Film, Media Indigenization, and Popular Culture

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Abstract

The currency acquired by popular culture in the long history of cultural studies can be charted by the increasing commercialization of culture through the democratization and indigenization of global media technologies. The emergence of film in 1895 signalled the popularization and commercialization of the already existing culture, thereby fuelling elitist condemnations of the exponential growth of film as a medium for meaning making. This paper establishes the emergence of popular culture within the context of film and global media indigenization. By so doing, the audio-visual media landscape is situated as a precursor of the rise of popular culture. It is found that film is a material popular culture factory.

Keywords: Film, media indigenization, popular culture, media, Hollywood, Nollywood.

Introduction

In its inception, film was not mass produced in the same way motor-cycles were produced, "the introduction of mass production techniques into the making of films, and the mass consumption afforded by cinemas, meant they could be regarded as commercial products" (Strinati, 2004, pp. 3-4). These products took over what was initially the people's traditional culture (folk culture), and commercialized them to suit the taste of the producers. For example, in Africa, folk songs were remodelled with the use of radio

and television to entertain a larger mass of audience. Thus, film became an agent of popular power used for the propagation, commercialization and augmentation of cultural commodities. This essay therefore situates the growth and commercialization of popular culture by establishing a link between the indigenization of global media and film culture in Nigeria.

As an inroad into this discussion, a brief account of the concept of *media indigenization* will suffice. The idea of media indigenization is simply an attempt at customizing the vast, disparate and multidimensional global media to relative local depletions. Harald Pins (2004) first coined the idea to mean the construction of indigenous forms of media practices by producers of culture who domesticate new media technologies by "forging new production practices and sociocultural and political discourses without necessarily capitulating to the constraints of global/western mainstream canons of culture production" (Ugor, 2009, pp. 395-396). The emphasis here is on the indigenization of the medium of film as a reconfigured social space for new cultural struggles, cultural mediation, and formation of new localized culture-territories as powerful transformative forces.

Audio-Visual Media Landscape and the Rise of Popular Culture

Situating the origin of film, Strinati argues that "apart from the popular press, cinema and radio were arguably the first archetypically modern mass media to emerge" (2004, p. 4), thereby fuelling fears about the commercialization of culture. Through the emergence of print, radio and film, the 'popular' of popular culture, as distinct from the 'traditional' of folk culture and the 'noble' of high culture was constructed. "The very fact that culture came to be almost infinitely reproducible due to the development of techniques of industrial production posed considerable problems for traditional ideas about the role of culture and art in society" (Strinati, 2004, p. 3).

Traditional art forms like painting, theatre and opera could not match the 'dangerous source of pleasure' which film provided. According

to F. R. Leavis, film provides "now the main form of recreation in the civilised world" (2005, p. 35). This is made possible by the power of the medium, as "films involve surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals, appeals the more insidious because they are associated with a compelling vivid illusion of actual life" (Leavis, 2005, p. 35). The new mode of culture provided by film as a result of new technologies of mechanical reproduction, changed patterns of leisure activity and played an important role in social life. The medium of film makes simulations of the real and the production of fantasy worlds possible. According to Kellner, "film production was accordingly organized on an industrial model with a mass-produced output aimed at capturing a secure audience share and thus realizing a substantial profit" (2004, p. 205). The advancement of film is therefore traceable to film's development as a commercial industry, rather than as an art form.

As early as it was invented, film became the most popular and influential form of media culture, with early inventions coming from technicians and entrepreneurs like the "Lumiere Brothers, Melies in France and the Edison Corporation in the United States. The first films ranged from the documentaries and quasi-documentary realist fictions produced by the Lumieres and Edison to the fantasy fictions of Melies" (Kellner, 2004, p. 205). The steady demand for film led these companies to produce and repeat formulas that were most popular with the audience, thus the birth of Hollywood as the capital of Western film industry. Following the coming of sound, Hollywood films developed into an array of popular genres like the western, crime drama, horror film, melodrama, romance comedies, the musical and dance film, et cetera. Recounting how film became the dominant popular entertainment and leisure activity, Dieterle (1941) argues that:

> Indeed, for the first half of the twentieth century – from 1896 to the 1950s – movies were a central focus of leisure activity and deeply influenced how people talked, looked, and acted, becoming a major force of

> enculturation. The number of theatres grew from about 10,000 storefront nickelodeons with daily attendance of four to five million in 1910 to around 28,000 movie theatres by 1928. In the 1920s the average audience was between 25 and 30 million customers a week, while by the 1930s from 85 to 110 million people paid to go to the movies each week (as cited in Kellner, 2004, pp. 205-206).

This figure continues to rise, making film a strong force of socialization, supplying role models and instruction in dress and fashion, in courtship and love, and in marriage and career.

Film as Popular Culture Factory

That early films reflected the modern urban social lives, and that they were consumed by the working-class, immigrants and urban audiences, did not only animate the commercialization of the medium, but also fetched elitist condemnations. These films are still viewed by the elite as cultural pollutants. "They are perceived to be a source of pollutants to the delicate nostrils of the elites who use the instrument of cultural nationalism to condemn what they perceive to be the international display of the dirty and tattered cultural fabric" (Shaka, 2006, p. 21). As a result, films are constantly under attacks. For example, the comedies of Charlie Chaplin were attached for lampooning authority figures, "romantic dramas were attacked by the Legion of Decency for promoting promiscuity, and crime dramas were frequently attacked for fostering juvenile delinquency and crime" (Kellner, 2004, p. 206). These attacks became the foundational store for the critics of popular culture as evident in the critical standpoint of the Frankfort school discussed in this volume.

In contrast, film as popular culture also had its positive turn. For example, in this same era under review (early films down to the 21st century), films were used as socializing agents to help 'Americanize' immigrants and the rest of the world, teaching audiences how to be good

Americans, how to behave properly and consume with style and abandon. Simply put, films popularized the best that has ever been taught or said as argued by the Arnoldian perspective. The Production Code that was adopted in the mid-1930s prohibited lengthy kisses, nudity, prostitution and drugs, and mandated that criminal elements be punished, and religion and church must not be attacked. This gave rise to the Hollywood studio systems where big studios maintained monopoly of the patents needed for film production, distribution and exhibition. Consequently, films were primarily produced for maximization of profit, vis-à-vis the resonance of mass taste, dreams and aspirations.

In her sociological study of *Hollywood: The Dream Factory* (1950), Hortense Powdermaker summed Hollywood as an industry that manufactures dreams and fantasies. These dreams and fantasies are made popular by the peculiar nature they undertake. Films resonate with the central conflicts and problems inherent in the society and offer soothing resolutions and reassurances. Thus, film is arguably the strongest, most accessible expression of contemporary popular culture. This is particularly true of Nigerian video films which Jonathan Haynes argues "are a prime instance of the interpenetration of the global and the local through the international commerce in cultural forms . . . and they are a prime instance of African modernity" (2000, p.2). They mirror the popular dreams and aspirations of the populace in customized form and style, thereby increasing their ideological powers. Similarly, Kellner maintains that,

> Western films, for example, assured their audiences that 'civilization' could be maintained in the face of threats from criminals, outsiders, and villains of various sorts, and celebrated individualism, white male authority figures and violence as a legitimate way of resolving conflicts" (Kellner, 2004, p. 211).

The medium of film is a prism through which popular culture can be viewed. The arrival of film changed aesthetic perception of popular culture and art profoundly. Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) who was a leading

literary critic at the Frankfurt School argues that the advent of film, though stripped the 'aura of the text,' brought the consumer closer to popular culture. In his 1973 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin argues that,

> Traditional works of art were one of a kind, that they possessed an aura of authenticity inseparable from a ritual function. However, there is at least partial compensation for the loss of aura that occurred once works of art were mass produced. Film and other new art forms could now create an emancipatory popular culture in which the once-sacred artwork would be 'de-sacralised' and 'de-aestheticized', in its infinite reproducibility making it both more democratic and less tied up with mystifying ritual: for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual (as cited in Castle, 2007, p. 68).

Benjamin's celebration of the positive potential of mechanical reproduction of art and culture occasioned by film, according to Susan Willis (1991), is "the single most important essay in the development of Marxist popular culture criticism" (as cited in Storey, 2009, p. 69). For Benjamin, the loss of aura changes the function of culture in society, signalling ambivalence at the heart of modern culture. "The very means by which traditional culture is robbed of its authenticity are the means by which art becomes available to the masses" (Castle, 2007, p. 68).

As a result of its rich iconography, film is the most powerful source of popular culture, which allows for easy assemblage and reassembling of cultural symbols, objects and artefacts by different groups in a literally limitless number of combinations. According to Adorno and Horkheimer (1993), to demonstrate film's "divine nature, reality is always repeated in a purely cynical way. Such a proof is of course not stringent, but it is overpowering . . . whatever a camera reproduces is beautiful" (p. 15). Film

makes popular culture accessible to more people, and creates room for critical evaluation of the conditions in which popular culture is received.

Conclusion

In this article, I have emphasized the critical discourses that have critiqued and analysed film and media indigenization as precursor of popular culture. Cultural activities became commercial products through the medium of film by reflecting the tastes of the general masses in tailored forms. This localized form of global media is argued to fuel the rise and spread of popular culture and the emergence of changing media environment that creates new spaces of social convergence.

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