
Cultural Transposition and Challenges of Policy Making: A Review of Select Nigerian Television Series

Chukwudi M.C. Okoye & Chibuike M. Abunike
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v20i3.7>

Abstract

Cinematic entertainment, it is safe to say, cannot be wished away. Indeed, as a child of necessity, the film and by extension the Televised Drama-series industry have come a long way. However, African countries like Nigeria today continue to grapple with issues of Genre, Form, Cultural imperialism and so on. This has consequently raised questions on issues of policy making and realistic interpretation as expressed by film scholars and critics and as observed through the eyes of the regular viewer. Furthermore, the issues of cinematic language or style, raises another concern as this is capable of engendering different levels of psychological involvement or emotional attachment from the viewing audience. Thus, factors such as the social, political and even religious make up of the intended audience become imperative for the director who must fuse these thematic, artistic and technical aspects in order to truly engage his audience on the discourse of the moment. This research work finds that there appears to be a disconnect on how the average Nigeria Television drama series is packaged and presented from its original thematic content. The question of cultural transposition further emboldens this view as directors seem to infuse certain values as seen through dialogue, dressing, set and so on; and as such distract and in some cases prevent the audience from accessing the real message behind the story. The researchers employed the qualitative research method which entails the analysis of text, online journals and

handbooks for proper and objective content analysis and appreciation. The researchers also analyzed two Nigerian series; that is The Johnsons and Professor Johnbull. The study recommends that discussions in the area of Cultural transposition and policy making especially as it concerns the film medium should be intensified as this would not only encourage a more, Professional approach to Film and Television. Drama industry, but would allow for the enthronement of content above glamour as well as engender more believable and realistic story telling.

Introduction

The media through its various genres and outlets has continued to play a pivotal role in societal perception and behaviour. Indeed, be it through the screen or radio and with each breakthrough in technological advancements, product presentation and advertisement appeal, the average individual appears to lose more confidence in his own opinion and decisions and inadvertently trusts the media on a wide range of issues especially as it concerns his cultural , social and even religious beliefs. Theories such as Media Imperialism advocate that show of dominance by one country or society over another may be presented through a systematic yet deliberate attempt to infuse not just concepts or products of that country but to also products in the societies they supposedly have advantage over.

The Media thus present as a readily available option for consumers who yearn to keep up with new ways of doing things. We learn how people in other parts of the world speak, dress, eat, marry and even worship because of the window created for us by media outlets. In Africa, the notion is not different. The role of the media in accelerating change in lifestyle especially among the youth is unprecedented. Babafemi Jacobs observes that:

The role of the media in changing the lifestyle of Africans from their ethnic lifestyle to a western lifestyle cannot be over emphasized. Many Africans due to their access and exposure to a growing number of media and technological equipments have gradually changed from a pure African culture to that of a mixed culture that learns towards the western culture (25).

The Film media possesses unique qualities in evoking real emotions from a given audience. As a re-enactment of possible true life situations and events artistically woven from story to script, embodied by characters and seen through the lens of a camera, each frame consciously or unconsciously is geared towards creating the needed impulse, appealing to the human sensibility and probably changing hither to held perceptions. The concept of Reality in Film and Television production thus, connotes that the viewer should be able to relate to the unfolding events as phases he has or is yet to pass through. Realist Scholars seem to agree that the Film medium should indeed portray the true state of man. These views have been expressed from Bazin's theory which incorporates Fact imagery and Theological underpinnings into the basic materials for film, the Rossellinian and Zavattinian approach, which basically recommends that the purpose of film is to depict the Social injustice in the world. Chloemarie Corrado also in her treatise on Formalism and Realism observes that:

The formalist film theory however is used to evoke certain emotions and mental states with the help of technical cinematic facets such as lighting, scoring, sound and set design. Formalism is primarily concerned with the way it

portrays and communicates different styles and emotions (2).

She further avers that:

When trying to understanding Realism, it is important to keep in mind that a film can have an unrealistic subject and theme, yet still show signs of realism in the way that it is shot and edited. We often associate pure films to realist films because of their limited use of sets, the use of Natural lighting and the limited editing, among other things (2).

The concept of Realism thus, appears to be such that should evoke a sense of believability in film. Scholars seems to put forward that flamboyant use of elements such as Light and Set may distract from the perception of Reality and believability from the viewing members of the audience. The present scene today in the Nigerian film and Television Drama industry appears to show an increasing number of productions houses, in apparent competition in the best Set, Locale, Sound and other technologically advanced components. The “village girl” or “Grass to Grace” themes appear to have been replaced with “Super rich city boys” and “Sugar mummy-wives” story lines and so on. The sets have also moved from rural and semi-urban areas to High brow urban areas in the two main cities in Nigeria; Lagos and Abuja. This appears to negate what scholars like Andre Bazin term the Incorporation of Material Reality which basically suggests that while components such as lighting and Set have migrated to accommodate modern concerns, characterization and content remains static and as such is a prerequisite for an unrealistic production. Quoting Bazin’s, analysis of Robert Rossellini’s film, *Germany Year Zero*, Chloemarie Corrato emphasizes on the importance on Realism and

attention to detail as crucial inclusions to any cinematic endeavour, she submits that:

It is present in the music that operatically opens the film and in the sweeping panning shots of the city matching the film's score. Rossellini follows a young German boy as he digs graves, steals some coal and makes his way back home through the rubble-strewn streets. The detail is important here, for Rossellini wants to explore the boy's naivety in the face of appalling reality. How, influenced by the ideas of a Nazi teacher, the boy ends up killing his father, but will his conscience leave him alone after this dreadful action? It would be easy, even normal, most of the time for the script and the acting to introduce us into the inner most recesses of his conscience. As Bazin's point is that many filmmakers would insist on shorthand to address the boy's crisis of conscience- Realism if you like, allows for long hand: for the slow process of self realization to come through (4-5).

Cultural and Content Development in the Nigerian TV-Drama Scene

Since the mid 80s into 90s, Nigeria can boast of a rich array of television dramas and soap operas that held the average family spells bound with each episode. Indeed programmes such as *Checkmate*, *Village Headmaster*, *Cockcrow at Dawn*, *Behind the Clouds*, still remain quite unforgettable even today. These televised-dramas enjoyed better popularity amongst the Nigerian populace until the videos film industry gained momentum in the mid 90s. Today, the televised Drama series have regained a large number of followership and this could be due to a number of factors. One of which being that the average Nigerian family today

now have easy access to cable entertainment which was an exclusive preserve for the rich in the 90s. Another factor is that with the aid of technological advancements, Director and producers can today churn out stories with better sound production, picture quality with more compelling set and graphic designs, the question of content however remains a grey area. Indeed as Grace Shalom-Isreal observes:

The time is ripe though for thoroughly researched local content television programmes, rather than ill-fitting and sometimes downright irrelevant content that are presently being dumped on Nigerian viewing audiences (77)

In Nigeria, culture plays a quite significant role in film as well as in other media, with a projected population of about 180 million people categorized across ethnic and religious divides, outlets such as the film media presents as channels of expression and indeed business opportunities for various individuals. Kwaghkondo Agber observes that:

The film industry is closely connected and integrated with the branches of the culture industry and the society as a whole. It is one of the most exciting and informative businesses in the world today. The Nigerian home video industry possesses most of the characteristics of film industries of other countries. It has produced its own film stars, directors, producers, scriptwriters, and other personnel. Unlike the other countries' industries where funding is firmly established and in the hands of well organized private commercial enterprises who finance and control the industry in Nigeria however, funding production and distribution are largely in the hands of auto spare

marketers and merchants of allied products who control and direct production as director-producers (74)

Today in Nigeria, the media has been able to make its mark and thus engender much more trust from its audience. Indeed with each breakthrough in technological advancements as well as product presentation and advertisement appeal, the average individual tends to believe the media more on a wide range of issues. Some schools of thought have even proposed that the Cultural imperialist theory as we know it is actually a Media imperialist theory due to the efficiency and indeed, the unique quality which the media possesses in galvanizing social awareness and responses on given issues as they affect the society. Marcel Okhakhu and Ate Asan Andrew further assert that:

Cultural imperialism is no doubt given accentuation by the media. Manufactured and pressured values are often disseminated through the media and given their ability to arrest attention, efficacy is usually high (13)

Story Development of *The Johnsons* and *Professor JohnBull*

The Johnsons is a Nigerian Drama Series which airs on the Africa Magic channel under the multichoice network franchise. The series is of the comedy genre and tells of the day to day travails of the average Nigerian family. A typical episode of the sitcom addresses themes ranging from sibling rivalry to get rich schemes. The head of the home is played by Charles Inojie. His general mien is that of a man who is very economical with money and would look for any means to get out of spending money. He is a scientist and would usually confuse his wife with high sounding words. His wife, *Emu* is played by Ada Ameh. Whose characterization is that of a poorly educated woman that is often underappreciated because of her lack

of formal education and limited vocabulary? She however remains the spine of the family. The eldest child of the Johnson is 'Jennifer' played by Seun Adebajo. She enjoys a strong mother daughter relationship with *Emu*. She is however known to struggle with her education. *Efe* on the other hand, is played by Chinedu Ikedieze and characterized as the eldest son is the most brilliant of the Johnson children. He usually narrates in between episodes and is known to be skillful with words.

Professor JohnBull is Television drama series that is aired on the Multichoice as well as Startimes cable network and sponsored by the telecommunication outfit, Globacom. The drama series revolves around the lead character from whom it derives its name; Professor Johnbull Eriweagwuagwu Macwigwe, Played by Kanayo O. Kanayo and characterized as a widower and retired Academic who lives with his son, (Churchill), daughter (Elizabeth) and Housemaid (Caro) in a serene neighborhood in Enugu, eastern Nigeria. Thus, by virtue of his academic and social exposure, he becomes the voice and conscience of people and his house, more often than not becomes a melting pot of activities.

The other characters in the drama series include *Ufoma*, an urhobo house help and village gossip played by Bimbo Okentolo, she portrays the character of a habitual busybody; always talking about everything that happens even when she is not sure of the facts. The character of *Etuk*, an Efik business man and Hotel owner is played by Imeh Bishop. He is an ardent admirer of Professor Johnbull and always consults him before taking any decision. Another character is that of *Mai Doya* a northern yam merchant, whose frankness endears him to Professor Johnbull.

The drama series basically boasts of an array of characters representing every ethnic persuasion in Nigeria. It is produced by Tchidi Chikere with consultancy services from Ace Actors,

Richard Mofe Damijo and Chika Okpala. Professor Johnbull exemplifies the Nigeria story. Attempts are made in mirroring different aspects of the Nigerian society with each episode addressing a certain societal ill or norm and always ending with closing quotes from the Professor.

Cultural Displacement and the Challenge of Believability in *The Johnsons* and *Professor JohnBull*

As has been earlier noted, the Film and the Television drama-series industry enjoy good followership in Nigeria; however Film and Drama scholars continue to propose that certain codes must be observed to guarantee a level of creativity and professionalism that is above par. Indeed, just as good storytelling as an aspect of dramaturgy is critical to the Film and Television Drama medium, it also becomes imperative that the filmmaker, Director and Producer, conform the story being told to a structure that elaborately develops the theme, plot, characters, and environment of the intended production. The concept of conflict should be also unraveled in such a way that it is realistic and believable. The target audience should be able to identify areas of conflict in consonance with the environmental factors as well as the development of the characters themselves. Herbert Zettl opines that:

The four basic components of a drama are theme, plot, characters and environment. All drama thrives on conflict. Conflict can be primarily outer-oriented or plot-based, in which the circumstance prompt the character's reaction, or it can be inner-oriented or character based in which the character causes the circumstances (54)

The Johnsons tell the story of an average Nigerian family. Each episode makes an attempt in addressing the different challenges an

average Nigeria family faces in their quest for a better life. These challenges build up as a result of certain external or societal forces as well as individual tendencies within the family. However a close observation may reveal that even though a majority of the episodes are usually centered on issues that are relatable to medium-income and in some cases low-income Nigerian families, some other factors may appear to be detracting from this main thrust of the drama series and thus raising question on believability. One of such factors is the main location for the series which is the residence of the Johnson family. The family occupies a very comfortable bungalow in the city, tastefully furnished, in an interlocked compound with a security post. While this may not appear to be an outrageous anomaly to many viewers, the tendency for issues arising from the series to be treated with the seriousness they deserve, may dwindle from the viewers' perspective.

From its debut in 2011, the Johnsons drama series have moved its primary set once and to justify this move, script writers of the production weaved up a grass to grace tale that saw Mr. Johnson becoming gainfully employed and so the family then moves into a better apartment. However, episode after episodes continue to give the impression of a family always struggling financially and this becomes reflective in each theme, a given episode addresses. In episode 435 in the 5th season, we see a family that struggles so much that everybody is encouraged to work to earn some money to support the home. Jenifer, the first of the Johnson children comes home distraught after she realizes that a job that had advertised a salary of eighty thousand was actually going to pay her five thousand. The situation of the family, thus in many instances appear not to be reflective of the very colourful and tasteful set that is being used for the production.

In *Professor JohnBull*, however, there appears to be an attempt by the producers to properly situate the main set of the production. The Professor's residence serves as the people's court and the melting pot for a lot of activities in the series. Observations would reveal that the Set designers paid some attention to detail in creating the ideal set befitting for a retired Nigerian Professor's residence.

Indeed, as many scholars have reiterated, realistic representation in any cinematic work is very germane to the perception of believability from the viewing audience; attention must be given to images, objects and set pieces as seen through the lens of the camera. Tony Mckibbin, again acknowledging Bazin submits that:

A lot of filmmakers have the common desire to put cinema at the service of what is called the fundamental faith in Reality. The credibility of a film does not come from its verisimilitude but from the identity between the photographic image and its object. Bazin identifies cinema as the fulfillment of the human craving for Realistic representation (4)

The attempt to ensure the essence of believability however, may have not been totally engaged in the other aspects of *Professor JohnBull*. The TV series which is presently in its third season, with twenty six episodes shot in the first two seasons, tries to address different societal problems with each episode. The episodes come with different titles like 'Claimant', 'Eliza my Daughter', 'Baby Bomboi', 'Work Men', 'Find Me Something' and so on. However, one may observe that within a particular episode, other plots may be introduced to the extent that the audience may struggle to keep up, in episode 6 in the second season, titled 'Kitchen on the Run',

the producers projected the main issue of eating bush meat and health risk associated with it. Olaniyi, the pepper soup seller, is sent into hiding when he gets wind that health officers are about to arrest him for selling unhygienic meat.

However, heated exchanges between Professor Johnbull's son, Churchill, played by Pope Odonwodo and another character played by Brownny over a girl at different scenes detract from the central issue. Another sub-plot also plays out when *Ufoma*, the village gossip character of the season and played by Bimbo Akintola faces off with another female characters played by Angela Okorie in a bid to protect her lover interest, Professor Johnbull himself.

Another notable observation in the *Professor Johnbull* drama series is the extravagant display of some sort of symbol from the main sponsors of the production, in almost every scene in a particular episode. The sponsors, Telecom providers, GlobaCom, apparently appear not to be content with any allotted commercial break period to showcase their products, but include their products and symbols within every scene in given episodes. This ranges from the Glo Vendor conspicuously from dressed in his Glo Jacket, who suddenly appears from nowhere to separate a fight to the Glo icon that appears when a character is sending a text message.

Conclusion

The need for Nigerian film makers and indeed, TV Drama producers to stay true to the uniqueness of the Nigerian story and infuse this within the fabric of their productions is indeed a germane one, producers should inject a good level of professionalism in telling their stories while incorporating quality

assurance on plot creation, characterization and overall packaging, Ephraim Aga Shimsenge and El-Ngugar Agon submit that:

The problem of quality in the industry has generated questions even from its viewers who are often found engrossed in discussions within the ‘circle of critics of the fast growing industry’. From incongruous plots to the action by the actors false and non motivated actions, misfit soundtracks/background music, poor picture/audio quality and overtly poor packaging. The list seems inexhaustible. Tracing the factors responsible for this poor quality, poor finance and lack of professionalism are identified as the greatest challenges faced by the industry. (107).

With the rising appeal in televised Drama series in Nigeria today, the business opportunity through advert placements and the likes have also grown significantly. However, producers and script writers should endeavour not to interfere with the artistic process through acts of over commercialization.

Chukwudi M.C. Okoye

Department of Theatre & Film Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
mc.okoye@unizik.edu.ng

&

Chibuikem M. Abunike

Department of Theatre & Film Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
cm.abunike@unizik.edu.ng

Works Cited

- Corrado, Choemarie. "Formalism and Realism". The Formalist Theory <http://wordpress.com>. accessed 2/12/2017.
- Zettl, Herbert. *Television Production Handbook*. Belmont, USA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009.
- Mckibbin, Tony, "Cinema Realism" <https://tonymckibbin.com>. Accessed 31/12/2017.
- Agber, Kwaghkondo "The Home Video Industry and the Nigeria Economy". Portharcourt, The Crab; *Journal of Theatre and Media Arts*. Vol. 1 No. 2. June, 2006.
- Babafemi, Jacobs. 'Cultural Imperism and the Evolution of White Africa" Ibadan; *Lead City Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 1, No.1, 2014.
- Okhakhu, Marcel and Ate, Asan Andrew. "Revisiting Cultural Imperialism Theory: Reading the Contemporary Nigerian Situation". Ghana: *International Journal of Multi Disciplinary Scholarship*. Deocraft Communications, 2008.
- Shimsenga, Age Epraim and Agav EI. Ngugar, "Improving Film quality in Nollywood through the introduction of filmmaking studies in Theatre Arts Department" *Maiduguri; Nigeria Theatre Journal of The Society of Nigeria Theatre Artist*, Vol. 13, No.2, 2014.