

HARNESSING THE POTENTIALS OF DOCUMENTARY FILM IN THE FACE OF GLOBAL ECONOMIC RECESSION

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Abstract

The world of film is broadly split into two types: the feature/fiction and the documentary genres. It is, however, the former that readily comes to mind whenever the subject of film is raised. The documentary incidentally is the less known notwithstanding that it is the older of the two. Indeed, the documentary film is the type of film that should be harnessed for its potentials in addressing human problems everywhere. The reason is that the documentary is closer to the needs of man as a film of fact; as a genre that addresses the challenges which confront humanity in the course of daily living. It is for this reason that this paper is embarked upon in order to enlighten humanity on how the documentary can be employed to address the problems of global economic recession and bring relief to mankind, with special focus on Nigeria. It will also provide reasons for the relegation of the genre by practitioners and scholars alike. The paper concludes that if the documentary is given even 5 percent of the attention given to the feature film, humanity would be economically, socially, politically, spiritually and culturally better off and would therefore, be able to cope with economic recession.

Introduction

Man by nature is a being prone to disbelief and doubt. In all things, he wants to be convinced beyond reasonable doubt before he can allow himself to be taken in. The only exception to this is, perhaps, in matters of religion, where faith all too soon takes the place of logical reasoning. But both faith and reason tend to desert man when he is confronted with visual reality: the evidence of his own eyes. Prior to improvement of technology and the evolution of photo shopping, we were made to believe that “photographs do not lie”. In other words, what one has seen with one’s two eyes can neither be faulted nor be a lie. All that now, is past. The digital era has made nonsense of reality because as the saying goes, in the world of film, impossibility is nothing, creativity is everything and this covers both the documentary and the feature/fiction genre. This paper makes a case for the documentary, however, hinging it on the focal point or objective of the filmmaker for embarking on the project. In other words, a documentary filmmaker who sets out to project reality would succeed in spite of the manipulations of the camera or editing.

The theatre requires of its audience a willing suspension of disbelief while the film expects of its viewers a willing postponement of belief. This is because both media have the capacity to distort reality. Their fares are more fiction than fact. The documentary on

the other hand, is a film genre, which specialises in reality. Indeed, one could say that where the feature film employs the figurative language, the documentary uses literal language. It uses the unembellished everyday language, the language of news to put its message across. This is because, the truth like good wine, needs no bush. Thus, this paper looks at ways in which the factual elements of the documentary as a film of fact can be harnessed to advantage in the face of the present day global economic recession. The premise of the paper, therefore, is that the documentary film, when properly utilised, given the avenues for its use in Nigeria, is in a better position to help us overcome the problems of global economic recession provided the filmmaker does not allow the opportunities for distorting reality becloud his focus.

One of the reasons for this submission arises from the fact that the documentary film endeavours to adhere as much as possible to reality, not using professional actors nor engaging professional studios to narrate its experience. Above all, the documentary strives to be faithful to its subject notwithstanding the few instances where it deviates from actuality like in trying to recreate the life and times of a dead man, or someone not immediately accessible for camera appearance. The selling point is that there is a very high degree of actuality in employing the documentary to narrate a story. This is clearly unlike the fiction/feature film where the entire narrative from conception of the idea to screening is almost entirely and wholly based on imagination and where the filmmaker is in complete control. The documentary filmmaker strives for faithful depiction of reality and this gives him an edge in credibility over his fiction filmmaker counterpart.

Definition of Concepts

Hyginus Ekwuazi, notes that the basic difference between drama/feature film and the documentary is that the former, “even if and when based on actuality, is acted”. He goes on to say:

The documentary is based wholly and entirely on actuality. For, essentially, the documentary contains the real words of real persons (or their writings, published and unpublished, including letters if they are not living or cannot possibly be reached and there is, no record of their voices), the moving pictures of their actions (or photos and drawings if films or video tape is unavailable or if they lived before motion pictures) and, concomitantly, the sounds and visuals of real events. The documentary documents actualities (14-15).

From the foregoing, one can see that unlike the feature film whose central focus is entertainment and which draws its materials from imaginative and creative manipulation of reality; the documentary film is wholly and essentially concerned with actuality. Indeed, even when exigencies dictate a leaning towards dramatisation, all such concerns are incidental. The focus is to be as true as possible to life and to this end every effort is made to reduce to a negligible extent, any trappings of fiction. Again, no matter the manipulations, no actor can imitate to the minutest details the dancing patterns of say, Michael Jackson. The movements can be followed, but not the exact gestures, facial

expressions and vocal nuances, among others, which no two people can have in every detail. Drawing from Paul Madsen, Ekwuazi, gives various definitions of the documentary film as follows:

- a) A creative treatment of reality.
- b) A selective dramatisation of facts in terms of their human consequence.
- c) A film, usually non-fiction in which the elements of dramatic conflict are provided by ideas and political or economic forces.
- d) Documentary films are defined as those that deal with historical, social, scientific, or economic subjects, either photographed in actual occurrence or re-enacted, and where the emphasis is more on factual content than on entertainment.
- e) Documentary films are those which reproduce life in all its manifestation- the life of man, of animals, of nature- without the assistance of professional actors or studios and on condition that the film represents a free artistic creation. We are led to name this genre film of facts (15).

The above definitions are self-explanatory and all point to the fact that documentary film concentrates more on actuality than entertainment. Also, while not dispensing with entertainment or creativity, all efforts are channelled towards projecting facts over and above other elements. This perhaps accounts for why many film makers stir clear of it. The fact is that unlike the feature film where the director has control over all the stages of production, in the documentary film, the director's degree of control is quite minimal, even negligible. This is because the filmmaker is dealing with real life. For instance, at a wedding, the priest says to the groom: "You may kiss the bride". If the groom merely gives a peck to the bride, he (the groom), cannot be asked to "take it again", as it obtains in film directing. The documentary filmmaker is not striving for perfection of the action where everyday errors are discountenanced. Indeed, if the subject has speech impairment, he is recorded, warts and all.

Having dispensed with the definition of the documentary film, we now turn our attention to economic recession. Recession literally means "a temporary economic decline during which trade and industrial activity are reduced". Indeed, one would say that economic recession is a time during which the economy of a nation experiences a temporary menopause, retardation or in the Nigerian parlance, the economy goes through a "go slow," which is a traffic gridlock. If it is on a global scale, then it's a global economic paralysis where the values of global currencies do not measure up with the value of purchase. It necessarily affects all segments of the society, political, social, religious, cultural, etc. since they are all prone to the vagaries of the capital market economy. Life itself becomes traumatic because neither capital, nor materials are enough. Everything seems to be in a kind of dormant state. Even laughter becomes mirthless, as if one were mocking oneself.

Documentary Film and the Economy

The media in all forms have direct effect on the economy and are also influenced by the economy. Indeed, economic factors universally drive the media and are in their turn affected by the media. The MacBride Commission submits that:

Both in its structure and its content, communication intermeshes with, and is dependent on, the economy in many ways. A constant flow of information is vital for economic life. As well as being a great economic force, with incalculable potentials, it is a decisive factor in development. As an element of increasing importance in all national economies, communication represents a growing segment of a country's gross national product and has direct repercussions on productivity and employment (23-24).

When properly harnessed, the media through communication which is their forte and focal point of relevance through their watchdog role, call attention to those areas of need which are of particular relevance to economic growth. This is particularly true of the documentary film one of whose definitions already cited under item (d) of definition of concepts reveals that, it "deals with the historical, social, scientific or economic forces". And because the genre functions to solve today's problems today; it is of great significance to the economy. This is because through research the documentary film maker discovers those aspects of a people's life which need exposure, attention, projection and of general interest. For instance, the vexed issue of female genital mutilation has engendered both feature fiction films as well as documentaries in the bid to correct the anomaly. The same is true of the Human Immune Virus (HIV) and its affiliate, the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and other related health issues.

No doubt, the feature fiction film has the power to do twice the job of the documentary but it lacks that factual plausibility of the documentary. One can echo Robert Maurer, a clinical psychologist, cited in Kondazian, when he observes:

Art has played a powerful and unrecognized role in the history of the world. I think the major motivation for people to be artists, and it can sometimes get complicated and/or corrupted, is this powerful need to express their spirits. There is a passionate need to be creative, to be expressive, to be seen and heard (xiv).

The above statement is particularly true of the documentary, which has a high tendency to be abandoned once it has achieved its purpose. However, because of the desire, a passionate one at that, to be heard, to express oneself and be creative, the documentary has continued to survive. Also, there is the danger of its being corrupted through the desire to be creative or unconsciously manipulative of the material, it can be abused. But this desire is usually suppressed for the higher goal and desire to be factual, to tell it as it is, which is how the documentary genre works.

The documentary film functions like the news media. It ferrets out human interest concerns especially those which border on development and sustainability of human life and brings them to the domain of national and international attention for the overall benefit of humanity. This is one of the strong areas of the documentary genre, to bring issues to public attention. It more or less exhumes abandoned and or, neglected areas of human interest and brings them to public domain so that such issues can be discussed. For instance, the issue of the dying Nigerian languages or the education of the girl-child would be of concern to a documentary filmmaker. These are necessarily discovered through careful research.

Such aspects of culture that have the tendency to be explored for cultural tourism like the source of River Ethiope in Abraka, Delta State, the Osun Oshogbo grove in Osun State, the Biafran Airstrip and Ojukwu Bunker in Abia and Imo States, respectively, or festivals which dot the length and breadth of Nigeria; mega churches that attract religious tourists, the famous Obudu Ranch in Cross River State, among others are a tip of the iceberg of the areas which engender documentary films. All the places of interest mentioned above when subjected to the documentary film process, help to add to the economy thus making it more viable. Besides exposing such places to global attention, it helps in no small way to add to the socio-economic growth and development in all aspects of the life of the community where they are domiciled or take place if festivals. The documentary filmmaker is like a journalist. He brings to public attention the human interest subjects in all their variety into sharp focus. He does what the journalist does in news selection. Thus, he is very careful in his choice of subjects to treat. Herein lies the merit of the documentary film over the feature: that the natural locations remain the same, the people live their lives without the assistance of professionals, things are done in their natural order without recourse to distortion, all dependent on the goal of the filmmaker though.

It is important at this point to discuss how the documentary film can be used to tackle global economic recession and be of benefit to both national and global economy. It has been posited here that the documentary film is concerned with tackling human interest issues and endeavours to project such issues which are of immediate relevance; the issues of now. How does the documentary do this? We noted that the major technique is through the use of research. Thus, having discovered people, events or places of interest or issues of general concern such as the endemic fuel scarcity and subsequent price hike and protests which follow it; the documentary film maker latches on it and places it on the front burner. Not stopping there, the 'documentarist' would proffer suggestions for solution which when adopted by the stakeholders would put paid to such problem if not permanently, then temporary relief would be given. In this way, the economy gains as life would return to normal. Fuel or premium motor spirit (PMS) would then be available at affordable price and for vehicular, business and domestic uses as well.

The issue of religious/evangelical tourism is gaining ground globally. Nigeria hosts the largest religious congregations/crusades in Black Africa. The glamorous life styles of the resident pastors and "men and women of God" who control these churches are enough and good subjects for documentary. The documentary filmmaker can interrogate the impact of these pastors and their teachings on their members, the community where

they are domiciled and the entire Nigerian even African society. Some of these Pastors have questionable live styles; employ suspicious methods/techniques for healing and miracles, among other behaviours which deserve investigation. The social media are replete with the antics of these pastors and *Sahara Reporters* are always carrying information on them – from Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, and other African countries. These reports can be further investigated by the documentary filmmaker. If the investigations are positive and these pastors are seen to be true men and women of God, the documentary on them can help boost membership as more converts would join the churches and this means more money from the various money generating programmes of the church.

For one, if their methods are healthy, people can be encouraged to invest in them and if otherwise, they channel their investment financial, spiritual and physical elsewhere. This will also help in the economic well-being of the individual who is equally a member of the global community as well as the overall society.

Other places of interest like the source of the beautiful and clear Ethiopia River in Abraka and the Turf Club, also in Abraka, are decidedly subjects of interest for the documentary filmmaker as earlier noted. When the documentary filmmaker calls attention to them; he raises awareness to their tourist potentials. The response from such attention would lead to investment and tourist presence which would reduce the effect and impact of the economic recession. The McCarthy Beach and Abraka River Resort are always besieged by tourists and people seeking recreational and relaxation outlets during the dry season. These are pure avenues for the ‘documentarist’ to contribute his quota to the issue of economic recession as people would come from all walks of life to enjoy the offerings from these national phenomena.

Again, some aspects of religious worship like the African Traditional Religion (ATR) deserve attention from the documentary filmmaker for several reasons. In the first instance, African traditional religions like Igbe, Ifa and Igo Mmuo practices need to be documented. Attention should be called to them in order to upgrade them both in terms of removing what is objectionable in them and infusing into them modern acceptable practices. Ifa worship for example, is practiced all over the world, United States of America, Brazil, Spain, North America and, other parts of the world. Its headquarters is situated in Yoruba land and it attracts thousands of adherents universally and has engendered much academic and scholarly interest. The documentary filmmaker can latch onto its established reputation which revolves around the festive period of Osun Oshogbo and give it more creative and artistic colouration that will boost its economic potentials. This in turn would help to reduce the economic recession as more money would come into the state and its environs. Also, the documentary itself, if well packaged, can be sold out to television houses both nationally and globally.

The documentary as a medium should be encouraged because it is our nearest visual record of history and social reality which has credibility in terms of faithfulness to reality. We cannot depend on the feature film to give us a faithful reconstruction of history that can be plausible and acceptable. Notwithstanding the many buffetings the documentary has received from all quarters, it has continued to survive, which is on its own evidence of its uniqueness. As Hyginus Ekwuazi has noted:

And today, though stunted, the documentary has continued to grow, thanks, largely, to the combination of the following structural factors: a fast growing television industry; a steady growth in the number of independent television/film producers and directors; and the growth in the number of polytechnics and universities where the documentary is a vital complement to the courses in broadcasting and film (286).

Nigeria is a multilingual society. Language is not only a vital part of culture; it is also a major purveyor of culture. Thus, the over five hundred languages in Nigeria represent over four hundred distinct cultures each of which has a crying need to be relevant. One major way to achieve this relevance therefore, is through the deployment of the documentary film genre to ensure their survival and relevance. This is a challenge which documentary filmmakers can focus on, especially those from the affected cultural/language cache.

Beyond the languages, each of these cultures also has a unique festival, ceremony or landmark, which needs national awareness and thence global attention. For example, in Imo State, the Oguta Lake Resort, the Nekede Zoo, and the Mbari Centre, as a symbol of a community's dwelling place for their gods, are attractions for tourists and further enlightenment for the people. In Bauchi, the Yankari Games Reserve; in Kano, the erstwhile Groundnut Pyramids; in Sokoto, the Emir's Palace; in Enugu, the abandoned coal mining sites, among others, are good for historical documentation and deserve a second look to discover how those things functioned or function; how the natural phenomena among them can be gainfully utilised or how the other unexplored aspects of the people's lifestyles can be made to yield the good in them. These are all avenues through which the documentary filmmaker can help in generating interest and create jobs and thereby whittle down the impact of the economic recession. Every effort made in creating jobs is a positive step that impacts on the economy. One does not have to carry the entire universe on one's shoulders to make positive contribution to the society.

Again, the documentary is a veritable source of creating awareness on health related issues. Such health challenges as STDS, sickle cell anaemia, genotype, female genital mutilation; all sorts of violence to humanity, environmental cleanliness, are all areas which the documentary has employed and needs to employ to impact on the consequences of global economic recession. This is because even in this 21st century, young people still get married without recourse to checking their genotypes. Only recently, this author lost a relation a week after his wedding. The young man was a sickle cell carrier and the stress of the wedding must have had serious negative effect on his psyche and thus led to his death. This was one avoidable death if only proper care had been taken to address his health challenges or even prevent the parents from dabbling into marriage when they were unaware of their genotype status.

A documentary on sickle cell anaemia and genotype with their attendant health challenges, if properly packaged and circulated, would go a long way to create awareness and reduce their negative consequences. A healthy person contributes to the societal well-being in productive terms materially, psychologically, intellectually, and so on. A person who is battling with his life in terms of good health would be so preoccupied with how to

survive the next day that he would not find anything outside his health concerns interesting. A good documentary would proffer suggestions on how to avoid the pitfalls from such health issues.

Governments in the bid to make statement of relevance and bear witness to themselves in terms of their achievements use the documentary and thus empower people economically. In the “Foreword” to *Delta State: The Ibori Years – Events and Achievements*, produced by Delta State Ministry of Information, Okubor captures the basis for the various governments’ involvement in the documentary whether for the screen or print, when he says:

The production of this work arose from a desire to chronicle pictorially in one publication, the highlights of the activities over an eight-year period, in order to provide posterity a rational basis for correctly assessing the administration now and in the future and accord it its proper place in history. The publication’s purpose is therefore, two-fold: first, to capture in a nutshell, most of the numerous landmark accomplishments of the Ibori-led government in the hope that succeeding administrations will draw from this, the impetus to seek to excel too in their service to the people for whom a record has now been set below which performance they will find totally unacceptable (6).

He says that the second reason was to have the publication as “a keep-sake”, from an administration that was leaving office and desirous of being remembered. And this, no doubt, has been one of the main reasons for the continued survival of the documentary film genre in Nigeria at least: The desire of governments to wish to be remembered. And this is even when they made no laudable policies or impacted on the people. They still want to be remembered! And how much more handy the documentary would come if the government did something worth remembering!

Marcel Okhakhu provides one of the reasons for the use of the documentary in his article on “The Use of Mobile Cinema in Promoting Health Issues in Nigeria”. According to him:

In the area of malaria, the exercise was also an eye opener. As old and prevalent as malaria is in Nigeria, it is frightening to note that in some communities, people still do not know that dirty environments produce congenial habits for the growth of the mosquito larva which – ultimately produces mosquitoes, the carrier of malaria disease. However, the information on the treated mosquito nets was received and enthusiasm was generated among the people for this anti-malaria product (21).

From Okhaku’s work, one could see one of the functions of the documentary which is to address today’s problems today. And having shot the documentary on a given social problem, the mobile cinema furthers the effort through screening by taking the problem straight to those concerned. As in the case above, having known the negative consequences

of an unclean environment, the people embrace the change that ultimately leads to better and healthier living, hence of longevity, greater productivity and a boost in the economy.

Conclusion

The documentary as a film genre that is quite amenable to handling issues of social, economic, cultural, even religious relevance has been explored in terms of its potentials in whittling down the challenges posed by global economic recession. The various areas where the genre can come in handy were also highlighted.

In all that has been said, the documentary film was seen as a genre that is close to addressing human concerns in terms of providing solutions. This is because filmmakers are free to dabble into any areas of man's need in order to bring them to global attention for solutions. By pointing out such neglected yet significant aspects of man's desires, the nation is spared unnecessary expenses as lives would be saved and productivity enhanced. With increase in productivity made possible by good health, national, even global economic recession would be drastically reduced if not eradicated over time. Moreover, a documentary on the supposedly volatile areas, which are made so by media reports rather than what reality holds, can help allay the security concerns in such places. For instance, Warri in Delta state has been so negatively portrayed by the media as an enclave for militants thereby scaring away foreign investors. The same applies to other parts of the country where such security concerns are evinced.

The documentary is best suited to achieving this end because of its plausibility, credibility and allegiance to the truth. The truth of the documentary is substantiated by the fact that it makes the people see where they have faulted as in the case of the causes of malaria among others. Thus, conviction is achieved because the people are witnesses to their own actions.

Recommendations

- a) Arising from the foregoing, the following recommendations if adopted could help in using the documentary film to assist in solving the problem of economic recession in Nigeria and elsewhere where such issues of concern rear their heads.
- b) Government should invest in the documentary film beyond using it to sing political and personal praises by focusing on areas which would have national interest such as festivals of the various communities that are relevant and have economic potentials.
- c) Researchers especially staff of the various cultural ministries can be engaged to ferret out such subjects of interest in order to ensure their continued preservation.
- d) Governments and individuals, even corporate bodies, can sponsor documentaries to allay the fears of insecurity in states and areas where the media have painted negative pictures of security. This would help to counter such negative reports and portray the real image.
- e) Media houses, especially government-owned ones like Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and state-owned ones can be mandated to air such documentaries when produced.

- f) The films can serve as avenues for cultural exchange and diplomacy with other nations of the world hence conscious effort and defined objective should be the watch words in their packaging.
- g) Documentaries should be made to highlight the positive aspects of our culture with emphasis on our hospitality, security, regard for other human beings and above all, the mutual co-existence inherent in our multi-ethnic relationships.

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