

Nigerian Video Film Cultures

Melita Zajc

University of Maribor, melita.zajc@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In Nigeria, the weakening of the state parallels the rise of the insecurities of everyday life. Traditional means of social promotion such as education or employment in public offices have ceased to exist. Movie making has proven to be a profitable activity and become a means of social promotion for unemployed but creative youth. Nigerian Video Film Cultures started as free enterprise and Nigerian video films have become prime media for the articulation of public discourse. The production and distribution are based on an alternative network for the distribution of video content. The language combines (language combines motifs) motifs from Western and Indian cinema. Nigerian Video Cultures challenge the global systems of video production and distribution. Can they also challenge the dominance of the Western system of visual representation? This is the main question addressed by this paper. The author combines the results of the research by colleagues from anthropology and media and film studies, with the fieldwork conducted in December of 2006 in Nigeria and online since then. She proposes that Nigerian Video Film Cultures subvert the dominant systems of video production and distribution, but they also provide space for the articulation of public discourse by innovating the film language itself.

KEYWORDS: film, video, digital cinema, Nigeria, colonialism

Introduction

I think this is the truly African film we have been waiting for. In content and in form. Ok celluloid, we don't want it. We will shoot our digital videos, DV, because it is cheaper for us, we can express ourselves better and the stories are just there for us to express, African, purely our stories. We are telling our stories now, for the first time.

(Esosa Kabat Egbon, writer/producer/scholar, in McCall 2002)

Roland Barthes, in his essay *Myth Today* (2000), a fundamental work on the semiology of the image, claims that images have more than one meaning. The production of the secondary or connotative meaning he termed 'the myth' and illustrated its mechanisms by the then recent (1955) cover of the magazine *Paris Match*. The cover is featuring a photo of black African soldier in French army uniform, saluting. What the photo shows, claimed Barthes,

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is not the African soldier himself but the glory of French imperialism, the capacity of French colonial power to unite various nations under one flag. The soldier is not simply made to disappear by the myth. He is deprived of his history, ‘...of memory, not of existence’ (Barthes 2000: 109), he is there but his image is made to tell a story and to glorify a history that is not his own.

Barthes’ main goal was to apply Saussurean semiology to the visual sign. Yet, particularly with the example cited above, he pointed to a crucial paradox of the use of images in Western cultures. Due to their technological basis, the images taken by a camera, movie or video camera are perceived as *natural* and, even more importantly, *neutral*, yet they are working in favour of those who own and master the technologies.¹ The mastery on the level of representation was supported by the logic of technological improvements. Every new technology was more difficult to use and more expensive to buy. Digital technologies brought a significant shift. Portable cameras and computers with storage, editing and post-production software that can all be purchased for a few thousand euro make visual expression generally available. Women, gays and lesbians, the old and the young, the poor, people in once-colonized countries and in countries with poor or no cinematographic tradition, they can all make images of their own. Furthermore, these images represent them in a clearly different way.²

The direct epistemological consequence is the realization that presumably neutral images are ambiguous and, of course, biased. The clarity of the image is inseparable from the intervention of power. Its ambiguity, even if being part of the relationships of power, provides space for creative visual expression. Contrary to the 20th Century practices of refusing the images as ambiguous and thus unreliable, the contemporary cultures are beginning to explore the potentials offered by their ambiguities.

In this perspective, I would like to analyze Nigerian Video Film Cultures and, I would particularly like to propose two traits both related to Barthes’ example. One is the idea that – contrary to the conventional use presented by the cited cover of Paris Match magazine – with video films black Africans in Nigeria are creating the images that present a history of their own. They are created by Africans, for African audiences and have specifically African content, i.e. they deal with specific issues in specific ways.

At the same time, they are almost completely ignored by Western film community and cannot be found at the major international film festivals. In 2008, for example, the International Film Festival in Venice showed two films from African continent yet none from Nigeria. This brings us to the second part of the argument. Nigerian films are not made on celluloid, they are not made for cinema screening and they are also purely commercial enterprises. However, the main difference separating them from typical festival

¹ Much research has been done in this field recently. I would like to point to the systematic analysis of the biases of visual representation in cinema by Richard Dyer. For the present discussion is of a particular importance his essay *White* (1997).

² Such is the point of Ann Kibbey (2005) for the cinema and I would also like to refer to my book *Digital Images*, exploring the use of images in cinema, photography, video and other media (2005).

art films is that they use images in a different way. The images created within the Nigerian video film cultures attest to a recent change in global cultures; specifically, that the ambiguity of images is not to be denounced but explored, and that the same image can simultaneously be used for artistic expression and as a tool for critically reflecting the social and cultural condition.

Empires and differences

Nigeria is a West African country with more than 140 million inhabitants living in 36 federal states. It was established in 1914 when British joined the previously-separated entities Northern and Southern Nigeria into one nation.³ The country was divided into three semiautonomous areas, the North (mainly Hausa-Fulani), West (mainly Yoruba), and East (mainly Igbo). But the main division still remained the one between South and North, since (contrary to the South-Western and South-Eastern territories) the North of Nigeria was administered through a policy of indirect rule, '... a system by which the British attempted to rule through existing structures of political authority and to preserve existing cultural and religious life-ways' (Larkin 2008: 22). The distinction between the South, more modern and less African, and the North, more African but less developed, survived the declaration of independence in 1960 and has been preserved until the present day.

The nation of Biafra, declared independent in 1967, following the putsch of January 1966, included Igbo and some other ethnic communities in the South-east of Nigeria is understood by many scholars as a cry for another, new Nigeria, one not divided along ethnic or class lines (Jeffs 2007: 207). It is, however, a mostly unspoken part of recent Nigerian history. The declaration was followed by the war, generally known as the war 'to keep Nigeria one' (Okoye 2007: 4), that lasted until January 1970. By the time Biafra announced its surrender, its territory – especially its cities, such as Onitsha, Enugu, and Owerri – had literally been razed to the ground. Today, Onitsha is one of the major markets for video films and the Igbo are among most influential and prolific actors of the Nigerian video film cultures, making their films in their own language but also in Yoruba and in English.

Generally, Nigerian video films are produced in English, Yoruba, Ibo, Hausa, Itsekiri and other languages. The Nigerian video film industry is structured along the lines, defined in colonial times, with three main regions: the Northern with Kano, south-eastern with Onitsha and south-western with Lagos. There are significant differences between films produced in the North and in the South. Even if diversities are that more acute since they are the heritage of the colonial practice of splitting African societies into discrete ethnic groups for maintaining the separation between the ruler and ruled,⁴ the boost of video films during the 1990s is a common Nigerian phenomenon.

³ The event has been characterized also as the 'invention' of Nigerian nation by the British (Okoye 2007: 7).

⁴ The so-called 'rule of colonial difference' (Partha Chatterjee, in Larkin 2008: 24).

Due to the speed of change, the lack of (the power of) institutions too keep track⁵ and the more general structural fact that the grey economy is a significant part of Nigerian society,⁶ the scope of films produced within the Nigerian video film cultures can only be estimated. Two years ago, the estimated earnings within the Nigerian video film industry were 200 million US dollars per year (Vasagar 2006). The latest data show the number is 250 million US dollars and the number of video films produced rose to 200 per month (Wikipedia 2008). In any case, for some years now the Nigerian video film industry has ranked as the third-largest in the world after the United States and India. Its name *Nollywood*, that follows the naming of American and Indian cinemas as Hollywood and Bollywood respectively, is sometimes contested. Not long ago Nigeria – just like the rest of the world – was colonized by Hollywood and Bollywood – while today it has become a ‘cultural imperial power’ (Haynes 2005) and Nollywood seems to be appropriate name.

Butchered at the altar of the oil boom

There is a school of thought that talks about the rebirth of the film culture in Nigeria. They claim that like in a horror movie, the infant film market was gruesomely butchered at the altar of the oil boom together with other sectors of the economy. The Indigenization Decree of 1972, which sought to transfer ownership of about 300 cinema houses in the country from their foreign proprietors to Nigerians did little to settle the matters. Though this transfer resulted in the eruption of the latent ingenuity of Nigerian playwrights, screenwriters, poets, and film producers, the gradual dip in the value of the Naira, combined with lack of finance, marketing support, quality studio and production equipment as well as inexperience on the part of practitioners, hampered the growth of the local film industry. (Aderinokun 2004)

When talking about history – and in particular when representatives of financial institutions talk about history – Western audiences expect a matter-of-fact type of speech. In the above quotation, Tayo Aderinokun, a banker, is presenting history by ritualistic metaphor. The myth, according to Barthes (2000), is a type of speech: one which regulates how people understand themselves, others and their place in the world. Therefore, it depends on the social position. The speech of the oppressed can only be poor, monotonous, and immediate. ‘Lying is a richness, a lie presupposes property, truths and

⁵ For example, the Nigeria Film and Video Censors’ Board, established in 1993, should review and classify all the films produced in Nigeria. Yet many films avoid the Board and are either shown by TV stations that gain publicity in showing uncensored films, or sold in the market directly (Ugor 2007).

⁶ Larkin warns that many statistics about Nigeria are ‘always provisional’ and ‘often simulacral, being not so much a numerical representation of an existing state of affairs but rather a mimicking of rationalist representations of economic life’ (2008: 225).

forms to spare' (ibid.: 137). Myth is also not easy to avoid, for the very effort to escape its hold becomes in its turn the prey of myth. Thus, claims Barthes, perhaps the best weapon against myth is to mythify it in its turn. Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth? All that is needed is to use it as the departure point, to take its signification as the first term of a second myth.

Barthes found examples of such second-order myths (ibid.: 123) in literature. They can also be found within the Nigerian video film cultures. In Nigerian films, the Africans are using the myths of the colonizers, from pop music hits to the popular film genres, in particular Bollywood musicals and Hollywood horror movies, as a material from which they create their own myths. Instead of poor, monotonous, immediate myths of the oppressed, their films are rich, colourful metaphors. The wonder – expressed by many Western but also Nigerian scholars (Adeleke 2003) when faced with the excess of love and singing in Hausa or the excess of blood and witchcraft in English and Yoruba video films – is reductionist as far as it fails to consider the specificity of the culture that does not limit the use of metaphorical language to art and presumably less serious subjects. It is also political, as far as its patronizing view cannot but be surprised by the richness of the language of the oppressed. However, it does have a historical basis. Celluloid film production indeed constrained Nigerian cinema, like many other world cinemas, to be a language of the poor, inferior to European art cinema and to commercial Hollywood alike. The history of cinema in Nigeria is a proof of that.

Private merchants brought cinema to Lagos as early as 1903; in August that year, the first screenings took place. The colonial government started to control Nigerian film industry in 1912 with its *Theatre and Public Performance Regulation Ordinance* which demanded that films could only be screened in venues licensed by the colonial government. To obtain the license, a complete and detailed description of the film had to be submitted. The Colonial Film Unit had the exclusive mandate to produce, distribute and exhibit films within the British Empire (Ugor 2007). Thus documentaries on the Queen's visits to Nigeria, English football matches, Westminster Parliamentary debates, and government-sponsored films on health and education, together with American Westerns dominated the cinemas until the late 1950s. In the era that many refer to as 'the good old '50s and '60s' (Aderinokun 2004), cinemas in Nigeria featured American, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese films.

Nigeria itself was put on the world film map by Hollywood. The movie *Sanders on the River* (1935), directed by Zoltan Korda, was partly shot in Nigeria. The Nigerian actor Orlando Martins acted in the film alongside the Afro-American actor Paul Robeson. An autonomous film culture started to develop during the 1970s, a decade after the civil war. One of the major auteurs from this period is the Yoruba Ola Balogun, a graduate of the IDHEC film school in Paris. In 1975, he directed *Amadi* (1975), a movie that featured pre-civil war Nigeria as one huge undivided house where Igbo musicians sang Yoruba and Yoruba sang Hausa songs. Yet even if '...this early example of Nigerian art on celluloid' was using '...the best of Western film techniques,' it was 'unable to impress the market against the dominance of imports' (Aderinokun 2004).

Another film-producing culture in the celluloid era was the Hausa in the North, particularly filmmaker Adamu Halilu (Mueller 2004). Hausa was art-house oriented cinema,

attempting to reflect Islamic beliefs, while Yoruba on the South aspired towards popular cinema. Ola Balogun's first major success was *Ajani Ogun* (1976), based on a popular Yoruba travelling theatre piece. Other travelling theatre producers like Ade Folayan aka Ada Love and Hubert Ogunde followed and a Yoruba travelling theatre film culture blossomed. Some producers began incorporating film and, later, video into their shows. They also realized their work in multiple media, as stage productions, TV series, and video. A local theatre video culture already existed even apart from Yoruba travelling theatre. It included taped Hausa drama group performances and short comic Igbo sketches, a kind of audiovisual spin-off from market literature.

In 1991, Hubert Ogunde, appeared along Pierce Brosnan in *Mister Johnson* (1991), a Hollywood adaptation of a novel by Joyce Cary and directed by Bruce Beresford. In one of the roles, the movie featured Yoruba Tunde Kelani, who later became one of the key figures of Nigerian video film industry. The movie was shot in Lagos and Tunde Kelani was also assistant director to Bruce Beresford. By that time, many Nigerian directors and/or producers went bankrupt while trying to create movies on celluloid (Adeleke 2003; Owens-Ibie 1998) and celluloid film production in Nigeria became almost extinct. The practice of going to the cinema was gradually vanishing, too.

In 1992, when Kenneth Nnebue produced *Living in Bondage*, a film about a businessman who achieves power and wealth by murdering his wife in a ritual, only to repent later when she haunts him, it was shot and distributed on video. This was one of the first blockbusters in the video film industry. A year later, the National Film Festival was held for the first time. They showed about 50 Yoruba films, 25 English, five Hausa and one Igbo film. In 1996, 258 video films were shot altogether, 166 Yoruba, 62 English, 22 Ibo and one in another language. Yet from 1994, when the Nigeria Film and Video Censors' Board was first reviewing videos, until May 1998 only one film viewed was shot on celluloid (Balogun 1998). Between 1994 and April 2005, the board reviewed about 4,600 films, but still only one of them was celluloid (Ugor 2007: 11).

In 2004, the International Film Festival in Berlin (*Berlinale*) devoted a special section to the Nigerian video film industry, while the Rotterdam International Film Festival presented a tribute to Tunde Kelani. The later was praised as '...one of the few real filmmakers in the video film business ... one of the only ones familiar with celluloid' (Mueller 2004). The Berlinale also tried to focus on celluloid cinema. It showed *The Return* (2003) by another Nollywood celebrity, Kingsley Ogoro, the director of one of the few Nigerian movies popular with Western audience, *Osuofia in London* (2003). The film *The Return* was shot on celluloid in 1998 in Calabar; yet according to one of the screenwriters, the version that was released in 2003 on DVD and screened on Berlinale the next year, '... was NOT made from the actual celluloid shots meant for the original movie,' and '...has been put together and edited from shots taken by an assistant cameraman who was simply filming back-up scenes from a different angle and with a semi-professional digital camera,' while '...the original film reels are still languishing undeveloped in a secure cold attic in London' (Munis 2004). Equally astonishing yet less incredible is another detail about that production, also recalled by Munis. The leading star, Richard Mofe-Damijo (RMD), who at that time was the most prominent Nigerian actor, walked out on the set stating that they

were ‘...wasting too much time’ (ibid.). Indeed. They were shooting on celluloid and it took the whole month, while shooting on video at that time took four to five days. Eventually, RMD had to be written out of the script prematurely.

The exclusion of celluloid is an essential part of the Nigerian video film cultures. Historically, so was the decline of the culture of going to the cinema. The austerity measures of the early 1980s increased the level of poverty. Widespread street violence and curfews made cinema-going virtually impossible. The few cinema houses existing either had to close down or were taken over by religious communities. In contrast, the huge success of the serialization of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, directed by David Orere in 1987 and broadcast by the Nigerian Television Authority, increased the popularity of televised theatre plays. Watching television or video tapes at home was a safe way to spend the evening.

Market literature, travelling theatre and popular TV shows are generally considered to be the main influences on Nigerian video film cultures (Ugochukwu 2008). There is of course another source of influence, less visible for the scholars who focus on production, yet evident from the perspective of the audience: imported feature movies that became available on video cassettes after the confiscation of cinemas in 1972.

There is also another reason why video cassettes were crucial for the development of Nigerian video film cultures. The legend says that Kenneth Nnebue, the electronics shop owner from Lagos was trying to sell a large stock of blank video cassettes he had bought in Taiwan, when he got the idea that the cassettes would sell better with something recorded on them. For this reason he shot *Living in Bondage*, a movie that sold 750,000 copies. Brian Larkin, in an excellent study of the mass media uses in Nigeria (2008), analyses the cassette sellers at the Koar Wambai market in Kano. He claims that the success of Kano’s cassette reproduction industry is grounded in three developments, all of which can also be applied to the other two major centres of video film industry: Onitsha and Lagos. The first is directly related to the seizure of cinemas by the above-mentioned *Indigenization Decree* of 1972 and the subsequent demise of cinema-going culture in Nigeria. In an attempt to indigenize the control of Nigerian companies, the Nigerian government seized the assets of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). In response to this, the MPAA suspended the distribution of Hollywood films to Nigeria in 1981. Second, the oil boom of the late 1970s boosted consumption, allowing for the mass dissemination of cassette-based technologies. Finally, the position of Kano (and this also can apply to Lagos as well as Onitsha) at the apex of wide-ranging transnational trading networks facilitated the quick exploitation of these possibilities and the forging of a wide distribution network.

This was followed by the spread of video piracy. Contrary to the intentions of MPAA, Hollywood films did not disappear from Nigeria. On the contrary, they became available at an unprecedented speed and volume (Larkin 2008: 223). Such radical creativity in responding to the insecurities of everyday life seems to be a Nigerian trademark. The architect Rem Koolhaas and the scholars gathered in Harvard Project on the City noted that Lagos, one of the largest cities in the world, with the population growing by 21 every hour, should have collapsed long ago, according to the rules of academic urbanism, yet it

is blooming and growing. The survival strategy of the people living in Lagos should be understood as ‘...a form of collective research, conducted by the group of eight to 25 million’ (Koolhaas et al. 2000: 718–719). Its urbanism is probably the most radical in the world, yet it is working.

A similar process can be detected in the realm of video film industry. The authors fear piracy because it is reducing the profits they make with their work. Yet they themselves use the pirate network to distribute their video films. The pirate video networks have been essential for the development of Nigerian video film cultures. The video cassette sellers were the first to be involved in the industry. The pirate video networks, with their centres in Kano, Lagos and Onitsha were and still are the main distribution vehicle for video films produced in Nigeria.

Instead of being marginalized by official distribution networks, the Nigerians using the pirate networks are participating in global media flows (Larkin 2008: 224–225). Yet more important than the participation in the international consumer culture is the role of the pirate video network within the local media scene. Media infrastructures in Nigeria are predominantly state-controlled, organized around publicity for state projects. Piracy, by contrast, is based in unofficial, decentralized networks (ibid.: 225). Another important thing about piracy in Nigeria is that it is a part of the shadow economy that is gaining dominance in the country. According to Larkin, it has grown to such a scale that no one knows how to represent it: ‘No one is sure how large the GDP is; no one can calculate the balance of payments or even the size of Nigeria’s population’ (ibid.: 225). Nigerian video films are based on the pirate network and represent the migration of these networks into the mainstream. The production of Nigerian video films – contrary to film production in majority of the world’s countries – is not in the hands of the state.

‘We are businessmen...’

In Hollywood, you have big corporations like banks, when you want to shoot a film, you send in your proposal and they finance it. Do you know how we shoot films in Nigeria? If you are my uncle and you have money, I would walk up to you and say, borrow me 2 or 3 million. Let’s be sincere with ourselves, how many banks would loan you that kind of money... So, if your dream in life is to be a movie producer and your mother gives you your father’s land and you sell it, use the proceed to produce a movie and you bring back the money, what would you do?... What I’m trying to say is that, we are businessmen as well... We don’t have big corporations that would finance us.

(Chico Ejiro, one of the main figures in Nigerian video film industry, cited in Umukoro 2005)

In Europe, media regulation is understood as a two-way process. The state imposes limitations on media, but in return it provides funding. The latter is what global organizations like GATT or WTO, when demanding that the EU provides free trade in media business, are up against. In Nigeria, as a typical African country where the power of multinationals

is growing and the power of state is diminishing, there are no film funds, but the state does regulate the film making business.

This regulation is also a part of Nigeria's colonial history. In the year after the successful *Living in Bondage* (1992) was shot, the Nigeria Film and Video Censors' Board was established. The Board replaced the Federal Board for Film Censorship, which operated under the aegis of the Cinematographic Act of 1963–64, but that did not cover video. During the colonial period, the Censors Board preceding the aforementioned boards was appointed in 1933. The screening was controlled through licensing from 1912, and the film production was in the hands of Colonial Film Unit.

It is quite clear that the British colonial power was cautious about the cinema and that '...what the Nigerian film audience saw were films that favoured and inflated British imperialist interests – culturally and politically' (Ugor 2007: 3). This does not differ, for example, from French Africa where film censorship also existed. Yet, in African countries under the French rule, indigenous production was encouraged through different sources of funding. Even today the French still fund film projects by local African filmmakers in their former colonies. In postcolonial Nigeria, the film industry has been regulated by state censorship, but its financing has been exclusive domain of the market forces.

The equipment – at present digital and previously analogue video – is cheap. The informal market of video cassettes provides fast and efficient distribution.⁷ Therefore, the calculation is simple. The film producer invests three million naira⁸ to produce, market and distribute a video film printed on a VHS cassette or a VCD⁹ that costs 300 naira. If he sells 10 thousand copies, he breaks even. If he sells 40 or 50 thousand copies, which is viewed as a normally successful film,¹⁰ it is enough to cover the costs or return the loan, invest into a new production, and still have some profit. Normally, he would invest a little more and shoot some more so he could initially divide the film into two parts, sell two films instead of one and double the revenue. Because of a tight budget, he has to shoot quickly. Because of the pirates, who will copy the film and sell the copies for their own income, he has to distribute and sell his product immediately. There are directors who are said to shoot a film in two days, and finish the whole cycle in 10 days. Usually the whole cycle, from production to sales does not last more than a month.

It is a process that does not require a bank. Thus, it is also suitable for people who usually do not use banking services. Additionally, to invest directly in video film production is evidently much more profitable than giving the money to the bank. I obtained most of the information about the economics and other rules of video film production in contemporary Nigeria from Franca Aernan, an excellent actress in many of Nigerian English video films, such as *Computer Girls* (2003) of Chico Ejiro. She graduated from the School of Dramatic Arts, is a co-founder of the Association of Nigerian Actors Guild and the

⁷ And has much the same role as the internet for the music industry on a global level.

⁸ At the beginning of 2009, the exchange rate was around 200 naira for one euro.

⁹ A cheaper version of digital video, DVD.

¹⁰ To avoid exaggerations, I tend to use the lowest available numbers. Ugor, for example, states that an 'average Nigerian home movie sells about eighty to one hundred and fifty thousand copies' (2007: 15).

author of the book *I am an Actor; Career Making in Acting* (2005). In her book, she advises the actors to take care of their future by investing into the video film production themselves. This proves that within Nigerian video film industry, the involvement with the work and with the results of the work is very intense. Aernan's book is written in informal, personal style and provides basic advice such as how to negotiate wages and how to behave on the set. It is evidently meant for absolute beginners. This is with a good reason: the Nigerian video film industry started as an industry that anyone can enter.

According to many scholars, this was the main reason for its success. The plummeting economy, worsened by political instability and general social collapse in the late 1980s and early 1990s, coincided with the availability of cheap portable video equipment: 'The unemployed but creative Nigerian youth ... were at the forefront of the new video culture' (Ugor 2007: 6). Filmmaking, which for a century was a privilege of the richest while the poor could only afford the cinema ticket, was transformed into an informal, private-sector based enterprise. Many marginalized but innovative urban youth could actually make money by producing their own entertainment. In an era of globalized entertainment industries, this is quite an achievement.

Of course, the production – as well as the product – differs significantly from the films one sees in contemporary multi-cinemas, and from the art-films shown by international film festivals. *This is Nollywood* (directed by Franco Sacchi in 2007) is a video film about an acclaimed Nollywood director who – equipped with a digital camera, two lights and 20 thousand dollars – wants to shoot an action film in nine days. It is fiction, yet the obstacles are not different from the everyday experience in the industry – the electricity goes out (it happens on a daily basis all over Nigeria), street thugs demand extortion money,¹¹ the lead actor does not show up on the set, the sound of prayers from the nearby mosque prevents the shooting and so on.

Such extreme conditions, of course, significantly affect the products. Nigerian video films often resemble found objects within the visual arts. They document the working conditions as much as they create new popular stories. In these stories, many influences are being recycled and many myths used as the material for the creation of new myths – third-rate Hollywood productions, Bollywood and *telenovelas*, Nigerian oral tradition, theatre and television. They are strange hybrids: open forms that can include anything that might come to hand, corrupt cops paying a visit to a witch doctor in a BMW, '...curses that can turn a woman into a vagina dentata, jolly jesters and born-again Christians, occasionally all-singing, all-dancing' (Mueller 2004). The rhythm of the narration is often erratic, the acting styles are mismatched and single films seem to encompass multiple worlds at the same time. Most often they even do not match: one story begins and without a resolution it is followed by another one.

¹¹ In an interview, Chico Ejiro, a famous director explained how he once left the set before even starting the shooting because in the little town where the shooting should take place, the prices went up because everybody wanted to earn money from the crew (Khiran 2004).

Nigeria has become famous for the 419 confidence trick, in which a letter is sent by fax or email, claiming that the sender is a senior Nigerian official or a relative of a dictator, urgently needing to transfer a large amount of money out of the country. The recipients are asked for help, and in return offered a percentage of the money. Complete strangers agree to this and the 419 – according to the FBI – became ‘...the most successful fraud in the history of the world’ (Larkin 2008: 223) and one of main foreign currency earners for Nigeria. The scheme uses new communication technologies, the professional networks of corporate capitalism, bank accounts and international money transfers; even the spectacular corruption that rules in Nigeria makes the 419 letters believable to their victims. It is a perfect example of the scope of the creativity with which people in Nigeria are facing the instability of everyday life.

The Nollywood, or the Nigerian video film cultures, surpass even the innovation of the 419. Using the popular fictions of the colonizers, past and present, the people in Nigeria are creating their own stories, own images, making the colonial myths working in favour of their own mythologies. Using the low-end remains of visual technologies that traditionally discriminate against the poor, they are turning the material conditions of the video film production into a vehicle for a new aesthetic, a new visual language.

Cinematic tastes of the urban poor

Mostly untrained in film production or any of its creative aspects, the film producers are urban-based traders who by sheer hard work, and in some cases, dubious means, have leapt from the lower working class into the enviable status of petty urban bourgeoisie. Their gaze and social consciousness, however, never leaves that forsaken domain of poverty. They are always aware of the desperate attempts by their old-time contemporaries to catch up with them on the social ladder. These efforts come in different forms, some genuinely legitimate, and others supposedly diabolic and visceral even to the point of wasting human lives. It is these stories that the marketers have always sought to fund. Some of these stories, they claim, are about known contemporaries who have made the social leap from economic ground-zero through supposedly diabolical, fraudulent, and illicit means. In a sense, therefore, the marketers are storytellers themselves versed in the complex and delicate world of postcolonial African city life. The difference is that they pay for their stories to be told.

(Ugor 2007: 15)

The amount of films produced within the Nigerian video film cultures is huge and there have been various attempts to classify this vast array of work. A classical cinephile approach is to identify the authors; thus, for example, the Austrian film critic Olaf Mueller (2004) proposes the IDHEC-graduate Ola Balogun and a director-producer of the new generation Tunde Kelani to be the main creative figures.

Another academic way to classify films is to use the genre typology. Mueller links the success of Balogun's witchcraft thriller *Aiye* which '...transformed this emerging cinema by spawning a whole new horror sub-genre' to the present when '...almost all video-films contain horror elements, some of them extremely graphic' (ibid.). Brian Larkin, on the contrary, proposes melodrama as the distinctive genre of Nigerian film. There is a variety of genres produced among the English language films in the South and Hausa language films in the North, from comedy and romance to horror and religious films. Yet melodrama, as a '...fantastic response to the insecurity and vulnerability of everyday life' (Larkin 2008: 172) is a common frame in which popular stories are being told in Nigeria.

There is, however, a major difference in the ways how melodramas of the North and of the South are dealing with economic, social and spiritual insecurities that define the life in contemporary Africa. In the case of Southern Nigerian films, the melodrama takes the form of '...the aesthetic of outrage' (ibid.) in which the narrative is organized around a series of extravagant shocks designed to outrage the viewer. In the North, Hausa films represent insecurity through the unstable and changeable world of love. In Southern Nigerian films, it is the theme of corruption, financial, sexual or spiritual, that generates the sense of betrayal and insecurity. In the case of Hausa films, the logic of love and romance, intensified by the presence of Indian cinema (ibid.: 173), is the privileged domain that inscribes social transformation.

In his comprehensive study, Larkin connects the content of the films with the social, cultural, political and religious context in which the films are being produced. Even stronger is the accent on social and cultural influences in the classification provided by Paul Ugor (2007) who claims that the content of the Nigerian video films is not much influenced by the Nigeria Film and Video Censors' Board¹² as by, what he calls, hidden censorship. This hidden censorship is performed by four major players within Nigerian video film industry: marketers, producers, religions and the audience.

Marketers are self-made businessmen, mostly former audio-visual cassette importers who found a novel business outlet in the emergence of video films. They provide money for the shooting, they mass-copy the finished product onto empty cassettes or video CDs and sell it to major distributors (Larkin 2008). They are of a working class origin and have made the leap from poverty either by hard work or by dubious means, but their mentality never left the domain of poverty (Ugor 2007: 16) and the films they produce bear traces of this experience.

The producers are in many aspects like marketers, but some of them have been trained in filmmaking. They often act in the triple role of a producer, scriptwriter and director, controlling the creative and economic parts of the business. They have privileged encounters with the urban nouveau riche and the stories of their films are also from this milieu: high-class double deals, rituals, family feuds, the urban sex trade and so on. These films are very popular amongst the working class (ibid.: 17) because they provide a look into the world to which they aspire to; this is also true with Nigerians living abroad.

¹² According to Ugor: 'Between 1994 and April 2005, the board censored about four thousand, six hundred films... and out of this number, some twenty-five or so films have been completely embargoed' (2007: 11-12).

Christianity and Islam, the two institutionalized religions in Nigeria, have different attitudes towards films. The Catholic Church has always recognized the persuasive potentials of film, but contemporary Christian videos are not merely intended to evangelize. They address social problems, assigning to them a spiritual rationale. Particularly active are the new Pentecostal Churches. They provide scripts, the majority of the cast and crew. Because of the huge social and economic problems in the country, church ‘...has become the last hope of the people’ (ibid.: 18) and these films are extremely popular.

Islam is the dominant religion among the Hausas of northern Nigeria.¹³ It is a religion and culture at the same time, and many scholars claim that exactly the pervasive presence of Islam as a way of life gives the Hausa film its distinctive character (ibid.: 18). Contrary to a decade ago, when hundreds of films were made in Nigeria and only a few of them in Hausa (Balogun 1998), at present video filmmaking in northern Nigeria seem to be as vibrant as in the southern parts. Video-films from the north of Nigeria are in most cases intertwined with the promotion and propagation of Islamic culture and doctrines, but mosques are not involved in the direct funding of video-film production.

Filmmaking in Nigeria is purely commercial activity, so it is clear that the audience is another determinant of the content of video films. The interesting thing in Ugor’s account is his statement that this audience has a very distinctive social character, i.e. it ‘...is made up of the urban poor... artisans and tradesmen, such as carpenters, mechanics, vulcanizers, touts, drivers, cleaners, and other unskilled labourers’ (Ugor 2007: 18) who actually encounter the difficulties associated with post-colonial existence and the stories of violence, ritual murder, unemployment, avarice and betrayals that are popular with them.

The problem, here, is not simply that Ugor associates the issue of audience with the issue of quality, but that the quality is the issue because the audience is – the wrong audience. Ugor explicitly claims that:

The lower classes cherish the fact that it is this filmic genre that recognizes and sympathizes with the present state of the downtrodden... To remain in the industry, the Nigerian videographer must continue to weigh the preference of the audience even at the risk of compromising refined cinematic taste (ibid: 20).

By putting *the lower classes* in direct opposition to *refined cinematic taste*, he not only presumes that there are higher classes that possess refined cinematic taste in Nigeria; he also accepts the colonizer’s presumption that there is but one refined cinematic taste, one canonical quality of films: the one that audiences of film festivals and film critics demonstrate when they do not find their expected cinematic quality in video films produced in Nigeria.

¹³ Even if in some of the states, like Taraba in the North East, the Hausa and Fulani are Catholics. Here I refer to my personal experience of meeting with Africans from Taraba State who presented themselves as Hausa and as active Catholics.

My proposal would be that judging Nigerian video films according to traditional canons of cinematic quality is not the most appropriate way since this judgement retains the criteria of the language that historically – as shown by Barthes example (2000) – has been working against those who did not have the means to participate at its development. Nigerian video films do not simply implement the same cinematic language in particular circumstances. This, perhaps, can still be said for the Francophone Africa where – thanks to the available funding – some kind of indigenous production existed even in the celluloid era. In British colonies, there was no such funding. In independent Nigeria, no state funding was available either. As a result, filmmaking was a pure commercial enterprise even in the celluloid times when it was much more expensive and state funding was part of what was, and to a greatest extent still is, perceived as canonical quality film production.

On the other hand, the Nigerian video films are not only innovative in responding to the insecurities of everyday life in Nigeria (Larkin 2008: 170); they are innovating the film media itself. This innovation not only concerns funding and/or production, which was made available by the new low-end filmmaking technologies. In order that the new type of financing would work, a new type of production was developed, and this brought about new type of products, made for a new type of audience.

The transformation is total. Nigerian video films present a new type of visual language, with its own canonical quality, because a new type of the use of film has been developed within the Nigerian video film cultures. The films in Nigeria are not ‘consumed’ in cinemas, but in other spaces. They are also not used as art (in canonical sense, again) and not as pure entertainment. Rather, it is a hybrid use, bringing together various existing forms, very much like at the beginnings of celluloid film in US and Europe, when the particular combination between art and popular entertainment was, as some scholars claim (Casetti 2007: 83–110), the historical innovation brought about by the cinema in the first place.

The spaces (and practices) of seeing

Every classification of course presumes a certain mode of use. Scholars looking for *auteurs*, for narrative or visual particularities, presume the films are being consumed as art objects, or – even more often in case of Nollywood– as entertainment. To test the claim that Nigerian films are being used beyond these two dominant Western uses, let me propose to look at how Nigerians themselves are ‘using’ their films. Here, I combine individual research done in the Benue State, a rural state in Central East Nigeria, and the results of a research done in the Nigerian financial and movie making capital, Lagos (Ajibade, 2008). In many ways, Lagos as a huge urban metropolis can serve as a model for whole of urban Nigeria. Benue, on the contrary, can provide and insight into the distinct features of the cultures of rural population. My research was motivated by previously-gathered knowledge on Nigerian video film cultures, but also by my previous research in technological and visual innovations (Zajc 2000; 2005). Particularly useful was the study of the beginnings of television in Slovenia (Zajc 1995). The practices of viewing video films in contemporary Nigeria resemble the practices of viewing television in its early times in Slovenia; their functions, however, are different.

My guide into Nigerian video film cultures, Franka Aernan, has mostly been acting in films in English; however, she belongs to the Tiv ethnic group. Her godfather, a renowned Nigerian politician and diplomat Iyorwuese Hagher, was also her employer at the time of my visit in December 2006. Mr. Hagher, who by profession is a professor of dramatic arts, had just left the post of the ambassador in Mexico and was among the candidates for the governor of the Benue State. Franka Aernan was running his Public Relations Office. We met in his residence in Makurdi, the capital of Benue State, a day before the party convention. Making video films was part of his plan to modernize the rural state and he promised quite clearly: 'If I will be elected Governor, we will shoot films here too.' He was not elected, but the last time (August 3, 2008) I heard from Franca Aernan, she told me that Mr. Hagher, who at the time serves as the Ambassador of Nigeria to Canada, was involved in film production. The people all around the city of Makurdi, in bars, hotels, restaurants and on the busy streets recognized Franca. She was very polite to those who wanted to talk to her. Later she explained that she does not approve of those actors who nurture their stardom by ignoring the audience. She understands herself as a role model and takes this with full responsibility.

In the society of Makurdi, there are other mass media beside video films. My insight was limited only to those in English, which is an official Nigerian language and widely spoken in the city. Newspapers and radio stations bring basic information about what is happening in Nigeria and federal states; many radio stations broadcast religious content. Television sets are common in public places; they mostly show one of two channels. In offices, it is the channel of the state-owned NTA, the Nigerian Television Authority. In the days of my visit, NTA was broadcasting, morning to evening, presentations of the candidates for governors. In bars and restaurants, television sets are either used for watching videos, or set to African Magic, a channel that is broadcasting Nigerian films, mostly in English. African Magic is a pan-African channel bringing Nigerian films to the whole of Africa. African emigrants have brought them to the rest of the world – in New York the Nigerian films are being bought by the Chinese, in Holland by people from Surinam, in London by Jamaicans. Yet the basis for their global popularity is the very broad accessibility of video films within Nigeria.

The fact that Nigerian films are not made on celluloid has brought the film-viewing experience to millions of people who did not have access to cinema. The absence of cinemas was replaced by the evolution of spaces within which videos are consumed by different audiences. The video film is usually sold in shops, kiosks and other street outlets but there are specific and contextual spaces that have emerged. Ajibade defines four various categories of these spaces: private spaces, dedicated spaces, tie-in spaces and found spaces. They all provide '...opportunities for everyday people to see and engage in the video dialogue – on their own terms' (2007: 4). In Benue State, these places converge within the institution of a video centre. Video centres serve as spaces for viewing, while their main role is distribution.

Makurdi is a three-hour drive away from the Nigerian capital of Abuja. The streets of Makurdi, but also the road from Abudja to Makurdi, are used for trade as well as travel. Any major concentration of the trading posts includes a video centre. These centres are

of various kinds; they can be buildings equipped with a player and a television set, walls covered with shelves full of VHS cassettes and VCD disks with the films, glass doors and windows covered by huge film posters. But they can also be simple stands with piles of cassettes and disks with colourful covers. Video centres are the main distribution points for Nigerian video films. The films cost between 200 in 350 naira. The latest are on the VCDs and cost more, the older ones on VHS cassettes cost less. In Makurdi, there are many more video centres than there are newspaper stands.

People who work in video centres are mostly young, women and men. They obviously watch the products they sell and all of them are, just like Tarantino et al., great cinephiles, lovers of and experts on their films. They recognize the old film titles and they respond with laughter when you mention the cult authors. When you ask for an old title, they are politely surprised and they explain to you that that film is older than their video centre; they obviously do not keep stock.

The role of these centres, however, does not end with vending. In Makurdi, some video centres serve as dedicated spaces for watching movies. Just like video parlours and video clubs/rentals, they are designated for screening video films. People can go there to rent videotapes and video CDs for, perhaps, one tenth of the purchase price, and if they can not afford viewing equipment they can actually see the films right there. Video centres, like video parlours, are furnished with a television set, a video player and benches or chairs for people to sit and watch video films. The chairs are arranged facing the viewing area while curtains or huge film posters block-out light and air from the outside. In general in Nigeria, as Ajibade describes, the nature of the video parlour or video club corresponds to the quality of the general neighbourhood. Some video clubs at city centres have durable structures, glass doors/windows and air-conditioners, other areas have more modest spaces for seeing video and ‘...discussing the dramatized social agenda’ (2007: 5).

In Makurdi, hotel lobbies, bars, restaurants, hairdressing salons, even some shops selling clothes are equipped with television sets and video players to show video films. Ajibade defines these places as ‘the tie-in spaces’ (ibid.: 6). Bar and restaurant owners furnish their shops with video facilities for customers to enjoy over food or drink. Even long-distance commercial buses play video films ‘...over the journeys to the keen and participatory passengers’ (ibid.).

The eagerness of contemporary Nigerians to watch locally-produced video films reaches even beyond the limits of dedicated and tie-in spaces, to a sort of found space, i.e. free spaces in the streets, in front of video centres and/or shops where people come by chance upon video showings. Many video shops, but also other shop owners, have television sets and video players inside their shops, often with monitors placed in such a way as to face the entrance doorway and enable the screen to be seen from the street, outside the shop. It is this television screen – on which a video is playing – that is ‘found’ and used by the people on the street, who do not have the financial means to enter the shop and buy a film. The found space may even be an open door or window in a residential building, where a video is playing to the residents. Neighbours and street people simply cluster around such windows or doorways to see the film. Found spaces then provide free video viewing to people who would not rent or buy videos and video equipment. Ajibade

reports that the shop owners do not disapprove of the found space audiences completely, because crowds also help to call attention to the shops.

All of the above-mentioned spaces are public. Such was also the viewing practice in the early stage of television all around Europe. For example, in Slovenia all three categories of spaces existed as well. Dedicated spaces had a form of television clubs. Tie-in spaces were certain bars and coffee shops providing television sets for the clients. On special occasions, such as first public demonstrations of television during the 1950s, found spaces were being created around places with television sets, often placed in such a manner that the monitors could be viewed from the outside (Zajc 1995). However, collective public viewing almost completely disappeared when individual viewing in private spaces prevailed as the dominant form of the use of television.

Contrary to this situation, in the case of Nigerian Video Film Cultures, the viewing of films in private spaces is just one of the possibilities, and even here the viewing usually takes place in a group. Private spaces include homes and offices where television sets and players are installed. What I observed in Makurdi is, according to the reports of the colleagues, a common practice in Nigeria. A good number of offices are furnished with video equipment so that staff can, at break or other intervals, watch television or see videos (Ajibade 2007: 4). These types of electronic equipment are also standard in highbrow residential quarters, yet in popular neighbourhoods it is usual to find just a few homes so equipped. These homes become ‘...sites for the rest of the community to see and discuss the video film’ (ibid.). People will crowd such homes in the evenings or at holidays to see the films:

As the film progresses people discuss both the video dramas and the social events that the films reference. Sometimes the talks and arguments can become heated. At such moments the film will be paused to enable the gathering to thrash-out knotty issues. All satisfied, the video sequence will be continued amidst fresh perspectives about the new video sequences (ibid: 6).

Ajibade’s report is of a particular importance. The viewing of films, even when taking place in private spaces, retains the qualities of a collective viewing. Contrary to the darkness, silence and immobility of the *dispositif* (Zajc, 2000) of the cinema, the viewing of Nigerian video films is distracted, like the television viewing, and it permits interruptions. These interruptions are partly the result of a particular technological condition: Nigeria’s national electricity supply is quite erratic and every public viewing place cannot function without an electricity generator. Yet the disruptions also serve for the discussion of the films and their topics from the perspective of their social contexts. Such viewing practices intertwine the on-screen and off-screen spaces in a very active, intense way. Similarly, within the films themselves the fictitious and actual events are combined in unprecedented ways.

Conclusion

Benue State has little less than three million inhabitants, most of them belonging to Tiv, Idome and Igede ethnic groups; the English films are the most popular with the local audience. Trying to avoid the canonical 'quality' films and to come as close as possible to the choice of the audience, I asked the video centres' keepers to choose for me the films that they liked the most. Women selected melodramas, men comedies, thus somehow denying the Western audience's presumption that witchcraft and magic prevail among Nigerian video films. The films were a valuable selection, so I did not check the technical state of the tapes until when watching them. Both, magnetic tape and digital versions were full of the drop out, i.e. technically damaged parts of recording. Sometimes, the cassette fell apart when I took it out of the box and I had to glue it together before watching. The VCDs stopped playing; sometimes, even a repeated start did not help, making me feel uneasy because I could not see how the film ends. The sound was, in most cases, so bad that it was hard to hear the dialogue and I had to repeat the viewing. The style of shooting was a combination of television, mostly talking heads and middle-shots, with informative shots separating the sequences, and seventies-style video-art or amateur styles of shooting with a lot of zoom-ins and outs. This – apart from cultural differences – could explain why the stories seem hard to follow and illogical (Mueller 2004), while the most simple, even overly simplistic ways of dealing with issues like the fight between good and evil, probably explain why one feels compelled to follow them despite the obstacles, and of course, cultural differences.

It seems that in Nigeria, the role of creating a critical public – the role which is performed by the press in Western European societies – has been taken over by the film, and thus by the media of the image that West European public often refuses as unreliable. The images in Nigerian films perform this role by being unreliable – unclear, open, ambiguous, and allegorical. The authors of Nigerian video films use fiction to talk about their lives; they narrate incredible stories to present common everyday experience.

Melodrama is a way of dealing with the instability of love, but also a genre most suitable for allegory; thus, in a broader sense, for talking about one thing to narrate about another. By talking about individuals, melodrama is always also talking about society. Society is a structural condition of melodramatic effects, since these effects are results of the obstacles that the love has to encounter in order to overcome them and thus show its power. The obstacles are often posed by society and the authors have been traditionally using melodrama to talk about the world they live in.

One of the most prolific and critical authors in this genre in Nigeria is Chico Ejiro, an Igbo director and producer who is also making films in English and in Yoruba, with the nickname Mr. Prolific. He shot more than 80 films; his leading characters are mostly women that have been pushed into misery, but they are neither weak nor helpless. Sometimes, with their help and without metaphors, he himself speaks up. In *Computer Girls* (2003) the pastor's daughter (Franca Aernan) enters prostitution to be able to afford the services of witchcraft and make a man of her choice fall in love with her. When her younger sister complains that her behaviour is not moral, she responds, 'Throw morality to the dogs. Everything that counts in Nigeria is money!'

Many scholars have drawn attention to the social aspect of Nigerian movies. Okome (in Ugor 2007) claims that through Nigerian films, producers and audiences alike, ‘name their sufferings’ (ibid.: 19). Ugor claims that these films are tableaux of the current social condition of their audience, reminders that society is aware of their plights, at least in so far as it is able to name them (ibid.). Larkin, analyzing Nigerian video film cultures together with other contemporary African phenomena such as Pentecostalism, Islamism and informal economies, states that they all have in common the realization of the instability of everyday life, the need for new networks for advancement and new conceptual schemata that explain the suffering of people, proffer a means for escape and represent a yearning for justice (2008: 170). In other words, however different, Nigerian films ‘...provide the occasions in which the drama of post-colonial Nigeria is both represented and enacted’ (ibid.: 173). The notion of Nigerian video film cultures I propose here does not negate the above claims. What it should do, however, is to place more stress on, but also trust for the audience. Not focusing on the films themselves, but also on the culture in which they are being produced and consumed, I propose to perceive Nigerian films as a part of everyday life, and to understand their reception – viewing discussions, sometimes fierce, during and after the viewing – as a significant part of public discourse.

In the popularity of Nigerian films, we should see not only description, but also critical reflection; not only escape, but also confrontation; not only a way to accept what is, but also the start of imagining what could be –in other words, the creation of a critical public opinion. They are entertainment, but also information. The roles, which have been perceived as separated in the Western world, performed together. From this perspective, Nigerian films are far from contemporary multiplex and art cinema, yet close to the role of the cinema at time of its beginnings in Europe and North America. Francesco Casetti (2008) claims that early films performed the role of art and entertainment at the same time and they could do this, because they provided images that were simultaneously fictitious and factual. In a similar way, Nigerian video films are art, entertainment and public discourse simultaneously because they merge facts and fiction, using images as real and false at the same time.

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Povzetek

V Nigeriji vse manjšo moč države spremlja večanje nestabilnosti vsakdanjega življenja. Tradicionalna sredstva družbene promocije kot sta izobraževanje in javna služba skoraj ne obstajajo več. Snemanje filmov se je izkazalo za dobičkonosno dejavnost in mnogi brezposelni, a ustvarjalni mladi Nigerijci so v tem našli način družbenega napredovanja. Nigerijske video filmske kulture so začele kot zasebno podjetništvo in nigerijski filmi so postali glavni mediji oblikovanja javne razprave. Produkcija in distribucija temeljita na alternativnih mrežah za distribucijo video vsebin. Jezik povezuje motive zahodne in indijskega kinematografije. Nigerijske video filmske kulture izzivajo globalne sisteme video produkcije in distribucije. Bi lahko predstavljale izziv tudi prevladi zahodnega sistema reprezentacije? To je temeljno vprašanje, ki ga postavlja članek. Povezujemo rezultate raziskav, ki so jih opravili kolegi s področji kot so antropologija, medijski in filmski študiji, ter terensko raziskovalno delo, ki smo ga opravili decembra 2006 v Nigeriji, po tistem pa na daljavo. Rezultati napeljujejo k sklepu, da Nigerijske video filmske kulture subvertirajo dominantne sisteme video produkcije in distribucije in nudijo prostor za oblikovanje javne razprave prav zaradi tega, ker pomenijo inovacijo na ravni samega filmskega jezika.

KLUČNE BESEDE: film, video, digitalni kino, Nigerija, kolonializem

CORRESPONDENCE: MELITA ZAJC, University of Maribor, Department for Media Communication, Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, SI-2000 Maribor, Slovenia. E-mail: melita.zajc@gmail.com.