Reimagining the 'Blockbuster' for Nigerian Cinema:
The Nollywood Narrative Aesthetic of Affective Spectacle

by

Tori Arthur
tarthur@bgsu.edu
American Culture Studies
School of Cultural and Critical Studies
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, Ohio

Tori Arthur is a doctoral student in the American Culture Studies program on the Critical Studies in Media, Film, and Culture track in the School of Cultural and Critical Studies at Bowling Green State University. Her dissertation will explore Nollywood's affective storytelling and the dissemination and consumption of Nigerian films in the digital sphere. Prior to beginning her doctoral studies, Arthur was a Visiting Assistant Professor of Broadcast/Television Journalism and Public Relations at West Virginia University, Morgantown. She is currently a senior editorial and acquisitions consultant with ARBI Press, an upstart publishing company based in Lagos and Calabar, Nigeria.

Abstract

The typical 'westernized' notion of a blockbuster film denotes it as a feature produced with a multi-million dollar budget, high production value, well-known actresses and actors, and the latest special effects and digital advances. This meaning becomes problematic when it is applied to films from developing nations that do not have access to digital tradecraft. A new definition that privileges storytelling over production gimmicks is necessary in order to carefully and thoroughly analyze the two types of features currently produced in Nigeria, the traditional cultural melodramas and the theatrical film that retains melodramatic forms while attempting to mirror the methods of a big budget feature. The Nollywood blockbuster can be defined by its narrative spectacle, or hyper-dramatic plotlines that reflect the lived conditions and social pathologies that the Nigerian people face. An analysis of Kenneth Nnebue's 1992 film *Living in Bondage* and Obi Emelonye's 2012 film *Last Flight to Abuja* positions and decodes the two types of Nollywood blockbusters, the affective spectacles within their narratives, and how they reflect a Nigerian culture and society reeling from the residual effects of colonialism.

Keywords: Nigeria, Nollywood blockbuster, affective spectacle, reflection of cultural crises

Introduction

My interest in Nollywood, the growing Nigerian film industry, began during my travels around Nigeria in the summers of 2011 and 2012. During my time in Naija, I walked through city street markets and shops in Lagos's Ikeja neighborhood and along Port Harcourt's Aba Express Road, ate in open air cafes and fast food restaurants in and outside Abuja, Calabar, and the University of Uyo, and attended village social gatherings in the Cross River State town of Obudu.[1] Films lined the stalls of street vendors. Men and women sold films on street corners from baskets and boxes strategically balanced on their heads. People crowded around tiny televisions in eateries and village compounds to watch Nollywood features. International satellite television network AfricaTV and its subsidiaries broadcasted movies like *Sweet Mama*, *Who Will Tell the President*, and *The President Must Not Die* throughout each day. In movie theaters in Enugu and Port Harcourt, Nollywood films played alongside Hollywood features. John C. McCall writes, "In market stalls and corner stores across Nigeria…these market driven movies have become the engine of a distinctively African popular culture."[2] In Naija, Nollywood is everywhere.

Nollywood was not always such a presence in Nigeria. The origins of film in the country date back to British colonial rule when film production and dissemination was government controlled. Chukwuma Okoye points out that colonial film in Nigeria operated as a mechanism for complete colonization of the African and European mind. Okoye states, "Not only were these films methodically chosen to glorify the image of the colonizer, but they also denigrated the humanity of the colonized…documentaries that deified the Queen of England and demonstrated English etiquette and technological wizardry were made for native consumption. When Africans began to be visually represented on the screens, they were portrayed as undignified and primitive."[3] After Nigeria gained its independence from Great Britain in 1960, Nigerian themes and performance styles began to enter films, particularly Yoruba cultural elements such as the Yoruba traveling theater, musical forms like *fuji* and *juju*, and plotlines from familiar television dramas. Yet, cinema houses in the nation mainly showed films imported from Europe and America. Ultimately, due to the rise of state funded television broadcast stations which adapted and broadcast popular theater productions for the small screen, the high cost of film production, a government moratorium on foreign film imports, and increasing economic and political instability in the 1980s, cinema patronage sharply decreased.[4]

Over the last twenty years, Nollywood has grown into the second largest film industry in the world behind India's Bollywood and ahead of Hollywood in the United States thanks in large part to the popularity of the dramatic narrative conventions that the industry has perfected.[5] Currently, Nollywood filmmakers are producing movies that can fall into two camps, the inexpensive traditional direct to video cultural melodrama and the emerging theatrical film that retains Nigerian narrative forms while attempting to mirror the technological methods of a big budget feature.

These two prominent types of Nigerian films can be considered Nollywood blockbusters when the term is divorced from the prevailing 'westernized' notion that prescribes blockbuster as a feature produced on a grand scale with a multi-million dollar budget, high production value, well-known actresses and actors, and the latest special effects and digital advances.[6] I argue here that a new definition of blockbuster that privileges storytelling over production gimmicks is necessary in order to carefully and thoroughly analyze the two types of features currently produced in Nigeria.

While Nigerian films do rely upon the star power of popular actresses and actors such as Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde, Jim Iyke, and Mercy Johnson, the Nollywood blockbuster can be defined by its narrative spectacle, or hyper-dramatic plotlines that reflect the lived conditions and social pathologies that the Nigerian people face. This new definition allows for a more nuanced socio-economic, cultural, historical, and political reading of the fictive dream worlds depicted in Nollywood films and how those dream worlds affectively influence viewers. By analyzing Kenneth Nnebue's 1992 film *Living in Bondage* and Obi Emelonye's 2012 film *Last Flight to Abuja*, I interpret and situate the distinct types of Nollywood blockbusters, the affective spectacles within their narratives, and how they reflect Nigerian culture and society at Nollywood's genesis in the early 1990s and in the contemporary moment. Ultimately, these films outline what constitutes a blockbuster in a highly promising and beautiful developing nation still reeling from the effects of British colonialism, political chaos after independence, and continuing economic instability as a result of corruption and World Bank/International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programs in the 1980s.

Reimagining Blockbuster

When applied to films, blockbuster becomes a tempestuous word without a tangible definition or set of criteria that can be used to measure whether a film is indeed a blockbuster. Julian Stringer asserts that the word defies a finite meaning because of the ways film has changed over time and space. He states, "As a key word of contemporary culture, 'blockbuster' is something of a moving target – its meaning is never fixed or clear, but changes according to who is speaking and what is being said."[7] Yet, the term has become a common way to describe any expensive special effects and star driven film that almost promises to be a box office hit before its release. A film considered a blockbuster does not have to make large sums of money, though many do rake in millions of dollars through the course of their theater runs. While I agree with Stringer's assessment that a definition for blockbuster can be hard to hit because of its kinetic nature, I argue that popular discourse has provided a list of characteristics that a blockbuster is not, a narrative driven independent feature film with or without well-known actors and produced on a relatively small budget.

Kirsten Moana Thompson argues that many scholars consider blockbusters to be films that include "spectacle, relative length and expense, and the adoption of special technologies and presentational features in the content and exhibition of the film."[8] This is a particularly useful way of thinking about both older and contemporary blockbusters originating in the global North. Thompson's definition allows for the sort of contemplation that includes analysis of the means by which the term's definition has changed with the rise of technology. Additionally, it provides an apt stick that can be used to measure whether films are worthy of blockbuster status. Thompson's assessment also offers a method for examining the limitations of the term and how its meaning is obscured once it leaves its largely western habitat and is applied to films produced in developing nations without access to the same technologies of their more developed cousins. She states that scholars must consider a new defining model that examines the ways global economic factors and cultural influences and/or aesthetics can "encompass national cinemas outside Hollywood."[9] Likewise, Chris Berry argues that the "blockbuster is no longer American owned" and states that scholars must acknowledge that today's blockbusters are international.[10]

What constitutes a blockbuster changes in various parts of the world. Each nation has its own blockbuster defined with that nation's unique cultural milieu. A Korean blockbuster undoubtedly differs from a blockbuster produced in Sierra Leone and a Sierra Leonean blockbuster differs from one produced in Ecuador. Thompson's and Berry's statements are true in the sense that blockbusters have become major cultural products; global film industries do not exist within cultureless vortexes. Socio-cultural factors within and outside a country can influence what is burned onto tape and celluloid and presented to the masses. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri contend that the "primary factors of production and exchange – money, technology, people, and goods – move with increasing ease across national boundaries."[11] Thanks to the world's rapidly expanding media-sphere, ideas also move with ease and can have a strong impact on the ways a specific nation's cultural products are produced. Cultural products are not accidental or uncontrived. Nigerian cultural products, particularly those produced in its film industry, are no exception.

If the more 'westernized' definition of blockbuster was used to measure typical Nollywood features, virtually no Nigerian films would be considered blockbusters. Most Nollywood features, especially those produced during the early days of the industry, would be considered narrative driven independent films produced on small budgets. A new definition is needed for Nigerian cinema, a definition that challenges the western privilege inherently embedded in the common meaning. Thus, I offer a definition that articulates two major distinguishing characteristics for a Nollywood blockbuster, one of which was born out of the transnational transmission of ideas and cultural products. First, a Nollywood blockbuster focuses on the affective spectacle of melodrama. Jonathan Haynes contends that melodrama, imported transnationally from Latin American *telenovelas*, films from India, and Anglo-American television soap operas, has been combined with the dynamic oral story telling found in Nigerian based Yoruba traveling theater to become the standard for Nollywood films.

The films' "extremes of fortune, emotion, and moral character are classic melodramatic elements; their predominantly domestic settings, multiple interwoven plot lines, and emphasis on dialogue rather than action" are what I argue make them affective symbiotic combinations of western soap operas, *telenovelas,* Bollywood *masala* films, and Nigerian popular art.[12]

Guy Debord's ideas are particularly relevant in examining the affective spectacle in Nollywood films. At its core, a spectacle is a public show or display on a large scale. Debord states that the spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive and indisputable.[13] Many Nollywood films contain spectacular or lurid stories of witchcraft and the occult, family conflicts, poverty and financial ruin, Nigerians coping with living abroad, romantic relationships and sexuality considered aberrant and seedy in Nigerian culture, Christian salvation and redemption, and the struggle to maintain Nigerian cultural traditions in the face of globalization and modernity. Messages about money, tradition, sex, religion, and the occult would be difficult for Nigerian viewers to ignore or dispute. The films are rife with evocative moments meant to induce fear, disgust, sympathy, anger, sadness, joy, love, and/or understanding and leave viewers with the feeling that they have watched something inherently good. Syncretism is what these blockbusters embody, a layering of affective responses to the spiritual, sexual, financial, and civic plight of the post-colonial Nigerian subject searching for personal agency. Viewers readily accept the narrative spectacles and derive a sense of pleasure from them because they address the cultural and emotional paradigms viewers are forced to inhabit and negotiate everyday. Spectacular plotlines have been consistent since Nollywood's early days and have instituted a national aesthetic of melodrama and affect that continues to exist in the industry.

The second distinguishing characteristic of a Nollywood blockbuster is its (however subtle) reflection on the nation's socio-cultural and socio-economic issues. John Markert's explanation of reflection theory is a pragmatic tool to analyze how Nollywood's affective spectacles, which could be viewed as exaggerations of Nigerian life, actually reflect society. He argues that "what is depicted in the book or on the screen is something that reflects a slice of the familiar world."[14] The familiar world reflected in many Nollywood films is one of financial instability and the search for a means of survival in the wake of the nation's economic bust. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Nigeria enjoyed a palpable period of growth and expansion; the nation's expanding petroleum market led to great economic prosperity. The prosperity did not last. McCall states, "As the oil boom waned and official corruption became endemic, Nigerians learned how transitory prosperity could be. The military coup that ensued met with little public disapproval, which the coup-plotters claimed to be an affirmation of the nation's rejection of electoral democracy."[15] By the mid to late 1980s, a series of anarchic military dictatorships further destabilized the nation.

In 1985, Major General Ibrahim Babangida overthrew Major General Muhammadu Buhari's military regime. Babangida was responsible for instituting the IMF's Structural Adjustment Program in Nigeria in 1986. The SAP was designed to deregulate the economy and pay down foreign debt.

However, the SAP led to decreased production, a devalued currency, and high rates of inflation; rampant unemployment and the inability to afford basic necessities such as food, shelter, fuel, clothing, education, and health care were the results of the program for most of the nation's people. Adebayo Adediji, the former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, states that the SAP did more harm to the nation than all the decades of colonialism put together.[16] The program left many Nigerians, who were unable to support themselves during Babangida's dictatorship and in the face of growing corruption, believing the SAP had sapped them dry. These economic anxieties were reflected in early Nollywood films.

When Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* was released in 1992, the nation was in the midst of Babangida's regime; wages were meager and poverty rates were high. The film epitomizes Nigerians' relationship with their nation's socio-economic and political crises of the time. Popular stories claim that Nnebue, an Igbo electronics dealer and film promoter, produced *Living in Bondage* after working with Yoruba producers to videotape Yoruba theater productions and after witnessing a wholesaler's efforts to sell a large stock of videocassettes he had acquired from Taiwan.[17] Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome note that Nnebue saw the potential of a Nigerian videocassette film market. After producing several Yoruba features, Nnebue shot the film on VHS with director Chris Obi Rapu and edited it using VCRs.[18] *Living in Bondage*, the redemption story of a dejected businessman who sacrifices his wife in an occult ritual in order to acquire wealth, is believed to have sold over 750,000 copies.[19] The film set the standard for all future Nollywood productions.

The conditions prevalent in *Living in Bondage* were and still are highly relevant to many Nigerians; these conditions can represent an aspect of collective Nigerian socio-economic culture. Sumita Chakravarty contends that the "paradox of cinema may well be that…its narrative organization and visual dynamics privilege the concrete and specific, the face in the crowd, the personal and singular."[20] For Chakravarty, this privilege can be a negative aspect of film because it fails to recognize the complexity and diversity of identity and lived experience. I argue it is not a negative for Nigerian cinema; the personal and singular Nollywood story is more often than not collective and plural. *Living in Bondage* is a prime example of how the personal and singular reflects the conditions of the collective.

Nnebue's film begins with unemployed banker Andy lamenting his fate as a failed businessman, follows him as he rises to power and prominence in his Onitsha community after killing his wife Merit in an occult ritual, and documents his internal turmoil as his wife's ghost haunts him. Andy is eventually redeemed spiritually and emotionally when he repents of his murderous occult act. The film enters Andy's psychological world, reveals how he and other characters tick, and articulates Nigerians' struggles in a nation that has fundamentally failed to shake the ghosts of colonization. Okoye states that Nigeria's social, economic, and political landscapes are "loosely typical of post-colonial African nations."[21] He argues:

> In Nigeria, this condition comprises a high rate of unemployment, disease, poverty, oppression, mismanagement, and inequitable distribution of justice and national wealth, as well as…various national events, activities, and foreign encounters which constitute everyday reality of the people. These provide a network of heterogeneous and continuous narratives which define the very character of the [Nollywood] video film."[22]

These narratives enable the viewer to come to a point of empathy and understanding because the inner worlds or inner lives of the characters are often an eerie reflection of their own. Nnebue's great success can be attributed to two crucial considerations, the audience's ability to identify with the socio-economic quandaries reflected in Andy's predicament and the film's affective spectacle.

Andy's lived experience reflects the ordeals of many Nigerians. Early in the film, Andy, in soliloquy, announces that he has quit his job at a bank because his salary was not enough to allow him to survive. He also reveals that he has worked for four companies and even started a trading business, but has not gained the same type of success as his friends who are also in trading. As he laments, he states that he believes someone has "bewitched" him and this is the reason for his poor situation. Merit, who has been listening off screen, enters the room with his meal and tells Andy that he has not been bewitched; she explains that he should not have negative thoughts about employment and money because many of his age-mates (peers) have not yet had their first job. She also mildly scolds him for quitting his position with the bank against her wishes. Later, in a conversation with a neighbor, Merit reveals she is concerned about Andy's proposal to invest the Naira 20,000 (currently about $120) she borrowed from her father. Andy eventually loses all the money in a bad business deal.

Andy's and Merit's financial strife would have been keenly affecting for many viewers. The couple's professional and social dilemmas would have resonated with those Nigerians chafing under Babangida's unsuccessful policies and widespread corruption. The idea that many Nigerians, including people like Andy and his friends (one humorously named Obi Million), would blame supernatural "bewitching" forces for their plight and resort to occult practices to gain power and wealth also would have been highly plausible to the largely Christian audiences that were and continue to be suspicious of traditional African religions and faiths that fall outside Christianity. Obododimma Oha contends that spiritual warfare is often considered the cause for economic misfortune or poverty in Nigeria. He argues that films with Christian themes work to shape public attitudes "in a social context of fear, uncertainty, helplessness, and hopelessness."[23] Nigerian audiences in the early 1990s would have been aware of the double entendre within the title *Living in Bondage* as many lived in economic bondage and would have been fearful of living in the sort of supernatural bondage Andy lives in after he sacrifices his wife. Thus, the spectacle of Andy's story is a relatable cautionary tableau and is a commentary on the post-colonial Nigerian struggle for stability.[24]

Kenneth Nnebue set out to produce a film that would appeal to viewers and sell in the midst of a military dictatorship when concerns about financial survival were high. He succeeded. *Living in Bondage* created a distinctly Nigerian blockbuster with a narrative that employs an examination of the nation's pathologies and relies upon affective themes of spiritual warfare and the occult to move the audience to rejoice as Andy is freed from demonic influence and gains redemption when his wife's spirit forgives him. The film established the tone for all subsequent straight to video Nollywood blockbusters including *Osuofia in London* (Kingsley Ogoro, 2003), *The Master* (Andy Amenechi, 2004), and *Bent Arrows* (Lancelot Imaseun, 2010). Each film incorporates basic and recognizable plotlines such as corruption and scam artistry (*The Master*), the experiences of Nigerians living in and traveling to the West (*Osuofia*), and immoral sexuality and generational culture clashes (*Bent Arrows*). Markert argues, "Movies…serve as a window on the world …the content of the cultural form is viewed through a mirror into the group's values. The reflective metaphor allows the cultural object, in this case, movies, to be 'read' as a sign of what people in society are thinking at any given time."[25] I further argue that deploying affective and empathetic plots which reflect the corporeal experiences of the audience enables Nollywood blockbusters to provide carefully constructed narrative windows into the highs and lows in Nigerian society.

Nollywood Blockbusters: New Directions

My second visit to Nigeria in June of 2012 took me to the city of Enugu where several Nollywood films were playing alongside Hollywood features at a local movie theater. The film *Married but Living Single* (Tunde Olaoye, 2012), a film about an ambitious career woman who privileges her job over her dying husband, was featured at the time. Another Nollywood film that was still popular during my travels titled *Two Brides and a Baby* (Teco Benson, 2011) is a film with a name that is a play on the 1980s era Hollywood feature *Three Men and a Baby* (Leonard Nimoy, 1987), but with a melodramatic storyline. In the film, a couple's wedding is threatened when the groom's ex fiancée shows up at the rehearsal intent upon exacting revenge for the pregnancy which forced her to leave Nigeria.

The traditional blockbuster that began with *Living in Bondage* is a cultural production that often reflects the state of the Nigerian people and affectively expresses their socio-economic and socio-cultural aspirations and fears. Nigeria is now seeing the rise of recent Nollywood features like *Married but Living Single* and *Two Brides and a Baby* that are continuing this narrative trend, but are employing the technological techniques of larger budget features to tell quintessential Nigerian stories. Like its traditional counterpart, the contemporary Nollywood blockbuster emotionally affects viewers when their realities resemble the fictive dream world presented in film and enables them to rejoice when the characters triumph over the ills they face. Yet, the fictive dream world in the contemporary Nollywood blockbuster is unlike the world presented in its traditional sister. Larger budgets and access to advanced technology have allowed filmmakers to produce visually stylized blockbusters that retain the insular feel of a *telenovela* or theater production.

It is difficult to pinpoint an exact film or moment when filmmakers began employing more technology to facilitate storytelling. Olivier Barlet notes that the new class of film and filmmaker emerged in the late 2000s to challenge the viability of the inexpensively produced melodrama. He states that director-producers like Tunde Kelani, Zeb Ejiro, Mahmood Ali-Balogun and Femi Lasode "stand out above all for their cinematic approach."[26] Barlet contends that these directors "combine a desire to raise public awareness of a variety of social issues (prostitution, AIDS, corruption, urban violence, etc.) and the desire not to alienate their audiences, hence the inclusion of action scenes, special effects, and stars. They class their films somewhere between auteur and popular film."[27] The Nigerian films shown during international film festivals are a part of the class Barlet discusses. Titles such as *Phone Swap* (Kunle Afolayan, 2012), *Tango With Me* (Mahmood Ali-Balogun, 2010), and *Maami* (Tunde Kelani, 2012) exemplify the contemporary Nollywood blockbuster, or the blockbuster that further syncretizes the Nollywood feature with a combination of affective spectacle, a reflection of socio-economic and socio-cultural conditions, and the technological tricks of a 'western' blockbuster film.

Obi Emeolonye's disaster thriller *Last Flight to Abuja* (2012) is an affecting example of the syncretic contemporary Nollywood blockbuster. CNN correspondent Vladimir Duthiers calls the film "a big-budget production starring many of Nollywood's biggest names."[28] Loosely based on a series of plane crashes that took place in Nigeria in 2006, the film is ultimately a comment on the failures of Nigeria's aviation industry. It stars Queen of Nollywood Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde along with an ensemble cast of other well-known Nollywood actors such as Hakeem Kae-Kazim and Jim Ikye. *Last Flight* was screened in theaters in Nigerian cities and in London; it was also a featured film in the 2013 NollywoodWeek Nigerian Film Festival held in Paris, France. Also, the film won the award for "Best Film by an African Abroad" at the 2013 African Movie Academy Awards. Ironically, *Last Flight* was released in London just twenty-six days after over 150 people died when a Dana Airlines flight from Abuja to Lagos crashed into an industrial building in Lagos's Iju-Ishaga neighborhood on June 3, 2012. The 2012 Dana Airlines crash was attributed to dual engine failure.[29] *Last Flight to Abuja* premiered in Nigeria on August 3, 2012, just two months after the disaster.

Between 2005 and 2006, four major plane disasters resulted in the deaths of nearly 500 people in Nigeria. In October and December of 2005, two commercial flights crashed; the December incident resulted in the deaths of over 100 people including approximately fifty boarding schoolchildren on their way home for the Christmas holiday. In September of 2006, a flight carrying top Nigerian military officers crashed, killing twelve. Just over a month later, a commercial flight carrying 114 passengers caught fire just after takeoff from Abuja. Ninety-six people died.[30] All of these disasters were blamed on mechanical failures. *Last Flight* begins in the middle of such a crisis; mechanical problems and a fire aboard the aircraft are shown in the film's opening sequence. In that sequence, passengers aboard the Flamingo Airways flight panic and struggle to breathe as the plane rapidly falls from 30,000 feet. The captain and his female co-captain fight to land the plane after the engine gauges stop working.

In the midst of this chaos, the screen fades to black and these words fill the screen: "In 2006, a series of air mishaps rocked Nigeria's aviation industry. This is the story of one of them." Nigerian audiences would have immediately associated the film's plot with the October 2006 crash that killed 96 people. Audiences would also have connected the film to the disaster that took place in June of 2012.

Last Flight then shifts to the stories of the passengers and the circumstances that led them to board the plane. An elderly couple on its way to Dubai for the husband's surgery laments the necessity of the flight. The pilot boards the plane after switching flights with a colleague so that he can take a few days off to spend with his disheartened wife whose medical practice is failing. A promising young football (soccer) player and his American agent talk about the possibilities of wealth and the player's serendipitous opportunity to leave Naija for the first time. A young career woman who has traveled to Lagos to surprise her fiancé pays a local tout (thug) an exorbitant amount of Naira for a scalped ticket to Abuja after she finds another woman in her fiancé's bed. The film also follows the lives of a group of employees of an information technology company traveling to Abuja for a weekend retreat. Viewers quickly learn that not all of the IT company employees operate legally and one in particular boards the flight after killing his lover and extortionist in a heated brawl over continued bribes. Also, viewers are shown the failure of the airline to properly prepare the plane prior to take off.

Embedded within each of the film's plotlines are common affective themes that reveal the extent of Nigerians' relationships with each other and the issues within their nation. Debord states that the spectacle is not necessarily a collection of images, but "a social relation among people, mediated by images."[31] These relations are showcased to dramatic effect throughout the film. Medical practices and hospitals throughout the country struggle to attract and retain paying patients because those Nigerians with the means to do so often travel abroad to the United States, India, and the Middle East for medical treatment. For many young Nigerian males in the lower classes, football, and not education, is seen as the only option for leaving behind the economic desperation in their towns and villages. Nigeria holds the largest number of universities in all of Africa; it also holds incredibly high numbers of unemployed college graduates.[32] The story of the unscrupulous corporate official in the film is a rather poignant comment on the nature of greed in Nigerian industry and how many Nigerians resort to criminal activity because they feel corruption is the only means to achieve true economic success in a society where honesty is mocked and derided and backdoor dealings are commonplace.

The late Chinua Achebe once keenly lamented, "Corruption in Nigeria has *passed* the alarming and *entered* the fatal stage."[33] He noted with great distress that the "system under which they live today makes corruption easy and profitable" and the standard way of life for many Nigerians.[34] Daniel Agbiboa and Benjamin Maiangwa offer a similar assessment.

They state, "Although some Nigerians vaguely believe that corruption is not in the best interest of the nation, many hold the view that life is a grim battle for survival…those who endorse this believe it is a waste of time to talk about corruption, they only smile when they come across opportunities to be corrupt."[35] One Nigerian business owner explained to me in 2011 that in Nigeria people who are not corrupt are not to be trusted. Surely, my business owner friend was talking in jest; however, his facetious statement speaks to a larger truth many Nigerians face.

The destabilization of the nation during colonialism, the steady stream of neo-colonial dictatorships, and further destabilization thanks to the neo-colonial Structural Adjustment Program in the late twentieth century has created a modern Nigerian where corruption is the hegemonic norm. Walter Mignolo points out that coloniality is synonymous with modernity; for Mignolo, there "is no modernity without coloniality."[36] This is true of Nigeria. Independence from Great Britain did not necessarily facilitate de-colonial thinking and strategies for creating a modern and democratic Nigeria with a strong economy that would benefit the masses. Achebe blamed this lack of de-coloniality on Nigeria's leaders. He powerfully stated, "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership."[37] Agbiboa and Maiangwa contend that the nation's leaders "clearly lacked a sense of *noblesse oblige* (the obligations of rank)" as they have been responsible for stealing billions of dollars from the country's coffers since independence.[38] Nigerian leaders have set the hegemonic standard for the country's people who largely excuse corruption and consider it a national identity marker.

Last Flight to Abuja provides dynamic examples of Nigerian hegemony and how it has evolved in the nation's postcolonial history. The film suggests that aviation industry malfeasance and relaxed safety standards in the interest of making money contributed to the Flamingo Airways flight's mechanical failures. Because the director clearly states in the opening that the film is the story of one of Nigeria's recent air disasters, the film can also be viewed as a comment on the inability of the country's aviation industry and ministry to prevent such disasters. The film also shows other ironies of Nigeria's "culture of corruption."[39] The tout who scalps tickets at the airport calls on the grace of God to assist in his underhanded dealings. At one point in the film, the corrupt IT official tells his extortionist who is attempting to seduce him, "I wouldn't touch you with a NEPA pole." This statement is a play on the common expression, "I wouldn't touch it/you/that with a ten foot pole." Yet, it has a deeper meaning. The acronym NEPA stands for "Nigerian Electric Power Authority," but many Nigerians humorously say that it actually stands for "Never Expect Power Always" because the funds necessary to provide sustained electricity are often stolen. When the corrupt IT official says he will not touch the woman with a NEPA pole, he is essentially saying that despite his own unscrupulousness he would not stoop low enough to pick up and touch her with a national symbol of corruption.

As the film progresses toward its climax, multiple possible moments of affect are produced. Nigerian audiences watching that know the outcome of the 2006 crash are moved to fear for the lives of the characters aboard the Flamingo Airways flight. Viewers are inspired to mourn the loss of a promising young football star, the end of a budding romance between the scorned fiancée and her 'good guy' seatmate, and the death of the elderly couple who take the last seconds of the plane's descent to express their love for each other and the life they have lived together. These moments before impact begin the most powerful images in the film; viewers are forced to reconcile that some or all of the plane's passengers may not survive. The final images show crying survivors comforting each other, emergency crews carrying away the injured in ambulances, and the plane burning in a field as the fire brigade attempts to put out the flames.

Though only the corrupt IT official dies (apt punishment for his corruption and the murder he commits), the film ends on a somber note. The last image the viewer sees includes these words: "Dedicated to the victims of the June 3rd disasters." *Last Flight to Abuja* is not meant to be a celebratory film. Viewers are not meant to rejoice in the 'good' passengers' survival. Instead, they are asked to remember past disasters and ponder the ways these tragedies reflect and affect the nation they call home. The (modest) special effects and advanced editing heighten the affect, push the film's narrative to its dramatic climax, and ultimately create a film that illustrates the ways the contemporary blockbuster is presenting and will continue to present cultural, economic, and political conditions to a people all too aware of their nation's infelicitous pathologies *and* amazing potential.

Conclusion

Chukwuma Okoye observes that Nollywood features "invent a progressive African aesthetic which undermines the cultural imperialism of the West and underscores the possibility of formulating both an African postcolonial identity, a mode of seeing and knowledge production, as well as an independent entrepreneurial framework."[40] The films are manifestations of Nigerians' present day anxieties and fears rooted in colonialism's inflictions of pain. Yet, they also serve as an optimistic bridge between the residual effects of colonialism and the way the Nigerian people view their present and future hopes for the country. Nollywood cinema is a compellingly sagacious example of how transnational cultural influences work together to create a distinctly Nigerian cinema that mirrors the country back to its citizens through emotional stories told on a large narrative scale. Nigerian film is an extension of the oral storytelling and theater culture than has survived multiple generations. It is also a nod to melodramatic Anglo-American soap operas, Latin American *telenovelas*, and postcolonial Indian cinema with its grand *masala* narratives. Nollywood features *do* work to undermine the cultural imperialism that has consistently denoted what constitutes a blockbuster film in the global sphere.

By taking the blockbuster out of its largely western or global North context, its ephemeral and shifting meaning can be reimagined to include films from Nigeria in its past and current postcolonial moments, future Nigerian films produced as the nation grows and develops into the global power it is capable of being, and films from other developing nations in Africa and beyond. Nigerian film will undoubtedly develop and morph as technology advances. However, I strongly argue that the affective narrative spectacle and the acute reflection of Nigeria's social, economic, and political climate will survive as the major defining characteristics of Nollywood blockbuster films; they are cultural markers that can work together to help the industry present a more refined postcolonial Nigerian agency and identity than the ones currently rooted in corruption, economic strife, and political instability. Therefore, it is imperative that the currency required to produce blockbusters or the currency they bring in should not mark or typify Nigerian blockbusters. Instead, Nollywood blockbusters should be defined by and lauded for the affective currency that exists within their narratives and for the potential they have to affect change in the Nigerian people and their cultural landscape.

Notes

[1] 'Naija' is a slang term that many Nigerians lovingly use to refer to their nation. I use it here with the affection of a daughter the nation has adopted. For a Nigerian perspective on the term, see Bilkisu Labaran, "Nigeria at 50: What does Naija mean?" *BBC News Africa*, last modified October 1, 2010, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-11447252.

[2] John C. McCall, "Nollywood Confidential," *Transition*, No. 95 (2004): 99.

[3] Chukwuma Okoye, "Looking at Ourselves in our Mirror: Agency, Counter-Discourse, and the Nigerian Video Film," *Film International*, Issue 28 (2007): 22.

[4] For an introduction to the history of Nollywood, see Jonathan Haynes, introduction to *Nigerian Video Films*, ed. Jonathan Haynes (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, *Research in International Studies, Africa Series No. 73*, 2000), 1 – 36.

[5] Dialike Krahe, "Nigeria's Silver Screen: Nollywood Film Industry Second Only to Bollywood in Scale," *Spiegel Online International*, last modified April 23, 2010, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/nigeria-s-silver-screen-nollywood-s-film-industry-second-only-to-bollywood-in-scale-a-690344-3.html.

[6] See Julian Stringer, introduction to *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2003): 8.

[7] Stringer, "Introduction": 1.

[8] Kirsten Moana Thompson, "*Once Were Warriors*: New Zealand's First Indigenous Blockbuster," in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2003): 231 – 232.

[9] Thompson, "*Once Were Warriors*": 232.

[10] Chris Berry, "'What's big about the big film?: 'de-Westernizing' the blockbuster in Korea and China," in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2003): 218.

[11] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), xi.

[12] Haynes, "Introduction": 22.

[13] Guy Debord, "The Commodity as Spectacle" in *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*, Second Edition, eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2012): 108.

[14] John Markert, *9/11 Cinema: Through a Lens Darkly*. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2011), xv.

[15] John C. McCall, "The Capitol Gap," *Journal of African Cinemas*, Volume 4, Number 1 (2012): 13.

[16] Celestin Monga, "Commodities, Mercedes-Benz & Structural Adjustments," in *Themes in West Africa's History*, ed. Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 228. For an extended examination of Structural Adjustment Programs, see Richard Peet, *Unholy Trinity: The IMF, World Bank and WTO, Second Edition* (London: Zed Books, 2009).

[17] McCall, "Nollywood Confidential": 99 – 100.

[18] Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome, "Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video Films," in *Nigerian Video Films*, ed. Jonathan Haynes (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, *Research in International Studies, Africa Series No. 73*, 2000), 55.

[19] "Nollywood Dreams: Nigerian films are so successful that the government wants to get involved," Economist.com, last modified July 27, 2006, http://www.economist.com/node/7226009?story_id=E1_SNNGDDJ

[20] Sumita Chakravarty, "Fragmenting the Nation: Images of Terrorism in Indian Popular Cinema," in *Terrorism, Media, Liberation*, ed. David Slocum (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 233 – 234.

[21] Okoye, "Looking at Ourselves in our Mirror": 23.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Obododimma Oha, "The Rhetoric of Nigerian Christian Videos: The War Paradigm of *The Great Mistake*," in *Nigerian Video Films*, ed. Jonathan Haynes (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, *Research in International Studies, Africa Series No. 73*, 2000), 55.

[24] Many of the essays included in Mahir Saul and Ralph A. Austen, eds. *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010) point to *Living in Bondage* as Nollywood's most important and influential film.

[25] Markert, *9/11 Cinema*: xvi.

[26] Olivier Barlet, "Is the Nigerian Model Fit for Export?" in *Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria*, ed. Pierre Barrott (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 124.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Vladimir Duthiers, "Last *Flight to Abuja*: Nollywood feature campaigns for safer skies," *CNN.com*, last updated September 4, 2012, http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/04/world/africa/obi-emelonye-nollywood-abuja.

[29] Adam Nossiter and Matthew L. Wald, "Engine Trouble Was Reported Before Nigerian Crash," *nytimes.com*, last updated June 4, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/05/world/africa/engine-trouble-reported-in-nigerian-crash.html?ref=world&_r=1&.

[30] "Nigeria's plane crashes in the last 20 years: timeline," *The Telegraph*, last updated June 3, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/nigeria/9309700/Nigerias-plane-crashes-in-last-20-years-timeline.html

[31] Guy Debord, "The Commodity as Spectacle": 107.

[32] John C. McCall, "The Capitol Gap": 21.

[33] Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble With Nigeria* (London: Heinemann, 1983), 38.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Daniel Agbiboa and Benjamin Maiangwa, "Corruption in the Underdevelopment of the Niger Delta in Nigeria," *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 8 (2012): 117.

[36] Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

[37] Achebe, *The Trouble With Nigeria*: 1.

[38] Agbiboa and Maiangwa, "Corruption in the Underdevelopment of the Niger Delta in Nigeria": 118.

[39] I borrow this phrase from Daniel Jordan Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[40] Okoye, "Looking at Ourselves in our Mirror": 28.