

Cinema-going in Lagos: three locations, one film, one weekend

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Abstract

Nollywood audiences are under-researched. Understanding audiences' sites of spectatorship has contributed to how and why Nollywood is consumed, and with what cultural implications for these audiences, and for producers, distributors and exhibitors. With the re-emergence of cinema theatres in Lagos, scholars are yet to articulate how the cinema-going audiences engage with Nollywood films in specific cine-plexes. This paper addresses the nature of a subset of Lagos-based audiences and ways in which they convene at cinema centres, experience a Nollywood film, *The CEO* (2016), and disperse from the spaces made possible by Lagos cinema operators. A commercially-vibrant city, Lagos is not only the birth place of Nollywood but also the location of a majority of the cinemas in Nigeria. The paper throws up insights on the demographic nature of Lagos cinema-going audiences and their meaning-making habits.

Keywords: cinema-going, audience, Lagos, Nollywood, cinema theatres

Introduction

From 2014 when a modern cinema facility was built in high brow Victoria Island of Lagos, cinema-going in the city became a favourite pastime of elite film lovers. Five years later, the practice has been democratised by the erection of several modern shopping malls, which house cinema theatres accessible to all social classes. Questions on the nature of audiences have been addressed by scholars who largely focus on theatrical spectatorship (Barber, 1997), improvised or provisional viewing sites such as beer parlours and street corners (Okome, 2007), general spectatorship (Akpabio, 2007), cinema theatre spaces, infrastructure and the politics of spectatorship (Larkin, 2008) and appropriated or localised viewership (Saul and Austen, 2010; Fair, 2010, 2018). Karin Barber's suggestion on the need "to ask how audiences do their work of interpretation" (p. 357) is important to avoid making unfounded assumptions about audiences. Equally crucial is asking who the cinema-going audiences are without taking that knowledge for granted. What age groups are most frequently seen in the cinema spaces in Lagos; and how do other demographic details influence their work of interpretation? Some audience work have already been done by the scholars mentioned above, but with the growth of cinema halls and theatrical releases of Nigerian films, the need to revisit the cinema-going audience question is glaring. Deviating slightly from the approaches adopted by scholars mentioned above, but nevertheless contributing to the discussion on audience engagement with a film text, a starting point of this study is the Nollywood cinema-going audience. This group of people are closely associated with New Nollywood¹, a term used to describe big budget films made for international audiences and theatrical releases.

¹ See Haynes (2017) and Ryan (2015) for descriptions of and references to New Nollywood

For the purpose of this paper, the audience is the group of cinema-goers who visit the cinema locations in Lagos² to give what Karin Barber (1997) calls their “intentional orientation” (p. 347) to a Nigerian film, *The CEO* (2016), in its opening weekend. This period is chosen because the publicity for the film was driven on several platforms – Facebook posts, email invitations, websites, cinema floors, and by word of mouth. Being a film by a well-known filmmaker, Kunle Afolayan, who Jonathan Haynes (2017) describes as the epitome of New Nollywood, viewer expectations were high, with audiences jostling to be among the first to see the film. Therefore, it was expected that every Nigerian film lover would turn out at the opening weekend. I examine the cinema spaces, the demographic details of this audience and their interpretation of Kunle Afolayan’s *The CEO*, which was arguably the most celebrated film of 2016 in Nigeria, with its pan-African cast and crew, and a high profile, Air France in-flight premiere. The plot of the film revolves around five African nationals and senior executives of Transwire Communication who are sent to a beach resort to be trained and examined for the coveted CEO position. Their past performances and each person’s little secret gradually emerge to disqualify them one by one from being the next CEO. The plot is complicated by the mysterious deaths of two candidates and the effort to reveal the murder.

At the opening weekend (July 15-17, 2016) of this film, I (with three research assistants) followed the cinema audience through three of the fullest screenings per day, gathering qualitative and quantitative data from the groups of people who thronged Silverbird Cinemas, Ikeja, FilmHouse, Surulere and Genesis Deluxe Cinemas, Lekki. I paid attention to these Lagos cinema spaces, how the audiences experienced the film, dispersed hastily and to their interpretation of the film. The cinema-going publics are educated, mostly dating couples, middle class citizens, who drive or use Uber taxis to get to modern cinemas in Lagos to view films. Resident in the two major parts of Lagos – the mainland and the island – audiences usually go to cinemas within their geographical location, but on special occasions like birthdays, some opt for a treat by going elsewhere to impress their partners. The method adopted for this study was partly inspired by Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner (1990) who sought public opinion on US politics and history through historical representations in film by taking a survey of cinema audiences using a questionnaire as they exited the cinema halls. This method allows for a simultaneous and quick collection of information on age, gender, educational qualification and preferred movie-going days and times from several people at the same time. It also enabled the researcher to observe and question viewers in an attempt to respond to the questions on who the cinema-goers are, what experiences they have at the cinemas; and how they do their work of interpretation. The article examines the cinema-going behaviour more broadly before focusing on Afolayan’s film and audiences’ reception of it.

Audience Experience of Cinema-going

African audiences first experienced film screening in colonial times as a didactic means of domination and colonial expressions of power (Ekwuazi, 1991; Akpabio, 2007; Larkin, 2008). Later, through the activities of Lebanese businessmen, American, Chinese and Indian films were imported and circulated among the people. This launched decades of consumption of foreign films which could be described as antecedents to and influencers of locally-produced films decades later.

² For a fuller description of Lagos in relation to Nollywood, see Haynes (2007), Nollywood in Lagos, Lagos in Nollywood

The theatre production companies of the 1970s and 1980s were the second in line to admit audiences into a cinematic experience. Theatrical performances were recorded on video cameras and played back to willing audiences for a fee. This permitted a communicative and psychological relationship between the motion pictures and the audiences, between screen and people, in ways that constitute private and public activities (Ekwuazi, 1991). These activities are at once spontaneous, reflective and vicarious, leading to a variety of perceptible and imperceptible experiences at the cinema. For many, the cinema experience is a dream, an aspiration, a site of entertainment, pleasure, escape as well as an awakening to life's crude realities, transportation and a school of everyday occurrences including how to deal with them. Audience experiences of cinema have, to a large extent, been redefined by Nollywood.

As Tomaselli (2014) claims, "Nollywood has revitalized the production sector, reinvented distribution and exhibition, and changed the nature of African cinema studies itself" (p. 17). It is now impossible to discuss African film audiences without attesting to the cultural and anthropological successes of Nollywood, which several scholars have alluded to (Ekwuazi, 2014; Tomaselli, 2014; Haynes, 2017). At the arrival of Nollywood filmmakers, Akpabio notes that they have been able to arouse audience interest significantly. The interest is claimed by both filmmakers, distributors and exhibitors since their interactions with the audience feed their business models. He observed that, in spite of the negative themes of Nollywood videos, the films were very popular among Lagos audiences who saw their daily lives and realities re-enacted on screen. Tomaselli (2014), like other scholars, attributes Nollywood's resounding popularity and success to the fact that the films "... are able to visually articulate the day-to-day concerns and social aspirations of the average person within a community setting that is instantly recognizable to viewers" (p. 13). This position addresses Nollywood audiences broadly speaking without necessarily making reference to the movie-going public, which this paper examines closely. But how do cinema-going audiences make meaning of their viewing experiences?

Barber says that we need to ask how audiences do their work of interpretation since as she claims, the meaning of a text is not within that text or the audience but the space between text and audience (1997, 357). She shows how audiences constitute meaning, making sense of media texts by recognising or aligning themselves to characters whose actions resemble theirs. Onokome Okome takes up the postulations of Barber regarding this interpretive strategy and the coming together of Africans to consume popular cultural products that visualise their dreams and pains. He theorises the street corner audiences, as well as those of the beer parlour in ways that elucidate Barber's act of coming together, as vestiges of colonialism. What Okome refers to in justifying the spaces studied and reported in his work as the absence of capital for the cinema halls is what this paper takes up as an extension of the sites of consumption, and how those sites facilitate or interfere with the work of interpretation. Nollywood is no longer just consumed within domestic spaces as Brian Larkin (2008) argued or in beer parlours as Okome points out but is also being consumed and has been for the last fifteen years in modern cinema halls in Lagos, Accra, Dar es Salaam, other parts of Africa and elsewhere.

One of the most extensive studies of cinema spaces in Northern Nigeria as sites of attraction and repulsion is Larkin's (2008) ethnographic work on media consumption and production. He examines the cinema viewing spaces as extensions of the colonial imperative, giving attention to the

ways in which mobile cinema (*majigi*) differed essentially from commercial cinema. The politics of establishing the cinema spaces in the first instance, with the racial, ethnic, gender and religious implications as well as their reception as new styles of leisure and urban experiences was from a historical point of view, “suffused with an illegitimate and immoral ambience” (p. 124). It was considered transgressive and hinged on class structures. Larkin affirms that cinema theatres are a peculiar kind of social space marked by “a duality of presence and absence, rootedness and transport” (*ibid.*). At the same time, cinema theatres created new modes of public association that had to be regulated – officially by the colonial administration and unofficially in local Hausa norms. Today, Lagos cinema facilities are still regulated as sites of exhibition not only by the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), but also by the operators and the audience in their prompt check in and checkout times, by the prohibition of cameras in the viewing spaces as well as the prohibition of food not sold by the cinema operators. The security checks on admission to the halls and the exit make the discussions that trail the beer parlour and street corner screenings reported in Okome’s study practically impossible. Each viewing hall has to be vacated and cleaned out within 10 minutes for the next screening to begin.

Larkin claims that cinema theatres and the social uncertainty around how to understand them is something that plagued cinema’s rise in Europe and America. He also ascribes the same uncertainty to the emergence of cinema theatres in the Arab world, among African and Asian populations to the anxieties produced as societies come to terms with the political and social possibilities enabled by new technologies (p. 126). In pre-independence (1949 – 1951 ff) northern Nigeria, commercial cinema was considered irreverent, pagan, even sacrilegious and the viewing spaces, or even the proposals to build and run them, were subjects of sharp contestations. Contrary to this, Laura Fair (2018) reports that Tanzanian cinemas were “considered by many to be the anchor of the community...walking through the streets on their way to a show with friends, family and lovers transformed their relationships with urban space, binding people and place together with affective ties” (p. 10). The Nigerian case is quite different today where government funding is supporting the work of Film House Cinemas, with Kene Mkpuru at its innovative centre. Financial institutions in Nigeria, such as the Bank of Industry (BOI) and the Nigerian Export Import (NEXIM) Bank now hold consultative and advisory meetings with filmmakers and creative industries practitioners to provide low-interest loans in recognition of their contributions to the national economy. These relationships have resulted in the rise of modern cinemas across Nigeria, with Lagos holding the largest number of cinema spaces in the country. Thus, Haynes (2017) summarises this in his chapter on New Nollywood,

The new theatres are multiplexes located in upscale shopping malls in affluent neighbourhoods of Lagos and other major cities. Ticket prices are very high by Nigerian standards...restricting the clientele to the elite. The locations themselves would discourage most of the population. The multiplexes show American movies and only gradually allowed in Nigerian ones (p. 287).

The picture painted by Haynes is changing because all cinemas now have dedicated screens for Nollywood films, sometimes two out of five. More so, lower middle-class citizens can conveniently visit the cinemas on the Mainland where tickets go for as low as £1 or £2 for students’ rate, and that with a free drink and popcorn. Such concessions are usually granted on weekdays and student ID

cards have to be produced to enjoy the low rates. Commenting on the social class of people who visit Film House Surulere, Nelson Adeniji, a cinema manager, said,

Everyone comes here. It's random. This place is not patronised by the upper class alone. Middle class and lower middle-class folks come here. Everyone can afford it. They just choose the cheaper shows... Today, cinema is for everybody (personal communication, 19 Feb 2019).

What modern cinemas in Lagos have succeeded in doing is to intensify audience viewing experiences, to modify the ways of engaging with the screen in line with contemporary global practices and technological cinematic innovations. The cinemas exist in shopping malls which arguably “cater to the city’s most elite consumers and explicitly brands itself as a landmark of exuberant leisure” thus “stimulating ...visitors’ sensory perceptions and ... commodifying leisure time” (Ryan, 2015 p. 61). The cinema halls are tucked into the topmost floors of shopping malls which “promise the same pleasures that a clientele who have enjoyed a level of cosmopolitan exposure come to expect from similar encounters abroad” (Ryan 2015 p. 61). The layout and atmosphere of the malls are similar to many seen abroad and they house a wide variety of retail outlets of consumer goods from clothing and fashion accessories to an assortment of electronic devices, food courts and telecom service shops, all air-conditioned. The location of the cinemas on the top floor of the malls suggests that visitors are expected to take in the sights and sounds of the luxurious shops on the lower floors, entertain themselves or be lured into shops with notices of new arrivals and discounts. It also anticipates the enjoyment of the aroma of freshly-baked confectionery, or even allows visitors to size up people strolling back and forth while assessing their own socio-economic status vis-a-vis those of the passers-by. The malls are designed as a one stop shop where urban Lagos residents shop, sight-see and relax. People rarely visit the malls alone and those who head up to the cinema are invariably paired couples. Occasionally groups of three ladies or men are seen but 70% of cinema-goers are dating couples (N. Adeniji, personal communication, 19 Feb 2019).

A Brief Overview of Nigerian Cinema Spaces and Growth

Following Nigeria’s independence, there were over 5,000 cinemas, each with one screen, showing American, Indian and Chinese films, so much so that Enahoro (1989) affirms that “Nigeria is a cinematographic province of India and America while its colonial masters are the Indians and Lebanese” (p. 100). Between 1960 and 1980, Rex, Royal, Regal, Capitol, Casino, Kings, Road House, Corona and Ikeja Arms Cinemas, to mention a few, existed in Nigeria. In 1977, the National Theatre in Lagos was also an exhibition site for stage and screen productions. By the late 1980s, military dictatorship, manifested in a breakdown of governance and the economy, led to an increase in armed robbery and insecurity problems. This resulted in a gradual decline in the number of cinema-going audiences until the practice effectively stopped by the end of the 1990s. From 1990 and especially after the 1992 release of *Living in Bondage*, video films were sold on VHS cassettes and CDs. The same technology through which American and Indian films were circulated was

employed in distributing Nigerian films. By 2000, several video renting clubs were privately set up and run by young men and women in Lagos. This allowed viewing within domestic spaces and small-scale commercial enterprises such as beer parlours to screen films as a strategy to attract more patrons to drink and talk.

Without question, the emergence of Nollywood has contributed to the growth of cinema halls in Nigeria. The cinema growth factors which have contributed to thriving cinema cultures include the large population of Lagos, the fact of being a film production base with more exhibition outlets than anywhere else in the country, the dominant location of film stars, media institutions and regulators, as well as the problematic straight-to-DVD distribution platforms in the city. Silverbird Cinemas reignited the movie-going culture in 2004 with the erection of the Silverbird Galleria, a multipurpose shopping mall in Victoria Island, Lagos, after a period of hiatus characterised by feverish security conditions which shut down existing cinema houses. It had five screens and none of them was digital. In 2007, City Mall Cinemas was set up at the heart of Lagos Island, increasing viewing options for film lovers. In 2008, Ozone Cinemas in Yaba (Lagos Mainland) and Genesis Deluxe Cinemas Lekki (Lagos Island) were set up in November and December respectively. Ozone awakened the cinema-going culture on the mainland with its strategic location close to three tertiary education institutions. Ozone prides itself on being the first built modern cinema facility in Lagos Mainland. In 2012, Film House joined the ranks of cinema operators opening in Lagos and Calabar. Silverbird seems to have passed the baton of leadership in the cinema business to Film House, which has become the fastest growing cinema chain in Nigeria today. Film House Cinemas is leading the growth with the creation of four cinemas in 17 months – Lagos, Dugbe and Samonda, Ibadan and Marina Resort, Port Harcourt. By 2015, there was a total of 30 cinemas, 145 screens, 100% digital and 25 3D cinemas in Nigeria (K. Mkparu, personal communication, 2016). Out of those, ten of them are spread within the two main parts of Lagos.

As of 2013, Kene Mkparu reported that there was at least 25% of local content in the cinemas and around 65% of foreign films, especially Hollywood and Bollywood but that is changing quickly with the increase in Nollywood theatrical releases. Mkparu, who is the leading figure in cinema development in the country is optimistic about the prospects. He says:

Cinemas in Nigeria today compare favourably with others even in more developed parts of the world. If you look at the market size, the box office size of the cinema is huge. Last year alone, Nigeria generated 3.5 billion naira in 29 cinemas alone. Imagine if we have enough cinemas to go round 180 million people (Mkparu 2017, p. 26)

In spite of the limited number of cinemas, revenue is on the increase. This gestures towards a lucrative business period for filmmakers, distributors and exhibitors when newer and bigger cineplexes are erected. It also beats piracy and forces production quality to soar in order to guarantee higher box office earnings (Supplementary Table S1). If in 2010, *Ije* made almost 60million and in six years, there is a 75% increase, then in twelve years, the projection will be at 150%. It is not surprising that Kunle Afolayan believes that the cinemas are filmmakers' best options given the prevailing socio-economic conditions.

Three Lagos Cinema Locations

The audiences for this study are cinema-goers who reside in parts of Lagos Mainland and Island. They were encountered and observed at various cinemas. The first two study locations were Silverbird Cinemas in Ikeja and FilmHouse in Surulere. Both are located on Lagos Mainland where a larger population of the city's over 15 million residents live. A third study site was the Genesis Deluxe Cinema (GDC) in Lekki, located in a high brow recently developed area of Lagos Island. GDC is located in The Palms Shopping Mall that houses retail outlets for designer brands of consumer goods. Next to departmental stores like Shoprite and Game, GDC occupies the largest physical space in the mall with its U-Shaped design and a VIP Lounge. This lounge was rarely occupied during my visits, but cinema attendants claim that it is reserved for special guests who pay twice or thrice as much as the regular ticket, sit in bigger seats designed with more leg room within the theatre and are served a wider variety of refreshments.

The area is frequently visited by expatriate dwellers; and only the upper class can patronise the shops that dot the mall. Tickets for a show at GDC throughout the opening weekend of *The CEO* cost ₦1,800 (£3.6) regardless of the screening times, while tickets for the same film at Film House at 12 noon was ₦ 600 (£1.2), and from 4pm, ₦ 1,000 (£2). There is a flat rate of ₦ 1,500 (£3) at weekends in Film House. Here, pricing is tied to the cinema facility itself and its location rather than to the aesthetic value of the film which Larkin (2008: 161-162), observed to be the practice in Kano, Nigeria. Big crowds never gathered at GDC because the area attracts elite residents in comparison to Silverbird and Film House, which made it easier to administer the research instrument at GDC than at the two mainland locations. The seating capacity of the hall allocated to *The CEO* at GDC is 131 (Screen 3), but it was never full for the nine shows observed. Half the seats or less were occupied at each screening. The cost may be a deterring factor as upper-class teenagers and youth are perhaps not closely associated with Nollywood films as they are with Hollywood.

The two-part 28-item questionnaire contained questions related to general audience tastes and preferences in the first part and specific questions on *The CEO* in the second. In addition to the ethnographic approach of this exploratory study, which entailed observing audiences milling around, into and out of the halls, and watching the film with them, quantitative data on age, gender, educational backgrounds, film preferences and preferred viewing times were obtained. Several audiences refused to fill out the questionnaire handed out at the exit and of those who accepted, about a third of them filled sections of the questionnaire incompletely. That could be attributed to the ambitious length of the questionnaire. This raises questions of validity of the data, but because this is an exploratory study, the preliminary findings are worth sharing because of the insights they hold. Qualitative data were also obtained to uncover in Barber's words "how audiences do their work of interpretation".

Within the Cinema Spaces

Several months before July, film director, Afolayan and his cast kept Nollywood fans up to date with details of release and screening locations. July 15 was set and all movie-goers in Lagos and elsewhere were apprised on Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms by the filmmaker on current developments including sharing the movie trailer and the sensational Air France in-flight premiere of the film. Announcements of movie stars' visits to the cinemas added to the thrill associated with a film release. That afforded fans the opportunity to meet and greet film stars, take pictures and express interests of collaboration to those who cared to listen. On the day of the theatrical release, Afolayan and film stars were casually dressed in promotional t-shirts that read *I am the CEO* while touring various cinemas. And several times when the ticket queues grew in length, Afolayan and either Wale Ojo or Kemi Akindoju (Lala) joined the box office personnel to sell tickets to excited fans.

The relationship between filmmakers and cinema owners is symbiotic. The filmmakers need the cinema owners and spaces to promote their films prior to exhibition. Promotional materials supplied by the filmmakers are conspicuously displayed around the box office area, in full view of passers-by and potential viewers. Details of screenings which would normally appear on the official website of the cinema were displayed on Afolayan's Facebook page so that fans were not in doubt of the screening times, which could change and not be reflected on the website early enough for intending audiences. Thus, Afolayan wears several caps as producer, director and promoter, not only of the film but also of the viewing spaces. Whenever Silverbird, Film House or GDC changed a screening time, Afolayan would update his social media pages accordingly. By announcing his cast's meet and greet arrivals at different cinema locations, Afolayan ensured that audiences who were interested in meeting the actors, Wale Ojo and Kemi Akindoju, thronged to the cinema theatres at the announced times. Thus by promoting his film, he was also promoting the cinema facility, the background of which was photographed and posted all over the social media platforms of viewing fans.

Cinema-going is a socialisation and bonding process as young people in this study (see Supplementary Table S2) rarely attended alone or engaged in the cinematic event without food. They were mostly in pairs or groups of threes and more, loaded with pop-corn, soft drinks and other kinds of refreshments sold only in the cinema facility. Why are 26-35 year olds the dominant group of audiences visiting the cinemas? Marriages occur when couples are within that age group. Therefore, one explanation might be the dating and courtship phenomena. Apart from hotels, restaurants and beaches, the cinema allows couples who are dating to spend time together, at least for the duration of the film and the theme of the film provides the subject matter for conversations. Dating couples also go in search of food or somewhere to eat and if the cinema affords entertainment while eating, it is hardly surprising that it is an attractive location. But not all kinds of food are permitted within the viewing theatre especially those not provided by the cinema operators. Ladies had difficulty persuading the cinema attendants that the chocolates or pastries tucked away in their handbags were not to be consumed in the cinema hall. Some had to go back to the pop corn and soft drink counters to make fresh purchases to get them to ignore the food items purchased from other vendors within the mall. This reveals a politicization of cinema food that influences spectatorship. Because tickets have already been purchased at that point, intending viewers are

unlikely to forfeit the film. Instead, they resort to purchasing more cinema food to guarantee their seats within the cinema hall.

Cinema-going audiences combine film consumption with other leisure activities as all respondents attested. Viewers who arrive well ahead of the screening times mill around the variety of retail shops that dot the mall on every floor, take selfies and watch other visitors. One of the young men I spoke to, Fred, said he goes to the cinemas with friends to watch films, shop and watch people. He begins his cinema experience by watching actual people go about their businesses within the mall before going on to watch fictionalised people, the combination of which enables him to understand and navigate the complex world around him. A businessman engaged in promoting men's fashion in Lagos and Accra, Fred is of the opinion that watching happy people at the cinemas and watching films are the best recipe for his relaxation when he is not busy designing outfits for men.

Viewers reported that the cinema ambience has a way of improving one's mood. And, watching the film with several others, even unknown to them, improved the viewing experience. So, in addition to enjoying a film with a partner, they hoped to de-stress. One lady said she visited the cinema on Friday evenings to escape the heavy traffic jam on her way home to the Mainland, and also to watch fashion trends. Most ladies dressed in modern, westernised outfits of skinny jeans, t-shirts, flats and hair extensions. When the ladies were not wearing hair extensions, they had stylish natural, kinky hair that suggests their intention to identify themselves as proud Africans in the style maintained and arguably popularised by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Other ladies appeared in short dresses, ripped jeans, off shoulder blouses and see-throughs while walking casually because they were busy clicking away on their smart phones. The men were also mostly in jeans, shorts, t-shirts and branded trainers. As a couple approached the box office, the young man typically led the way, picked the leaflet that advertised the films on offer and read out the titles to his partner who Googled each title to be sure that a reasonable choice was made. Some ladies walked slowly with a gait that revealed a consciousness of being watched or exhibiting the desire to be watched. The look on some faces – most were heavily made up – were either of admiration of other viewers' appearances, aspirations to the modernisation attained by upwardly mobile consumers or the indifference and security of being with others.

Many were in a haste to exit the cinema hall as though they were going to other appointments elsewhere. In fact, viewers stand to leave the cinema hall as soon as the closing credits begin to roll. In comparison to Okome's street corners and beer parlours, where viewers engage in animated conversations, laughter or lamentations during and particularly after the film, it is worthwhile to remember that modern cinemas do not afford the audiences the luxury of keeping up extended conversations with other non-familiar audiences during and much less after screening on the cinema premises. The post-viewing discussion, therefore, is not with strangers or to those who have gathered to see the film. The cinema owner's business imperative forestall's the collective post-screening exchanges typical of beer parlours since they have only ten minutes to prepare the viewing space for the next set of viewers. So, the discussions occur within oneself, with one's partner(s) who depart together to attend to other leisure activities within or outside the cinema complex. Watching through other people's eyes (McCall, 2008) is partially absent within the cinema but can occur in other ways through movie reviews, tweets and other kinds of posts on social media networks.

More women privilege going to the cinemas than men (Supplementary Table S2). Women's appetite for film consumption has been noted by Larkin (2008). In Larkin's work, he claims that women consumed Nollywood films presumably more than men because the films had 'crept' into the domestic space, through VHS and CDs, which is primarily occupied by women. These data demonstrate that even in non-domestic spaces such as cinema locations, women's attendance outnumbers that of men. The only exception occurs in Film House Cinema in Surulere where out of about 45 viewers in one screening, only 10 of them accepted the questionnaire. Were the two incomplete copies women, the numbers would still be higher in favour of the men. Higher male numbers is a noteworthy albeit rare occurrence; but it does not suggest that men would outnumber women at the cinemas because data from seven other locations do not support that. Furthermore, the small number might be responsible for the exception. Haynes (2017) affirms that, "as consumers, women dominate Nollywood. The industry agrees that women are the primary audience" (p. 81). Men have a greater interest in viewing Hollywood and in football especially the English Premier League and similar brands of international football than in viewing Nollywood. But the cinema remains a favourite hangout destination for men and women alike. Some male respondents said cinema was mainly for guys like them who still go on dates, thus suggesting that fewer married men movie-goers. Segun's response is interesting: "I don't come here alone. If I'm alone, it's the live viewing of interesting football games at a viewing centre – not at home – that I'll engage in. There, we can argue, predict the outcomes, and talk about politics or other interesting topics during the breaks".

Female first-degree holders who are between 26 and 35 years old go more frequently than men to see a Kunle Afolayan film, or any other Nigerian film for that matter (see Supplementary Table S4). Even so, the frequency of this group to the cinema is surprising (see Supplementary Table S5). Among those who correctly responded to the frequency question, more viewers claim to visit the cinemas less often than once a month. Some viewers reported that only few films will attract them to the cinemas at all. Being a famous and celebrated filmmaker, Afolayan is one of the few whose films will attract a large audience. The frequency reported here is in contrast with the optimism reflected by cinema operators and filmmakers stated above. If filmmakers and cinema operators are optimistic of the boom which cinema-going portends, it implies that viewers will go more frequently than what the data show. There is also the potential danger of inaccurate self-reporting, which might suggest that cinema-goers are not fully conscious of their cinema habits and as such, may be inaccurate in reporting same. Another explanation to the perceived incongruence between frequency of visits to the cinema and the enthusiasm of practitioners on the rise of the cinema culture is the population size. With data variously placed at 15 to 17 million inhabitants, there seem to be more than enough people to fill the few existing cinemas in the city. As previously observed, this exploratory study is far from making conclusive assertions. Its strength lies in its ability to document richly contextualised preliminary findings, which will need to be developed through further interrogations and interpretations of audiences.

The educational background of the audiences (see Supplementary Table S5) suggests that their interpretation of the film will be enlightened and to an extent informed by their level of education. It can be expected that their frames of interpretive reference will draw on their education in ways not attainable by secondary school leavers or by other non-degree holders. For the viewers, their notion

of film has been shaped by Hollywood offerings, which makes their interpretation of films veer towards a comparison with American films. These audiences are mostly Yorubas (see Supplementary Table S7). This came as no surprise given that the study was conducted in Lagos, with the dominant ethnic group being the Yoruba. The same is expected to be found in the eastern and northern parts of the country, which are quite divided along ethnic lines. The study did not anticipate that ethnic affiliations will affect the interpretations of the film. The pan-African nature of *The CEO* was hardly the focus of the comments made by viewers. They were interested in other elements of the story: the technical and aesthetic values of the production and the quality of the acting. That the protagonist was a reckless Yoruba man who was in competition with other African nationals for the position of the coveted CEO did not merit the attention of the cinema-going audience, who participated in the study. To many viewers, Wale Ojo (Kola Alabi) was the recognizable Nollywood celebrity in the film and that sufficed, not his ethnic background.

As messy and fluid as genre classification is, with the features of one genre blurring the boundaries and features of another, the audience was able to identify its preferred genre from the list. Haynes (2017) asserts that a complete understanding of Nollywood requires a differentiation of its genres. Such differentiation, he argues, enables the appreciation of the values of each film and the world from which it emerges (p. xxvii). In spite of a third of the audience not completing the relevant question, the data (Supplementary Tables S1 and S7) suggests that audiences rate romantic comedies as top three in terms of their preferences, which is evident in the highest grossing Nigerian film of 2016 being *The Wedding Party*, a romantic comedy. *The CEO* was advertised as a thriller (a category that is absent in Haynes's classification) and as reported below, the audience enjoyed viewing the film enormously. But thrillers occupy the third favourite genre for the cinema audience. The suspense and narrative twist woven into the film were two plot elements frequently mentioned among the audiences who viewed it.

Apart from consuming Nollywood films at the cinemas, audiences also tune into Africa Magic, the satellite television channels devoted to African films from different countries notably Nigeria and Ghana. The big budget, block-buster films like *The CEO* and others listed above are not featured until much later on by the channels dedicated to English and indigenous language films, but numerous other films get aired on the channels. It is noteworthy that Africa Magic occupies a key role in the dissemination of Nigerian films and that already points to an area of further research to advance that done by Tomaselli (2014) and Ekwuazi (2014), and which is reported in this study. Multichoice's dedicated television channels have enabled the circulation of Nigerian and other African films in ways no other media conglomerate has. The Africa Magic Viewers' Choice Awards (AMVCA) suggests that audiences cluster around the satellite TV platforms both on and offline, and that might be a starting point for a continent-wide study of the audiences of African films. Among those who chose two or more options, one of them was invariably Africa Magic while the other(s) was either YouTube or IrokoTV. Whereas online viewing of films is growing, it still lags behind among this group of audiences. A number of reasons are proffered: Internet penetration in Nigeria is still under 40%. Data plans might be affordable among the first degree holders of 26-35 years, but using it to view feature length films might not be a priority where Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram are strong competitors.

Interestingly, cinema screens and posters are the biggest sources of information for the audiences who visit the cinema. The cinema halls are built within shopping malls and complexes that attract various people even those uninterested in films. Roll-up banners, posters and other publicity materials litter these malls and they do so intensely on the cinema floor. LED screens are placed at strategic locations and film trailers are constantly screening on them. Films already in the cinemas and those yet to be released invite even the passers-by to view and entice them either to buy tickets or decide on a date to return to the cinema. People who go to see a particular film are exposed to previews and trailers of three or four other films. So, it is not surprising that cinemas are also sites of cultural promotion and awareness. The advertisements and publicity on display would not cost the facility owners additional amounts, but they will have to choose which trailers are on display and for what duration. Next to the cinema advertisements and online posters, online sources are important sources of information. Kunle Afolayan has a vibrant social media presence and does not fail to deploy various platforms to reach his fans and audiences. His films are promoted through Google mails, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter in addition to the online platforms of arts and culture journalists.

Audience Interpretation of *The CEO* (2016)

Prior to the movie starting but now already seated, the audience engages in eating, chattering, texting and exchanging expectations of the movie with their partners, friends or acquaintances just made in the cinema. The first fifteen minutes of screening are spent on advertisements and cinema etiquette as part of the cinema protocol. As screening progresses, attention is elicited and the narrative structure of the film secures affective responses. There is pleasure, laughter, surprise, disappointment, gasps, even sniffs from the audience who are by this time immersed in the cinematic experience, which leaves them glued to their seats as if in a trance. And all these go on in the dark and air-conditioned spaces of cinema halls. It is not entirely clear for this particular audience if the meaning-making begins within the cinema hall as the film begins, as Barber (1997) suggests, prior to entry as Larkin (2008) suggests, or after viewing as Akpabio's (2007) study infers. Based on the participant-observation experience, however, it is safe to assume that the meaning-making process and the audience interpretation begin with the decision to see the film. The decision to see *The CEO* and not the other movies screening at Silverbird, Film House or Genesis Deluxe at the same time bears within it a kind of meaning attributable to several factors. Two of them are who the director or cast are and how recent the film's release. A film directed by Kunle Afolayan raises audience expectations of quality and superior entertainment in the same way as actors Wale Ojo, Kemi Lala Akindoju or the music maestro, Angeliqe Kidjo will do. Film enthusiasts will also want to see the film as soon as it hits the cinema because of the thrill and excitement of being among the first viewers. These pleasurable experiences hold some meaning which is extended into the viewing experience and, if it happens, the discussions that follow viewing.

According to the verbal responses provided by the audiences of this study, viewers' interpretive strategies draw on three frames of reference: narrative, cultural and technical. To a very large extent, viewers described the movie as suspenseful, and as such, they were happy to recommend the

film to friends and family. When asked to describe an element that held the potential to attract an award to the film, no other word featured as frequently as ‘suspense’. There were favourable reviews by over two thirds of the respondents. Most viewers went to watch the film because of the director himself and the majority because of the lead actor, Wale Ojo (Kola Alabi), who embodied the successful albeit carefree business executive, confidant, opponent, lover and hero. Another character, Angelique Kidjo (Dr Zimmerman), was responsible for attracting viewers. Her lines were the subject of subtle adulation among the audience of GDC. Lala Akindoju came in third place. However, whenever an element of interest was named, it was one of the first two actors with Ojo’s name featuring more times than Kidjo’s. Dialogue and storyline were other narrative properties which audiences drew on to interpret their experiences of viewing the film. During the drills between Dr Zimmerman and her five CEO-potentials, mild applause was heard within the viewing spaces. Audiences whistled, called out and exclaimed words of praise as if they expected to be heard by the actress. The character was believed to possess oratorical skills replete with pithy sayings which appeared to impress the audience in no small measure. Besides, the fans of the music icon also expected Kidjo to transfer to the screen the *élan* with which she draws cheers all over the continent. Afolayan’s casting of Kidjo was a narrative and business strategy intended to broaden the audience base and popularity of the film. Thus, in his explanation of New Nollywood, Connor Ryan (2015) observes that producers have created “films that depict modes of consumption...and forms of global popular culture in a bid for wider transnational reach” (p. 58).

The narrative elements in the film constituted the merits and demerits which audiences ascribed to it. When asked if she thought the film had any flaw, one viewer said, “flaw *ke?* The film is awesome *joor*”. This is a combination of English and Yoruba that negates the possibility of any flaws in the film. Another viewer described the film as the “best puzzle”. That notwithstanding, viewers identified considerable flaws at the end of the film which were the basis of some of the interactions I had with them as they walked away from the theatre. The displeasure of viewers was based on some narrative plot points in words like “poor ending”, “confused”, “rushed or senseless ending”, “not too real ending”. Kola’s flashback with which the narrative began, revealed that he was a survivor and therefore constituted a spoiler for viewers. In GDC for example, 22 favourable comments and none against the film were recorded, whereas 19 comments referred to flaws found such as abrupt ending or ending not tied together. Another viewer summed this up by saying “so many things were going on in the film that we could not explain why”.

Most of the cultural factors mentioned had to do with language. One viewer said, “Kola’s Chinese was needless and out of place as well as the Chinese characters. It was as if the filmmaker was struggling to include more ethnic groups than the film really needed”. This implies that viewers have a sense of story structures and when those structures are violated, they express their disappointments. Another interpretive approach gleaned from the audiences in this study is one that enables them to negotiate the value derived from their experience of the film, as a way of gauging or auditing their decision to watch. While filing out of the cinema hall, comments like “That was a good two hours...”, “Thank God I did not waste my time” and “This is value for my money” were heard.

Another interpretive albeit minor frame of reference invoked by audiences is the technical aspects of the film. Overall, the film was highly rated with the top best qualities being cinematography and

production values. Superlatives such as “super perfect”, “best film ever”, “best camera work”, “excellent sound track”, “fantastic cinematography”... were used to describe the film. Viewers also often compared Afolayan’s other films especially *Oct 1* (2014) and *The Figurine* (2009) to *The CEO* as a way of accounting for the similarity in plotlines, narrative and technical decisions of an Afolayan film. In terms of the technical quality of the film, those who commented on it preferred *The CEO* to the other two films by the same director. Understandably, Afolayan’s technical expertise and his ability to hire competent hands for successive productions will improve over time. But the comments of regular cinema-goers on the technical aesthetics of the film must be treated with caution as they tend to throw around terms presumably heard from family, friends or acquaintances without an understanding of such terms, or they hesitate to explain precisely what they mean by their responses. An instance of this occurred when a viewer stepped out of the hall and was asked what she liked about the film she had just seen. She immediately quipped, “Ah, the cinematography”. But when asked which aspect of that, she hesitated and continued, “I just like the story; it is very interesting.” Could it be that only a specialised audience with the requisite training can make informed judgements about the technical qualities of a film? Less than one-fifth of the audience made references to the technical aspects of the film while attempting to interpret it.

In Conclusion

It might be too soon to make definite conclusions on the multiple ways of how this age group (26-35 and 16-25 year-olds) experience, delight in, frown at, are amused by or dream of their life goals and aspirations through the lens of one celebrated pan-African movie. But I am excited at the vistas that open by reflecting on the cinema-going audience of Nollywood – as they convene, engage with the film and disperse – in spaces made possible by Lagos cinema operators and that the government provides. It reiterates the importance of the audience question in film histories and African cultural studies and how it facilitates or inhibits audience experience and meaning-making of film texts. It tells the cinema operators about their income sources (Larkin, 2008), how many more screening times to add or subtract (Mkparu, 2016), how the cinemas are changing spectatorship, modernity and neoliberalism as well as how long to keep the films in the cinemas. Audience studies – formal or informal – signal to the filmmaker what other kinds of films to produce and even suggest how to do so, thus gesturing to the fundamental role of cinema audiences (especially in a piracy-infested industry such as Nollywood) and the structures of feeling that suffuse the space and are responsible for the coming together, the excitement and desire it promotes - all of which are integral to the total experience of cinema.

This exploratory study is important for the contribution it makes to understanding cinema-going audiences in an African context. It engages with the discussion begun by Barber, Ekwuazi, Okome, Tomaselli, Haynes, Ryan, Fair and several other film scholars in ways that continue to unpack the nuances of how cinema-going constitutes a socialisation and meaning-making experience in a technologically-dominated, modernised and mediated world. The cinema spaces in Lagos are only one set of many sites of spectatorship. The cinema-going publics are educated, middle-class citizens, who drive to modern cinemas in Lagos to view films. As such, this study has not accounted for the demographics and interpretive strategies of the millions who stream Nollywood films online

on affordable or less-affordable subscription models, Africa Magic channels accessible to several in community viewing halls, hair salons, beer parlours, street corners, hospital and airport lobbies to mention a few. A lot more viewing might be going on in locations not yet accounted for. Therefore, suggestions of further research on the known and unknown (to use Tomaselli's term) spaces and sites of African film spectatorship are germane, together with deeper explorations of cinema-going audiences.

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