2016).

The meaning and genesis of the name have been the focus of strong disagreement among commentators. Most believe that the “N” in Nollywood represents Nigeria and the “olly” and “wood” are borrowed from Hollywood and Bollywood to achieve a conceptual connection with those hegemons (Lady Truth, 2023). While a few asserts that the “N” in Nollywood’ instead of actually signifying “Nigeria’, was constructed from the word “Nothing” (Ogunjiofor, 2023; Inwang, 2023). Whatever it stands for, Onishi used the term to describe the English language films that resulted from the production and distribution formula of *Living in Bondage* in Nigeria, (Enete, 2023; Haynes, 2016: p. xxiii).

Contrary to widely held opinion, this study has traced the origin of the term Nollywood closer to home by highlighting its early informal emergence in Nigerian filmmaking circles long before Onishi’s 2002 article. Charles Novia, one of Nollywood’s pioneer directors, contends that the term “Nollywood” was bandied around by film practitioners like Paul Eberonwu at Winnie’s Hotel in Surulere, Lagos around the year 2000, as a self-deprecating term of endearment, christened from the Hollywood and Bollywood template to describe the practice that was emerging in Nigeria at the time (Novia, 2023). Explaining the Onishi connection, he believes that, after marinating himself in the then epicentre of Nigerian filmmaking, Surulere Lagos, Onishi must have picked up the term and what he then did with his 2002 article was to put it squarely into the global film lexicon. Novia uses the controversy surrounding the term’s origins to take a postcolonial position by alluding to the imperial arrogance of Westerners who claim to discover and name things that preceded their arrival in the postcolony.

What can I say? If Christopher Columbus discovered America and Mungo Park discovered the River Niger, then Morimitsu Onishi named us Nollywood. That is the way of the West. We

don't exist until they breathe life into our existence with a Western baptism. (Novia, 2023)

While the debate about its exact origin rages on, the term has developed a multiplicity of connotations. On the one hand, there is a school of thought that is apathetic to the name. To its adherents, whatever we choose to call the industry does not matter. C. J. Obasi, director of Nigeria's entry in the 2024 Oscars, *Mami Wata* (2023) does not even want to discuss the name. To him, it means nothing and having achieved success without it, he intends to stay away from its controversy (Obasi, 2023). Others believe that it is the content that counts (Esosa-Egbon, 2023) asking: what's in a name? "I don't see the difference it makes, except that it becomes easier for critics and scholars to discuss the industry" (Ezepue, 2023). This group believes that a name does not prejudice the bearer with any connotation of good or bad (Enete, 2023) and the reputation of the industry should be predicated on the quality of its filmic output, rather than the sound of its name, especially when that naming was developed out of harmless, fond regard, as in the case with Nollywood (Inwang, 2023). They are of the opinion that appropriating and owning the imperfect name will validate it for an industry in search of a unique means of affirming its global identity.

Another school of thought believes that despite its contested origins, the "apt Nollywood term" (Omoefe, 2023) has come to stay as a metonym for capturing the essence of the Nigeria filmmaking process (Gukas, 2023), as well as identifying, clearly defining and projecting the industry (Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023). Consequently, it should be seen as positive for the industry because the association with other established global film practices underlines the distinctiveness and rapid growth of the Nigerian film industry (Elliot, 2023; Duker, 2023).

The name Nollywood signifies the industry's ambition and determination to establish itself as a global player in cinema. It captures the rapid growth and proliferation of Nigerian films, which share similarities with the larger-than-life nature of Hollywood productions. This term has contributed to branding and marketing efforts, helping to draw attention to the unique cinematic output of Nigeria (Nzekwe, 2023).

This group, that is in the majority, has credited the Nollywood sobriquet with popularising the “wood” appendage to film industries, making it “a universal shorthand for various national movie industries to identify themselves” (Okpue, 2023). Consequently, Ghana has Ghollywood and Tanzania has Bongowood and Cameroon has Collywood (Boyo, 2023). Although this school of thought recognises the intrinsic value of the Nollywood term “as a catchy linguistic choice that creates an affinity with well-known film industries like Bollywood and Hollywood”, its advocates agree that such nomenclature might lead to comparisons that may not correctly “reflect the unique qualities of the Nigerian film industry” (Nwigwe, 2023).

And this is the premise upon which Haynes anchors his denunciation of the “silly” “wood” name. He supposes that it undermines the Nigerian film industry by subordinating it to Hollywood and portraying it as an imitation rather than something “original and uniquely African” (Haynes, 2007). Some Nollywood insiders share this pejorative position and see the naming as “missing a great branding opportunity to make a clear statement of its unique identity of the Nigerian film industry from the onset” (Okpue, 2023). They further argue that it marginalises the existence of disparate film practices in different languages within Nigeria (Egbe, 2023; Bisschoff, 2015), which, according to the Nigeria National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), produced 61% of films in native languages between 1994-2001 (Schnell, 2017). These advocates believe that the term has also tended to undermine Nollywood’s inherent diversity by attempting to homogenise a complex industry with myriad genres, diverse forms and eclectic canons (Lawrence, 2007; Mofe-Damijo, 2023). Finally, they contend that the elementary term “Nollywood” perpetuates a focus on imitation rather than celebrating the industry's originality and cultural contributions (Abulu, 2023).

Furthermore, the fact that Nollywood was not named by the owners of the industry or even a Nigerian, but instead by a foreigner; has been flagged as an extension of a colonial mentality (Menakaya, 2023). Articulating this opposition view, Nkechi Okadigwe posits that

“the term somehow seems like a call for the validation of the Western film industry (Okadigwe, 2023). Even Onishi himself could not escape the irony that an industry championing cultural independence for Africa had been branded, admittedly without much thought, by a Japanese man working for an American newspaper. On a phone call to his editor, from his Johannesburg base in South Africa, Onishi said “It’s like Hollywood or Bollywood but in Nigeria- Nollywood”. (Onishi, 2016). A few days later, his article with eternal relevance for the Nigerian film industry made the front page of the iconic *The New York Times* with a headline written by an anonymous copy editor- “Step Aside L.A. and Bombay, for Nollywood”. Onishi’s unwillingness to take full credit for inventing the term leaves the scholarly dispute about its true origins inconclusive. The primacy of the term as a vehicle for appreciating and discussing the Nigerian industry has become unquestionable. However, it was only on his return to Nigeria about fourteen years after his 2002 article that his personal popularity in Nollywood academic and professional circles, as well as the full import of the name that he admitted was flippantly coined, hit home.

Beyond the hypocrisy of its Hollywood pretensions, there is a rather extreme view that the Nollywood term has been materially detrimental to the Nigerian film industry.

The name has hindered the industry's independent growth in terms of establishing its own identity apart from Western influences. The name's implicit connection to Hollywood has shaped perceptions and expectations, potentially overshadowing the individuality and diverse narratives that Nollywood brings to the global cinematic landscape (Nwakalor-Akukwe, 2023).

Therefore, Obi-Rapu, director of *Living in Bondage*, who claims a prerogative to name the “industry that he helped conceive”, prefers a name like Naija film or Naija cinema. Even though the industry has operated for over 20 years as Nollywood, he also suggests that the industry should undergo an urgent rebranding exercise to accommodate its new Naija cinema identity, in a similar way that has seen Facebook morph into Meta (Obi-Rapu, 2023).

Whatever the deliberation about its origin and despite the contested suggestions that it represents only the mainly Igbo segment of the diverse industry, (Haynes, 2016: xxiii; Kelani, 2015), Nollywood has come to be generally accepted as the umbrella term or certainly an "empty signifier" that may be variously used for a reading of the popular but heterogeneous Nigerian film industry (Mishra, 2006; Haynes 2016: p. xxiv: p.126; Agba, 2014; Pratt, 2015). Furthermore, Emeka Mba, the Director General of the Nigeria Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) between 2005 and 2012, adopted the name Nollywood for his sweeping initiatives from 2005. The Central Bank of Nigeria in 2015 devised a controversial three billion naira grant initiative correspondingly termed Project Act Nollywood (Ogunjiofor, 2023). These tacit official endorsements of the term lend seriousness to it and act as a pseudo-governmental assent to its christening (Mba, 2023).

So, just like the Indian film industry has converted "Bollywood", a condescending term coined by some snobby Indian critic in the 1970s (Sundaram, 2016), into a positive, Don Omope thinks that today, credit to the success of the industry, the glib and shallow name "Nollywood" has become a symbol of triumph (Omope, 2023). "Nigerians and the world over have come to accept the term, so much so that I wonder what the industry would have been called if that name never emerged when it did" (Munis, 2023).

The considered opinion of this study is that the origin of the term "Nollywood" reflects a complex interplay between aspirations for global recognition and the desire to maintain a unique Nigerian identity within global cinema. On the one hand, it has risen above its initial limitations to help create a distinct identity for Nigerian cinema and contribute to its global recognition, morphing into "a cool branding label that encapsulates the industry's journey, successes, showcasing its growth, artistic innovation and ongoing challenges" (Nzekwe, 2023). On the other hand, however, it has been perennially associated with certain negative connotations, such as low production values, bad editing, linear storytelling and the refusal to

be described as cinema, which is at the core of this study. Despite these constraints, this study will adopt the now widely-accepted homogenising metonym: Nollywood, in broadly describing the contemporary Nigeria film industry and the films that emerged from it, even as it attempts a broader appreciation of the constituent local film practices and the innate generic and periodic subdivisions.

As an aside, this study recognises an intellectual property minefield developing around the term and its legal ownership. A simple search of the United States Patent and Trademark Office website credits the Nollywood wordmark to one Nicholas Opara (A Nigerian, from his name). The implication for this is that Opara can legally lock all the Nigerian filmmakers out of the US market; which at the moment is the industry's largest diaspora market. The legal import of this intellectual property confusion is outside the scope of this study but the industry should strive to unravel it because, although it doesn't matter who names the child, as Steve Gukas contends, it matters who owns the intellectual property rights in that name, especially in the United States.

### **3:07            Nollywood and Television**

The Nigerian film industry has historically enjoyed a close relationship with television. The Western Nigeria Television (WNTV) provided a veritable training ground for eventual Yoruba traveling theatre filmmakers (Haynes, 2016. p.6; Haynes, 1995, p. 100). It is not alone in this close association with television. Even Hollywood flirted with television when Alfred Hitchcock used his television crew to shoot the critically acclaimed movie *Psycho* (1960) [Metz, 2006]. Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), when it emerged in 1976 (Umeh, 1989. p.58), created the stars, provided the aesthetic template and trained the technical personnel for the emergence of the film industry (Obi-Rapu, 2023).



Once again, television rose to the fore in 2003 to instigate the next phase of the industry. In July of that year, a South African television company, Multichoice, set up Africa Magic, a 24-hour satellite television channel exclusively showing Nollywood films as a means of celebrating African culture and couture (Mba, 2023). Africa Magic was based on a Pay-TV formula, transmitting a scheduled bouquet of Nollywood films into living rooms across 42 Africa countries (Emelike, (2023). These included Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, Cameroun, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. As we shall see later in this study, this was to have a telling impact on Nollywood, especially at a time when VCD sales were depressed locally by audience fatigue and over-production. MultiChoice acquired “television rights” for films, a concept previously unknown to embattled producers and EPs, at “giveaway prices” (Benson, 2023; Obi-Rapu, 2023). This new outlet represented, for the mercantile EPs, a welcome relief and financial boost. So, they raided their expansive back catalogues and dug up forgotten films in order to milk this new boon for the evolving industry (Menakaya, 2023).

This development instantly increased the popularity of the films by taking them farther than the informal VCD distribution networks and the trans-national pirate system could, virtually into living rooms across major urban cities in Nigeria and all-over sub-Saharan Africa: from Lagos to Maiduguri and from Mauritania to Lesotho. The Africa Magic channels were also available and popular in hotels and bars in many cities, allowing people who could not afford the relatively steep subscription rates for their homes to experience the magic of Nollywood, if only fleetingly in public spaces. So, despite the technical and artistic shortcomings of the “Nigeria movies”, as they were fondly called (Benson, 2023), the films on Africa Magic were warmly embraced and rapidly became very popular, vindicating MultiChoice’s ambitious bet on the industry that had so far enjoyed no major investments from within and outside of Nigeria. In response to the initial success story and to further stake huge investments in the industry, over the next few years, MultiChoice launched several more

channels showing Nollywood films with generic specialisation. For example, Africa Magic Epic for films with village settings, Africa Magic Urban for films set in cities. At the time of this study, Africa Magic had 7 channels including Africa Magic channels for Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba language films (Emelike, (2023).

The reasons for the enormous success of the MultiChoice experiment with Africa Magic channels can be traced to their unequivocal value proposition to both the viewers and the filmmakers. On the one hand, watching the films on satellite television made financial sense to the audience. This was because the monthly subscription fee for the premier MultiChoice bouquet of about N9000 in the year 2006 represented the total market cost of about 15 VCDs at over N500 each (Ogunjiofor, 2023). And taking into account that most of the films were truncated into multiple individual parts for commercial reasons, the N9000 may only be enough to buy the many parts of perhaps 5 films. The fact that the N9000 subscription fee came with access, for a calendar month, to a bouquet which included additional channels for news, film and sport, made its value offer undeniable. From a logistics perspective, with satellite television showing the films, the viewers did not need to go out and source the VCDs through its informal distribution networks nor did they have the necessity to store the VCDs that became valueless once they had been watched (Enete, 2023; Gukas, 2023). Although the majority of the films broadcast on the Africa Magic channels at the beginning may not have been exactly new films, the audience did not care. They embraced the films as new whenever they first saw them, irrespective of their date of production (Ogunyemi, 2023). However, subsequently with VCD sales plummeting further and the licensing of television rights growing in importance as a recoupment mechanism in Nollywood, MultiChoice was able to acquire rights in brand new films to show on Africa Magic, thus eliminating the question of the film's currency (Erinugha, 2022).

On the other hand, satellite television offered filmmakers and EPs the opportunity to recycle films that had exhausted their VCD shelf lives and afforded them the chance to obtain substantial residual revenue. MultiChoice was paying up to \$2500 US dollars for satellite television rights for films at its inception (Balogun, 2023). Multiply that by the number of films that many really prolific EPs and producers like OJ Productions and Chico Ejiro had in their back catalogue and the Multichoice proposition began to translate into tidy sums. For filmmakers then with reputations for decent production like T-Chidi Chikere, Teco Benson and Lancelot Imasuen, they were commissioned by MultiChoice to produce specific projects for the channel, removing the need to search for an investor or EP and providing them the scope to make more profits from the commissioned projects than with their EP collaborations (Benson, 2023).

The popularity of these various Africa Magic channels led to the second impact of Nollywood's association with satellite television. In a similar way that the Nigeria Television Authority innocuously helped to undermine the foundational connection between the Yoruba traveling theatre cinema and its audience in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Africa Magic's satellite television was to hasten the erosion of the commercial bases of Nollywood's VCD market. Now that audiences in Nigeria and from across Africa could watch Nollywood films in their homes for a subscription fee that represented a fraction of the costs required to stockpile VCDs in keeping with the frenetic release cycles, the producers and EPs saw a marked reduction in the quantity of VCDs sold (Mba, 2023; Abulu, 2023; Ihunwo, 2023). The shortfall would have been offset by the satellite television licensing fees and, in some cases, the commissioning by MultiChoice for special projects. However, the revenues from the former were insignificant and incidences of the latter were few and far between to dent the economic losses the industry suffered from the resulting drop in VCD sales.

### **3:08            The Decline**

The film *Osuofia in London* (2003) directed and produced by Kingsley Ogoro and starring the legendary Nkem Owoh represented the commercial zenith of Nollywood's VCD format (Menakaya, 2023; Munis, 2023). After *Osuofia in London* sold in excess of a million copies and achieved unrivalled ubiquity throughout Africa, the Nollywood VCD industry went into a downward spiral. This decline was fuelled by myriad socio-economic conditions as the industry continued its evolution, predicated on what has been termed "commercial brinkmanship" (Mofe-Damijo, 2023)

Firstly, even though the demand was still staggering, the Nollywood industry started to oversupply VCD films in a fit of uncontrolled commercialisation (Benson, 2023), with the number of films released each week rising incrementally until it reached the heady heights of fifty-four films a week by about 2002 (Steinglass, 2002). Most of these films were token variations of similar hackneyed storylines, performed hastily by the same clutch of known actors (Gukas, 2023, Akudinobi, 2019: p.138; Schnell, 2017). Initially, the Marketers' Union attempted to stave off the overwhelming tide of film releases by limiting members' releases through monthly quotas. However, most of the members showed legendary disingenuity by registering their apprentices as union members to increase their release opportunities, thereby thwarting the policy and exacerbating the glut of films in the market every week (Mba, 2023).

Emeka Mba was appointed as the new Director General of Nigeria Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) in June 2005, to reform the agency that had grown moribund and to make it more relevant to the growing Nollywood movement (Mba, 2023). Mba's vision for NFVCB was outlined in the "Nigeria in the Movies" project and comprised a new distribution framework, aimed at controlling the volume of film production and streamlining the value chain in order to attract bigger investment into the industry from corporate Nigeria. He opined that

the future of Nollywood could not be sustainable without adequately structured distribution. It was unable to attract formal finance because it was opaque and unaccountable; with no legal contracts existing in the entire value chain. No one could account for the number of VCDs being sold or where they were being sold. There was no licensing for the video clubs. Just artistic and commercial chaos (Mba, 2023).

The marketers' union and the EPs vehemently opposed the Mba-led NFVCB initiatives, on the grounds that it amounted to a gentrification of "their industry" (ibid). Even though they were haemorrhaging money and in dire need of some strategic intervention, they fought every policy, claiming that the government and organised public sector were attempting to "usurp the industry they built from nothing with hard-earned investment" (Elliott, 2023). Some of them took extreme exception to the initiatives and went as far as threatening Mba's life (Mba, 2023). Correspondingly, the "Nigeria in the Movies" project was frustrated and Mba's tenure ended in controversy in July 2012 (Novia, 2022).

As each VCD release made less money, the producers and EPs, to compensate for the dwindling revenue and to increase the odds of getting lucky with a hit film, made and released even more films. This blunderbuss release gambit by the EPs aggravated an already saturated market and further eroded the technical and artistic quality of the films as they slashed budgets and reduced film production cycles from about one week to only a few days, to give themselves any chance of making profits. Literally, there was a film shoot taking place on every street of Lagos, Enugu, Asaba and Aba. The quality that was previously borderline-acceptable dipped drastically and the audience noticed the dip with contempt (Menakaya, 2023). So, the VCD market declined drastically in the face of falling demand for VCDs due to over-production and audience apathy, not to mention the impact of MultiChoice satellite broadcast of Nollywood films on Africa Magic.

Secondly, the Nollywood film industry had been created on a structure of piracy and had existed under its challenging spectre for so long that a detailed commentary on the issue of piracy appears puerile. It is worth noting however that by circa 2007, piracy had reached

epidemic proportions and had taken a transnational dimension due to “the rabid expansion in the global consumption of Nollywood on the internet and through cable broadcasting” (Okome, 2019. p.77; Omoefe, 2023). The lax business and intellectual property regime, in the form of illegal copying, piracy on the internet, and unauthorised public exhibition in video parlours and long-haul buses, conspired to frustrate Nollywood filmmakers and their EP sponsors (Nwakalor-Akukwe, 2023; Okome, 2019. P.75). Contemporaneously, there was a proliferation of ancillary businesses that supported the VCD-based industry. These included the unrestrained importation of electronics, including blank disks, VCD players and flat screen television sets by businessmen at the famous Alaba International Market in Lagos. Other businesses were printing presses for posters and VCD sleeves, street vendors of VCDs as well as logistics companies responsible for finishing, packaging and delivering VCD films. But more importantly, there were the VCD dubbing and duplication factories, some of which, like Transerve in Lagos, were able to churn out thousands of VCDs in one production cycle (Ejiro, 2023).

At their peak, there were over ten major VCD duplication factories in Lagos alone, augmented by hundreds of cottage establishments operating from domestic addresses with server-lined walls (Irole, 2022). The ubiquity of these factories meant that multiple films could be released in the same week without production bottlenecks, thus easing and speeding up the process of film releases in the industry. However, for an industry that has had piracy at its core and which has flirted with informality and business impunity right through its existence, the convenience offered by the duplication factories was soon weaponised to exacerbate the menace of illegal copying and bastardising of any VCD film that threatened to raise its head above the parapet of commercial mediocrity that was becoming the norm. The monster that Nollywood had created was beginning to eat the industry from the inside (Nwigwe, 2023).

Another negative development, borne out of avaricious profiteering of the EPs, was the industry convention that saw producers and EPs carve up single films into several parts or seasons, with each being sold as a separate VCD. The seeds of this technique that sought to exploit the popularity of a particular title were sown by Hubert Ogunde in 1980 when he milked the popularity of his 1979 film *Aiye* by releasing its sequel *Jaiyesinmi* (Let the World Rest) in the same year. Taking the tactics to extreme levels, the EPs were not waiting for their first releases to become successful before “sequelling (sic) them” (Inwang, 2023). They were simply balkanising the projects from *ab initio*, selling each incomplete segment as a full film and thereby forcing the viewers to buy multiple VCDs in order to watch a complete story that could have fitted into one VCD (Erinugha, 2023). The film content in each VCD kept shrinking until many had no more than 15 minutes, with trailers and film promos filling up the disks (Benson, 2023; Munis, 2023). So, after peaking with the million-selling *Osuofia in London* in 2003-2004, VCD sales plummeted as viewers stopped buying them in the numbers that they used to (Nwoba, 2022). And by 2007, films were selling on average under 10,000 VCD copies, as opposed to the hundreds of thousands a few years earlier (Ejiro, 2023).

The predatory phenomenon that further devalued the Nollywood VCD industry and became the final straw to break the commercial spine of the industry was “super discs”. With these, Nollywood pirates started bundling up to 16 full Nollywood films into one super disc. Produced in China and imported in containers, already packaged, these super discs sold for as little as N300 naira, reducing the cost of each film on the compilation to under N20 (or less than 10 cents) [Nwigwe, 2023].

The final nail on the Nollywood VCD coffin was the evolution of technological innovations like the internet and streaming. Sites like YouTube which had continued its growth as the repository of popular culture since Google acquired it from its developers in 2007 for \$1.65 billion (Arthurs *et al.*, 2018). In its early years YouTube allowed Nollywood films to be

uploaded indiscriminately without consequence, turning it into another “wild Nollywood piracy haven” (Abulu, 2023). However, since the launch of YouTube Nigeria and Iroko TV in December 2011, the internet has become a more sanitised ecosystem and its value to Nollywood has been growing by the day, gradually undermining the foundations of traditional Nollywood VCD and providing early alternatives to viewers and producers alike as they experimented with novel monetisation strategies. The full impact of online platforms and streaming will be addressed later in this study.

All of these ailments ate away at the popularity of Nollywood and culminated in the onset of audience fatigue. Viewers started complaining about, among other things, “part 1 and part 2” truncation (Ajogu, 2023), the lack “fresh faces” amongst the actors (Benson, 2023) and the dearth of new themes other than the pedestrian ritual films and their predictable vigilante cousins (Olukotuyi, 2023; Lady Truth, 2023). Responding to the financial basis of their industry being mortally eroded and in a move that vindicated Emeka Mba, even the EPs and producers began to lose confidence in the ability of the industry to recover from the depressing dip in affairs that was gradually being normalised. One by one, the EPs and producers stopped investing in films altogether. Those that owned ancillary Nollywood industries like VCD duplicating operations started shutting them down (Ejiro, 2023) and started moving their investments from Nollywood into other ventures (Benson, 2023). The alternative investment of choice became building of hotels. Notable among Nollywood EPs that ventured into hotel business is Ojiofor Ezeanyanche of OJ Productions, who started DMatel Gold Hotel in Enugu but has grown the brand into a chain of hotels across Nigeria (Abulu, 2023). The Nollywood film industry had reached a critical impasse. To most observers, the set of events spelt the end of Nollywood VCD era and seemingly, the honeymoon between the industry and its now disinterested audience had come to an end. For the first time since its birth in 1992, the



Nollywood film industry recorded negative growth in the few years from 2007 to 2012 (Mba, 2023).

### **3:09 Nollywood: An Unusual Beginning**

Most independent black film practices in the world have evolved out of a socio-political compulsion to talk back to the unsavoury colonial and post-slavery representation of blacks. The various waves of African American cinema principally emerged as responses to the portrayal of the African American in Hollywood. They were considered inferior by the white majority and hence were depicted in films as “objects of ridicule not to be taken seriously unless they are sacrificing themselves for their white masters” (Lawrence, 2007). Films like *Dancing Dark Boy* (1895), *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (1904), and *For Massa’s Sake* (1911), reinforced racist attitudes prevalent at the time. However, it was Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) that solidified Blacks as “the quintessential Other” (ibid) in Hollywood and in diametrical opposition to which the race films were born to plead the cinematic cause of African Americans by projecting real black identities on the silver screen (Everett, 2001). The blaxploitation movies exploded out of the pent-up frustrations of African Americans, shut out from mainstream productions which found vent through Melvin Van Peeble’s 1970 hit *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (Lawrence, 2007). Equally, the Francophone African film practice has its origins in the postcolonial concept of talking back to the empire- France, in this case- who incidentally was responsible for propping up the industry with grants.

Nollywood has displayed a genuine uniqueness by emerging from purely entrepreneurial origins, devoid, initially, of artistic pretensions or taking itself too seriously as a political and ideological arrowhead (Mofe-Damijo, 2023; Nzekwe, 2023). Put simply, Nollywood became a craft with form before it sought elevation to high art status. That unique genealogy afforded Nollywood a certain commercial robustness that has deepened its self-

sustaining appeal as well as its longevity. Paradoxically, the same pedigree has also imposed a certain aesthetic illegitimacy and what has been described as an “unformed art” (Wainstein, 2020) reputation, both of which have proved difficult for Nollywood to shake off, despite its recent transformational growth (Gukas, 2023; Ezepeue, 2023).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Advent of New Nollywood

#### 4:01 The Rebirth

To preserve its commercial viability and to confound critics that prematurely predicted its demise, the industry had to show resilience by finding ways of inventing itself and reinvigorating the most vital entity for its survival- its audiences (Mofe-Damijo, 2023).

From the historic dip in 2007, one of the catalysts for the rebirth of Nollywood was the cyclical transition from home video entertainment on VCD back to cinema. The opening episode of that movement can be traced back to 2004, when Peace Anyiam-Osigwe set up the Africa Movie Academy Awards (AMAA), to honour and promote excellence in the African film industry (Menakaya, 2023). The inaugural award which was held in Yenegoa, Bayelsa State in Nigeria on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May 2005 brought together films and filmmakers from across Africa and even the African diaspora. And for the first time, a credible African film award disregarded the mode-of-production criterion of earlier film awards and festivals like FESPACO and Carthage in its selection and nomination process. The discriminatory yardstick had favoured celluloid film practices like Francophone cinema and ridiculed the less traditional video format that was Nollywood's mainstay (Ogunyemi, 2023). Furthermore, the importance of transcending mere commercial success and aiming for artistic merit was amplified to Nollywood filmmakers after experiencing the glamorous side of the film industry that was before then alien to them (Menakaya, 2023; Munis, 2023).

It was on the basis of this new motivation for arty films, suitable for cinema screening across Africa and able to provide an alternative to the dying VCD formula while offering scope for winning awards, that some Nollywood practitioners like Stephanie Okereke and Chineze Anyaene embarked on filmmaking courses in America. They returned to Nigeria, armed with the skillset and the zeal to take the industry to new heights (Ugwu, 2023). By this time too, a clutch of Nigerians in the diaspora had joined the Nollywood industry, bringing with them

modern filmmaking techniques, bold ideas and a world view that was truly international. Among them were filmmakers like Akin Omotosho, Obi Emelonye, Pascal Atuma, Tony Abulu, Mildred Okwor and Lonzo Nzekwe.

The mindset of this new generation of Nollywood filmmakers, caught in this fluid creative landscape, was no longer focused solely on the banal commercialism of the EPs and their wards. They were determined to get training and attempt to rise above the subsistent practice of the VCD era. There was a certain professionalisation bothering on gentrification (Ezepue, 2020) that was occurring as filmmakers hungered to make films that were worthy of critical success with AMAA nominations and other international festivals which had started glamourising artistic merit and separating the skilled artists from the non-skilled (Olokotuyi, 2023). They felt the pressure to upgrade their projects to the new digital format that was evolving, or risk obscurity and anonymity in the old style that was now seen as un-progressive (Duker, 2023). This meant paying more attention to the factors of production: the script, the acting and the editing; using the best equipment; and spending more money on the films to raise them above the coarse old Nollywood aesthetics (Okpue, 2023; Okpechi, 2023). Curiously, as the need to increase film budgets became more apparent, the industry was yet to devise a means of monetising the more expensive version of Nollywood films that was beginning to emerge from this new paradigm. The VCD format was now a tired medium for carrying content and YouTube, at the time, still represented, at best, a haven of piracy and a commercial curiosity (Eke, 2023).

One of the first films to emerge from this more expensive template was Kunle Afolayan's *Irapada* (2006). The African supernatural story achieved critical acclaim by winning the AMAA award for Best Film in an African Language in 2006. Other films that adopted this sophisticated and correspondingly more expensive filmmaking formula were *30 Days* (2006), a thriller by Mildred Okwor, *Sitanda* (2006) directed by Izu Ojukwu and *The*

*Amazing Grace* (2006) shot on celluloid by Jeta Amata. As a reflection of their higher quality and indeed bigger budgets, all of these films enjoyed multiple award nominations at AMAA and other emerging award ceremonies like City People Entertainment Awards (Menakaya, 2023). However, apart from a glamorous premiere for *Sitanda* (sponsored by Amstel Malta), and a few command screenings for *Irapada* (at Silverbird Galleria, Victoria Island) and *The Amazing Grace* (in Calabar sponsored by the Cross Rivers State Government of Nigeria), these films still relied on the fading VCD format as their major means of monetisation. In a counterintuitive way, their high profile and award success marked them out for special attention by VCD pirates. The industry had reached a palpable stalemate.

The mood was once again primed for a coincidence of occurrences; a *déjà vu* if you like, as another version of Nollywood emerged from the crisis of overproduction and audience fatigue; just like the original version of Nollywood emerged from the demise of Yoruba travelling theatre and the collapse of Nigeria's inchoate cinema infrastructure (Haynes, 2014). The world had begun to pay attention to this bold, upgraded film practice that had boldly announced itself in Nigeria (Okagbue, 2022). However, this new iteration of Nollywood needed to reinvent its commercial basis from the fading VCD format to something new in order to survive. The VCD business formula had been undermined by the same informality that engendered its emergence (Gukas, 2023). Critically weakened by Mnet Africa Magic satellite telecast of Nollywood films into homes across Africa, the arrival of super disks in container loads from China had ended the commercial viability of VCDs. Faced with the reality that the industry was not supported by government grants or corporate finance, Nollywood had to find a quick means of achieving profitability and retaining its legendary sustainability, otherwise this foray into more expensive productions, in spite of its promise of winning awards, may hasten its demise.

#### **4:02            The Return of Cinema**

The spark that ignited this rather tense setting was the emergence of Silverbird Galleria, Victoria Island. When an entertainment company known for beauty pageants opened a multiplex cinema in the plush Victoria Island neighbourhood in 2004, it became the first major cinema infrastructure built in the whole of Nigeria for nearly two decades (Babatope, 2022). And for the first time in decades, Nigerians could sit in an air-conditioned theatre to watch a wide range of film genres. Alongside its schedule of Hollywood films, Ben Bruce, its proprietor, made room too for Nollywood films. But the Silverbird Galleria offered more than just cinema and films. Residents of Lagos tramped from different parts of the city to visit the plush establishment in Victoria Island as a tourist attraction. It became a runaway success and Silverbird embarked on an expansion programme that saw it open new branches in Abuja and Port Harcourt in quick succession.

This triumph provoked a resurgence in the development of cinema infrastructure in Nigeria so that when South African shopping mall company Shoprite established in the affluent Lekki area of Lagos, the property included a multiplex cinema to be run by another South African company, Nu Metro. However, when Nu Metro left Nigeria suddenly, Nigerian business man, Nnaeto Orazulike, bought over the cinema multiplex from the departing South Africa company and with the support of Kene Mkparu, Kene Okwuosa and Moses Babatope, known fondly as the “Odeon expats”, set up Genesis Deluxe Cinema in 2008 (Odiye, 2023). Genesis Deluxe Cinema quickly became hugely commercially successful for the same reasons as Silverbird Galleria. And although the Odeon expats left Genesis Deluxe Cinema to pursue a project we shall come to in a moment, the brand grew to include branches in Port Harcourt, Warri, Owerri, Abuja and Asaba. Shortly after, in November 2008, Ozone cinema opened in Yaba, the first multiplex of its kind in the not-so-affluent, working-class part of the bustling city of Lagos.

After leaving Genesis Deluxe Cinema en-masse, the Odeon expats, led by Kene Mkpuru, opened Film House Cinema in the densely populated Surulere area of Lagos on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2012 (Babatope, 2023). The strategic vision for the company was to offer the cinema experience to ordinary Nigerians and to be the biggest cinema chain in Nigeria. The Film House experiment in Surulere recorded resounding success as the entertainment-starved locals effusively embraced it and its no-frills cinema offering, literally selling out every screen and every show, including Nollywood titles. Such was its success that Film House cinema surprised one of its major financiers, Nigeria's Bank of Industry (BOI) with the unprecedented speed of its loan repayment (ibid), thereby attracting further finance. Film House then commenced an aggressive expansion campaign and it came as no surprise then that they achieved their objective of owning and operating the largest cinema chain in Nigeria within five years of the establishment of their first cinema house (ibid). Other operators like Kada Cinema, Viva Cinema, Ebony Life Cinema and i-cinema followed in many urban locations across Nigeria, including Benin, Akure, Enugu and Ilorin, considerably improving Nigeria's screen count and solidifying the reach and gains of the sector in Nigeria.

Interestingly, with near-zero cinemas in Nigeria as at 1992 when Nollywood emerged, except for a few in the north (Iwuh, 2015; Chowdhury, *et al.*, 2008; Nuhu, 2023), Nigeria had a growing array of cinema screens which at the time of this study stood at 251 (Usono, 2023). While this number does not make for an impressive screen-to-population ratio for a country of nearly 200 million people (Schnell, 2017), and despite Nollywood's numbers not always adding up (Haynes, 2014), since 2004, Nollywood films have been regularly scheduled alongside Hollywood blockbusters and many have even surpassed their Hollywood counterparts in audience engagement and box-office returns (Odieta, 2022; Haynes, 2016: p.285). Examples of such Nollywood box office triumph include Mo Abudu's *Wedding Party*, Funke Akindele's *Omo Ghetto* (Odieta, 2021) and Ayo Makun's *Christmas in Miami* (2021).

Haynes has rightly identified movie theatres as the major introduction that defined the phase of the Nollywood film industry that was blossoming around 2011. He envisaged that the cinema infrastructure accelerated a growing convergence between this cinema-based Nollywood and the iconoclastic Francophone African cinema. However, the 2014 article ended on a rather pessimistic note by doubting the future of Nollywood, based on Nigeria's population-to-cinema ratio and the potential size of the audience willing to pay the exorbitant cinema tickets (Haynes, 2014).

Since its inception, Nollywood has been notorious for inculcating those who have predicted its demise based on western standards or even standards of reasonable logic. Nigeria's screen-to-population ratio at that time appears much higher than the sub-Saharan African average of 781,402 by being closer to a million persons per screen. Although Nigeria enjoyed the second largest screen count in the region behind South Africa (Babatope, 2023), its much higher population worsened its screen average (Odiete, 2023). Ten years after Haynes' report, that situation has improved with marked growth in both the cinema infrastructure in Nigeria and the established commercial viability of Nollywood films showing extensively in them. Ironically, Afolayan, the filmmaker who was the focal point of Haynes' study in 2014 has now bypassed the cinema and is making Netflix-commissioned straight-to-streaming films. Later in this study, we shall elaborate on that disruptive trend that has seen streaming rise to the top of the Nollywood financial structure.

As the Nigerian cinema infrastructure developed at a rapid pace, just exhibiting Hollywood blockbusters alone will not lift Nollywood. A film industry at a crossroads as regards the medium of its presentation to its loyal audiences needed be a pool of quality films to service the emerging cinema schedules. The Nigerian filmmaker must decide to make quality films and patiently put them through the rather slow cinema distribution mechanism. And patience was not in abundant supply, due to the ad hoc nature of traditional film financing in



Nollywood which consisted of equity investments predicated on unsubstantiated, most times non-contractual promises that the film will make profits (Ugwu, 2023). These profit promises had been further devalued by the loss of the immediate transactional dimension of the VCD formula, making the investment pitch a little more precarious for the filmmaker.

As we explore the deepening of the pool of available quality films for the cinemas, it is worth noting the impact of film distributors in this new dispensation. In 2005, a South African film exhibition and distribution company called Nu Metro launched in Nigeria to become the first cinema film distribution company of the Nollywood era since the demise of the mainly Lebanese distributors of the celluloid era (Odieta, 2022). Silverbird Cinema followed suit by adding a film distribution company to its conglomerate structure in 2006. Once again, it was Silverbird's that started distributing Nollywood films in addition to the standard Hollywood bouquet of Nu Metro (ibid). And by 2010, Genesis Deluxe, Ozone and most cinema companies had formed distribution arms. At first, these entities were not interested in Nollywood content, focusing rather on foreign content predominantly from Hollywood. However, as Nollywood films got more popular with cinema audiences, exemplified by the undoubted success of Funke Akindele's *Jennifer* (2008), the film distributors responded by curating more Nollywood content (Odieta, 2023). Independent distributors soon joined the growing distribution business. Blue Pictures Limited, the then exclusive cinema distribution company was set up by Joy Odieta in 2010, after Nu Metro, the company she worked for ceased operations in Nigeria. Blue Pictures had bought over the distribution portfolio of Nu Metro and inherited the sub-distributor role for some Hollywood studios. However, the company had a Nollywood-centred focus in its business strategy. The first Nollywood film distributed by Blue Pictures Limited was Obi Emelonye's *The Mirror Boy* (2011) [Odieta, 2022]

In 2014, something happened in the distribution space that would have multiple ramifications for the cinema sector and the industry at large. That year, Film House Cinema

created a consolidated entertainment company, FilmOne, as its distribution and more significantly, its production subsidiary for cinema-targeted Nollywood films (Babatope, 2023). This move gave Film House multiple vested interests in films beyond their usual box office cut. And these interests consequently fuelled a drive to ensure the commercial success of their titles through extensive promotions, favourable scheduling and sometimes, under-hand ploys (Inwang, 2023). Biyi Bandele's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013), based on the award-winning novel of the same title by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was the first Nollywood film distributed by FilmOne. Furthermore, FilmOne launched their film production for cinema regime in 2015 with *Lunchtime Heroes* (2015), directed by Seyi Babatope (Babatope, 2023). Many other cinema operators followed suit by spreading their businesses vertically across the creative value chain, morphing into exhibitors, distributors and executive producers.

These new corporate entities, in more superintended climes, would have been flagged as monopolies or at least as representing an unacceptable oligopolistic conflict of interest. They would have been outlawed by legislation like the Paramount Consent Decrees of 1948 which broke Hollywood studios' oligopolies and prohibited vertical integration (Metz, 2006. pp. 1-2). But their emergence and practices raised no issues in an industry with little government interest or oversight. Nonetheless the formation of super film companies energised the sector with a profusion of made-for-cinema Nollywood films. However, the vertical integration grossly disadvantaged independent producers and directors whose projects were suppressed by the super film companies who skewed the box office in favour of their anointed projects (Inwang, 2023).

In any case, following in the footsteps of *Irapada*'s limited release in Silverbird Galleria in 2006, one of the first films to take advantage of this rare opportunity with theatrical releases in Nigeria was Stephanie Okereke's *Through the Glass* (2007), released in many of the nascent cinemas in 2008. This romantic comedy, about a white playboy who falls in love with his

neighbour (Stephanie Okereke) after seeking her help to look after a baby forced into his care, launched formal theatrical releases of Nollywood films in multiple cinemas across Nigeria and its decent box office showing teased cinema as a veritable monetisation mechanism for Nollywood films (Babatope, 2023). Funke Akindele's big break, *Jennifer* (2008) followed, but it was the release of Afolayan's *The Figurine* (Araromire, 2009) that confirmed Nollywood's cinema reincarnation. Following its many nominations and wins at AMAA awards in 2009 (including Best Director), this African spiritual story of retribution starring Ramsey Noah, Omoni Oboli and Kunle Afolayan made a commercial impact in the cinemas (Odiete, 2023).

Incidentally, Afolayan is the son of one of Yoruba traveling theatre filmmakers, Ade Love Afolayan. And just like his father's film *Ija Ominira* (Fight for Freedom, 1977) blazed the trail for the emergence of the Yoruba traveling theatre celluloid film practice, over 30 years later, the son's film, *The Figurine*, became the touchpaper that really re-ignited the lost cinema culture in Nigeria. The explosion of cinema that followed its release saw theatrical runs for Ali Mahmoud Balogun's *Tango with Me* (2010), Lonzo Nzekwe's *Anchor Baby* (2010), Jeta Amata's *Inale* (2010) and Chineze Anyaene's *Ije* (The Journey, 2010); all recording impressive box office numbers that became the envy of other filmmakers who were yet to embrace this high risk-high reward Nollywood cinema novelty, which was still to be named at this time.

#### **4:03            The Emergence of New Nollywood**

The journey to find a name for this emergent industry began when the international news channel Cable News Network (CNN) invited Nigerian filmmakers to the Southbank Centre in London in November of 2010. The aim was to record its *Inside Africa* (2010) documentary programme that looked into innovative business and celebrity stories from the continent of Africa. The focus of that edition of the programme was to explore the new cinema-based film practice that was emerging from the often-vilified Nollywood film industry.

Filmmakers interviewed included actor Wale Ojo, Omenihu Nwanguma (co-director of the acclaimed short film, *Area Boys*, 2009) and the current researcher (whose film, *The Mirror Boy* [2011], was about to be released at the time). When that programme ran on CNN international a week later on the 19<sup>th</sup> of November, the world was introduced to the phrase “New Nigeria Cinema” as a term used tentatively to describe the new quality output, a sort of “crème de la crème” of Nollywood (Emelonye, cited in Curry, 2010), made by mainly western-trained Nigerian practitioners which relied on cinema releases instead of the customary VCD video sales (Odiete, 2023).

While this first attempt by CNN at conceptualising the new cinema practice from Nollywood with a name does not represent the highest levels of inventiveness, it is believed that it provided the stimulus for many scholars, like Jonathan Haynes and Lizelle Bisschoff, to summarize the emerging industry with the term “New Nollywood” (Haynes, 2016: p.285; Haynes, 2014, Bisschoff, 2015). Similar to the contested emergence of the term Nollywood, this new moniker for the cinema-focused version of the Nigerian film industry has also been plausibly traced to a foreign entity. In the case of Nollywood, it was *The New York Times*. And in the case of New Nollywood, some debateable credit has gone to CNN. For an industry whose postcolonial credentials have been rendered unimpeachable when it quietly appropriated the colonial apparatus of film and then strategically deployed it in the creation of a bold identity that has disrupted western conventions, it seems rather diminishing that the names of its two most important eras have been traced to the same western powers against whom its ideological protestations are targeted (Okagbue, 2022).. This study is quick however, to make the distinction between playing a crucial role in the creation of the Nigerian film industry, in any of its various iterations and the simple global amplification of various uninspiring tags for the industry, as *The New York Times* and CNN have done for the emergence of Nollywood and New Nollywood respectively. This study therefore believes that despite a baptismal trace to a

western hegemon such as CNN, New Nollywood's postcolonial credentials and indeed its ability to protest against western inequalities or its capacity to forge a bold identity are not in any way lessened.

While the conceptual margins of the term New Nollywood are debated, it has since been extensively accepted as the signature for the Nollywood post-*Figurine* category of films, filmmakers, and their medium-scale cultural economy. Just like Nollywood, the industry has brazenly adopted the New Nollywood term almost in spite of the foreign influences who claim to have originated it. New Nollywood is defined by technical sophistication and conventional aesthetics, larger budgets, star power and wide releases through a new, tiered theatrical distribution system resembling the American blockbuster strategy (Nzekwe, 2023; Ryan, 2015; Ezepeue, 2020) or streamed globally online.

#### **4:04            The New Nollywood Mode of Production**

By this point in 2010, Nollywood filmmakers, even those without formal training, have made significant progress by the sheer length of time they had practised. The script writers were getting more experienced and employing better techniques of storytelling. The actors had become more exposed to international performance conventions and had eased off on the shouting and histrionics. Directors were making do, in the absence of formal training, with consuming YouTube how-to and behind-the-scenes videos. So, the mentality of the average Nollywood filmmaker was already changing anyway before the toting of cinema ambitions, film schools abroad and fatter budgets commonplace amongst New Nollywood practitioners.

Therefore, technically speaking, one of the most remarkable differences between the old Nollywood and its new cinema incarnation, apart from the obvious variance in the mode of distribution, was the time spent in production and the camera equipment or mode of production. There was a marked change of direction as the industry moved from humble

television and home video cameras of old Nollywood to state-of-the-art digital cameras. In prioritising image and glossy visual style over old Nollywood's preoccupation with narrative and speed (Nwigwe, 2023; Schnell, 2017), New Nollywood filmmakers embraced the high-quality digital cameras that were being released globally (Benson, 2023) instead of the celluloid cameras of the last century. This was an economic as well as a technical decision. Digital technology was cheaper, more adaptable and had more streamlined post-production workflows. Through the digital format, filmmakers could achieve High Definition (HD) video quality, up to 4K, at the time, more than the celluloid format could offer. It could even mimic the celluloid film feel where that was a narrative or stylistic requirement (Gukas, 2023). With the digital format taking hold and democratising quality filmmaking, the need to distinguish between video and film had been rendered redundant (Mofe-Damijo, 2023).

The first New Nollywood film shot on the RED One camera system was Chineze Anyaene's *Ije* (The Journey, 2009) and Arri Alexa was introduced into Nollywood in Emelonye's *Last Flight to Abuja* (2012) [Odiete, 2023]. RED One and Arri Alexa became the cameras of choice, responsible for shooting nearly all New Nollywood films (Babatope, 2023), apart from *The Amazing Grace* (2006) and *Tango with Me* (2010) that were both shot on 16mm celluloid.

The use of such high-end camera equipment had a telling impact of bumping up the production costs to unprecedented levels, compared to old Nollywood. Perhaps more critically, the use of these cameras resulted in a level of picture quality and dynamic range that meant the films could withstand the extreme magnification of their images that happened on huge cinema screens without pixelating and losing quality. Thus, began the preoccupation with picture quality among Nollywood filmmakers and audiences alike that elevated the resolution metric to the zenith of gauging a film's overall quality or value, while overlooking other elements like story, acting performance, mise en scene, direction or even sound quality. As we shall see later

on, it was in paying more attention and providing answers to these, once overlooked fundamentals, that the industry was able to usher itself into the next phase of its evolution-global streaming.

Just like it had done in the past when it moved from celluloid to video, from cinema to VHS/VCD, Jedlowski believes that Nollywood has always suffered structural instability at the moment of evolution from one technological format to another (Jedlowski, 2013. p.28). Although that susceptibility was not apparent when the industry moved from VHS to VCD, it had a more palpable effect in the evolution from video to digital. For a while, the industry was conflicted as old “Nollywood stalwarts” battled the “new cinema impostors” for supremacy in the industry (Onwochei, 2023). Old Nollywood, as they were disparagingly called, saw the glossy new practice as some kind of usurpation (Ezepue, 2020) of the industry they had forged. They therefore resisted and subverted the New Nollywood filmmakers at every turn, predicting a short life for its fleeting brilliance and threatening to exclude them from the VCD commercial formula which they still controlled and which remained an important part of recoupment process at the time, even for the New Nollywood films (Babatope, 2023; Onwochei, 2023).

However, New Nollywood navigated this critical transition period through what has been termed “sheer brinkmanship” (Mofe-Damijo, 2023), which involved not letting go of one branch until it was firmly holding on to another (Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023). Building on national publicity campaigns for their cinema releases, New Nollywood films tended to do very well when released on VCD. Therefore, the old Nollywood VCD distributors may still resent their significance, yet the commercial argument that these New Nollywood films presented was too persuasive to be ignored. With money to be made by all, the marketers of old Nollywood could not carry out their threat of denying New Nollywood films access to their VCD networks. The result was that despite antagonism and bitterness from the marketers, New Nollywood was able to wait for the deepening and entrenchment of the cinema culture and all its appurtenances,

before finally letting go of the VCD format, and by so doing, relegating it to the insignificant and vestigial commercial model that it is to this day.

#### **4:05 The Arrival of Hollywood Studios.**

The subtle entrance of Hollywood studios into the Nollywood cultural economy is explored in greater detail later in Chapter six of this study. For now, it is pertinent to note that the most influential Hollywood event with the most impact on the future of Nollywood happened in 2014 when Netflix aggregated its first bouquet of Nollywood films (Njoku, 2016). The films included *Half of a yellow Sun* (2013), *Confusion Na Wa* (2013), *Flower Girl* (2013), *Onye Ozi* (The Messenger, 2013) and *October 1* (2014) [Nollywood REinvented, 2015]. And on the back of growing investment in the industry, in February 2018, Netflix formally set up operations in Nigeria with the launch of Netflix Naija, following the acquisition of Genevieve Nnaji's directorial debut *Lionheart* (2018) as its first Nigerian Original (Menakaya, 2023).

Amazon has followed with the establishment of Amazon Prime in Nigeria in August 2022, which is aggressively acquiring Nollywood content to build its catalogue offering (Ude, 2023). There are credible signs that Disney, Paramount and HBO are on the brink of entering the battle for dominance in the Nigerian film space (Babatope, 2022). This fraternisation with these heavyweights of Hollywood is shaping to disrupt conventional production and distribution patterns in New Nollywood, an industry with a not-so-traditional, syncretic character, where the formal and the informal vie for prominence (Pratt, 2015; Lobato, 2012). But in the immediate, the nodes of its multifaceted impact have been spread across the entirety of the New Nollywood business.

In its characteristic flexibility, New Nollywood has co-opted the global streaming platforms, not just as the mainstay of its monetisation mechanism, but also as the vessel for conquering new viewers in its perpetual quest for international recognition (Nwakalor-



Akukwe, 2023, Ogunjiofor, 2023). Nigerian films on the Hollywood global platforms have performed creditably with shows like *Blood Sisters* (2023) attaining a top ten position globally in May 2023 (Etike, 2023). Although Netflix seldom shares back-end data, Nigerian Original, *The Black Book* (2023), in September 2023, was adjudged to have risen to the unprecedented number one position based on the platform's global viewing figures (Udugba, 2023).

Besides, the arrival of the Hollywood streamers has brought more funding and training that will benefit the industry. Netflix has already invested an estimated \$23.6 million US dollars into Nollywood in the form of nearly 300 titles and three commissioned originals (Etike, 2023). Although industry commentators have criticised Netflix for investing nearly 5 times more (\$125M US dollars) into the South African film industry in the same period (Munis, 2023), this represents a huge injection of cash into an industry that has traditionally failed to attract corporate investment (Okpue, 2023). So far, figures do not abound for Amazon's investment in Nollywood but the company's frantic acquisition of Nollywood content, in addition to exclusive deals signed with Inkblot and Jade Osiberu point to a substantial investment in Nigeria. These moves have forced more ambitious projects and set Nollywood's technical bars very high, all of which are beneficial to the industry. However, these gains have not whittled down the Nollywood food chain fast enough and the Hollywood studios have ignored the more egalitarian conduit that the professional guilds and associations could have offered (Okpechi, 2023).

Netflix has partnered with local film schools like Kunle Afolayan Productions (KAP) to train aspiring filmmakers (Oloketuyi, 2023). Amazon Prime has aligned with the Africa International Film Festival (AFRIFF) to run a series of masterclasses aimed at heightening the skill set of Nollywood filmmakers (Ude, 2023). While some commentators believe that such collaboration is imperative for the growth of the industry, there is a growing discontent about the opaque operational style of Netflix and Amazon Prime which encourages nepotism

gatekeepers, and which means that opportunities are not based on merit or equitably distributed but rather concentrated in only the few hands of those with connection (Menakaya, 2023).

Conversely, there are also concerns that the influx of Hollywood streamers has impacted local distribution networks and theatre attendance in Nigeria. It has taken New Nollywood nearly 20 years to build the present cinema infrastructure, together with its attendant cinema culture. All of that is being threatened by the on-demand immediacy and plethora of choices that streaming offers through the likes of Netflix and Amazon Prime. Additionally, with revenue from cinemas dwindling and some filmmakers bypassing that process entirely, Hollywood streaming has assumed a dominant role in the monetization of Nollywood content (Odiete, 2023; Babatope, 2023). The legendary intrepidity of Nollywood to devise fresh modes to reach its audience is on the wane as producers become lazy and complacent with the easy life that the big streamers have afforded them (Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023). Some industry observers are worried that, while the cinemas in Nigeria are Nigeria-owned, “platforms like Netflix and Amazon are Hollywood companies with complete allegiance to their bottom lines, which raise politico-economic complexities related to independence and control” (Nwakalor-Akukwe, 2023).

A palpable fear also exists that the Hollywood streamers, in wielding their dollar power, have started controlling the stories emerging from New Nollywood and shaping the palette of its viewers (Ogunjiofor, 2023). There has emerged a pattern in the commissioned projects, and indeed those that were subject to acquisition, of a disposition for violence (*King of Boys*, 2018; *Blood Sisters*, 2022), a thematic predilection for nudity and sex (*Shanty Town*, 2023), a ghettoization of Nigerian urban living or celebration of cultic violence (*King of Boys* (2018), *Brotherhood* (2022)) and the infusion of LGBTQ themes (*Crazy, Lovely, Cool* (2017)). While these ideas have jarred Nigerian audiences’ conservative sensibilities at the very beginning, they have become gradually normalised and almost institutionalised in such a

way that the audience have come to expect them and indeed demand them from future projects. The power of any film industry is in its ability to stay true to itself, to be authentic and to document the stories that are important to it.

I say this guardedly but I sense in the streamers entry an attempt to shape how Nigerian stories are being told in a way that panders to certain types of subject matter and story. I think that their tendency to guide or curate a certain kind of genre of stories and storytelling is what is a bit detrimental to the industry. (Gukas, 2023).

Not everyone in Nollywood shares this pessimism. Some observers believe that storytelling and story content will always evolve for every film industry, reflecting the contemporary values and the preoccupations of the times and that New Nollywood is just undergoing the experimentation with themes as part of its natural evolution (Nwigwe, 2023). Later on in an exercise in prognostic conjecture, this study delves deeper into the historic import of these manifestations of the “unholy alliance” (Nwigwe, 2023) formed with Hollywood studios, speculating on what it portends for the Nollywood film industry and prompting obligatory comparisons with the independent African American film movements of the last century whose fate in the hands of a similar Hollywood embrace did not have a happy ending.

#### **4:06            The COVID-19 Pandemic.**

From 2004, the cinema infrastructure component of New Nollywood steadily improved until 2021 when the industry had 68 cinemas and 251 screens (Uoro, 2023). The geographical spread of these cinemas saw nearly every state in the southern part of Nigeria having at least one cinema. However, Lagos state had the majority share of all the cinemas in the country with 26 cinemas across the densely populated metropolis (Odiete, 2023). This phenomenal growth from near zero cinemas in 1992 had fuelled the rapid expansion of New Nollywood into a position of supremacy in the eclectic industry. However, as New Nollywood was beginning to

consolidate on this new imperative and entrench its novel business proposition, the arrival of COVID-19 pandemic and its debilitating restrictions between 2020 and 2022 dealt the industry a near-fatal blow. Further discussions about the cause and general impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are outside the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that like most businesses globally, New Nollywood's cinemas were closed for large swathes of the 2-year pandemic as part of the measures that included social distancing and ban on public gathering (Babatope, 2023). Although the lockdown in Nigeria was not as strictly enforced as in other parts of the world like Europe, North America and China, even after the restrictions were eased, people were still uncomfortable to move around freely or gather in numbers even in churches (Inwang, 2023).

Under the throes of the pandemic and in response, as was the case in the early 1990s when security and political strife were the causes, Nigerians resorted once again to home entertainment. And this time, instead of VHS machines and tapes, the instrument of this domestic entertainment regime was streaming, a method that favoured the strategic prior positioning into the Nigerian space of some of the world's streaming platforms. This development did not just usurp the gains made by New Nollywood in terms of cinema culture and infrastructure, it has confirmed the supremacy of online streaming in the content wars, and also announced the ominous arrival of Hollywood studios into the Nigerian media space.

So, with the COVID-19 and its bleakness receding in people's memory, the cinema has attempted to claw its way back from the brink. Many of the existing cinemas have reopened and are operating at reasonable capacities. However, the speed of growth pre-pandemic has been hampered by Nigerian's preference for the better economic bargain that streaming has presented, as well as its convenience and flexibility, resulting in a significant fall in box office numbers across the country (Babatope, 2023).

#### **4:07            New Nollywood and the Critics**

Evidently, Nollywood and its New Nollywood incarnation represent Nigerian filmmaking in its “most evolved state” (Gukas, 2023). They have transcended national borders, corrupting neighbouring film practices (Ghana, Cameroun, the Gambia etc), changing film tastes and habits, seeping across regions and offering a unique version of Afromodernity (Krings & Okome, 2013. pp.5-10). Since its inauspicious beginning in 1992, it has achieved unrivalled growth in the ensuing years (Benjamin, 2023; Munis, 2023), without the assistance of the state, NGOs, international agencies, foreign countries or film festivals (Mofe-Damijo, 2023; Lobato, 2012: p.338). It has survived over-production, audience fatigue (Akudinobi, 2019: p.138; Schnell, 2017), the ravages of piracy, the mushrooming of satellite television stations showing the movies, a lack of improvement in the quality of the production (Okpue, 2023; Schnell, 2017), and multiple changes of format.

The economic bases of the industry have been repeatedly upset only to reinforce its resilience, and the minor Nigerian industry had become a dominant regional and global force (Nzekwe, 2023; Okadigwe, 2023; Krings & Okome, 2013. p.10). Today, Nollywood (old and new cumulatively) is one of the largest cultural industries in the world (Onwochei, 2023; Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023; Haynes, 2016: p. xxiii), and indeed the biggest in the whole of Africa (Benson, 2023; Omoefe, 2023; Bisschoff, 2015); boasting of a fanatical local connection and the kind of transnational appeal that is reminiscent of Hollywood (Bisschoff, 2015; Ihunwo, 2023; Witts, 2017: p.113). It also claims to be one of the largest self-sustaining film industries in the world and the only one in Africa where the factors of production and distribution are predominantly in the hands of Africans (Okhai, 2022; Omope, 2023).

However, despite these achievements, Nollywood, in whatever dressing, has been excoriated by critics and academics alike, who have refused to see it beyond its humble video beginnings (Mofe-Damijo, 2023; Saul *et al*, 2010: p.11; Agba, 2014; Haynes, 2011: p.78) or

forgive the audacity of its common affront on the official global film economy (Ugwu, 2023; Oluyinka, 2008; Ogunjiofor, 2023; Adejunmobi, 2011). It has been viewed with little attention and no respect from the educated class or the critics. The following quote sums up this contemptuous scholarly assessment

...the iconoclastic Nigerian popular film culture, was met with ambivalence, even derision, in normative African cinema circles partly because of its rough-and-ready productions practices, stylistic melanges, humdrum soundtracks, stilted dialogue, prevalent technical lapses, chaotic straight-to-video distribution, commerce-driven ethos, and proclivity for melodrama, the supernatural, and occult horror (Akuninobi, 2015: p.133).

So, many commentators refused to acknowledge the improvements that have seen Nollywood become unrecognisable from its humble incipient video form. In the “jaundiced opinion of critics who fear what they do not understand”, Nollywood is seen as a video practice and nothing more (Mofe-Damijo, 2023). And therefore, most of the studies that were undertaken on the industry summed it up with simple, dismissive generalisations (Okpechi, 2023: Haynes, 2016: p. xxvii). For example, Ademola James, an executive director of the Nigeria Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) in the late 1990s waved away the practice as “driven more by excessive commercialism” (Haynes, 2016: pp.193-4). Every aspect of Nollywood, old and new, has been “othered” from the presumed Western “centre”; vilified and dismissed by critics as being devoid of high art (Ogunjiofor, 2023; Shaka *et al.*, 2016) and suffering from congenital formal impoverishment (Mofe-Damijo, 2023).

In discussing artistic failure in modernist novels, Wainstein deliberates on how modernism represents a violent antagonism against any system of inherited rule of form. This nonconformism opens up an unstable zone between the two extremes of sophisticated testing on the one hand and artistic incompetence on the other (Wainstein, 2020). By inference, Nollywood epitomises such aesthetic ambiguity that marks it out from conventional global film practice. But it is not alone in such disparity.

In the late 1950s a group of French youth who were dissatisfied with commercial films and wanted to make their own films, mobilised private and personal funds along with government grants to produce low-budget films. The result was known as the French New Wave, considered by some as one of the most pivotal moments in film history. (Diawara, 1993, p. 5). The French New Wave existed between 1958 and 1964 and had a similar influx of untrained entrants into the film industry as Nollywood. These French people who have not worked their way up the studio systems attempted to tell unconventional stories in styles that were bold and made to look spontaneous and aesthetically indifferent (Neupert, 2006). Filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard, in the 1950s, essentially disrupted Hollywood's cinematic sophistications with a style of less subtlety. They foregrounded the director as "auteur" and elevated the director's role to that of an author of a novel. They deconstructed the actor and valorised unconventional storytelling techniques, like the jump-cut, hand-held camera operation and camera-shake, all of which smirked in the face of Hollywood's refinement (ibid). Yet, instead of being greeted with artistic vilification of the type that has trailed Nollywood's similar demystification of Hollywood's sophistications, French New Wave was seen more as refined experimentation and eulogised by some as "one of the most significant film movements in the history of cinema" (Neupert, 2007, p.xv).

Postcolonialism is one of the most important conceptual frameworks for this study. Essentially, it is a concept at the intersection of arts and politics which offers provocative ways of viewing colonial power, postcolonial identity and the perennial push back against inequalities and violence (Hiddleston, 2014). Although it will be treated in greater detail in subsequent Chapters, it is important to use it here to make sense of the alternative visualisation afforded Nollywood, compared to New Wave.

Film was employed in Africa as an instrument of colonialism (Ukadike, 1998. pp.28). The filmic revolt against colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa took different forms. While the

French west African colonies took a more direct approach as filmmakers like Ousmane Sembene made “national consciousness films” which attempted to denounce colonialism by talking back to the empire and critiquing the emergent African elite following independence (p.4). However, by dint of its success in decolonising the film medium by pidginising its language, appropriating its apparatus and disrupting global filmmaking conventions, Nollywood, even in the absence of an overt, confrontational resistance against colonial and neo-colonial injustices, is intrinsically postcolonial and political (Okagbue, 2022). It is when the industry is viewed through this vista that the deliberate devaluation of its achievements begins to add up. Nollywood’s verbose dialogue, inchoate structure and loose editing (Okhai, 2022) could have also been justified as some form of vernacularisation of Hollywood’s pre-eminent form, as a kind of sophisticated experimentation with form instead of being dismissed as artistic failure (Okagbue, 2022). In other words, just like the Nigerian pidgin has become accepted as a bona fide language that is distinct from English, with its own syntax and vocabulary, Nollywood could be deserving of such artistic autonomy, so that its exploitation of the video format, DVD and the alternative narrative techniques that emerged from them could be co-opted, just like the analogously unprofessional aesthetics of the French New Wave movement (Neupert, 2006), into accepted global cinema lexicon (Okagbue, 2022).

The critical vitriol with which Nollywood is regarded compares to the unforgiving manner in which critics received race films in 1920s America, particularly films by Oscar Micheaux. Despite producing under economic pressures, Micheaux was accused of “technical amateurism and aesthetic poverty” and his works were dismissed as naively artless (Cripps, 1977). The Blaxploitation films of the early 1970s, despite their redemptive Hollywood gloss, did not fare any better with the critics. The very little that was written about the movement castigated it for its brazen black sexuality, violence, urban grime, pimps and drugs (Lawrence & Butters, 2019). As further proof of its non-acceptance, although the blaxploitation films



saved MGM and Warner brothers from bankruptcy, one cannot tell by how quickly it was jettisoned into historical and academic obscurity after Hollywood discovered the blockbuster genre (ibid).

It has been argued that Nollywood has incurred the contempt of mainstream critics and academics for demystifying the celebrated cinema paradigm, causing them to spitefully judge it with a western lens (Ogunjiofor, 2022; Iwuh, 2015). While this opinion may represent an exercise in self-indulgence on the part of Nollywood practitioners, what is clear is that despite unprecedented strides by the industry, epitomised by its now established cinema culture and digital media credentials, critics still approach Nollywood from a limited critical framework, refusing to take it seriously (Tanimonure, 2014: p.298; Lobato, 2017: p.339; Iwuh, 2015).

The mistreatment of and indifference towards Nollywood are not restricted to western establishments, academics and critics. Closer to home, even practitioners from the less-sustainable and less-commercial Francophone film industry (Munis, 2023; Haynes, 2011: p.69; Haynes, 2016: p.3), seen by many in the west as the “most eloquent expression of African cinema” (Agba, 2014) - note the deliberate use of the term “cinema” with reference to Francophone African films - have traditionally despised Nollywood. From their headquarters in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, they see Nollywood’s original video format and indeed its digital incarnation as having little artistic worth (ibid). Consequently, they have variously labelled its practitioners as “interlopers,” “untrained incompetents,” or “stark illiterates” (Haynes, 2011: p.78), and barred Nollywood’s popular films from their major identity showcase- the biennial FESPACO (Duker, 2023; Oluyinka, 2008; Saul *et al*, 2010: p.2; Agba, 2014). That was until recently when the film *Mami Wata* (2023) by C.J. Obasi featured and won three awards, including African Critics Award at the 2023 edition of the festival (Husseini, 2023)

Moreover, during its emergence in the early 1990s, Nollywood's vernacular aesthetics was in contrast to the refinement and global acceptance of other areas of Nigerian cultural production. Literature, dominated by the likes of Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka and the renowned Chinua Achebe, enjoyed universal acceptance and validation. Local and international acceptability of Nigerian music was epitomised by the eclectic talents of Fela Anikulpo Kuti. In spite of its acceptance by the audiences, Nollywood's unabashed video entry into the cinema space was received with apathy bordering on the contemptible by the professional establishment. Ogunde, the most notable Yoruba travelling theatre film practitioner, was famously quoted as saying that "video will be accepted as film over his dead body" (Haynes, 2016: p.7) as he resisted the release of *Ekun* (Tiger), one of the first Nigerian video films in the heydays of the Yoruba travelling theatre celluloid practice in 1986. However, it was Ademola James, head of Nigeria Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), who summed up the disdain with which Nollywood was received, even locally.

...the films were dominated by the exploitation of 'negative tendencies' in Nigerian culture including 'occultism, cultism, fetishism, witchcraft, devilish spiritualism, uncontrolled tendency for sexual display, bloodiness, incest, violence, poisoning etc...From all indications, indulgence in the production of film with 'negatively biased themes' is driven more by excessive commercialism or love of profit to the detriment of a sense of social responsibility and relevance reception (James quoted in Haynes, 2016: pp.193-4)

Also, the Nigerian academy, at first, did not take Nollywood seriously (Elliott, 2023; Tanimonure, 2014: p.298). There was the view that the industry lacked artistic merit and was consequently not deserving of academic attention (Okhai, 2022). Some of that scholarly apathy towards Nollywood was engendered by the inequalities in the global academy which prioritises funding for more western-oriented research over ethnic-focused film studies (Okhai, 2023; Schnell, 2017). This situation was exacerbated by the paucity of funding for vigorous academic research in Nigerian universities (Obi-Rapu, 2023; Saul *et al*, 2010: p.12). Therefore, the pioneering scholarly effort of Ukadike was a break from the norm and worthy of mention.

Although his writings on “Nigerian cinema” as he nobly called it, arrived earlier and through the embryonic stage of Nollywood’s emergence in the 1990s, it provided foundational literature for the nascent industry.

However, long before the *New York Times* announced Nollywood to the world in 2002 (Schnell, 2017), Haynes and Okome, in their seminal article - “Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video Films” (1998), had presented some of the earliest and most concise and systematic research into the Nigerian Film industry. This effort acted as the invaluable catalyst for establishing it as a veritable academic field. Although referring to Nollywood then as ‘Igbo video’ (Haynes & Okome: p.121), they read the industry with a new critical vocabulary, moving away from the comparatist mode of interpretation which had previously subjected the fledgling industry to global cinematic archetypes (Okadigwe, 2023; Okome, 2019).

In the following Chapters, this study explores the concept of cinema and juxtaposes that against Nollywood’s ontology to gauge its appropriateness. In lieu of that analysis, the industry’s position on the alterity that has been imposed on it by predominantly western critics could not have been more aptly encapsulated than in the following statement by Mofe-Damijo, one of Nollywood’s biggest box office draws.

Nollywood has evolved and developed into a veritable film industry that demands recognition and respect. If the mindset of the so-called critics has not evolved with it, then that is their problem. But to allow racist or supremacist views to becloud incontrovertible truths in the name of scholarship is the height of hypocrisy (Mofe-Damijo, 2023).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Nigerian Film Industry and the Concept of Cinema

#### 5:01 The Different Eras

Aspects of the discussion below may veer this study towards a pseudo-political tangent that is both unexpected and unintentional. However, it is clear that the discussion about the denial of cinema status to the Nigeria film industry transcends mere conceptual theories and pragmatic analysis (Okagbue, 2023). In order to achieve its remit of a critical interrogation of the subject of Nollywood's cinema status and indeed its future survival, there is need for this study to allow cultural, economic, political and socio-anthropological considerations to seep into its analysis.

The issue of the Nigerian film industry's inclusion into cinema taxonomy cannot be resolved by simply denying the industry's immense strides in creating a commercially viable, culturally nuanced high art of international standards. Nor can it be settled by blindly and uncritically including it and indeed any other practice. There remains therefore, a compelling argument for some quality consideration to be ascribed to the cinema label. However, it should not be exclusively viewed, as has been customary thus far, from the western hegemonic perspective. Instead, in the case of Nollywood in any of its forms, it should be based on a complex postcolonial reading of the industry, in which the quality evaluation, analysed from a broad-based, syncretic cultural premise, should be the responsibility of Nollywood's primary audience: its local viewers. As will be espoused in this Chapter, it is this study's view that it should be a requirement for Nollywood to rise above basic video making to attain cinema recognition. In truth, Nollywood has made remarkable improvements in the area of quality by transcending an inauspicious colonial legacy to communicate an authentic African aesthetic to the world. In this study's opinion, its status as cinema should not be contingent on some sort

of democratising ideological loophole, but instead on a sense of entitlement based on objective, culturally-nuanced and verifiable criteria.

Like any other film industry in the world, the Nigeria film industry is made up of different components, with unique characteristics in terms of mode of production, quality, aesthetics and mode of distribution. As already established, the industry can be broadly divided into three main eras- the celluloid era, the Nollywood era and the New Nollywood era. The celluloid era can be traced to the Yoruba traveling theatre tradition of the 1970s and 1980s, spearheaded by Hubert Ogunde. While the Nollywood era started with the VCD-based practice that emerged directly from the success of *Living in Bondage* (1992), the industry peaked in 2023 with a New Nollywood practice that enjoys global attention, cinema releases and streaming on global platforms (Babatope, 2023; Haynes, 2016: p.285). An enquiry into the cinema status of Nollywood should examine which one of these various eras of the industry is to be identified as most suited for the cinema taxonomy.

This stratification of a film industry in order to categorize it is not peculiar to Nollywood. In addition to Hollywood's glossy model and its many manifestations with varying aesthetic qualities over the years (King, 2002: p.2), the United States of America also has a non-Hollywood, straight-to-video practice which shares similar unrefined aesthetics with Nollywood. However, these B-category films are frequently excluded when the glamorous face of Hollywood is used to homogenise the disparate film practices in the United States. Why is it that the cinema taxonomy ascribes great value to the sophisticated Hollywood component of the eclectic industry, to the exclusion of lesser facets? The question, as it concerns Nollywood therefore, is: which of its many facets should be held as most significant in the calculation of its cinemanness? Is it the Yoruba traveling theatre era that made films on celluloid and exhibited them in cinemas and town halls? Or is it, as is currently apparent, the VCD-based Old Nollywood offspring of *Living in Bondage* that is still practised today in Asaba and Enugu in

Eastern Nigeria? Or maybe the fulfilment of cinema criteria for the Nigerian film industry is to be grounded on the arty and glossy New Nollywood films, wrought by technically savvy auteurs, showing in cinemas and streaming on Netflix and Amazon Prime. Furthermore, is the attachment of the cinema term static, in the sense that once it is applied, as in the case of Black American cinemas, or indeed denied, as in the case of old Nollywood, that taxonomy is final? Or is it a fluid, dynamic nomenclature that is subject to evolutionary vagaries? Let us explore a bit deeper.

### **5:02            The Nigerian Celluloid Era as Cinema**

It has already been established that the Nigerian celluloid era filmmaking was epitomised by the Yoruba traveling theatre. This was a popular, partially-improvised and frequently unwritten theatre tradition that metamorphosed into a film practice. It attracted very little critical or scholarly interest (Kerr, 1990. p.57) mainly because cultural studies, as a discipline, was in its infancy in the 1970s and 1980s when it held sway. At the time also, the post-independence focus in Nigeria and most African countries was dominated by literary criticism, at the expense of other cultural endeavours like theatre and film. So, despite being shot on celluloid using 32 mm initially and then 16mm afterwards (Haynes, 1995. p. 97), and in spite of enjoying public exhibition in all manner of cinema houses (pp.100-101), the filmic output of Yoruba traveling theatre greats like Ogunde, Ade Love Afolayan and Duro Ladipo suffered an invidious scholarly neglect. And when treated at all, it was reviewed on the basis of abstract concepts taken mainly from postcolonial and gender studies (Saul & Austen, p.12). With only a few exceptions, the industry was seldom described as cinema, only enjoying that privilege, as we shall see imminently, in the hands of scholars such as Frank Ukadike and Jonathan Haynes. The films were often despised as populist melodramas, based on imagined

scripts and lacking the cinematic elitism and political awareness of their Franco-phone counterparts (Barber, 2004, 181; Adesokan, 2004, p.190).

So, the 1970s and 1980s era of Nigerian filmmaking under the aegis of the Yoruba traveling theatre was unable to shake off its theatre ontogeny; both by name and in practice. And even though the era had managed to forge a vibrant but independent production, distribution and monetisation system of the type never seen before in sub-Saharan Africa (Ogunjiofor, 2023), it was unable to shed its condescending “theatre on screen” (Ukadike, 1998. p. 149) tag. Ironically, Ukadike was one of the first scholars to use the word cinema to describe the Nigerian celluloid practice between the 1970s and the 1990s. He called it the “Yoruba traveling theatre cinema” (Ukadike, 1994: p. 6). Haynes followed suit much later in his 1995 article titled “Nigerian **Cinema**: Structural Adjustments” (emphasis: mine). In the article, a younger Haynes reflected that the Yoruba traveling theatre was “at least cinema of the people, by the people, for the people, expressing their consciousness, and (...) (bearing) the promise of a future industry” (Haynes, 1995, p.112). That prophesy for a future industry has been fulfilled by the emergence of a vibrant film industry from the 1990s VCD practice to the present-day eclectic practice with more sophistication .

Many of the present-day Nigerian film practitioners share Haynes’ refreshing optimism and positivity for that distant era of Nigerian film making. They believe that, based on their definition of cinema and judging by the deconstruction of the term by film philosophers as seen in the last Chapter, the Yoruba traveling theatre film era was definitely cinema (Ezepue, 2023). Nollywood scholar, Don Omope and film star actress, Uru Eke, agree that the Yoruba traveling theatre film practice represented authentic cinema, with Omope referring to Ogunde and his contemporaries as “masters of their craft” (Omope, 2023). Also, film scholar, Ezinne Ezepue, believes that the “theatre on screens” films meet the elementary definition of cinema- “the art of creating and producing films for public exhibition” (Ezepue, 2023). Even when juxtaposed

against the characteristics of cinema based on Ponech's deconstruction of the term, the Yoruba traveling theatre film practice still makes a compelling argument.

1 - pictorial images- the Yoruba travelling theatre used picture to tell stories

2 - made photographically with a camera- they employed mainly celluloid 16 mm films

3 - said images being recorded, stored and exhibited using flexible film strips- they recorded the footage, stored and edited them into film reels for exhibition.

4 - their public exhibition using a projector casting light through a film strip and onto a screen- the films are publicly exhibited using a projector in cinemas, schools and town halls

5 - so as to produce the impression of movement- the images are imbued with the semblance of natural movement.

Obi-Rapu proposes a cinematic continuum between the Yoruba traveling theatre film practice and contemporary Nollywood in which technology moderates the format but content and purpose remain invariable. He calls out the attempt by foreign elements to force an old-new dichotomy on the Nigerian film industry so as to truncate its progress and deny the industry of its cumulative gains. Correspondingly, Steve Gukas invites us to read the Yoruba traveling theatre films not just from their purported "abuse of the technical process of filmmaking" perspective, but as art. And he believes that, once we do, the aphorism that cinema is the art of storytelling, captured in moving images and edited with sound and effects will resonate with what the likes of Ogunde and Ola Balogun practised (Gukas, 2023). Although criticised for their brash theatricality, Gukas supposes that the Yoruba traveling theatre filmmaking epoch makes a robust claim for cinemanness, principally, through its celluloid medium and its huge commercial standing.

Conversely, a school of thought, which includes actor and producer Lorenzo Menakaya, film scholar Ovunda Ihunwo, veteran filmmaker Teco Benson and actor Francis Onwochei, holds that, although remarkable by its independence, celluloid heritage, public exhibition and



unashamed boldness, the Yoruba traveling theatre film era falls short of an absolute claim for cinemanness. They have quoted many factors as militating against the acceptance of the Yoruba traveling theatre films as cinema. One of the major issues cited is the education or training of its practitioners. The practice of filmmaking, by virtue of the skills required and costs involved, is an elitist art everywhere in the world.

The race films emerged from a renaissance against unjust black representation in Hollywood films championed by Oscar Micheaux (Green, 2000; Lawrence, 2007). Micheaux was a writer and academic and the filmmakers that followed in his footsteps were educated black men like Spencer Williams, who studied at the University of Minnesota (Cripps, 1978). Also, the blaxploitation era in America was led by Melvin Van Peebles, a graduate of Literature from Ohio Wesleyan University (Lawrence, 2007). Similarly, the pioneer Francophone filmmakers were predominantly trained at world-renowned Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinematographiques (IDHEC), Paris, and enjoyed substantial technical and financial support from the French government.

On the other hand, most of the Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners did not have such privileged academic or social backgrounds (Haynes, 1995, p.112). They also enjoyed no patronage or support from governments, national or colonial. They were mainly drawn from a group that was neither the mass of farmers nor the white-collar elite; an “intermediate class” with some schooling but which cannot be said to belong to the educated class (Barber, 2004. pp. 176, 179). For example, Ogunde, who only worked as a primary school teacher at St John’s Primary School, Ososa in the present Ogun State before embarking on his theatre journey, was never formally trained in filmmaking and had no higher or further educational qualifications (Klíma, 1982. p.377). Initially, Ola Balogun, and then much later, Afolabi Adesanya, were some of the notable exceptions by virtue of being trained formally in filmmaking overseas (Haynes, 1995, p.113). Balogun was trained at IDHEC in Paris together with some of the

Francophone filmmakers. He could therefore be said to rank with French West African filmmakers in terms of academic background and it was his professionalism that helped to establish the technical foundations of the industry at its inception. This study does not deem the socio-economic alterity of the Yoruba traveling theatre film practitioners as critical to their qualification as filmmakers or relevant to the cinema classification of their works. However, it is necessary to underline the differences in background and class between them and the average African or even African American filmmaker of the times. Furthermore, the permissive industry, hereby engendered, has huge postcolonial implications by erasing elitism from the industry and democratising its access.

Another related issue that has been mentioned against the acceptance of the Yoruba traveling theatre as cinema is the perception that the films that they produced were below par in terms of style, quality and finesse. They used oral tradition as a storytelling technique with all of its cultural resonances in words and images, as well as the social connotations of the speaker's personality and the speech itself. And because these elements brashly disobeyed the doctrines of conventional Hollywood five act structure, the style was vaudevillised, minstrelised and sensationalised (Taylor, 1983). Nevertheless, according to Morgan, there is not just one realism, but several realisms. "Each period (film) looks for its own, the techniques and the aesthetics that will capture, retain and render best what one wants from reality" (Morgan, 2006. p. 459). In other words, by usurping a colonial apparatus, localising it and force it into a cultural service, the Yoruba traveling theatre found a conduit for their own realism. They then used oral tradition elements of dance and song to deliver that realism to their appreciative audiences who should, to the exclusion of western conventions, hold the veto as to the quality of the films'.

Balogun directed the early films of that era and his pedigree provided his contemporaries with a veneer of professionalism by helping to challenge the prevalent negative

perception of the industry. As he enjoyed French sorority with appearances at FESPACO (Haynes, 1995, p. 98), his status reflected back on the fledgling film practice in Nigeria at the time. Incidentally, whatever influence he wielded soon waned following what Haynes calls “aesthetic blockage”; a situation in which the theatre producers stubbornly resisted his professional advice and eventually jettisoned his services as their companies seamlessly morphed overnight from theatre companies to film companies (Adesokan, 2004, p.190). After well chronicled disputes with Balogun, practitioners like Afolayan ultimately assumed the responsibility for directing their films with neither formal training nor experience (Haynes, 1995, p. 102).

The result was that the early shoots of conventional quality and correspondingly of outside reputation that Balogun’s influence stimulated were ruptured by the creative obstinacy of the theatre producers who were, despite their refusal to acknowledge it, technically unprepared for the new format of film. Inevitably, the critics followed with vitriolic commentary highlighting several sins, chief amongst which was the smuggling of the operatic exuberance of traveling theatre convention, in structure and in tone, into what should have been the subtlety of cinema, without adaptation or modification. Biodun Jeyifo was unrestrained in his categorisation of the practice.

The diversification of the media of expression for the traveling theatre troupes no doubt reflects, among other things, the commodification of popular artistic and cultural expression in order to exploit the cultural and psychological needs of the newly citified masses for entertainment, diversion and even escapism (Biodun Jeyifo cited in Adesokan, 2004. p. 189)

The Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners did not care what the critics and scholars had to say about them and their films. They were aware that they had created a flourishing creative cinema business with no help from anyone and they detested having their deficiencies pointed out by a group of people who have never made a film in their lives or even when they have, never made money from it (Haynes, 1995. p. 111).

Juxtaposing the celluloid era of the Nigerian film industry against the principles of cinema postulated by this study produces a moderately successful match. In relation to the first principle, the Yoruba traveling theatre practice fulfilled the criterion by making two-dimensional films of feature length. Most of the films made in the era also ticked the boxes for the second and third principles by being set in a real world and by being created using celluloid cameras. Furthermore, by being edited using traditional movieola methods, it can be argued that some of the fourth principle's recommendations were engaged by the Yoruba traveling theatre productions. However, the productions may have fallen short of the supplementary element of this fourth principle, concerning the films' audio and video quality not affecting their appreciation. In line with this study's postcolonial paradigm, the onus of determining whether or not these quality issues impinge on the appreciation of the film lies with the Nigerian audience. And although the final two principles are perfunctory for an industry that exhibited on the big screen and was appreciated by its teeming fans who refused to measure it against anything else but the deep cultural significance, entertainment value and the instructional quintessence of their narratives, there exists a major paradox concerning this quality imperative. Firstly, who, amongst the variegated Nigerian audience, should be considered as representative in this quality calculation? The majority of Yoruba viewers saw nothing wrong with the films, thoroughly enjoyed and flocked venues to see them. However, there remained a few dissenting voices that were discerning enough to flag stylistic issues with the productions, ironically based on seemingly western conventions. This unfair profiling of the Yoruba traveling theatre against western film conventions is unfortunately for a study with postcolonial pretensions. But it is also unavoidable because film, no matter the level of domestication, remains essentially a foreign apparatus. Therefore, in some kind of syllogism, the minority dissenting voices against the quality of the Yoruba traveling theatre films cannot be ignored. As the era is not contemporary and in the absence of audience reviews, this study

has predicated this anti-postcolonial position on the opinion early Nigerian film scholars such as Ukadike who wrote scathingly about the films' "theatre on screen" (Ukadike, 1998. p.149) credentials, as well as on the judgement of Nollywood practitioners, some of whom are old enough to have lived-experience of the films. Onwochei remembers watching an Ogunde film in Lagos.

I remember the feeling of elation I had sitting in that rowdy hall on the outskirts of Lagos and watching *Jaiyesimi* in 1981. I was a young boy at the time with dreams of becoming an actor but I remember there were things visually different about the film, compared to the smoother Indian films I would also see in that period. It is only now that I can understand that jumpy nature and fleeting blanks on the screen as signs of really bad editing. Although I still enjoyed the film, I could have done without them (Onwochei, 2023)

While not expecting the refinement of Hollywood from these productions that suffered from financial exigencies, it can be contended that the notorious editing mistakes and the employment of song and dance as thread to stitch together disjointed narratives which the entire industry inherited from *Ajani Ogun* (Ukadike, 1998. p.215), did materially affect the enjoyment of the films by some fans, even if they remained ardent in spite of it.

While this study accepts that the stylistic issues with the Yoruba traveling theatre films can be justified as resulting from a cultural localisation of the filmmaking process through the infusion of folklore, dance and magic realism, this study believes that, in its role as a means of avoiding an over-liberalised cinema taxonomy, the quality precept inherent in this study's fourth principle can be reluctantly triggered to resist offering a positive cinema recommendation for the Yoruba traveling theatre era of Nigerian filmmaking.

### **5:03 Nollywood as Cinema**

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Yoruba traveling theatre practice ended under the spectre of inauspicious socio-economic and political circumstances, and a new medium was

born, nicknamed Nollywood (Schnell, 2017; Onishi, 2016). Founded on the fantastic commercial success of *Living in Bondage* (1992), Nigerians started another filmic journey on VHS and then VCDs (Ogunjiofor, 2023). Along with the proliferation of films in this era was a swathe of enthusiastic Nollywood practitioners. However, as foreign scholars analysed the industry with unflattering critical binoculars from a distance, the opinion of these army of Nollywood insiders- producers, actors, directors, scholars and critics- have often been disregarded. Part of the unique character of this study has been its appreciation of the input from this group through the decolonisation of Nollywood research and the amplification of the voices of these practitioners from the inside of the industry. To this end, this study has interviewed nearly 50 practitioners in what is an unprecedented research cohort of Nollywood insiders (Babatope, 2023). The opinion of these Nollywood insiders was strong across this cross-sectional study but the disputed cinema taxonomy for Nollywood debate attracted the most engagement from the group.

Surprisingly, a good number of the participants believe that Nollywood (as in the VCD practice that started in 1992 and peaked in 2007) should be classified as cinema. One of such participants is Chuks Enete who imagines that cinema taxonomy inheres once a practice is using images and sound to tell stories that an audience can relate to. The equipment to record that audio-visual project and the mechanism of showing it to the audience, he believes, should be secondary to the character of the project itself. He goes on to compare the refusal of the critics and scholars to see Nollywood as cinema to “valuing the genuine Mona Lisa painting at a few dollars because it has been displayed in a town hall in Nigeria and not as an installation at the Louvre in Paris” (Enete, 2023). The conclusion therefore is that a valuable work of art should remain a valuable work of art, irrespective of its place of exhibition or style of presentation.

Enyinna Nwigwe similarly aligns Nollywood to his definition of cinema as “the art and technology of creating and projecting moving images to an audience”. He moreover acknowledges that Nollywood's distinctiveness comes from its specific production methods, distribution models, and cultural context.

The Nollywood industry has historically focused on catering to local audiences with themes and narratives that resonate with them. It has also played a role in shaping societal conversations and addressing social issues in Nigeria and beyond. If that’s not cinema, then what is? (Nwigwe, 2023)

Ultimately, even though the term cinema may take on a slightly different colouration when applied to Nollywood films, Nwigwe deems it essential that Nollywood’s unique contributions to global storytelling and its impact on cultural representations should be recognised. Steve Gukas invites us to depart from the technology of the film and focus on the art, suggesting that Nollywood may have already attained cinema status in the VCD era but critics and scholars haven’t noticed because they have been expecting the quality of the films to be different as the exclusive signifier for such attainment (Gukas, 2023).

This study is sympathetic to this notion that quality should not be an exclusive signifier for cinemanness, although it agrees that quality or some stylistic elevation beyond the mundane (Nzekwe, 2023) must be one of its many insignias. However, quality is a really subjective and indeterminate concept. Therefore, to render this requirement more objective, the fourth principle, as enunciated by this study, asks if the video and audio outputs of the film have negatively affected the enjoyment of the film by the audience. Also, as part of its postcolonial reading of the industry, this study agrees with a variegated colouration of the cinema term to accommodate the peculiarities of unorthodox film practices like Nollywood. However, determining the limits of this preferential assessment and the areas of its application may lead to an over-complication of an already complex inquiry.

Onwochei contends that outside its physical structure, cinema concerns itself with the product transmitted on the screen: the motion picture film. He opines that this film comes in different genres, styles and formats; resolving that once, like Nollywood films, the product stimulates experience in its audience through the use of assets like moving image and sound, it is cinema. Kabat Esosa-Egbon has a more combative advocacy for Nollywood's cinemanness. He claims that Nollywood is "validated by the people who watch it and not the scholars. What is cinema anyway? Cinema is telling good stories whether on 35mm or on a mobile phone. It is the content that matters. Form is irrelevant" (Esosa-Egbon, 2023). This study values the varied opinion of Nollywood insiders and, while agreeing that form may not be the most relevant consideration for cinemanness, it deems it cavalier or even dismissive to insinuate that form is irrelevant.

Kola Munis sees Nollywood as coming from a more functional place where aesthetics takes a back seat in the film practice that tows a completely unconventional course towards satisfying its audiences. He blames the refusal to acknowledge Nollywood's cinemanness on "purists who are reluctant to acknowledge the change in the global ground rules" (Munis, 2023). Nzekwe also recognises the impact of "inherent biases and preconceived notions" on the shaping of the perception of those judging Nollywood using the ideological and technical frameworks of the global north. He affirms that Nollywood is cinema because it creates narratives through audio-visual assets which fulfils the fundamental essence of cinema.

Neglecting to label Nollywood as cinema overlooks its ability to evoke emotions, provoke thought, and contribute to the global cinematic dialogue. This reluctance actually limits the broader discussion about diverse cinematic expressions and Nollywood's role in shaping the global cinematic landscape (Nzekwe, 2023).

This study concurs that Nollywood's global impact has been phenomenal. However, arguments about cinemanness do not turn singularly on the global power of the industry being considered. Although such influence can contribute to the confirmation of an industry's engagement with



audiences, it is this study's remit to discover more empirical metrics that can be systematically applied to confirm the cinema taxonomy. The notion of a consensual aesthetic framework for Nollywood falls outside the scope of this study but it can point to a growing literature examining semiotics, spectral aesthetics and the formation of a common vocabulary of meaning in Nollywood (Inyang *et al*, 2023).

Conversely, some dispassionate Nollywood insiders have spoken up against this undesirable outcome which may emanate from the unrestrained opening up of the cinema category to include the VHS/VCD films of the 1992-2010 era of Nollywood. Director Uzodinma Okpechi posits that before that era or any of its modern embodiments can be accepted as cinema, it needs certain parameters in place for improvement in pre-production, post-production and general workflows. He thinks that allowing VCD Nollywood a free pass into cinemanness may represent a stretch which may trivialise the exalted art of cinema and leave ambitious Nollywood filmmakers with nothing to aspire to (Okpechi, 2023). In a similar vein, actress Uru Eke (2023) affirms that the VCD era of Nollywood is "below par" to be called cinema. Her conviction is based on the fact that the output was of low quality and it was not screened publicly but rather enjoyed privately on small screens.

Previously in this chapter, we have witnessed how Carrol's expansion of Ponech's fourth paradigm for cinema opens up the accepted template to include small screens, TVs, computer screens etc (Carrol, 1996). This proviso obfuscates Eke's arguments and reasserts accusations of "cultural bias" against scholars and Nollywood critics like Eke who "view Nollywood through a narrow lens that does not fully appreciate its diversity of storytelling styles, cultural contexts, and artistic expressions" (Nwakalor-Akukwe, 2023). While this study endorses Bazin's advocacy for realism marked by the absence of stylisation (Morgan, 2006. p. 480), it recommends that a more nuanced reading of Nollywood is required to fully appreciate its value. However, completely dismissing the form, vehicle, quality and style of the films or,

as the case may be, blaming the exclusion of Nollywood from the cinema taxonomy purely on bias and prejudice, as suggested by some of these Nollywood practitioners, may force a new gauge which embraces any work of filmic art involving sound and video. This study restates that such inclusivity may ultimately render the cinema category undignified or even meaningless (Omope, 2023).

Away from the views of Nollywood insiders, the Nollywood academy has benefited from renewed research interest after the foundational work by the likes of Jonathan Haynes and Frank Ukadike. The industry started to be seen as an exotic curio (Okome, 2017; Agba, 2014) to researchers, mainly from foreign universities. Many emerging studies of the time examined Nollywood's cinema credentials and some concluded that while the term cinema can be ascribed to Nollywood, the value and purity of its import should be moderated by making the condescending allusion to Nollywood's stylistic connection to soap operas (Miller, 2016:3).

Alessandro Jedlowski was one of the notable international researchers to remotely associate the VCD Nollywood era with the word cinema. In his 2012 article titled "Small Screen Cinema: Informality and Remediation in Nollywood" (2012), he contends that:

The films that the industry produces are often referred to as cinema but, compared to the output of other film industries around the world, Nollywood produces something that can be located in-between cinema and television. The informality of Nigerian videos' production and distribution has in fact allowed for the articulation of complex processes of remediation, which have participated in creating an original product, something that I would like to call "small screen cinema" (Jedlowski, 2012)

By diluting his flattering cinema association with the phrase "small screen" so as to highlight the determinant role its playback format plays in the "understanding of the industry's social, economic and cultural relevance", Jedlowski argues in favour of rebranding Nollywood by inextricably binding the informality of its production and distribution systems to a hybrid identity that is inferior to cinema. Paradoxically, this article was written at a period when many

Nollywood films (such as *Ije* (2010), *The Mirror Boy* (2011), *The Figurine* (2010) and *Anchor Baby* (2010) had transcended the TV screen and were battling Hollywood blockbusters for box office supremacy in multiplexes across West Africa.

Aboubakar Sanogo's piece in 2015 titled "In Focus: Studying African Cinema and Media Today" was one of the few studies to pose the question whether Nollywood was cinema or video. Sanogo astutely recommends the analysis of Nollywood in its own positivity. But unfortunately, the paper answers the cinema/video question without an evidence-led methodology and does little to interrogate the cinema taxonomy with a view to revealing its constituent character. The book, *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution* edited by Saul and Austen, while making a clarion call for the academy to take Nollywood seriously, goes on to undermine the same Nollywood by identifying other filmic outputs from Francophone Africa as cinema but referring to the Nollywood in its title and treatment as a "video revolution".(Saul & Austen, 2010). It is for the purpose of eliminating such uncertain classifications and similar academic double-standards that this study hopes to clarify, once and for all, whether or not associating the term cinema with Nollywood is deserved and hence to be demanded.

Generally speaking, therefore, if Ponch's precepts are all it takes to become cinema, then Nollywood on VCD and VHS, in spite of their aesthetic individualism (Taylor, 1983) has a compelling argument in favour of having satisfied the classification criteria, especially when the hypothesis foists no aesthetic criteria "for maintaining cinema's artistic purity" (Ponch, 2009: pp.56-7). Morgan emphasises this view when he writes that cinema "realism is not a particular style, lack of style or stylistic attributes, but a process, a mechanism- an achievement" (Morgan, 2006. p. 445). That said, this study, once again, acknowledges a counter-argument that such uninhibited lowering of the quality and artistic thresholds for

cinemanness may undermine the traditional conceptual appurtenances of the cinema term as well as corrode its noble inferences (Bazin, 2004: p. xix).

The Nollywood VCD industry meets the majority of the principles for cinema classification enumerated in Chapter One. And just like the celluloid era, this study opines that it trips up on the pseudo-quality imperative contained in the fifth principle which places an artistic huddle on the road to cinemanness. That huddle poses the salient question whether video and audio artefacts interfere negatively with the audiences' enjoyment of the film. However, who should be the arbiter of whether the video or audio quality is meddling adversely with the appreciation of the film? The audience of the films? A communion of established film industries? Or a lone critic or scholar writing from the partiality of their dark office? This study believes that the power to determine if the adverse quality of the film's video and audio is impacting on the appreciation of a film should lie with the film's audience. This stance is buttressed by Barthes' notion which, although borrowed from religious scholarship, can be used to imbue the audience with responsibility for interpreting narrative as "...that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (Barthes, 2016. p. 148). Empowering the audience in this way by ceding the right to constitute and appraise local quality to local audiences will further advance the decolonisation of global cinema.

Many of the Nollywood practitioners partaking in this study may not have all started their journeys in the industry during the VCD era. However, they were around and watched those films as audiences. Eighty-five percent of those canvassed agree that the quality of the sound and video of the majority of the Nollywood films of the VCD era were remarkably poor and invasive of the enjoyment of those films. They cited literal and linear storytelling, very bad acting, distracting editing issues, wall-to-wall music, brevity of actual filmic content in the VCDs, indiscernible audio and grainy picture quality as some of the off-putting quality

challenges of that era (Novia, 2023, Nzekwe, 2023, Onwochei, 2023, Okpue, 2023). By returning the power to gauge film quality to Nollywood audiences in this way, this study believes that a level playing field for the appreciation and calibration of various filmic endeavours from around the world can be created. It may also not be such a bad idea to, through this decentralisation, divest scholars, academics and the majority western national cinemas of their abrogated control privileges.

Once again, it sounds counter-intuitive to raise the voice of a discerning few members of the Nollywood VCD audience to drown out the majority who loved the films and made it globally successful. Without derogation to its postcolonial stance, or the dereliction of artistry to affirm cinema purity that is implicit in Wollen's hypothesis (Wollen, 1998, p. 89), this study's assessment of the cinemanness of Nollywood's VCD era must be conclusive. Although what constitutes cinema is up to us (Ponech, 2011:60). However, in order to forestall a permissive situation where every video project can lay claim to the cinema taxonomy, this study has elevated the hackneyed quality complaints against the VCD Nollywood era to levels that undermine its legitimate claim to cinemanness.

#### **5:04            New Nollywood as Cinema**

Lonzo Nzekwe makes bold by calling New Nollywood

a transformative phase which...witnessed a remarkable evolution within the industry, as filmmakers set out to transcend the established norms. During this period, filmmakers began to focus on enhancing production values, storytelling techniques, and thematic depth. Films like *Anchor Baby* (2010), *The Mirror Boy* (2011), *Ije* (2010), *The Figurine* (2009), *Tango with Me* (2010), and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013) marked a shift towards a more mature and cinematic approach (Nzekwe, 2023).

Those early moves towards enhanced production values have culminated in a situation where the only distinguishing factors between the present-day Nollywood films and their Hollywood counterparts are the origin of the actors, the setting and sometimes the language of the films

(Menakaya, 2023). So, with the mode of production elevated to the present gold standard - the digital format - and with New Nollywood films being exhibited in cinemas across Africa and streaming side by side with the biggest films from around the world, one would have thought that its cinema classification would be a formality. But it is not. Many scholars and critics and international agencies have remained obstinate in their refusal to ascribe the cinema taxonomy to New Nollywood. In its report in 2017, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) still viewed Nollywood as a video practice and excluded it from its report on global film practices (UNESCO, 2017). Incidentally by this time in 2017, New Nollywood films had been streaming for nearly three years alongside global films on Netflix, and shortly after, several films like *30 Days in Atlanta* (2014), *Wedding Party* (2016) and *A Trip to Jamaica* (2016) were out-performing Hollywood films in West African cinemas (Babatope, 2023).

“Stop Comparing Nollywood to Hollywood: Reorienting Western Understanding of Nigerian Cinema” (2017) by Breanne Schnell valorises New Nollywood’s self-sufficiency and challenges perceptions about the industry with what seems like an impassioned defence of its unique look and feel. However, Schnell could not help but propose that what she calls New Nollywood’s “televisual aesthetics” had a closer affinity with television than cinema (Schnell, 2017). Analogously, Jade Miller’s “Nollywood Central: The Nigerian Video Film Industry” is another essay that argues that Nollywood movies have more of a stylistic connection with soap operas than arty African films (Miller, 2016. p.3). Measuring it against the conventional canons of global cinema, Miller acquiesces that New Nollywood resides “in both style and format somewhere between cinema and television” (p.7). This study transcends such arbitrary repudiation of New Nollywood and in addition to a juxtaposition against cinema canons to vindicate or indict its cinema taxonomy, it explores New Nollywood’s contestation of its hybrid identity as it attempts to stay true to itself while, at the same time, seeking acceptance into the

global cinema community through unrestricted engagement on global streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime. Once again, a view from the inside of the industry is instructive.

Although recognising cinema taxonomy claims as being intrinsically subjective and despite a stout defence of old Nollywood's rights to be called cinema, Nwigwe believes that the New Nollywood era stands out with its production quality, storytelling, technical savviness and international recognition as Nollywood's best ever claim to cinemanness (Nwigwe, 2023). Munis concurs that Nollywood as a whole deserves consideration as cinema but New Nollywood should be treated as a dead certainty. This is because "New Nollywood is the best stage of Nigerian filmmaking evolution" (Munis, 2023). Veteran filmmaker, Andy Boyo agrees that the exponential growth of Nollywood distribution across cinema and streaming have elevated New Nollywood to a level of parity with any film industry in the world (Boyo, 2023).

However, one of the reasons for ignoring these strides made in the New Nollywood era is that many scholars have continued to see Nollywood as one continuum, thereby lumping the basic VCD practice of the 1990s and the early 2000s together with the high quality digital films breaking box office records in cinemas and on global streaming platforms since 2011 (Mofe-Damijo, 2023). That refusal to acknowledge the schism that occurred in the ontology of Nollywood at about the year 2012 means that observers will paper over the outstanding achievements of New Nollywood: bigger budgets, improved technical and artistic qualities, truly global acceptance, and release schedules involving theatrical, streaming and satellite TV. Some scholars see the relationship between old Nollywood and New Nollywood as "mere evolutionary trends, showing different sides of the industry with the same DNA" (Okagbue, 2022). While this assertion may be correct, however, to fully appreciate the magnitude of transformational growth that the industry has undergone and how different today's New Nollywood films like *Brotherhood* (2022), *Breath of Life* (2023) and *The Black Book* (2023) are from old Nollywood films like *Glamour Girls* (1994) and *Blood Money* (1997), observers

need to, at least mentally, divide the Nollywood era into those two distinct and perhaps irreconcilable film practices: old Nollywood and New Nollywood.

Nollywood scholar and director, Ugochukwu Ugwu, makes the perfect analogy in viewing the evolutionary relationship between the two Nollywood practices as a metamorphosis in which a caterpillar (old Nollywood) morphs into a beautiful butterfly (New Nollywood). Yes, there is a genetic affinity in that they share the same DNA and are indeed the same organism. Yet their outward dissimilarity from each other could not be more palpable. (Ugwu, 2023). It is the mistake of seeing the present industry through the flawed vista of the old Nollywood VCD era of the 1990s that obscures the creative and technical revolution taking place as Nigerian filmmaking steps up to global standards in every aspect: mode of production, style, mode of distribution, all along retaining its cultural ethos and umbilical connection to its audience (Nzekwe, 2023).

The perennial mode of production argument is another reason why scholars and critics continue to ignore New Nollywood's improvements and sustain their denial of cinema status to the industry (Saul *et al*, 2010: p.11; Agba, 2014; Haynes, 2011: p.78; UNESCO, 2017). In this vein, film purists have considered New Nollywood films as "imperfect cinema", films with rough and unfinished quality which are not interested in quality or technique but find their audience in those who struggle and their themes in their problems (Espinosa, 1979). Espinosa also argues that imperfect cinemas like Nollywood should be content with serving their audience and therefore not aspire to what he calls the narcissistic exhibitionism of the European cinema class. It is fair to say that New Nollywood should not be obsessed with this quest for outside recognition or even attainment of cinemanness.

In any case, some other film practices, like the Francophone African productions and even the African American films of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have remained ideologically imperfect cinemas without compromising their cinemanness. Ukadike suggests that the explanation for



this ability by film practices like Francophone African cinema to maintain their dual and sometimes mutually exclusive identities can be found in the controversial notion that the cinema taxonomy inheres on the basis of the mode of production; in this case celluloid (Ukadike, 1994: p. 99). Therefore, because New Nollywood's native format is now digital, such means of production inferences cannot be easily drawn in its favour.

Howbeit, that logic begins to fall apart in the light of emphatic evidence that the digital format has "lodged itself at the heart of postmodern image culture" (Bazin, 2004: p. xvi) and has rapidly displaced and replaced celluloid as the choice medium of production, even in Hollywood (Manovich, 1995: pp.26-27). The question then is, do stories necessarily have to be recorded on celluloid grade in order to qualify as cinema? (Iwuh, 2015). As we discovered in Chapter One, none of the film philosophers whose cinema theories were examined made any prescriptions about the type of camera to which cinema taxonomy attaches. In today's filmic environment, almost everything can be created or simulated on a computer with the right budget and sufficient time. This means that filming physical reality, a feature of cinema that Bazin elevated to its intrinsic essence, (2004: p.11) has simply become just one possibility of the many available to filmmakers (Manovich, 1995: pp.20-21). By being able to generate moving images without the camera, the innovation of the digital format has also obliterated the "recorded with a camera" imperative of early cinema theorists (Andrew, 2010: p. xxvi; Ponech, 2011: p.54).

Therefore, with the popular drift away from the now mundane celluloid technology which used to define cinema, towards the intrepidity of the digital format, it may be argued that Hollywood and most western national cinemas that now rely on the same new format, should be denied of their hitherto automatic cinema status. This consideration has become more pertinent with ninety-two percent of Hollywood films in 2017 shot using digital technology (Pramudita, 2018) whose contribution in the form of computer-generated special effects has

now taken centre stage in Hollywood productions (Manovich, 1995:26). Based on that same mode of production reasoning, Hollywood's cinema classification should now also be called into dispute, as the digital media has reformed the very identity of cinema, turning celluloid that used to be one of its defining characteristics, into just the least artistic choice, out of many superior choices available.

Until recently, only big Hollywood studios could afford the advantage of digital media and the possibilities they offered. Falling prices and a profusion of less expensive versions of both hardware and software have democratised the technology, meaning that most film practices can now afford them (Manovich, 1995: p.26). That includes the New Nollywood film industry, where, "...one hundred percent of New Nollywood films since 2018 have been shot on digital cameras, like Red, Arri, Black Magic, Sony, Panasonic and Canon" (Babatope, 2022). Many New Nollywood films have also employed computer generated imagery to great effect. Worthy of mention are Gukas' *A Place in the Stars* (2014), Femi Adebayo's *King of Thieves*, Emelonye's *Last Flight to Abuja* (2012), and Dimeji Ajibola's *Ratnik* (2020). Having progressed to using and mastering the same quality digital media as Hollywood, it may be time to review New Nollywood's exclusion from cinema taxonomy that was on the basis of the archaic VHS and DVD technologies of the industry's earlier epoch.

This study's third principle recognises the availability of not just a broad range of cameras but also a plethora of digital means to generate life-like moving images without a camera. It therefore does not prescribe a particular type of camera for cinema classification, so long as the images produced do not interfere negatively with the audiences' appreciation of the film made.

On the issue of artistic style, Peter Wollen extended Bazin's anti-aesthetic negation of the style and artistry of a film project because cinema can only find purity through the destruction of itself and any pretensions of style. The attempt of New Nollywood films to

faithfully capture the reality of Nigerian life, sometimes unembellished by too much stylistic veneers can be viewed in the same counterintuitive light. According to Wollen, such dereliction of artistry, instead of jeopardising their cinema credentials, actually affirms them (Wollen, 1998, p. 89). This proposition simply means that by being less cinematic, New Nollywood can edge itself closer to the truth and enhance its own cinemanness.

The absence of a pervasive cinema infrastructure in Nigeria (Schnell, 2017) has been cited by some observers as a strong contributory factor in the denial of cinema classification to New Nollywood. The race films were not always screened in cinema settings, but instead “...were shown in different contexts” (Field, 2015: p.13). Yet, the cinema classification was accorded to them by both scholars and critics (Diawara, ed, 1993: p.30). Nigeria’s cinema infrastructure count is impressive by African standards - 72 cinemas - compared to South Africa’s leading 120 cinemas (Odiete, 2022). It is the denominator of Nigeria’s large population that renders the ratio disappointing and consequently weakens its argument, that is, if it were to be a criterion for cinemanness. As evident in the last chapter, the revised precept by Carroll eroded the monopoly of theatre projection for cinema classification by introducing a template requirement which opens up the principle to other means and sizes of video display (Carrol, 1996. p. 62). The principles articulated by this study in the last chapter also offer an elastic range of display and storage options for a film product to be classified as cinema.

Following Ponech’s logic, it can be said that cinema is a cultural form that is in a constant state of flux (Ponech, 2009: p.57). With streaming taking hold globally following the entrenchment of changes in viewing habits, cinema and its infrastructure are on the decline. For example, in the UK and the US, due to falling audience numbers and declining box office figures, the Cineworld cinema chain declared financial difficulties in 2022, closing several of its venues and making many of its staff redundant. It only just emerged from chapter eleven

bankruptcy in late 2023 with its financial footing and future prospects still uninspiring (Reuters, 2023). A gradual evolution towards TV and online alternatives has been sped up by the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. The cinema, that “dark theatre where the spectator gazes at and reflects upon images that relay a world that is both elsewhere and present in its visual trace” (Bazin, 2004: p. xvii), has stopped being the choice global medium for experiencing quality filmic content (Hanchard *et al.*, 2023: p.3); and accordingly, the value of cinema infrastructure in determining the status of a film industry, if it ever had any, should also be diminished.

Since the lockdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of streaming as a means of consumption of quality content and the domination of sites like Netflix, Disney, Amazon and Hulu, mean that people watch more content on television, computers and even mobile phones than they do in cinema buildings (Hagen, 2022). However, in spite of this widespread attitudinal change and the resultant erosion of the supremacy of cinema infrastructure, not to mention its present close association with the television, the laptop or even the mobile phone, Hollywood still retains its top-level cinema industry classification in the eyes of critics, scholars and inter-government agencies like UNESCO. Unlike Nollywood, it has not been burdened with Jedlowski’s patronising “small screen cinema” expression (Jedlowski, 2012) even though it is now more associated with small screens on laptops and tablets than large cinema screens.

A lack of training in the art and science of filmmaking has also been touted as a reason for Nollywood’s unique aesthetics (Chowdhury, 2008: p.38), as well as its marginalisation from cinema taxonomy. That position has been challenged by the influx of western-trained filmmaking professionals into the Nollywood industry; from actors (Chiwetel Ejiofor, John Boyega), to writers (Tunde Babalola, Don Omope), to cinematographers (Yinka Edward, Robert Peters), to directors (Biyi Bandele, Akin Omotosho). Furthermore, Nollywood and

especially New Nollywood have drawn from a pool of theatre arts graduates from many Nigerian universities, in front of and behind the camera. There are twenty-nine universities in Nigeria offering theatre arts degrees, most of them with film studies attached (Udugba, 2022). Many of these courses, despite their ambitious filmmaking titles, are mainly theoretical in nature because practical film training is hampered by a lack of suitable equipment and teaching expertise. Having said that, this study acknowledges a healthy tradition of filmmaking in Nigerian universities aimed predominantly at the film festivals and YouTube channels, with limited scope for theatrical release and streaming on Netflix and Amazon Prime. In the end, these universities churn out thousands of graduates every year with few career choices other than some kind of involvement in Nollywood. Genevieve Nnaji, Omotola Jalade Ekeinde, Richard Mofe Damijo, Kate Henshaw, Stella Damasus, Segun Arinze, Charles Novia, Obi Emelonye, Lancelot Imasuen, Sam Dede, Tunde Babalola, Monalisa Chinda, Mercy Aigbe, Rita Dominic and Yul Edochie are some of the Nollywood personalities that are theatre arts graduates (Kanayo, 2023).

Also, as an industry with little or no entry requirements, Nigerian graduates from other disciplines gravitate towards Nollywood, attracted by the glamour, fame and Netflix dollars with unemployment amongst young people skyrocketing in the country (Inwang, 2023). According to Victor Okhai (2023), the president of the Director's Guild of Nigeria, some of those in this category are Kunle Afolayan (Banking), Funke Akindele (Law), Joke Silva (English), Kenneth Okonkwo (Law), Kanayo O. Kanayo (Philosophy/Law) and Kemi Lala Akindoju (Insurance). This study believes that this cross-disciplinary migration is not such a bad thing for Nollywood and has ensured that educational levels in Nollywood are considerably high, compared to many other film industries in the world (Nzekwe, 2023). But specific film training leaves more to be desired in the industry (Okhai, 2022). The National Film Institute in Jos has not made a great impact in the film training terrain as it was envisaged to. It has

produced many practitioners but only few have established themselves in New Nollywood. Notable amongst them are Yinka Edward, Kenneth Gyang, Ifeanyi Iloduba and Ifeanyi Ikpoenyi (Inwang, 2023).

Recently, many film schools have emerged in different cities in Nigeria, mainly Lagos and Abuja, offering a broad range of film training, across a broad quality spectrum. Some of them include Del York Creative Academy, High Definition Film School, National Film and Television Institute, Royal Arts Academy, PEFTI Film Institute and Ebony-Life Creative Academy. Education and professional training have been elevated in Nollywood to levels where their values are underlined and hopefuls see them as imperative to attaining success in the industry. Today, even experienced practitioners are seeking retraining opportunities to sharpen their craft and remain competitive (Elliot, 2023).

In contrast, some of Hollywood's top-ranking practitioners did not undergo formal film school training while others did not even complete post-secondary education of any sort. Christopher Nolan, director of *Inception* (2010) and *Oppenheimer* (2023) studied English Literature, and James Cameron (*Titanic*, 1997 and *Avatar*, 2009) read Physics. Some others like Stephen Spielberg (*Indiana Jones*, 1981 and *Schindler's List*, 1993) and Quentin Tarantino (*Kill Bill*, 2004 and *Django*, 2012) are actually college dropouts; the former returning in 2002 to complete a film degree he abandoned in 1969 (Ogunjiofor, 2022).

Some critics have touted the lack of training in the art and science of filmmaking as the reason behind Nollywood's unique aesthetics and by extension a logical explanation for its denial of cinema categorisation (Chowdhury, 2008: p.38). In robust defence, some Nollywood observers have pointed to what they consider an unfair situation in which American producers with little education and no training can blag their way into making films that are universally seen as cinema, while "better educated Nigerian practitioners can be disenfranchised with the claim that their works cannot rise to cinema because they don't have film training" (Gukas,

2023; Okpechi, 2023). This study has not discovered, in its research, any proviso in the literature that makes the training or education of the filmmaker a prerequisite for the cinema classification of their projects. Of course, this study values training and education as important for the self-development of film practitioners. However, it sees their filmmaking skill and ability as directly proportional to their talent, exposure, ambition, experience, coaching and budget to assemble the best production teams.

New Nollywood's cultural specificity (Oluyinka, 2008) has also been used against its cinema recognition, with some arguing that Nollywood's syncretic origins, together with the cultural influence (Afolayan, 2014) - particularly of oral tradition (Agba, 2014) - have combined to afford it an aesthetics of immediate impact "rather than subordinating every element in the film to an overall sense of design" (Haynes, 2007). Once again, a question of style over form. No national film practice has been marginalised by the fact of its cultural introversions. The race films of 1920s America, had Black people at the core of its presentation and representation, in diametrical opposition to the ludicrous caricatures of Blacks on American screens. Based on the self-reliance principles of the uplift movement, filmmakers like Micheaux used film as a tool for self-representation (Field, 2015: p.1). Irrespective of this cultural and political particularity, not to mention their tensions and ambivalences (Field, 2015: p. xiv), race films were unanimously recognised as cinema.

In fact, the insularity of the blaxploitation films, their unique style, political verve and African American focus of their themes have become their most celebrated attributes which have not compromised their cinema classification. So, how come scholars can rationalise that New Nollywood, with less utilitarian focus or political obsessions, can be denied that classification on the grounds of its cultural distinctiveness? The double standard against Nollywood that this bias points to has often been defended with the comparatively more artistic credentials of these various film practices, as well as the routinely cited mode of production

argument. In a similar way, Bollywood, the film industry from the Indian subcontinent, is unabashedly inward-looking as far as cultural orientation is concerned. This manifests in their films as a revolt against the linearity of Hollywood's five act structure, in favour of a celebratory storytelling style filled with song and dance (Singh, 2021). In spite of this specificity, Bollywood is universally regarded as cinema but Nollywood, which despite its peculiar aesthetics, tows similar narrative lines with Hollywood, is not (UNESCO, 2017). This study sees a logical explanation for this inequity in the doctrine of repression and emasculation against which some form of postcolonial insurrection, manifested in the form of cultural affirmation, can be aimed at mitigating.

Nollywood, as one of the youngest national film practices in the world (Odiete, 2023) has been excluded from cinema taxonomy because of its infancy, coupled with the fact that unlike other earlier national practices, it emerged at a time when several options existed for mode of production, instead of just the almighty celluloid. Film production started in 1903 in India when Harishchandra Bhatvadekar, the first Indian to make a film, ordered a camera, a projector and film negatives from London. It was impossible to make moving images in a different way at the time other than via celluloid, so he employed the techniques used in making the British short films that he had been screening in Bombay (Massey, 1974: p.369) and hence the Indian film industry started on celluloid. Correspondingly, the race film directors like William Foster and Micheaux did not have any choice because they also made films at a time when celluloid was the only mode of recording video available. (Field, 2015: p.10) While these two industries started like most other international film practices- as a celluloid art before becoming commercial- Nollywood bucked the trend by becoming a commodity on VHS/VCD business before it started harbouring any artistic pretensions (Ogunjiofor, 2023).

Prior to the advent of Nollywood, Oladele and the Yoruba travelling theatre movement that came after him shot on celluloid too and screened in cinemas and town halls. But even



then, their craft was not deemed to rise to levels of high art and they were considered cinema only by Nigerian critics (Ukadike, 1994: p.6). Ogunjiofor, whose film *Living in Bondage* (1992) birthed the practice that evolved into present-day Nollywood, did not have the benefit of a celluloid legacy. The cost implications for that medium ensured he did not even consider it as an option. Instead the video format offered him an opportunity to make money by telling local stories that were too good to resist and he found his audience in struggling Nigerians and his themes in their problems which included insecurity (Espinosa, 1979).

So, the foundations of the Nigerian film industry were firmly built on entry level celluloid in the 1970s and 1980s (Babatope, 2023) and more recently on the video format. And although the industry has progressed significantly to digital, many Nollywood practitioners deem the cinema classification as unresponsive to the industry's evolutionary advances, and as an example of western ideological fanaticism, many of them suspect that the cinema taxonomy has been framed to stick once it is offered or rejected, without recourse to any appeal procedures and oblivious of subsequent developments (Menakaya, 2023).

The reluctance of individual scholars and critics, including international agencies like the UNESCO, to acknowledge New Nollywood's improvements and so persist with a condescending view of the industry as beneath cinema tempts this study to agree with the above view that the cinema taxonomy is deliberately unresponsive, especially to reversing a negative decision. By this study, research attention will be focused on the somewhat opaque and faceless process of cinema classification, and how, individually and collectively, the subjective opinions of scholars and critics are elevated to stamps of authenticity used in defining hapless film practices. It is also the hope of this study that by empirically analysing cinema and its taxonomy, critics and scholars, and indeed the UNESCO whose prejudiced and dismissive summations on New Nollywood have gone unchallenged for so long, might be compelled to review their positions.

Finally, the celluloid and the Nollywood VCD eras of the Nigeria film industry compared favourably with most of the elements of the six principles of cinema that emerged from this study's analysis of the practical and theoretical concepts of cinema, only failing on the pseudo-quality criterion concerning the interference from sound and video artefacts which negatively affect the audiences enjoyment of the films. This failure is a commentary on the shoddy editing melanges of the celluloid era and the rough and ready technical lapses of the Nollywood VCD era (Akudinobi, 2019. p. 133). On the other hand, however, New Nollywood filmmakers, by their training at international film schools, have managed to iron out many of the technical challenges that old Nollywood faced, like disruptively amateurish cinematography, bad action choreography, alienating soundtrack and a complete lack of art direction, to name a few. These improvements manifest in the films which, while not achieving complete Hollywood gloss and sophistication, manage to be easy on the eye of the viewers in a manner which ensures that their enjoyment of the improved narratives is not materially devalued by sound or video artefacts (Okagbue, 2024; Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023; Mofe-Damijo, 2023; Gukas, 2023).

In other words, New Nollywood meets all of the principles earmarked by this study for cinemanness, including the quality imperative of the fourth principle. In furtherance of its postcolonial stance, this study believes that the decision concerning whether or not any artefacts in video and sound undermine the enjoyment of the New Nollywood films has to be left to the industry's growing audience. The Nollywood cohort canvassed in this study, serving as a microcosm of the Nollywood audience, has almost unanimously endorsed and applauded New Nollywood films (Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023; Mofe-Damijo, 2023; Nwigwe, 2023, Munis, 2023). If confirmation is required, this unanimous endorsement by itself resonates with Ponech's hypothesis that what is cinema is really up to us. (Ponech, 2011:60). Its argument has been further strengthened by the not-so-surprising concurrence of film critics and scholars alike

on the marked improvement in the quality of New Nollywood films (Haynes, 2016: p.285; Haynes, 2014, Bisschoff, 2015; Ryan, 2015; Ezepue, 2020; Okagbue, 2023).

This study therefore makes bold to pronounce that New Nollywood's right to cinema classification should be beyond reproach. All that remains is for scholars and critics to offer their endorsement and dare I say, their apologies for the dreadful error or omission that has gone on for over ten years. This study hopes that its empirical and systematic contributions to the Nollywood academy can mark the beginning of the end of this protracted challenge by Nollywood practitioners against the unfair denial of the cinema taxonomy for the industry (Ogunjiofor, 2013; Munis, 2024; Gukas, 2024; Mofe-Damijo, 2023).

#### **5:05 Nollywood as a Politically Conscious Cinema.**

Said's seminal book, *Orientalism*, was the catalyst in 1978 for postcolonial theory's argument that some kind of imposed western orientation towards the Other - in this case, the ex-colonies - may be borne out of a colonial mindset. This imperial prejudice that saw the western centre attempt to systematically negate the cultural difference of the non-west (Nandy, 1983: p. xi) by wanting everything to come from it (Fanon, 1965: p.63) was also felt in a different form in Nigeria where film was introduced and simultaneously stifled by the colonisers (Saul *et al.*, 2010: pp.6-7). But after independence, while Francophone African countries endeavoured to indirectly critique the cultural and political hegemony of the coloniser with the aim of redressing the "...foundational economic, cultural and political damage inflicted by colonial occupation" (Gandhi, 2019: p.44), filmmaking in Nigeria was allowed to develop more as a news gathering, "escapist entertainment" practice (Ukadike, 1994: p.104), or as a "...vulgar, populist entertainment with none of the political or aesthetic skills of their celluloid cousins[s]" (Larkin, 2008. 178). Critics believe that Nigerian filmmaking spurned the

goal of speaking back to the empire and instead, what emerged was “a celebratory, culturally nuanced but politically blunted practice” (Okhai, 2022).

This study sees this reading of Nigerian filmmaking as fundamentally flawed. Firstly, every film has a political meaning (Christensen & Haas, (2015) and not every political resistance needs to be adversarial or confrontational (Okagbue, 2024). Secondly, Nollywood’s postcolonial hybrid status became confirmed as soon as the industry appropriated the filmmaking apparatus that was employed by the colonisers in its subjugation, localised its methods and usurped its language to tell its own stories in its own way. The industry’s affront on the established conventions of production and distribution has been disruptive and liberating for minority film practices worldwide. If that is not political, this study wonders what is?

In contrast to Nollywood’s style, the race films in 1920s America were employed as a medium to assert the “humanity, respectability, modernity, and utility of African Americans for white and Black audiences at a time when such propositions were, more often than not, challenged by cultural and political norms” (Field, 2015: p.16). They adopted the more orientalist system- although prior to the emergence of the theory- which bid to break down the stubborn hierarchies of value responsible for propagating what Said called “dreadful secondariness” (Said, 1995: p.207). Du Bois called it “twoness”.

One ever feels his twoness- an American, a negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois, 2015)

Instead of seeing the twoness as a handicap, like DuBois and the African Americans of his time did, Nollywood has reclaimed its own hybridity, embracing it and owning it as a part of its quintessential character. In other words, Nollywood, it can be argued, has created its own type of cinema by advancing a fertile decolonization from Western aesthetic norms (Taylor, 1983)

and it is asking to be accepted as such (Okagbue, 2022). For Nollywood, this kind of bold statement of identity could be the antidote to the unravelling that happened with Black American cinema movements when Hollywood abandoned them. It could be a feature that may ensure Nollywood's survival, whatever comes from the ominous embrace with Hollywood.

The Blaxploitation films of the 1970s started around the same time as Nigerian filmmaking (Ukadike, 1994: p.6) on the back of Van Peebles' 1971 hit *Sweetback's Sweet Baaadasss Song*. It first emerged as an impolite practice set up to spite Hollywood for its refusal to open doors to black creatives, as well as their continued negative portrayal of the Black person (Diawara, 1993: p.118). The movement gave birth to films like *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972) but despite its ideological difference from Hollywood, the Blaxploitation films followed Hollywood aesthetics and structural conventions as an elitist, celluloid high art. They were accorded cinema status and when the movement was co-opted by Hollywood as it struggled with an existential drop in revenue, Black directors were afforded the opportunity to work very successfully in Hollywood and the movement's cinema status became essentially rubber stamped.

Nollywood's path to filmmaking, by design or accident, was very different from the mistrust of Orientalism or the self-obsession of the American race films. It focused on a common commercial appeal in order to build a popular culture. In a perverse way, Nollywood has answered back to the empire by inadvertently creating an industry whose perceived arrogant strut on the global stage has dislodged existing paradigms in filmmaking and has blown the boundaries of cinema taxonomy, to create a "new cinema" (Okagbue, 2022). This new cinema does not ask politely before taking its place at the table. It is bold and brash and unapologetic and must be read with a new set of lenses that do not ignore their unique cultural value.

Many of its practitioners have argued that the resistance to accord the Nigerian film industry, in any of its incarnations, a fairly deserved cinema taxonomy is a political one (Okhai, 2022; Benson, 2023; Mofe-Damijo, 2023). Traditionally, the west is always suspicious of new ideas that question or dislodge their place in the centre of things (Okagbue, 2022) and having challenged some of the notions of cinema by disregarding its putative conventions in production, and pushing the boundaries of distribution, New Nollywood has incurred the wrath of western cultural hegemonies (Okhai, 2023). Some Nollywood practitioners believe that in retaliation, the global west has used discriminatory categorisation, based on colonially defined parameters, to compel Nollywood to accede to criteria which ignore dissimilarities in cultural taste and artistic appreciation (Obi-Rapu, 2022; Nwoba, 2023).

This study, through its intimate Nollywood associations, might begin to understand the basis for this type of conspiracy theories. From the inside of the industry, it feels like the whole world is against Nollywood (Okhai, 2023). However, there is no proof, in this study's research, of any systemic or deliberate attempt by international organisations from the global West of negating the Nollywood film industry. In fact, Hollywood studios are circling around the industry, betting huge investments in a bid to get a stake in its future. This study believes instead that it is individual critics and scholars who have done the most harm to the industry's reputation through using their sometimes ill-informed and inadequately researched publications, or through their unforgiving amplification of actual flaws, to give the industry a bad name. However, with the strengthening of the voices from the inside of the industry as exemplified by studies such as Ezepeue, (2020) and this, an equilibrium of assessments on Nollywood may soon be achieved. And at the midway point between the two extreme views would lie the truth about the industry, its cinema taxonomy and all.

## **5:06 Nollywood as National Cinema**

Another way to view Nollywood's claim to cinemanness could be through the national cinema paradigm. However, it is a hypothesis that veers this study slightly away from its main focus: an artistic and non-partisan cinema taxonomy and its constituents. So, while it will accept the minor deviation, this study will devote comparatively little space to the notion of national cinema.

Cinema was a truly global and transnational phenomenon at its inception because it had no words and hence no national language beyond basic universal human codes. However, the point of departure for nationalism in cinema came with the introduction of intertitles and sound which preserved, objectified and opened up speech in films to cultural manipulation (William, 2002, p.2). To understand the concept of "national cinema", we need to appreciate Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as "imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (p. 1). The word "imagined" here suggests that there are no tangible binding forces, just an abstract sense of community or sharing kindred spirits. The Nigerian nation, under this provision, should therefore be all members of a particular group of ethnic communities "within a historically coherent empty space" (p. 3).

National cinema is often used to describe the films produced in or by a nation state which sets a different sphere of expectation for the audience (Higson, 1989: p.38). Higson further argues that the boundaries of national cinema should be sketched not only at the site of production but also at the site of consumption. This stance does not value the supposed subjective quality of the films based on so-called international conventions, but instead proposes a more exhibition-led and consumption-based approach which re-channels attention on to audiences and how they connect with the films they watch (Higson, 1989: pp.36-47). It is not just where the films were made, it also poses the question, who is watching the films? In this regard, Nollywood films, across its many transmutations as sites of conflict (Williams,

2002. p.5), have eked out a unique aesthetic and technical identity, however coarse, which the audiences recognise, watch, accept and appreciate. These include all the things that the critics have said is wrong with the industry: "...the exuberance of its stories, the rhythm of its music, the evocative flowery language, the passionate celebrations, the cacophony of loud voices and tones, the riot of colours, the cadence of its storytelling and the distinctive acting style that sometimes borders on the melodramatic" (Mofe-Damijo, 2023).

The audiences have given unequivocal approval to these unique features in Nollywood films (Okome, 2017), sometimes favouring them over Hollywood projects, despite their many challenges (Odieta, 2021; Okpue, 2023; Babatope, 2023). Accordingly, Nollywood cinema can be seen as "a synthesis of historical, political, economic, social, and cultural institutions, as they manifest in the real-life experiences of post-independent Nigeria" (Ashaolu, 2016: p.204). It becomes a *vox populi* tool used to engage in national conversations that would otherwise have been overlooked (ibid). This proposition situates Nollywood at par with other western national cinemas, like the French, British and Italian cinemas which have, for decades, used protectionist policies to battle the erosion of their identities in the face of Hollywood's ideological and commercial domination (Segrave, 1997, p.194). The only difference, which is a critical one, is that other national cinemas like the French (cinema d'art et essai), which the French government sponsors by taxing Hollywood, are indifferent to commercial success but are instead focused on artistic development and creating a certain national philosophy of the world (Diawara, 1993, p. 5). Nollywood suffers from an absence of a concerted and strategic government policy towards the industry or its promotion (Oguamanam, 2011) as a weapon of state supported cultural nationalism (Williams, 2002. p.6) or as a pictogram of national identity. This is because there is no ownership, co-option or claim of the industry by the Nigerian state. For if Nollywood is to be national, it truly must command national patronage so that instead of Nigeria just being related to Nollywood, Nollywood becomes an essential part of the process



of defining Nigeria (Williams, 2002. p. 4). Until this happens, it is this study's opinion that Nollywood cannot justifiably seek entry through the back door with national cinema and must therefore pursue cinema classification through other paradigms.

### **5:07 2<sup>nd</sup> Largest Film Industry in the World?**

As mentioned earlier in passing, the UNESCO's Institute of Statistics (2012) report that puts Nollywood as the second largest film industry in the world- based on the quantity of films released- second to India's Bollywood and ahead of America's Hollywood, has been heavily touted as a badge of honour in Nollywood scholarship and practice. However, a similar UNESCO report in 2017 that studied top feature film producing countries around the world between 2005 and 2013 had India's Bollywood as the top country for every year under review, followed by America's Hollywood. The film industries of Japan and China swapped places for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> (UNESCO, 2017). Incidentally, Nollywood was conspicuous by its absence, only appearing as a footnote which explained that Nigerian films were not included in the survey because they were "produced in video format" (p.8).

The pertinent question once again is, which facet of Nollywood was referenced in this study? This is because by 2013, the year referenced in the report, many of the films made in Nollywood, particularly those made in New Nollywood, were shot using digital media and not the video format. And if Nollywood was to be excluded from the study based on that criterion, most other film practices, including Hollywood, ought to be removed from consideration since, at the time, they shared similar digital production formats. The exclusion of New Nollywood from the study may support the hypothesis that, following Nollywood's triumph by coming second in the 2012 survey, on the grounds of volume of production, UNESCO introduced fresh eligibility parameters for national film practices that have discriminated against and ultimately marginalised Nollywood (Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023). This argument lends credence to the popular

conclusion in Nollywood circles that “...even international agencies like UNESCO are not immune to a certain prejudice against Nollywood” (Ogunjiofor, 2023). Mofe-Damijo likens Nollywood’s attempt to defend itself against such extensive conspiracy to

...setting the same trap for a smart rabbit at the same spot- futile. I think the industry should remain oblivious and impervious to what are obviously envious disparagements and continue to march boldly towards self-determination (Mofe-Damijo, 2023).

Bold talk, but Nollywood, while being culturally insular, cannot survive as an island. That said, with or without the cinema endorsement, this study believes that Nollywood will continue to defy the odds and the critics to grow in stature and commercial viability at a time when all the indices point in the opposite direction. On the basis of this artistic and commercial resilience alone, the cinema taxonomy should be bestowed on the industry, if for nothing else, in deference to its creative invincibility (Nzekwe, 2023).

## CHAPTER SIX

### The African American Film Movements

#### 6:01 The Concept of African American Cinema

There are a few examples of narrative film practices that were built on operational ideologies dissimilar to those of major national film industries such as classic Hollywood. In America, there have been a few of these which, in spite of operating outside of the Hollywood blueprint, have wrought unique cultural and semiotic codes that have been well received by their grateful and supportive viewership. The African American film movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century exemplifies such practices.

...Black independent filmmakers can and do make movies just like Black musicians, preachers and writers showed there are different ways to make improvisational music, oral jeremiad, and narratives that could be both understood by their own cultures and later celebrated by Eurocentric cultures (Diawara, 1993, p. 35).

The concept of African American film has been fairly easy to define, mainly because of its binary racial character. “This is a cinema in which Afro-Americans are both the subject and the object of consideration. And the relations of those considerations are least tampered with by extraneous manipulations” (Taylor, 1983). Note the use of the term “cinema” to describe the African American practice which automatically imbues it with the exalted, high art classification, in spite of the many technical and artistic limitations that we shall shortly examine in this Chapter.

Framed differently, Mark Reid visualises African American film as “any film whose central narrative explores the life and experience of the African Diaspora in the United States” (Reid, 2005. p.1). Over the last century or so, there has been a few remarkable African American film movements. Clyde Taylor identifies five distinct epochs.

- The era of Hollywood films portraying Blacks before World War 1 (WW1).
- Hollywood films after that war

- Race films by Black independents before WW2 by the likes of Oscar Micheaux
- Blaxploitation films of the 1970s by filmmakers like Melvin Van Peebles
- The New Black Realism (Bausch, 2013) starting from the 1990s (Taylor, 1983).

This study focuses on the race films of the 1920s and the blaxploitation films of the 1970s with a view to exploring their origins, make up and cultural impacts. The selection of these two eras of African American film tradition deliberately targets their analogous journeys from bold Black autonomy, through economic and artistic interference from white Hollywood studios, to their rise and fall under the spectre of the same white entities.

In seeking equitable treatment in order to pitch African American cinema against Nollywood, this study noticed a bewildering and sometimes frustrating dearth of literature on the African American film movements of the last century (Lawrence, 2017). This is regardless of their over-a-100-years of intermittent existence and in spite of their vast political and cultural significance locally in America and internationally. Most of the available literature was written only recently by predominantly non-Black scholars who have framed competent discourses which do not possess the impetus to adequately illuminate the history, genealogy, identity, upsurge and decline of these iconic film movements, as much as a contemporaneous or more partisan study, in the heat of the movement in the 1920s or shortly after, would. A good example of this erudite but telescopic treatment is Allyson Nadia Field's book, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of a Black Modernity* which was only published in 2015, nearly one hundred years after the end of the race films movement. Also written only recently, a smattering of other works, like Novotny Lawrence's 2007 book: *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre*, take the analytic or critical academic stance that one would expect for a film practice whose contributions to the world of cinema have been iconoclastic. Lawrence, in collaboration with Gerald Butters, has maintained a steady flow of elucidating articles and books that pay critical homage to the African American

film movements, particularly blaxploitation. Noteworthy amongst these is the influential book, *Beyond Blaxploitation* (2016) and the erudite article “Introduction: Blaxploitation Cinema” (2019).

It has been argued that the global cinema academy is controlled by white power, a corps of Caucasian gatekeepers at research institutes that allocates the grants and resources for research, academy award voters and studio executives (Kim *et al*, 2020.). Correspondingly, the shortage of academic studies on the various African American film practices or indeed any other sphere of African American life reflects the contempt with which these institutional doorkeepers of the global centre regard the industry and its history. As the study of these movements form part of a cultural economy whose sign value to the consumer is never objectively matched to its utilitarian purpose (Scott, 2005. p. 3), the subjective calls by these research sentinels to, for example, greenlight research studies in other areas instead of the African American film movements can be creditably justified in logic that may disguise their bias.

A case can be made for African American scholars not showing sufficient academic interest in the matter concerning their race and not doing what Nollywood scholars did by forcing academic discourses on Nollywood films even when it was unfashionable or unprofitable to do so. That, however, is outside the scope of this study. It is worth mentioning though that Nollywood scholars succeeded in reversing an invidious initial neglect from international film scholars and kick-started a flurry of academic curio around Nollywood through mustering indigenous, homegrown scholarship and consistent academic investment, the type of which is much required to drive African American cultural history to its deserved place of scholarly sufficiency.

Faced, therefore, with this paucity of literature in the African American film research field, this study makes no attempt at being encyclopaedic on the subject. It also humbly admits

that its proclivity for narratives validating a certain hypothesized position may have skewed the focus of its research methodology to veer discoveries away from more generic intellectual literature on the African American film movements. As the saying goes, we only find what we are looking for. That said, this study has managed to attain critical adequacy with the available literature on the subject of African American film movements, so as to confidently distil robust and novel correlations with Nollywood as it concerns their shared experience of economic subversion from Hollywood studios that is usually heralded by innocuous cultural interaction.

## **6:02            Race Films of the 1920s**

Since the invention of cinema in the late 1800s (Manley, 2011. p.1), the medium has been used to portray African Americans in an uncomplimentary light, mirroring their inferior socio-political status in America. In that slavery era, films were deployed as tools of oppression used to reinforce the prevalent racist attitudes of the times which saw Black people as objects of ridicule (Lawrence, 2007. p. 1). The films that epitomised those racist ideals included: *Pickaninnies Doing a Dance* (1894), a white gaze of plantation life, which framed, captured and fetishized African American slaves singing and dancing; *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (1904), in which a Black-faced white actor steals firewood from a white farmer and takes it home to his wife, played by a Black-faced white male; *The Wooing and the Wedding of a Coon* (1905), which is a stupendously racist portrayal of two dim-witted and stuttering buffoons; and *For Massa's Sake* (1911), in which a slave owner, on his death bed, bequeaths his entire estate to his son apart from his eight slaves to whom he gives freedom (slaves were then considered personal property).

However, historians believe that these films were merely the opening acts for D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), considered to be the most grotesque caricature of Black people on American screens (Fields, 2015. p. 1). *Birth* was adapted from a novel titled *The*

*Clansman*, written by a clergyman and teacher, Thomas Dixon, to offer what he considered an accurate depiction of the South of the United States of America during the Reconstruction era. In the film adaptation, which remained faithful to the book, African Americans were depicted as wild, sex-starved animals. It also glorified the Ku Klux Klan by presenting them as the saviour of white people from black savages (Lawrence, 2007).

After a difficult and cash-strapped production in the then evolving Hollywood system in southern California during which shoot was postponed three times, *Birth* was eventually completed on a budget of \$500,000 US dollars and released in 1915. The film's narrative revolves around the Cameron family in Piedmont, South Carolina. Before the war, they lived a quaint life with their infantile African American slaves who worked the cotton fields and sang and danced for them. However, when the civil war breaks out, residents of Piedmont are intimidated by marauding African American gangs who raped white women and pillaged white neighbourhoods. The Reconstruction era sees more African American folks with attitude moving from the North to the southern states, bringing with them depravity, that was seen as latent in all Negroes, to corrupt the former southern slaves. They also harass whites, legalise inter-racial marriages, shove whites off sidewalks and overrun elections, helping an African American candidate to win. But when an African American renegade soldier named Gus attempts to rape Cameron's daughter, she kills herself rather than submit to his barbarism. Her "bravery" triggers the members of the Ku Klux Klan to hunt down Gus, lynch him and restore order and white rule in Piedmont.

Despite its obvious egregious misrepresentation of African American people (Fields, 2015. p.1) and its abhorrence of miscegenation (Diawara, 1993. p. 3), *Birth* was hailed by the whites as a masterpiece that must be seen by all. However, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) demonstrated against the film as "immoral, improper and unjust" (ibid). In spite of widespread criticism, *Birth* was a resounding financial

success, making over \$10,000,000 in the box office and garnering a reputation as the first epic film ever made. It is credited with positioning African Americans as the quintessential Other in Hollywood (ibid), a situation which persists in various ramifications up until the present day. After all, Griffith, the director of *Birth* was a founding member of United Artists (Diawara, 1993. p. 3): a production and distribution company that is still an influential force in today's Hollywood. This demonstrates how mainstreamed the misrepresentation of African Americans was at the time and regrettably continues to be.

Following the ground-breaking release of *Birth*, Emmett J. Scott, who was the former secretary of the author and proponent of the uplift movement, Booker T. Washington, started making a film directly aimed at countering it. Originally planned as a short and titled *Lincoln's Dream*, the film snowballed into a feature, financed by the wealthy African Americans of the time and shot in Florida and Chicago. Riddled with production issues concerning set, cast and crew, Scott eventually had to seek help from white funders who, naturally, diluted the political stance of the film. And after over three years in the making, the effort was released as *Birth of a Race* (1918).

Narrative-wise, the film has a structurally tangential plot which sees a Christ-like persona break into a meeting between the Kaiser and his counsellors to give a convoluted speech about the history of the world. Then it dabbles into suicides, murder and betrayal during the First World War. *Race* was a failure commercially, technically and artistically. It was ridiculed by the press as “perhaps the worst conglomeration of mixed purposes and attempts ever thrown together” (Lawrence, 2007).

Despite its failures, just like *Ajani Ogun* did in 1975 for the Yoruba traveling theatre and *Living in Bondage* did for Nollywood in 1992, *Race* inspired African American filmmakers to stand up against this portrayal in American films by establishing their own film movement to make their own cinematic case (Field, 2015. p. 1). It signalled a call for African American



self-representation, some sort of catalyst for the decolonisation of the film medium that had been blatantly weaponised to dehumanise African Americans. Hence, it started an audacious, representative expression of African American life (Taylor, 1983); a film industry, complete with cinemas, directors and distributors (Everett, 2001. p. 108). The goal was

...not to rely on white filmmakers to change the characterisation of Black people but to provide a model for Black filmmakers- and an emerging Black filmmaking practice- that would avoid representational problems evident in mainstream films (Field, 2015. p. 1).

At the same time, the uplift movement, championed by Washington, which placed the burden of the advancement of African Americans on the achievement of the individual (Field, 2015. p. xi) was at the height of its articulacy. And one of its crucial components was the ambition of reclaiming the image of African Americans that had been so listlessly damaged in mainstream white films (p.6). The race films were born to, in some way, practicalize these rhetorical uplift mandates. Film therefore became a mechanism for the misrepresentation of African Americans, and at the same time, a tool for asserting it (Field, 2015. p. 1). However, while African American film producers utilized the term “race film” to describe the motion picture made for African Americans by African Americans, they inadvertently helped in establishing a racially biased classification system that would eventually permeate the mainstream American film industry for years to come (Lawrence, 2007).

Historically, the first African American film producer was William Foster who produced *The Railroad Porter* in 1913 (Field, 2015. p. 10). The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, founded by Black actor Noble P. Johnson and his brother George Johnson, was one of the first African American film companies. Lincoln produced films like *The Realisation of Negro Ambition* (1916). However, it was Oscar Micheaux who emerged as one of the best-known African American filmmakers of that era (Lawrence, 2007; Field, 2015.p. 9). Exemplifying the “bootstrap mentality” of the uplift movement (Field, 2015. p. xi), Micheaux

started as a novelist, publishing ten of his own novels through his own publishing house within ten years. Soon he established his creative reputation by regularly organising elaborate book tours to promote the books as soon as they were published. Micheaux' first film, *The Homesteader* (1919) was followed by others like *Within our Gates* (1920) and *Body and Soul* (1924). The untapped population of African American spectators, eager to see themselves on the screen, provided fodder for filmmakers like Micheaux to blossom under race films. The excited mood of African Americans at the time was summed up by Ossie Davies when he said:

There were Black people behind the scenes, telling our Black story to us as we sat in Black theatres. We listened blackly, and a beautiful thing happened to us as we saw ourselves on the screen. We knew sometimes it was awkward, that sometimes the films behaved differently than the ones we saw in the white theatre. It didn't matter. It was ours, and even the mistakes were ours, and the fools were ours... We were comforted by that knowledge that as we sat in the dark, knowing that there was something about us up there on the screen, controlled by us, created by us- our own image, as we saw ourselves (Davies quoted in Fields 2015. p. 22).

The race films were initiated as “reactionary vestiges of past oppression” (Cripps, 1977) and were powered by the heady political enthusiasm of their African American practitioners and audiences. Therefore, little thought was accorded to commercialising and monetising the films. Unfortunately, when the African American moviegoers, on whose passion the movement was founded lost interest in the race films due, in part, to the waning of the novelty of seeing more truthful and sometimes complimentary portrayal of African Americans on a movie screen, it appeared that the race film fan had unwittingly turned against the race films. A commentary in a contemporary article of the time put it succinctly by stating that “the day of expecting charitable consideration in business even of our own people just because we are Negroes is past” (Lawrence, 2007: p.10; Leab, 1975, p. 10). The failure to rise above this first challenge of falling interests confirmed the economical unsustainability of the race films (Leab, 1975). Additionally, the race films suffered discrimination regarding exhibition spaces as they were only allowed to be shown in just a few hundred of the over twenty thousand cinemas in

America in that era (Lawrence, 2007). For over a decade, Micheaux carried on the race film movement in the face of mockery and indifference from Hollywood (Cripps, 1977. p. 34), the mainstream American film establishment which was emerging at the time (Metz, 2006).

In contrast, the Nigerian film industry started as a commercial endeavour (Ukadike, 1984: pp.8, 95) without the initial burden of an overt political significance (Larkin, 2008. 178). The celluloid era Yoruba traveling theatre film practice emerged from astute commercial considerations rather than political fervour. In the case of Nollywood, its rather crude but potable VHS and then VCD formats afforded the industry a business blueprint that was as outwardly apolitical as it was resilient. These seemingly overt commercial stance belied a robust postcolonial character that usurped the apparatus of colonialism and used it as a means of making a strong cultural and political proclamation. This sugar-coated pill mechanism (Nwigwe, 2023) meant Nollywood could survive several debilitating format changes as well as the saturation of the industry, unlike the race films which choked with partisanship.

So, with dwindling interest from African American moviegoers and growing disillusionment from the African American filmmakers themselves, the race film movement reached a critical impasse in the late 1920s when white Hollywood studio executives started acquiring control of some of the race film companies and began hiring African American stooges to front for them (Leab, 1975: p.83). While this gave an investment boost for the flagging practice, it had a negative impact of watering down the cultural authenticity of the films that emerged. Before long, the films had lost their political passion and their uplift DNA, becoming more overtly commercial, further alienating the African American audiences and additionally diminishing their interest in the films.

In a perverse and counterintuitive turn of events, the white Hollywood studio executives re-injected a profit-driven vision into the race films but they also drove the films back towards the previously-rested Hollywood stereotypes for African American people in order to boost

flagging box office figures. Films like *Hearts in Dixie* (1929), which, despite its bigoted portrayal, was described as glimpsing the real soul of a Negro, *Bargain with Bullets* (1937), *Underworld* (1937), *Mystery in Swing* (1938) and *Hallelujah* (1929), which showed contented and “shuffling darkies” (Leab, 1975. p. 90), epitomised that era of hybrid race films with white fingerprints all over them.

The African American race filmmakers consequently faced a conundrum in which the economic power of white people had become the sustenance of an ethnic film industry that prided itself on positive depiction of African Americans in spite of the same white people funding it. So, the African American filmmakers had no choice but to compromise on, not only the venom of the films’ political messaging but also, on the control of artistic and commercial rights for the films themselves. And it was these particularly untenable compromises that played a major role in the demise of the movement in the late 1930s (Pines, 1975; Cripps, 1977. p. 33)) when a mixture of acerbic criticisms, falling box office numbers and lack of profitability forced Hollywood to stop funding the race films.

By this time, the initial African American infrastructure that wrought the early shoots of the race films - the independent production houses, the local cinemas - all had been allowed to die in the wake of Hollywood support for the movement. The result was that once that Hollywood support was withdrawn, already weakened by their lack of commercial foresight, the race films could not endure. As we shall discover further in this Chapter, merely ending their support for the movement was not the critical point. It was the manner of the discontinuation and the action that Hollywood studios took or did not take afterwards that was instructive.

### 6:03            **Blaxploitation Films**

In the 1970s, another African American film movement emerged, consisting of films which introduced African American-oriented themes, African American heroes and heroines, and new cultural motifs into the white-dominated American film industry (Sauers, 2012). These were films made approximately between 1970 and 1975 by both black and white filmmakers (Bausch, 2013. p. 258) which were embedded in the fantasy of black emancipation and the rhetoric of Black Power. Initially the films did not have a consensual name and was simply seen as some kind of renaissance cinema aimed at exploiting the African American urban audiences.

The term blaxploitation was eventually coined from a critical statement by Beverly Hills NAACP president, Junius Griffin on the film *Superfly* (1972) in which he said “black exploitation in films has reached devastating proportions...” (*Variety*, 1972). The two words black and exploitation were then conjoined by critics and industry execs to form blaxploitation. So, by criticising the drug-dealing narrative of *Superfly*, Griffin accidentally invented the term blaxploitation which became the reductionist moniker used to describe these African American-led films that manipulated African American audiences in the 1970s (Lawrence & Butters, 2016) by reflecting African American expectations and values on the screen (Doherty, 2010. p. 5) and reinforcing African American beliefs (Lawrence, 2007) through their narratives.

It is pertinent to mention that the term blaxploitation, just like Nollywood, was not universally accepted as a nickname for films made in that era. Some scholars reject the term because it generalises a complex film practice and argue that the films of that early 1970s epoch should instead be called “Hollywood Renaissance” (Metz, 2006). However, this study believes that to do so will be to erase the name of the Black race from a period in which it was a catalyst for socio-economic change in America; a period in which it remained at the core of conceiving,

producing, monetising, distributing and consuming filmic contents. This will be tantamount to denying African Americans the unequivocal and titular credit they have earned for their pivotal role in the evolution of American cinema. Although blaxploitation eventually acquired a negative undertone in the eyes of many mainstream African American intellectual and cultural stalwarts of that era like Griffin, this study also supposes that African Americans now have no choice but to appropriate that imperfect name, like Nigerian filmmakers have done with the term Nollywood. It suggests that the pragmatic thing to do is to own blaxploitation's historical contributions and its artistic relevance while continuing the unending public relations exercise to launder its undesirable appurtenances.

Blaxploitation films were named as such and existed because whites, who constituted the bulk of the mainstream audience, represented the norm. There was nothing like white-exploitation films, just mainstream cinema which had many genres but which singularly excluded blaxploitation films. The blaxploitation concept therefore acknowledges the addition of blackness but downgrades the films to which it is ascribed by excluding them from the generic categories and constructing them against a superior whiteness (Lawrence, 2007).

It is evident that blaxploitation was not the first-time films were called into the service of squeezing emotional value out of themes and then monetising them with particular audiences. From very early in cinema history, filmmakers realised that film was primarily about storytelling and the moviegoers wanted to believe the story they were told. Therefore, filmmakers have since tried to use what they know about the audiences' conviction to create narratives that confirm those convictions (Doherty, 2010. p 6). This led to the concept of exploitation in movies which sought to capitalise on different aspects of a film's narrative, theme or subject matter, in order to garner publicity or to facilitate vicarious advertising. Doherty, in *Teenagers and Teenpics: Juvenilization of American movies*, ascribes three overlapping connotations to the exploitation term in films. Firstly, it refers to the advertising

and promotion used to entice audiences into the theatre (p. 2). Studios like Columbia and Paramount, in the early days of cinema, maintained “exploitation departments” who were responsible for concocting eye-catching adverts and stunts aimed at drawing public attention to their films. This construct of exploitation films has been heavily used in films targeted at teenagers (p. 7) like MGM’s *Slander* (1956).

Secondly, exploitation is construed as a communication concept with focus on the manner in which the film in question endears itself to its target audience through reflecting their expectations and values on screen (p. 5). Blaxploitation films, by capitalising on the angst of African Americans and their frustration with the civility of the civil rights movement, has a close resonance with this paradigm. And the third paradigm of exploitation in films attempts to manipulate timely or currently controversial subjects (p.36) and use it for the indirect publicity of the film. For example, *Back to Bataan* (1945) was released in tandem with the return of American troops to the Philippines, thereby attaching a filmic event to a real life topical one in order to ensure an uncanny synchronicity between the film’s promotions and all the national publicity that trailed the real life event.

Researchers believe that blaxploitation emerged predominantly as a result of three social, economic and political factors- the perennial misrepresentation of African Americans in Hollywood films; the social consciousness engendered by the civil rights and the Black Power movement; and Hollywood’s financial struggles. After the demise of the race films in the late 1920s and the failed attempt to resurrect them in the 1930s, Hollywood studios simply reverted to its old stereotypes for portraying African Americans in its films (Lawrence, 2007). Even though the industry softened its discriminatory language and moderated the bigotry inherent in its practice to allow for the emergence of stars like Sidney Poitier and Jim Brown in the late 1950s and 1960s, the portrayal of the African American in films did not keep pace with social trends as racial equality principles seeped into every sphere of American life. The

majority of African American male characters in classic Hollywood films were still portrayed as asexual, usually childlike (Bausch, 2013), essentially placing them at the opposite end of an earlier assessment that viewed them as sex-starved savages (Lawrence, 2007).

But the heady years of the early 1970s ushered in a new black consciousness, exemplified by the emergence of the Black Power movement. The more confrontational ideology of Black Power emerged around 1968 as an impatient and radical response to the perceived conciliatory platitudes of the civil rights movement championed by individuals such as Martin Luther King and organisations like the NAACP (Bausch, 2013. p. 260). Its promoters such as Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) called for infectious racial pride, physical opposition to white supremacy and aggressive political consciousness amongst African Americans. These ideals found vent through the narratives and tone of the films that came to be called blaxploitation films.

Contemporaneously with this socio-political movement and its macho tendencies, Hollywood studios were battling falling cinema attendances and reeling from major losses. The social upheaval that emanated from the widespread adoption of the television in America had a direct dampening effect on cinema box office numbers of major Hollywood releases of the time like *Dr. Dolittle* (1967) and *Dolly* (1969). Furthermore, there was a new emerging blue-collar African American population in urban areas after these were deserted by whites who moved to the suburbs in the legendary “great white flight” (Walker *et al*, 2009). Hollywood studios were desirous of acknowledging and targeting this emerging African American demographic in a change to the white-only focus of their films prior to this time.

Another influential factor was the Paramount Consent Decrees of 1948 which broke Hollywood studio oligopolies by outlawing vertical integration; meaning that studios could no longer produce, distribute and exhibit films. Handicapped by this restriction, the studios could not chase after the whites and build cinemas in the suburbs for them. One of the easiest ways



they could reverse the downward trend in their revenues would be to target the African American moviegoers in the urban areas where the cinemas already existed (Bausch, 2013. p.261). The critical question then was- with what content? The films that the Hollywood studios made up to that time were targeted exclusively at white audiences and African American audiences were not factored into the writing, making or promotion of those films. A new plan was hatched for the studios to produce very low budget films with African Americans in them which will be curated to appeal to urban African American audiences.

Furthermore, the hands of Hollywood studios were also forced by the American Justice Department's threat in 1969 to sue them for their discriminatory practices against African Americans. Therefore, the Hollywood studios conceived the targeted films that emerged to serve two purposes in one- make money from the teeming urban blue-collar African Americans and also placate the federal authorities and African Americans alike on the undeniable injustice and lack of opportunities hoisted on them.

In the years leading up to the blaxploitation movement, Sydney Poitier and Jim Brown were viewed as forerunners to the arrival movement. On the one hand, Poitier was a supremely talented African American actor with unthreatening airs and moral intelligence, who rose to Oscar prominence in the 1950s and 1960s. While on the other hand, Brown was an ex-American football player who thrived in the same period to become the Separatist era's first Black hero (Keenan, 1975). These men managed to break the glass ceiling in Hollywood based on their talent. The expectations of an influx of other equally talented African Americans into the top echelon of Hollywood did not materialise. Consequently, necessity and serendipity, not just talent, would play more pivotal roles in what followed for African Americans when blaxploitation dawned in the 1970s. In the five years of its existence, the above mix of favourable conditions forced Hollywood studios to turn their attention on the long-ignored African American moviegoers who would prove their commercial worth, even if it was for

only a few years, by thronging to cinemas to see the blaxploitation films with African American lead cast, their positive racial discrimination and their impatient political overtone (Lawrence & Butters, 2016).

The start of the blaxploitation movement has been traced to Ossie Davies's *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) which was based on Chester Himes series of novels, *La Reine de Pommès*. Samuel Goldwyn Jr. of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) had bought the rights to *Pommès* following its success in France. But he needed an African American writer to adapt it for screen in order to retain the authenticity that made the novel a hit with African Americans (ibid). Ossie Davies was eventually responsible for adapting it for the screen and directing the film, as only the second time that an African American would helm a film in Hollywood (Ossie & Dee, 1998) - the first was Gordon Parks Sr. with *The Learning Tree* (1969) [Lawrence & Butters, 2016]. *Harlem* was released by United Artists as a Hollywood film and tells an urban-set story in which two Harlem African American police officers suspect an African American priest of staging a robbery to steal money from a local fundraiser.

While the plot is fairly unremarkable, *Harlem* presented a fresh unabashed perspective on urban life, while setting what would become enduring aesthetics and conventions for blaxploitation films, including politically-conscious African American leads, African American supporting cast, ghetto setting and blues soundtrack (Lawrence, 2007). *Harlem* became a huge commercial success, grossing over \$15 million US dollars in film rentals from an audience that was 86% African American (Parish & Hill, 1989). With this success, Hollywood execs, who traditionally aimed their films at white audiences, reasoned that it was possible to make a commercially successful film that just targeted African Americans, without caring about what anyone else thought of it. That reasoning was correct but proof was required by the very risk-averse Hollywood studios.

Although seldom recognised as a blaxploitation film, some historians believe that *Watermelon Man* (1970), Van Peebles' inaugural Hollywood film, released in May of that same year should be viewed as a "...prediction in retrospect" for blaxploitation (Lawrence & Butters, 2016). In the film, which African American director Van Peebles was hired to direct after breaking into Hollywood following the success of his French romantic film, *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* (1968), a bigoted white salesman wakes up one day as a black man and has to navigate the daily challenges of being an African American in 1970s America. But Van Peebles was so frustrated by his ideological clashes with the writer of *Watermelon Man*, Herman Raucher, that he turned down a three-picture deal from Columbia Pictures and instead chose to make a film in which he had ideological and editorial control, away from the Hollywood studio system (Massood, 2003). With its ramshackle, non-Hollywood, independent release, Van Peebles' seminal film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1970), was the film that would confirm the economic potential of African American moviegoers, as was briefly teased by *Harlem*. It was also this film that announced the movement that was eventually tagged blaxploitation with all the noisy brashness of its leading character.

Van Peebles set out to direct a hard-hitting drama that will articulate blacks' frustrations regarding the United States' discriminatory racial practices while also transforming the African American cinematic image from one-dimensional caricature to victorious, renegade character (Lawrence & Butters, 2016)

American cinema had therefore become a site for struggle. Van Peebles, who had been accused of epitomising the ideological shortcomings of the blaxploitation movement (Metz, 2006. p. 18), dropped a raging bomb with *Sweetback* whose reverberations were felt throughout the country. Van Peebles had written, produced, directed, scored, edited and starred in the film that avoided the powerful unions by pretending to be an adult film. It cost \$500,000 US Dollars, including a \$50,000 loan from actor Bill Cosby (Bogle, 2001; Rhines, 1996). But *Sweetback* received an "X" exhibition classification which made finding a distributor difficult. The film

was ultimately picked up for distribution by Cinemation, a low-budget porn company. And in a marketing masterstroke, Van Peebles exploited the racial politics he and the film had faced by announcing *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* as the film “rated X by an all-white jury” (ibid).

So, despite just opening in two cinemas (Bausch, 2013), the film galvanised large segments of the African American urban population who enjoyed experiencing the sights, sounds and challenges of African Americans that were never shown in films, taking centre stage for the first time on the big screen. Building on the introduction by *Harlem*, *Sweetback* confirmed two additional canons of the blaxploitation movement: violence and black sexuality. It grossed \$4.1 million US dollars in box office and domestic rentals (Parish & Hill, 1989). Although the subject of critical ambivalence by the African American population who praised the film’s racial boldness but condemned it in the same breath for its sexiness, its chauvinistic hero and its depiction of African American community as ghettos, *Sweetback* established African Americans as a veritable demographics for commercial films and ignited a boom that would be as dazzling as it was short-lived.

The plot of the film revolves around Sweet Sweetback, a black orphan who grew up in a brothel and now works there as part of the sex show. After killing some racist cops, Sweet Sweetback goes on the run, trying to escape to Mexico with the assistance of the ghetto community and some disgruntled members of Hells Angels. Consolidating on the racial appeal and coarse aesthetics of *Harlem*, not to mention the anger amongst African American moviegoers, *Sweet* sold out ghetto cinemas even with the undeserved X rating (Nwigwe, 2023); exciting ethnic audiences with its anti-establishment overtone, the brazen virility of its lead character, his mistreatment of whites and his victorious emergence against the racist American society. The film was “dedicated to all brothers and sisters who have had enough of the Man” – referring to white police (Melvin Van Peebles, 1970).

The box office success of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* ignited an explosion of new films which brought to the fore issues central to African Americans with linear narratives and characters that represented a collage of voices such as DuBois, Franz Fanon, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King (Diawara, 1983. P. 5). These alternative African American voices on the screen were very appealing to African American audiences in the urban ghettos and they voted with their feet. Other African American filmmakers noticed the growing opportunity and so did the Hollywood studios who actually started the experiment with MGM's *Harlem*. The continued decline in the box office numbers for their exclusive white films, coupled with their struggle to find a winning formula after the decline of the cowboy era, circa 1965, drove Hollywood studios into looking for new audiences and telling them new stories. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Warner Bros and American International Pictures led a Hollywood-wide craze for blaxploitation films, like Hugh A. Robertson's *Melinda* (1972), Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Superfly* (1972), William Crain's *Blacula* (1972), Jack Starrett's *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), Gordon Parks' *Shaft* (1971) and Lee Frost's *The Black Gestapo* (1975).

In an unprecedented move, the Hollywood studios availed the blaxploitation films access to the whole gamut of Hollywood promotional machinery and the entire cinema exhibition infrastructure, so that instead of just showing in ghetto cinemas in African American suburbs, blaxploitation films were available in virtually all of America's cinema screens. The result was an unparalleled wave of African American films that offered African American directors and indeed actors and technicians the opportunities to work in the Hollywood system. This liberal policy by the Hollywood studios became proof that mainstream cinema would always feed off independent cinema, stealing its themes and narrative forms (Diawara, 1993. p. 4).

In this regard and to benefit from this explosion of interest that had galvanised African American neighbourhoods, Hollywood studios focused on making African American films,

starting what would ultimately lead to the usurpation of the movement. And they had good reasons, as the cheaply-made ethnic films became their cash cows. *Shaft* made \$13 million dollars out of a \$500,000 budget (Mitchell, 2016), and another of Park's instalments, *Superfly* knocked *The Godfather* off the number one spot on American box office charts on its release, eventually grossing \$6.2 million dollars on a paltry \$500,000 budget (ibid).

It is pertinent to note that not every film targeting African American audiences and made in the early 1970s could be justifiably forced into the blaxploitation mould. Among its other characteristics, blaxploitation films relied heavily on a black-white revenge (Lawrence & Butters, 2016) premise. This meant that racially courteous films like Martin Ritt's *Souther* (1972) were not classified as blaxploitation. The film has none of the machismo of blaxploitation films and tells the tale of a meek Louisiana sharecropping African American man, Nathan, whose son and his dog, Sounder, struggle when he gets sent to jail for stealing food for his family. Another example of a contemporaneous film that was not deemed a blaxploitation film is Sidney J. Furie's *Lady Sing the Blues* (1972). That biographical drama about Billie Holiday follows Eleanora Fagan's life as she struggled with rape, drug use and prostitution in her quest to build a career based on her uncommon singing talent.

Although both race films and blaxploitation films addressed issues pertaining to the African American experience in America such as oppression, representation, deprivation and discrimination, beyond the obvious historical ones, there were a few differences between the two film movements that were fifty years apart. Most race films were set in rural communities of the southern part of the United States. But the blaxploitation films had urban settings like Harlem and Oakland to lend authenticity and highlight the social neglect of those communities on the big screen. Blaxploitation also had African American characters that were socially and politically savvy, as opposed to the understandable timidity of the characters in race films which was a consequence of the slavery era in which they were made. The cultural boldness of

the blaxploitation filmmakers also saw a reversal of roles in which whites were now cast as villains and the African American heroes had to defeat them. *Foxy Brown* (1973) and its evil white crime boss provides a great example of this mindset (Lawrence, 2007). In the race films, sexuality was suppressed, what with many years of showing African American men as sex savages, the filmmakers started cultivating a more reticent and reserved African American male sexuality. The sexuality of black women did not fare any better; merely limited to voluptuous bashfulness to ensnare their masters (ibid). However, blaxploitation films offered a liberated, sexually astute African American female; epitomised by Pam Grier in her lead roles in *Foxy Brown* (1973) and *Coffy*. On the other hand, blaxploitation films unleashed the African American male protagonists in all of his lewd splendour to proudly appropriate the image propagated by *The Birth of a Nation* and such films.

As the boom for blaxploitation films raged on, its demise was simultaneously looming (Bausch, 2013). The critics did their best to point out the Achilles heels of the movement, undermining the superficial commercial success of the films through their venomous reviews and eventually hastening the end of the movement. Majority of scholars and practitioners were worried about the impact of the films on the lives and culture of young African Americans. Captions like “Black Film Boom: Culture or Con Game”, “NAACP Blasts ‘Super Nigger’ Trend” and “Black Movie Boom- Good or Bad?” paint a picture of the furore that trailed blaxploitation films at the time (Lawrence & Butters, 2016). The NAACP and other similar organisations set up a Coalition Against Blaxploitation, aimed at discouraging African Americans from watching blaxploitation films (Bausch, 2013, p. 265).

However, some African American practitioners including Gordon Parks and Jim Brown did speak up in defence of the films, offering more positive views of their socio-political impact. Their arguments posed the rhetorical but pertinent question: who was being exploited by these films? Evidently, the African American actors, directors, producers and technicians

were working and getting paid in their droves, more than at any time in history. Obviously, the African American audiences were getting the politically aware African American narratives and empowered black lead characters they wanted on the screen. Taking it further, even the Hollywood studios were getting what they wanted: a new lease of commercial life to see them through a fraught phase in their history. So, who was exactly being exploited? Instead, this optimistic group of practitioners choose to see exploitation in blaxploitation films as merely a question of conjecture and subject to interpretation. To them, exploitation may refer to the marketing of the emergent African American vernacular film market which used the rambunctious publicity of the blaxploitation movement to achieve its commercial impact. A good example of the marketing potential can be found in *Coffy* (1973), *Foxy Brown* (1974) and *Friday Foster* (1975), films released by American International Pictures, who were considered the low-budget masters of the blaxploitation cinema. In all the posters for these films, sex and violence were sold in visceral pictorial motifs (Koven, 2010). Finally, these proponents argue that blaxploitation was a win-win for everybody and should not be given such a bad rap. Parks, the Director of *Shaft* was one of those. He was public with his dislike for the derogatory or at best patronising term, blaxploitation.

The so-called Black intellectuals' outcry against Black films has been blown far out of proportion. It is curious that some black people, egged on by some whites, will use such destructive measures against Black endeavours. They should realise that we new black filmmakers are not yet running the big Hollywood studios...If they would have us more subservient to their wishes, then they should bestow upon us the means or more bluntly, the money (The New York Times, December 15, 1972).

Parks' defence of the many sins of blaxploitation films was predicated on the necessity for African American filmmakers to pander to the whims and caprices of very white Hollywood studios or risk extinction. And pander, they did. Of the two hundred or so films released in the blaxploitation era (Walker *et al*, 2009), only about one-fifth were actually made under African



American control and even fewer were made or financed by African American production companies (Koven, 2010; Rhines, 1996).

While that pandering was effective in sustaining the industry for a while, it was eventually weaponised to truncate it when the patronage from Hollywood studios that Parks alluded to was withdrawn without explanation, notice or offer of alternatives. In his take on the debate, Jim Brown, star actor of the 1950s and 1960s, argued that blaxploitation films had made notable contributions not just to African Americans but to the film industry as a whole. He opined that “it has allowed Black directors, black producers, black technicians, black writers and black actors to participate on a higher level than ever before” (Koven, 2010).

It did not matter if they were positive or negative, the passionate critical reviews on both sides were good for immediate promotion of blaxploitation films. But soon, the sheer weight and contempt of the vitriolic reviews started to make the blaxploitation films less desirable with moviegoers and ultimately unattractive to commercially-minded studios. There was also the small matter of most Hollywood studios joining the fray to churn out blaxploitation films in numbers, thereby saturating the market. The blaxploitation movement hit what was considered the bottom of its barrel with the badly acted, poorly choreographed lame attempt at an action film titled *The Guy from Harlem* in 1977 (Lawrence & Butters, 2016). After that, it was obvious to the Hollywood studios that there was no more meat on the bones of the blaxploitation game. Predictably, the natural pattern of ebb and flow in Hollywood releases took hold, diverting the attention of the studios to more germane ventures and conveniently forgetting the blaxploitation films, the African American filmmakers and their African American audiences.

...the sad irony was that the decade, which had opened revealing to the industry that there [was] a Black audience, closed with the industry believing that the ‘Black film’ and the Black audience were both dead (Bogle, 2001. p. 266)

In the heydays of the blaxploitation movement, the films were showing in big multiplex cinemas across America. The filmmakers and actors became global superstars and the industry flourished (Nwigwe, 2023). Many of the ghetto cinemas from whence the movement originated fell into disuse and gradually disappeared. This development became a critical factor in the lack of resilience and longevity of the blaxploitation movement. Also, importantly at this time, blaxploitation films were no longer the exclusive reserve of African American socially and politically conscious directors. White directors and producers had jumped on the bandwagon with films like Larry Sprangler's *Black Caesar*, *The Soul of Nigger Charley* (1973), and Robert Clouse's *Black Belt Jones* (1974), all made by white directors and producers (ibid). Just like the race films of the 1920s whose authenticity was watered down by the appropriation of the ethnic style by white filmmakers, the white blaxploitation filmmakers betrayed a lack of the passion for black representation and harboured no genuine interest in the stories beyond using them to make money. This superficial interest soon filtered into the films, making them less authentic and turning off the avid African American audiences. Before long, the films had lost their commercial verve and when they no longer made the Hollywood studios money, the white studios could not wait to throw them overboard.

So, it came to pass that from about 1973, Hollywood studios had come to the realisation that African American audiences had grown tired of the various reiterations of the "crime-action-ghetto formula". It also became apparent that African American films that had toned down their confrontational blackness and political activism, like *Souther* and *The Lady Sings the Blues* were more popular with a mix of black and white audiences. Put simply, Hollywood studios grasped that they did not need to make an exclusively African American film in order to add African American viewers to the mainstay of their commercial formula, the white audience (Guerrero, 1993). From there on in 1975 started the decline of blaxploitation films as Hollywood studios showed little interest in continuing the blaxploitation genre that had been

used, rinsed and exploited over a period of only five years (Gukas, 2023). With revenues dwindling from the films amidst criticism of their style and aesthetics, as well as their glorification of crime and the drug trade, black exploitation in films had reached devastating proportions (Variety, August 16, 1972) and a critical juncture. Griffin, president of Beverly Hills branch of NAACP articulated the pushback.

We must tell both white and black movie producers that we will not tolerate the continued warping of our black children's minds with the filth, violence and cultural lies that are pervasive in current productions of so-called black movies (ibid)

Before the audience or even African American filmmakers would notice, Hollywood studios, pursuant to their goal of finding a film genre that did not require racially segregated productions, turned their attention to the emergent blockbuster format (Lawrence *et al*, 2019. p. 745) which appealed to more universal audiences, and potentially doubled box office revenues (Guerrero, 1993). The harbinger for the new format was the hugely successful release of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) which drew 35% of its audience from African Americans (ibid). Then Stephen Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) confirmed the commercial potentials of this omnivorous format and its crossover appeal to black moviegoers. And by the time George Lukas released *Star Wars* in 1977, the blockbuster format was fully established and blaxploitation films were truly a thing of the past (ibid).

Note that this redirection of focus from blaxploitation films to blockbusters was not a gradual process over years. All of a sudden, African American actors and directors, who were only a few years earlier commercial hot property, were jettisoned and abandoned (Walker *et al*, 2009). They were not reassigned or given new gigs within alternative but active Hollywood studio projects. The majority of them simply stopped working in film altogether, having no independent business plan for monetisation of films other than Hollywood's access and magnanimity. Critically, by this time, the ghetto cinemas that bred the blaxploitation movement in 1970 were all but gone, leaving the black directors and producers with nowhere to turn. On

the other hand, in what is a clear demonstration of racial discrimination against African American practitioners, white producers and directors involved in the blaxploitation movement were seamlessly reabsorbed into Hollywood with new engagements (ibid).

What would usually happen when Hollywood execs find that a genre or a movement has begun to flag due to over-saturation or audience fatigue is to tweak it or introduce fresh elements to enliven it. They did that with the horror genre which previously chronicled popular monsters like Count Dracula and Jekyll and Hyde in the 1960s and early 1970s. However, when audiences tired of these biographical horrors, Hollywood studios introduced a modification of the genre with slashers. This saw the release of blood-cuddling films that preyed on teenage partygoers like *Halloween* (1978) and *Nightmare on Elms Street* (1984). Conversely, when Blaxploitation films declined in popularity due to a heady mix of problems, mostly of its own making, Hollywood studios did not attempt to infuse the movement with fresh materials, like they have done with other genres. Instead, the studios turned their backs and concentrated on the newly-discovered blockbuster cycle, privileging the white actors over their African American counterparts (Lawrence & Butters, 2016) and bringing the blaxploitation film movement to a shuddering end.

Some scholars like Ezinne Ezepe have attempted to argue that blaxploitation films were not renewed by Hollywood studios because blaxploitation was just a film movement instead of a genre like horror or film noir (Ezepe, 2023). That argument is rather weakened by the fact that blaxploitation emerged as a result of similar socio economic and political stimuli as the film noir. However, since its fall from favour in Hollywood in the 1950s, some films are still being made, even though they are now shot in colour, with tell-tale film noir aesthetics: low key lighting, dramatic camera angles, voice-over narration and moral male protagonists (Crowther, 1989). They include: *Blade Runner* (1982), *LA Confidential* (1997) and *Sin City* (2006). Although there has been some reincarnation of blaxploitation aesthetics

in recent films like *Jackie Brown* (1997), *Shaft* (2000) and *Django Unchained* (2012), there is not an abundance of cinematic homages to blaxploitation cinema (Crowther, 1989).

The final insult on the blaxploitation movement is that very little has been written or spoken about it in journals, history books or documentaries since its demise circa 1975 (Nwigwe, 2023). Even a number of survey texts historicising American film traditions have neglected to mention blaxploitation. Apart from a few extant films online and in museums, as well as documentaries like *Baadassss Cinema* (2002), it is as if the movement never occurred until recently, when a renaissance of African American culture saw a new research focus on the era and its contributions to Hollywood and global cinema. Worthy of mention are the early works of Tom Bogle, *Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Black American Films* (1973), March Reid's *Redefining Black Film* (1993), and Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (1993). These publications provided an encouraging treatment of the blaxploitation movement, be it in chapters. Other published books such as Yvonne Sims *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Heroine Changed American Popular Culture* (2006), Stephane Dunn's *Baad Bitches and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films* (2008), as well as academic journal articles such as *Screening Noir*, edited by Anne Everett have brought critical attention to Blaxploitation films in general by examining the intersection of identity and feminism in their discourses. The untiring contributions of Lawrence and Butters have illuminated the African American academic landscape with series of books and articles, including the distinguished treatise *Beyond Blaxploitation* (2016)

The nearly six years of the Blaxploitation era represents a period of unprecedented participation of African Americans in the racially exclusive Hollywood film industry in numbers that have never been repeated since or before (Sauers, 2012; Lawrence & Butters, 2016). Not just for African Americans, the movement was critical to the survival of many

Hollywood studios by providing them a cash line at a time of extreme commercial upheaval. Commentators have ascribed to the Blaxploitation movement the credit for literally saving MGM and Warner Brothers from bankruptcy in the early 1970s (Lawrence *et al*, 2019. p. 746; Walker *et al*, 2009).

In spite of all that accolade, a certain dichotomy exists, in industry and academic circles, between the treatment received by other film embodiments like film noir and horror, which are geared towards white audiences, and the ignoble treatment that the race films and blaxploitation eras have received (Lawrence *et al*, 2016). Is there something to be said about a vindictiveness on the part of Hollywood studios because these African American movements like blaxploitation films challenged their traditional representation of African Americans, and indeed their business formula? Can blaxploitation filmmakers lay a similar claim that they have been victimised, just like some Nollywood filmmakers, for their audacity to challenge the hegemony of Hollywood studios? (Nwigwe, 2023)

Oddly, even with the film practice and its practitioners disappearing into the dust storm of history, the term, blaxploitation has endured regardless, retaining its currency in modern critical and cultural lexicon as the vernacular for an iconic film craze that lit up the 1970s. Note however that this anecdotal reference does not usually inspire any deep analysis of or elicit any regard for the historical implications of that industry in the minds of those who flippantly use it. This study hopes that its foray into the analogies between these 20<sup>th</sup> century film movements and Nollywood, in relation to their involvement with Hollywood studios, will provide a tangential but welcome addition to the African American film academy. Furthermore, it is anticipated that its findings will distil the lessons from the seemingly fatal embrace between the race films and the blaxploitation films with Hollywood studios, so as to prepare Nollywood and indeed other film movements looking to partner with Hollywood studios, with evidence that could mean the difference between retaining sustainability and becoming endangered.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Hollywood, Nollywood and the African American Film Movements

#### 7:01 Aetiology of Hollywood.

In their response to one of this study's questions, most of the Nollywood practitioners surveyed simply described Hollywood as the film industry of the United States of America that is based in Los Angeles, California (Nwigwe, 2023; Jalade-Ekeinde 2023; Ugwu, 2023). Such cautious and simplistic framing of the term may appear technically correct. However, it stands on fragile grounds because it does not capture the detailed conceptual boundaries necessary to delineate Hollywood's history, genetic makeup and how its sphere of influence has expanded to usurp other prominent American film hubs and many of the film movements that have felt its tentacles, including the African American film movements of the last century. Such lucid scrutiny can be invaluable in gauging Hollywood's influence on the present-day ontology of and future prognostication for New Nollywood since their recent convergence. Similar to the Nollywood concept which has seldom been explicated, but for which a comprehensive definition will be attempted at the end of this study, there has been only but a few attempts at a revealing deconstruction of the Hollywood phenomenon, over and above mere descriptive ordering of empirical results in time and space. One of such illuminating insights was achieved cogently in Allen Scott's *On Hollywood: The Place, The Industry* (2005). Such detailed analysis is outside the scope of this study and what is demonstrated here instead is a determination to decipher the origins of Hollywood's historical, artistic, economic and geographical entrance into the global cinema culture.

Commentators like Kola Munis, Ezinne Ezepue and Omotol Jalade-Ekeinde have observed, and rightly so, that there is no entity with a unified voice, objective and strategy called Nollywood or New Nollywood. In the same vein, it is problematic to articulate the essence of Hollywood into a distinctive entity whose actions and influence can be tracked and

evaluated. This is so despite having a generally accepted geographical location in southern California called Hollywood and notwithstanding the unifying influence of the very powerful studios and trade unions that control the various arms of the broad industry. So, two pertinent questions will initiate our foray into the influx of the American megaliths into the African American film movements of the last century and also their recent encroachment into the Nigerian cultural space: What really do we mean by Hollywood? And how can we benchmark its entry into a new film practice such as the Nollywood film industry?

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the New York and New Jersey metropolitan area was the original base of American filmmaking (Scott, 2005. p.12) and the leading film companies of the time: Edison Manufacturing Company and the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, were located there. When it started in 1907, Hollywood was geographically a small district lying no more than seven miles northwest from downtown Los Angeles (p. 11). But today, it has stretched to Santa Monica in the west and to the San Fernando Valley in the north and become an industrial motion picture district incomparable to any in the world in size and influence (p. 1).

The first permanent move which led to the establishment of Hollywood in the Los Angeles area of Southern California occurred between 1907-1914 (p. 18) and can be traced to the New York independent producer, Carl Laemmle, who challenged the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC also known as Trust) over its anti-competitive practices in New York city. At the time, MPPC was a cartel made up of a few film companies, including the Distributor Pathe and the two biggest production houses - Edison and Biograph - (p.17). Laemmle won the court case but such was the power of MPPC that it turned out to be a hollow victory as no meaningful progress could be achieved in wrenching the oligopolistic powers from MPPC. Laemmle decided to move his operations to Los Angeles, Southern California, initially, to escape MPPC but also the inhospitable weather of New York and Chicago. Before



this time, the Los Angeles corner of California had been known to filmmakers, having been scouted for winter shoots by the Selig Polyscope Company and others (p18). Laemmle was soon joined by producer Thomas Ince, who came in 1911 to produce a cowboy film for the New York Motion Picture Company. Both men were wowed by Los Angeles' varied landscape which livened films with a unique on-location exterior vistas that trumped the stale urban landscapes of New York.

Incidentally, D. W. Griffith, the director of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was instrumental to the consolidation of Los Angeles as America's movie making hub. Before his move from New York, Griffith was directing shorts for the New York-based Biograph. However, when he was refused the opportunity to make one of his intricately edited short films into a feature, Griffith left Biograph and financed his own film, *Birth* (1915) in Los Angeles. He is credited with expanding the visual vocabulary of filmmaking by introducing the close-up shot, the flashback and the fade out techniques (p.22). Following the remarkable success of *Birth* which grossed over \$18 million dollars in the box office, more than any film of the silent era (p. 23), many other filmmakers and film companies who had not already made the move, migrated to Los Angeles to take advantage of, among other things, the terrain and the clemency of its weather (p.12); the growing pool of actors, writers and technicians now working in Hollywood (p. 8); and the vast lands in which sound stages, marketing and distribution companies, and elaborated set construction could be located (p. 9). In an attempt to build on the artistic and commercial success of *Birth*, Griffith followed the film with the very ambitious *Intolerance* (1916). Despite its elaborate Babylonian set and innovative editing, *Intolerance* was a colossal failure and losses intrinsic to its botched grandeur signalled the beginning of Griffith's financial troubles (Metz, 2006. pp. 1-2).

Ince is also recognised for a crucial role in industrialising the Los Angeles filmmaking process. He initiated many procedural and administrative innovations such as the use of the

continuity script, breaking shoots down into disconnected non-linear segments. His innovations helped to push southern California filmmaking beyond the simple set of crafts that previously constituted it, into an industry with advanced division of labour (Scott, p. 22). The vitality of the incipient film hub in Los Angeles was also highlighted when Charlie Chaplin went to work there for Mack Sennett's Keystone Studio in 1913. As one of film's biggest stars of the time, his return to set up his own studio in Los Angeles in 1918 was the final confirmation, if anyone needed it, of the permanent seismic shift of American film production activities and finance towards southern California (ibid).

Following the construction of the first permanent film studio in Los Angeles (Selig in 1909 in Glendale community, east of Hollywood [p.18]), other filmmakers and film companies gravitated towards Los Angeles, this time, no longer merely drawn to the area by random quest for sunnier exterior locations. Instead, they were now attracted by what has been termed "agglomeration economies", an economic concept which takes into cognizance the effect of localised collective advantage (p.16). So, the Los Angeles region became a distant satellite film town of New York (p.18) and by 1912, there were 17 production companies in the axis, encouraged by self-fulfilling rumours of the merits of the region's climate on film cameras and tales of the comparative benefits offered by the dedicated and exclusive novel city where everything was geared towards filmmaking. The new companies included: New York Motion Picture Company, Mark Sennett's Keystone Studio and Jessen (Scott, p. 18).

In theory, Scott identified three segments in the development of Los Angeles' industrial agglomeration. The first involved what a pioneer like Laemmle did by the initial random or motivated relocation of his production business to the Los Angeles region. The more critical second segment occurred in 1915, when the Los Angeles region started attracting more filmmakers like Ince and Griffith, who saw advantage in the area's ability to offer filmmakers a fresh start, in more ways than one. This phase explains clearly, more than the rather trite

physical or geography argument often bandied about, the emergence of the Los Angeles region as the epicentre of filmmaking. And the final phase of the development of Los Angeles agglomeration, according to Scott, was when the accumulation of filmmaking companies in Los Angeles utilised its comparative advantage to extend and consolidate its market share, to the detriment of other locations like New York (p.16). So, while the New York-based production companies were constrained by the Trust, which strategically prioritised the protection of inherent oligopolistic advantages for its signatories, Los Angeles studios were busy pioneering successful alternatives to oligopoly which focussed on decisive business strategy, individual and collective development and innovations in filmmaking and film marketing (Scott, p.24).

The result was that over time, the Los Angeles area went from being a simple, chaotic accumulation of units of production to manifest into a dense, interconnected system of production, distribution and exhibition. This agglomeration heralded the industrial age of American motion picture which geographically and ideologically came to be called “Hollywood” (Metz, 2006. pp. 1-2; Scot, 2005. p.11, p. 25). Hollywood’s critical emergence around 1915, transformed Los Angeles from an ordinary branch plant extension of New York’s film industry into “a composite system with a strong endogenous dynamic of development” (Scott, 2005. p. 23). About 10 years after it started, nearly eighty percent of the world’s filmic output was being made in Hollywood (ibid).

Within the first three decades of its existence, Hollywood had coalesced around a studio system in which the entire industry was controlled by a small group of companies (p. 11), a situation that ironically mirrored the power imbalance created by the trusts in New York. Following a period of phenomenal growth, the studios settled into a definite hierarchy with the fully vertically integrated “big five” (Paramount, MGM, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, Warner Bros and RKO) producing, distributing and owning cinema chains. This allowed them to maximize

profit at every level of the filmmaking business, while enjoying near oligopoly advantages through standardisation, block booking and outright bullying (Metz, 2006. pp. 1-2). They were followed by the mid-sized “little three” made up of Universal, Columbia and United Artists. A variety of smaller independent production houses like Monogram and Republic held up the bottom of the Hollywood pyramid, making low budget genre films like cowboy movies.

With this classical studio system of production now firmly entrenched, Hollywood was on the brink of ushering in its golden era which lasted until after the Second World War (Scott, 2005. p.25). Notwithstanding the impact of the 1948 “Paramount case” in which the Department of Justice won an antitrust case against one of the big five and by extension against all Hollywood studios, forcing them to admit oligopolistic collusion and agree to remove exhibition business from their vertically integrated portfolios, the studios continued to exert considerable influence on the exhibition of films which is the least capital-intensive but most profitable aspect of film business. In spite of the protracted legal attempts to diminish it, this power to control, manipulate and weaponize what films people see globally in cinemas persists until this day (Scott, 2005. p. 5).

A “New Hollywood” started to emerge following the Second World War, in which the studio system was transformed with more dispersed production patterns (p.9), transgressing the geographical limits of southern California and becoming a ubiquitous school of thought in filmmaking without borders that was tethered to Hollywood’s financial and distributive drip line. This meant that films could now be shot anywhere in America or indeed all over the world with Hollywood finance or talent (behind or front of camera) on the aesthetics and commercial formula of Hollywood, by companies associated with or based in Hollywood, and the “Hollywood identity” of the project will still be assured. Hollywood films like *Black Panther* (2018), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *Antman and the Wasp* (2018), *Stranger Things* (2016), as well as Hollywood franchises such as *Hunger Games* and the *Fast and Furious* were all

filmed in Atlanta, a film hub which is becoming “the Hollywood of the south” (Dockterman, 2018). Furthermore, Hollywood films such as *Titanic* (1997), *Good Will Hunting* (1997), *The Terminal* (2004) and *X-Men: Day of Future Past* (2014) were all shot in Canada. This global “everywhere-ness” (Babatope, 2023) boosted Hollywood’s concentrated industrial advantages by allowing Hollywood studios to act as financial fountainheads for independent producers dispersed all over America and the world at large.

So, through its sheer experience at commercial imperialism and taking advantage of globalisation (p.10), Hollywood has had an undisputed but by no means unassailable stranglehold on global cinema as the most influential cultural-product agglomeration in the world. Unsurprisingly, it may continue to be so for a long time to come. However, its supremacy has been challenged over the years by other niche film practices, such as the British or French film industries (p.10). And who knows? One day, maybe the walls of Hollywood’s invulnerability will begin to crack and perhaps another niche industry like India’s Bollywood or Nigeria’s Nollywood may surge through to challenge Hollywood’s hegemony by making specialised, non-Hollywood films, or indeed through an unforeseen large-scale shift in markets and or technologies (p.17). The biggest test for such contestation will be the absence of marketing and distribution structures of comparable magnitude and impact with Hollywood’s (ibid). For it is the wielding of such immeasurable financial, marketing and distribution influence for which Netflix and Amazon are reputed, that force industries like New Nollywood to cower in submission. The prediction however, is that the future of global cinema will be more variegated (Scott, 2005. p.17) and other niche commercialised cultural productions like New Nollywood may eventually be allowed a larger piece of the global market, instead of the crumbs with which they have to make do right now.

As a precursor to the definition of Nollywood later in this Chapter, an attempt is made by this study to delineate the boundaries of the intractable concept that is Hollywood. Based

on the foregoing analyses, Hollywood is a term that describes the films, the institutions, the filmmakers and geographical filmmaking agglomeration which started in southern California at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with unique, glossy and sophisticated aesthetics based on a fragmented studio system and an innovative marketing and distribution mechanism. The term has also become synonymous with an aggressively territorial and globally dispersed production and distribution system which ensures that Hollywood studios can act as fountainheads for independent producers who are tethered to the ubiquitous Hollywood finance, distribution and technical support across other regions of America and indeed from around the world. This vicarious relationship is such that the Hollywood identities for many projects shot under this expatriate system in far-flung parts of the world can be affirmed with a mere stamp of a Hollywood studio ident and the patronage of its unprecedented marketing impetus.

This summary description of the historical, geographical, philosophical and practical aspects of Hollywood may appear a little long-winded. However, this study's research could not discover a previous similar attempt. Therefore, despite its limitations, its simplified depiction of Hollywood has channelled and succinctly distilled the multifarious dimensions of the concept into an eloquent nugget which will now serve as a conceptual foundation for the rest of the discussions in this Chapter as well as provide inspiration for the articulation of similar delineation for Nollywood at the end of it.

## **7:02           Heralding Hollywood's Arrival.**

With Hollywood acquiring a ubiquitous, transnational identity, what is the condition precedent that announces Hollywood's presence in a different film industry? Is there an entity that is singularly representative of Hollywood and does that entity or its agents need to physically move into the geographical region of the said industry before we can truly say that Hollywood has arrived into it? Using the example of Hollywood's relationship with the African

American film movements of the last century, it can be deduced that there was no need for a wholesale migration of a physical or even metaphoric nature for Hollywood studios to invade the race or the blaxploitation film movements. That infiltration was effectively achieved through the ideological redirection and immersion of Hollywood studios into the cultural economy of the African Americans, driven by profit and the quest for control.

In the 1920s, MGM and other Hollywood studios became interested in race films and invested time, talent and money in making similar but watered-down versions of the uplift-themed films made by the likes of Micheaux. Accordingly, in the 1970s, American International Pictures, Warner Bros and MGM were financially stressed and needed respite from the commercially thriving, ghetto-set African American films with offensive political ideologies. They invested in the films and allowed African American filmmakers access to their structures and huge marketing impetus. Both of these were rather detached engagements that allowed the named Hollywood studios to operate in the cultural spheres of the race film and the blaxploitation film movements without the need to be embedded, thereby retaining a certain nimbleness and flexibility; sprightliness which the studios exhibited by abandoning their interests in the two film movements, each time on a whim and without consequences to them.

It is important to make these points so as to answer the second thematic question of this section by providing a benchmark to gauge whether the present in-road of Hollywood studios into New Nollywood can be deemed to constitute a “Hollywood’s arrival into the industry” (Amao, 2023). There is no entity called Hollywood having any dealings with New Nollywood. Instead, since 2014 (Njoku, 2016), entities, either located in Hollywood like Netflix, with headquarters in Los Gatos, in west Hollywood and Paramount that is based in Hollywood’s Melrose Avenue (Babatope, 2023), both with solid infrastructure, huge pockets, global reach and influence have made New Nollywood the subject of their diversified investment interests.

It is also worth mentioning that YouTube with headquarters in San Bruno, California did enter the Nigerian fray earlier than all of these, although their engagement is predominantly with Old Nollywood filmmakers still operating on the *Living in Bondage* aesthetics and commercial model. On the other hand, another global hegemon, Amazon Prime, has also decided to invest in and benefit from the cultural economy of New Nollywood and indeed the whole of Nigeria and its diaspora. Although headquartered in Seattle, with no direct geographical affinity with Hollywood, Amazon Prime espouses Hollywood's ideological values and partakes in its commercial territorialism (Nwigwe, 2023). The fact these production studios cum online streamers have not set up physical presence in Nigeria or that none even possesses a postal address in the country (apart from YouTube with a small office in Lagos [Nwoba, 2023]) is very revealing, with all choosing to operate their Nigerian operations variously and remotely from Amsterdam, London and South Africa (Babatope, 2023; Odiete, 2023).

To all intents and purposes, the New Hollywood's dispersed engagement formula, that was deployed by MGM, Warner Bros and other Hollywood studios with the African American film movements of the last century, allowed Hollywood to transcend borders through financial and technological manipulation of independent producers including satellite production hubs. Similarly, through the platformisation (Abhyankar, 2020), through which online platforms develop economic and infrastructural extensions into the production, distribution and circulation of cultural content (Nieborg & Poell, 2018. p. 4288), the likes of YouTube, Netflix and Amazon Prime have invested in the acquisition, curation and promotion of New Nollywood film content on their various online streaming platforms. In addition to their vicarious co-production arrangements with some independent Nigerian filmmakers, these moves by Hollywood studios are cumulatively tantamount to a meaningful engagement with



New Nollywood (Ugwu, 2023) and hence proof of Hollywood presence in the Nigerian cultural space.

Med Hondo, in his characteristic ideological militancy, predicted this phenomenon described by Williams as economic imperialism (Williams, 2002. p. 11) when he wrote as far back as 1979 about western hegemony

throwing a cloak of fraternal paternalism over our filmmakers, ignoring and discrediting their works, blaming them, in the short term forcing them to comply with a formal and ethical mimesis- imitating precisely those cinemas we denounce- in order to become known and be admitted into international cinema, in the end forcing them into submission, into renouncing their own lives, their creativity and their militancy. (Hondo, 1996. What cinema is for Us. Eds. Bakari & Cham. *African Experiences in Cinema*. p.40)

The projections of Africa's firebrand filmmaker resonate uncannily with the present circumstances for Nollywood as it searches for its soul under the spectre of global platformisation, a movement, as we shall see later in this Chapter, that is forcing New Nollywood to yield elements of its core identity in an unequal embrace from Hollywood. Before we get into that, let us ask: why has Hollywood decided to come into Nollywood?

There always has to be a motivation, or some sort of ideological provocation or even commercial incentive for Hollywood to make its imperialist business moves. In the case of the race films and the blaxploitation films of the last century, Hollywood studios came calling because they were seeking profit at a time of grave economic decline. The inroad of Hollywood studios into New Nollywood is also being driven by pure commercial interests in the Nigerian demographic and economic possibilities (Omope, 2023). Obi-Rapu believes that while the Hollywood studios may not have been presently experiencing financial distress of the magnitude that they felt in the 1920s and 1970s, he contends that they are in search of thematic inspiration from Nigeria, the type they got from Hong Kong cinema in the 1990s (Obi-Rapu, 2023). Their coming to stir the cultural economy of Nigerian filmmaking was therefore

grounded in a sense of adventure, curiosity and prosecution of a trade war based on a colonial sense of entitlement (Nwigwe, 2023).

For decades, Hollywood studios had neglected Nollywood and its later incarnation as they struggled with structure, format and indeed reputation. Obi-Rapu concludes that Hollywood's arrogance was irked by the fact that New Nollywood rose to prominence in global cinema, diverting the attention of the Black world and undeniably African Americans from Hollywood itself. He projects, rather cynically, that the aim of Hollywood studios in coming into Nollywood was "to throw its dollar about, kill the egalitarian nature of Nollywood and take filmmaking back to the high budget realm in which it is king" (Obi-Rapu, 2023). Although worthy of mention as an exemplar of the mindset of conservative New Nollywood practitioners, this study does not ascribe to such extreme reading of the intentions of Hollywood studios that attempts to over-simplify what is a densely complex cultural, political and economic subject. The following systematic examination of New Nollywood's engagement with Hollywood is required to arrive at more fact-based, less partisan conclusions.

### **7:03            Hollywood and Nollywood**

Nollywood has emerged as a disruption to the global cinema landscape. It prides itself on its independence, reflecting African belief systems and defying the western critical frameworks which have been used to emasculate it (Ukadike 1994: p.1). However, with cultural globalisation seeping into the Nollywood ecosystem as global players in the streaming game such as Amazon Prime and Netflix hustle for supremacy in the country, Nollywood's attempts to pander to western technical demands could take the "Nolly" out of the "wood", thereby eliminating its essence and sacrificing what might have been important for African audiences, all in the quest for an elusive Western acceptance (Ajibade, 2013. p.281). Nollywood, today, appears to be in the throes of an ideological impasse at the intersection

between a bold artistic identity and unashamed conformism, between upholding the “nolly” in defiance of the “wood” and embracing the “wood” at the expense of the “nolly”. This has engendered a political identity paradox, in which strengthening compliance with external requirements, like Hollywood’s film conventions, would ensure survival by preventing insularity and isolation, (Smucker, 2012). However, such acquiescence presents a problem for the preservation of Nollywood’s unique and invaluable distinctiveness.

In whatever form, Nollywood has continued to defy the critics who foretold its doom, effortlessly navigating an inadequate and stifling ecosystem, surviving the impossible malady of piracy, enduring wholesale audience fatigue, making light of the bane of over-exposure, mocking the existential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and smirking in the face of artistic stagnation (Babatope, 2022: Okhai, 2022, Odieta, 2022). All these conditions, individually, have the capacity to kill a film industry. However, Nollywood has actually thrived in the face of their sustained, simultaneous and multi-pronged onslaught.

And although each of Nollywood’s reincarnations is still denied the cinema classification by most scholars and critics, there is no denying their proven commercial accomplishments, no matter how informal. The palpable potential of the industry when calibrated simply as a factor of the population of Nigeria and the increasing availability of an empowered middle class with sizable disposable income has interested global companies seeking growth from uncharted territories. As “Nollywood’s net worth has surpassed the six-billion-dollar mark” (Babatope, 2022), attracting the envy from Hollywood streaming studios has been effortless.

Even though streaming has been the subject of local entrepreneurial experimentation from the likes of Iroko TV, IbakaTV and Afrinolly, investment in the sector has been unencouraging and growth therefore has been uninspiring as it has been plagued by lack of internet infrastructure, pervasive piracy (Jedlowski, *Eds* Krings & Okome 2013: p.38), and

high cost of data (Njoku, 2016). Nonetheless, streaming, in its various forms, has become an important aspect of Nollywood's financial matrix over the last fourteen years or so (Babatope, 2023) once the biggest Hollywood studios like YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Paramount and more recently Meta started their incremental, uncoordinated and sometimes insidious incursion into Nollywood.

Nollywood started flirting with streaming as soon as YouTube was launched globally in February 2005. Nigerians all over the world took the self-broadcast slogan of the platform literally, uploading people's content indiscriminately (Okpue, 2023). The result was a free-for-all online marketplace, similar to the early days of Nollywood, where Intellectual Property (IP) rights were not respected and chaos reigned (Benson, 2023). With the introduction of monetisation in December 2007, YouTube attempted to sanitise its platform by clamping down on IP infringement and taking down unauthorised content (Njoku, 2015).

And in 2010, spurred by his inability to find Nollywood films on YouTube for his mother to watch, Jason Njoku set up Nollywoodlove to exploit Nollywood's growing transnational and diaspora popularity. Together with his partner Bastian Gotter, Njoku visited Nigeria to acquire online rights to hundreds of titles, for as little as \$100 (one hundred dollars) each from Nollywood EPs and producers. Online rights were previously unheard of in the industry and represented an unexpected windfall for the EPs and producers who were still reeling from the demise of the VCD business formula and searching for a new monetisation medium. Like they did with Multichoice in 2004, these rights owners lapped up the windfall.

Nollywoodlove streamed the rights-cleared films for free online and made a deal with YouTube Germany to monetise the views. The site became rapidly successful, garnering international media interest from the likes of CNN and CNBC and ultimately attracting a US-based hedge fund, Tiger Global Management, who raised an initial eight million dollars for the

launch of an independent subscription-based website Iroko TV (dubbed “The African Netflix” by Mohammed, 2016) on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2011 (Njoku, 2015).

Coincidentally, about one week later, YouTube launched its Nigerian operations in Lagos and platforms like IbakaTV were established, thus commencing the scramble for the online business of Nollywood. Iroko TV has held out as the only surviving indigenous online stand-alone platform for nearly twelve years, experimenting with all manner of monetisation formulas: from subscription video on demand (SVOD) to transaction video on demand [TVOD] (Novia, 2022). But it gallantly bowed out on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 2023 when its inability to keep pace with the huge buying and marketing power of global streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime forced it to cease operations (Duruson, 2023). On the other hand, buoyed by finance from one of the world’s biggest companies- Google- YouTube had grown in leaps and bounds, especially in the Nollywood space where it has literally replaced the VCD as the medium for monetisation in a segment of the industry without New Nollywood aspirations (Duker, 2023). Thriving on the YouTube platform in an understated form which requires further study are channels like Mark Angel Comedy (nearly 9 million subscribers) Sam Spedy (3 million subscribers) Nollywood Pictures TV (2 million subscribers), IbakaTV (still going strong with nearly a million subscribers) [Abulu, 2023].

At the beginning, YouTube was viewed as a novelty to Nollywood filmmakers (Benson, 2023) who only started taking it seriously by 2015 when the demise of the DVD/VCD as a means for monetising content was confirmed (Obi-Rapu, 2023). Nigeria’s Bank of Industry accepted failure in its attempt to rejuvenate the VCD industry with an eye-watering investment rumoured to be over N1.2 billion naira (equivalent of roughly 6 million US dollars at the time) in G-Media, owned by Nollywood marketer Igwe Gaboski (Benson, 2023). When the first bouquet of highly anticipated films including *Onye Ozi* (2013) by Obi Emelonye and Kunle Afolayan’s *Phone Swap* (2012) released through the much-touted and expanded VCD

distribution matrix of G-Media flopped woefully, it became clear to practitioners that there was no hope for the increasingly obsolete technology that had served the industry so well in the past (Mba, 2023).

While a vestigial VCD market has remained in many cities outside of Lagos and Abuja after this watershed moment (and still remains to this day), most of the “old” Nollywood practitioners outside of the New Nollywood cinema sector gradually turned to YouTube as a means of distribution and monetisation. Unlike the streaming platforms that emerged in later years with stringent quality requirements and gatekeeping apparatus, YouTube’s non-judgemental, open-access formula to all creatives and their contents became the closest reawakening of the informality and freedom that VCD format had earlier offered to Nollywood practitioners. And over the years, these practitioners have cultivated and grown the YouTube business model to levels where it has become the financial mainstay of Old Nollywood and some of the channel owners are rumoured to be making in excess of \$50,000 monthly on the platform (Ajogwu, 2023; Menakaya, 2023). Their success is evidenced by a very overheated production ecosystem where YouTube channel operators are simultaneously commissioning multiple film shoots for their channel with independent producers in a dispersed production pattern akin to Hollywood studios. There are many hundreds of channels curating Nollywood content on YouTube, with over fifteen of them- like Nollywood RealnollyTV, NollywoodPicturesTV, Nollywood5Star and Nollywood Smart TV - having in excess of one million subscribers. The COVID-19 pandemic exponentially grew the number of Nollywood “millionaire YouTube channels” (Okhai, 2022) and today, the YouTube channel of comedy skit maker, Mark Angel, has the largest number of subscribers in Nigeria with nearly nine million (Oamen, 2021).

That early incursion of YouTube and its whole-hearted adoption by old Nollywood practitioners has been likened to a mere preamble (Babatope, 2023). The main article, as it

were, was written in 2014 when Netflix, as part of its global expansion and in an attempt to trial the economic potential of Nigeria's population, licensed its first bouquet of New Nollywood films. Ironically, it did this through Iroko TV, a supposedly rival local streaming service. That initial bouquet consisted of seven New Nollywood films which included Afolayan's *October 1* (2013), Nzekwe's *Anchor Baby* (2010) and Emelonye's *Onye Ozi* (2013) [Njoku, 2016]. That innocuous release, accompanied by little fanfare, marked a seismic shift in the trajectory of New Nollywood. Although the organisational and infrastructural limitations in Nigeria as regards the internet still existed and the majority of "Nigeria's enormous internal market" (Haynes, 2016:5) were still not online (Odieta, 2022), Netflix hedged its bet on Africa's most populous country, based on the exciting potential portended by her massive population (Babatope, 2023).

Those tentative first steps into the Nigerian territory were firmed up in 2018 with the glamorous launch of Netflix Naija, a dedicated service offering an impressive oeuvre of New Nollywood films and celebrating the trendy Nigerian acronym- Naija. With the launch, Netflix's investment in Nigeria increased considerably and the company commenced acquiring and branding independently already-made content as "Netflix Original", starting with Genevieve Nnaji's *Lionheart* in 2018 (Odieta, 2022). Since then, Netflix has commissioned further big budget originals, including Afolayan's *Anikulapo* (2022) and Mo Abudu's *Blood Sisters* (2022), thereby raising optimism that such investments will elevate the profile of New Nollywood and trickle down the food chain to affect quality across the industry.

At the present time of this writing, the far-reaching impact of Netflix' investment in New Nollywood that was anticipated has not come to pass (Okhai, 2022). Rather, what has been achieved thus far is an unsavoury sedimentation of the industry in which the heavier players, like Mo Abudu, Play Network and Kunle Afolayan, have settled at the base of the

beaker- where it is overheated, thereby sucking interest and money from the smaller filmmakers and their films floating towards the top of the solution (Okwuowulu, 2022).

In defending criticism from this infiltration, Ezinne Ezepeue sees Netflix' entrance as a temporary phase in the evolution of New Nollywood (Ezepeue, 2023). However, nearly ten years afterwards, they are still here and many other Hollywood studios have arrived, digging their heels in, entrenching their investment even when the financial numbers haven't been as spectacular as was first thought (Babatope, 2023). Amazon Prime, owned by one of the world's biggest companies, joined in the Nigerian fray with the launch of Amazon Prime Nigeria in 2021 (Odieta, 2021, Babatope, 2023; Ude, 2023). Once again, this raised hopes among Nollywood observers for some kind of value to emerge from "the anticipated competition between two monoliths of Hollywood seeking dominance in the wild, wild west that is New Nollywood" (Nwigwe, 2023). Despite throwing its weight about with the acquisition of major Nollywood contents like Jade Osiberu's blockbuster *Brotherhood* (2022) and Emelonye's controversial biopic *Badamasi* (2021), as well as the sponsorship of the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of Africa International Film Festival (AFRIFF) in 2021 in Lagos, many industry insiders believe that the reality is that Amazon Prime has mirrored most of Netflix' business practices that were unsympathetic and almost inimical to the growth of New Nollywood. Erinugha frankly articulates these as

...abysmal valuation of New Nollywood content, fostering of a gatekeeping culture that encourages nepotism, a wholly unethical invoicing structure that spreads payment of paltry licence fees over nearly a calendar year, and a stranglehold on the industry that silently dictates the thematic and editorial direction of projects, and consequently of the industry at large (Erinugha, 2022).

Hondo admonished in 1979 that this kind of contemptuous behaviour will continue against African films "...until we grasp the crucial importance of this cultural and economic strategy, and create our own networks of film production and distribution, liberating ourselves from all foreign monopolies" (Hondo, 1996. p.41). Nollywood emerged in apparent compliance with



this counsel to create an African indigenous film industry. However, as the industry enters its fourth decade, most of its achievements in forging a certain level of artistic and commercial independence in distribution and production are being threatened by the concessions it is being compelled to make in an unequal embrace with Hollywood studios. This segment will attempt a contemporary elaboration of this identity riddle and what has been termed “a marriage of convenience with Hollywood studios” (Ugwu, 2023).

#### **7:04 Primexit**

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2024, Amazon Prime shockingly announced the discontinuation of its operations in Africa (consisting of Nigeria and South Africa) and the Middle East with immediate effect. Following that, mainly African staff recruited less than two years prior to run African operations were unceremoniously disengaged. Amazon Prime Video’s Vice-President for Europe, Barry Furlong who announced the drastic move, said that the closure was to “rebalance and pivot...resources to focus on areas that drive the highest impact and long-term success” (Yossman, 2024). That area of focus is Europe. This quote, although part of a terse statement by Furlong reveals a lot about the mindset of Amazon Prime and its white executives. In other words, Amazon Prime was closing operations in Africa and the Middle East to expand its activities in Europe.

Wangi Mba-Uzoukwu, the head of Amazon Prime Originals Nigeria, has stoutly defended the success of the Amazon Prime experiment in Nigeria. She argues that based on the available indices: the more than anticipated subscription commitment from Nigerians, particularly those in the diaspora, the success of the New Nollywood releases on the platform - like Jade Osiberu’s *Brotherhood* (2022) and BB Sasore’s *Breath of Life* (2023) – not to mention Amazon’s relatively insignificant financial outlay for the territory - “Amazon Prime Nigeria was a success in every ramification of the word” (Mba-Uzoukwu, 2024). As one of the

last members of the African team to be formally relieved of her duties, Mba-Uzoukwu is on some kind of gardening leave in lieu of what this study expects will be an inevitable termination of her contract. Constrained by her allegiance to Amazon with whom she was still officially employed at the time of interviewing her, Mba-Uzoukwu could not say it outright but this study could construe her unspoken responses to mean that the cancellation of African operations was ordered by the upper echelon at Amazon Prime without seeking Uzo-Mbaukwu's opinion or consulting the overall head of Amazon Prime Originals Africa, South Africa's Gideon Khobane. Just like the Hollywood studios during the tail end of the blaxploitation movement circa 1975, the Amazon Prime executives in America deemed the African and Middle East territories surplus to requirement and decided to walk out, not in a phased, gradual and orderly withdrawal, but an abrupt exit that has taken all, including Amazon Prime's senior staff, by surprise.

The entire Nollywood industry has been reeling from the shock of this unexpected departure which has now been nicknamed "Primexit" (Emelonye, 2024), with many of the insiders agreeing with Mba-Uzoukwu that Amazon Prime could be deemed a success in its short stint in Nigeria. Amazon Prime in Africa was essentially a movie streaming service. This is unlike its layered structure in the global North where the core of the business is e-commerce and movie streaming is only a supplementary service (Mba-Uzoukwu, 2024). Therefore, the growth projection for the company in Nigeria was not inordinately ambitious. And although Amazon Prime, like most streamers, did not share subscription data or financial statements, judging by social media engagement around the streamer and their Nigerian titles, "the word on the street is that Amazon Prime had started to dent Netflix' dominance of the Nigerian streaming market" (Babatope, 2024).

Ogunjiofor feels that the advent of Amazon Prime into New Nollywood after Netflix signalled to the world "that Nollywood was ripe and ready for business. And their coming

helped to contextualise the Nigeria space by providing options to New Nollywood filmmakers and challenging the monopoly of Netflix in the territory” (Ogunjiofor, 2024). Nwigwe is of the opinion that “Amazon Prime actually paid more than Netflix for New Nollywood content, the only difference being that Netflix guaranteed more eyeballs due to their nearly 10 years subscription head start on Amazon Prime. They will surely be missed. But something tells me Amazon will be back soon” (Nwigwe, 2024).

However, not everyone in Nollywood shares that optimism. Erinugha questions the commitment of the streamers since none of them, apart from YouTube even has an office in Nigeria. He posits that this kind of knee-jerk reaction shown by Amazon Prime is only possible because of what he calls “drone investment”, a situation which sees foreign entities hover above ground level challenges to suck up commercial value from Nigeria without putting down roots (Erinugha, 2024). However, in the eyes of this study and under the Nigerian government, Amazon Prime has broken no laws by exiting the Nigerian space (Nuhu, 2024). As unethical and as callous as it may sound, its allegiance, as a corporate entity, is to its bottom line and not to the best interests of a country’s film practice.

On his part, veteran director Charles Novia blames the cancellation of Nigerian operations on the “divisive and nepotistic actions of the Nigerian team that Amazon recruited”. He believes that this group of people have mismanaged the opportunity, forcing Amazon to cut its losses and go back to the drawing board (Novia, 2024). Some other practitioners point to more objective causes for Primexit. Blue Pictures Cinema’s Joy Odiete contends that the subscription numbers in Nigeria have not matched the expectations or indeed the projections of Amazon Prime. She also believes that the global economic stagnation has played a crucial role too (Odiete, 2024).

Whatever the cause, an event that was anticipated by this study to happen in the distant future has been brought forward into sharp contemporary relief, highlighting the relevance of

this study and its uncanny timeliness. Therefore, while bemoaning the loss of Amazon Prime from the commercial calculation of New Nollywood, this study believes that it presents a unique opportunity for Nollywood to look inwards and think more strategically about future engagements with foreign partners (Okpue, 2024). For how does New Nollywood open up to the world and still retain control of its own affairs?

The answer is ownership of the infrastructures of our cultural economy- cinemas, production houses, streaming sites (shame about the demise of Iroko Tv). For unless we build our own instead of allowing strangers to take from us without even respecting Nigeria with a postal address in the country, we may wake up one morning with our industry used and jettisoned like the exploitation films of the 1970s (Emelonye, THISDAY, 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2024).

As melodramatic as this may sound, the sheer panic in New Nollywood circles on the back of the Amazon Prime exit creates a clear and present danger of an implosion of the industry if Netflix was to follow Amazon Prime out of Nigeria any time soon. It is this study's hope that such a cataclysmic event does not happen soon, at least until the industry has had the time to process this loss and prepare for further eventualities.

The next phase of Hollywood studios' penetration into New Nollywood has been in the form of partnerships, sponsorships and buy-overs. In July 2019, France's Canal+ (not exactly Hollywood but representing a Hollywood-esq commercial philosophy with dispersed production capabilities) bought ROK Studios, Iroko TV's production studio, to help it create Nollywood content on an industrial scale (CNN, 2019). The huge amount of money bandied about for that acquisition has not been officially confirmed by either parties, but nonetheless it represents another case of segmental overheating in the industry. In June 2022, Nigeria's Lavidia Studios, led by Chioma Ude, the founder of AFRIFF, announced a production partnership with The Story Lab, worth 50 million US dollars (Ude, 2023). Although nothing further has been heard of that pronouncement which shook the industry to its core, the Lavidia/Story Lab deal has retained its place in Nollywood folklore as the biggest deal involving

a Nollywood company. Earlier in 2019, Chinese media company, Huahua (another non-Hollywood foreign studio) partnered with Nigeria's FilmOne through the signing of a co-production agreement (UNESCO, 2021).

In what has been termed the Hollywood consolidation phase (Eke, 2023), Marvel Studios, Paramount Studios have announced their intentions regarding the New Nollywood space by becoming co-sponsors of the 11<sup>th</sup> Africa International Film Festival (AFRIFF) held in Lagos in November 2022 (Ude, 2023). The United States Mission in Nigeria was also listed as a partner of AFRIFF 2022 (Ukpai, 2023). There are credible rumours that HBO and Disney are on the verge of having substantial investment and presence in Nollywood soon (Babatope, 2023). It is worth mentioning that there is a short form social media monetisation opportunity that is being exploited by Nigerian filmmakers on Meta and Tik Tok. Sharing videos on these platforms and monetising them has also become a veritable source of revenue for some Nollywood filmmakers focusing on mainly comedy skits. However, as skits are considered micro-form contents (Babatope, 2023), these activities, although commercially viable, are outside the scope of this study.

At the time of concluding this study, Netflix and YouTube are the only Hollywood streamers with operations in Nollywood (Ude, 2024; Babatope, 2004). No one knows how the exit of Amazon Prime will affect the intentions of players like Paramount (who have started recruiting Nigerian staff) and Disney and the rest. Would they be put off by the negativity of one of the biggest players, who by rejecting it, thrashes the much-trumpeted potential for Nigeria's population? Or would they see Amazon Prime's stepping aside as a unique opportunity to consolidate in the Nigerian territory and gain from Amazon's loss? In fact, under the guise of fulfilling their earlier business commitments, Amazon Prime is still doing business behind the scenes with New Nollywood distributors like Lavidia Studios three months later, acquiring content and discussing co-productions (Udeh, 2024). Note that Primexit did not stop

already acquired New Nollywood content from showing on the platform (Mba-Uzoukwu, 2024).

Does this mean that Primexit was a smokescreen for Amazon Prime to repackage its business in Africa which had been accused of being unsustainably top-heavy (Inwang, 2024)? Would Amazon Prime return to Nigeria with a slimmer operation in the near future? No one really knows. But what is clear is the need for New Nollywood to learn the lessons of Primexit and indeed the blaxploitation movement nearly 50 years earlier by preparing itself for a probable life after Hollywood studios, even in the throes of enjoying the benefits of their unpredictable liaison. This study is a timely first step in that preparation.

#### **7:05            Impact of Hollywood on New Nollywood**

The analysis in this segment is based on the state of the New Nollywood industry prior to Primexit in January 2024. How that event will affect these dynamics in the industry should be the focus of future studies. Having said that, Nollywood insiders see the arrival of Hollywood studios into the Nigerian space variously as a challenge, a complication and an opportunity (Nzekwe, 2023). It has provided select New Nollywood filmmakers with access to larger budgets, advanced distribution networks and engendered for them improved technical expertise (Duker, 2023). Each arrival of a major global player on the New Nollywood scene comes with the promise of huge investment- for which the jury is still out- and more importantly represents, just like it was for the African American film movements of the last century, a shift in the dynamics of an industry originally built on unconventionality and informality.

Some of this shift is for the good of the industry, reflected in better quality of technical and creative aspects of the films (Enete, 2023). Nollywood actor and politician, Desmond Elliott is very encouraged by the entry of these Hollywood studios because he attributes a jump

in New Nollywood budgets and corresponding rise in quality of New Nollywood films to this advent (Elliott, 2023). Film Director Ogo Okpue (2023), credits the Hollywood studios with providing a reliable recoupment template with their acquisition which New Nollywood filmmakers can exploit to readily access third-party funding.

Other contemporary New Nollywood practitioners have pointed to the wider exposure that the likes of Netflix and Amazon Prime have afforded New Nollywood films through their global networks (Lady Truth, 2023; Inwang, 2023). Andy Boyo views the presence of Hollywood studios in Nollywood through the veneer of a rise in the earning power of actors and practitioners (Boyo, 2023). This rise is reminiscent of the growth in earnings experienced by a select segment of African Americans associated with the blaxploitation movement. It is such lack of wider spread of these financial gains that Jalade-Ekeinde points to as a basis for requesting that the Hollywood studio investments in New Nollywood should have a more egalitarian and grassroots impact (Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023).

Furthermore, commentators have commended the archival qualities of the streaming platforms in preserving and repackaging Nollywood films that would have ordinarily disappeared from circulation were it not for them. YouTube has been a free global archive of filmic content before Netflix and Amazon Prime came into the picture. Chuks Enete attributes the revival of Nollywood films from over a decade ago, like *October 1* (2014), *Anchor Baby* (2010) and *Last Flight to Abuja* (2012) to the Netflix' Nollywood catalogue acquisitions (Enete, 2023). Nwigwe, on his own part, views the impact of the Hollywood studios in Nigeria through a job creation vista. He argues that with bigger budgets and growing acquisition fees, producers are making more films and attracting a rising number of Nigerians, young and old, into financially fulfilling engagements in the Nollywood industry (Nwigwe, 2023). Others see Hollywood studios in New Nollywood as cultivating a platform for potential cross-cultural collaborations and co-productions on a global scale (Nzekwe, 2023).

As the jostle for space in the informality of New Nollywood continues in an unpredictable manner, a series of turf wars seems to be brewing for the essence of New Nollywood - amongst Nollywood practitioners, between local entrepreneurs and the “invading hegemons” (Menakaya, 2023), among the global players themselves, and even between the audience and the filmmakers (Okpechi, 2023). The gradual offensive of Hollywood’s heavyweight studios has engendered a situation where New Nollywood filmmakers are gravitating towards the Hollywood model of storytelling, seeking the validation from its agencies, while gradually relinquishing the authorial and distributive independence that combined to forge its earlier identity. Nzekwe questions the cultural representation and the impact of these fiercely commercial Hollywood studios on Nollywood’s well-documented creative freedom.

As Nigerian filmmakers, we find ourselves at a crossroad where we must balance the attraction of international recognition with the obligation to uphold the essence of our distinct storytelling traditions. The influx of foreign capital and influence, while advantageous to us, also invites a re-evaluation of how we safeguard the unique stories and perspectives that define Nollywood's identity (Nzekwe, 2023)

Lady Truth observes a trend in which characterisation and dialogue have been unashamedly predicated on Hollywood stereotypes and clichés as the filmmakers chase global acceptance (Lady Truth, 2023). Munis, while applauding the injection of more investment in New Nollywood by the Hollywood studios, bemoans the size of such investments, relative to other African countries like South Africa. He points to Netflix investing only \$23.6 million dollars in Nigeria when it has invested over \$125 million dollars in South Africa with a lesser population in the same period (Etike, 2023).

Seen from a different angle, alternative revenue streams are drying up in the industry as these megaliths of Hollywood now represent the major source of monetisation for New Nollywood “middle of the road” projects on certain budgets above \$20,000 US dollars (Okhai, 2022). The budgets of these projects cannot accommodate the quality and star power required



for a successful cinema run and on the other hand, they may be too expensive to seek recoupment via the humble YouTube formula. Therefore, Netflix or Amazon Prime really become the only means of making money from these mediocre projects.

Francis Onwochei fears that the infiltration of Hollywood studios into Nollywood through streaming has dealt cinema and its popularity a deadly blow, resulting in a huge fall in box office and audience numbers (Onwochei, 2023). Despite the fantastic, one-off success of Funke Akindele's *A Tribe Called Judah* (2023) [which is believed to have made over N1.3 billion naira in the Nigerian box office], figures show that there has been a huge fall in box office takings in Nigerian cinemas since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Babatope, 2023). Expanding on the above fears, Kabat Esosa-Egbon warns that the Hollywood studios, while representing various opportunities for New Nollywood may become the bane of the industry, if unchecked. His concerns stem from the possible loss of identity or authenticity in New Nollywood's quest for global acceptance.

Today, involvement with the likes of Netflix or Amazon Prime has also become the currency for bragging rights and ultimately the coveted gold standard of success for New Nollywood filmmakers (Erinugha, 2022; Menakaya, 2023). Just like Hollywood did with the race films by stealing the tallest trees in its forest (Nollen, 2014), Hollywood streamers have also commenced a system of drafting in select New Nollywood practitioners that fit into their strategic focus. Akin Omotosho (*Man on Ground* 2011, *Vaya* 2016) is a Nigerian filmmaker who was engaged by Walt Disney Pictures to direct their 2022 biopic, *Rise*. Omotosho represents the first of many ploys to put New Nollywood practitioners to the service of Hollywood. Okey Ogunjiofor fears that the next phase of the Hollywood incursion into New Nollywood will be the singling out of New Nollywood talents to be incorporated into Hollywood projects. By doing so, they'll make such selfish conquests the hallmark of success in the industry and get everyone chasing after it. This will then weaken the talent pool for New

Nollywood projects and lead to outcomes that will not be favourable to the industry's future (Ogunjiofor, 2023).

While this practice of “picking a few and discarding the bunch” (Abulu, 2023) may mean better careers and rewards for the chosen practitioner, as it did for Paul Robeson in the 1920s and Sidney Poitier in the 1950s, it may represent the kind of brain-drain that is reminiscent of the manner in which talent was extracted from the African American films and thrust into the service of Hollywood. It has been argued that such Hollywood star-hunting excursions that redistributed Black talent were responsible, to a great extent, for the diminishing of Black interest in race films in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a situation that hastened its demise (Nollen, 2014). Boyo bemoans the lack of meritocracy in the perceived divide-and-rule local policy of the Hollywood studios in Nigeria (Boyo, 2023) where opportunism, tribalism and nepotism were the major determinants for access. Okpechi, on his part, believes that involving Nollywood professional guilds and associations as overarching conduits in the collaboration with Hollywood studios will bring equity to the engagement process. (Okpechi, 2023). Gukas has also noticed a tendency for Hollywood studios, through their acquisition and co-production body language, to curate certain kinds of genres that are not truly Nigerian, like sex, nudity, violence and especially, homosexuality and permissive gender boundaries. “We need to be very careful and not get carried away by the money and then lose everything that we have laboured for” (Gukas, 2023). Hence the calls for “leveraging the resources of Hollywood but preserving New Nollywood's soul” (Nwakalor-Akukwe, 2023). While Nwakalor-Akukwe does not make clear what Nollywood soul really is, this study understands it to be the freedom to remain authentic to itself despite rise in quality, to tell stories that celebrate Nigerian culture, unencumbered by the need to conform or the quest to be accepted. This can be achieved by marrying the global technical standards of Hollywood studios with

the authentic story of New Nollywood in order to go “glocal” – local while being global (Esosa-Egbon, 2023).

In addition to its other objectives, this study looks at the post COVID-19 pandemic trends that have started eroding the identity and independence of New Nollywood, creating a state of affairs which places the industry at a critical crossroads in which the next collective actions of the industry and indeed the Nigerian government can be the difference between consolidating Nollywood’s proud legacy, and allowing the industry to be swept away in the tide of Hollywood’s self-centred commercialism (Ogunjiofor, 2022). How far would Nollywood change, for better or for worse, from the “...oil and water confluence of two fast-flowing cinematic rivers”? (Nzekwe) What would be the outcome of the lopsided handshake between Hollywood’s aggressive commercial and cultural territorialism, and the informality and lack of domestic protection under which New Nollywood has thrived? (Ogunjiofor, 2022). Primexit, while not proffering answers to many of these questions, has lifted the lid slightly on what the future may potentially hold for New Nollywood.

This study sees an uncertain future, fraught with danger of abandonment from Hollywood studios when they find new interests in other territories. In January 2024 it was eastern Europe that stole Nigeria’s Amazon Prime thunder. In 2026, it may be India opening up more to Netflix that will cause a dislocation. Nollywood practitioners have immediately reacted to Primexit by deepening their relationship with Netflix and further exploring the liberated business proposition of YouTube (Novia, 2024). How they and the entire industry respond to this and future withdrawals of Hollywood studios in the long-term is the subject of academic conjecture. That uncertainty poses the question: will Nollywood’s different set of circumstances ensure that its experience in the event of the exit of all Hollywood studios will be dissimilar to the incident of the African American film movements of the last century? The

next segment explores some of the ambiguities, similarities and disparities between them and New Nollywood as a basis for forecasting the future of the Nigerian film industry.

### **7:06            New Nollywood versus the Race and Blaxploitation Film Experience**

The race films of the 1920s was the first time that a film industry emerged which was wholly controlled, independent of the aggressive Hollywood systems of the time, by Black people, telling Black stories for Black viewers (Field, 2015). It has been stated that it emerged as a practical response to the negative representation of African Americans on Hollywood screens (Diawara, 1993:6), epitomised by the highly controversial Griffith's picture, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Taking advantage of an overlooked pool of spectators willing to see themselves on the screen, African American filmmaking entrepreneurs carved "something significant out of nothing" and used film as a bold invention "to imagine a separate community into existence" (Field, 2015:10). Despite being plagued by inadequate finance and lack of screening spaces (Pearson, 2000:14), the race films reached their peak in late 1920s (Lawrence, 2007), but their decline was swift. We have briefly studied this unfortunate end in the previous Chapters. However, a recap of the activities of Hollywood studios that contributed to that demise would add clarity to this segment's analysis.

The African American audiences on whom the Hollywood studios involvement in race films was predicated were no longer interested in the films being made. Firstly, in order to boost mainstream white engagement, the studios watered down the African American essence of the films, pursuing more generic stories and more white characters. Eventually, they relapsed back to the portrayal of old Hollywood stereotypes of African Americans. As it turned out, white economic power, in the shape of Hollywood studios, was sustaining the viability of the ethnic film market (Willet & Pine, 1975). This paradox completed the demise of the race movies by the end of the 1930s, when Hollywood studios turned their backs on the race films,

taking with them their finance and their distribution structures. Once again, left bare, with no commercial infrastructure, the African American filmmakers of that era could not sustain an industry without their white benefactors. The race film movement disappeared without trace before the start of the Second World War. It had been infiltrated by white economic power, undermined from the inside by them, and then jettisoned when they became unprofitable (Lawrence, 2007).

Similarly, another African American-led independent film movement, in which Black people, at least initially, owned and controlled the factors of production, editorial content and distribution was the blaxploitation movement of the 1970s. The socio-political and economic backdrop against which blaxploitation films flourished was profound and has been treated in the previous Chapters. As we saw, blaxploitation films were however short-lived because they were conceptually handicapped by being excluded from generic categories (Lawrence, 2007), and framed diametrically against whiteness. Furthermore, Hollywood's unending quest for reinvention meant that it showed no further economic interest in the blaxploitation films once they attained their peak as Hollywood studios immediately sought to initiate a new round of genzrification (Altman, 2021: p. 62). The success of the blockbuster genre which attracted white and Black audiences alike eliminated the need for Hollywood films targeting only Blacks and marked the beginning of the end of the blaxploitation movement in 1975 (Lawrence & Butler, 2019: p.745).

Nwigwe is keen to cast doubt on the real role of Hollywood studios in the demise of blaxploitation. He claims that the movement may have dissipated due to changes in audience taste, economic shifts and fluctuations in the socio-political milieu that birthed it. While this position is well reasoned and properly articulated, research has shown that the causal link between the demise of the blaxploitation era and the direct actions of Hollywood studios at the time is sufficient to attribute a lion's share of the blame to the Hollywood studios (Lawrence,

2007). The movement may have been weakened by socio-political factors that Nwigwe mentions, however, the blaxploitation movement died when it was denied funding and interest by Hollywood studios at a time when the movement had become wholly dependent on them for these. That may not be the smoking gun that Nwigwe seeks but nevertheless a fatal blow is discernible.

Cripps, in his polemic, *Slow Fade to Black* (1977), posits two mutually exclusive scenarios. On the one hand, he maintains that ‘no black producer was sufficiently capitalised to produce good film and that Hollywood was sufficiently capitalised to co-opt any successful idea from a black producer’ (Cripps, 1977: p.30). This signifies a slow fade out of independent black producers. This was what happened with the race film and the blaxploitation movements- a gradual integration of these African American movements into Hollywood studios, culminating in a total eclipse that led to their demise. On the other hand, Cripps also hypothesizes a reverse of the osmotic diffusion in which Hollywood is assimilated into independent black productions (the slow fade in) to improve itself and produce what Du Bois terms ‘twoness’

One ever feels his twoness- an American, a negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois, 2015)

New Nollywood feels a similar twoness, a certain hybridity which seeks to be accepted into the comity of cinema nations while simultaneously striving to retain its cultural specificity. However, unlike the unstable two-ness of Du Bois in which the black and American components engage in a perpetual tussle for the soul of the African American, pulling them in different directions, Nollywood’s hybridity under postcolonialism is a stable and settled syncretic state which the industry has come to accept, own and celebrate.

With its relationship with Hollywood studios still at the start of the osmotic diffusion stage, would the deepening of relations, as represented by the glamorous launches,

partnerships and synergies between Hollywood studio entities and New Nollywood filmmakers, pan out as a slow fade out, in a trajectory similar to that of the race films or the blaxploitation films of African Americans? Or, would the dynamic, size, history and deep-seated cultural identity of New Nollywood resist such macabre fate in contemporary times, resulting in a slow fade in that allows a Nigerianisation of Hollywood as well as an Americanisation of Nollywood (Okagbue, 2023)? The latter scenario, while more desirable, would result in “the possibility of two social identities at the same time, whose relations to each other are strained” (Green, 1993: p.27). Whether it ends up being a slow-fade in or a slow fade-out, the paradoxical conclusion is that assimilation of some sort is a necessity for New Nollywood’s survival, but it is also inimical to the retention of the industry’s unique identity.

There is a clear divide amongst Nollywood insiders on the question whether or not Nollywood would suffer the fate of African American film movements of the last century by freezing and dying up after the exploitative grip of Hollywood studios (Ugwu, 2023). Some New Nollywood practitioners have argued that the epochs are different and the lack of options for monetisation in the business of film in the 1920s and 1970s had a detrimental effect on the ability of the race and blaxploitation films respectively to survive rejection from Hollywood studios (Odiete, 2023). By extension, they posit that the times are different now and the global business of film has developed myriad paradigms for commercialisation (cinema, streaming, SVOD [Subscription Video on Demand], sponsored, TVOD [Transaction Video on Demand], FVOD [Free Video on Demand], satellite television, DVD, etc), all of which cumulatively offer a film practice like New Nollywood a robust foundation to withstand the snub of one business archetype, no matter how significant that may be (Babatope, 2023: Gukas, 2023). In practicalizing this opinion, since the exit of Amazon Prime at the start of 2024, many New Nollywood filmmakers have refocused their attention to growing their YouTube channels. However, this has somewhat overheated the YouTube space as everyone clamours for

subscribers and views, the number of channels growing exponentially without a significant change in the number of viewers available. Inwang sums it up when he said “Everyone is promoting YouTube channels. Who is going to watch whose?” (Inwang, 2024).

There is an acknowledgement of a real fear that New Nollywood may lose its soul or risk a dilution of its essence in this unholy union with Hollywood studios (Nwakalor-Akukwe, 2023). However, New Nollywood would not go the way of Blaxploitation films because its stratified nature means that only one segment of the eclectic industry (New Nollywood), representing less than 20% of the entire industry, is in bed with the Hollywood streamers (Okhai, 2023). There is still a teeming majority of Nigerian filmmakers engaged in the *Living in Bondage* formula of filmmaking; whose closest connection with Hollywood studios is YouTube which does not acquire or commission films and whose relationship with those Nollywood filmmakers is more of an arms-length one (Ogunjiofor, 2023). These old Nollywood practitioners will be exempt from the anticipated strangling effect of Hollywood studios (Ugwu, 2023), and would provide the green shoots for regenerating the industry after the creative dystopia that may be imminent (Nzekwe, 2023; Gukas, 2023). This means that when, and not if, Hollywood studios eventually leave Nigeria, a trend that Amazon Prime has unceremoniously commenced, old Nollywood will provide the seeds for an industry that will continue to thrive for the masses (Mofe-Damijo, 2023).

Lorenzo Menakaya will attribute the anticipated survival of New Nollywood to the advantages of the information age and the availability of knowledge. Nzekwe, on his part, maintains that those who have sounded the death tolls for New Nollywood under the sceptre of Hollywood studios discount the industry’s resilience, unique cultural attributes and its legendary ability to endure and overcome multiple challenges since inception.

Nollywood's resilience lies in its deep connection to local culture and the understanding of its audience. This foundation provides the industry with an advantage which is the ability to offer stories that resonate on a personal and relatable level. Even as Nollywood



collaborates with international partners, the industry's storytellers continue to draw inspiration from the rich fabric of Nigerian life, which sets it apart from other global film industries (Nzekwe, 2023)

Jalade-Ekeinde acknowledges the complexity of the union between Hollywood and New Nollywood, and underscores its refusal to lend itself to generalisations. She suggests that how the industry ultimately fares will depend on how it responds to the changing landscape. She sees New Nollywood and the African American film movements of the last century as two distinct entities with their own trajectories and peculiarities. She points to New Nollywood's significant global presence, its resilience and its capacity to adapt and evolve as being critical to a different outcome (Jalade-Ekeinde, 2023).

Novia looks at Nigerian music and the inroads by American record labels in the last few years as a metaphor for New Nollywood and Hollywood. Nigerian musicians have become global superstars on the back of such partnerships and he believes the same will be the case for New Nollywood (Novia, 2023). It is worth noting that others have pointed to the selective empowerment of American music labels and warned that Hollywood's imitation of that harpooning formula may pose a major clog in the genuine overall growth of Nigerian cultural industries (Nwoba, 2023). Odiete, on her part, opines that New Nollywood is too large a cultural entity to go the way of what she calls "a sub-genre like blaxploitation" (Odiete, 2023). However, she sees the influx of Hollywood studios as an opportunity, as well as a threat, projecting that the incursion may ultimately mark the end of a phase of New Nollywood but never the end of a people's cinema that was built on the passion of its audience by intrepid creatives who will not take no for an answer (Odiete, 2023).

Joseph Benjamin believes that its audience will be New Nollywood's insurance policy against a blaxploitation-type implosion in Hollywood's embrace. No matter how much New Nollywood has experimented with formats and vehicles over the years, one constant has been its audience. He thinks that so long as it retains the loyalty of that audience, New Nollywood

will be virtually indestructible (Benjamin, 2023). Elliott counter-argues that New Nollywood's survival hinges on authenticity, ownership and control. So long as New Nollywood, while accepting Hollywood studio money, retains these imperative elements, its future will be secure, irrespective of what the Hollywood studios do in their own commercial interests (Elliott, 2023). This scenario seems to be playing out with the present Primexit situation, justifying Ihunwo's belief in New Nollywood's numbers game. So long as a good percentage of 200 million Nigerians are behind whatever form New Nollywood takes, the survival and indeed the flourishing of the industry can almost be taken for granted (Ihunwo, 2023).

Another school of thought believes that Hollywood's infiltration into New Nollywood will spell doom for the Nigerian film practice. Ogunjiofor fears that the quest to conform to Hollywood standards is gradually eroding the New Nollywood brand; a case of who pays the piper, dictates the tune. Olatunbosun Amao recommends that New Nollywood should eschew the mistake of benchmarking their film products with Hollywood criteria, pointing to the gradual change in the taste of New Nollywood audiences for certain hitherto foreign and shocking phenomena. He argues that the normalisation of cultural novelties such as violence, nudity, liberal sexual-orientation etc are not acceptable in Nigerian culture and their propagation through strategic editorial control of New Nollywood producers by Hollywood studios might take the soul out of New Nollywood and leave it an empty shell, which may be worse than dying (Amao, 2023).

The analogy that this study attempts to draw with the independent African American film movements of the last century that did not survive their interaction with tyrannical Hollywood studios may constitute a rather pessimistic projection for New Nollywood at the time when the study began four years ago in 2020. However, the plausibility and probability of such inauspicious occurrences have been highlighted by the abrupt closure of Amazon Prime's operations in Africa and the Middle East in January 2024. That said, with Nollywood's

industriousness and its proven ability to acclimate to whatever business environment, the ominous foregoing prognosis, while inspiring cynicism, may ultimately birth a new and more intrepid wave of Nollywood audacity. Femi Odugbemi's rallying cry for Nollywood's immortality sums up such optimism.

Nollywood has not sought authentication. It has not sought permission to intrude into the cinema space. Its death has been predicted over and over again. The only reason it has not died is it became owned by the people whose history it is telling (Odugbemi quoted in Witt, 2017:19).

Emily Witt, in spite of the patronizing stance in her polemic on Nollywood titled *Nollywood: The Making of a Film Empire* (2017), concurs that the story of Nollywood is the story of an industry that has been defined by its obstacles. She believes that "there is little doubt that Nollywood will adapt itself to a future model of distribution in ways that will likely be as unpredictable as the rise of the industry itself" (Witt, 2017. p.94).

An end has been announced for Nollywood many times in the past as it navigated the crypts of informality surrounding every aspect of the film business, but the Nigerian film business has adapted, conformed and prostituted to stay alive. But we may now ask, what really is Nollywood? Haynes' attempt to define Nollywood using its genres (Haynes, 2016. p. 278) helped to unpack the complex Nollywood phenomenon. However, it did not achieve any near-concise characterisation of the industry. Some other commentators have simply tried to encapsulate Nollywood in a description by variously calling it a brand of "afromodernity" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2004. p. 202), "an entrepreneurial endeavour that subverts conventional modes of exhibition and distribution" (Krings & Okome, 2013. p. 12), as well as "a paradigm that is set on multiple levels: as art, as creative expression, as political tool, and as commodity" (Ellapen, 2013. p.67). While these descriptions capture some essence of Nollywood in a piecemeal manner, none really achieves a panoramic view of the industry or its projects. Once again, the term Nollywood here captures the entirety of the post *Living in*

*Bondage* film practice that stretches through the VCD popular phase to include its present iteration as New Nollywood with cinema and streaming segments.

With the benefit of this study's accumulation of historical, practical and philosophical data, Nollywood can be used to describe filmic projects in different genres, languages and different lengths, from feature to television series, made in Nigeria or produced elsewhere employing a dispersed production pattern (Scott, 2005. p. 9), akin to Hollywood's with Nigerian money or Nigerian talent. Without being overtly political, these filmmakers have emerged as one of the most potent postcolonial voices, appropriating the film medium, decolonising it and deploying it in forging an identity that epitomises strategic resistance and struggle. Earlier in its history, Nollywood projects were usually told in a fusion of oral tradition and conventional narrative style (Ukadike, 1998. p.166). They historically possess an evolving unique performance style and bold aesthetics ((Larkin, 2004) that have been honed to prioritise the immediacy of African storytelling, over ostentatious artistic refinements. However, more recently, they have come to attain the sophistication and refinement of Hollywood, while retaining a proud umbilical connection to African culture through a variety of symbolic configurations (Ukadike, 1998. p. 201), and the unwavering support of the peoples of the world's most populous Black nation through whatever medium it has experimented with, from VHS to VCD, from cinema to the more recent streaming.

This delineation endeavours to provide a 360-perspective that recognises the two old Nollywood and New Nollywood eras of the industry and to also cater for the many Nollywood films shot outside of Nigeria like *The Mirror Boy* (2011), *Anchor Baby* (2010) and *Black Mail* (2022). It is further devised to help underline one of Nollywood's unique strengths- its connection with its faithful audience. Although not a perfect description by any stretch of the imagination, it provides a starting point for the many dialectic discourses that need to be brought to bear on it in order to engender its refinement.

## CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to converge a plethora of topical issues, including the historization of filmmaking in Nigeria and the emergence of Nollywood, the concept of cinema, its constituents and the potential claims of the different eras of the Nigerian film industry to its taxonomy, the elucidation of the social and historical foundations of the African American film movements of the last century and the juxtaposition of their experience with Hollywood studios against the current platformisation of New Nollywood by Netflix and Amazon Prime. All of these are supported by an interdisciplinary epistemic framework that is at the intersection of cultural studies and political economics, and examined with analytic rigour from a perspective that is objective but yet committed.

In order to compensate for the absence of a discussion chapter, this conclusion chapter goes into detail as it endeavours to summarise the achievements of this study, weighed against its initial aims and, in comparison to the enquiries proposed in its research questions. Furthermore, it tries to uncover this study's significance, uncommon timeliness and its outstanding contribution to the burgeoning Nollywood research and the lacklustre scholarship on African American film movements. Finally, this segment proffers policy, artistic, cultural and practical recommendations based on its findings, as well as calculated suggestions for areas of further study.

The first aim of this study was to critically examine the popular opinion amongst scholars and critics that the contemporary Nigerian film industry, also known as Nollywood, cannot be classed as cinema. This is in spite of the major strides achieved by Nollywood, especially in its New Nollywood incarnation, which have seen it master some of the technical challenges that earned old Nollywood its international notoriety. New Nollywood has now improved film quality to levels reminiscent of Hollywood sophistication, consolidated its

cinema culture and infrastructure, and attracted the investment from Netflix and Amazon Prime - some of the world's biggest streamers - on whose platforms many New Nollywood films are performing exceedingly well. To appreciate why the cinematic alterity has continued in spite of these improvements, this study had to first of all trace the genealogy of the Nigeria film practice, cataloguing its journey from the incipient Colonial Film Unit to a flamboyant celluloid practice in the 1970s, from a subsistence VHS/VCD practice in the 1990s to the glossy New Nollywood era in cinemas and international streaming platforms. The detailed history that followed, incorporated the voices of Nollywood insiders, for the first time in substantial numbers, in providing comprehensive answers to the first research question (about the origins of Nollywood and how the unique features of its various iterations have informed their cinemanness), and challenging some of the myths about the industry's origin that have become embedded through scholarly reaffirmation.

Following colonisation and subjugation of sub-Saharan African countries from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, film's audio and visual immediacy were deployed as imperial tools to overcome the communication limitations of oral and written texts previously used. European colonisers quickly weaponized film's potential for influencing behaviour and its persuasiveness as they embarked on a campaign of deculturation and acculturation of their colonies. Nigeria was one of such colonies for the British. But unlike the French, the British were not interested in training locals or transferring the apparatus of filmmaking. This meant that after independence, Nigerians inherited what was left of the Colonial Film Unit, without adequate infrastructure or manpower. So, Nigeria started life as an independent country without the structure to produce films and simply became a consumer of poor-quality films distributed by mainly Lebanese businessmen.

That was until the emergence of a celluloid film practice in the 1970s from the experimentation of pioneers like Francis Oladele and Ola Balogun with *Kongi's Harvest* (1970) and *Ajani Ogun* (1975) respectively. The era of filmmaking that followed was championed by the likes of Hubert Ogunde and other Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners. Despite their celluloid origins and in spite of being exhibited in cinemas, scholars and critics were reluctant to describe these popular films as cinema. The excuse could be accepted that film scholarship was in its infancy at the time and the field of cultural studies was dominated by literary works. Due to the legacy of the British colonisers, there was no local photographic infrastructure to support the films that were tagged “theatre on screens” due to their duplication of stage antics on film. They relied therefore on British companies to process their celluloid films. So, with the naira falling in value against the pound, these filmmakers faced a multi-pronged barrage from inflation, the loss of popularity of their films and stifling economic conditions.

When this coming together of political, social and economic circumstances ended the celluloid practice at the beginning of the 1990s, a new film practice sprouted on the back of *Living in Bondage* (1992), a VHS experiment by Okey Ogunjiofor and his financial backer, Kenneth Nnebue. This led to a proliferation of copycat projects that blossomed into a vibrant but informal film industry. By 2002, the industry acquired a reductionist acronym, Nollywood, when *The New York Times* article written by Norimitsu Onishi thrust a name that had been casually used within the industry as a term of endearment into the international film lexicon. Following phenomenal transnational growth, this industry hopped from VHS to VCD format, becoming UNESCO's second largest film industry in the world by 2009. Once again, despite its stupendous commercial success, this film practice was consistently denied the cinema taxonomy by critics and scholars, called a phenomenon, an empire, a video film industry, but seldom cinema.

Issues around over-production, saturation, lack of quality, satellite television broadcast, audience fatigue and piracy led to a decline in Nollywood's fortunes. But once again in a show of resilience, a new cinema-based and quality film practice morphed out of this depression. The new practice was driven by a crop of film school-trained practitioners who became active in the industry from circa 2006-2011. This practice was nicknamed New Nollywood. Following a remarkable growth in cinema infrastructure and culture, New Nollywood attracted interest and investment from Netflix, YouTube and Amazon Prime, some of Hollywood and the world's biggest streaming platforms. Despite these seismic strides, scholars and critics remained obstinate in their denial of cinema taxonomy to New Nollywood. Some scholars, in offering a token cinema association with New Nollywood generously diluted such references with television, suggesting that the industry had more affinity with television than with cinema and describing it as "small screen cinema". While this study found an umbilical link between television and every iterations of the Nigerian film industry, a dialectical analysis of Nollywood's cinema credentials should be predicated on the chronological, semantic, etymological and philosophical characterisation of the cinema term in order to distil its essence.

This was achieved through the analysis of the postulations of renowned film scholars including Andre Bazin, Trevor Ponech, Noel Carroll, Gregory Currie and Dudley Andrew, buttressed by contributions from a wide range of Nollywood practitioners. But before that, in an attempt to cover all the ramifications of the second research question, what is cinema, this study explored the origins of cinema, tracing its ontology from the experiments and discoveries by Eadweard Muybridge, Hermann Casler, Robert W. Paul, Thomas Edison and the Lumiere brothers, that led to the invention of the cinematograph, an amalgam of two Greek words from which cinema was coined.



That exploration led us to discover that early films or actualities as they were called were unstaged recordings of real life captured with a static camera. Then gradually, style and art were introduced into filmmaking with camera direction, followed by script writing, editing and introduction of multiple scenes and the concept of narrative continuity. This took the mundane, almost scientific filmmaking machine and made it into a flair art and marked the beginning of cinema's association with ostentatious ingenuity and style that have come to separate it from banal visual storytelling. Considerations about what constitutes this high art went to the very heart of this study's analysis of the cinema taxonomy.

In tackling the chosen Bazinian philosophy of cinema, it became clear that, despite the efforts of great film writers to intellectualise their searches for a definition of the term, it had proved a very difficult term to encapsulate. Dictionaries saw the term as the business and art of filmmaking and many Nollywood practitioners concurred with that simplistic characterisation, with only four percent of them attempting to deconstruct the term to discover its constituent parts. The above-named philosophers identified different variations of cinema precepts to establish what is required of a filmic project or practice to become cinema. It is pertinent to note that the relevance of many of the precepts recommended by the philosophers have been eroded by technological innovations and their mention here merely served an academic purpose.

Firstly, after lauding cinema's inherent ability to produce the likeness of the world in the making of which no man played a part, and failing in his books' titular quest to define what cinema is, Bazin, is able to identify three precepts which constituted cinema. He believes that in order to be cinema, a work must be a pictorial imagery, produced by photographic means and imbued with the semblance of movement. Modest requirements, if you think about it. However, the "produced by photographic means" requirement has been diminished by the

ability of CGI and animation to generate imagery from sources other than mere photography. Having said that, one of the most important aspects of Bazin's analysis is his plotting of filmic projects in concentric circles, with the feature film in the middle and other forms taking their places along the diameters. This provision opened up the cinema classification to documentaries, animations and indeed minority practices like Nollywood which can be seen as satellites caught in the centripetal cinema forcefield, however far from the feature film centre.

Ponech's contribution to this quest to define cinema is to create some doubt by hinting at the existence of two different cinemas and prevaricating on whether cinema truly had an essence. Ponech achieves a granular extension of Bazin's three precepts, by including storage in film (celluloid) and the use of a projector to take his version to five precepts. These two additional requirements have also been undermined by the availability of other video storage (hard drives, Solid State Drives [SSDs]) and video display apparatuses (televisions, computers, even mobile phones) respectively. Counterintuitively, he acknowledges that cinema's connection with culture, technology and art renders it susceptible to change, a feature that makes the term rather intractable. Crucially, he goes further to make no recommendations for quality of the filmic work before the cinema taxonomy can attach.

Noel Carroll elaborates on the five precepts by Ponech, reading each precept in a broader context. Worthy of mention are his introduction of spatial dislocation requirements to exclude live events, and particularly his attempt to future-proof his precepts with the insertion of the template into his fourth precept which incorporates recording and display methods other than film strips and projectors respectively. Other philosophers like Gregory Currie broadly concur with Carroll's precepts, and some like Peter Wollen goes as far as endorsing Bazin's notion of pure cinema in which cinema must find purity by destroying itself. This anti-aesthetic

concept, together with the repeated absence of style or quality requirement from all theorists open up the cinema taxonomy to Nollywood.

When every era of the Nigerian film industry was juxtaposed against these precepts, all, including the VCD Nollywood era met every liberal requirement. The implication was that on the basis of any of the versions of precepts by all the film philosophers reviewed, the cinema identity of these eras of Nollywood and indeed any other video recording should be irrefutable. It was in the hope of avoiding this undesirable outcome which will constitute a trivialisation of the cinema taxonomy that this study used its findings to attempt an enunciation of its own, up-to-date, contemporarily relevant principles of cinema taxonomy. The highlight of these principles included the introduction of multi-dimensional audio-visual content of appreciable length, in order to embrace three-dimensional and four-dimensional content, as well as contents of appreciable length other than feature films, like television series. It added augmented and mixed-reality environments to the principles and opened the methods for creating moving images to include CGI, AI and various forms of animation.

Crucially however, this study introduced the notion of quality or style as a component of its fourth principle for cinema classification. And because this element is subjective and idiosyncratic in nature, this study proposed the idea of whether the video and audio contained artefacts that affected the enjoyment of the film as an objective formula to measure it. Finally, it created a sixth principle to award the primary audience of the film the prerogative to make the unbiased calls for such issues such as the interference of the film's enjoyment and to address other issues around equality and decolonisation. This means that in a case of reviewing New Nollywood films, this prerogative to determine if there are artefacts that rise to levels which impinge on the enjoyment of the film should rest with Nigerian audiences. This postcolonial principle which rises above merely liking or disliking the films was unique and important to

ensure that films are measured in their own positivity and not on the one-size-fits-all metrics of the global North. This is because, according to Ponech, what counts as cinema should be up to us.

Juxtaposing this study's six principles on the various eras of the Nigeria film industry has provided a near-empirical commentary on their cinemanness. The celluloid era met the majority of the principles but fell on the quality imperative where Nigerian audience reviews of the films pointed to artefacts in the video and audio that impacted negatively on their enjoyment of the film. Such artefacts included the notorious editing problems as well as its many continuity issues. On its part, the Nollywood era had a very similar scorecard when set against the six principles, also stumbling on the quality issue due to its audiences' complaints about narrative inconsistencies, picture quality and sound problems.

However, the New Nollywood era, having ticked all the other boxes, also produced a different result in the quality stakes upon which its older cousins had tumbled. This was because New Nollywood had ironed out the majority of the stylistic and refinement issues that plagued earlier iterations of the Nigerian film industry and its local audiences have complained of no real artefacts that affected their appreciation of the films. Therefore, this study can say, with a certain confidence that emanates from a deeply researched, data driven analysis, that New Nollywood deserves a cinema classification, and scholars and critics should begin the process of correcting the injustice of this sustained cinema alterity, an error or omission which has lasted over ten years.

The second aim of this study was to examine the curious cases of the first independent Black film practices in the world – the race films of the 1920 and the blaxploitation films of the 1970s - and their romance with Hollywood studios that did not have a happy ending. The hope was to contrast them with what seems like a similar recent infiltration of studios into

another fiercely independent Black film practice - the New Nollywood era of the Nigerian film industry – to see similarities and contradictions and to engage in an exercise of prognostication as to what future awaits the Nigerian film industry as it enters the fourth decade of its existence.

African American cinema included films in which African Americans are both the subject and the object of consideration. In seeking analytic equivalence with New Nollywood, this study discovered a perplexing dearth of academic materials on the African American film industries of the last century. And for significant film movements with strategic local and international relevance, the vacuum that existed in their literature was almost inexplicable, underlining the invaluable achievements of a less than 30-year-old Nollywood scholarship in decolonising its field and elevating its voice to levels of near saturation and dominance. A lot of what was found on the movements that wrought the race films and the blaxploitation films were written recently in this century, away from the contemporaneous heat of the movements or their immediate aftermath.

This study traced the race *films* to a revolt against the abhorrent depiction of African Americans in Hollywood films, epitomised by the hugely successful film by D. W. Griffiths, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Anchored on the tenets of the uplift movement, Emmett J. Scott responded with *Birth of a Race* (1918), which despite its artistic and financial failures inspired African Americans into creating their own industry to champion self-representation. This industry was built on the enthusiasm of an audience hungry to see their own on the big screen. Oscar Micheaux was the movement's most notable filmmaker with titles like *Within Our Gates* (1920) and *Body and Soul* (1924). But soon, white producers became interested in race films and started hiring African Americans to front their production. This culminated in the white executives resorting to archetypal Hollywood portrayal of African Americans to boost flagging box office numbers. Faced with this existential paradox of championing African American

representation while being sustained by white money, the race film movement declined rapidly. And when Hollywood withdrew its support due to the films' lack of profitability, the film industry that was built on racial passion but without much of a business strategy could not survive afterwards.

Nearly 50 years later, this time on the coattails of the Black Power movement and its impatience and dissatisfaction with the genteel civil rights movement, another African American film practice evolved from the success of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1970) by Melvin Van Peeble. The movement, eventually called blaxploitation for its exploitation of black audiences, featured politically savvy African American lead characters with a penchant for violence and a preoccupation with sexual machismo. The growing African American blue-collar demographic at the time bought into these edgy racial films and flocked urban cinemas to watch them. Soon again, Hollywood studios noticed the commercial importance of an African American population which their made-for-whites-only films had never considered. At that time also, the Hollywood studios were reeling from the assault of television's popularity on their box office takings as they sought a new winning formula at the end of the cowboy era. Gradually, Hollywood studios, led by MGM, Warner Bros and America International Pictures, set up special operations to make blaxploitation films for African American audiences.

A boom occurred in the industry as they put Hollywood marketing impetus and cinema infrastructure at the disposal of the mediocre films that emerged. Successful titles such as *Shaft* (1972), *Superfly* (1972) and *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) followed, opening up the largest ever opportunity for African Americans to work in Hollywood. However, the sector soon became oversaturated with hastily-made blaxploitation films. In a move reminiscent of the one during the race films, white Hollywood studio executives started watering down the Black Power coloration of the films, exemplified by the likes of Martin Ritt's *Sounder* (1972), and African

American audiences started to turn away from the films. The films were also heavily criticised by the civil rights movement and its agencies such as the NAACP, who mounted campaigns to stop young people from watching them.

Hollywood studios discovered the blockbuster genre when Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) turned out a huge commercial success, drawing twenty eight percent of its audience from African Americans. Then *Jaws* (1975) by Stephen Spielberg confirmed that Hollywood studios did not have to make the increasingly unprofitable blaxploitation films anymore when the blockbusters have proved to be successful and racially omnivorous. So, by 1975, Hollywood studios stopped making blaxploitation films, withdrawing their finance and infrastructure from African American filmmakers. Once again, stripped of the ghetto structures that birthed the practice before the infiltration of Hollywood studios, these African American filmmakers could not continue without Hollywood support and the industry died, disappearing like it never occurred. Following the demise of the industry, its main African American practitioners were not reabsorbed into other Hollywood projects like their white colleagues. They were jettisoned, simply going from hero to zero in a blink of an eye. Furthermore, not a lot of books and articles were written and only a handful of documentaries were made about the industry despite its brief but impactful history.

This historization of the film movements was not enough. To fully appreciate the impact of Hollywood studios on the African American film movements of the twentieth century, and to dissect their ongoing romance with New Nollywood, a deeper understanding of the history and workings of Hollywood was essential. Hollywood began in 1907 as a minor geographical entity lying North West of downtown Los Angeles, Southern California. Its scenic exteriors and hot weather attracted filmmakers like Carl Laemmle and Thomas Ince from New York, which at the time was the hub of American filmmaking. When Griffiths joined

them and made his epic *Birth* in the area, the barren stretch of land, now called Hollywood, attracted more filmmakers and studios, growing into an integrated system of production, distribution and exhibition, where eighty percent of global film output was produced by the early 1920s. Hollywood was able to rise from being a mere New York City's satellite film hub to the largest filmmaking settlement in the world due to what has been called agglomeration economies, an accumulation of similar companies which generated group advantages that helped them to consolidate their market share to the detriment of other territories.

So, by the 1930s, the archetypal Hollywood studio structure had crystallised, with the vertically integrated big five (Paramount, MGM, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, Warner Bros and RKO) at the top. But more importantly, after the Second World War, Hollywood perfected its dispersed financing and production mechanism which allowed it to become financial fountainheads for film producers outside of Southern California and outside of the United States of America. This remote and vicarious control mechanism allowed Hollywood studios to invest in the African American film movements through proxies. It afforded them a certain nimbleness to exit without fanfare and consequence when they no longer saw commercial value in the partnerships.

It is the same dispersed contrivance that has also allowed Hollywood studios like Netflix and Amazon Prime to invest in New Nollywood, through platformisation, without as much as local postal addresses in Nigeria. So, with this comprehensive historical and contextual information on Hollywood and its contact with Nigerian and African American film movements, this study answered its third research question and while doing so, set out to attempt a conceptual delineation of Hollywood – encapsulating its agglomeration dynamics, its glossy and sophisticated aesthetics, its fragmented studio system and innovative marketing



and distribution mechanisms, its production fountainhead character and its ubiquity through vicarious relationships.

In answering the final research question about forecasting the future of New Nollywood, this study traced the journey of Nollywood in the embrace of Hollywood studios back to the launch of YouTube in Nigeria in 2011. Since that time, growth had been sluggish but steady in the sector. Netflix arrived in 2014 and went for broke in 2018 with the launch of Netflix Naija. The explosion of online engagement with New Nollywood during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 became the highlight for streaming in New Nollywood. Amazon Prime has since joined the tussle, producing mixed reactions from Nollywood practitioners who saw the ingress of global streamers variously as a challenge, an opportunity and a threat. But the events of January 2024 which saw Amazon Prime close its operations in Africa and the Middle East with immediate effect had led to a watershed moment for New Nollywood. It has hinted at an earlier occurrence of the eventual withdrawal that this study anticipated in the distant future. As the industry digested the impact of the Primexit, as it has been called, a dampening of the flurry of investment activities from Hollywood studios in the New Nollywood space became confirmed.

Concerning the prognosis for New Nollywood's future - post Hollywood studios - many Nollywood practitioners have strong opinions, with the consensus favouring a survival of the industry, predicated on regenerative shoots from parts of the industry that has been presently un-touched by the Netflix and Amazons of this world- old Nollywood. They believe that due to the multiplicity of monetisation mechanisms available today, New Nollywood's cultural identity, the legendary resilience of the industry and the invaluable support of its loyal audiences, Nollywood will not go the way of the African American film movements. The popular conclusion is that however sadly this fling with Hollywood studios ends, the

Nollywood industry has acquired an intrepid hybrid postcolonial identity, a sort of positive version of the Twoness that Du Bois teased. And finally, the industry that has been defined by its many challenges may not just survive, but also thrive.

Buoyed by the cumulative conviction from the foregoing, this study attempted a similar delineation of the conceptual boundaries of Nollywood as the unifying moniker for the contemporary Nigerian film industry (comprising old and New Nollywood), something that had been done with limited success within the burgeoning Nollywood scholarship. Although not a perfect definition, it tried to see Nollywood through the prism of its various genres, its quality of being made in Nigeria or made by dispersed Nigerian talent or money outside of Nigeria, its use of a fusion of oral tradition and traditional film narrative styles, its acting styles and aesthetics, its deep cultural significance and sustenance from its loyal audience.

This study has tried to wedge itself in the knowledge gap that existed in cultural scholarship regarding the absence of an empirical method for determining the cinema credentials of the Nigerian film industry in any of its many iterations. Prior to now, literature review had revealed that scholars and critics did base what was predominantly the refusal of the cinema taxonomy for Nollywood on arbitrary, whimsicality or subjective considerations, mainly predicated on western paradigms. There was no standardised measure for the cinema classification. And although Euro-American scholars have attempted to deconstruct the cinema term in order to ascertain its true constituents, the precepts they enumerated have not frequently been used empirically to judge the cinema credentials of film practices because they have been rendered obsolete by innovations. This study attempted to harmonise the assessment of cinemanness by adopting the precepts enunciated by these western scholars, which have been moderated with both the idea of current technological innovations and the notion of postcolonialism. The hybridized principles that emerged from this exercise has become the

most recent attempt to essentially distil cinema's components. The results from juxtaposing them, for the first time, against the unique character of various eras of the Nigerian film industry discountenanced both the Yoruba travelling theatre and old Nollywood's cinema claims while establishing New Nollywood's deserved entitlement for the cinema taxonomy. By this exercise, this study has attempted to create a harmonised measuring template which can be applied globally to decide the cinemanness of minority film practices, while simultaneously updating, decolonising and expanding the scope and realm of film philosophies championed by the likes of Bazin, Ponech and Andrew.

At the outset, this study discovered a startling scarcity of literature on the African American film movements of the 1920s and 1970s. In exploring the origins, the rise and the fall of the race films and the blaxploitation films, it has contributed to the sparse scholarship on those iconic but ignored film movements. And by further making the rather obvious Hollywood analogy between them and New Nollywood, this study has also introduced an association with a contemporary and similarly independent film movement. It has also brought an up-to-date relevance to the African American film movements, providing a continuum for the evaluation of the potential influences of Hollywood studios on Black film practices with any pretensions of independence or postcoloniality. This study takes pride in having achieved such cross-fertilisation of ideas between Nigerian and African-American cultural scholarship.

New Nollywood has faced the challenge, opportunity and the threat of an insidious infiltration by Hollywood studios since YouTube snuck into the Nigerian space with little fanfare in 2011. While a plethora of articles and studies have made this ingress their focus, none, to the knowledge of this study, has made the link with the only other independent film practices run by black people - the race films and the blaxploitation films – or used the experience of these movements under the spectre of Hollywood studios to forecast the future

of Nollywood. But while this study was predicating its prognosis for Nollywood on the departure of Hollywood studios in the distant future, the immediate cancellation of Amazon Prime's operations in Africa and the Middle East in January 2024 brought the startling possibility of that exodus into immediate currency. This near-prophetic timeliness inherent in this study has underlined its importance and relevance. It has also challenged optimistic assumptions about Nollywood while confirming the existential identity encounters that await the industry in the fourth decade of its existence.

Several attempts by different studies, particularly those from outside of Nigeria, to incorporate the voices of Nollywood practitioners into their research on the industry have been met with difficulty. The unwillingness of the practitioners to engage research studies with the required academic rigour have frustrated scholars and resulted in systemic inequalities that have silenced the voices of the same practitioners. This study has attempted to overcome this handicap by decolonising Nollywood scholarship and engendering a more inclusive participation from Nollywood practitioners. It has achieved this through exploiting its relationship within the industry to elicit participation, as well as employing a patient, adaptable methodology which includes a somewhat informal data gathering method such as WhatsApp, texts and voice notes. The result is the largest cohort of Nollywood insiders of any study in the industry, contributing enthusiastically to discussions that go to the identity, the features and the future of their industry. It is hoped that the success of this study's strategies will ignite scholarly interest and engender more routine participation from these practitioners in future studies to enrich them with invaluable views from the inside.

Based on its overall findings and subject to successfully completing this doctoral programme, it is the ardent desire of this writer to publish this research and any others empirically exploring the cinema classification of Nollywood, in its different eras, into a

compendium that will authoritatively and dialectically make the case with academic clarity. For it is such scholarly satiety on the subject that would begin to contest the arbitrary cinema taxonomy narrative of the past few decades concerning Nollywood. With regards to the increasingly inevitable deepening of relations with Hollywood studios, this study will also recommend the preservation of Nollywood's unique cultural ethos which has become one of its most distinguishing features as well as one of its strengths. While accepting the finance from Hollywood studios, this can be achieved by unashamedly projecting Nollywood's hybrid narrative style which incorporates folklore, celebrating its loudness in colour, personality and din, and continuing to boldly tell stories in Nigerian native languages and Nigerian pidgin English. Nollywood can also benefit from rejecting Hollywood studios' overbearing imposition of liberal values like sex, nudity, homosexuality and gender change. Additionally, strategic, reciprocal collaborations based on fair valuation and reasonable deals, between Hollywood studios and Nollywood practitioners in an equitable manner that prevents one from usurping the other, would also be vital.

This study believes that more intentional support from the Nigerian government should be geared towards the elevation of Nollywood to the status of a national cinema, instead of the potpourri of independent practices without a binding national character, that it is now. This will involve not only more targeted funding but also film-friendly policies and regulations. Under such provisions, the Nigerian government, as a cultural gatekeeper similar to the government of France, can pro-actively defend the industry's image as intrinsically tied to its own, championing the industry's development through legislation, funding and advocacy, and protecting Nollywood against opportunistic advances or indeed withdrawal from entities with the financial power that may skew conventional business processes. Nollywood becoming a national cinema may take away some of its rugged independence but it will at least protect it from itself.

This study further recommends that there should be a tax on foreign films showing in Nigerian cinemas and a levy on international companies platformising Nollywood (Netflix and Amazon Prime etc). The revenue generated can be used in training practitioners, procuring national infrastructure like cinemas, film equipment, studios and native streaming platforms which will cumulatively help in anchoring Nollywood's commercial foundations locally as it expands globally. It can also be used as an economic weapon to afford Nollywood film practitioners a fairer deal in a competitive arena of global capitalism where everything is sold to the highest bidder.

Finally, this study feels that the continued commercial miracle that is presently occurring on the YouTube platform - where humble Nigerian film practitioners like Mark Angel Comedy are truly exploiting Nigeria's huge population, the prospect of which attracted streamers like Netflix and Amazon Prime, but has mysteriously eluded them – deserves more study. How come that the slapstick short skits made on old Nollywood aesthetics are outperforming sophisticated New Nollywood films? And how is it that YouTube's simple monetisation process is translating to more revenue in foreign exchange for filmmakers than the trumpeted high-profile licensing from Netflix and Amazon Prime?

Furthermore, the full impact of the cancellation of Amazon Prime Africa on the revenue structure of New Nollywood and indeed its future merits deeper scholarly enquiry. How does it impact the attitudes of investors, filmmakers and the audience? What is the next big move for Netflix, left presently as the only streamer actively operating in the Nigerian space? Would Amazon Prime return with a new structure and strategy? Will other streamers like Paramount, Hulu and Disney+ convert their voyeuristic curiosities into bold investment steps? Whatever the answers, the world of Nollywood throws up ceaseless opportunities for expansion of African cultural scholarship into which this study has initiated a stimulating tangent.

The African American film movements of the last century, particularly the blaxploitation films of the 1970s, deserve more academic study to document and dissect the make-up and significance of one of the shortest film movements in American history, as well as learning the lessons from their legendary interface with Hollywood studios. This study also recommends for further study, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Nollywood industry, including the consolidation of streaming as the prime medium for engagement of audiences under its restrictive regime and its complimentary devastation of the gains made by the industry in terms cinema infrastructure and culture. Such studies will provide invaluable insights into what the industry has done incorrectly and how it can best prepare for the eventuality of such occurrences in the future.

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## APPENDIX

Below is a selection of interviews from Nollywood insiders. This selection includes extracts from an emailed response to the principal research questionnaire from Okechukwu Ogunjiofor, a transcribed one-on-one with Enyinna Nwigwe as well as a WhatsApp response to the research questionnaire from Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde.

### EXTRACT 1

**1. What is your name (as you would like it documented) and how long have you been associated with the Nollywood industry?**

My name is Okechukwu (Oke) Ogunjiofor popularly known as “The Father of Nollywood”. I have been in the Nigerian film and television industry since 1985, (38 years) and subsequently pioneered Nollywood, the digital format for film making in 1992, (31 years) ago.

**2. How would you describe your role in the industry?**

I would describe myself as a pioneer, as a trail blazer. You see, after my pioneering Nollywood with “Living in Bondage” 1992, “Circle Of Doom” 1993, “Nneka the pretty serpent” 1994/95, “Brotherhood of Darkness” 1996 and other hits, the whole world took notice of our industry and other distinguished colleagues joined the fray. Since then, my role has been that of a midwife, to continue to deepen the acceptance of this phenomenon called Nollywood to the rest of the world. It was for this reason that I started The African Audio-Visual Awards (TAVA AWARDS) in 2009 to raise a common benchmark for film making among the practitioners in Nollywood.

Nollywood has gone through four defining epochs, and with all humility, I have been relevant in the emergence of these epochs with other colleagues. Our role has been that of creating locally themed but globally relevant contents, digging up indigenous stories not only to entertain Nollywood’s growing global audience but to research and document the lives and times of our heroes and heroine’s past in order to re-write the negative narratives and prejudices against Africa in the global arena, and also create the impetus upon which Africa’s growing young population would stand and aspire for higher ideals.

In keeping with our vision as the “Father of Nollywood”, I strive to constantly chart a new course for others to follow via my character and the way I live, the content I create, training and mentoring opportunities for budding youths, especially to carve niches for themselves in the movement towards the investors’ market. It is an honour to constantly show what is possible so that younger producers and investors can have a template upon which to base their calculations and decisions.

**3. What is your view on the origin of the term Nollywood?**

It was Matt Steinglass who derogatorily referred to us as Nollywood in his article printed in New York Times Magazine in 2002 titled “Step Aside Hollywood and Bollywood, here comes Nollywood”. In that article he took an appraisal of our new industry, he compared Nigerian film-making style with the more established Hollywood and Bollywood. His satirical conclusion was akin to saying that we were doing – “Nothing near the Wood”, - “Nollywood”.

Nevertheless, “Nollywood” has become a name for the Nigerian movie industry, African movies from neighbouring countries, and in-fact all African cinema made in the “Nollywood” style.

Nollywood has become the voice for rebranding Nigeria and Africa to the rest of the world, the platform on which the teeming unemployed youths of Africa find expression. Indeed, it has become the mirror with which the entire world reflects on Africa.

At the beginning, our major obstacle was acceptance and recognition, everyone tried to kill Nollywood at its inception; no one gave it a chance globally. Older filmmakers criticized our industry and called it nonsense but later they joined the nonsense. While some local journalists praised the feat, others took us to the cleaners rather than comparing our experiment, especially quality-wise with foreign films. But here we are still today by the grace of God.

#### **4. Is the ‘wood’ term good or bad for the industry and why?**

Although the creators meant it for bad, we adopted it instead and it has become a good nomenclature for our practice in the global film space. So far, outside Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood, there is no other film industry with a “wood” attached to its name. Who knows, it might be because of this “wood” that our industry is rated among the tripods at the top of successful film making nations in the world.

#### **5. Trace a brief history of the Nigerian film industry or Nollywood, going as far back as you have knowledge of.**

You see, in the 60s, & 70s Nigeria had a very vibrant cinema industry operated by foreign businessmen. Then, foreign film production companies like (Warner Brothers, Sunny Studios, Universal Studios etc) produced and distributed films around the globe, Nigeria inclusive. Then also, notable Nigerian filmmakers like Mr. Ifoghale Amata, Chief Eddie Ugboma, Chief Ola Balogun, Chief Adeyemi Adelove Afolayan, Mallam Brendan Shehu, Mr. Francis Oladele, Pa Hubert Ogunde etc were producing classic movies and had them distributed through the Cinema chains built, managed and administered by Americans, Europeans and other foreigners in Nigeria. This was before 1972/75, when the indigenization decree of General Olusegun Obasanjo took away ownership of most of these cinemas (and other foreign concerns) in Nigeria from the foreign filmmakers and drove them away. So, Nigerians, who didn’t have the competence, didn’t have the resources, nor the administrative capacity to manage the business side of filmmaking then were saddled with the responsibility of manning and servicing these cinema houses across the nation.

Then, for as long as the locals didn’t have resources to make enough movies and the competence required to manage film business, it meant that a lacuna was created waiting for smart businessmen to fill the gap. It was also impossible to get the ‘Big Fives’ who were the major studios making films abroad to bring their products to distribute in Nigeria since they could not have control of their products to the final consumers, how would they get their monies back? So, they short-circuited Nigeria from the content supply chain and the gap became even wider.

It took quite a while for the few filmmakers I mentioned earlier who tried but couldn’t make enough movies to satisfy the hungry audiences across Nigeria. So, cinema-going culture began to nosedive and the cinemas themselves began to decay. Amidst so many challenges like infrastructural decay, epileptic power supply, and then insecurity to lives and properties in a country that has so much of downturns in its economy, it was a matter of time before the cinema-going culture finally died. Unscrupulous businessmen and pirates cashed in on this lacuna.

Those few indigenous filmmakers mentioned above were making films on celluloid. They had very minimal competence in terms of finance; they would gather some local and foreign crew who worked with them in order to tell the stories. But then, celluloid filmmaking has always been cumbersome. If one wanted to make movies on celluloid, one needed to have a lot of money, have access to foreign exchange because most of the materials you would need were obtained from abroad. The film stock is bought from abroad; storage is not even easy here because you need some temperature range to store the film stocks. Then, when you finish production, you still need to travel outside to get the neck-cuts, matching done during the development of the negatives...in the studio. And then you edit, print, package, run into reels – the reels that we then use at the cinemas. So, if one doesn't have the technical competence and money for such long-term investment, one couldn't even dabble into film production.

It was at that period that I left Television College Jos where I graduated in film and television productions in 1987 and headed straight to Lagos to find purpose and destiny for my life.

When we left school, because there were no platforms for us to practice our trade, it was like we had gone to school to waste our time. So, we needed to reinvent the modus operandi of the way things were done in the film sector in order for us to be relevant. It meant that we either reinvented ourselves and the structures available or we just died unemployed. **SIMPLY PUT:** The Nigerian cinema industry was at a cross road and a “Messiah” was needed to find the new ways of doing the old things.

It was a period of employment embargo everywhere in Nigeria. The Nigerian Television Authority that would have readily absorbed a few of us could not because the government was going through a turbulent economic crisis. So, most of us who really wanted to make a living out of cinema decided there must be something we could do. And, one of the things I thought to myself was to use an ordinary hand-held VHS camera to tell my story to the world. **I would take the cinema to the homes of people instead of taking people to the cinemas.** In school we were taught that the story-telling quality of a picture is the same, no matter the format.

Please keep in mind that no one was in doubt that the quality of the VHS camera I intended to use was inferior to cine cameras. No one was fooled; we knew the difference between the quality of the big gauge compared to VHS. The disparity is huge. But I just wanted to survive! And, I wasn't going to be talking about quality when I needed money to feed myself. So, I said, if I could get a VHS camera, with about ₦150,000 budget, I could make a movie, a low-quality movie though, low budget movie, and put it out there in the homes of the teeming cinema audience hungry for the cinema experience. I wasn't going to take the film to the cinemas that were nonexistent. All I planned to do was put the film in cassettes and take them to the homes of people. So, the model was, take cinema to the homes of people instead of taking people to the cinema. My business plan was also simple. Produce a film for N150K and sell each cassette at N300 only. This is of-course excluding all other logistics and incidental costs.

Example A. Cost of production: N150,000 + N60,000 (cost of 1,000 VHS 3 hrs cassettes @ N60each) sold at N300 each = N300,000. Profit = N90,000.

Example B. Cost of production: N150,000 + N600,000 (cost of 10,000 VHS 3 hrs cassettes @ N60each) sold at N300 each = N3,000,000. Profit = N2,250,000.

Example C. Cost of production: N150,000 + N6,000,000 (cost of 100,000 VHS 3 hrs cassettes @ N60each) sold at N300 each = N30,000,000. Profit = N23,850,000.

So, with this idea, I hit the road searching for investors, but no headway. I knocked on many doors; nobody was ready to buy into my idea because it had never been done before. I floated from job to job and finally took to the streets to hawk. I did that for four years – from 1988 to 1992 thinking I could raise N150,000 (less than \$15,000USD at that time) to make my film.

After four years of hawking on the streets of Lagos Nigeria to raise this fund, God finally smiled on me in 1992 when I got a referral from Mrs. Ruth Osu to Chief Kenneth Nnebue (an electronics merchant who imports empty VHS cassettes for sale at Oshodi market) who then agreed to invest in *Living in Bondage* when I pitched the idea and the business model to him. The partnership set to work, I produced the film while Chief Nnebue financed and marketed it. Within one month, it was a breakaway success. A new industry was born; later to be called Nollywood. Perhaps, because Chief Kenneth Nnebue sponsored the film, marketed the film and carried the promotional campaigns of the film in his (Nek Video Links) company's name it became so easy to associate him with the idea than the street boy who God used to make it all happen. But this has got to change.

**6. What is your view on the reluctance of critics and academics to use cinema in describing Nollywood?**

Their reluctance is typical of the attitude of the West to always deride every innovation or societal change that does not have the West as its origin. It is on record that before George Lucas Jnr shot *Star Wars* with digital hand held camera we had shot *Living in Bondage* in 1992, *Circle of doom 1&2* 1993, *Nneka the pretty serpent 1&2* 1994/95, *Brotherhood of darkness* 1996 and others with digital hand-held cameras, yet the world gives him the credit for re-defining film-making because we are not from the West.

Giving credit to George Lucas Jnr for pioneering digital film-making in the world is erroneous and should be corrected, yet my conclusion here would be, if George Lucas and the rest of Hollywood professionals describe the films they make in this new dispensation of digital revolution in terms of cinema, and academics and critics acknowledge them to be so, it will only be hypocritical for them not to acknowledge Nollywood in the same terms as cinema.

**7. What would you consider to be cinema and how, in your view, does Nollywood compare?**

igiglobal.com describes cinema as “the recording of motion pictures”. Merriam -Webster Dictionary says “The meaning of Cinema is motion picture”, while Dictionary.com defines cinema as “the art or business of making films”. In my view, if the above definitions are actually the global definitions for cinema, then Nollywood cannot be described differently or with anything less since Nollywood is acclaimed globally as the second film making industry in the world by volume only behind Bollywood.

**8. What era of Nollywood do you think represents its best claim to cinemahood? (Please use reference to individual films to underline your point)**

I think the period that represents our best claim to cinemahood would be the period between (2008-2013, till date)

After the 2<sup>nd</sup> market crash of Nollywood, the industry went through another defining moment. Then we entered the third epoch when New Metro, DSTV/Africa Magic appeared on the scene to give Nollywood content visibility around Africa and the world. Then followed by Silverbird cinemas, Ozone cinemas, Genesis Cinemas, later FilmOne Cinemas and the market bounced back with Stephanie Okereke's “Through the glass” 2008, Kunle Afolayan's “Figurine” 2009,



Chineze Anyaene's "Ije" 2010, and Mahmood Ali Balogun's "Tango with me" 2010. This period was characterized by the following:

- Well researched stories deliberately made for the big screen cinema audience.
- Good screenplays of locally themed, globally relevant stories.
- Big budget meant to acquire top notch equipment, top notch cast and crew, for high production values, exotic set design, costumes, props and global sounds.
- Cinema distribution with big box office numbers..
- So, this continued into 2013 when the federal government of Nigeria through Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Coordinating Minister of Nigerian economy re-based our economy and said Nollywood's valuation was \$5.1 billion accounting for about 3.1 percent of the country's gross domestic product GDP.
- They announced that Nollywood was a game changer and that they will energize it with some grants for filmmakers.
- Then enter global streaming platforms like Iroko, Netflix etc to expand the distribution opportunities for Nollywood content.
- In 2014, that announcement gave rise to the ProjectAct initiative for the creative industry.
- Subsequently the Bank of Industry NollyFund sprang up with collateral free loans to practitioners.
- In 2021 The Central Bank of Nigeria in collaboration with Banker's committee announced a N500m facility to assist the entertainment industry.
- Suddenly, almost all of the banks opened Nollywood desks in their banks to enable practitioners in the creative space access easy funds.

**9. Nollywood has been described as 'hastily-made...disposable forms of popular entertainment' with no political significance. What is your response to this view? (Please use reference to individual films to underline your point)**

On the contrary, Nollywood is a product of a carefully crafted business plan, a simply planned cause of action to demystify Celluloid filmmaking which was very cumbersome in order to make film making more inclusive and pocket friendly for young filmmakers with big ideas but little or no funding to participate. It was our experiment to make film with hand held digital cameras that took out big corporations like Agfa, Kodak, Tudor and other film stock manufacturers. It was a creative attempt to deliberately demystify celluloid, and it has succeeded globally, but only the big studios afraid of losing huge investments of centuries are still romancing celluloid.

Before 1992, those shooting pure celluloid films in Nigeria could never guarantee us an industry. They couldn't play the international politics in film production and distribution and so they became echoes of the western world, collecting foreign grants just to amplify the propaganda of the west against Africa. It was like an elitist club, a closed circuit of few people who protected their trade from outsiders. Those who didn't belong to their clique were left to die unemployed. What was the problem then? There was very little money and technical know-how to sustain an all-inclusive industry. Film making technique was never professionally democratized nor was it inclusive and pocket friendly for the younger generations to practise.

Consequently, there were no jobs, cinemas were comatose, nothing was working, films were not being made and stage performances were not what one could depend on. How many times would you have to rehearse a stage play (maybe months) and perform for one day or so and you are paid a pittance? Was that what we were going to depend on? So, I said to myself, that

we must reinvent the practice to make it all inclusive and pocket friendly because we can't die unemployed. There has to be a way out, to break away from hunger and joblessness. The big idea was to "take cinema to the people instead of taking films to the non-existent cinemas". That was the only way to demystify celluloid and cinema distribution to make the practice more inclusive and pocket friendly, and that was what we did and *Living in Bondage* came in 1992. Yes, Nollywood may have started with low budget-low production value films at inception but today our recent films like "Amina" are enjoying global attention in 190 countries through a global streaming platform - Netflix and so many Nollywood films are delivering huge box numbers at the cinemas locally.

**10. How would you describe the present state of the Nollywood film industry as of August 2023? (Please use reference to individual films to underline your point)**

The Nollywood industry has continued to grow in leaps and bounds (story, technical and ROI) especially since global streaming giants took notice of the huge content possibilities in Nollywood and began to stream our contents to the world. In 2021 Okechukwu Ogunjiofor & Izu Ojukwu's film, "Amina" began the documentation of the life and times of African heroes and heroines through film. It became a global success that paved the way for so many films of epic nature. Amina became the first Nigerian film to make global top 10 list on Netflix in 190 countries around the globe with so many local and international awards including the most prestigious Best Overall Film in Africa at the AMVCA 2022.

Since then, other films of its ilk and too many others to mention here have been made for the global audience including the most recent 2023 release titled *Jagu-Jagun* by Femi Adebayo.

**11. What is your experience of the entry of Hollywood through the likes of Netflix, Amazon and Paramount into the Nollywood space?**

The entrance of Hollywood into Nollywood through the likes of Netflix, Amazon, Paramount etc is a welcome development when we consider the expansion of the industry financially and technically. Their entrance has created a competition of sorts which underscores the importance of the Nollywood content industry to global entertainment. Their entrance means more jobs, more creative activities and ancillary services, more distribution opportunities for the practitioners, more exposure of our content on the global stage and ultimately more money to all concerned.

**12. In your view, how has Nollywood films or indeed the film industry changed since Hollywood's arrival? (Please use reference to specific films to underline your point)**

The arrival of Hollywood into Nollywood signposts a period of huge production and distribution opportunities for good and creatively made content for global audiences. Since their arrival, it is no longer funding or distribution that is Nollywood's problem but the capacity of the professionals to deliver indigenous African stories in their raw formula for the global audience that is the issue. Their coming signifies that the world is hungry to consume well researched, well told African stories made with global pictures and universal sounds. And only those professionals in Nollywood with the requisite capacities to meet the rules will be in business.

**13. Commenting on the arrival of Hollywood into the industry, some people have said that Nollywood would ultimately lose its soul to Hollywood. Based on your experience or research, what are your thoughts on that? (Please use reference to specific films to underline your point)**

Yes, the coming of Hollywood into Nollywood could spell doom for our industry if industry practitioners do not take heed. If care is not taken, it will be a repeat of what happened between Nollywood film makers and their Marketers before the 2<sup>nd</sup> market crash in 2005. When the marketers left their role as marketers and began to fund films as executive producers, they began to change the rules of the game. Then they graduated to producers and directors with no requisite training, began to determine what story was produced, who played in the film and was not driven only by quantity and profit. Soon they began to ban professional actors who insisted that industry rules must be observed. This led to the 2<sup>nd</sup> crash of the market and the industry.

You see, there are a few factors that endeared Nollywood to the world from inception, which is why they have taken notice of what we are doing. Such values, I would plead with my colleagues that we retain. The resilience, the ingenuity and prolific nature of our industry is a factor that labelled Nollywood a phenomenon. Our model of filmmaking is quite different and experimental to the rest of the world. Nollywood is about finding new ways to do the old things. It is about the low-cost approach to achieving big picture effects.

Consequently, the greatest obstacle facing Nollywood presently is the mistake of benchmarking Nollywood products with foreign films, especially Hollywood. The drive to conform with Hollywood standards is gradually eroding the Nollywood brand. Talk about he who pays the piper dictating the tunes. There were reasons Nollywood products compelled the whole world to pay attention to our style of filmmaking. But gradually, owing to foreign investments especially from production and streaming giants, and the quest to compel every content to be like Hollywood, we are beginning to lose those unique flavours that distinguish our products from all others. While we cannot argue that the Nollywood quality could still be improved, yet, we have carved out a niche for ourselves in the global film market space, a niche that if tweaked a little bit with a little more funding, and a little more investment in distribution structures, and a little more technical details, Nollywood brand of filmmaking will soon crystallize just like the India's has, just like the Chinese has, just like the America's Hollywood film industry has, without losing authenticity.

#### **14. What do you know of the Black American film movements of last century? (Race films of the 1920s and the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s)**

Although my knowledge here may not be much, I think that the Race films and the Blaxploitation films are two sides of the same coin. While the Race films of the 1920s were tailor made and funded by white folks in Hollywood on themes that appeal directly to the emotions of black audiences, the Blaxploitation films which came later in the 1970s were not very much different except that they drew most of their thematic connection from slavery and the brutal treatments that slaves were subjected to before then.

Both exploited the emotions, the fears, the insecurities, the lifestyles, the sex, the habits, the music and crimes inherent in the black communities in those days. The funding and production of the two genres were dominated by white folks and the films were hugely successful at the box office, although full of prejudice in execution and interpretations until blacks ventured into them to take control of their narratives. Then Hollywood typically pulled the carpet. They began to cast the leading lights among the blacks into mainstream Hollywood films and that spelt the death kernel of the movement.

**15. Being that these independent black film movements, just like Nollywood died after Hollywood infiltrated them and undermined them from the inside, how do you see Nollywood faring with Hollywood in town?**

See my thoughts in 13 above

**16. If you think Nollywood will go the way of Black American film movements and be suffocated by Hollywood, why do you think so and how do you believe Nollywood can be saved?**

As I have said earlier, there is a common saying that he who pays the piper dictates the tunes. To avoid being swallowed up by Hollywood, Nollywood must avoid the mistake of benchmarking Nollywood products with foreign films, especially Hollywood. We must avoid the drive to conform with Hollywood standards in order not to gradually erode the Nollywood brand. We must stick to those reasons why Nollywood products compelled the whole world to pay attention to our style of film-making. We must define and stick to our industry standards when accepting foreign investments especially from production and streaming giants who may want to compel every of our content to be like Hollywood. We must take charge of the creative process in order to preserve those unique flavours that distinguish our products from all others. While we cannot argue that the Nollywood quality could still be improved, yet, we must strive to improve our film industry without losing her authenticity.

**17. If on the other hand you believe that Nollywood would survive and thrive with Hollywood's presence, why do you think so? What are the elements that bode well for the partnership? Or what in Nollywood would account for its resilience?**

Like I said in 13 above, there are a few factors that endeared Nollywood to the world from inception, which is why they have taken notice of what we are doing. Such values, if well retained, would preserve and protect our industry. The resilience, the ingenuity and prolific nature of our industry is a factor that labelled Nollywood a phenomenon. Our model of filmmaking is still quite different and experimental to the rest of the world. Nollywood is about finding new ways to do the old things. It is about the low-cost approach to achieving big picture effects. Nollywood is the people, it is in the mind and not a place.

**18. Looking at present trends and taking everything into account, in what form do you envisage the Nollywood film industry to be next ten years from now?**

Presently, Nollywood is cruising to its final frontier, the investors market. In 10 years, Nollywood would have consolidated its position in the global demand conscience of our teeming audiences, Nollywood would have become the go-to place for investors and content creators who desire good content with huge ROI.

**END**

## **EXTRACT 2**

**1. What is your name and how long have you been associated with the Nollywood industry?**

My name is Enyinna Nwigwe. I have been associated with Nollywood since my first movie role in 2003 titled 'Wheel of Change'

**2. How would you describe your role in the industry?**

I am popularly known as an actor. However I am also oftentimes involved in core production.

### **3. What is your view on the origin of the term Nollywood?**

The term "Nollywood" is used to refer to the Nigerian film industry, similar to Hollywood and Bollywood. It's generally believed to have originated in the early 2000s by combining "Nigeria" and "Hollywood." This term highlights the industry's significance and influence in African cinema. The origin of the term dates back to the early 2000s, traced to an article in *The New York Times*.

### **4. Is the 'wood' term good or bad for the industry and why?**

I believe that the use of the term "wood" in "Nollywood" is not inherently good or bad for the industry. It's simply a linguistic choice to create a likeness with well-known film industries like Hollywood and Bollywood. While some people might see it as a catchy and recognizable way to identify the Nigerian film industry, others might argue that it could lead to comparisons that may not always accurately reflect the unique qualities of Nollywood. Ultimately, whether it's considered positive or negative depends on individual perspectives and opinions.

### **5. Trace a brief history of the Nigerian film industry or Nollywood, going as far back as you have knowledge of.**

From research, the origins of Nollywood can be traced back to the late 1960s and early 1970s with the production of the first Nigerian films. These films were often produced by foreign filmmakers and focused on historical and cultural themes. Towards the 1980s, the Nigerian film industry began to grow significantly with the emergence of indigenous filmmakers producing movies in local languages. The advent of home video technology played a crucial role in this expansion, allowing for the distribution of films to a wider audience.

The 1990s marked a turning point for Nollywood. The industry saw an explosion in production, driven by low budgets, quick production cycles, and stories that resonated with local audiences. These films often dealt with social issues and everyday life in Nigeria.

Nollywood's popularity spread across Africa and even reached the diaspora.

We became commercially relevant in 1991-1992 when actors and producers came together, created their own movies, and sold them on DVDs. This opened up a new avenue for epic stories set in times before ours, often revolving around rituals and a young man's struggle to make ends meet, getting influenced by friends to get into the game to make money, as seen in the movie "Living in Bondage" which set Nollywood on its commercial path. These themes influenced subsequent films.

### **6. What is your view on the reluctance of critics and academics to use cinema in describing Nollywood?**

I think the reluctance of some critics and academics to use the term "cinema" when describing Nollywood may stem from various factors. Nollywood has a unique production and distribution model that differs from traditional cinematic practices found in Hollywood or other established film industries. This model often involves quick and low-budget productions, frequent use of video formats, and direct-to-video distribution, which might not align with the conventional understanding of cinema.

However, the reluctance to use "cinema" might unintentionally overlook the significant cultural and artistic contributions of Nollywood. While the industry's production methods and aesthetics might differ, its impact on storytelling, cultural representation, and social discourse is undeniable. Nollywood is still evolving and its production practices continue to diversify,

it's worth considering a more inclusive perspective that acknowledges its place within the broader cinematic landscape, even if it challenges traditional definitions of cinema.

### **7. What would you consider to be cinema and how, in your view, does Nollywood compare?**

Cinema can be broadly defined as the art and technology of creating and projecting moving images to an audience, typically in a theatrical or cinematic setting. It involves various elements such as storytelling, cinematography, editing, sound design, and visual effects to create a cohesive audio-visual experience.

Nollywood, while having its own unique characteristics, aligns with many aspects of this definition. However, Nollywood's distinctiveness comes from its specific production methods, distribution models, and cultural context.

Compared to traditional cinema, Nollywood's production cycles are often faster, budgets are lower, and films are frequently shot on video. The industry has historically focused on catering to local audiences with themes and narratives that resonate with them. It has also played a role in shaping societal conversations and addressing social issues in Nigeria and beyond.

While Nollywood might not conform to all the traditional norms of cinema, it has still managed to create a massive and influential body of work. It's essential to recognize and appreciate Nollywood's unique contributions to global storytelling and its impact on cultural representation, even as the term "cinema" may take on different nuances when applied to the local industry.

### **8. What era of Nollywood do you think represents its best claim to cinemahood? (Please use reference to individual films to underline your point)**

Pinpointing a specific era in Nollywood as its "best claim to cinemahood" is subjective and can vary based on individual perspectives. However, one era that often stands out for its notable contributions to production quality, storytelling, and international recognition is the "New Nollywood" era of the late 2000s and 2010s.

There was a joint effort during this time to improve production standards, acting quality, and storytelling depth. A few films from this era that underline Nollywood's progress toward cinemahood include:

"Ijé: The Journey" (2010) Directed by Chineze Anyaene, this film gained attention for its production values, including cinematography, editing, and performances. It was also recognized for being one of the highest-grossing Nigerian films at the time.

HALF OF A YELLOW SUN (2013) Based on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, this film directed by Biyi Bandele garnered international attention for its historical narrative and performances by acclaimed actors like Chiwetel Ejiofor and Thandie Newton

THE WEDDING PARTY 1&2(2016 & 2017): Directed by Kemi Adetiba, this romantic comedy became a major box office success and highlighted Nollywood's ability to produce crowd-pleasing, high-quality entertainment.

These films, among others, demonstrate Nollywood's progression in terms of production values, narrative complexity, and international recognition. They exemplify a period in which the industry actively worked to enhance its cinematic quality while retaining its unique cultural identity. However, it's important to note that Nollywood continues to evolve, and subsequent eras might also hold their own claim to cinemahood based on different criteria.

**9. Nollywood has been described as ‘hastily-made...disposable forms of popular entertainment’ with no political significance. What is your response to this view? (Please use reference to individual films to underline your point)**

The view that Nollywood produces "hastily-made...disposable forms of popular entertainment" with no political significance is a limited perspective that overlooks the diversity and complexity of the industry's output. While it's true that Nollywood has a history of producing films with varying levels of production quality, it's important to recognize that the industry has also produced films of depth, substance, and political significance. For instance, the film *GIDI BLUES* (2016), directed by Femi Odugbemi. This romantic drama not only explores the dynamics of love and relationships but also touches on important societal issues, including urbanization, gentrification, and the challenges faced by people in Lagos, Nigeria. The film's portrayal of the changing urban landscape and its impact on the lives of ordinary citizens reflects a political undercurrent.

Another example is "93 Days" (2016), directed by Steve Gukas. This film tells the true story of the medical professionals who worked to contain the Ebola outbreak in Nigeria. It highlights the challenges faced by healthcare workers and the government's response to a public health crisis. "93 Days" sheds light on political and governance issues within the context of a major health emergency.

Furthermore, the biopic "BADAMASI: Portrait of a General " (2021), directed by Obi Emelonye , Based on real events, Badamasi follows the life of a Nigerian Army General(Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida) who rules the country during a time rife with tribalism and ethnic tensions

These examples demonstrate that Nollywood is not solely focused on disposable entertainment but also engages with meaningful political and societal themes. While there might be films that fit the description of "hastily-made," it's important to avoid generalizing the entire industry based on a subset of its output. Nollywood's capacity to address relevant political and social issues through storytelling deserves acknowledgment and appreciation.

**10. How would you describe the present state of the Nollywood film industry as of August 2023? (Please use reference to individual films to underline your point)**

As of August 2023, Nollywood continues to evolve and maintain its status as one of the world's most prolific film industries. The industry has seen improvements in production quality, storytelling, and global recognition.

Some recent films have showcased the industry's growth and diversit :

*OLOTURE* (2019) Directed by Kenneth Gyang, this film delves into the dangerous world of human trafficking and prostitution. Its gritty realism and social commentary on such a critical issue underscore Nollywood's engagement with important societal topics.

*NAMATSE WAHALA* (2020) Directed by Hamisha Daryani Ahuja, this romantic comedy showcases Nollywood's ability to collaborate with other film industries. The film is a Nigerian-Indian production that explores the challenges of an intercultural relationship.

These films, among others, reflect Nollywood's efforts to produce works that go beyond surface-level entertainment and engage with relevant societal issues. While challenges such as piracy and distribution still exist, Nollywood's trajectory appears to be one of growth and increasing recognition on the global stage.

**11. What is your experience of the entry of Hollywood through the likes of Netflix, Amazon and Paramount into the Nollywood space?**

The industry's expansion into global streaming platforms has allowed for wider distribution and exposure to international audiences. Personally, during the COVID pandemic (lockdown) a lot of people around the world acquired tastes for diverse content, I received emails from new fans across Europe who had just gotten into the Nollywood catalogues on Netflix & Prime videos.

Also, to meet the standards set by these platforms, there's been a push for higher production quality in Nollywood films. Filmmakers are striving to create content that matches the technical and storytelling standards expected by these international platforms.

**12. In your view, how has Nollywood films or indeed the film industry changed since Hollywood's arrival? (Please use reference to specific films to underline your point)**

In my view, there has been significant growth in Production standards, Storytelling diversity, global reach, collaboration & cross-cultural impact, Economic impact (forex). The influx of international platforms has injected more financial resources into the Nollywood ecosystem. This has led to the creation of more jobs in the industry and further contributes to its growth.

**13. Commenting on the arrival of Hollywood into the industry, some people have said that Nollywood would ultimately lose its soul to Hollywood. Based on your experience or research, what are your thoughts on that? (Please use reference to specific films to underline your point)**

The concern that Nollywood might "lose its soul" to Hollywood with the increased presence of Hollywood studios and platforms is a valid consideration, but it's also a nuanced topic. While the influx of international influence can lead to changes, it doesn't necessarily mean Nollywood will lose its unique identity. Nollywood has a rich history and cultural significance that continues to shape its output.

One way to look at it is through the lens of cultural exchange and adaptation rather than outright loss. Nollywood can evolve by incorporating global best practices while still retaining its distinct characteristics. For example, the film "The Ghost and the House of Truth" (2019) directed by Akin Omotoso, while addressing universal themes of grief and justice, remains firmly rooted in Nigerian culture and context.

Additionally, collaborations between Nollywood and Hollywood can lead to innovative storytelling that bridges cultures. Films like "Namaste Wahala" (2020) directed by Hamisha Daryani Ahuja exemplify how cultural intersections can create engaging narratives while celebrating both Nigerian and Indian cultures.

It's important for Nollywood to maintain a balance between embracing international standards and preserving its own voice. By doing so, the industry can continue to evolve without necessarily losing its soul. Filmmakers and stakeholders in Nollywood have a role in shaping this evolution and ensuring that the industry remains authentic to its roots while embracing new opportunities for growth.



#### **14. What do you know of the Black American film movements of last century? (Race films of the 1920s and the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s)**

The Black American film movements of the last century had a significant impact on the representation of African Americans in cinema and played a crucial role in shaping the industry's cultural landscape.

1. Race Films of the 1920s: During the early 20th century, racial segregation was prevalent, and African Americans were often marginalized or stereotyped in mainstream films. In response to this, the "race film" movement emerged. These were independently produced films that featured all-Black casts and were made primarily for Black audiences. Notable films from this era include "The Homesteader" (1919) directed by Oscar Micheaux and "Within Our Gates" (1920) also directed by Oscar Micheaux. These films addressed social issues and sought to challenge stereotypes.
1. Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: The Blaxploitation era emerged in the 1970s and was characterized by the production of films that targeted urban Black audiences. These films often featured action-packed stories, charismatic antiheroes, and urban settings. Notable Blaxploitation films include "Shaft" (1971) directed by Gordon Parks and "Super Fly" (1972) directed by Gordon Parks Jr. While these films faced criticism for sometimes perpetuating negative stereotypes, they also provided a platform for Black talent and addressed contemporary issues facing Black communities.

Both of these film movements were responses to the lack of representation and the misrepresentation of African Americans in mainstream cinema. They paved the way for greater diversity and authenticity in storytelling, allowing Black filmmakers and actors to showcase their talents and tell stories that resonated with their communities. These movements continue to be acknowledged for their historical and cultural significance in shaping the trajectory of African American cinema.

#### **15. Being that these independent black film movements, just like Nollywood died after Hollywood infiltrated them and undermined them from the inside, how do you see Nollywood faring with Hollywood in town?**

The impact of Hollywood's involvement in different film movements, including the Black American film movements you mentioned, has varied over time and situations. While there might be instances where Hollywood's influence led to challenges for independent movements, it's not necessarily accurate to say that these movements died solely due to Hollywood's presence. Factors such as changing cultural dynamics, economic shifts, and evolving audience preferences I believe, also play a role in the trajectory of any film movement.

When it comes to Nollywood and Hollywood, the situation is complex and cannot be generalized. Hollywood's entry into the Nollywood space through platforms like Netflix, Amazon, and Paramount has undoubtedly brought about changes, both positive and challenging, for the Nigerian film industry.

Ultimately, how Nollywood fares with Hollywood's presence will depend on various factors, including how the industry responds to the changing landscape, how it embraces opportunities for growth, and how it balances global standards with its own cultural identity.

**16. If you think Nollywood will go the way of Black American film movements and be suffocated by Hollywood, why do you think so and how do you believe Nollywood can be saved?**

I think it is important to note that Nollywood and the Black American film movements are distinct entities with their own unique contexts and trajectories. While there might be similarities in terms of Hollywood's involvement, the outcomes can vary based on a multitude of factors. Nollywood has a significant global presence, and its resilience and growth over the years have demonstrated its capacity to adapt and evolve.

If concerns about Hollywood's potential impact on Nollywood exist, strategies could be considered to help safeguard Nollywood's identity and longevity:

1. **Preserve Cultural Identity:** Nollywood's cultural identity is one of its strengths. The industry can focus on telling authentic Nigerian stories that resonate with local audiences while still appealing to international viewers.
2. **Collaborate and Learn:** Collaboration with Hollywood can be a two-way street. Nollywood can learn from Hollywood's industry practices while also showcasing its unique storytelling techniques and perspectives.
3. **Advocate for Fair Deals:** Nollywood should advocate for equitable partnerships and fair compensation when collaborating with international studios or platforms.
4. **Global Distribution:** While Hollywood's involvement brings global reach, Nollywood should also explore diverse distribution channels to ensure that its films reach both local and international audiences.
5. **Support Local Filmmakers:** Creating a supportive ecosystem for local filmmakers, including funding opportunities, training, and mentorship, can help foster a thriving industry.
6. **Regulation and Policy:** Governments and industry bodies can implement policies that protect and promote the local film industry while fostering healthy competition.
7. **Celebrate Diversity:** Nollywood's diversity is a strength. Embracing stories from various regions and cultures within Nigeria can enrich the industry's content.

The impact of Hollywood's presence on Nollywood will depend on how these strategies are implemented and how Nollywood stakeholders navigate the changing landscape. Nollywood has shown resilience in the face of challenges and has the potential to continue thriving while maintaining its unique identity.

**17. If on the other hand you believe that Nollywood would survive and thrive with Hollywood's presence, why do you think so? What are the elements that bode well for the partnership? Or what in Nollywood would account for its resilience?**

There are several elements that suggest Nollywood could benefit from Hollywood's involvement and maintain its resilience:

1. **Cultural Identity:** Nollywood has a strong cultural identity that resonates with audiences both within Nigeria and the African diaspora. This unique perspective gives Nollywood a competitive edge and sets it apart from Hollywood's narratives.
2. **Diverse Content:** Nollywood produces a wide range of genres, catering to diverse tastes. This versatility allows it to appeal to various audiences and explore a multitude of themes.
3. **Global Demand:** Nollywood films have a significant global following, especially within Africa. Hollywood's involvement could increase Nollywood's international reach and introduce its stories to even broader audiences.

4. **Talent Pool:** Nollywood boasts a pool of talented actors, filmmakers, and creative professionals. This human resource can contribute to the industry's continuous growth and evolution.
5. **Digital Innovation:** Nollywood has adapted well to digital platforms, which aligns with Hollywood's digital distribution strategies. This adaptability positions Nollywood to effectively leverage the global reach that Hollywood platforms provide.
6. **Cultural Exchange:** Collaboration between Nollywood and Hollywood can lead to cultural exchange, exposing both industries to fresh perspectives and fostering creative growth.
7. **Resilience and Adaptability:** Nollywood has already demonstrated its resilience by navigating challenges like piracy and limited resources. This adaptability bodes well for its ability to evolve and withstand the changes that come with Hollywood's involvement.
8. **Nigerian Diaspora:** The Nigerian diaspora has a strong connection to Nollywood. Hollywood's entry can help bridge the gap between these audiences, potentially strengthening Nollywood's global influence.
9. **Unique Storytelling:** Nollywood's storytelling often reflects real-life Nigerian experiences. This authenticity is something that can resonate with viewers worldwide.
10. **Opportunities for Growth:** Hollywood's involvement could lead to increased funding, exposure, and opportunities for collaboration that could further elevate Nollywood's status.

While Hollywood's presence could pose challenges, these are outweighed by the potential for growth, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas. Nollywood's ability to adapt, its cultural relevance, and its established global presence all contribute to its resilience and potential for continued success with Hollywood's partnership.

**18. Looking at present trends and taking everything into account, in what form do you envisage the Nollywood film industry to be next ten years from now?**

I see Nollywood in the next ten years moving with continued focus on improving production quality, cinematography, and technical aspects of Nollywood films. Also, with the increasing influence of digital platforms, Nollywood's presence on streaming services and online distribution channels could be even more pronounced, expanding its global reach.

Another area I see major growth is in evolving distribution models. The next decade might bring forward a new generation of filmmakers, actors, and creative professionals who can bring fresh perspectives and ideas to the industry. Also, recognition and awards, Nollywood could receive greater recognition on the global stage, with more films being submitted to international film festivals and awards.

Also, I think it is important to note that the future is uncertain and can be influenced by a wide range of factors, including technological advancements, economic shifts, societal changes, and audience preferences. The direction Nollywood takes will depend on how industry stakeholders respond to these dynamics while preserving the industry's unique identity and cultural relevance.

**END**

**EXTRACT 3**

1. **What is your name (as you would like it documented) and how long have you been associated with the Nollywood industry?**

Dr Omotola Jalade Ekeinde, MFR. 28 YEARS

**2. How would you describe your role in the industry?**

Actress, Change Maker, Filmmaker

**3. What is your view on the origin of the term Nollywood?**

The Name Nollywood I believe was initiated by the Press when our movies started to get international mentions. A couple of us were invited to N.york and caused a stir... when the press were going to write about the New Nigerian Film industry getting everyone's attention , it was called Nollywood the Nigerian movie industry.

**4. Is the 'wood' term good or bad for the industry and why?**

It has come to stay. I don't think it is about being good or bad. To me it should be about being identified and to clearly define what it stands for to us, by us. To Hollywood, it was an area of land initially named by the Wilcox family.... To us it's become an identity describing the Nigerian film industry as long as its meaning is not negative, I'm fine with it.

**5. Trace a brief history of the Nigerian film industry or Nollywood, going as far back as you have knowledge of.**

The English speaking film industry now mostly identified as Nollywood took off sometime around 1993 with a movie " Living in bondage" when traders selling cassettes at the time thought to add content to cassettes to cost it higher... The industry has since gone through many stages and changes... through the home video era to cinema and now svods.

**6. What is your view on the reluctance of critics and academics to use cinema in describing Nollywood?**

I am not aware there is such reluctance. However, as stated earlier, the Industry has gone through many transformations. The revival of Cinema culture only happened a few years ago, having lost to the home video era. Unfortunately, it has had to compete with many recent challenges such as: the continuing dominance of home video, Insecurities, The Pandemic and Now the Online platforms such as YouTube, Streamers and Svods.

**7. What would you consider to be cinema and how, in your view, does Nollywood compare?**

Cinema could be described in two ways: As a theatre where movies are shown for public entertainment or the production of movies as an art or industry. I believe Nollywood meets both definitions.

**8. What era of Nollywood do you think represents its best claim to cinemahood? (Please use reference to individual films to underline your point)**

I would say these movies showcase a time of cinema

I would say from the year 2010 or thereabout .... With movies such as:

- Ije

- Last flight to Abuja

**9. Nollywood has been described as 'hastily-made...disposable forms of popular entertainment' with no political significance. What is your response to this view? (Please use reference to individual films to underline your point)**

This is a very condescending analogy on an industry that has had to produce films with

very meagre budgets under harsh and unfavourable environmental conditions. On different levels and at different times, there have been breakout movies of diverse significance in strong societal topics. For an industry with barely any incentives and structural support, Nollywood in just about 30 years has not done badly ... it however can benefit from better planning and structure.

**10. How would you describe the present state of the Nollywood film industry as of August 2023? (Please use reference to individual films to underline your point)**

Pushing on, I believe at this point, the Industry needs the platforms coming in to raise its standards. For example, why do platforms deal with artists, Talents or filmmakers directly? Why not request to deal only with their Agents/ representatives? Unfortunately, it hasn't looked like the industry has been elevated by the influx of international studios or platforms just yet. The Prospects are there, however, there is need for proper education, shadowing, collaborations, proper budgeting and Transparency. It is important for budgets and monetary compensations to be made public to eradicate Corruption in Nollywood.

**11. What is your experience of the entry of Hollywood through the likes of Netflix, Amazon and Paramount into the Nollywood space?**

This should be an Uplifting collaboration done according to World standards . In some aspects of distribution and visibility it has been an added advantage ... However , it has not necessarily improved the standard of productions or standards of work and living as should be expected . It has especially not elevated the Industry to world standards but seems to be conforming to the local standard.

**12. In your view, how has Nollywood films or indeed the film industry changed since Hollywood's arrival? (Please use reference to specific films to underline your point)**

Hasn't quite changed.

**13. Commenting on the arrival of Hollywood into the industry, some people have said that Nollywood would ultimately lose its soul to Hollywood. Based on your experience or research, what are your thoughts on that? (Please use reference to specific films to underline your point)**

I hope not. So far it hasn't been compelled to. We have had movies come on on these platforms with strong cultural story lines and story development . However, there have been grumblings of series being shot on these platforms with insertions that are not welcomed by the local audience with strong themes of sexual content, sexual orientation, strong languages etc... they are not acceptable to parents or the African culture.

**14. What do you know of the Black American film movements of last century? (Race films of the 1920s and the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s)**

The Black American film movement has come far from being slave and gang-only themes to Romantic , Heroic and even Horror themed films and have succeeded in the box office against old narratives that movies with Black people as leads or in these other roles could not be box office successes.

**17. If on the other hand you believe that Nollywood would survive and thrive with Hollywood's presence, why do you think so? What are the elements that bode well**

**for the partnership? Or what in Nollywood would account for its resilience?**

Nigerians are generally known as a people of Great confidence and self-worth. Only time will tell if Nollywood will hold up against any influx of ideas over its content.

**18. Looking at present trends and taking everything into account, in what form do you envisage the Nollywood film industry to be next ten years from now?**

I Believe Nollywood would be the Biggest film industry in the World. I have maintained this stance since 2013 before Nollywood was declared the second Largest movie industry in the World. In the Next 10 years, I hope to see the crop of Nigerian young filmmakers now in diverse schools in the world bring in their wealth of knowledge. I hope to see a Nigeria with Tax breaks for filmmakers and a film friendly Country with Structure and infrastructure to support Filmmaking. As someone who is in the business of building studios, I hope to see World class studios to cater to / host film productions from all over the World.

**END**