



## From “Makers of Images” to Cineastes? Looking Critically at Festivals and Critics’ Reception of Nollywood

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### Abstract

At its inception in the early 1990s, the Nollywood film movement did not attract a positive appraisal from most “learned” critics. Its non-conformist approach to filmmaking made most critics to associate it with the act of just “making images” as well as a lack of respect for cinema. Even major film festivals seemed “not friendly” to Nollywood films. Today, the quality of Nollywood films has remarkably improved even though much is still to be done. However, it remains important to examine if such improvement in quality has affected international film critics’ reception of Nollywood films. Using secondary sources and critical observations this author examines how Nollywood film criticism has evolved over these last years. The author focuses specifically on how the FESPACO and Cannes Festival have received Nollywood productions.

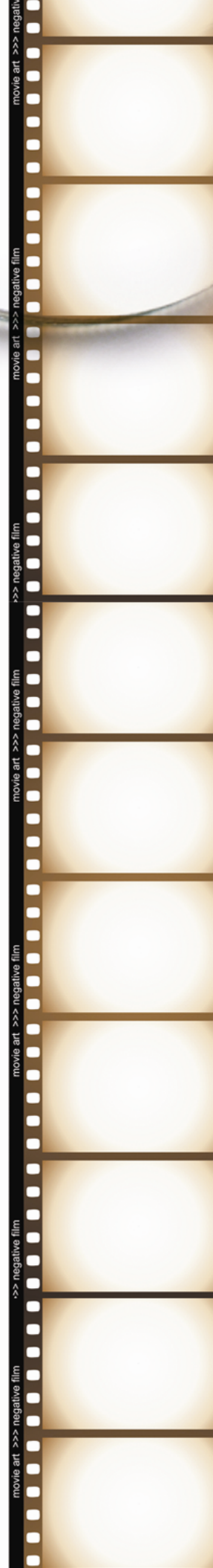
**Keywords:** Nollywood Film Criticism; Film Festival; Cineastes; Video Films; FESPACO; Cannes Film Festival



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# From “Makers of Images” to Cineastes? Looking Critically at Festivals and Critics’ Reception of Nollywood

Floribert Patrick C. Endong

## Introduction

When the Nollywood movement sprang up in 1992 with the straight-to-video release of Chris Obi Rapu’s *Living in Bondage*, many “clairvoyant” Nigerian, African and Afro-American filmgoers saw in it the birth of a fantastic cinematic revolution in the “Black” continent. The latter’s sentiment and intuitions could be said to be justified and later on vindicated. This perception followed from the fact that Nollywood in itself came to epitomize the positive idea of Africa representing and interpreting itself in the rawest and purest form (Zina Saro-Wiwa cited in Barrot, 2009). Besides this, Nollywood films emerged as a serious alternative, if not a better alternative to Hollywood movies. The Nigerian film industry also emerged as a visual culture that profoundly spoke – and has continued to speak – to African peoples’ quotidian challenges and postcolonial experiences. Early Nollywood audiences (particularly those of Nigerian or African extraction) viewed the producers, directors, actors and other players of the newly born industry as local replicas of their Hollywood idols. As conceded by Gwaambuka (2016), back then, the various escapades of iconic Nollywood actors spoke profoundly to African love-lives and audiences were hyper excited about these actors’ dating rumours in the same manner most people are today excited about the Kardashians. Actors such as Genevieve Nnaji and Ramsey Noah were Nigerian audiences’ Jack Dawson and Rose DeWitt Bukater of *Titanic*, born and bred in Africa and with no need to pretend to be American.

Similarly, African diasporas, Black Americans and audiences in the Caribbean viewed – and continue today to see – Nigerian films as interesting narratives which connect them to their

ancestors who centuries before, were taken away from their African motherland by slavers and colons. Even in faraway Brazil, Black filmgoers quickly received the Nollywood filmic text as a peephole into the lands of their African origins. Nollywood films actually represented a channel through which they could know where their families and ancestors came from. Furthermore, Nollywood to early African filmgoers represented a phenomenon that had come to stay and give Hollywood a run for its money. As beautifully put by Chimmanada Ngozi (2009), the growing local audiences' avid utilization of Nollywood films has since the early 2000s, been the best example of Africans consuming what they produce.

While most Nigerian/African filmgoers and “laymen” positively received Nollywood films, their “learned” counterparts (that is informed film critics and many early Nollywood scholars such as Murphy 2007, Brian 2007 and Gugler 2003) did not view the Nollywood film industry as a serious cinematic revolution. Those with seemingly westernized mind sets mostly tended to see the industry as a “dwarf infant of Nigerians’ creativity” (Endong & Vareba, 2018). In effect, Nollywood’s non-conformist approach to filmmaking actually caused most academicians and critics with westernized mind sets to exhibit a disdain for Nollywood films. The prevalence of issues such as unprofessionalism, poor image and sound quality, questionable use of *nigerianisms*, over emphasis on voodoo and negativisms, poor plot construction and the capitalist tendencies of filmmakers among others, all motivated most critics to even deny Nollywood the right to be called cinema (Geiger, 2010). Thus, many critics showed questionable dexterity in derogatorily associating the Nollywood movement with the act of just “making images” as well as with a lack of respect for cinema. Even major film festivals such as the Ouagadougou Pan-African Film Festival (FESPACO) and the Cannes Festival seemed “not so friendly” to Nollywood films.

Today, the quality of Nollywood films have remarkably improved (compared to production standards at its inception), even though much is still to be done particularly to improve their technical quality. Moderately high-budgets films such as *Ije* (2013), *The Wedding Party* (2017), *Invasion*, and *Black September* (2012) have of recent characterized part of the industry. Also, Nollywood-Hollywood cooperation-culture – as seen in the production of films such as Biyi Bandele’s *Half of the Yellow Sun* (2013), Jeta Amata’s *October 1<sup>st</sup>* (2012) and Peters Roberts’ *30 Days in Atlanta* (2014) is progressively taking root in the industry. The above developments combined with a handful of other production paradigms have progressively led to the release – albeit sporadic – of films with a better technical quality.

However, it is important to ascertain the extent to which improvement in the quality of filmic productions has significantly affected international film critics’ reception and perception of Nollywood movies. In this paper, the author uses secondary sources and critical observations to examine how Nollywood film criticism has evolved over these last years. The paper focuses more particularly on how the FESPACO and Cannes Festival have received Nollywood productions. The article specifically seeks answers to three principal research questions including: what are the concrete indications showing that the quality of Nollywood films has improved? How has such improvement in quality affected Nollywood film criticism? And how has such an improvement affected major film festivals’ reception of Nollywood film?

### The Quality Factor in Nollywood Film Production

In 2009, the UNESCO rated Nollywood as the third largest film industry in the world after Bollywood and Hollywood. Subsequently, Nollywood’s rank improved to second most prolific film industry in the world after Bollywood, this according to a 2015 British Council report. Such rating has been grace to the industry’s over 2000 to 2500 movies and TV series produced yearly

(Igwe 2015; Bouillon, 2019). The above ranking has often been brandished as a very positive development in the African cinema in general but the truth remains that the development is more of an “incomplete achievement” or rather, a yet to be completed advancement. This follows from the observation that Nollywood’s apparent prolificacy is mainly determined in terms of the quantity rather than the quality of its films. The production costs of Nollywood films generally range between \$20,000 to \$70,000 (Fleishman 2019; Bouillon, 2019). Fleishman (2019) even contends that some Nollywood films are produced with budgets as low as \$10,000. In addition to this, Nigerian films are mostly produced within a month and in line with a legion of un-Hollywood or non-conformist cinematic paradigms. Finally, Nigerian films are generally profitable only within the three weeks that follow their release. Such production conditions and environment have favoured a deplorable situation where quantity rules over quality in the industry. As have noted scores of informed observers, Nollywood film producers have, in their majority majored in the culture of producing cheaply to sell quickly. This un-Hollywood production paradigm has been responsible for the yearly massive release of “images” and not films, to borrow the terms of Labouba (2012).

Based on an ethnographic study aimed to interrogate popular production paradigms in Nollywood, Ajibade and Williams (2012) share corollary. They observe that low financial investment – seen in film budgets that hardly exceed N 2.5 million (\$21,000) – generally translates into low quality of technology, technical manpower and creativity invested in Nollywood video films. The urge to produce very cheaply in order to sell quickly causes Nollywood producers to embrace various gutter practices and unprofessional cinematic cultures that will likely shock, scandalise or even amuse most film critics who sacralise cinema or believe in Hollywoodian paradigms. In guise of explanation, Ajibade and Williams (2012) add that:

The experience at video locations differs remarkably from the so-called “African time” which, in social practice, is said to run very slowly. On video film sets there is no African time. Every one of the cast and crew is in a great hurry and things happen very quickly. Rehearsals are not overly stringent. At some instances there may be no rehearsals at all. Scripts are loose and actors simply improvise dialogues in-between. Besides the high degree of improvisation, the most spectacular aspect of Nollywood is the time it takes to shoot a film. (p.205)

Ajibade and Williams (2013) go on to enumerating many other production issues arising from the urge by Nollywood filmmakers to shoot fast and produce as many films as possible in just a reduced interval of time. They remarks that:

At all of the film locations the authors attended, the shoot processes were always very speedy. Cameras roll quickly through multiple scenes. To save precious time, a good many scenes are shot only once. Retakes are kept to the barest minimum. Amidst the screaming of directors, tempos and tempers stand very high as cast and crew scamper to meet deadlines. These deadlines are set not by directors but by video marketers. As bankrollers of the films, marketers literally wait at film locations with video jackets in hand – ready to sell. (p.205)

Many other empirical research works or investigative reports have concurred Ajibade and Williams’ conclusions (Geiger 2010; Barrot 2009; Fredrickson 2009, Endong, 2017; Akande 2018; Haynes 1997). A review of these empirical studies reveals that, a typical Nollywood film is bound to be the “shadow” of a low-budget Hollywood film. This follows from the fact that Nigerian films are generally shot in few days. They are also not necessarily based on a well drafted script. The generally do not hinge on a storyboard and give less importance to picture composition but integrate more of dialogues. These dialogues are generally excessive. A typical Nollywood film also stars talents that are mostly decided by marketers and not specific experts. These talents most often use few days for rehearsals and dry runs. In addition to the above, a typical Nollywood film is characterised by poor sound and picture quality; In effect, Nollywood filmmakers generally give reduced attention to these technicalities. Additionally, a typical Nollywood film is the product

of very brief postproduction formalities. In effect, post-production in Nollywood is generally concluded within hours on personal computers.

Thus, Nollywood's high volume of production has mostly been thousands of low-budget films that have so far basically functioned as a double edge sword: on one hand, the films have enabled Nollywood to become hugely popular in Nigeria, Africa and the Caribbean diaspora and on the other hand, they have fostered low and deplorable standards. In spite of these low standards, the industry has from time to time (particularly in recent times) witnessed an increase in film budgeting, a relative growing cooperation from the Nigerian government as well as well as various cases of Nollywood filmmakers cooperating with Western film experts and talents. These developments coupled with many other positive factors have been concrete harbingers and indexes of film quality improvement in the industry.

Increase in film budgeting in particular could be established by considering the budgets of the (most) successful video films produced in Nollywood over these last years. In effect, 1980s successes such as Kenneth Nnebue's *Aje ni Iya Mi* were in the whereabouts of 20,000 Naira (Haynes & Okome 1997). This figure is contrastable with late 1990s successes budgets which were in the region of 250,000 Naira (Ajibade & Williams, 2012). Today, films such as *Ije, The Wedding Party* and Kunle Afolayan's *October 1<sup>st</sup>* are produced on budgets that amount to millions of Niara. Sources generally situate contemporary film budgets in Nollywood in between \$10,000 and \$70,000 (Geiger, 2010). Commentators such as Fleishman (2019) estimate that Nollywood film budgets range between \$ 20,000 to \$ 130,000. The above mentioned increase in film budget has, according to Chijioke Uwaegbute (cited in Bouillon, 2019) led to a 36 percent increase in box office revenue between 2017 and 2018.

The development presented above is an indication that investment in film production has augmented over the years enabling the production of highly grossed films as well as aesthetically better movies. These new kind of Nollywood movies have not only become a real attraction for audiences at local cinemas but also won international acclaims. A case in point is Adetiba's romantic comedy titled *The Wedding Party* (2017). Produced on a budget of 60 Million Naira, This film successfully grossed up to \$ 1.3 million at local cinemas. *The Wedding Party* and its sequel *The Wedding Party 2* is today considered as one of Nigeria's highest-grossing movies (Bouillon, 2019). According to Bouillon (2019), the production exemplifies the very first – and so far the only – Nollywood film which has beating out US blockbusters.

Another good example of sterling Nollywood film is Tope Oshin's 2019 *Up North* which grossed 50 Million Naira (\$ 137,000) at Nigerian cinemas. Other Nigerian film directors who have adopted better approaches to film budgeting include Genevieve Nnaji. Her 2018 conventional comedy titled *Lionheart* is an original production which was acquired by Netflix before its premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival. Actually, Netflix acquired Nnaji's movie at the price of \$3.8 million (Ihidero, 2020; Tsika, 2021) All the earnings mentioned above are not only indexical of the fact that Nollywood filmmakers are beginning to experience significant return for investment in the industry but a pertinent sign of Nollywood's ascension. Bigger investment in films has always translated into more complex thematic contents and nuanced aesthetic values in Nollywood films.

As earlier mentioned, besides revolution in film budgeting, many Nollywood film directors and producers have of recent entrenched the culture of cooperating with western film experts or talents. This form of cooperation has enabled the inclusion of trained professionals in the crew and cast of a number of Nigerian films. This culture of cooperation has ultimately enabled a number of



Nollywood films to be of better production quality. A case in point is Biyi Bandele's \$10 million film titled *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Released in 2014, Bandele's film is among the 10 highest-grossing films ever produced in Nollywood. The movie has won several critical acclaims. Two other good examples are Kunle Afolayan's N330 million film *October 1<sup>st</sup>* and Lancelot Imasuen's *Invasion 1987* which all two benefitted from their directors' cooperation with several British talents. As has noted a number of Nollywood film critics, the two above mentioned films are a real example of improvement in the technical quality of Nollywood films. To some extent, the movies constitute an evidence showing that a number of Nollywood film producers and directors are real professional and that, there has, to an extent, been a serious dynamism in the Nollywood industry.

It should also be highlighted that a number of positive cultures such as the premiering of films at festivals and regular schemes aimed at celebrating sterling film productions such as the Africa Movie Award and the Nollywood in Hollywood Award are presently taking roots in Nollywood. These cultures have since 2009 been motivating the majority of new generation of Nollywood filmmakers to adhere to better cinema paradigms and to prioritise quality to the detriment of quantity. More and more, Nollywood filmmakers are abandoning the hitherto popular concept of "two day film". They now majorly adopt the paradigm of "more matured films".

In a 2013 ethnographic study aimed at examining levels of advancement in the Nollywood film industry, Passchier did an x-ray of the impact of film award on the attitude of filmmakers and their filmmaking methodologies. He observed that all the filmmakers he talked to, tended to have fixation on the movie awards they have earned or which they hoped to earn in the nearest future, rather than on the number of films they have shot so far. The filmmakers also tended to express negative sentiments towards what is popularly called "Old Nollywood" which is mainly

characterised by unprofessionalism. The filmmakers interviewed rather showed readiness to champion the “New Nollywood” concept epitomising the urge to thrive toward professionalism. Passier (2014) adds that at first sight he thought the filmmakers were simply exhibiting hyperbolic showmanship but a large volume of evidence gathered through conversations with the “videastes” made him give them some credits. As he puts it, “It became clear that all my interlocutors [the Nollywood filmmakers] were speaking of a will to change, reinvent, renew and progress. Two decades after Nollywood began, it was ready to close the door on an old chapter and open a new chapter – a new wave called New Nollywood” (p.66). Passchier’s findings confirm a series of observations Haynes (2007) made about changing mentalities and filmmaking methodologies among Nollywood producers seven years earlier. Haynes actually conceded that:

The Igbo marketers who largely control Nollywood are bitterly resented by many filmmakers who stereotype them as a mafia of semiliterate traders with no education or real interest in cinema and an extremely narrow and shortsighted view of the film industry. They blame them for choking the industry’s development through their demand for immediate and reliable profits guaranteed by cheap and predictable products, for their philistinism and for their ability to impose worn-out stories and overly familiar actors and to kill any project that doesn’t meet their tastes (Haynes, 2007, p.31).

This is an indication that a number of Nigerian filmmakers are embracing new and better practices, compared to their predecessors. A number of such filmmaker is more and conscious of the need to drop the concept of “two week film”. Nollywood film director Chikere notes for instance that the imperative to pay more attention to quality and detail emanates from the fact that Nollywood audiences are exposed to films from around the world. These films are of high quality. Nollywood films need to raise their standards to be able to compete with these exogenous films. The director of *Blood Sisters*, *Light will Come* and *Stronger than Pain* concedes that: “There is now a demand for quality, so the number of movies being produced has reduced because quality

takes time. I started filming a film in August last year [2019]. I am still working on that. In the past, I would have been done in one week” (cited in Naseer, 2020, para 13).

Considering all the points discussed above, one could say there is actually a clear divide between the “two weeks film” filmmakers (adepts of the Old Nollywood) and the “serious film” makers (the New Nollywood). The two schools of thought continue to co-habit in the Nigerian cinematic landscape given the fact that while a number of filmmakers keep on improving their film production philosophies (and by such shift in production philosophy win acclaims), others – perhaps the majority – still adhere to the old “two week film” paradigm.

For a film industry which was not conceived to be Africa’s answer to Hollywood, Nollywood has so far done well in realizing its mandate to tell African story and challenge a myriad of colonial stereotypes of Africa in general. The industry has witnessed a number of positive developments and improvement as seen in the “New Nollywood” concept. However this improvement narrative is subject to controversy. Not all eyes see Nollywood as a significantly evolving industry as far as quality of production is concerned. No doubt Nollywood film criticism still remains highly mitigated in nature.

### Quality is Improved but Criticism is still Mitigated

There may be a number of recently made Nollywood films that are higher in quality and which are making palpably high impact at the box office. But the truth remains that the bulk of Nollywood films produced yearly are traditionally low-budget films compared to the ones produced in

advanced cinematic industries such as Hollywood. In their majority, Nollywood movies have low sound and image quality and are mostly marred by myriads of production issues. In line with this, they generally inspire a mitigated kind of criticism from both filmgoers and film critics both in Nigeria and abroad. Though it is common to find apologists of the industry who sometimes disregard or downplay the obvious technical weak points of Nollywood productions and highlight their positive reception of Nigerian movies, negative reviews of the Nollywood industry do abound. The literature available for this study confirms this observation. In effect, most 2014-2020 critiques which focus on the technical quality of Nollywood films continue to highlight the same production problems fore-grounded by early Nollywood criticism. Even those that recognize the efforts of innovative and acclaimed film directors, always do not forget to lament the remaining majority of directors who, to borrow a Christian idiosyncrasy, are still in “cinematic perdition” or who simply major in what Haynes (2007) call cinematic “philistinism”.

Critics such as Onwuliri (2019), Abdulkareem (2019) and Gwaambuka (2016) applaud particular breakthroughs and success stories in the Nollywood industry but make it a point of duty to review factors which reveal Nollywood toxicity to innovation and progress. Similarly Passchier (2014) recognizes serious advancement and enthusiasm towards better production practices among Nollywood filmmakers. But he also decries the filmmakers’ insistence on Juju films and predictable plots, issues which critics take into account in their negative appraisal of Nollywood. Passchier (2014) actually writes: that

There is patently a desire from New Nollywood filmmakers to distance themselves from such philistines. Despite the distance, the storylines still hew to time-tested Nollywood themes, including the classic juju genre. New Nollywood films devise their cachet from the glamorous display of well-polished aesthetics as evidenced by the exquisite cinematography, compelling and subtle performances from actors, tasteful production design and a sophisticated modern twist in the scriptwriting. (p.72)

Going by the issues explored above, one has the impression that Nollywood film criticism has still not really changed. The ambivalence that has characterized it from its inception in the 1990s continues to prevail more than two decades after its birth. In other words, film quality in Nollywood is still subject to controversy. Sure, recent higher quality movies such as Adetiba's *The Wedding Party*, Niyi Akinmolayan's *Chief Dady* and Genevieve's *Lionsheart* are massively acclaimed here and there by observers and cinema festivals but the criticism is still strongly and perceptibly dominated by skeptical or gabby appraisals and well-wishing talks which tend to suggest that the Nollywood film industry still has a long way to go to optimally ameliorate the standard of its movies and convince cinema ideologues. Abdulkareem (2019) notes for instance that:

Nollywood is not at the stage where the films being produced have the range to feature in or compete in global conversations about the quality, purpose and vision of film. In business terms, perhaps, but no way in terms of plot, dialogue or the aforementioned production values, despite an increase in the number of expensive cameras being purchased. Exceptions of course exist. (p.28)

Abdulkareem goes on to censure a recent tendency among a good number of Nigerian and exogenous film critics to inflate Nollywood success story with the visible aim of giving the misleading impression that, advancement in the industry is at a supersonic speed and that, the industry has reached the zenith of the cinematic art. She pointedly notes that:

It is a worrying habit. It is the nascent Nigerian trait. A tendency to overinflate and prioritize the appearance of growth and excess over true development. It was visible in the Africa rising narrative, yet Nigeria is ranked the second country in the world with the worst electricity and the country with the highest number of [people living in] poverty. For all of its self-congratulatory antics, Nollywood seems more concerned with projecting growth, than engaging in actual development. Industries are not built on the whims and agendas of one or two people, they are coalitions of a shared needs,

vision and ambition among others; but it seems on the vision front, Nollywood is desperately lacking. Even more regretful, is that the industry has turned itself into a kind of toxic environment for filmmakers who would like to place a priority on craft and offer some alternatives to the loud drama and crass comedy, not that those are necessarily bad things themselves. Somehow Nollywood has imbued that character, believing that an increase in the number of subpar content equals the development of the industry.(p.29)

In the same line of argument, Gwaambuka (2016) concedes that though Nollywood will never become – and should never think of becoming – Hollywood, it still needs to review the technical quality of its films and design ways of coming up with standards that make sense. In his language, “Nollywood was built with no view of becoming the next Hollywood and even if it was trying [to do so], it is unable because the quality of production is deplorable. Hollywood may have its faults but [it] is undoubtedly ahead in quality” (p.31).

Gwaambuka – like a number of other critics – avoids using Hollywood as a yardstick with which to judge Nollywood. Many of his counterparts however, depart from this method of assessing the merits of the industry. Most of such counterparts tend to suggest that so long as Nollywood films are based on the straight-to-video paradigm rather than the celluloid technology, its production quality will never instil respect from critics. In other words, the whole Nollywood movement is just an insult to, or a “lack of respect” for cinema. In 2011, a number of critics viewed Nollywood’s straight-to-video cinematic model as the art of just making images and a form of desecration of cinema. This derogatory description of the Nollywood model has continued to characterise the greater part of Nollywood criticism. Labouba (2012) notes for instance that in the African film environment and in some Western circles of film ideologues, what differentiate the celluloid from the video has less to do with technology than with status and prestige. To many observers and commentators, celluloid is associated with cinema meanwhile the video/digital technology is relegated to television and audio-visual media (notably music video, news reports and the like).

By this logic, there is a hierarchy between not only the productions done on video and those on celluloid, but also between their respective authors. As put by Labouba (2012), this logic has been “established by first generations of African filmmakers, in order not to be confused with mere *“faiseurs d’image”* (image makers). The above logic enable first generations of African filmmakers to elevate themselves to the status of “full-blown filmmakers” (p.11).

It is somewhat rare to find non-African critics of Nollywood like Dovey, Lindiwe who do not really see the straight-to-video paradigm as Nollywood’s Achilles heel. Dovey (2010) actually contends that:

It no longer makes sense to divide African screen media into oppositional categories such as ‘FESPACO films’ and ‘video films’ (FESPACO is the Pan-African Festival of Cinema and Television of Ouagadougou), ‘arthouse films’ and ‘commercial films’, or ‘serious films’ and ‘entertainment films’. Such oppositions are being rendered obsolete by, first, the diversification that has occurred in terms of the mediums in which African filmmakers are working (for example, the highly regarded Chadian director Mahamat Saleh-Haroun has shifted from making films on celluloid to making television films, as well as short films on digital formats), and, secondly, the diversification in terms of the kinds of films that festivals are screening (FESPACO, for example, now has categories devoted to films made on digital media). (p.2)

Thus, to many moderate African and non-African film critics, the progressive popularisation of the straight-to-video paradigm among African filmmakers has saved Nollywood filmmakers and films from a whole lot of negative appraisal that focus on film technology. The video film model has already been embraced by a number of renowned and acclaimed African cineastes which means that it has come to stay and is even becoming a received idea in the world of cinema, this in the same right as the celluloid. What continues to remain a great source of negative criticism is

Nollywood films' technical quality which, though in constant amelioration, remains worryingly low.

### Nollywood Films in Major Film Festivals: Cannes and FESPACO in Perspective

Nollywood became the talk of the town among African film ideologues and filmgoers right from its inception in the early 1990s. However, much of what influential and internationally recognized film critics said and thought about it revolved around its opportunistic commercial models and its worrisome and “troubling” departure from conventional/Hollywoodian cinematic paradigms. This departure made it to be popularly viewed as a postmodern culture and a cinema current film critics who respected themselves had to keep a distance from (Labouba, 2012; Barlet 2013; Barrot, 2009). Furthermore, although a remarkable cinema revolution in the “Black Continent”, the Nollywood phenomenon remained unknown to many continental publics in Europe, America and Asia. This reduced popularity of Nollywood in continental Europe, North America and Asia even continues up till today. Because of all the issues mentioned above, particularly the too negative perception of Nollywood's non-conformist approach to cinema, most big film festivals entrenched the tradition of marginalizing Nigerian video films, mostly in an unavowed and subtle way (McCain 2011a; Dovey, 2010; Mahir & Raul, 2010). Film critic Didi Cheeka (cited in Nwanne, 2020) shares corollary thus:

Every film culture has got a mainstream and an alternative or underground – with Nigeria, seemingly, the exception. For years, international focus on Nigerian cinema had exhausted itself on the commercial phenomenon known as Nollywood, showcasing it at festival sidebars; ostensibly denying the possibility of the existence of other filmmakers wanting to go beyond Nollywood. (p.38)

It is actually of recent that prominent western film festivals such as the ones organized yearly in Toronto, Berlin, Cannes and Venice have adopted the formality of showcasing Nollywood films mostly at sidebars shows. Cases such as the Toronto film festival which premiered Genevieve



Nnaji's *Lionsheart* in 2018 and the Berlin festival – which has accepted to premiere Nollywood films in February 2020 – are really rare. In line with this tendency, the Ouagadougou FESPACO (*Festival Pan-Africain du Cinema de Ouagadougou* – Pan-African Festival of Cinema and Television) showed unfriendliness to Nigerian video film productions particularly at the early stage of the evolution of the Nollywood film industry. Lamenting this scenario in 2007, Nollywood filmmaker Mahmoud Alie Balogun (cited in Fofana, 2007) suspected that FESPACO's marginalization of Nollywood video films emanated from its apparent sacralization of celluloid film production and its profound disdain for anything non-celluloid. In an interview granted the *British Broadcasting Corporation News* magazine, he submitted that one could not find a Nollywood video film showcased at the 2007 edition of the FESPACO because those who packaged the festival that year discriminated against the kind of films Nollywood producers do. "They don't feel comfortable with what we do", he said in the interview.

FESPACO's officials have most often reacted to this type of accusations with a nuanced rhetoric which neither confirms nor rejects Balogun's fears and suspicions. In 2007, a FESPACO's executive, Baba Hamma, attributed the constant absence or relatively reduced participation of Nollywood films at editions of his festival to the "non-conventional" ways in which Nigerian films are most often packaged. He observed that by not producing their films on 35mm and by failing to subtitle their movies in French (for French-speaking countries), Nigerian filmmakers made their productions not suitable for the festival. He pointedly highlighted in an interview granted *BBC News* that: "our festival is for films. That means you have to bring films on 35mm and Nollywood usually makes movies on a video tape" (cited in Fofana, 2007).

Hamma's reaction epitomises two things. First, it suggests the growing tradition not only among film festival organisers but also among film scholars, to view "FESPACO films" and Nollywood films as two binary opposites or at least as two very distant cinematic traditions. As noted by Ogbechie (2016) in his review of the book *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty First Century*:

The obvious differences between FESPACO and Nollywood film[s] extend beyond the production conditions, content, and form into the realm of cinema scholarship [...] Scholars of francophone art film are humanists who are mainly concerned with cinema aesthetics while the study of video films is mainly dominated by social scientists (mainly anthropologists) and relegated to the realm of cultural and media studies. (p.3)

The second thing Hamma's reaction epitomizes is a popular tendency among festival organisers (particularly in the West) to consider video films as a joke or a non respect for cinema. To such festival organisers, a filmic production had to subscribe to the fundamentalism of the 35mm to be considered worthy of attention. This prevailing aphorism caused most Nigerian films in the competing feature film category of pre-2015 editions of the FESPACO to either be shot or at least printed on 35mm. Egregious examples include European-based filmmakers' works such as Newton Uduaka's *One man's Show* in 2014 and Andrew Adunsumu's *Restless City* (in 2010 and 2011), Mark Kusare's *Champions of our time*, Kunle Afolayan's *The Figurine*, Chidi Cheeka's *Bloodstones* and Julius Morno's *The Camera*.

Since 2009 however, FESPACO's tendency of sacralising celluloid filmic productions seems to have started withering away, giving room to a greater acceptability of the Nollywood commercial model in editions of the festival. Since 2015, films shot digitally have started being eligible for the FESPACO's main prize, particularly for the video and television category (Frassinelli, 2019; Shammira 2017; Bakari, 2018). In 2017, Oluseyi Asurf Amuwa's *Hakkunde* (In Between) was screened as the very first Nollywood video film to take part in the official feature

competition of the FESPACO. Thus, Nollywood films have since 2015 been increasingly showcased at the pan-African festival with some of them getting the warmest audience's reception among screenings at the event. In 2011 Mark Kusare's *Champions of Our Time* won the jury prize (second prize) in the category, as well as a special ECOWAS jury prize (McCain, 2011b). In spite of this positive development, Nollywood films have rarely won accolades at the festival. So far, none of them have ever won the Yennenga Stallion award, the festival's most prestigious and coveted accolade (Sanogo, 2019).

In spite of its removal of exclusivist rules that favoured films shot or printed on celluloid, the FESPACO has to a great extent, remained a space less favourable to Nollywood movies. First, the festival is Francophone dominated from the jury to the festival goers. Mbye Cham who served as president of the Official Jury for Long Feature Films at FESPACO in 2011 and in 2017, has once noted that:

That's one of the perennial issues that FESPACO has had to deal with. It's not just an issue with Nigerian films, but really with Anglophone films. Because for a long time, the Anglophones have felt marginalized. The festival is still pretty much Francophone heavy. And, there needs to be some type of balance. This year [2017] definitely was no exception at all. Even though in the main competition, there was a film by a Nigerian, Newton Aduaka. He's a Nigerian but living in Paris. (cited in Shammira, 2017, para 4)

The Francophone domination of the festival has created a situation where Anglophone filmmakers (including Nollywood filmmakers) need to subtitle their films in French to make their productions appealing to francophone countries/audiences, a requirement from which their Francophone counterparts are completely exempted. Secondly, many Nollywood filmmakers have the impression that their films are just tolerated at the festival (Bakari, 2018). The celluloid films

continue to reign and be preferred. Because of these realities, many Nollywood film directors continually see the FESPACO with much suspicion. Many of them are not encouraged to submit their works for the competing categories of the festival.

If the FESPACO has, to a reduced extent, reversed itself on its attitude towards Nollywood films, the Cannes festival has since its existence represented a relatively impenetrable space for Nollywood films. The festival has so far offered fewer opportunities for Nigerian filmmakers to showcase their films and win accolades. Perhaps it will be more appropriate to say Nollywood filmmakers have still not, by their standards, convinced the Cannes festival. Up till date no Nollywood feature film has screened there. In 2011 for instance none of Nollywood films was accredited for screening at the festival. So far, the Cannes festival has only offered few Nollywood filmmakers the opportunity to showcase their films at its “Metrage” section, a slot where filmmakers pay a fee to have their works screened. Much of Nigeria’s participation in the Cannes Festival has been without films. As Hussein (2016) observes, the festival has so far mainly enabled officials of the Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC) to make inquiries from foreign filmmakers and investors about production and coproduction opportunities in Nollywood. In 2019, over ten Nollywood film stars were said to have participated in the Cannes festival. However, their engagement in the event was mainly in the level of exchange of ideas and the search for collaboration with counterparts from African and non African countries, at the Pavillon Afriques, a hub conceived to enable African filmmakers exchange ideas and market their films. In an interview granted the online tabloid Pulse, the Pavillon Afriques’ operation director Prudence Kolong (cited in Gbenga 2019) explains the function and place of this hub in the festival:

With [the Pavillon Afriques] project, we are creating a unique venue for movie trade and promotion that outlines the diversity and plurality from Africa and its diaspora film and television content. Our ambition is to become an exclusive business platform

where film industry stakeholders meet, discuss, trade, make deals and take advantage of the unique atmosphere of the Festival de Cannes. (para 5)

Thus, Nollywood films have so far never been accredited as competing movies at the festival. This situation has provoked concerns and reflections among many Nigerian film critics, popular culture scholars and filmmakers; one of whom is film director Abudu who, during a French president's visit to Nigeria in 2018, asked the statesman on visit what it could take a Nigerian film to make it at the Cannes festival. A number of observers who followed the event judged Abudu's question as a naive but hypocritical interrogation on the basis that the persistently low standards of Nollywood films only predestine Nigerian movies to be negatively received by the Cannes festival. In reaction to the question, Abdulkareem (2018) notes for instance that Abuddu's inquiry is fraught with "undeniable comedy". According to her, Nollywood most acclaimed filmic productions (among which could be cited Abudu's *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel*) are "leagues away from conversations about entering Cannes, much less an award" (p.38). In other words, Nollywood filmmakers still have a long way to go to compete with their counterparts from Europe, America and Asia at the most prestigious film festival. Al-Amin (2018) expresses a similar view when he notes that in spite of their popularity and commercial success in Africa and in Caribbean countries, Nollywood films are still unable to compete with Hollywood, Bollywood and other world cinematic products for the coveted prizes and other attractions of the prestigious Cannes festival.

It thus goes without saying that, for most Nollywood filmmakers, the Cannes festival has mostly remained a cinematic enigma or a far away "promised land". It is common to find Nigerian film directors or producers who fantasize over premiering their films or getting them screened at the main bowl of the Cannes festival or other prestigious international film feasts. Such enthusiasts generally recognize that they still have a long way to go to achieve such lavish artistic dream

(Nwanne, 2020). A second set of filmmakers on the other hand claim that instead of trying to satisfy the standards of some festivals when your means may not afford you such luxury, it is better you focus on improving your standards according to the taste of the African film consumers. In an interview granted Udobang (2016) highly acclaimed Nigerian film director Kunle Afolayan concedes that “Instead of dreaming [that], I want to break into Hollywood and you try to do that for 20 years and you keep hoping and dancing to the tune of these people who tell you this is how your story should be told, then I will settle for the first option” (cited in Udobang, 2016, p.89).

## Conclusion

It is evident that Nollywood films have witnessed an improvement in their technical quality. This has been thanks to the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers (the new Nollywood) who have deployed higher film budgets, cooperation with foreign film experts and institutions and premiering in prestigious film festivals among other, to revolutionize film production paradigms and film-related cultures in the Nollywood industry. Scholars (as reviewed in this study) have through comparative methodologies involving 1990s and 2010s Nollywood films, succeeded to illustrate this improvement in the industry. Other scholars have highlighted the fact that a number of compelling Nollywood filmic productions have since 2008, not only been premiered but also won acclaims and awards at various western film festivals or international film competitions, while others have been highly grossing movies in Nigeria and abroad or have been hosted on such first-class film streaming platforms as Netflix. Scholars have generally brandished the above mentioned positive developments as an evidence of growth in quality. However, it must be underscored that the development mainly indicates that a number of laudable cinematic cultures (notably premiering of films at international film festival, revolution in film budgeting, Nollywood-Hollywood cooperation etc) are just taking roots in Nollywood.

The positive developments do not cancel the fact that much of Nollywood films are still of very laughable standards. You still find \$10,000 films which are fraught with poor sound and image quality, predictable plot, over emphasis on voodoo, uncreative use of nigerianisms and many other aesthetical issues. Many contemporary Nollywood films are leagues away from conversations about entering prestigious film festivals. Some are even leagues away from the standards of Hollywood low-budget films. In this essay it was discussed that Nollywood films still find it difficult to win awards at major African film feasts such as the FESPACO. More worrisome is the fact that the films have never been screened as competing movies at the prestigious Cannes festival. This is an indication that much is still to be done. Priority should be placed on encouraging greater investments in film production in Nollywood. If film entrepreneurs continue to not have access to funding and to invest less in terms of film budgeting and training, it goes without saying that production quality will continue to be very low.

The fact that Nollywood video films are increasingly screened at the FESPACO festival and at the “Metrage” section of the Cannes festival also augurs good things. This is an indication that the video filmmaking model is progressively taking its place in the pantheons of the seventh art. When the model emerged in 1992, most observers showed great disdain for it and relegated it to the status of cinematic heresy. Today, with the premiering, the screening and the nomination of these films in festivals and other film-related events across the world, one may argue that the negative perception of video filmmaking – and by extension Nollywood films – is progressively withering away. This is good development.

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