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An Exploratory Commentary on Nollywood
Filmmakers' Portrayals and Frames of Societal Issues

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Abstract

This exploratory commentary investigates the dynamic relationship between the subjective 'frames' of Nollywood filmmakers and their on-screen portrayals of societal issues. Adopting a qualitative textual analysis approach, the study examines canonical films to understand how personal worldviews are externalised into cinematic narratives. The article utilises a triadic theoretical framework, synthesising

the Social Construction of Reality, Social Cognitive Theory, and Framing Theory, to explore the lifecycle of filmic reality. The central thesis argues that Nollywood is an active agent in shaping public perception rather than a passive mirror of society. The analysis demonstrates how filmmakers' subjective realities influence themes of corruption, gender relations, religion, and youth, while also critiquing the "New Nollywood" shift's introduction of a commercial frame that consolidates class-based realities. The commentary concludes that filmmakers bear a significant ethical responsibility to leverage their craft for deliberate and positive societal transformation.

Keywords: *African Cinema, Filmmaking, Framing Theory, Nollywood, Social Issues, Social Construction of Reality, Social Cognitive Theory*

INTRODUCTION: UNVEILING THE NOLLYWOOD FRAME

The Nollywood film industry transcends its status as a commercial enterprise to function as a profound cultural and social institution. Recognized worldwide by its sheer volume of production, the rapid growth of the industry is inextricably linked to the socio-political and economic realities of Nigeria and the rest of the African continent. Unlike its western counterparts, the emergence of Nollywood was not a top-down, state-sponsored affair; it was a grassroots, decentralised phenomenon born from a period of national economic precarity. This unique trajectory fostered a symbiotic relationship between the industry and its audience, premised on the belief that Nollywood tells "true stories" that reflect the world exactly as its consumers experience it.

However, the prevailing notion that these films serve as a raw, unfiltered mirror of society requires critical re-examination. This commentary argues that the cinematic frame is not a neutral lens but a physical manifestation of the subjective worldview of the filmmaker. Although previous scholarship has documented the industry's fascination with technology and its informal distribution networks (Shaka, 2003; Arthur, 2007; Hussein & Sunday, 2019), there remains a gap in understanding how the filmmaker's personal social frame actively constructs the reality presented on screen.

The specific objectives of this article are twofold. First, it explores how the personal frames of Nollywood filmmakers, shaped by their unique social realities, influence their on-screen portrayals of societal issues. Second, it investigates how the shift to a 'New Nollywood' has introduced a powerful commercial frame targeting an affluent audience, which may be contributing to the consolidation of class-based realities. Moving beyond the passive

mirror metaphor, this paper posits that the filmic frame is an active instrument for the social construction of reality.

Structure of the Article

To articulate this argument, the article is structured into three main sections. The first section outlines the Methodology and Theoretical Framework, justifying the use of a triadic lens to interpret cinematic content. The second section, 'Theorising the Nollywood Gaze', applies this framework to analyse specific thematic portrayals, including corruption, gender relations, religion, and youth, while demonstrating the link between the filmmaker's psyche and the screen. The final section examines the Evolution of the Frame, analysing how the economic imperatives of "New Nollywood" are reshaping narrative priorities. The article concludes with a commentary on the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers in shaping social narratives.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach centered on textual analysis and the application of a combined theoretical lens. As an exploratory commentary, the research is nonempirical in the traditional quantitative sense; rather, it conducts an in-depth analysis of existing cultural artifacts, specifically, canonical Nollywood films, to deconstruct the underlying messages embedded within them.

The primary method involves qualitative content analysis applied to specific thematic units, including camera angles, dialogue, characterisation, and narrative resolution. This approach allows for a dissection of the filmic frames to move beyond surface-level plot descriptions and explain the psychological and sociological processes that shape these narratives.

THEORISING THE NOLLYWOOD GAZE: A TRIADIC FRAMEWORK

To fully understand the filmmaker's role as a constructor of reality, a single theoretical viewpoint is insufficient. Therefore, this paper uses a triadic framework to capture the full lifecycle of the cinematic narrative.

1. **The Origin (Social Construction of Reality):** Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's theory (1966) is used to understand the *source* of the narrative and how the filmmaker's subjective reality is formed and subsequently externalized.

2. **The Process (Social Cognitive Theory):** Albert Bandura's theory (1986) is pivotal in analysing the *mechanism* of creation. It explains the reciprocal relationship between the filmmaker's cognition, their creative behavior (observational learning), and the unique production environment of Nollywood.
3. **The Output (Framing Theory):** Erving Goffman's theory (1974) is used to interpret the *product*, which is the film itself. Connects the internal cognition of the filmmaker to the external observable choices made on screen.

Justification for a Triadic Theoretical Framework

The analysis of the relationship between the filmmaker and his creative work required that this article utilise a triadic theoretical framework, which comprises Social Construction of Reality, Social Cognitive, and Framing Theory. They are selected for the following reasons:

1. These three theories are interconnected in the sense that they provide a complete chain of causation that explains how reality is perceived (Construction), how behaviour is learnt (Cognition), and how it is presented to others (Framing).
2. These three theories are relevant to Creative Agency because they specifically address the role of the individual (the Filmmaker) within a broader social structure; this is crucial for the decentralised nature of Nollywood.
3. These three theories have an explanatory power, beyond the discourse of 'reflectionism', to the explanation of the active construction of social norms.

The Social Construction of the Filmmaker's Reality

The theoretical foundation for understanding the Nollywood gaze begins with Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's seminal work on the social construction of reality. The theory posits that human reality is not an objective fixed entity but rather a product of shared human experiences and ongoing social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This process unfolds in a continuous loop of three moments.

1. **Externalisation**, where individuals and groups create a social world through their actions;
2. **Objectivition**, where this created world becomes a perceived reality

seemingly independent of its creators; and

3. **Internalisation**, where individuals are socialised into this objectivated world and adopt it as their own subjective reality.

The unique and decentralised origin of Nollywood serves as a powerful case study for this process. The industry was born from an impossible production environment characterised by a lack of government support, limited investment, limited technological infrastructure (Oguamanam, 2020), and competition from foreign (Hollywood, Indian, and Chinese) films, all of which had destroyed the older celluloid film tradition (Madichie et al., 2019). Rather than being dictated by a single authoritative voice or institution, a vast network of individual filmmakers externalised their personal perceptions of Nigerian society through rapid-fire home video productions.

According to Garritano (2014), this mass externalisation, repeated and consumed by millions of people over decades, became the objectivised reality for a generation of Nigerians. Just as Alabi (2019) further puts forth, this fragmented, trilingual nature of the industry, the Igbo-based productions in the East, Yoruba-language films in the West, and Hausa-language films in the North, further demonstrates this phenomenon, as distinct groups of filmmakers externalised their unique cultural and linguistic realities, which then became a shared reality for their respective communities. In this way, Nollywood's grassroots origins represent a collective, albeit uncoordinated, act of social construction that contrasts sharply with the top-down propaganda-driven filmmaking of the earlier colonial film units and the Nigerian Television Authority, NTA (Ogunleye, 2014).

Social Cognition and Creative Agency

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory provides the second crucial lens for understanding the filmmaker's role in this process of Social Cognition. Bandura's theory emphasizes a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between an individual's personal cognition (their beliefs and experiences), their creative behavior, and their environment. This **reciprocal determinism** (of learning 'work' by watching and imitating a Master at his craft [Oladejo, 2019; Isiani et al., 2024]) is fundamental to the Nollywood context. The theory suggests that filmmakers, as individuals, acquire and maintain behavior, in this case, the practice of filmmaking, by observing and interacting with their environment.

Another key element is **observational learning**, in which individuals witness and reproduce the behaviors of others. The Nollywood industry, built by "nonprofessionals," including former NTA workers and video

cassette marketers (Azeez, 2019), did not emerge from a preexisting academic or professional film culture but from individuals observing successful, if rudimentary, production methods. The low budgets and rapid turnaround times that characterised classic Nollywood were not simply a result of limited resources; they became a learned and reinforced behavioral norm through the proven profitability of the get-rich-quick genre and other popular formats (Obafemi, 2017). These dynamics underscore a significant paradox: the industry's explosive success was built on the creative agency of technically unskilled individuals who nevertheless possessed immense confidence, or **self-efficacy**, in their ability to tell stories and succeed in a volatile market. This reliance on personal background and creative drive, rather than formal cinematic training, positioned the filmmaker's individual worldview as the primary force shaping the aesthetic and narrative direction of Nollywood.

The Filmic Frame as a Social Frame

Erving Goffman's Framing Theory provides the final piece of the theoretical puzzle, connecting the filmmaker's internal cognition to the external, observable act of filmmaking. Goffman argued that frames are interpretative structures that individuals use to make sense of the world, simplifying complex information and guiding interpretation. In the context of filmmaking, the **filmic frame** (the specific choices of what is included, excluded, and emphasized on screen) is not just a compositional device but a powerful tool that reveals a creator's way of seeing the world. According to Weaver (2007) and Field et al. (2018), this functions as a second-level agenda setting, where filmmakers do not merely select topics for the audience to consider, but actively guide *how* those topics should be interpreted by highlighting specific attributes and downplaying others.

By synthesizing the three theories, a powerful causal loop becomes apparent. The socially constructed reality of a Nollywood filmmaker (Berger and Luckmann) shapes his personal cognition and creative choices (Bandura). These cognitive and behavioral patterns are then physically externalized through the filmic frame (Goffman). This process is not always conscious. For example, the repeated on-screen portrayal of the barren woman as a societal pariah or the vilification of traditional religions is not necessarily a deliberate act of malice. It is a cinematic reproduction of a filmmaker's own deeply internalized and objective social reality. This unconscious framing, in turn, influences the audience's perception of social issues, reinforcing a cyclical process of social construction. The core

argument here is that the problems with Nollywood's social commentary are not simply that the media reflects society, but that the personal, often biased, frames of its creators become the new, objectified reality for the masses.

What makes Reality real for the masses?

Our individual realities are not shaped by objective truth but by our subjective interpretation of it. As a sociologist, W.I. Thomas (1928) famously stated in the Thomas Theorem that "*if a person perceives a situation as real, it is real in its consequences*" (p. 572). This means that our behavior is a response to our personal perception of a situation, and the outcomes of that behavior can make that perception a tangible reality. For example, a teenager repeatedly labeled as rebellious might start acting out, thereby making the label a reality.

Filmmakers like screenwriters and directors play a powerful role in constructing reality for their audiences. They do this by drawing on their own learned perceptions and assumptions to shape the narratives we see on screen.

Ethnomethodology: This concept, explored by Harold Garfinkel (1967), explains how our background assumptions, the unstated rules, and patterns we learn from our daily lives guide our understanding of the world. For example, a filmmaker's personal experiences of family will likely influence how they portray family structures in their films.

Dramaturgy: Erving Goffman (1974) viewed social life as a theatrical performance. We all play a role on a metaphorical stage, and our daily interactions are a form of impression management. Goffman distinguished between the **front stage** (public interactions, like a wedding or a classroom) and the **back stage** (private moments where we can be ourselves). The realities presented in films, therefore, are often a curated front-stage performance based on the filmmaker's own beliefs and interpretations of these social roles.

Together, these theories explain how the subjective realities of filmmakers, shaped by their backgrounds and social roles, can become the constructed reality for many Nigerians who watch their films.

FROM FRAME TO SCREEN: THEMATIC PORTRAYALS OF SOCIETAL ISSUES

This section applies the triadic theoretical framework to specific examples of thematic portrayals in Nollywood, demonstrating how a filmmaker's personal frame manifests itself on screen and shapes a collective social

reality.

The Framing of Corruption and Political Patronage

Corruption is a pervasive and recurring theme in Nollywood films, with frequent portrayals of political "godfatherism," bribery, and unaccountable leaders (Ezeh et al., 2015; Ameh et al., 2025). The literature indicates that this portrayal on screen is disproportionately reconcilable with the social reality that audiences identify and associate with the subject (Awala, 2011). In these films, corruption is rarely presented as an anomaly, but as a normalised systemic reality and a necessary path to power and wealth (Fukuyama, 2018). The filmmaker's frame, in this instance, is one of lived experience. Their narratives are an externalisation of a world where political patronage is a familiar, almost expected part of the social and economic landscape.

By framing corruption in this manner, Awodiya and Amobi (2013) submit that Nollywood films perform a dual function. They provide a space for social critique and serve as a bold reminder of government incompetence. However, by consistently presenting these corrupt behaviors as the dominant, if not the only, way for characters to achieve power and success, the films also objectify this reality for the audience. This creates a cinematic world that validates the pre-existing belief that political power is inherently linked to corrupt practices. The filmmaker's personal, internalized experience of corruption is thus presented as an objective fact, making it a familiar and almost empathetic concept to the audience.

Gender, Abuse, and Ambivalent Narratives

The portrayal of women in Nollywood is deeply complex and contradictory, revealing a profound clash of frames within the filmmaking community itself. Classic Nollywood films often reinforce patriarchal stereotypes (Uwah, 2018) that frame women as subordinate, domestic, or valuable only for their fertility (Okunna, 2002). According to Swift (2013), this on-screen narrative will, for example, blame a rape victim for her own abuse or portray a barren woman as deserving of disdain and ritualistic violence. This is a clear externalization of the traditional, male-dominated social reality of many filmmakers, which, in turn, reinforces these norms for the audience through a process of selective perception and retention (Shaka & Uchendu, 2012).

However, Martins et al. (2025) suggest that the industry has also demonstrated emerging trends where women are framed as 'resilient', 'ambitious', and 'independent', a reflection of a younger generation of filmmakers navigating a more progressive reality. Yet, this empowerment is often framed as problematic or risky in the narrative, complicating the stories of self-reliant women with elements that make their independence seem dangerous or lead to their downfall (Kayode-Adedeji et al., 2025). This ambivalent framing reflects the filmmaker's own struggle to reconcile competing social realities, such as the traditional beliefs they were raised with and the modern aspirations they now confront. The narrative compromise serves as an appeal to both traditional and progressive audiences, but also demonstrates a fundamental tension in the filmmaker's creative worldview, which is then projected onto the screen.

The Spiritual Frame: Religion, Ritual Killings, and the Supernatural

According to scholars like Kumwenda (2007) and Bature-Uzor (2017), the Nollywood film library, particularly from its early years, is replete with themes of ritual killings, occultism, and witchcraft. These narratives are a direct externalization of a mindset where success and wealth are believed to be rooted in supernatural, rather than purely secular, forces. This is especially evident in the distinct subgenre of evangelical films, which emerged from the Christian bloc of Nollywood (Olayiwola, 2017). These films consistently frame and vilify traditional African religions, beliefs, and icons while portraying Christianity as morally superior.

This frame of reference demonstrates a personal frame actively and intentionally building a new reality. As a highly religious group, the typical Nigerian filmmaker, drawing from a deeply religious belief system, externalizes a reality in which the material world is in constant battle with spiritual forces. They create a cinematic narrative where the forces of evil are synonymous with traditional beliefs, and redemption is found only through Christian conversion. This is not merely a reflection of a religious society; it is an active deconstruction of one reality (traditional belief systems) and the construction of another (Christian supremacy). As one heavily critical source notes, this type of on-screen portrayal can be seen as an advertisement of God (Ukah, 2003), a direct consequence of the filmmakers' personal spiritual frames becoming the foundation for the cinematic world.

Youthfulness and the Perpetuation of Stereotypes

According to Ekwenchi et al. (2013), the on-screen exemplified portrayal of

youth through the comedic characters of *Aki* (Osita Theme) and *Panpaw* (Chinedu Ikedieze) in Nollywood provides a compelling instance where framing can contribute to and reinforce societal stereotypes. While the filmmakers' initial intent may have been to provide mere comic relief, the repeated cinematic framing of these characters as deviant, corrupt, and delinquent created an unconscious and incautious image that became an objectified social reality for a wide audience (Muncie, 2009).

This situation illustrates the critical distinction between a filmmaker's creative intent and the social consequences of their framing choices. A creative choice made for entertainment (to create a funny caricature) became a powerful social fact for the audience (the idea that youth are inherently unruly and disobedient). This is a potent example of how the filmmaking process, through the externalisation of a simplified frame, can shape public perception in unintended but consequential ways.

Table 3.1: The Filmmaker's Frame and its Thematic Manifestations in Classic Nollywood

Social Issue	Filmic Manifestation	Canonical Film(s)	Analysed Filmmaker's Frame	Theoretical Link
Corruption & Political Patronage	"Godfatherism," bribery scenes, and unaccountable leaders	<i>The Last Party, Igodo</i>	A frame of lived precarity; a systemic, normalised understanding of corruption as the path to power.	Social Construction of Reality: Externalization of a preexisting social stratification.
Gender & Abuse	The "barren" woman, victim blaming, and submissive wives	<i>Living in Bondage, Blood Money, Isakaba</i>	A frame of traditional patriarchal norms, where a woman's value is tied to domesticity and fertility.	Social Construction of Reality & Social Cognitive Theory: Internalisation and reproduction of traditional gender norms.
Religion & Supernatural	Ritual killings for wealth, exorcism, and the vilification of traditional beliefs	<i>Living in Bondage, Blood Money, End of the Wicked</i>	A deeply spiritual, Christian frame that perceives wealth as linked to the supernatural and vilifies traditional beliefs.	Framing Theory: Active construction of a narrative that establishes Christian supremacy over traditional religions.
Youthfulness	Youth are delinquent, disobedient, and mischievous	Films starring 'Aki & Pawpaw.'	A frame of simplification for entertainment, creating a caricatured view of youth behavior.	Social Construction of Reality: A creative choice for comic relief becomes an objectified social stereotype.

Source: *Research Fieldwork*, 2025

THE NEW NOLLYWOOD AND THE EVOLVING FRAME

The Neoliberal Shift and the Reframing of Audience

The last decade has seen a significant transformation in the Nollywood ecosystem, driven by technological advancements and the emergence of new distribution channels (Madichie et al., 2019). The proliferation of digital technologies, streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, iROKOTv, and others like them (Mauyakufa & Pradhan, 2018), and the rise of multiplex cinemas have created a major structural shift that is fundamentally altering the industry's business model and, consequently, the filmmaker's frame (Keating, 2017). This new system targets a different demographic: described by Izorya (2017) as a disproportionately young, affluent, educated audience with a taste for transnational, US-influenced cinema. According to Mwangi (2023), this contrasts starkly with the, for instance, market women and bush hunters, who formed the core audience of the original home video market. The economic imperative of this "New Nollywood" has introduced a powerful new variable into the creative process: the **commercial frame**. This frame is not derived from the filmmaker's personal, lived reality but from the economic logic of the new market. According to Wayne and Castro (2021), to attract global platforms and cinemagoers, filmmakers must now produce content that meets higher technical standards and features beautiful people in beautiful settings. This economic environment is actively and deliberately shaping the filmmaker's frame, influencing creative decisions away from the raw, unfiltered portrayals of the past and towards a more polished, internationally palatable aesthetic. The financial success of a film is now intrinsically linked to its ability to conform to this new commercial framework.

From Social Critique to Aspiration: The Changing Narrative

The shift from the home video era to the new cinematic age has also resulted in a change in narrative focus, demonstrating a class-based social construction of reality. The original Nollywood, born from a period of national economic crisis and precarity, often mounted a stinging social critique (Agbetiloye, 2024) and explored themes of witchcraft, spiritual anxieties, and societal ills that resonated with a mass audience. In contrast,

films of the New Nollywood era largely accept the premises of this life within enclaves of wealth, focusing on the sophisticated lives of successful professionals and aspirational narratives.

This evolution reveals a bigger, fundamental change in the industry's social function. Old Nollywood, by externalizing the fears and anxieties of the masses, constructed a collective national reality centered on struggle and spiritual warfare. The new Nollywood, however, externalizes a different reality, that of Nigeria's rising middle and upper classes. It focuses on issues relevant to this specific demographic, such as romantic relationships, career ambitions, and family dramas, rather than the pervasive social ills that defined its predecessors. This means that the industry is no longer constructing a single national reality but is, as Aondover and Aondover (2023) suggest, implicated in the formation of social classes and the consolidation of distinct class cultures. This highlights that the filmmaker's personal frame is no longer solely a reflection of the national condition, but is increasingly shaped by the economic realities of a segmented, class-based audience.

CONCLUSION

Nollywood as Cultural Molder

This exploratory commentary has shown that Nollywood is much more than a passive mirror reflecting Nigerian society. It is an active and powerful agent in the social construction of reality, a process driven by the personal "frames" of its creators. Through a comprehensive analysis using the combined theories of social construction of reality, social cognitive theory, and framing, this report has shown how the subjective realities of Nollywood's screenwriters and directors, born of their unique experiences, beliefs, and environments, are externalised through the cinematic medium. This externalisation, whether conscious or not, creates an objectified social reality that is then internalised by the audience, influencing their perceptions of a wide range of social issues, from corruption and gender roles to spirituality and youth. The analysis has also shown how the advent of new technologies and a new demographic of more affluent audiences has introduced a powerful commercial framework, which is now deliberately shaping creative output and reinforcing a class-based social reality.

Concluding Commentary and the Path Forward

The immense power of Nollywood lies in its capacity to tell "true stories" that express "their world," thereby forging an intimate bond with its audience. However, this analysis reveals that this is not a one-way street of simple reflection. The filmmaker's frame, whether rooted in personal spirituality, cultural ambivalence, or the economic pressures of a new distribution model, shapes the very reality that it claims to reflect. Therefore, Nollywood filmmakers have a significant responsibility as cultural arbitrators. The body of literature and available research points to a clear path forward, advocating for a conscious shift in narrative strategy. Rather than simply highlighting problems for entertainment, filmmakers have the capacity to adopt a different frame, and this is one that actively portrays potential solutions and promotes progressive values (Obiora & Uche, 2024). This includes intentional and gender-inclusive storytelling that challenges outdated stereotypes (Uwah, 2018) and narratives that not only depict social ills but also frame paths toward their resolution. By critically examining and evolving their own personal frames, Nollywood filmmakers can move from being unconscious purveyors of socially constructed reality to becoming deliberate and intentional agents of positive societal transformation (Adedeji-Olona, 2025). The future of Nollywood is tied not only to its technological advancement, but to the conscious evolution of the minds and frames that create its stories.

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