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Globalization And African Cinema: Distribution And Reception In The Anglophone Region

A reflexion by Professor Martin Mhando

Introduction

Globalization is the all-pervasive constituent of contemporary living, especially where it is underwritten by colonial histories. Keyan Tomaselli (1999: 45) argues that European interpretive frameworks have determined readings of African texts. Globalization needs to be understood through the discourse of capital, to understand how entire societies have become affected economically and socially by the dynamics of this new international division of labour (Sassen 1997: vi). Globalization is indeed the narrative of socialization that also helps us to locate the local within the global.

Globalization therefore in turn assists us to understand local experiences and consequences as reflective of culture, history and identity. As we find with cinema distribution in Ghana and Nigeria, globalization led to consolidation of strategies to confront its effects.

One of the greatest ironies of the film industry in Africa is in the area of distribution: African film producers often target the international commercial market but receive meagre or non-existent earnings from it. In the process, they become totally dependent on the festival circuit for the distribution of their product. Other methods for distributing African films continue to be tried in many different parts of the continent: Ghana and Nigeria, for example, have individually developed appropriate means for distributing their films commensurate with their economic and social histories.

This paper will look at the changing environment of African cinema and the new distribution channels developing in many African countries in terms of how they use technologies appropriate to those who will use it rather than its marketers.

I will focus on the trends in 'anglophone' countries for two main reasons. The first is because of the lack of material from francophone countries translated into English, but secondly, and more importantly, because there is still a scarcity of critical material on cinema from anglophone countries with regard to the distribution and reception of visual material in Africa south of the Sahara.

I use the terms 'anglophone' and 'francophone' though I dislike them for semantic and ideological reasons. The colonial inferences embedded in the terms continue to highlight a very recent affinity between African nation states that is based on European languages and colonial experiences. African ties are deeper than that.

Experiences of commercial distribution of films in Africa have failed miserably. The strength of the commercial distribution system only suited the products for which it was created. The environment of film distribution in the continent is typically that of the West. One might as well have been in London or New York as regards cinema in any African capital before the 1980s. The African product was on alien grounds, even in Africa, especially where cinema technology influencing the take-up and eventual control of the cinema business.

The 'theory' that one immediately recognizes when studying the continued state of affairs in film distribution in Africa is that of dependency – the local cinemas' continuing dependence on the dominant cinema for its global construction and maintenance.

Indeed, the effect of Western-based distribution circuits has been to sideline novel and cheap distribution methods that evolve with the economies of African countries; western capital will always protect its markets. This is evident in the industrial structure of the commercial 35mm theatres and multiplexes, which exclude participation by local distributors except those that western businesses canonize.

However, local film-makers have always expressed divergent needs as regards distribution through their texts and local structures of production and exhibition. A good example is that of the late Sembène Ousmane when he decided in 1974 that he would only film in Wolof, because he wanted to reach what he regarded as 'his audience' (Ashbury 1998: 82). The challenge of reaching African audiences remains the key to the growth of African cinemas. In the reception of its product, African cinema also presents its diversity and strength.

I want to argue here that the re-birth of African film distribution was dependent on the renaissance of marketing strategies of times gone by, such as those of the African travelling salespersons, or the market woman. If African cinema were to challenge this 'normalcy' of global cinema, it would require an avant-gardist approach to producing and distributing their texts. If African filmmakers were to take up this challenge it would imply the following:

1. The new cinema would not be concerned with communicating using shocking means, skewed moral intents or diverse aesthetic values;
2. The new cinema would be unlike the oppositional cinema of the 1970s, which was for personal expression, and the directors knew that they would not be suitable for mainstream theatrical release;
3. The new cinema could aim at commercial gain and use conventional and non-conventional forms and methods in its effort at communicating with an audience outside the laid-out (and now dying) distribution channels.

These conditions would lead to applying the socialization technologies such as happened in Nigeria and Ghana. These unfolding socialization processes are unfortunately often denigrated, and their locally based approach undermined by contemporary production and distribution structures. The mainstream cinema distribution pattern is a symptom of the sick state of affairs in film distribution as well as production in Africa.

I would therefore like to discuss this unfolding trend, taking into account the nature of globalization and how it continues to affect the way African cinema adapts to the globalizing environment.

Challenging the globalized medium

One might ironically say that a certain renaissance of African cinema was to emerge thanks to the Structural Adjustment Programmes meted out by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the 1980s. After state subsidies and controls from cinema were removed in Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Mozambique in the 1980s, corrupt businesses characteristically

exploited commercial and legal opportunities. Video distribution shops were opened in every available commercial street corner, as well as homes, and traders broke copyright regulations with impunity. Young lovers who could not afford cinema tickets and the bus/taxi fares to city centre cinemas could now enjoy a night out close to their homes watching videos!

Things changed since the 1990s. Filmmakers and grassroots distributors have taken up the challenge of film and video distribution in Africa with very little prompting. While the commercially run sector still thrives on blockbusters from Hollywood, it is the cheap local film and video that now commands the attention of the urban and rural spectator. Writing in 2002 Jeremy Nathan in fact presents them as role models:

Nigerian filmmakers have found a way to circumvent the usual industry distribution channels, regularly making both new movies and a living. Relying on neither government funding nor television coin, the Nigerian film industry has forged a viable digital video revolution – a business model that all of Africa and indeed many other parts of the world could emulate. (Nathan 2002)

One way that would invariably ensure the video medium's sustenance, and even its viability, is to understand the nature of distribution. To do this, producers may need quite novel ways of communicating visual materials to larger audiences while integrating technology and its socialization capabilities.

Theorizing distribution in Africa

Conditions of reception in Africa contain specific parameters for cinema consumption, suggesting that audience responses need to be accounted for outside of western theories. I submit that, under the current social conditions in the linguistic regions of Africa (anglophone, francophone, lusophone and swahiliphone), it is only appropriate to base a theory of distribution within theories of social appropriation. I use the term 'appropriation' while aware of the implication of its discourse. From the discussion on the Nigerian and Ghanaian distribution experiences, appropriation can also be understood as the process through which dominated cultures re-inscribe their hegemony over and above the hegemony of the imperial powers (Ashcroft et al. 1998: 34). Through appropriation, the dominating culture's form is reconstituted to express and interpolate experience in order to reach a wider audience. It is also used to express some deeper knowledge of narratives. Just as language can be used to 'bear the burden of another experience' (a quotation often ascribed to both Chinua Achebe and James Baldwin), so too can cinema technology be used to bear the burden of another techno-cultural experience. By appropriating modern technologies of culture, communities in Africa are able to intervene directly in the dominant cinema's discourse. This challenge to western hegemony is both pragmatic and constant. This is how the communities insert their own cultural realities.

Criticism of this thinking is often based on the assumption that the dominant practice has such an overwhelming and powerful hegemony as to reject the possibility of its demise. I contend that this is not necessarily the case. The strength of any appropriation lies in the context of the appropriation, which, in this case, is found in the immediacy of experience within a filmic expression. For example, when mainstream western films and videos are shown in the villages, devoid of their publicity and marketing machinery, they tend to lose

their 'hegemonic' patronage and attain an inferior position to that of traditional community media. Audiences react to the showings, as would an adult to a child's game – aware of the implications of participation. In that way, the cultural and social impact of the supposedly dominant order is minimized.

The discourse of distribution here, as it has been projected in many other cultural situations, is that of resistance and resilience. Distribution of visual material in the anglophone Africa region will grow in all its complexity as it continues to express the discourse of survival. This is clearly reflected in how video distribution in these countries has mushroomed to unheard-of sizes in recent times.

Indeed as Gayatri Spivak says,

The emergence of a vital and prolific popular cinema in Nigeria could be regarded as an important African response to the encroachment of Western pop culture in this age of global information flows. Rather than aping foreign models ... it is a window into a particular contemporary African society, offering fascinating insights into how people see themselves, their aspirations and fears, including the desire for material well-being and status, and the value attached to pleasure and entertainment in an uncertain post-colonial world. (Spivak 1991: 66)

Conclusion

I have here tried to discuss the basis of cultural bias in understanding cinema and development with regard to Africa in general and anglophone Africa in particular. I have focused on arguing the case for the regional perspective only as an analytical instrument. I suggest here that African cinema has lost and stands to lose even more in its cinematic expressions through accepting systems that are vigorously negative to its culture.

It is only in its efforts towards re-formulating a more Africa-centred system that African cinema shows potential for development.

I argue that there is a sense of inadequacy in the overarching global interpretive practices, due principally to differing political and ideological investments in what are essentially contradictory cinema cultures.

The privileging of European positions can be observed in a number of environments dictating how and what can be represented in a given film. Such tendencies occur all through Africa.

I propose that a study of the cinema of this continent should help us theorize about cinema language and culture as we make sense and come to terms with contemporary global society. To do that, one needs to approach the study of each area with regard to historical references, to social action and interaction between the production and interpretation of texts. That way each new and developing cinema would determine its own subject matter, authorial status and direction.

This new cinema culture subverts conventional expectations and offers a populist critique of African cinema of the past 40 years. It explores the popular even and proposes 'alternative' African cinemas.

What these new entrepreneurs are doing is to re-interpret the commercial aesthetic outside the conventional market through establishing relatively inexpensive modes of production and distribution. At the same moment they undercut the dominance of western distribution channels, which have been failing African audiences for many decades. The capability to produce simply presented to these filmmakers a discursive practice that comments on both the limiting and limited influences of the globalized cinema.