

AFRICAN FILM DISTRIBUTION IN THE UNITED STATES: ASSESSMENT AND PROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

Distribution remains one of the main challenges facing African cinema. Reaching domestic and international audiences is difficult despite the promise of digital technological innovations over the last fifteen years. In fact, scholarship on African film distribution in the United States is currently scarce and limited to a few contributions in articles. These articles have included “African Cinema in the American Video Market” by Cornelius Moore (1992); “La construction identitaire par le cinéma: diaspora africaine aux États-Unis” by Boukary Sawadogo (2017); “Evolving Nollywood Templates for Minor Transnational Film” by Moradewun Adejunmobi (2014); and *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* a monograph by Jonathan Haynes (2016). Yet, the distribution of African films in the United States should be the subject of more sustained scholarly attention, as the market is expanding with diverse African diasporic communities increasing in the country that is home to Hollywood. African films are distributed in North America through four channels: the festival circuit; independent distributors; informal circuits (pirated copies of DVDs sold in subway stations and African stores); and online platforms (Amazon, Netflix, YouTube, Vimeo, irokoTV, etc.). African cinema has to cultivate a niche in a market that is not only dominated by Hollywood big budget productions, but also where other films from around the world compete for visibility.

THE ARGUMENT

In discussing film as art or business, Bordwell and Thompson (2013) note that, eighty percent of the world’s distribution circuits are dominated by Hollywood companies such as Warner Bros., Universal, Columbia, Twentieth Century Fox, and Paramount (p. 34). Concretely, this means that a movie that is not (co)produced with one of those Hollywood companies faces an uphill battle in terms of international distribution through theatrical releases. However, Hollywood studios’ dominant position in distribution is challenged by the expanding reach of online distribution platforms and “the multiplication of screens” (Barlet 2016, p. 344), with portable electronic

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devices currently shaping how images are consumed. For other cinematic traditions and practices such as Bollywood and Nollywood, their popular and commercial success hinges not only on the domestic market but also on the international audience. In this regard, Nollywood has developed several transnationalisation initiatives such as Nollywood Week in Paris, launched in 2013, cable and satellite broadcasting on M-NET's Africa Magic channel, and the Filmmakers Association of Nigeria, USA, a project intended to organise the American market and encourage crossover projects (Haynes 2016, p. 237). A deeper reflection on the distribution of African cinema in the United States is needed to help locate opportunities for consolidation and growth, considering the large African diaspora living in the country and consuming audio-visual content from Africa (Sawadogo 2017, p. 89). In addition, the multiplication of screens offers US-based academics alternate lines of inquiry in their production of scholarship on African cinema, which African audio-visual professionals could also use as a marketing tool in targeting American consumers.

In his article entitled "African Cinema in the American Video Market", Cornelius Moore (1992) interrogates the place of African cinema in the United States by asking:

How can one of the least known and most under-funded cinemas in the world, African cinema, find a place in the most lavishly promoted and capitalized media marketplaces on earth, the US feature film market? (p. 38)

A quarter of a century later, I would like to pose the same question again regarding the accessibility to African films. In an attempt to answer this interrogation, I assess the current state of African film distribution in the United States, focusing on the festival and academic circuits as the two main channels, and offer a prospective analysis of how streaming and downloading platforms will shape access to African movies. Given the relative dearth of scholarship on African film distribution in the United States, I hope this assessment will offer African audio-visual professionals and interested parties some insights into the US market.

In her book *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals*, Lindiwe Dovey (2015) examines African film festivals as a distribution channel for the continent's productions within the larger context of the global market. In addition to the historical and contextual background, Dovey's (2015) study rests on the dichotomy between African film festivals in Africa, such as Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage and Fespaco (p. 95), and those regularly held in Europe and North America, including Festival des trois continents, New York African Film Festival, and Vues d'Afrique (p. 111). Despite the emergence of local festivals in West Africa within the last fifteen₂₂

years such as Festival du Film Documentaire de Blitta (Togo), Festival International du Film de Ouidah (Benin), Festival de Film Ciné Droit Libre (Burkina Faso), and Gorée Cinéma Festival (Senegal), the Western-based African film festivals still retain an overwhelming power of attraction for many filmmakers. Internet-based film festivals currently being experimented with in the West are still embryonic on the continent because of infrastructural constraints, particularly connectivity and data issues with regard to streaming and downloading.

On the other hand, the greater appeal of African film festivals in the global North may be attributed to the desire for international exposure outside the continent and the increasingly transnational nature of the working and living spaces of these filmmakers. As most of the funding sources are located in Europe and North America, the festival circuit represents a channel for international recognition that filmmakers hope to translate into distribution contracts for DVD releases, and that offers networking opportunities for the funding of future projects. In contrast to the second generation of African filmmakers such as Mali's Souleymane Cissé or Burkina Faso's Idrissa Ouédraogo, who live and work on the continent, the contemporary generation of directors operates literally and figuratively in trans-national spaces, as is the case for Abderrahmane Sissako, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Jean-Marie Teno, Mahamat Saleh Haroun, Dani Kouyaté, and Alain Gomis. As they live and work between Africa, Europe and America, participation at independent festivals dedicated to African or world cinema is perceived as an expression or extension of their 'transnationality'.

As for the festival circuit, independent and Black film festivals constitute the main gateways to the American market for African filmmakers. Other informal distribution channels for African films in the United States are predominantly geared toward the diaspora (Haynes 2016, p. 238). However, I have opted not to focus on them because of the lack of reliable data on their reception despite their contributing undeniably to the dissemination of African films to a diverse spectatorship. African films are regularly screened at independent festivals such as Sundance Film Festival (Sawadogo [2017] 'Africa at Sundance 2014'), New York African Film Festival, Tribeca Film Festival, Ann Arbor Film Festival, Chicago International Film Festival, and African Diaspora International Film Festival. Because of the international scope of their line-up and the mission to promote independent productions, independent festivals have proven to be hospitable terrain for enhancing the visibility of African films. In addition to independent festivals, Black film festivals or festivals devoted to Black cinema have also served as a promotional vehicle for African films entering the US market. In fact, the lines between independent and Black film festivals are often blurred, as is for instance in the case of the New York African Film Festival, Image Nation,

Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) African Festival, New Voices in Black Cinema, and Africa World Documentary Film Festival.

There is an apparent contradiction between African directors' reliance on the niche of Black cinema festivals as entry points into the US market and their efforts to be identified as filmmakers in the broadest sense rather than being ghettoised in the African or Black categories at festivals. This apparent contradiction points to the larger issue of defining the global positionality of African cinema within world or international mainstream cinema. In this regard, academics have to (re)imagine new global analytical frameworks to study African cinema beyond those of 'Third Cinema' and black transnational cultural movements such as decolonisation, black arts movement or British black arts movement.

In addition to the festival circuit, academe represents another major diffusion channel through the teaching and scholarship of US-based African film scholars. As Adejunmobi (2016, p. 127) observes, "In the United States, one is more likely to find one scholar or two working on Africa in departments of history, anthropology, and literature (English, French, Portuguese, and Comparative Literature)." However, Adejunmobi (2016) is quick to highlight the small number of Africa scholars working in media-related departments (p. 128). Their teaching and research interests ensure a continued academic investigation of African cultural expressions, including cinema. In this regard, African directors are regularly invited to campuses and meetings of professional organisations such as the African Studies Association (ASA) and the African Literature Association (ALA) for screening and discussion of their works. For the filmmakers, invitations to US campuses and professional organisations represent recognition but also a means for promotion outside the festival circuit. Examples range from the pioneering figure Sembene Ousmane to contemporary filmmakers such as Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Jean-Marie Teno, Joseph Gaï Ramaka, Wanuri Kahiu, and Fanta Regina Nacro.

For purposes of teaching and research, scholars rely on DVD releases of African films by independent distributors, of which California Newsreel has been a main actor for a long time until recently, when its Library of African Cinema project ceased acquiring new titles. East coast independent distributors such as ArtMattan, Women Make Movies, Kino, Icarus, Milestone, and Documentary Educational Resources also have a longstanding tradition of serving the academic market by releasing African films on DVDs. However, a close examination of catalogue offerings on their websites show that each of these independent distributors acquires on average three or four African titles per year. In addition, the interests of the distributors do not always coincide with the filmmakers', as they first tend to acquire only films that are likely to make profit while the latter would want all their productions to be made available to the largest audience in possibly different formats. Thus, an₂₄

argument can be made about the limited significance of the impact of these DVD releases by academic oriented independent distributors on the larger issue of distribution facing the African cinema. Nevertheless, the role of interface played by these distributors should not be dismissed, especially in a context where the academic market is not growing fast enough and university libraries are facing budget cuts. As such, new distribution platforms and channels need to be explored to harness fully the potential spectatorship among the Black diaspora and other niches in the United States. Reaching this potential spectatorship will not only bridge the Atlantic divide between African and diasporaic audio-visual storytellers by creating opportunities of collaboration but will also expose African cinema to a much broader audience worldwide. The resulting increased visibility and integration into mainstream cinema might offer solutions to the perennial funding and distribution challenges facing Africa's mostly independent filmmakers.

It is my contention that connectivity should guide African cinema's distribution, particularly in the current context of increasingly digital modes of production and online channels. The distribution landscape in the United States has seen the emergence of streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon video, Hulu, Vimeo, YouTube, Video on Demand on cable channels, Kanopy, Docuseek2, and African Network Television. These streaming platforms target both the public and the academic market. The streaming channels offer unparalleled competitiveness because African movies can be on multiple platforms, accessible from anywhere in the world. In fact, a quick YouTube search on African films yields a sizeable list of movies available for free streaming, though some of them are illegal posts.

This constitutes a start in the appropriation process of online distribution but there must be a movement for a significant change to happen. Contrary to the infrastructural constraints in Africa, the United States offers relatively conducive technical conditions for setting up the platforms, leaving the question of accessibility on the continent unresolved. In this regard, a downloading platform may be more compatible with Africa's current situation because streaming would require uninterrupted, high bandwidth connections that are not presently available in many locations on the continent. The emerging online distribution platforms channels could potentially cause changes in filmmaking practices, including the length of creative works (short films and serialization of productions). Other changes concern how African filmmakers should be better equipped legally to address copyrights issues that are likely to arise. By definition, distribution of cultural products is about ceding rights over one's work for a given amount of time and within agreed territorial boundaries. Online distribution, by its inherently global nature, raises issues of distribution rights and contracts.

In conclusion, from the Rockefeller Foundation's launch of the National Video Resources (NVR) initiative in 1990, which initially funded the Library of African Cinema project at California Newsreel (Moore 1992, p. 39), to the distribution today of African titles by a small number of independent distributors, African cinema is still on the margins in the United States. Internet-based distribution has benefits for a minor cinema like the African moving image arts to gain more visibility in the context of an industry dominated by Hollywood, but it is not a panacea for the complex issue of African cinema distribution. African filmmakers will need to pool their resources by, for example, setting up joint ventures or collaborating on the most cost-effective distribution framework to promote their films. As online distribution platforms continue to expand in numbers and reach, African audiovisual professionals will greatly benefit from further research on viewership, reception and distribution to better position themselves in an increasingly global digital market. Therefore, the research on global distribution networks will not only aid African producers and directors in devising effective marketing strategies but will also produce knowledge that contributes to a better understanding of complex issues such as identity affirmation, cultural politics, and the economics of global circulation of images.

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