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Gender stereotypes and reconstruction: a feminist appraisal of Nigerian video films

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This paper posits that the video film, a popular art form in Nigeria, should initiate a new image and foster the empowerment of women, rather than merely reflecting the damaging traditions within society. Traditionally, a woman's role is that of a subordinate to man, and women are restricted to a very narrow domain. This is reflected in the film media by means of a portrayal and projection of negative female stereotypes, which furthers the wrong socialisation of the female in society. Negative stereotypes are reflected particularly in some of the thematic concerns, including prostitution, adultery, jealousy and crime. In the context of film's having become one of the most powerful agents of change within society, this study provides an interpretative evaluation of the Nigerian video film industry and advocates that the battle against stereotyping must necessarily be fought by adopting a tripartite approach, at the levels of ideology, film-making and film criticism.

Les stéréotypes du genre et la reconstruction: une appréciation féministe du vidéofilm nigérian

Cette étude postule que le vidéo film nigérian, une forme d'art populaire au Nigéria, initie une iconographie nouvelle et encourage la promotion de la femme, plutôt que d'être un thermomètre qui reflète tout simplement des traditions nuisibles dans la société. Traditionnellement, le rôle de la femme est vu comme étant subordonné à celui de l'homme. Ce rôle limite la femme à une place très exiguë au sein de la société; et ceci se reflète dans le genre filmique à travers un portrait et une projection de stéréotypes négatifs de la femme, qui contribue à faire avancer une socialisation inacceptable de la femme dans la société. Les stéréotypes négatifs dans les films nigérians se reflètent dans quelques-uns des préoccupations thématiques poursuivies dans les films. Ces thèmes comprennent la prostitution, l'adultère, la jalousie, le crime et quelques autres. Le genre filmique est devenu un des acteurs de changement les plus puissants au sein de la société. Cette étude fournit une évaluation interprétative de l'industrie cinématographique nigérianne et préconise que la lutte contre les stéréotypes dans les films nigérians doit forcément être engagée en adoptant une approche tripartite. Elle doit se faire au niveau de l'idéologie, de la production de films, et de la critique cinématographique.

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> For a woman to look at her life, she must look at powerlessness, she must, that is, choose decisively to confront what has been happening to her as a passive creature and try actively to understand what it means and has meant (Janeway 1979: 346).

Socialisation is the process by means of which human beings, and, by extension, society, become endued with the ability for companionship with others and are made sociable. Over the years, Nigerian society has been "socialised" to hold certain erroneous beliefs about the person and functions of women in society. Consequently, the gender environment in Nigeria has been quite disproportionately tilted in favour of men. Women have been seen as mothers of men, daughters of men, wives/mistresses of men or sisters of men. They are hardly seen as viable characters in their own right. Women's voices are seldom heard, even when issues that directly concern them are to be discussed. More often than not, the female voices that are heard are lone ones in the patriarchal wilderness. The role of women has also mainly been assigned as the biblical "hewers of wood and fetchers of water". To exacerbate matters, the electronic mass media sometimes championed this derogatory image of the African woman. This has partly been done through the portrayal of negative stereotypical images of women, including witch, termagant, whore, subordinate to men, the low-income worker, the actress playing a supportive role to the actor, and so on.

It is distressing to find that even female producers champion such damaging stereotypes. The reason is that producers tend to pander to the box office; the film must sell and purchasing power lies more with men. This paper will argue that the video film, a popular art form in Nigeria, should be thermostatic, initiating a new image and fostering the empowerment of women, as opposed to serving as a thermometer, merely reflecting damaging traditions within society — even if the latter does make more money. There is a need for consciousness-raising among female producers to help them understand who they are and what role they ought to play in furthering the feminist agenda. In this article the discourse is approached in terms of Carol Boyce Davies's African feminist theoretical framework for analysing African literature. According to Davies, a true African feminism is a hybrid, combining African concerns with feminist concerns. African feminism recognises certain affinities with international feminism, while taking cognisance

of specific issues arising out of the concrete realities of women's lives in African societies (Davies 1986: 1-23; Petty 1995: 141).

Some of the video films produced in Nigeria will be examined in this study and a feminist reading of them will be attempted. This interpretative evaluation is intended to bring to the fore the media image of the Nigerian woman, and an endeavour will be made to pinpoint ways in which this image may be improved. According to Hunt (1991: 334), by its nature, an interpretative evaluation may not change opinion overnight, but it may be helpful in changing the framework through which events are viewed. Apart from the interpretative evaluation, a case will also be made in this study for re-socialisation and remobilisation of the society through feminist film aesthetics in order to make a positive change.

1. The sociology of film and the woman question

The social function of science by J D Bernal was published in 1939. Its central theme was that "science should serve human welfare". Macrae (1976: xi) is also of the opinion that social scientists should make positive contributions to social diagnosis and prescription, emphasising that such contributions should be guided by clear notions of social health, which translates to ethical criteria. In the same vein, film sociologists have made specific claims about the functions of film. An American film critic, Gene Youngblood (1979: 754-60) believes that film expands the audience's consciousness. This implies that audiences, through watching films, tend to understand their society better and that the films stir them up to action to participate in issues concerning society. This is further borne out by Freud and Marx's sentiments, as cited by the editors of *Cahier du cinéma* (Mast & Cohen 1979: 778- 831), who believe that every film is part of the ideological superstructure, reflecting the ideology of the society that produces it. This may either confirm the effectiveness and propriety of the ideology or provide an internal criticism of such it.

The whole idea of film as it affects society may be summarised by the Marxist critic Walter Benjamin's (1979: 848-70) assertion that the traditional role of art has changed. Rather than absorbing its beholders, it is absorbed by them. This absorption of a film's content by an audience

then effects a reaction, which should affect society in a positive way (if the message is positive). Film has become one of the most powerful agents of change within society. This is not unconnected with its form, which enables it to reach a mass audience and also to simulate reality. Kaufmann acknowledges that the film form is quite apt for tackling many of the pressing questions of our time. These include an inner state of tension, doubt or apathy. The film, according to Kaufmann (1969: 58),

> ... can externalise some physical matters that, for example, the theatre cannot easily deal with, and it can relate them to the physical environment in a manner that the theatre cannot contain, nor the novel quite duplicate.

This places a special responsibility on the shoulders of media dramatists.

Traditionally, woman is seen as subordinate to man. Women are regarded as incapable of performing roles that require a great deal of intelligence. Such retrogressive traditional values are not confined to Africa alone, but can be found in almost every human society. For instance, in Illinois in the year 1873, Justice Bradley pronounced that:

> The natural and proper timidity, which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life. The constitution of the family organization, which is founded in the divine ordinance, as well as in the nature of things; indicates the domestic sphere as that which properly belongs to the domain and functions of womanhood (Obilade 1983: 2-3).

This indeed is a backward view. It limits women to a very narrow place within society, and this is reflected in the film media through the portrayal and projection of female stereotypes. It is a popular but unconfirmed assertion that females comprise more than fifty percent of the world's population (Abiola 1986: 7, 18). It is a confirmed fact, however, that the role of women in society is changing. Today's women are better educated and participate in diverse spheres of society hitherto regarded as male preserves. Therefore, it has become important that the image of the "stereotype woman" be dropped from the film medium and that film-makers be encouraged consciously to assist in presenting woman as she is and enabling her to perform her role in development.

2. Methodological framework

The battle against stereotyping in Nigerian film must be fought by adopting a tripartite approach, at the levels of ideology, film-making and film criticism. It is the social ideology that feeds the film content, and the film-makers bring the ideology to life. Film critics contribute greatly to the way the films are viewed, by either consenting to the images as presented or by raising a voice of dissent, to encourage a critical or oppositional gaze. It becomes important therefore to cultivate critical aesthetics as allies in the battle. The film theorist and critic Maggie Humm (1977: 5) describes this process as

> ... a double agenda: the task of critique — attacking gender stereotypes and the task of construction, sometimes called feminist praxis — constructing new models.

Another film theorist, Sue Thornham (1999: 10) has described feminist film theory as an urgent political act. According to her, without theoretical tools one cannot begin to transform existing myths and practices. These existing myths and practices are social constructs. Unfortunately, in many African societies, including Nigeria, patriarchal ideology determines social constructs, including the concepts of "masculine" and "feminine", and also oversees the process of learning to be "masculine" or "feminine". Film has been used as an instrument of patriarchy over the years. It has helped to maintain the *status quo*, which in this context means male superiority. This is largely because men have been behind and in control of the movie camera in more ways than one — physically, economically and ideologically. African men, more than women, possess the capital and the means of production. The class dichotomy and unequal status which have made the African woman poorer, less educated and disempowered have also made her a victim in film portrayals. She has no means of drawing a portrait of herself through film. What she sees on film is an image she cannot recognise — a figment of the imagination of the male.

Feminist film theory is a derivative of the real lived experiences of women. The manifesto for feminist film criticism might read something like the following declaration in the editorial of the journal *Women and Film*:

> The women in this magazine, as part of the women's movement, are aware of the political, psychological, and social and economic oppression of women. The struggle begins on all fronts and we are taking up the struggle with women's image in film and women's roles in the film industry — the ways in which we are exploited and the ways to transform the derogatory and immoral attitudes the ruling class and their male lackys [*sic*] have towards women and other oppressed peoples (Thornham 1999: 9).

This quotation indicates that the battle lines are drawn on the levels of both participation and portrayal. Maggie Humm, too, states that feminist film theory deals with every aspect of a woman's life — her sexuality, work and family, and so forth. This focus is designed to challenge traditional frameworks of knowledge and question traditional assumptions such as the "universalism" which upholds biological universals (Humm 1997: 5). Delyse Ryan (2004: 3) also debunks the "biological" agenda, describing this as

> … a mythical system, which our society arbitrarily grafts onto the biological men/women or male/female. This is a case of ideology forced on to biology.

Ryan argues further that because of this negative system, the image of women on the stage (and of course on the screen) is always opposite, always contrary, always inferior — and, we might also add, always patronising. She provides this diagram for further illustration:

Masculine	Feminine
Power	Weak
Superiority	Inferior
It is more privileged	It is not an equal duality — this is where oppression steps in.
It is defined as not being feminine (therefore, it's very important to remember that the feminine is needed to define the masculine).	The feminine helps to define the masculine by contrast.

The feminine column presents emotions and ascriptions imposed on female characters in patriarchal films.

These ascriptions succeed in obscuring the real woman. "Feminists are of the opinion that obscuring what women experience is the genesis of oppression" (Canning 1996: 39). This obscuring tendency is

clear in the activities of the male bourgeoisie who make films in Nigeria. The stories of women are not told from a woman's point of view. Rather, what we see on screen are not women, but figments of the imagination of men — women as men perceive them, or as men would rather have them be — pure male constructs. It is not surprising that women cannot bond with such characters; they are caricatures, aliens who strike no familiar chord in the mind of real women. This has necessitated the theory of the oppositional gaze as developed by the writer bell hooks. The foundation for the theory arose from what hooks describes as "the absence of black female presence and [the] insertion of violating representation" (hooks 1999: 313). In developing this theory, hooks (1999: 317) says:

> Critical black female spectatorship emerges as a site of resistance only when individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking [...] We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions. As critical spectators, black women participate in a broad range of looking relations [...] contest, resist, revise, interrogate and invent on multiple levels.

This oppositional gaze is very necessary if the Nigerian female audience and critics are to become determinants of box-office success and contributors to the formation of a feminist aesthetics of the Nigerian film.

Nigerian feminist film criticism should focus on the theory of consciousness-raising, which gained currency in the 1960s and encouraged women to make meaning of their lives by means of a clearer understanding of the operation of oppression. It led to the formation of discussion groups in which women shared their stories and interpreted them politically. Such focused group discussions helped the women to understand both their own lives and socio-political issues better. This has been described as a process of politicisation and identity construction, in which the personal becomes political. This paper seeks to initiate a feminist reading of Nigerian video film and to encourage the development of an oppositional gaze with a view to developing a feminist aesthetics of the Nigerian film.

3. The stereotype

A stereotype is a hasty generalisation — a conventional and oversimplified characterisation of a group of people. This implies the presence of prejudice because such opinions are based on insufficient or unexamined evidence (Fowler *et al* 1989: 141). According to Ornstein & Carstensen (1991: 612), prejudice arises from the human process of simplifying issues by sorting them into categories. When categories become overextended, they become stereotypes — a generalised assumption attributing identical characteristics to all members of a group.

Allport agrees that there might be a grain of truth in such stereotyping. However, he contends that it is not possible to assume that most members of any large group possess any trait one may conjure up. This is the type of unkind categorisation visited upon the heads of women in creative works, which transcends the form found on screen. Film furthers the wrong socialisation of the female in society. If a female, a girl child, in particular, sees herself portrayed in such negative stereotypes on a consistent basis, she begins to believe that the filmic image is the appropriate portrayal. She may even make attempts to fit this negative screen image. According to Burns (1979), the keystone of the self-concept is being male or female. Psyhosocial attributes do not necessarily match biological ones. The relationship is learnt, not innate; it is culture bound. Something has to be done to resocialise society on the subject matter, and film can help in this resocialisation.

Over the years, the film medium has put the woman in firm pigeonholes and built false images around her. In this regard, the Venezuelan Televén presenter and human rights activist Marta Colonina de Rivera submits that the television image of women is far from realistic. Consequently, the problems faced by women are swept under the carpet as if they do not exist. In such a situation, such problems cannot be pragmatically addressed. Rivera has stated that there are two images of women in the Latin American setting:

> The 'mythical' one presented by the media, and the other, the real one of lower- and middle-class women […] the real women are exploited, unhappy, chained to domestic chores […] whereas women as depicted by the media are mostly rich… women for whom work is a game or entertainment. And if a woman is depicted by the media as poor, she must be beautiful, her beauty enhancing her status. The poor woman in film or television has only one preoccupation; how

> to keep the man she loves, love being the universal panacea that sa-
> tisfactorily solves all economic and emotional problems (Richardson
> 1981: 94).

This kind of fare is used to present escapist entertainment for women, and to salve the conscience of the oppressor or dominant male in society. However, this will not help to solve the female problem in society. Essentially, men are the actors on television, while women are acted upon. Males are aggressive and rewarded for their behaviour; females are deferential and ignored, unless they are assertive, in which case they are punished (Richardson 1981: 94).

On the Nigerian theatre scene, Charles Uji (1991: 2) describes most portrayals of females in Nigerian plays as absurdly unrealistic. According to him, most of them

> … depict the woman as a naïve, romantic figure whose spheres of interest
> and capability are neatly detached from the center of socio-political
> and economic activities.

Women are shown mostly in roles involving "love-making, procreativity, domestic chores, nagging, gossip, prostitution", and so on. He concludes that in the few instances where women are portrayed positively,

> … as a socio-politically active, determinate and articulate being[s], the
> morbid individualism that becomes her forte creates a tragic trap for
> her inevitable destruction (Uji 1991: 2).

This same negative outlook is present in the Nigerian film. Examples of video films on the Nigerian scene which fit Uji's description include *Girls' hostel*, *The prostitute*, and *She devil*, to mention a few. (A thematic analysis of these films will be carried out in the next section of this article.)

Many studies have shown that images of women in film are negative, disparaging and stereotypical in direct contravention of the principles of the Declaration of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 7 November 1967. The film medium re-inforces traditional attitudes about women that are counter-productive, degrading and humiliating. There is a need to reflect changing attitudes in society, with a particular focus on the changing roles of the sexes. Helvi Sipilia, the first woman to hold the rank of Assistant Secretary-General of the United

Nations, gives a further insight into the question of the female stereotype. Due to her personal experience of the weak position of women in society, she became a promoter of women's rights. According to her, there are three common stereotypes of women:

- The "dumb blonde", a woman who is laughed at by men for her lack of education, and whose sexual endowments generally place her in the "desirable" but not "marriageable" category;
- The "nice girl", the virginal woman with whom the hero falls in love and [whom he] marries. This stereotype has the qualities of a good servant: cheerfulness, dutifulness and obedience to the desires of her husband.
- The middle-class working woman who seeks to free herself from either of the previous stereotypes and who seeks, through her work, to reach parity with the male. This newly emergent type of woman is continually put in her place by the media, [which] frequently identify her as domineering, sharp tongued, unattractive and castrating (Toeplitz 1980: 57).

The first type appears in light entertainment and situation comedies. She is presented as a character to be laughed a rather than to be laughed with. A variant of this type is what Andre Bazin describes as the "pin-up girl" — a specific erotic phenomenon used as a sexual stimulus in films (Bazin 1971: 158-62) which portray women as objects with only one purpose, mainly to satisfy the lust of the male sex. The Nigerian film *Girls' hostel* is replete with such types.

The second type woman is presented against the backdrop of "home and family". She is seen as a being whose very existence depends on pleasing her husband, rearing children, housekeeping and so on. If she has a career, it has to be sacrificed on the altar of the home or secondary to the home. On the other hand, male characters are presented as possessing both a thriving home and a successful career.

The third type is a recent but unsuccessful and biased attempt to pander to the new feminist consciousness. It attempts to present the woman as quite able to hold her own in a male-dominated world and making an impact on her career, but it does so in a distorted way which implies that she is a freak, thereby arousing more suspicion than sympathy.

There is, however, another stereotype: the super-woman. There are two forms of this type. The first is what Folabo Ajayi describes as the "formidable historical women of Efunsetan and Madam Tinubu's status,

[...] tower[ing] above the ordinary woman" (Ajayi 1983: 24). Indeed, this is a super-image, more of the romantic than the realistic. One good thing about this form is its positive outlook. It celebrates womanhood, avowing the possibility of the existence of female heroes. On the other hand, we have the "bionic woman" type who successfully imitates her male counterparts — typified by *Charlie's angels.* However, there is a taint on the female characters of this form, as the journalist, Judith Coburn, points out, denouncing such portrayals:

> 'Charlie's angels' is one of the most misogynist shows the networks have produced recently. Supposedly about strong women, it perpetuates the myth most damaging to women's struggle to gain professional equality; that women always use sex to get what they want, even on the job. The programme is a version of the pimp and his girl; Charlie dispatches his street-wise girls to use their sexual wiles on the world while he reaps the profits (Toeplitz 1980: 58).

On the Nigerian scene, we have the examples of *The adulteress* and *Express ladies*. These films present women who wield tremendous extortional sexual power over males. They create a bad image of women, bringing all of them down to the level of sluts.

Another distressing manifestation of the negative stereotype is what Jean McNeil presents as the invisible woman syndrome. Here, the filmmaker tacitly ignores the presence or existence of women, who are presented in very minor roles or even as part of the décor. The absence of an image is sometimes as socially and psychologically important as a false or realistic one (UNESCO 1980: 53, 58). This is thus a very unwholesome attitude.

In the American films of the 1930s and 1940s, before and during the Second World War, women stars and heroines were popular. The situation was presented that, as the men were involved in military action, women on the home front were as important for the morale of the nation as the men on the battlefront. However, this image was superseded by the image of the "pin-up girl" after the war. From then onwards, positive screen images of women have been few and far between. Women are either absent, appear in supporting roles or as sex symbols. In catastrophe or satanic films, women are the victims while men are the fighters. These types, however, sadly create or confirm in viewers' minds the notion that women exist primarily as auxiliaries to men and that this is the natural order of things in the world (Toeplitz 1980: 58). The par-

ticipants at the UNESCO symposium on women in cinema in 1975 unequivocally affirmed:

> We […] denounce the existing images of women in the mass media, and appeal to women all over the world to carefully examine and analyze these images and to realize that they are literally living in a world of man-made images which do not resemble real women, or deal fairly with the realities of woman's experience (Toeplitz 1980: 52).

4. Some misogynist themes in Nigerian video films

4.1 Prostitution

A random sampling of Nigerian video films reveals that many directors, both male and female, are fixated on the theme of prostitution. We shall attempt an interpretative evaluation of three of these films: *Girls' hostel* (2000), *The prostitute* (2001), and *Omo empire* (*Child of the empire*, 2002).

Girls' hostel focuses on female university students. Tunica Roberts, a freshette, comes into the university as an innocent girl from a Christian home. She, however, succumbs to intense peer pressure and goes into prostitution. She later dies as a result of a ghastly motor accident. On the point of death, she confesses the truth about her terrible lifestyle to her parents.

The prostitute (2001) presents Venor, an innocent young girl, and her experiences in life. Born into a very poor family with an alcoholic father, Venor has to go and live with an aunt. While there, she kills an intending rapist in self-defence. She is sentenced to a term in prison but she escapes and goes to Lagos, where she becomes a prostitute.

Omo empire (*Child of the empire*, 2002) concerns the adventures of Bolanle, a prostitute. She meets a noble patron, Yomi, who, after hearing her life story, decides to marry her. At an early age, adverse circumstances forced Bolanle to become her family's breadwinner. In order to save the lives of her mother and her sister, she was forced to take up odd jobs. In the course of her travails, she encountered a rich man who seduced her and infected her with HIV. Throughout the film, the relationship between Yomi and Bolanle remains platonic as Yomi seeks a cure for Bolanle. However, one day when Yomi is away from home,

his friend, Ojo-Ade, rapes Bolanle. Another friend of his, Segun, taunts her for being a prostitute. Bolanle vows to get even with Segun and lures him into bed. Afterwards, she tells him that she is HIV-positive. Bolanle later commits suicide, leaving a note for Yomi, informing him of the behaviour of his friends. Ojo-Ade also commits suicide for fear of becoming HIV-positive.

4.2 Infidelity

Films in this category present cuckolded husbands who are at the mercy of unfaithful wives. *The adulteress* (2002) is a film scripted and directed by two women, Chinny Matts Chukwu and Simi Opeoluwa. It graphically presents the theme of women's infidelity. The epitome of infidelity in the film is Mary, ably supported and encouraged by another female friend, Fidel. On the flimsy excuse of not obtaining satisfaction from her conjugal union, Mary decides to seek sexual gratification in extramarital escapades. Unfortunately for her, her husband George discovers her love nest and rigs up surveillance machinery in the room. This brings to his computer, in pornographic detail, Mary's activities with her lovers, one of whom happens to be George's bosom friend, Fred. George becomes a secret avenging angel, killing off his wife's lovers one after the other. Mary becomes afraid of the strange series of coincidences which is leading to the violent deaths of all her lovers. However, her friend Fidel urges her on. Finally, the day of reckoning arrives for her as George silences her with a bullet. It seems very strange that women would write and direct such a script. It shows that box-office considerations are more important to some women than any feeling of sisterhood. The film parades explicit sexual acts, nudity, obscenity, and so forth.

Another film with the theme of infidelity is *She-devil* (undated), also produced by a woman. It portrays a young woman, Sweet, who is deported from the USA on drug peddling charges. A female lawyer, Chioma, defends her in court. On learning that Sweet has no place to live, Chioma offers her accommodation after she has been acquitted and discharged by the court. Sweet, however, proves unable to reform. She reverts to her life of debauchery and steals Chioma's boyfriend, Richard, whom she eventually marries. She subsequently goes into adulterous relationships and attempts to murder her husband. Sweet is portrayed as a very unwholesome character who had attacked her boyfriend, Johnny,

with a broken bottle and acid while she was in the USA before her deportation. After marrying Richard, she becomes vixenish, driving away all his friends and family members from their home. Ironically, when Richard is involved in an accident, which almost results in the loss of his legs, the first thought to come into Sweet's mind is how to get rid of him and inherit his vast wealth. She colludes with Richard's physiotherapist to murder him. However, the physiotherapist hands her over to the police and she ends up in jail.

4.3 Women in organised crime

Express ladies (1993) presents a bevy of young women who go into armed robbery on the flimsy excuse that the mother of one of their friends, Sewa, has been defrauded to the tune of one million Naira by a rogue, Wemmy. In a bid to recover the money, one of the girls steals her boyfriend's pistol, and Wemmy is killed. To avoid arrest, the ladies commit various other atrocities. For instance, after establishing the fact that the police Area Commander in charge of their case is a philanderer, one of the ladies, Toyin, is mandated to become his lover in order to be able to monitor his movements and leak the secrets of the police force to the girls. Another of the girls, Ore, dispossesses a total stranger of his car after he has given her a lift. Eventually, they are all arrested. However, the judge acquits and discharges them, stating that they were provoked into criminal acts because of Wemmy's behaviour. This is done in a condescending manner, as though women are not intelligent enough to be real criminals. Whatever they do, they are not supposed to have enough gumption to measure up to men.

Rituals (1997) presents a society where women are victims of organised crime or members of criminal networks. In the film the ritual activities of the vampire fraternity are demonstrated along with the relentless murder of both innocent and not-so-innocent girls in order to obtain satanic powers. The film commences with a state governor who hires some thugs to invade a female hostel and kidnap a young virgin, who is eventually murdered for ritual purposes. Another young girl, Obi, acts as a courier for the cult. Her car is stopped at a police checkpoint, and two freshly decapitated human heads are discovered in the boot. She becomes another victim of the cult, as she is murdered in police custody before she can reveal the identity of her bosses. Finally,

Lady F is introduced. She is an active member of the cult who procures girls for other cult members for ritual purposes. She enlists the help of her young sister, Tessy, a university undergraduate, who lures two of her friends and presents them to Lady F. The girls are eventually sold off for ritual purposes. The female image presented in this film is pathetic. Women are shown as falling prey to the lures of unscrupulous men, while also being perpetrators of evil themselves.

4.4 Women as jealous beings

Some Nigerian films present women as totally mindless and senseless, due to their penchant for jealousy. It is implied that jealousy is an emotion which women are incapable of handling. *Owu* (1998) is a story of abject jealousy in the life of a woman called Demi. In this film two common problems are dealt with: the absentee husband and the two-timing husband. Demi's husband, Deji, has been away in London for years; leaving Demi and her twin children at home in Nigeria. All entreaties for him to return fall on deaf ears. Out of desperation, Demi consults fetish priests for occult aid to bring Deji home. In the end, Deji returns but dies prematurely.

During the obsequies, a woman and a child arrive from London, claiming to be Deji's wife and child. Demi cannot contain her anger and jealousy at Deji's betrayal. She takes her two children inside, administers a poisoned drink to them and takes some herself. The children die, but she is rescued and rushed to hospital. Instead of showing the villain, the errant husband Deji, as being punished and blamed for his duplicity, the producers shift the blame onto the head of the poor betrayed wife, Demi. At the end of the film, nobody remembers to blame Deji. The ire of the audience is aimed against poor Demi, who botches her suicide attempt and will be forced to face the wrath of the law for murdering her twins.

Another film featuring the theme of jealousy is *Agbo Odaju* (1996). This film presents a polygamous situation. Chief Dele Johnson has recently married for the second time. His new wife is Bimpe, a young business administration graduate, who now manages his business affairs. His first wife, Yinka, feels threatened because her husband no longer gives her adequate attention. Yinka also believes that if Dele Johnson could have his way, he would give all his property to Bimpe. Yinka

consequently hires some thugs to kill her husband. After much investigation, she is arrested and brought to book by the police. In the film, Yinka is portrayed as a rich woman in her own right. However, the film reveals her as being insatiable and jealous, with both these passions moving her to commit murder.

4.5 Summation

The films analysed above all exploit the image of women. The women in the films are all exploited by men. They are used as objects to satisfy the sexual lusts of both the men depicted in the films as well as those watching them. Laura Mulvey has described this as the scopophilic instinct. The term scopophilic was used by Freud to describe the process of looking at another human being as an erotic object. The film utilises three types of gaze:

> [...] the camera, usually operated by a man, looking at women as objects; the look of the male actors within the film, which is structured to make the gaze powerful; and the gaze of the spectator, who is presumed to be male, voyeuristically identifying with the camera/ actor gazing at women represented in fetishistic and stereotypical ways (Humm 1997: 14).

The explicit sex scenes in some of the films reduce them to the level of pornography. The way in which the women are garbed in the films is used to promote voyeurism. Women are presented as immoral, seldom refusing men's amorous advances, particularly when money is to be obtained from them.

Moreover, the men in these women's lives either betray them or they themselves betray all the men who come their way. Betrayal by men is seen in the case of Venor, who is betrayed by her father and later by her boyfriend, who turned out to be an armed robber. A woman betraying men is exemplified by Sweet, who betrays her husband Richard and her boyfriend Johnny. The film producers fail to allow the women a chance of living virtuous lives. Venor is left with no choice, faced as she is with such intense problems. No option is left to her but to become a prostitute. Tunica might have turned over a new leaf if she had been allowed to live. However, the scriptwriter kills her off at the point of her atonement. Bolanle could have become a good wife to Yomi, but she has been irredeemably tainted with HIV and eventually kills

herself. Finally, the women themselves are likewise portrayed as having no regard for each other. Chioma, who helped Sweet by defending her in court and giving her a roof over her head, later becomes hostile. Sweet steals her benefactress's boyfriend.

The women are shown throughout as quarrelling with one another because of money, men, position, and so on. The films thus send negative signals to society. The negative portrayal of women in Nigerian films is a result of their situation in Nigerian society. To this end, the video film serves as a reflection of social circumstances. The diverse negative social attitudes reflected in these films include polygamy, which sometimes leads to the "wicked stepmother" phenomenon or to jealousy in polygamous households, prostitution, witchcraft and a host of other anomalies. Nigerian producers should instead be encouraged not to reflect negative stereotypes, but to become agents for change in society.

5. Conclusion: the challenge of change

It is certain that the negative image of women presented in and through film constitutes a major obstacle to eradicating discrimination against women and perpetuates traditional sexist attitudes. There is a crucial need for change. The fact that the film industry projects such morbid stereotypes may not be unconnected with the fact that men are usually at the helm of affairs in film production and decision-making. The feminist film critic Claire Johnston has coined the term "counter-cinema" to challenge the sway of the dominant patriarchy in the film industry, and suggested that feminist critics need to go beyond scrutinising images to an interrogation of the process of film production. Images can no longer be regarded as mere mirrors of actuality, but should instead be seen as ideological signifiers (Humm 1997: 13). There is a need for women to become involved in every facet of production so that female interests will be adequately protected. The UNESCO publication, *Women in the media* (1980), which emanated from the submissions of the National Meeting on Women in Cinema took place in Saint Vincent, Italy, and a later UNESCO study on the role of women in radio, television and cinema (UNESCO 1991: 25-6). Both made certain recommendations to those in control of the media, including the following :

> The projection of a more dynamic image of women […], the taking into account of the diversity of women's roles and their actual and potential contribution to society, the depiction of the roles and achievements of women from all walks of life throughout history […], the development in women of confidence in themselves and in other women, and a sense of their own value and importance as human beings (UNESCO 1980: 16).

This is indeed a challenge to film-makers. A positive response would help to improve the image of women in society. The role of the media in the woman question is emphasised in the World Plan of Action:

> A major obstacle in improving the status of women lies in public attitudes and values regarding women's roles in society. The mass communication media have great potential as a vehicle for social change and could exercise a significant influence in helping to remove prejudices and stereotypes, accelerating the acceptance of women's new and expanding roles in society, and promoting their integration into the development process as equal partners (UNESCO 1980: 16).

The report also condemns the negative stance of the media:

> At the present time, the media tend to reinforce traditional attitudes, often portraying an image of women that is degrading and humiliating, and fails to reflect the changing roles of the sexes. They may also have harmful effects in imposing alien cultures upon different societies (UNESCO 1980: 16).

Every resource, particularly film, must be utilised for the preparation of women for equality and leadership in order to increase their contribution to the development of their families and societies (UNESCO 1980: Preface). This will aid progress in the field of human rights and the removal of divisions between individuals and nations.

On the positive side, television, unlike film in developed countries, particularly the USA, is increasingly taking cognisance of the positive image of women. This is not unconnected with the fact that women take more and more important decisions in terms of domestic finances. Andrea Figler (2001) states that recent research indicates that women make 80% of financial decisions around the home, including paying the cable bill. This economic clout wielded by women, combined with statistics which show women to be heavy watchers of television programmes, makes them a very viable target audience. Jon Lafayette (2002) corroborates this by quoting from the February 2002 Nielsen Media Research Report:

> [W]omen spent five hours and 18 minutes a day watching TV […] men spent just four hours and 35 minutes. Because of this, buyers who want to reach viewers of the female persuasion […] have more choices.

The reported economic strength of women is encouraging advertisers to become interested in sponsoring women's programmes. One of the filmic genres dedicated to satisfying women's tastes has been described by Figler as the "women in jeopardy" genre. An example of this genre is *The burning bed* (1984), which starred Farrah Fawcett as a battered wife who set her husband on fire (Figler 2001). Many television networks are endeavouring to profit from catering to women's tastes. An example is Women's Entertainment (WE), a cable network whose programmes target only women. Kate McEnroe, President of AMC Networks (which oversees WE), presents the mandate and vision of WE as providing content that comes from and for the voice of women. To achieve this, the network provides funding, thereby giving women more opportunity to produce and direct their own films. The films sponsored by WE focus on women's issues, female characters or heroines (Figler 2001). One of their most important films is *In the time of the butterflies*. Salma Hayek, the movie's executive producer, states that the film

> […] features a story based on the Mirabal sisters who helped bring down the government of [the] Dominican Republic's dictator Rafael Leonid Trujillo in the early 1960s. While the plot addresses the political upheaval in that nation, the film focuses on the emotional hardship of the sisters, something that most any woman could identify with (Figler 2001).

Women are becoming more important to advertisers and programme-makers because of their financial strength. Consequently, more money and better research are being expended in the cause of women. For example, a non-fiction network, Discovery Health, provided between $125 000 and $600 000 for the production of documentaries and dramas utilising real-life stories of women facing difficult situations. According to one of the executives of Discovery Health, Donald Thoms (Figler 2001),

> [The] original research showed us that women were more likely to want to know about their health than men […] and women watch television for the emotional value of it.

What it all comes down to, then, is the issue of money and in whose hands it resides. The image of women on television is improving because women have become an important target group for television producers and advertisers. If this ensures that women are given their rightful position within society by means of realistic and objective portrayals in media programming, the end will have justified the means.

The situation in Nigeria cannot remain bleak for much longer. All over Africa, women are responding to the challenge. Women producers are no longer a rarity in the field. For example, the writer of this article has produced many films with a more objective definition of the African woman, including *The solid rock* (1993), *The broken hedge* (1997), *Born to live* (2000), etc. A Cameroonian female film producer, Margaret Fombe (1995: 350) describes the audio-visual vista thus:

> African women are still to find their place in audiovisual production, which seems to be reserved to men. However, while those who are privileged to work in this field of activities are confined to being actresses, continuity girls or editors, some are becoming film producers and directors, in spite of tradition, which assigned women to their home and children […] they organize themselves to proudly defend their status and gain access to funding to produce meaningful works.

There is a need for a realistic portrayal of women as collective activists, possessing ideological level-headedness and astuteness. This, of course, can only be achieved through the "systematic annihilation of phallic megalomania and chauvinism" (Uji 1991: 12). Docile, sheepish stereotypes should be driven to extinction. What is needed instead is the introduction of role-models who offer stiff resistance to dehumanisation. There is a need to portray the female gender as the highly intelligent human beings which women are, having great potential to contribute positively and substantially (in the most collectivist sense) towards the advancement of society (Uji 1991: 12).

It has been suggested that one of the primary tasks of feminist aesthetics is to study and promote women as producers of art (Humm 1997: 9). When this is no longer a rarity on the Nigerian film scene, the images of women may be guaranteed to change for the better. The women producers, however, must be sensitised concerning feminist aesthetics of film. Sheila Rowbotham (1973: 27) emphasises the imperative of voiceless people speaking out for themselves:

> ... in order to create an alternative, an oppressed group must at once shatter the self-reflecting world which encircles it and, at the same time, project its own image onto history.

This would be the best way to deal with women's subjectivity and subvert the sexist values of the dominant patriarchy as it is currently manifested in the Nigerian video film.

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