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An Evolution in Nollywood, Nigeria's "New Wave": A Conversation with Chris Eneaji

Carmen McCain

"Aren't we going to watch any Nigerian films in this class?" my student complained. It was the second day of my three-hundred-level Activism and Filmmaking class at Kwara State University in September 2015. The week before we had watched Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925, Soviet Union), and I had just begun an opening lecture on Third Cinema filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *La Hora De Los Hornos / The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968, Argentina). Her question struck me because it seemed so different from the approach students had taken when I first started teaching Nigerian films. In 2008, the first time I taught film at a Nigerian university, my final-year "Gender and Media" students in the Mass Communications Department at Bayero University, Kano, seemed embarrassed when I brought up Nigerian films.

Seven years later, at Kwara State University, Malete, I have not noticed this same sense of embarrassment. The students in the Film Unit of the School of Visual and Performing Arts are there because they want to become a part of the Nigerian film industry. They pass around pirated digital copies of the latest Nigerian films on laptops and phones, and they often seem slightly bored when watching films from outside of Africa. They warm up when I show them Ousmane Sembene's films *Le Noire de...* (1966, Senegal), *Borom Sarret* (1963, Senegal), *Mandabi* (1968, Senegal), and stay after class to continue discussing them. One student noted in a response paper that the screening of Sembene's film *Mandabi* was the first time they hadn't

been bored by the films we watched in the class. In Nollywood studies, we often talk about the disparities between Nollywood films and “FESPACO” films of which Sembene’s work is often used as an exemplar, yet seeing the way my students respond to Sembene makes me think that it isn’t that audiences don’t like other African cinema, so much as that up until now there have been few opportunities for most African audiences to see the older films.

With the coming of what is often called the “New Nollywood,” students look to a new cinema tradition, admittedly ideologically quite different from that promoted by Sembene and the activist filmmakers of FEPACI. The “New Nollywood” is not Third Cinema. Indeed, it may be the closest Nigeria has ever had to a “First Cinema” ideal. But these new cinema films draw audiences who prefer Nigerian to American films. These are not the historic open-air theatres of Ouagadougou or Kano or the video parlors that even those without televisions could afford, but instead new multiplexes in malls, tied closely to multinational businesses like the South African grocery store Shoprite or the American fast food restaurant KFC. The 90-120-minute romance and comedy films are marketed toward Africa’s growing, ever more mobile, middle class.¹ Viva Cinemas in Ilorin, where I live, screens at least five or six Nigerian films a week, usually for a run of two weeks to a month, alongside American, Indian, Chinese and South African films. And it is these Nigerian films that my students want to write about for their BA theses and these filmmakers they

¹ Nigerian cinema films have been disciplined, by cinema length requirements, from the sprawling parts 1,2, and 3 so common on VHS and VCD, into films no longer than two hours. On a visit to Filmhouse Cinemas in Kano in July 2015, however, I did go to see part 2 of an action adventure *Hindu* by filmmaker Hassan Giggis.

want to do their national youth service with.² It is a film tradition that has finally been accepted by Nigeria's once aloof middle class.³

I first saw Chris Eneaji's 2013 thriller *The Secret Room* when the final year exhibition class at Kwara State University projected it in the university auditorium for their final exhibition project in April 2015. With the permission of Eneaji, who is a friend and collaborator with their lecturer Emeka Emelobe, the students printed big posters and advertised the screening on the radio. They drew in a large crowd of students, who gasped and shouted in the darkened auditorium as the story unwound.

Much of the story unfolds between the two characters—Kinglsey (O.C. Ukeje) and Edna (Lilian Esoro), a man and wife—and they get most of the screen time, although other characters come in here and there to play crucial complicating roles. The film opens at the funeral of Edna's father (Jide Kosoko), a former ambassador to Sierra Leone, and the second scene shows the couple driving down the road. A flashback reveals that only a few days before, Edna had received her father's will, alerting her to the existence of a property she never knew he owned. After their SUV breaks down on a deserted patch of road, Edna passes through a strangely empty village looking for help, but eventually she finds a mechanic (played in a cameo by Eneaji) who agrees to work on their vehicle and take them on his motorcycle the rest of the way to the abandoned house that once belonged to Edna's late father.

By the time they reach the abandoned house, it is a dark and stormy night. The old mansion has all the creepiness of a haunted house, with cobwebs and creaky doors, and roach and mouse droppings in ancient kitchen drawers where Edna

² All of the lecturers in the Film Unit at Kwara State University are doing research on Nigerian films, and this may also influence the interests of the students.

³ While Nigerian films have been accepted by Nigeria's middle class, sometimes they still have a hard time competing with the spectacle of American films as Chris Eneaji noted in his talk at the Nollywood Studies Seminar at Kwara State University. Malete, in July 2015, lamenting that one of his films came out at the same time as *The Avengers* (2012, United States).

searches for candles. This house remains the primary location for the rest of the action, on which there are twists and turns in the narrative and complicating characters who reveal a history of shocking secrets that haunt Edna's family and turn the young couple's life upside down. Larger histories of multinational corruption are tied to more intimate betrayals.

The technical aspects are the most impressive parts of the film: the set design, the lighting, the cinematography. A sense of horror lurks in the dark and the sinister is revealed in brief hot flashes of lightning. This attention to detail is certainly not what the "old Nollywood" is known for, but there are thematic continuities that go back to *Living in Bondage* in the questions the film raises about the loyalty of family, genealogies of revenge, and the destructiveness of greed. Like other "New Nollywood" films, there is a focus on middle class concerns. We identify with the wealthy characters with their Jeep and smartphones, rather than the somewhat sinister villagers or the Pidgin-speaking mechanic. Like Kunle Afolayan's *The Figurine* (2009, Nigeria), the film plays cleverly on the ambiguity between spiritual haunting and human treachery. As the film goes on, sometimes it feels like the story gets lost in all the horror, but on the whole it is a striking film, and one that would be a good classroom introduction to the "New Nollywood."

Secret Room is what Eneaji calls his second film, even though he had worked on other more typical Nollywood films previous to this time. The 2013 film he calls his first film is *Murder at Prime Suites*, a police procedural based on a true-life story that shocked Nigerian social media in 2012, when a young woman was murdered after travelling from Abuja to Lagos to meet two men she had met on Facebook. Perhaps because it is based on such a well-known story, the film is slightly less lacking in suspense than it would be otherwise, because we know, even if the police don't, that

the murderer will be traced to Facebook. There are holes in the story and as a viewer I was frustrated about all the clues the police miss. However, although *The Secret Room* is the technically more interesting of the two films, one can see Enejaji's emerging sense of style here—a fascination with dark noirish rooms where faces are lit from below as the camera circles the police interrogation. There are also continuities of style in the unexpected twists in the story and the exploration of the psychology of betrayal.

The story focuses on the lead detective Ted (Joseph Benjamin) and his partner Hauwa (Keira Hewatch). Their investigations make both lead characters worry about their families. Ted has issues with his ex-wife, who he doesn't think is protective enough of their sixteen-year-old daughter, while the unmarried Hauwa frets over her younger brother, to whom she acts as a mother figure. Although there are a couple of touchingly intimate moments between Ted and Hauwa that indicate a potential romance, most of the narrative focuses on the investigation and the series of clues that build up over the course of the film. The partners interrogate witnesses who repeat several different versions of events, digging into deeper more layered versions of the story, until the murderer is found. The middle-aged protagonists are faced with a wild younger generation who seem connected to each other in ways their elders cannot fathom. These connections lead to ever more crimes of spectacle—rapes videoed and uploaded online, young people lured into the lairs of digitally disguised criminals met on social media. And perhaps this is why the detectives miss so many clues. Perhaps Ted's halting discovery of the victim Florence's online activity is meant as dramatic irony. The young people in the clubs and hostels know by Blackberry Messenger and Facebook that there has been a murder at Prime Suites almost before the family of the girl has been informed, and certainly before the police have any idea that the victim

even had a Facebook account. Once Ted checks Florence's Facebook account, he employs a half-mad Pidgin-slinging hacker, who offers a few moments of hip Lagosian comic relief, to break into what they believe to be the suspect's account. At the end of the film during a scene of Florence's funeral, a voiceover cautions about the risks of the mobile phone and social media. In a film entirely devoid of the spirit world Nollywood is often accused of being obsessed with, the Internet, the ever-encompassing social media and Blackberry Messenger, take the place of the temptations and dangers of witchcraft. The Internet too is a mysterious and occult place, and can lead to deadly encounters with predators. There is a powerful sequence at the end where characters' hands almost dance in response to the warnings of the voiceover, and unexpected connections are made as each person at the funeral checks their phone or sends off a message.

Both *Murder at Prime Suites* and *Secret Room* have been nominated for multiple awards. *Murder at Prime Suites* received two nominations for the 2014 Africa Magic Viewer's Choice Awards, including for Best Movie (Drama), and won Best Sound Editor. It also received two nominations for the Africa Movie Academy Awards. *Secret Room* received five nominations for the 2015 Africa Magic Viewers Choice Awards, including nominations for Best Movie (Drama) and Best Movie Director. Both films can be watched on iROKOTV.com.

In July 2015, Eneaji came to the Ilorin campus of Kwara State University to screen *Secret Room* at a faculty Film Studies workshop, one of the first events of the Centre for Nollywood and New Media in Africa, organized by Onookome Okome, myself, and other members of the School of Visual and Performing Arts. After the screening, Eneaji engaged in a two-hour Q&A on the making of the film and later agreed to an interview with me that I partially reproduce here.

In the talk, Eneng responded to questions about the old and new Nollywood by saying he dislikes the terminology of “old and new.” Instead, he says, “I would choose to say Nollywood has evolved. We are still one family, except that some set of us chose to tell our stories differently and pay more attention to details than the rest of us.” He later described it to me as a “new wave” in Nollywood filmmaking.

In both the talk and our interview, he spoke about his early days in Nollywood, what led him into this “new wave,” his experiences on set, and the challenges of piracy and the cinema genre in a rapidly changing Nollywood. I have edited down the interview and have partially rewritten some of my questions. I also cut a few excerpts from the talk into our conversation and have occasionally moved around sections and edited grammar and sentence structure to read more smoothly in written form.

CM: Could we talk a little bit about your journey into filmmaking?

CE: I joined the industry in 1998 as an actor. I was still in secondary school in Enugu. Enugu used to be popular with Nollywood at the time. The very first time, I came for an audition was in Presidential Hotels in Enugu in 1998. I read lines—and the way I was rushed out—“Thank you, leave”—wasn’t encouraging because I didn’t even finish. I was starting to get towards what they were asking for, and the next thing I heard was “ok, cut, thank you. Next.” And I felt that I wasn’t going to make it, but I kept coming until I got myself the first role in a movie called *Igodo*. I was an extra. I was a coffin carrier, among the villagers crying when someone died. I had told the people in my neighbourhood that I was part of a movie and then after the movie came out, I didn’t see myself because the editors had cut me off in the post-production process.

Another next big movie that I was a part of was called *Slaves*. I auditioned and there was one other guy who I was struggling to get the role with. So they kept auditioning both of us, and then called us back for casting. But it was still for two or three speaking roles, it wasn't that major.

When I went to university. It had been my dream to study theatre. But it wasn't possible because my elder brother filled my JAM form and forced me to study engineering. I studied Physics Electronics in the Engineering Faculty at Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Anambra State between 1999 and 2004. But my first year in engineering is when I met the guys in Theatre. One of our partners, Mr. Emeka⁴ is the first person I met in Theatre, and one other guy called Canarys, he's a popular actor. I asked them is it possible that someone who is in engineering can do a part time in theatre? They took me to the HOD at the time, and he said ok, if this guy is this interested and passionate.... I never had a certificate but I did as many stage plays as any theatre artist and even stayed in their classes.

I remember a particular incident. I was supposed to be in this play, *Moremi*. It was a final year production for one of the students. I was casted, and I had been rehearsing, only for an exam I had in engineering to clash with the same day. I had to choose. I didn't want to mention it to them in the theatre because they would ask me to go and find another person to take up the role. So I juggled the two on the same day. I had to rush my exam. I left the hall, and I was rushing down to the theatre rehearsal grounds. I had a heavy migraine. It was one of those days that I asked myself why I was doing that. But, at the end of the day, it all came out well. I did my exams in the morning and still participated in the stage in the evening.

⁴ Emeka Emelobe is currently the Head of the Film Unit at Kwara State University.

While we were in school, we went for auditions. A point came during this audition process that I found that the roles were not coming. I kept going, and they kept giving me the “waka pass” roles. And I decided that, you know what, I don’t think I am too handsome of a guy, you know, one of the faces that are going to be good on the screen, and I should do something else behind the camera. Going behind the camera, I was thinking someday I could produce mine, direct mine. I decided that if I need to be close to the director and watch what he does, I should choose continuity. Being continuity manager I did a couple of movies.

I don’t think all the movies I did before I left Nollywood in 2006 were up to eight. I directed two. I directed my very first in 2003, and then in 2004. And other normal short ones where you have church people and they have one video camera and you do directions. One of the reasons I left Nollywood at the time I left was because of funding. I’ve gathered friends and we’ve got money together. At the time it was one point something million naira. We made our first movie, gave it to a marketer in Aba who distributed and then we started the journey of asking for our money. We didn’t recover any money.

Then I left. I started doing music videos. At the time, it was late in my university days. I had already started handling a few cameras. I found out that music videos have a lot of effects because the guys in the music videos always want to look like they are abroad. So there was a lot of green screen filming. I had heard one of the directors, while were filming, say if you want to be a better director, you should learn how to edit. If you know how to cut your pictures, you can be a better director on set. You will not have to take so many shots. You just know the shots you need to take. I felt that while I was still finding my feet in the industry, I should learn this. I went into editing after I finished at school between 2005 and 2006. I waited for like a year

for my [National Youth] service, and I learned editing at one studio in Enugu. I learned everything that has to do with effects, visual effects, and then chroma key and editing, and that's how I started working with the guys in the music video.

I was handling the camera. I was doing the editing myself and doing everything from start to finish. Directing a music video is not the same as movies, but it was a good way to tell people to stand there, sit there, do this and do that so it felt like directing. It was then in Enugu that the music video started dying down. Most people felt like the music videos that we were doing in the East at that time weren't rated as high in quality as those that were done down south. Everybody left us and started going down to Lagos.

At that time we felt it was the camera. Everybody said that the camera they were using was different and that their postproduction process was different. So I had already called people to ask, "Which cameras are you guys using? What softwares are you guys using to do your postproduction process?" We kept changing the camera and the videos kept looking the same. When it looked like we weren't getting it, I came down to Lagos fully in 2009 to see if I could compete with the guys here.

When I came to Lagos, already I had a few friends who had shot their videos in the East that were based in Lagos at the time. I had Nigga Raw. I called him up and said, "Guy, I'm here. I don't know if you can hook me up. If you want to do your video, I can do it." I remember when Nigga Raw shot one of his music videos. That was the first time I saw different lighting than what we did in the East. They had HMI's and reflectors and bouncers and diffusers, and we never used that in the East. So, looking at this process told me, now this is it. They were almost using the same cameras we were using but their lighting process was quite different.

Nobody believed that they could give me their music videos to do, except one guy in middle 2009, but the music video didn't do well. Because I was still learning at the time—it didn't match up to what you originally could get from the good guys. The guy didn't come back again, and nobody ever did come back. I felt a little bit frustrated at the time, and I needed to survive. I stumbled into advertising in late 2009. I did advertising for 3-4 years.

CM: Is there anyway that your experience in advertising has affected what you are doing now?

CE: What I enjoyed in advertising was how we were able to discuss how people consume media, and how the media affect them and how their environments affect them. I would listen to a lot of radio, look at a lot of TV and then advise clients where to put their adverts. They would ask me to tell them who is watching and who is not watching and why are they watching, and, if they place an advert there, why would people want to buy their product. The study in advertising really helped me when I left.

At that point, I had made a little money in advertising, and I felt like I should really, really, really go back to what I loved to do. There was this TV in the office where we worked. Every time I looked up there was a Nollywood movie playing. Some of the colleagues in that office knew I was coming from that industry, they would see me play gateman, and they would tell me, "See, see your people, I don't know what you are doing here."

In 2012, I told myself, ok, I have a little money, and I think that this is the time for me to tell my stories. Especially what made me decide to leave at that time was the release of movies like *The Figurine*, *Ije*, and the likes that went to the cinemas. They

had good quality and attention to details, and I felt like this is the industry now I want to belong to.

Before I left, I asked how the distribution process was. If these new kind of movies they make, if they still go back to those guys that duped me in the past. I found out that, yes, you have to rely on them for a proper distribution in Nigeria, but now that there are some other platforms who are particularly interested in good pictures, some other pay TVs and global TVs, and in-flight too. They are particular about this content. They could even give you more money than you could make [the old way.]

It sounded nice at the time. But I never had enough capital. They told me the average budget to do such movies was between 8 to 20 million naira, as against the kind of movies that we shot before that we would do with 2 to 3 million. I spoke to one of my friends, and said I think there is a new trend in moviemaking, and I feel if we do it properly we can have a box-office hit and we can get our money back, because we are gearing towards the cinema. Everybody at that time was saying that the cinemas could give you the money you were looking for. And that is how we decided, let's give it a try. I made my first, *Murder at Prime Suites*, in 2012.

I came up with the story and wrote it myself and directed it. But I got someone to produce. I had done production management in the past, but I didn't know the new trend. I needed someone who already is in the industry, who would understand the dynamics, and how to get these actors and then manage them and get me good locations.

CM: Could you tell me about the process of coming back into this new industry?

CE: In the old—I won't want to say the "old Nollywood." In the one that we did before, it had been a very fast process. The process that we employed wasn't to pay attention to details. What was important was to get on set and get out immediately. Because the more you stay there, the more you waste money. The kind of things that disturb us making films now, like the ambient noise or people standing to watch, or lights or harsh lighting or weather conditions does not stop us at the time. The only thing we focused on was, are they seeing the picture, are they seeing the characters speaking? Can they understand what the character is doing? Can they follow the story? We don't concern ourselves with every other detail. But coming back right now, I found out that it is a different process.

I did small auditions in my office in Surulere in Lagos. I found out that there is this new wave of actors cropping up who are passionate and are not like those that we saw back then. Back then, it used to be ladies and guys who are pretty and handsome, who just feel that because they are like this that they can get a role, and some other things go behind for them to get listed in movies. It was not just about your quality of acting or your capabilities. But right now there is a lot of competition.

I can say that even 80 percent of my cast came from the audition. I only called my three major characters. It was Joseph Benjamin, who at the time had become a popular face and Keira Hewatch, who had become a popular face, and then I had Moyinoluwa Olutayo. Those were people that people had been seeing on the screen. They were collecting so much money. I never knew it had gotten to that height, I asked questions when I was budgeting for the movie, but sitting with them and negotiating with them gave me another insight.

One thing we did while we were prepping in the preproduction process was to secure a particular timing for the shoot. Originally, when I was still in the old

industry, seven to eight days is like the max you can do on set. Then you were shooting fifteen to sixteen scenes in a day. In fact some do twenty and they will tell you these are great directors because they can do twenty scenes in a day.

Coming lately, I found out that if you do more than six in a day, you are quite wonderful. I never understood why they will just do six scenes until I came into the industry and I started asking questions. I visited one or two sets, and I found out that setting up, especially the lighting process, was taking a lot of time. I did a short course in South Africa in 2012 before I started filming. Of course, I had experience shooting the old way. But the new processes I didn't understand quite well, so I had a short course and came back. And then I hired good hands. I made sure that my gaffer and my cinematographer had done cinema movies so they understand the process. In fact, when we were prepping and we did the technical meetings, I asked them what are the kinds of lights we need, how do I achieve this?

They advised me on the camera. They advised me on the lightings to hire, and they made me to understand that you have to go to locations, see the locations, see if you are going to have obstructions, see if the lights are going to work there, see if the cameras are going to fit in there, see everything before you go on set.

So prepping for my first movie wasn't easy. We would go to locations time and again. At the time I wouldn't understand. We would come to a place and the gaffer and the cinematographer would say, "No, no, no, we can't film here." And I would be like "Ok, why can't we film here?" Because coming from my knowledge, you can film anywhere. Just put your camera and record. When they started telling me about colours and harshness and reflections, I wanted to stop to go study more and watch what is happening more. But because we had started the process, I had committed to some people, I told myself I was going to finish it. I sat down with the

technical department and said, “This is what I want. Help me to achieve it. I will focus on my actors and bringing out the best in them.” We agreed and went on set. It didn’t go down well when they started setting up, because they would set up for four hours and I didn’t understand it. I kept on asking them, why do you have to do this? They would look for scaffolds, they would look for black to mask off some places. They would look for diffusers. And truly at the time I didn’t even understand the names of all these. I was just looking.

The only thing I did was to rehearse my actors, and block and tell them the marking points, come here, do this and that. But my DOP was in charge of the technical department, and my gaffer. The two helped me a great deal. And the art department. Of course, because I was coming from stage, I understand about makeup, and styling, and a little about set properties so I worked with them too, and that is how we stayed for more than two weeks. In fact, the time that I gave to my actors was two weeks but we stayed sixteen days as against fourteen days. When the contract expired, they felt that we had a good story, this guy is just new, he just started, we need to help him achieve it.

Joseph Benjamin helped me a great deal. He had told me that from this point, to this point, he was supposed to be in Ghana. So when we started filming and we found out that we were running behind schedule, he called me and said, “Ok, now how do we do it?” I never knew what to tell him because we had already agreed that he will leave at this point. But he called them and asked for them to shift for him. And apart from him, no other person had any other thing scheduled. They were just there trying to help me and probably cancelling anything that was coming up until we finished.

At the time I had learned the editing process. I could cut my pictures, but because I wanted everything done the professional way, I employed everybody that did that. I found when we went into the editing process that everything the editor was able to do, I could do. It's just that I hadn't done the new kind of movies for cinema, so I needed to see him do it. When he finished, I told myself, "Ok, now I know, there is no magic. It is the same thing you do. It's just sitting down to pay attention to do it well." So when we finished, I went for further studies. I told myself that I need to be in charge of everything, so I started understanding lights and cinematography.

CM: And how did you do that?

CE: If I say that most of my learnings are from YouTube, most people don't understand. And I read a lot. I asked questions. I met Teco Bensen. I met Emem Isong. I met a couple of producers and directors. And I kept asking them, ok, so especially in distribution, especially in exhibition, how do you guys get to the cinemas, how is this done? What are the processes? They gave me their own firsthand information, but the rest of understanding how to film, how to set cameras and lighting, I first started with YouTube and other sites. Asking questions about the setting, the ISO, my aperture, my focus, understanding how to fit in cameras and change lenses, I read myself sitting in my office.

Then, I was looking out for a film school to attend. I really wanted to go for New York Film Academy, until I asked questions, and they told me the money was quite much. And I was saying, "Ok, if my movie does well, I could use part of the money and train myself." But I met this guy that had finished in film school and he was doing a project. I said, "Can I come around and see?" I was thinking that if you go there, there is something huge you can do differently. It was not until I met him

that I found out that there was nothing he was doing differently that I don't know already. I found out that he understands the theory and he can explain the cameras to me, the difference between this camera and that, and how to achieve this and that. But he told me, see, if he wants to advise me, "make I no go." That's the language. He said, "Guy, forget the film school" that he still today has challenges while filming as against what they tell in classes, but it's good to go and listen. And of course, there is something about our audience and Nigerians, if you mention that you went to Colorado or you went to New York Film Academy, or this one in the UK, "Ah, you are a good filmmaker." Even without seeing your works, they will believe you are a great filmmaker. But I told myself, that those our pioneers that started, the Tunde Kelani's, and all them, I don't know the school they studied, but most of them learned hands on, they learned practically, they moved around on set, they saw what others were doing and then decided to do it themselves. They learned the hard way. And if I am dogged and patient enough I could still learn the same process.

If I see a new movie, I will go on YouTube and start looking for the making of the movie to see if there is anything they brought in that is unusual. So, for me, my learning process wasn't particularly in any film school. I went early this year (2015) to train again. There was this workshop that held in Paramount studios in California. In that workshop, I sat in classes. And then I understood that it's not about the things you sit down in classes to learn. There is a lot more to be learned in the field than you can learn in classes. But going for the second training made me understand more about cameras, because we focused more on cinematography and lighting, and continuity light and using lighting processes. Here in this part of the country, situational lighting, mood lighting, natural lighting is not quite popular. We light with

every light we have to make it bright so people can see. So I came back with a different view of filmmaking.

It helps to go for such things, but I advise people all the time: Make the mistakes first. Make lots of mistakes, then you can go to class and sit down and understand why you made the mistake, and learn how to correct them. Learn the standards but then break all the rules and learn how to break the rules, so that you can make things and content that is different from the rest of the world.

CM: If there is an 18-year-old who has the choice of going to film school or the choice of getting into the industry first, what would you tell them?

CE: I would tell the person to get into the industry first. Seriously. I did a job, for example, for one of our biggest producers in Nollywood, Emem Isong, and she had these directing students that came to understudy me to watch what we were doing and ask me questions. And in a few days, the questions they were asking me were not the questions they ought to ask. They were asking questions about camera settings and how can you achieve this. I answered all the questions, but when we finished the movie, I sat them down and I said, “If you want to make a great director, think... Every director should understand every crew and department and what they do. If you concern yourself with just the pictures and how the pictures will come out well, you will not know that the art and makeup person contribute a lot to what people see on the screen. You won’t even know that even the person called the PA has a lot to do with making the process better.” They had a lot of notes on what to do and what not to do when filming—and I said, “Why don’t you leave the notes and watch what to do and what not to do?” So if anybody is just trying to start and they have an option of a film school and then coming to the industry first. I will ask you, “Come to the

industry first and then look at all the mistakes and then go to the classes and understand how not to make the mistakes. Learn the rules and then how to break them.”

CM: I’ve come across a lot of people who’ve gone to film school and made one or two short films, and they tend to be very snobby towards the majority of the people operating in Nollywood. How do you react when you meet those kinds of people?

CE: I’ve met them! I’ve met them time and again. I will not call names. They go to film schools, and of course they have projects, and their projects are short films. What I always tell them is, “You know what, it’s fine. It’s nice that you’re doing it. I don’t know the environment. If you find yourself in that environment that you’ve studied, maybe the things you did there can help you. But if you leave the environment and come here, you understand that the factors that affect you here and there are not the same. But if you’ve been here and understand the different temperaments, and different ways we maneuver things to overcome obstacles, then you could go do your short. You could come back and then you have a balance. You can tell people, ‘I’ve done this the hard way. In fact, I’ve messed up here and there. In every environment I see myself, I can fit in perfectly well.’” I feel like that is the best process to go through.

For example, how I learned cinematography was watching the cameramen set their cameras. I asked a lot of questions. Even when I was filming, why would you set the ISO here at this speed? Why would you change your temperature here? Why is your white balance different from here? I always have my jotter and jot it down.... Once I finish my movie, I go back to my computer and I’m googling. And I must tell

you the things I learn sitting down in my office is huge and greater than the things I learn sitting down in classes.

CM: Could you tell me about moving from *Murder at Prime Suites* to *Secret Room*? And in particular how you achieved the lightning and the storm in *Secret Room*?

CE: When I made my first movie, I didn't understand the cameras and I didn't understand the lighting. Coming into the second one, I already knew what to tell them. I already knew that if I need to achieve this picture, these are the settings and these are the lenses I need.

I called some of the same technical guys I used on the first, but on the second one, they knew something changed. Most of them thought I had gone out to study, which I did not deny. I just said "yeah, yeah," so that they would listen to me. Because that's the only time they would listen. They wouldn't want to believe you learned on your own, they would want to rubbish you still. They would just tell you, "No, no, Director, this is the way I have been doing this." But immediately I told them. They said "Ah, e be like say director don go study." I said, "yeah, yeah, yeah, let's go," so they listened more because they felt there was something different. And that's how the Nigerian community responds to people who go away to do this.

I came up with the whole lighting process. I told myself, "I need to create lightening. How do I do it?" I asked YouTube and the only thing that they were able to tell me was special effects, post production effects. Or then, there's this big equipment that has light. I think they set it every second, but it's not here. Nobody's got that. Nobody has tried to make movies that have something like that.

The only light I knew that heavy was HMI's. Coming to the location, I already built something with iron, and some plywood, cut in different dimensions so I could use it to create a flicker. Once I slide it up and down, it creates a lightening effect, but it wasn't working properly because it continued to leak light. It wasn't giving me the darkness and the lightening effect that I needed. On set, we constructed a flag, a plywood, that we used to cover the light. We kept taking it off and putting it back, kept taking it off and putting it back. When we tried it, it was amazing. That is how we consistently pulled off the lightening effect.

Every time I had to create a lightening effect at some interior, there were places that the stand for the HMI could not reach. So I resorted to making use of the welding machine. I know a welding machine sparks a lot of light, especially when you see it at night, so what I did was to use the welders there in the interiors. It had to come from the windows and it couldn't reach there. I would have to build a platform for them outside. Then I brought in a huge mirror that reflected. It was in the hotel. We had to beg them and they agreed they would loose the mirrors on the wall and use on set. So we were using the mirrors to bounce off the light.

CM: So a lot of it is just trial and error, figuring things out as you go?

CE: Yes, *The Secret Room* was completely a mistake—a mistake that turned out well. I read in a book—I think by Maslow—that if you are not prepared to make a mistake you will never come up with something original. If you follow the practice, and the ways they teach you the ways it ought to be done, you will still come up with things people already know. But in the process of making a mistake, it becomes an idea, it becomes an invention. You do a lot of trial and error to invent. And it was a huge trial and error. At the time we started filming, the cameraman stopped filming and came to

meet me and said they've looked at the rushes and they feel it is not working. It is too dark, the lightning coming in cannot help people see the whole story. I thought I had made a big mistake. It took someone else to say, "No, let this be your style." I said, "Let it just be like that, let us just be consistent. If we are losing the main moments in the story, let's re-take the scene and make sure the lightning comes in at the time we need to see those actions."

If you've seen *The Secret Room*, there is a point the man dug a hole, dumped the lady in and then he slipped and fell. He was coming out and the lady held his legs, and he hit the lady with a shovel. We took it over and over again, because at the time we needed to see the shovel hitting the lady in the lightning. That's the only way. You cannot miss it. So, we did the first one. It wasn't working. We were pumping water from the fire service people that came to create rain for us. If it didn't work, I will stand beside him and shout "Take it again, the other light person, watch this thing, watch this thing, No!" So it was a crazy moment. A lot of takes where the guy was delivering lines. There was a point where he needs to shout, and lightning and thunder will follow every statement. We took it over and over and over again. It was a lot of work. I watched all of the rushes and I cut every moment that made sense, and mixed all of them together. There were a lot of takes and a lot of re-shoots.

CM: How long did it take you to get that scene?

CE: There's a particular scene. The guy with the lady and the shooting of the gun and running away was done almost in one full night. With every night scene we shot, we came on location by 4pm and start prepping around 5, setting lights and all that. By 7 or 8 we were filming. So we did that all night. In fact, the digging the grave and the pushing the girl was done for two nights. Because we were on a hill, the first time the

fire service came, they couldn't drive up to the place. They told me the tanker was so filled that it might roll back. So the two options we had was to bring longer pipes and lose pressure, or they would reduce the water in the tank and drive up. I didn't want to reduce pressure, so I said reduce the water. They reduced the water almost in half and then they drove up. The first night we were filming, we hadn't gone half into the scene and rain finished from the tank. Then we had to stop and schedule another day. So that was done for two days. The other was done in one full night. It was just one scene. We had to take it over and over and over again. And we had a lot of fuel because it was a generator. And we were very far from any petrol station. Ah, I thank everybody that was a part of it. They really helped me because they had to make sure the fuel was there. Because every time you lose fuel, you stop filming.

CM: Could you tell me about how you budget your films?

CE: The budget for the first movie was quite higher than the second. My first movie took more than 10 million. The things that take money from you while you are filming are hotel and equipment. The hotel takes a lot of money because you have to lodge everybody in the place. And of course the kind of rooms you give to these guys we call the "Stars" are [more]. Then they stay there for 10 or 14 days. And then the equipment. You take it and you go on set. You camp with it, so whether you are using it or not, you are paying for it. So those are the things that will take your money, and why what I spent on *Murder at Prime Suites* was quite high. Why I came low on the budget [on *The Secret Room*] is that when I finished *Murder at Prime Suites* one person asked me, why did I have to spend that much? I didn't understand the question until the person broke it down for me. I found out that because I was new, there was not proper management. I spent money where I ought not to.

I had a full working crew. Every person they mentioned in my first movie, I would say, “Bring the person.” But I found that most of them on the set wouldn’t contribute.

They started telling me where to cut down the budget. You can find a service flat, and you negotiate with them and then you are going to pay almost half of what you are going to pay in a hotel. They were telling me, “Look at your schedule. Know when you are using the kind of light that cost you so much money. Know when you are using the crane, know when you are using the tracks. Those days, hire them, have them taken back when you finish rather than keeping them all through.” It is proper planning.

My next movie I planned a lot. When I did the first movie *Murder at Prime Suites*, the art department took a lot of money from me because they had to get the set properties, original things. Coming forward I learned that you can use this money to make something—use painting, use some kind of material to wrap around and it looks real. Most things and artworks that people saw in *The Secret Room*, we created there. In fact the structures, the artifacts, the art director made with clay. He used some kind of painting to wrap them up and make sure it was shining, so it looked real. I found out there is a lot you could curtail if you plan properly.

So coming forward to the next movie, I spent less than the budget. The first one had a lot of characters. There were extras, there were a lot of locations. The second one had one major location. Once I paid for the location I didn’t have to pay for so many other places. And I had few characters. Apart from the first condolence visit scene, I just had four major characters I had to take on set. So it was a lot fewer people to manage, a lot fewer rooms to pay for, and I didn’t take all the equipment on set. Then I reduced my crew members. I made one person do almost two or three

functions. They agreed. I calculated all that I would have paid to all the people who would have come. I said, “Ok I will be dividing it into half and I’m giving to you and I’m holding this back because I need to spend less.” So that’s how I was able to manage the second production.

Before I did *Secret Room*, I had been asked a question by Teco Benson. When *Murder at Prime Suites* was nominated for AMAA, I met him at Bayelsa and we got talking. He told me I need to choose. If I need to make movies to make money, even in this New Nollywood, they go and look for the A-listers who everybody wants to go see in the cinema, and who everybody on every platform will say, “Ah, I want to see this person,” and price them well. Or that I should know how to get on a location and get out quickly and not spend much money. So, he said, if I want to go the business way, if I am here to make money, that he must tell me that what I did at *Murder at Prime Suites* was a waste of money. It was nice that it was about social media crime, and how to curb social media crime. It was inspired by a true life story. He told me, “It is a good story, but that’s not what Nigerians want to see.” Then he asked me, “What genres do you want to make?”

I had already told everybody that kept listening that I don’t want to do romance, I don’t want to just do just drama. Everybody is doing romance and drama and comedy. I want to do something different. Most of the stories I want to tell should be inspired by true life, and they should be not the things people want to see but tell stories of what is happening in a subtle way.

He said, “Choose. It’s either you want to make money, or you make the movies that will make the name for you.” I said, “Ah, I want to make the name.” He said, “Well the one thing is that the name may pay at the end of the day. If you make good films then people might start consulting you and calling you to come make such

films for them, or you might start getting nominations and getting to travel and getting to meet people who can get good distribution for you out of the country. But,” he said, “it’s going to take you time. You have to really invest, and the movies you do, do it properly and don’t look for a huge return on investment. Because these kinds of movies, they don’t really make money out of it. It’s just that they make the initial capital and then a little money to buy fuel for their car. They put it back and they keep making them until they get noticed and recognized.”

I asked myself a lot of questions sitting alone in my hotel room in Bayelsa. Are you sure this is it? Are you sure this is it? Until I told myself, you know what. Whatever it takes, let me keep onto these kind of movies, because I wouldn’t want to start competing with the guys out there. In fact, I was one of those that criticized what we did. I felt that we shouldn’t churn out such multiplicity of movies at the same time, that we should pay attention to details. I understand too that there is some kind of respect that some of us who do these kind of movies get that they don’t get.

My decision actually came from the fact that I was passionate about what I do. I need to make the name, and not the money, and I need to make great content that will stand the test of time. So I have brought that to everything I have done. I brought that to *Secret Room*, and people have said, “No, ah. It won’t sell o.” Even when I casted, they thought I had the wrong casting. This guy is not a face. The lady you used is not a face. There are no faces. Nobody is going to buy. If you take it to the market, nobody will buy.”

When I first finished *Secret Room*, I took it to all my family members, and it didn’t go more than 20 minutes and someone was asking me, “can we change?” I was depressed at the time. I took my DVD. I didn’t even drop a copy at home. I just came back to Lagos. The two moments for me to go back watch this again and ask myself,

“Was it you that made this movie?” was the first time they called me and said there was a class in UNN (University of Nigeria, Nsukka), the theatre arts, who was reviewing the movie. The second moment was when I got nominations. I felt ok, there is something good about it, and the thing that was good about it was the way I chose to tell the story as against what people wanted to see. That’s the way I want to go on.

CM: Could you say a little bit about distribution and piracy?

CE: When *Murder at Prime Suites*, my first movie was pirated, it was 8 movies in one. When they gave it to me, the only thing I made sure about was to rush and see that the quality stays so someone doesn’t see it and feel it is not made properly. I inserted the DVD, and I was amazed to see that the copy they have is just as clear as the one that I had released. I was quite happy. They told me there is nothing that you can do.

Talking to the marketers, you find out that the pirates live with them, and these are some aggrieved boys who felt their masters did not treat them well and then they went into pirating their works and they formed a cartel.

I was talking to Kunle. How his movie *October 1* got to them—they called him on the phone and told him that we have your jacket and master, we are waiting for you to finish in the cinemas so we can release. He employed all the forces he’s got, spoke to government and the marketing associations and everybody he could talk to and they released nevertheless. So these guys know exactly what they are doing, and they know there is nothing that anybody can do about it.

I feel it is a whole revolution that will happen in the industry for piracy to be curbed, not even to be stopped. Even if you curb it from the marketers, there are boys out there that are pirating and selling to cities that you know nothing about. They will

help you distribute there while you are distributing in the major cities. One of my friends is telling me he wants to release the pirate's way. He wants to print his DVDs and jackets like it is the pirate's and then send it in the streets because he feels that those boys sell more. Those guys can sell up to 20 DVDs in one day, in traffic.

Right now, most of us don't resort to releasing our movies in the market like we did before. Right now we are particular about going to film festivals, and going online, and then going to pay-TV's, looking for international distributors. There are some platforms who could get your content and help you distribute across pay-TV's, in and out of Africa, and global TV's, and on flights as in-flight entertainment, and on Internet for streaming. If you calculate the money you could make by going round to distribute in this way, at least you would get a return on your investment. So we see the local market as a last resort right now.

We find out that if you finish your work and you have your master, the only two ways, they get it out and pirate it is if you take it to the cinemas or you release a DVD copy. They can get your DVD copy, clone it and repackage it differently to sell. Or if you do a cinema release, they can go to these guys in the cinemas and lobby them to get the master from them and then they could release from there. I have a friend who has told me that he is paid N150,000: "If someone comes and says I'm paying N500,000, you no go do am?" So you find out that they are getting them from the cinemas or if you do a release on DVD.

So, now, some of us are beginning to think, I'm just going to go online and release on global TV's and then start selling across the globe before I come to the cinema. But the cinemas won't agree. Once you release online, once you release on pay-TV's, they will say, "No, no, no, it's released already. We're not showing it."

For we that are passionate about cinema, every job you do, at least you go to the cinema. Because cinema has a way of promoting it too, giving the larger audience a view and making you small money. But the argument is that while you are busy making money in the cinemas, the work is getting out there.

If pirates don't exist, I'm telling you, every filmmaker in Nigeria should be able to live comfortably—should be able to make great films.

CM: So, for online distribution and in-flight cinema, all of those audiences are upper class, so do you think this kind of struggle with distribution is changing the kind of stories you tell that are appealing to wealthier audiences?

CE: Yes, I think it is beginning to affect it. When I studied the classes of people that go to the cinema, you find out that these are not the kind of people who can go on the streets and buy your DVD. They are just a particular set of audience, who want to have the cinema culture. They can go there and see a movie or they are travelling and they can see it on the plane or they are in the comfort of their homes and Africa Magic shows this content. Or they are on the Internet and they subscribe to one of these Iroko, Ibaka, or all the rest.

These guys are affecting the kind of stories we tell. If you make a movie that the story is not too great and the picture is not too fine, those platforms will not buy. The onlines will not stream. They will tell you, No, sorry, this is not their kind of production. Audiences are beginning to yearn for those kind of movies. They've seen the quality and the kinds of stories we tell. They've seen that we are different from what we did before. They are beginning to believe in the Nollywood and the future of Nollywood.

Some of us still believe in the ordinary, because that is where the larger audience is. That's where the market women and the traders who will not even sell an item in their shops but will go home with a copy at the end of the day. Those people who are still selling to the local market—the straight to VCDs make the larger money. One of my friends who is a marketer has given me statistics that if you release, at least in the first two weeks, you are guaranteed to at least 80-100,000 copies. And by the time you multiply the little, little 15, 20 Naira they make per DVD, it gets them into millions. And they are ready to jump back on set and start doing another one. I feel they still make the larger money. At some point they tell you they sell close to 400-600 thousand copies of a particular film. And that is part 1 and 2 put together alone, and then 3 and 4, because they cut it in bits, 3 and 4 will still give them some level of income too. I feel they make a lot of money. I've been called time and again to create that kind of content. Friends that knew me, "Ok, come now, come let's do this, sharp sharp." I don't say no outright, I just say, "no, I am busy."

I feel that in this new wave that is happening right now, we are trying to tell the rest of the world that we are gradually coming up in the kind of content and the kind of way we tell our stories, that we are particular about details, and we have good actors who are not stars but who are willing to put in a lot to make a movie happen.

I know that people are particularly looking at us. And beginning to say, ok these are the people wanting to change the face of Nollywood and tell the stories differently. If they are consistent, someday revolutions will happen.

CM: You said you still hope to appeal to the market women? So the kinds of characters you have in your films are they mostly middle class characters?

CE: Yes. We have middle class characters. Ok, now, of course, you should know about the A-list and B-list and C-list characters in Nigeria. When I directed for some other person, and then he didn't use quite many faces, he had come back to tell me these online people are telling him he did not use A-listers, so they will not buy.

The A-listers are the people everybody knows. You see them and you say, oh, these are Nigerian actors. B-listers are the people supporting, and the C's are the kind of people we use because they are up and coming and they are young and fresh blood, and they are ready to do anything you want them to do, but they are not popular yet.

The argument has come that if you don't work with them in Asaba, if you don't do straight to VCD, you won't be an A-list. Because the A-list is someone who everybody knows him. And those are the kind of movies and contents they create that goes to the street and everybody knows.

So, people are particular about the A-list and the B-list and the C-list. The market is diversified now. If I bring in an A-list, in my movie right now, someone who is popular in straight-to-VCD, who everybody knows, and I use him to make a content that is going to the cinemas, if you put the posters up in cinemas, people will go to see, they will believe that you are bringing that their kind of movies to the cinema. For the cinema people, they don't particularly care about your actors, they want to go there and see a good story. But if you use the known faces, you are going to attract some set of people to the cinemas to see it. But the question is, who are you attracting there? Because the upper class people particularly feel that those are the people who are rubbishing the industry, and we are the ones trying to make it better—that if you use them, no, you are not making this movie for me.

So, it's been a divide for a long time in trying to merge these two markets. What most of them are doing right now is to even come down to Lagos. They call me

on the phone all the time, “See, Chris, if you have a project you want to be a part of, it is going to the cinema, abi?” “Yes.” “I want to feature. I haven’t been.” Most of them have not gone to cinema. Most of them have not done a project that has been in the cinema and are really, really yearning to be in the cinema. Because they feel the new platforms that honor filmmakers, they are beginning to honor most of our films, more than they even recognize theirs. This is what has been happening. They want to come in and do part of our movies. While the C-list guys we use here want to go and do theirs because they feel if they do theirs, that is the way they can become A-list. Because you have to do movies that go to the streets for people to know them.

It is a back and forth process, but we are managing it. We are beginning to define how to merge them, how to bring in someone they know well is a cinema face and then someone they know well is a straight-to-VCD face, pull them together, do a content and see if you can attract both markets to sell.

CM: As the award nominations have come in, have they helped you get the kind of people you want to work with on set?

CE: Yes, yes. In fact, I direct for M-Net. M-Net Africa Magic original films. I believe that it’s some of these nominations that people get to know you. When I joined them, I hadn’t done much in the market, but when they got to know about *Murder at Prime Suites* and then they saw *Secret Room*, they felt, “Oh, ok you?” Some of the people I have worked with called me up because they saw *Secret Room* and noticed that I got a nomination for Best Director. These days, people don’t call me to question if I can do it. They’ve seen that this guy has nominations.

I had gotten enough people calling me to do their jobs for them. I’m still choosy because I know right now I’m on the building stage. I need to build to a

certain level. I don't want to come to AMVCA again and not get a trophy, and if I need to get a trophy, I need to do content that will give me a trophy.

I want to be called a controversial director. I'm passionate about doing things that are quite different. One thing I never wanted to do is to follow the crowd. I don't want to compete with anybody. The best competition is with yourself. Try and be better than your last job. And once you focus on anybody's work and you want to replicate it, then you will be competing amiss, you will be lost. I just want to compete with myself and the way to compete with myself is to find those pertinent issues that I am passionate about, discuss it and tell the story the way I feel it, just like I did in *Secret Room*.

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