

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Pierre Barrot. *Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. xii + 147 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22117-9.

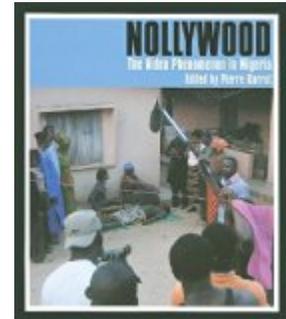
Franco Sacchi, dir. *This is Nollywood.* Produced by Franco Sacchi and Robert Caputo. San Francisco: California Newsreel, 2007. 56 minutes. DVD.

Dorothee Wenner. *Nollywood Lady.* New York: Women Make Movies, 2008. 52 minutes / color.

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Evaluating Resources on Nollywood: Where to Begin?

For the past two decades “Nollywood” (as the industry is popularly known) has flooded the African continent with its own brand of movies. Scholars concerned with cultural developments in Africa have struggled to assess the importance of the rapid rise of the video industry because scholarly materials about the industry are few. Teachers who want to incorporate these popular narratives into classroom teaching about Africa find the videos difficult to integrate into an established curriculum.

There are many practical obstacles to teaching about Nollywood. The first is the sheer volume of material. Nigeria produces more movies every three weeks than African celluloid filmmakers produced in three decades. The quality of the Nigerian titles is uneven and every “box office hit” generates legions of hastily made knock-offs. Without a corpus of reviews or canon-building scholarship, the task of sorting the important movies from the junk is daunting. In addition, the movie narratives are resolutely indigenous. They assume an African audience with a cultural background appropriate to follow subtle references to sociocultural specifics of life in Africa. Thus, for non-African audiences the movies may be culturally opaque and confusing.

Most of the scholarly literature on Nollywood to date has taken the form of academic journal articles and conference proceedings. These materials are diverse, and usually too advanced in approach or specialized in focus to be appropriate for classroom teaching. However, the works examined in this review—*This is Nollywood*, produced by Franco Sacchi and Robert Caputo (2007), along with Pierre Barrot’s edited book *Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria* (2008) and Dorothee Wenner’s video *Nollywood Lady* (2008)—approach Nollywood at an introductory level. My primary goal is to assess their potential as resources for teaching about Nollywood.

Pierre Barrot’s book, *Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria*, has some strengths in this regard. The book is idiosyncratic in form—Barrot wrote the first six chapters; the following eight are by other authors. Brief reviews of relatively important Nollywood movies, fourteen in all, are placed between each chapter. The logic underlying this organization is not readily apparent. The movie reviews, though cursory, are welcome because teachers have little to work with when it comes to contextualizing Nollywood movies for students. In addition, it is difficult for teachers to locate specific Nollywood titles, and Barrot wisely chose to review titles that

are not only popular, but also likely to be available from major vendors.

Barrot's description of specific films, however, makes up only a small part of the book, most of which is devoted to placing Nollywood in a broader context of postcolonial political economy and culture. To Barrot's credit, he devotes a chapter to the importance of understanding Nollywood's location in Africa's informal sector, and the way that economic informality shapes and limits the production, financing, and distribution of Nollywood movies. He also devotes a chapter to reviewing the small body of reliable statistical data that exists on this largely undocumented industry. I emphasize "reliable" since rigorously compiled statistical data on Nollywood is scarce because of the informal character of finance in the video movie industry. As a result, the research literature is awash in what I call "folk statistics"—casual estimates gleaned from interviews that acquire a false sense of validity as they are repeatedly quoted and cited. Though the book offers little new data for those already familiar with Nollywood studies, the chapters focused on the economics of the industry and statistical data are quite useful for anyone researching Nollywood.

Although Barrot is admirably careful when vetting the factual data he reports, he has more trouble keeping his distinctly Gallic opinions about film in check. He is a journalist and cannot resist dramatizing the consternation that Nollywood movies cause among French film critics, many of whom regard film as an art form that reached its aesthetic pinnacle in French high-art cinema. However, this cultural drama is likely to miss the mark with students who do not share this perspective. Barrot's reverence for celluloid film over video and his categorical disdain for Hollywood movies may require additional explanation in English-speaking classrooms.

In Barrot's prose, glib quotes become sensational chapter titles, beginning with the first chapter: "Video is the AIDS of the Film Industry." This quote from Jean Rouch predates the existence of Nollywood, and is typical of the kind of journalistic flair that weakens the book for non-French readers. Most American students won't readily understand why Nigerian filmmakers who draw inspiration from Hollywood rather than French auteur cinema are so obviously a cause for dismay. The culture of elite French cinema is as foreign to many students as the logic of African witchcraft practices. Thus for the uninitiated, Barrot adds another layer of cultural translation to the teaching project. In sum, the book is probably not an ideal resource for teaching about Nollywood.

Fortunately, video documentaries come to the rescue. Although books about Nollywood are rare, documentaries on the topic are becoming plentiful. Though some are better than others, I am pleased to say that I consider both of the documentaries I am reviewing here to be excellent tools for classroom use. *This is Nollywood* presents a fairly accurate picture of Nollywood in its developing years. While the film includes interviews with many major players in the industry, most of the footage is devoted to documenting the production of a single movie, *Checkpoint* (2008), an action film directed by Bond Emeruwa. By following the movie's production from auditions to final edit, the documentary conveys a vivid sense of the daily struggles of Nigerian movie production and the indefatigable spirit of the artists and entrepreneurs who make it happen against the odds. *This is Nollywood* artfully avoids the urge to sensationalize, a problem that plagues the Nollywood documentary genre. We are spared the hyperbole about the dangers of Lagos and the chaos of Nigerian society. The result is a solid film that believes in the inherent value of the industry it documents and does not feel the need to push the narrative forward with self-aggrandizing representations of risk. *This is Nollywood* also manages to create a vivid sense of Nollywood as culture. By this I mean that the film helps the viewer understand how Nollywood engages the lives of Nigerians, both producing popular narratives with indigenous roots and generating a proud sense of cultural ownership as an industry that employs thousands. It would be hard to find a better means of introducing Nollywood.

That said, Dorothee Wenner's excellent documentary *Nollywood Lady* takes the project considerably further. In addition to providing an introduction to Nollywood's unique methods of production, *Nollywood Lady* digs even deeper into Nollywood's crucial position in Nigerian culture and society. The film features movie producer Peace Anyiam-Fibresima, who also makes a cameo appearance in *This is Nollywood*. She is a major player in the movie industry and, with her own weekly talk show on broadcast television, a celebrity by any measure. Amyiam-Fibresima is the titular "Nollywood Lady" and she provides us with a grand tour of the industry, introducing us to an impressive line-up of major Nollywood professionals along the way. The central concern of this documentary is the social role of Nollywood as an industry and as a cultural voice for African development. We hear from several representatives of the informal amalgam of guilds and professional associations that are Nollywood's collectivist alternative to Hollywood's highly centralized

and vertically integrated studio system.

Like so many African artists, Amyiam-Fibresima identifies her project in pan-African terms: “The need to tell Africa’s story is my biggest mission.” One African story that gets her attention is the exploitation of the Niger Delta peoples by the predatory practices of major oil companies and the Nigerian government. Antiquated reified notions of culture fall away as the documentary explicates the complex place of media in the play of tradition and social transformation in Nigeria. Culture is not treated as a “thing” by which Nollywood’s representations can be measured for authenticity. In *Nollywood Lady* we see the complex and unfolding phenomenon of popular video production in Nigeria as a vibrant example

of culture-in-process.

In conclusion, both documentary films reviewed here are excellent choices for instructional purposes, and both could be used in the same class without redundancy. The utility of Barrot’s *Nollywood*, on the other hand, is limited. While his consolidation of statistical data and some key previously published articles makes it a handy resource for any serious Nollywood researcher, the book does little to advance scholarship on the subject. Ultimately, Barrot frets too much about the artistic merit of Nollywood, and that undermines the more interesting things he has to say about the video industry’s social impact, and the way the video movie industry is transforming the mediascape in Africa.

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