

Nigerian and Ghanaian film industry: creative capacities of developing countries

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Palavras-chave

economia política do audiovisual/ políticas culturais/ cinema: mercado África

economia política del audiovisual/ políticas culturales/ cine: mercado en África

political economy of audiovisual communication/ cultural policies/ cinema: African market

Summary

In sub-Sahara Africa - with the possible exception of South Africa - the prohibitive expense of producing films, the poor state of cinema houses, the absence of government support for filmmaking, and the widespread availability of foreign films have tied many filmmakers to foreign funding, equipment, expertise, and audiences.

Without question, the emergence of local video industries in Ghana and Nigeria over the past decade represents the most important development in African cinema.

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Resumo

Na África sub-Sahariana, com exceção da África do Sul, os gastos proibitivos para se produzir filmes, o péssimo estado das salas de exibição, a ausência de apoio governamental para a atividade, e a disponibilidade ilimitada de filmes estrangeiros, fizeram com que cineastas africanos permanecessem dependentes de apoio, equipamento, expertise e platéias ocidentais – principalmente em festivais europeus e norte-americanos.

Neste contexto, a indústria cinematográfica - e do vídeo - em Gana e Nigéria representa o mais importante passo dado pelo cinema africano na última década.

Resumen

En la África Subsahariana, con excepción de África del Sur, los gastos prohibitivos para producir filmes, el pésimo estado de las salas de exhibición, la ausencia de apoyo gubernamental para la actividad, y la disponibilidad ilimitada de filmes extranjeros, hicieron con que cineastas africanos permanecieran dependientes de apoyo, equipamiento, expertise y plateas occidentales - principalmente en festivales europeos y norteamericanos.

En este contexto, la industria cinematográfica - y del video - en Gana y Nigeria representan el más importante paso dado por el cinema africano en la última década.

In April 2008, I took part in the “Creative Africa Initiative” launched at UNCTAD XII, in Ghana, and that fruitful setting, generated synergies between African audiovisual producers and a Brazilian Institute that resulted in an effective international cooperation: the project “Audiovisual Observatory for south-south cooperation”, put into practice by the Instituto Iniciativa Cultural, with the support of the Brazilian Ministry of Culture and several international collaborators such as correspondents, academics, analysts and policymakers.

The strategy chosen to install this debate on audiovisual policies implies the concept of an internet portal to be used by public, private and third sector organisations, enabling the accomplishment of agreements between Brazilian and African producers, creating a suitable atmosphere for partnerships and agreements of co-production in order to really enable, Brazil, at very low costs, to take part in this kind of market.

The guiding principle for the application and development of an internet portal in order to broaden the control over the international distribution of films (which is a basic need for the television and cinematographic industry) is the improvement in the use of information.

In this sense, the Internet is presented as an important arena, where the actors of the society and the companies can benefit from the most horizontal and interactive communication provided by the new information technologies in order to set communicative links and, as a result, articulate specific demands from the several social actors and the government.

The debate on African audiovisual policies in Brazil started with the launching of the series “World Cinema: Industry, Politics and Market”, which brings specific analysis of Africa. Under a political economy perspective, the series introduces a critical view of the economic issues and social and power relations that surround production, distribution, exhibition and consumption of film as a cultural product.

In sub-Saharan Africa - with the possible exception of South Africa - the prohibitive cost to produce films, the poor state of cinema houses, the absence of governmental support for filmmaking, and the large offer of foreign films have tied many filmmakers to foreign funding, equipment, expertise, and audiences.

Thus, African films have been dependent on overseas financial support which conduces to a type of cinematography not always well-received by African audiences.

On the other hand, video technology, brought a real cinematic revolution in Ghana and Nigeria in the late 1980s, allowing video-makers to create a tremendously popular cinema for local audiences: features made on video. In the first half of 2007, more than a thousand films were produced, outnumbering all previous records, according to the National Film and Video Censors Board.

Undoubtedly, the emergence of local video industries in Ghana and Nigeria over the past decade represents the most important development in African cinema.

Although video films have, for a long time, been considered second-rate products of the film industry, the mode of production and distribution of digital video films in Nigeria and Ghana is socially, politically and economically significant. They are sold for home viewing on web sites, showing an online dimension for this phenomenon.

The digital video films are also broadcast sold via satellite, as well as at small media outlets which serve the diasporic communities in metropolitan cities, such as New York and London. Freed from the requirements for cultural and economic capital imposed by the film medium and encouraged by new media technologies, international and independent video industries based in Ghana and Nigeria have flourished.

The proliferation of video films that satisfy the tastes of African viewers counterbalances the production of “art films”, more or less required by outsiders. The videos locally produced and consumed, basically changed this cultural landscape: the video production is an economic response to a craving for images to which a popular audience can relate.

Nollywood – the so-called Nigerian film industry – produces more than a thousand feature films annually, shot on micro budgets and sold to audiences on DVDs, VCDs and video cassettes. Prolificity is not only measured by the number of features produced annually, but

also how some outstanding directors have adopted various formulas to create new markets and attract more audience to their films.

In 1989, some Nigerian video-makers began producing their own video features, first in Yoruba, and later in Igbo, Hausa, and English, creating, what soon came to be a vast and prolific industry. In 2000, 20.000 copies of each video produced were distributed within and outside of the country.

Nollywood is not dominated by a single popular genre. Instead, themes are affected by regional cultures as much as they are by tastes. The only 35mm film in 2006 was **The Amazing Grace**, screened at the Cannes market. It was subsequently distributed in Nigeria and South Africa through Nu-Metro cinemas, which have shown a renewed interest in screening films at cinemas before they are released on DVD. Another new format that has allowed films to receive theatrical distribution was used by the director Tunde Kelani, who created an ingenious Mobile Cinema project. For a foreign audience, African films are not frequently shown, or they are screened with limited publicity at alternative venues such as film festivals, museums, universities and independent movie theaters.

Nevertheless, Nollywood is also counting on the African Diaspora, particularly in the United Kingdom. To many producers distributing 35mm or high-end digital productions to cinema abroad will hopefully cut out piracy. The film **Twisted**, was the first film to win a distribution deal with the Odeon cinema chain. Similarly, two other movies, on HD, **Mission to Nowhere** and **Mirror of Beauty**, were screened at seven Odeon and Cineworld cinemas in London.

The videos are produced as quickly and inexpensively as possible. The Ghanaian director Socrate Safo's 2005 production, *Amsterdam Diary* was shot in six days, but, in the same year, Nigerian films had almost destroyed local production. Currently, many producers prefer to trade Nigerian videos rather than to make their own. Distributors, who once bought the duplication rights from Nigerian producers and copied the videos in Ghana, now travel to Nigeria to buy large quantities of video cassettes and carry them into the country to avoid duplication costs. Of course, a weak system for policing piracy laws means that many Ghanaian distributors do not have any incentive to actually buy the rights to the videos.

The cases of Ghana and Nigeria illustrate how the film and video industry, if properly developed, can be indeed a potential source of employment generation, wealth creation and skill development. Positive steps taken by the Nigerian Government to create the necessary policy environment for the growth of the film industry, are evidences that some developing countries have started benefiting from the dynamism of creative economy and allocated policies to enhance their film industry.

Also, four directors (Chico Ejiro, Fidelis Duker, Charles Novia and Fred Amata) formed “Project Nollywood” in mid-2007. With assistance from banks, they plan to produce and distribute movies using the local bank branches across Nigeria as sales outlets.

Ghana and Nigeria are also examples of how new production and business models have been emerging as alternatives, and how developing countries can harness their creative capacities for development gains.

These countries are incorporating technological tools to create their own networks for the production, distribution and consumption of culture, detached from the regulated sectors of cultural production.

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