

Culture

Author Nadia Denton's film masterclass uses African examples to demonstrate the ways in which filmmakers can bring their content to new audiences.

A masterclass in African film

This month, a masterclass for filmmakers is being hosted by the British Film Institute in London. It covers audience development, festival strategies and self-distribution. I am giving this interactive training session based on guidance from my books *The Black British Filmmaker's Guide to Success* and *The Nigerian Filmmaker's Guide to Success: Beyond Nollywood*.

It's a recognition that African filmmakers are acting as cultural ambassadors for their continent and that they are redrawing the creative lines. Running alongside these developments, soaring mobile phone usage has allowed bold content creators to extend their reach across multiple platforms: engaging with the tech scene

is aiding the development of a burgeoning film sector.

In Nigeria, a new class of content creator is emerging. These filmmakers are making documentary, indie films, animation and Nigerian diaspora films with a very different aesthetic and budget to traditional Nollywood. We are seeing a trend towards more expensively produced films with higher production values.

Fifty, *October 1*, *Invasion 1897* and *Black November* were made for over \$1m each, a far cry from the average budget of \$20,000 that Nollywood films typically have been known for. These films have had theatrical runs at home in Nigeria and also in the UK and US, and prestigious premieres on the international film festival circuit. What's more, a number of Nollywood films, including *Flower Girl*, *October 1* and *Confusion Na Wa*, are available to global audiences on movie-streaming platform Netflix.

While Nollywood is recognised as Africa's biggest industry in terms of output, South Africa has long been seen as the continent's most successful industry for film revenues and international acclaim. It produced the most successful African blockbuster to date, *District 9*, which grossed over \$210m at the international box office. South Africa has also enjoyed Academy Award success. It won an Oscar in the Best Foreign

Below: The encounter that changes everything in Aberrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu*.



Film

Language Film category for *Tsotsi* in 2005 and the country regularly makes academy submissions. Its filmmakers consistently produce content which speaks unapologetically about the state of the nation, themes we have seen in films such as *Beauty, Of Good Report* and *Four Corners*, which pushed the boundaries and received due recognition internationally.

Recent titles *Necktie Youth* and *Cuckold* demonstrate bold young South African voices, not afraid of interrogating sensitive issues in the post-apartheid era.

Continent-wide co-productions

African producers are increasingly seeing the value of continent-wide co-productions rather than those that favour the West. South Africa remains a popular destination for the shooting of ever-popular Nigerian Afrobeats videos and South African actors have been featured in many a Nollywood film.

Cooperation in the multibillion-dollar black segment of the global film industry is vital to the economies of both countries. Last year a South Africa/Nigeria Film Summit, initiated by Jackie Motsepe of the KwaZulu-Natal Film Commission, Mahmood Ali-Balogun, head of the Nigerian delegation, and UK-based distributors Talking Drum Entertainment, ended with a resolution that these two film industries work together in development and production, co-production, distribution and financing. This year they expect to release their first slate of co-produced films: *Coma*, *And the Spirit Slowly Dies* and *The Wedding*.

While Nigeria and South Africa dominate the film space, we are finding interesting and surprising developments from other parts of the continent, whether East Africa or Francophone West Africa.

In East Africa, Docubox, an East African documentary film fund, offers the factual film community in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania opportunities to exchange and network with their industry colleagues. Founder and executive director Judy Kibinge is an active filmmaker herself, having directed a number of films including *Something Necessary*, a dramatic feature where the lives of two ordinary Kenyans collide against the backdrop of civil unrest. *Yellow Fever*, the multi-award-winning animation-documentary piece created by Royal College of Art graduate Ng'endo Mukii, tackles the politics of skin colour and beauty amongst African women.

The work of both of these filmmakers is an illustration of the politicised approach that many a bold



Top: O.C. Ukeje stars in *Confusion Na Wa*. Below: Left to right, Emmanuel Ikubese, Ireti Doyle and Omoni Oboli in *Fifty*.

FIFTY Director: Biyi Bandele

Pivotal days in the lives of four Nigerian women at the top of their careers.

OCTOBER 1 Director: Kunle Afolayan

In 1960, a Nigerian police detective is dispatched to investigate the murders of women in a small community.

INVASION 1897 Director: Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen

Historical drama based on the 1897 invasion of the great Kingdom of Benin in Nigeria by the British.

BLACK NOVEMBER Director: Jeta Amata

In the Niger Delta, a community wages a war against their government and an oil corporation to save their land.

FLOWER GIRL Director: Michelle Bello

In Lagos, a shy florist and a movie star conspire to push her boyfriend into proposing marriage.

CONFUSION NA WA Director: Kenneth Gyang

The lives of strangers become intertwined over the course of a day in a Nigerian city.

NECKTIE YOUTH Director: Sibs Shongwe-La Mer

Johannesburg friends are shocked by an online suicide.

FOUR CORNERS Director: Ian Gabriel

Family is lost and regained in a coming-of-age crime drama.

OF GOOD REPORT Director: Jahmil X.T. Qubeka

A teacher in rural South Africa starts a doomed affair with a pupil.

CUCKOLD Director: Charles Vlunda

The struggles of a young Johannesburg professor to pull himself together after his wife leaves him.

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African filmmaker is upholding as fundamental to their work and creative practice.

Movies for mobiles

The intersection of digital technology and mobile phones has started to have an impact. With mobile phone subscriptions continent-wide approaching 900m, digitally savvy, young African audiences (65% being under 35) are consuming audiovisual content on their mobile phones as never before.

The tech scene has started to merge with filmmaking practice and we have seen the growth of entertainment content apps such as Afrinolly. Gaming is also developing a niche for itself with Gamsole, Africa's leading game studio, having over 10m downloads in 191 different countries. In Uganda we have seen a hub of young, local Ugandan animators create the popular cartoon *Katoto*. It is clear the extent to which culturally specific content for both the big and small screen is creating a new discourse both at home and abroad.

Africa has also seen its first feature-length mobile-phone movie. *Jongo Love*, a youth empowerment film, was entirely shot on a mobile phone on location in Nairobi last year. The producers, Shujaz, have made it freely available on YouTube.

The international picture is even more promising. In 2015 the anti-jihadist film *Timbuktu*, directed by Mauritanian Abderrahmane Sissako, swept the French César Awards. The film has also gone on to be the top-grossing African film – by a black African director – in US box office history, making over \$1m.

Ethiopian coming-of-age drama *Lamb*, directed by Yared Zeleke, featured as part of the Cannes International Film Festival official programme in 2015 – a first for an Ethiopian film – and was Ethiopia's entry for the Foreign Language Oscars this year.

The film industry in Africa is starting to be identified as a sector that has massive potential for the wholesale skills development and employment of rising youth populations. Emerging filmmakers are creating a whole new niche for themselves in areas such as documentary making, animation, music videos and tech. Africa continues to rise not just economically but also in terms of its creative output.

Nadia Denton is an African film specialist. Her masterclass No-One Cares About Your Film: A Grassroots Guide to Marketing, Film Festivals and Distribution takes place on 2nd April, BFI Southbank, London.