

**CINEMA THEATRE, QUALITY CONTROL AND NATION
BUILDING: EXAMPLE OF SILVERBIRD CINEMA THEATRE
IN PORT HARCOURT CITY**

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Introduction

Cinema culture in Nigeria was first recorded in 1903 in Lagos. According to Ekwuazih: "it was in 1903 that the Alake of Egbaland and his chiefs gathered at Glover Hall in Lagos with other prominent personalities in the country to watch the first film show in Nigeria"(44). In a parallel vein, Enahoro, exposes the necessity of a cinema to a country when he posits that:

A man without a mirror is better than a nation without a cinema industry. The cinema gives a community a more reflective picture than the mirror does to the man. The mirror gives a man his reflection but his right side is presented to him on the left of the mirror. The cinema presents the community's image as it is (68).

In this respect, it becomes apt when Luciani posits that: "the cinema is one of the major institutions of human civilization"(46). He comments further that:

As far as influence is conceived, it has become the "fifth Estate", after Parliament, the Cabinet, the Magistrature and the Press. But its range is so vast that at times it can be designated the "First

Estate": experts have calculated, in fact, that some films - have influenced millions of spectators. Thus the cinema can condition people (qtd. in Akpuda 1).

Shaka has observed in describing the use of film in Lagos in the 1920s,

The initiative to use film as a medium of public enlightenment/instruction was to illustrate to the people of the Lagos protectorate the ways in which rats carry the disease and also enlist the co-operation in eliminating the plague bearing rats (7).

Shaka's report above is a government initiative towards bringing to an end the superstition and rumour on the causes of an epidemic in Lagos in the 1920s. The documentary film was used to show how rats were carriers of the disease and the need to exterminate them.

The introduction of cinema in Colonial Africa generally was as an instructional, educational, propaganda, medium etc. The first point of call of the Colonists was the cities close to the sea such as Calabar, Lagos, and Port Harcourt respectively. And the method of cinema management was distribution and exhibition since facilities for filmmaking were not available in the country.

Cities that had the privilege of hosting Europeans during the pre-colonial era witnessed the establishment of movie theatres where people gathered to see films at night throughout the week and also used such halls for church services on Sundays. These halls and activities of film shows provided means of recreation,

entertainment, education, interaction etc for the inhabitants of such cities after the day's struggles. The movie theatres popularized Indian, European and Chinese films and actors in Nigeria. Films like *Dramidra* and *Gitadra*, *Snake in the Monkey Shadow*, and *Dracular* all became billboard attractions. An experience of the day the writer stole out of the hostel as a junior student to visit Plaza cinema to watch *Dracular* remains very memorable because at the end of the film show, he came out to face the problem of returning to school through the fence that late in darkness as there was power failure. Your guess is as good as mine. Every image standing in front of him looked like the vampire himself.

These cities for several reasons no longer have such movie theatres and where they exist, they serve permanently as churches and halls for rentals. The reasons for the near dearth if not extinction of these halls have been traced by scholars like Shaka and Ekwuazi to the rise of urban crime as an aftermath of the post Civil War of the 1970s, and the devaluation of the naira as a result of the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). Also to be considered as one of the problems that has swept the cinema viewing culture underground is the rise of television drama and subsequently the paradigm shift of the 1990s- video film industry.

In Port Harcourt, so many movie theatres existed until the challenges mentioned above affected it. The cinema viewing culture is today being rejuvenated in the city of Port Harcourt by the Silverbird, Genesis and I-cinema theatres. This paper is an attempt at capturing the efforts of the Silverbird theatre in the control of quality in the relatively young film industry in Nigeria, accessing how successfully the organization is contributing to nation building.

Cinema Culture in Port Harcourt City (1960s-1980s)

The 1960s up until the late 1980s experienced a better cinema culture in the city of Port Harcourt in spite of the aftermath of Civil War etc as already noted by some scholars. Movie theatres such as Rivoli, Central, Plaza, Empress and Abbey were all over the city serving its movie loving inhabitants. Those at Borokiri area had access to Central and Plaza, people in Main Town went to Rivoli, those at Diobu area used the services of Empress and Abbey cinema respectively.

The premises of these movie theatres round the week witnessed city inhabitants standing by the billboards checking out new arrivals and repetition of popular films. As early as 7.00pm, members of the public were already gathered to purchase tickets that will enable them see advertised films. The place also served as a venue for the hawking of certain essential needs of the people thereby providing means of livelihood.

Although, such places were ridden with pick pockets, the management of these movie theatres used the services of able-bodied young men who were popular boxers in town to protect their premises and audiences from molestation. At other times, the lay about, were used to clean the premises, post posters, and run errands for the organizations.

The movie theatres provided source of alternative entertainment and opportunity for the people to see the culture of other peoples of the world. It also provided opportunity for excursion for schools within and outside the city. The movie theatres were places where traders looked forward to spending their time during the weekends giving that it was open to them unlike the Port Harcourt Club exclusively for the Europeans and elites.

Brief History of Silverbird Cinema

Silverbird Group, one of the largest entertainment Companies in Africa was founded in 1980 by Ben Murray-Bruce. What is today a conglomerate is said to have started in the premises of Bruce's father with the seed money of twenty thousand naira only. The group today distributes films in Ghana, Kenya, Zambia and several other West African countries with her head quarters in Nigeria. The group made yet another stride in the 1990s by establishing a radio station, Rhythm 93.7 FM operating in Port Harcourt and Lagos.

Silverbird pioneered the revival of cinema theatre culture in Nigeria with the establishment of cinema theatres in Lagos and Port Harcourt in 2004 and Abuja thereafter. The organization is also credited for the building of the first fully equipped Cineplex of five theatres with Dolby Digital Surround Sound and Contiguous Media Store for the audience in Ghana.

The Silverbird Group has branched into TV collaborations with foreign Companies all over West Africa. Presently, the syndicate of programmes such as *Desperate House Wives*, *Lost* and *24* are some of her on-going projects in West Africa.

The Cinema Theatre has continued to serve as an exhibition venue for the promotion of both indigenous and foreign movies till date. The Silverbird Group has also motivated the establishment of other cinema theatres like Genesis Cinema and I-Cinema for the enjoyment of the general public and alternative screening places for film producers generally.

Activities of Silverbird

Silverbird cinema theatre has been screening films since inception. Below is a record of films screened from 2011 to date. They include:

Year one - - 2011

| | | | |
|---------------------------|---|---|------|
| Social Network | - | - | 2011 |
| The Mechanic | - | - | 2011 |
| The Tourist | - | - | 2011 |
| Green Hornet | | - | 2011 |
| Gulliver's Travel | | - | 2011 |
| Burlesque | - | - | 2011 |
| Red | - | - | 2011 |
| I Am Number 1 | | - | 2011 |
| Big Monna's House | | - | 2011 |
| Mars Needs Moms | | - | 2011 |
| Spud | - | - | 2011 |
| The Room Mate | | - | 2011 |
| Trust | - | - | 2012 |
| Hope | - | - | 2012 |
| Priest | - | - | 2012 |
| Fast Five | - | - | 2012 |
| Alvin and the Chip Munks | - | | 2012 |
| Kung Fu Panda | - | - | 2012 |
| Black Oran | - | - | 2012 |
| X-men | - | - | 2012 |
| Jumping the Broom- | - | | 2012 |
| Hanna | - | - | 2012 |
| Private Storm | - | - | 2013 |
| Eti Keta | - | - | 2013 |
| Aramotu | - | - | 2013 |
| Tango with Me | - | - | 2013 |
| Kiss and Tell | - | - | 2014 |
| Knocking on Heaven's Door | - | | 2014 |
| Son of God | - | - | 2014 |
| Heaven is for Real | - | - | 2014 |

| | | | |
|-------------------------|---|---|------|
| Devil in the Dress | - | - | 2014 |
| The Amazing Spiderman | - | - | 2014 |
| Non-Stop | - | - | 2014 |
| Captain America: Winter | | | 2014 |
| Mr. Peabody and Sherman | | | 2014 |
| Muppets Most Wanted | | | 2014 |

Audience Patronage

The Cinema Theatre which can sit 1000 persons always record attendance of not less than 500 persons per show. Some other times there are bookings by schools and corporate organizations. The cinema theatre screen films that run between 45 minutes and an hour most of the times. Presently, they have adopted a style where “Stars” especially in the Nollywood Industry are invited to sign autographs and this has increased patronage. They also use the Radio Department of the Group, Rhythm 93.7 FM to publicize the activities of the Cinema Theatre. This also has helped in greatly in increasing patronage.

Silverbird Cinema Theatre, Quality Control and Nation Building

A procedure intended to ensure that Silverbird Cinema Theatre and the film screened for the viewing audience adhere to a defined set of criteria or meets the requirements of the client is put in place by the management of the group thus;

1. Screening of films on 35mm

This laid down rule allows for the maintenance of international standard. Its advantages which are enormous motivate indigenous filmmakers to work towards the making of films in that format. It also prepares the indigenous filmmaker to qualify for competitions in any part of the world. The challenge of films made in Nigeria

not being able to show in foreign countries becomes a thing of the past. The idea of complex before the Hollywood or Bollywood films is gradually erased.

2. Constant Upgrading of Facility and Alternative Halls

In compliance with the group's constant upgrade of her facilities, standard films from any part of the world can be screened in the theatre for public viewing. The different halls are also available for cooperate bookings by establishments at any time.

3. Respect for Classification

The Silverbird Cinema Theatre insists on the appropriate classification of films to be shown giving no room for any unapproved screening. The management ensures that schedules are kept religiously to accommodate adults, children, working class and other bookings from time to time. This activity is in furtherance of the law operated by the Nigeria Video Censorship Board (NVCB). The board is invested with the power to regulate the activities of filmmakers by looking at their films and determining the category of people allowed to view the film. This of course is guided by the established morals, laws and conventions of the people. The protection of this article by extension plays a definitive role in nation building.

4. Plans for Patrons Comfort

In making sure that her patrons are in relaxed mood while in the premises, a kingpin restaurant, baglios Ice Cream shop, Live Style Store, Games Arcade and other forms of relaxation are in place for the enjoyment of the patrons. The provision of services such as the ones mentioned affords the patrons, residents or

tourists a place of comfort and association. It also creates enabling environment for business negotiations between patrons who become convinced of the safe atmosphere. All of these translate to economic empowerment for the people of Port Harcourt city who now enjoy night life without fears.

5. Security/Transport Arrangement

The premises are constantly guarded by security personnel, both in uniform and mufti ensuring that patrons are not in any way threatened. A transport system is also in place to ease challenges of movement by patrons who visit the theatre. The arrangement prevents loss of properties by the patrons who are sure of the cabs they are boarding. The cab owners are duly registered with the management by paying a charge and depositing of vital personal identification documents which are screened by a recognized security outfit.

Conclusion

This research has been able to x-ray the place of Cinema Theatre in the control of quality in the Nigeria Film Industry and practice of film exhibition generally. It has also been able to highlight the role of cinema theatre in nation building. The research recommends the establishing of cinema theatres in all nooks and cranny of our society in other to benefit from the enormous contribution of the medium.

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