

Doublethink, Society and the Gender Question in West African Video Narrative

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Abstract

Society and its cultural configurations are important elements in the production and consumption of films. Apart from providing the social canvas from which films are framed, society provides the institutional framework for the film industry to thrive. The contradiction between the demand by society for „*pure films*’ or culture compliant films and the subtle taste for the opposite by some sections of the West African film audience is yet to be adequately explored . This paper, therefore, using Orwell’s concept of *doublethink* examines the disconnection between culture, society and film in West Africa. It is established that the representation of the female body in West African video films is influenced by film audience. . The West African film audience presents two contradictory stimuli, an open dislike/hostility towards films considered to be morally corruptive and a hidden desire for such films. Ironically, it is this (mis) framing of the female body and its deliberate imposition on the narrative code that often serves as a stimuli for the attraction to the West African video film. This has created a hate/dislike and like/desire attitude towards video films in West Africa.

Introduction

This paper is about film and society .It examines the role of society in promoting the production and consumption of certain film genres and its role also in discouraging the production and consumption of certain genres. In any film making, „there is no such thing as real presence, only a representation or a representation“, James (382). The way and manner the female actress is framed or re-presented in West African visual narratives, especially, the video film, has generated a lot of conflict. As suggested by Shohat in James (382), “Films should be examined not only in terms of who represents who but also in terms of who is being represented, for what purpose, at which historical moment, from which location , using which strategies and in what tone of address”.

This paper is a review of the factors that have influenced and are still influencing the physical and the psychosocial representation of the female actress in West African video films. Who is responsible for her Bimbo image? What factors are sustaining this Bimbo image despite the huge public outcry/protest against it?

Video entertainment has become an important feature of the social life of contemporary Africa. In West Africa, the video film is gradually supplementing the traditional means of entertainment. "In some segments of urban West African population today, fictional narratives created locally are more likely to be on video film rather than read in a book or listened to on radio" Moredewun Adejunmobi(51). The film director/producer is Africa's modern griot.

West African video films are socio-cultural constructs about the dialectics and dynamics of change in contemporary Africa using portable, cheap, hand held video cameras. The films, with popular appeal among the broad spectrum of society, are produced in English or French but mostly in the numerous ethnic languages of West Africa. When produced in local languages, they are easily accessible to the public. As social platforms, they explore the impact of globalisation on society and the subsequent dislocation of traditional life. The video films provide succor / comic relieve in an ever oppressive and dehumanising social milieu.

The cheap cost of production and the high demand for these films has led to the proliferation of many *woods* in the region, *Ghollywood* (Ghana) *Riverwood* (Kenya), *Sollywood*, Sierra Leone and beyond West Africa, *Vollywood* and *Jollywood* in South Africa.

Nollywood and Ghollywood video films are not films in the classical or conventional sense of the word. They hardly provide the esthetics and the visual panorama of traditional cinema. They are rather "dramatic features shot on video and marketed on cassettes and exhibited publicly with video projectors or television monitors. They provide little of the visual poetry of true cinema", Jonathan Haynes (9). The conventional films are produced on mega budgets using cine cameras and may take several months/years of processing before release to the public.

West African video films are produced on small budgets and the duration of each production is usually a week or month. This has impacted negatively on the technical and artistic quality of the films. However, despite these limitations,

they have become popular narratives and means of popular entertainment.. In Ghana and Nigeria „Hollywood films are now replaced with Nollywood and Ghollywood films“, Frank Ukadike (3). The films are not only used to educate, and entertain, but also to evangelise.

Evangelism has become a strong social objective of West African video films, Foluke Ogunleye (105) describes how religious groups are using the video film apparatus to preach sermons and spread religious messages. A distinctive religious genre showing the mortal combat between the forces of darkness, Satan and God has evolved in West African video narrative.

Many people are gainfully employed in the West African video film industry. It has made many actors and actresses in the region popular. But despite this, there is a subtle antagonism towards the film industry in West Africa. There is a hidden conflict between film and society in this region. This is because of many factors. The industry is accused of mindless copying and imitation of foreign cultures. “An objective look at the type of stories we tell, the language we use, the appearance of the characters – costume, hair-do and make-up tends to indicate that many film makers are mindless copycats and shameless imitators” Akinwumi Isola (12). And according to Jeyifo: “Many story lines defile logic and structures...I have watched countless Nollywood films in which the image of Nigeria and African cultural traditions that they project show more ignorance and hostility to our traditions than the most racist of Hollywood films about “darkest” Africa,” Biodun Jeyifo (16)..

Literature Review

The emergence of the Home video in West Africa expanded the discursive space in the region. An informal distribution network came into existence which ensures that video films produced in the region were easily accessible in the major cities in the region. Patrick Ebewo describes the social -economic significance of the Home video in West Africa as follows: “In countries such as Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya where the industry has assumed a commercial dimension, the sector is fast becoming a job market for unemployed artists, and a foreign exchange earner...” (27). But, despite its socio- economic significance, there is a subtle dislike for films in West Africa. The films were accused of misrepresenting African culture. In the north, filmmakers were arrested to discourage the production of films. During the Hiyana crisis, film making was temporarily

suspended in cities like Kano and Kaduna. In the south, Kayode Animasaun (140) reports that a young actress was suspended from church for playing the role of a prostitute. The film industry was accused of producing yadda yadda films and promoting social obscenities through soft porn.

Emily Oghale God's Presence (222) lists the following titles from Nigeria and Ghana as containing explicitly sexual materials: *Hot Fork*, *Big black booty*, *Ghana in love*, *Blackberry Babes*, *Virginity and clash of passion*; *pleasure and crime*.

Dul Johnson (188) blames the production of such films on the Director. „The controlling factor in the gaze is that of the camera, which in effect means the Director's". This paper holds a different opinion. The sleaze in West African Home video should be blamed on the film audience. The audience through the type of films it buys, unconsciously controls and directs the gaze of the camera.

Statement of the Problem

Despite its contribution to the general development of the region, the relationship between film and society in West Africa is not too cordial and is sometimes characterised by mutual suspicion and subtle antagonism. This has led to the physical destruction of locally produced video CDs and DVDs by aggrieved vigilantes and religious groups especially, in the northern part of Nigeria. The major area of challenge is the female actress. Africanus Aveh (127) describes her screen image in the following manner.

Mini skirt Leeches – young, Sexy looking ladies, in skimpy mini – skirts whose appearance provokes older married men to abandon their marital home and obligation...

Efforts to create a less disturbing image of the film actress has not changed the situation. In spite of many censorship laws and other legal provisions, filmmakers and directors are becoming more daring in their visual representation of the female body. What is the motivating factor?

Objectives of the Paper

The objectives of this paper are:

- (a) to draw attention to the contradiction between the film taste of the West African film audience and the type of films demanded by society.

- (b) to show the dialectics of demand and supply in the production/consumption of video films in West Africa.
- (c) to argue that the empowerment of the film actress, her social and financial independence, has become a threat to the hegemonic control of her body by patriarchy.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework is anchored on Orwell's principle of *Doublethink*. Orwell is a popular British writer. His most famous novel is *Animal farm*. In *why I write* (313) Orwell identifies esthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse and political purpose as some of his motivating factors. In *Nineteen eighty-four*, Orwell's political position and vision of the world are well projected. Politically, Orwell is not favourably disposed towards dictatorial or fascist regimes. *Animal farm* and *Nineteen eighty-four* are satiric indictments of dictatorial regimes throughout the world. His vision of the world is that of universal brotherhood devoid of wars, human suffering, misery and governed through popular franchise. *Nineteen eighty-four* (published in 1949) describes the evils of dictatorship and the manipulation of the human mind through scientific devices and hallucination inducing drugs. The novel predicts the rise of totalitarian states and the emergence of powerful dictators like big brother. The popular slogan in Oceania is BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, (6).

Big brother dominates/controls the state of Oceania through spying machines (telescreens) and the psychological manipulation of people. The manipulation is done through the invention of new expressions in new *newspeak* and the replacement of oldspeak with *newspeak*. . . Every citizen of Oceania is denied a personal identity. They are simply numbers. Winston Smith is citizen number 6079 (240), Bumstead, J. is citizen number 2713 (241).

In Oceania the abnormal is accepted as normal. In this social setting, TWO AND TWO MAKE FIVE (283). The party through the principles of INGSOC, is perverting and concealing reality by creating contradictory and self-negating slogans: WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH (30).

INGSOC is a society in which to think is a crime, a crime that could lead to death. *Thought crime does not entail death: thought crime IS death*, (.31). INGSOC also denies the citizens the expression of basic instinctual needs such as

love and sex. The Proles are not allowed to contemplate love or sex, let alone engage in either. Yet big brother is constantly engaging in love and sex. This amounts to *doublethink*.

Doublethink is:

To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which canceled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing both of them; to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it... P. 38

West Africa as a region suffers from *Doublethink*. There is so much religion in the region but little morality. In spite of the many places of worship in Nigeria and elsewhere in the region, the country/region has a disturbing level of corruption. At the level of governance, in a manner reminiscent of *Doublethink*, leaders in the region deliberately tell lies to people as truths. The lies are told on oaths using important religious books. Like the *telescreens* of big brother, religion has become an important instrument of state manipulation. It is used to screen (cover) lies. Like Oceania, in West Africa today, ignorance has become strength and freedom (from colonialism) has become slavery.

Doublethink is a powerful instrument of mental and psychosocial control/manipulation. Through Doublethink, big brother manipulates reality. The citizens of Oceania are made to live in a world of perpetual dream, a world of self-delusion and a world of false expectations. They are forced to imbibe simultaneously two conflicting and contradictory stimuli. The objective is to create the illusion of reality. In *Nineteen eighty-four*, Doublethink is:

The power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them... to tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient... to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality one denies (220).

The Husserlian phenomenology of *double consciousness* is comparable to the philosophy of *doublethink*. "The consciousnesses that manifest themselves in double consciousness are (1) consciousness of how mainstream society sees itself (dominant reality) and (2) consciousness of its contradictions (subaltern reality). Since to see both is to see the dialectical relationship constitutive of truth, then the first by itself must manifest a form of consciousness that hides itself",

Adeshina Afolayan (8). The *dominant reality* in film discourse in West Africa is the condemnation of *bad* films, the West African film audience will not want to be associated with such films, the *subaltern reality* is the secret desire for such films.

The psychosocial and psycho-mental disposition of the West African film audience has identifiable features of *Doublethink* and Husserlian phenomenology of *double consciousness*. The first is the denial of reality. The reality is that the world is changing and the region cannot remain isolated from global influences. Another element of *Doublethink* is the desire to get entertained without getting corrupted. Modern entertainment is often accompanied by acts that may be deemed corruptive. It is also *doublethink*, the thought of using modern technologies without grappling with their negative effects. The observations of Dizard (1985) in Mike Gasher and Rowland Lorimer (88) are very important:

- (a) all technical progress exacts a price, that is, while it adds something on the one hand, it subtracts something on the other.
- (b) all technical progress raises more problems than it solves...
- (c) the negative effects of technological innovation are inseparable...it is naïve to say that technology is neutral, that it may be used for good or bad ends; the good and bad effects are, in fact, simultaneous and inseparable.
- (d) all technological innovations have unforeseen effects.

West Africa did not invent video technology but it has domesticated it. The technology has both positive and negative effects. The possibility of mis-use is one of its negative effects.

Gender issues in West African video film

The gender issues in West African video film are mainly on the perceived negative framing of the film actress. This is manifested in her:

- Poor costuming
- Poor social disposition
- Promotion of soft porn

In these and other things, the video film industry is only reacting/responding to the taste and demand of the West African film audience. As Vanghan in Manthia

Diwara (4) observes: “African film audiences, when faced with the choice of seeing simplified screen narrative produced by the colonial film unit and the foreign commercial entertainment have overwhelmingly decided in favor of the latter products in spite of their complicated technical conventions”

The beautiful Indian actress made Hindi films popular in many parts of the world. In Nigeria, especially, the northern part of the country, people go to watch Indian films because “they have great songs...” *the women singing them were beautiful...* Brian Larkin, (165). In the same region, religious films were not received with the same enthusiasm as Hindi films, Brian Larkin (164).

At independence, the Ibadan study revealed that the film genre most favoured by the young and old in Ibadan metropolis are Hindi films, Hyginus Ekwuazi (83). This crucial finding by the Ibadan study is a clear indication that the desire to see young beautiful girls on screen has been part of the psychology of the West African film audience before and after independence. To deny this reality, is *Doublethink*.

The Ibadan study further revealed that „sex films are most liked by the male and female respondents“, Hyginus Ekwuazi (84). Several years after the Ibadan study, another audience research by Musa (2001) in Kayode Animasaun (151) reveals that 53 percent of the audience can watch a nude play. This, in the opinion of Kayode Animasaun (151), is the reason why movies where some Nigerians appear nude enjoy high level patronage than seduction free movies. Kayode Animasaun (76) further reports that “Even though the censors board placed a ban on *Outkast*, *Omo empire* and *Shattered home* because of the overt portrayals and promotion of sexuality and seduction in the movies, audiences still sneak to watch them”“. It therefore amounts to *doublethink* to accuse West African video film of promoting (soft) pornography. What is projected is what the audience wants to see. This is corroborated by the recent interview of Angela Philips, a Nigerian film actress. According to her, *Nigerians are hypocrites who love nudity but pretend not to because of some cultural and religious orientations*.

If you shoot a movie where everyone is well dressed and covered from head to toe nobody will buy it. They want to see naked girls. Nigerians should stop pretending (*Vanguard*, Electronic, Jan. 17, 2015).

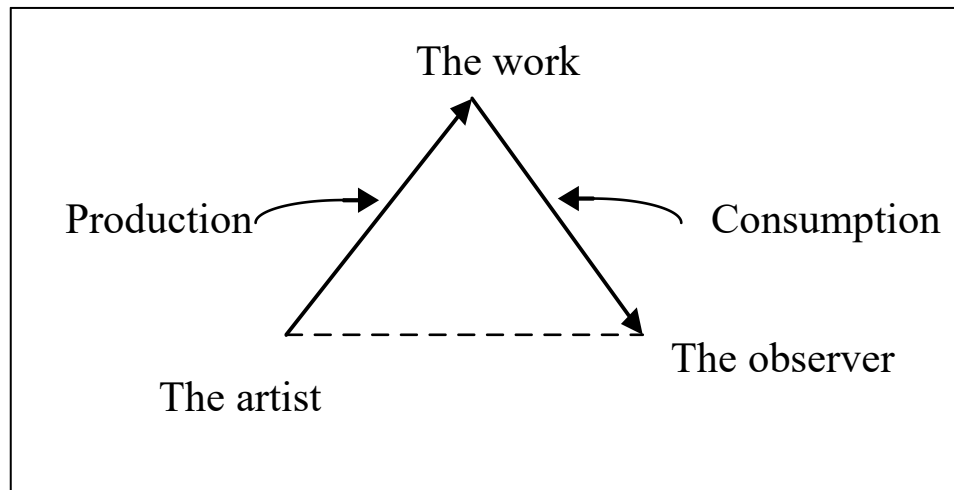
In Ghana, a film actress Lydia Forson made similar observation on the attack on Hamamat Montia, a beauty queen on her perceived poor dressing during a public event. She condemns the public for its double standards. According to her:

Unless there is a law against dressing a certain way your personal opinions, standards should remain just that...And please don't start with the moral and cultural standards cards you people only pull when it's convenient for you. If you are going to shows and watch telenovelas with half naked women and cultural festivals with girls showing their breast all over the place or even post pictures of American celebrities in bikinis and think it's ok then take several seats and sip on bleach. The moral and cultural cards are used subjectively. This is *doublethink*. It also amounts to *double consciousness* to enjoy watching women in bikinis and to condemn it.

This also reflects the views of a film producer in *Kannywood*. According to Baba in Abdalla Uba Adamu (90)

The viewing audience contributes significantly to encouraging film makers to adopt westernization. This they do through refusal to buy films that do not have these elements... despite all their criticism they still rush out to buy these film...

The present framing of the female actress in West African video is a reflection of the endemic psychosocial and psycho-mental factors in West Africa. It is not a moral problem. As stated earlier, there is a disconnection between the film taste of the West African film audience and the open demand for *Godlywood* films, (apologies, Dupont) by society. West African video films are a reflection of what is demanded by the audience. *Godlywood* films cannot be produced in an ungodly social environment. Morality films/plays cannot be produced in an environment in which they are not desired. It will amount to a financial disaster or suicide for a producer/director to invest in a film that will be a DOA (dead on arrival) with the public. In the diagram below, James Monaco (11) demonstrates the symbiotic relationship and the critical interface between arts and society. Every artistic production needs a social space to thrive. This social space is provided by society. As could be seen below, production and consumption are two sides of the same coin.



Source: Monaco, p. 11.

A large segment of the West African film audience is against soft porn and the suggestive sexual dance in many home videos. As stated earlier, there is a vibrant sub-generic form of West African video films totally devoted to preaching religious sermons and messages. They are produced by religious groups such as The Mount Zion Faith Ministries International, Christian Multimedia International, Evangelical Outreach Ministries, The Breakthrough Ministries International. Some of the video films produced by these groups are *The great mistake*, *Just a little sin*, *I will heal the land*, *The solid rock*, Foluke Ogunleye (110). Based on output, this genre is gradually losing its vibrancy and appeal. The West African film audience is trapped in a situation reminiscent of Jungian's *The collective unconscious*. It is collectively unconscious of its support (through patronage, preferences and taste) to a film genre it dislikes and abhors. The archetypal film audience in West Africa will condemn soft porn in the morning and watch it at night.

To change the current film pattern will require a radical transformation of the film taste/preferences of the West African film audience. The arbitrary arrest of filmmakers, censorship, or the destruction of film CDS are temporary remedies. The most important and permanent solution is a change in the film taste of the West African film audience. "The viewing audience is a great determining factor in the popularization of a theme or an idea projected in films", Emily G.

Oghale (219).

Furthermore, the warning by Ann Kaplan as cited in Dul Johnson (188) should be not be ignored, “Screen images of women are sexualized no matter what the women are doing literally or what kind of plot may be involved”. Ironically, Orwell hinges the salvation of humanity on women but NOT as sexualized objects. “Everywhere stood the same solid unconquerable figure, made monstrous by work and childbearing, toiling from birth to death and still singing. Out of those mighty loins a race of conscious beings must one day come” (227). The future of film as a literary tool is bright in West Africa. Women have a strong role to play in making this a reality. Out of their strong social vision and regenerative capacity, shall emerge a vibrant West African cinema.

Recommendations

- West African film producers/Directors should explore the rich oral resources of the region instead of mimicking foreign films with their unwholesome sexual materials
- They should produce film texts that could be used in the class room as done by the likes of Sembene Ousmane.
- Professionalism (through training) should be encouraged.
- The West African film audience should be conscious of its taste and preferences

Conclusion

This paper draws attention to the perennial conflicts between film and society in West Africa. The paper also examined the causes of these conflicts and proffered solutions to them. A major cause of the conflict is the film taste of many people in West Africa which is at variance with their public display of piety and morality. Conflict is a necessary ingredient for social change. West Africa is in dire need of change. The society needs film to constantly remind it of its structural and institutional contradictions and/or failures. Positive change begins with film.

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