



Businessday, Nigeria – 23 March 2010

Movies, movies and more movies

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The annual Oscar ceremony is over, and this year the big surprise was a piece of history when we had a female director, Kathryn Bigelow, winning the Best Director award for 'The Hurt Locker'. Much was expected from 'Avatar', but James Cameron's magnum opus did not receive as many accolades from the Academy as expected, but undoubtedly, he has broken new ground in cinema and the entrepreneur in him received wonderful financial and critical success.

This is not about the Oscars but truly the magic of cinema has not dimmed despite many alternate forms of entertainment that have challenged it. From the era of silent films to the Talkies, from the Jazz Singer to the animation in Up & Avatar's 3-D wizardry, the movies have never failed to captivate us, young and old.

While Hollywood is the benchmark for most things in cinema, the fact is that movies are universal magic. But in the razzmatazz world of movies, we often forget that making movies is serious business. This is an underestimated and unrecognized form of industry that not only brings together a very large number of extremely talented individuals - amongst the most creative in the universe - but also draws from multiple fields - science, engineering, the arts, music, drama, and everything else put together!

The output of such a combined effort: the tally for 2009 from worldwide box office sales for all films was USD 29.9 billion, which reflects a growth of 7.6% over the previous year. It is estimated that in 2009 over 2500 movies were made across the world, even though in the United States the number of movies produced has declined over the last few years, from 920 in 2005 to 677 in 2009! And, today with the advances in technology, movies are dubbed or sub-titled in almost every language.

Data for the United States indicate that despite many options, movies continue to be everyone's favorite form of entertainment, attracting more people than all theme parks and the glitz and glamour associated with major American sporting events (like NBA, NFL, etc.). And, truly, globally, movies continue to be the most popular & affordable medium of entertainment for the masses, the genuine opium for the masses, if there ever was one! Interestingly, the rise of animation movies has meant that human actors are now willing to be the voice giving life to electronic heroes on screen. However, movie stars have always fuelled the dreams of ordinary people, and they continue to allure. Often it is convenient to ignore that the high cost of living in a cocooned world of make believe has claimed numerous victims of its own. Be that as it may, in select cases the screen persona has created an identity so powerful that real life has imitated art in many countries where stardom has become the route to an alternate career in politics, all the way to the White House, in fact.

Amongst the most prolific sources churning out movies are those from the Chinese and Indian film industries. With over 500 movies last year, China's output is impressive but the industry still has to meet the parameters laid down by the communist state which is hypersensitive about what can (and cannot) be portrayed in a film made in China. The more unfettered Hong Kong film industry has presented a whole genre of martial art movies that have created a powerful impact, reaching out to a wider global audience with subtitles and dubbed versions. This contribution has created global stars from China, including Jackie Chan, Jet Li and Chow Yun-Fat, and made the craft of Ang Lee and John Woo famous by providing them with a special place in Hollywood.

The Indian film industry has gained popularity as Bollywood, but few know that India has the distinction of being the largest producer of films, with an output of about 1000 movies last year. While the largest number of films are in the Hindi and Telugu languages, the diverse nature of India means that there are over 15 languages in which movies get made annually. Even though Hollywood studios are better known and are part of popular film folklore, the largest movie studio complex in the world is in Hyderabad, the Ramoji Film City. The output from the Indian movie studios (and in particular the Hindi films, with their trademark melodramas, song-and-dance routines, and puerile action themes) are lapped up across the world not just by the Indian diaspora but also by large audiences in Africa, the Middle East, and South-East Asia, giving rise to a new form of soft power for the country.

In terms of volume, the Nigeria film industry (aka Nollywood, known for its melodramas) is also known for its quantity, and some maintain that they are the world's second largest movie industry. Digital technology has made this feasible and they have left behind older film producing nations, such as the Egyptian one, once known for its family dramas in Arabic, which are popular all over the Middle East.

While movies will undergo technological transformation, they will continue to be with us in some form or the other. What globalization has done is to make the market for movies more international than ever before with the added benefit that this has created new bridges across societies divided by gender, race, religion and language. Viewed in this light, it will be difficult to deny that the output from the film industry has been one global product offering variants that suit local needs, and fit the popular adage of being 'glocal' in nature.