

THE NEGLIGENCE OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMUNITY SCREENINGS AND FILM FESTIVALS AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN SOME URBAN AREAS: A STUDY OF ONITSHA POPULACE

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Abstract

Theatrical works, especially films have been one of the major social agents for change. Many a times, people watch films, not just as pass time activity but because there is need for them to acquaint themselves with relevant information concerning their immediate environment. Hence the general belief that film is not just an entertainment medium but also an information and educational medium that offers its target audience new ideas and orientation. Community screening is organized by individuals and groups with relevant information to pass across to a defined audience. In the same way, in film festivals, the audiences are meant to select the kind of movies they want to watch and stand by for other sessions like questions and answers sessions, interviews, etc. This strategy of bringing the audience closer to the production team is what makes the entire presentation real. The problem of the study is that despite the rich cultural heritage that Onitsha people enjoy, there is a part that they have been lagging behind. And that is the area of using film screenings and festivals to influence the populace. Therefore, the aim of this work is to conscientize those in the film producers, marketers and distributors on the need to screen their films in semi urban centers to enable the viewers to watch and learn moral lessons embedded in their films for the overall good of the populace. This work is based on Peter Brook's Empty Space Theory which states that any empty space can become a stage for a performative act. The research process employs the survey approach of the qualitative research methodology for the realization of the research objectives. Focused group discussion was used to analyze the data. The result of the findings show that The neglect of community film screenings and festivals in Onitsha is a multifaceted issue influenced by economic, infrastructural, cultural, promotional, security, and technological factors. The work recommends that concerted efforts is needed from local authorities, cultural organizations, and the private sector to invest in infrastructure, promote cultural diversity, and provide financial and logistical support to reinvigorate the local film industry.

Keywords: Negligence, Effectiveness, Community Screenings, Film Festivals, Social Change, Urban Areas

Introduction

Film, according to Tom Sherak, “is a reflection of society, both present and past”(1). Films have not just been there to entertain, but has in every way impacted the lives of common man consciously and unconsciously. Hence, movies are different things to different people. To some, movies are about escapism. Here, escapism theory suggests that when individuals encounter unpleasant circumstances, they narrow down their focus to the activity that helps them in escaping the self- evaluation. Again, Laura believes that:

Not only is film influential but is a source of entertainment and escapism. Film combines music, stories and pictures all in one and it's a way to forget the real world for 120 minutes or so but at the same time can give audiences a reality check. ... Movies can create awareness about the importance of education, art, sports and politics and can also warn us about the dangers of drugs, alcohol and other criminal activities. It also brings people to understand more about other cultures, the atrocity of living homeless, and the countries who are in constant battle with war and terrorism. These socially enlightening movies help us understand the world and influences our thought process in a positive way and helps us try to do our bit in order to be of some help to humanity...(5).

Hence, films are important for several reasons. They have the ability to entertain, inspire, and provoke thoughts. They provide an escape from reality, offering moments of joy, laughter, and even catharsis. Films tend to address important social and cultural issues, raising awareness and fostering empathy. According to Enzo Zelocchi, "...They have the capacity to bring people together, creating shared experiences and sparking meaningful conversations" (2). He goes further to explain that movies enrich our lives, stimulate our imaginations, and offer a profound connection to the human experience. Nkemakonam Aniukwu opined that, "The film medium over the years has proven to be an effective tool in shaping the events of a particular nation. As such, it is important that the contents and intended message(s) are designed to effectively achieve desired result" (226). There are just a lot that films can help audience achieve individually and collectively as a people.

Film festivals according to Roger Ebert:

...Are natural extensions of that escapism, especially for those wanting to further break out of their shell. It is one of the simplest, most feasible places for starting a conversation with a stranger. There is an assumed commonality of interest. Even if the opinions on a film execution differ, film festival focuses on showcasing work that spurs dialogue amongst its attendees, hoping that it will spread to wider audiences as well (5).

To the places already reached, more impact is expected in the art world and in the society at large. To those unreached, there seem to be many opportunities for the film makers and the potential audience who wishes for development to come around his/her environment. To most scholars, Film is an urban phenomenon. According to Alexandra, "Cinemas have always traditionally been situated within urban centres, limiting the audience but reinenforcing the urban qualities of the medium. The urban film is an embodiment of modernity, reflecting repeated attempts to capture the fleeting moments of life in the metropolis" (1). For this reason, this work is bothered about the negligence of effectiveness of using films to influence and impart the lives of those in urban cities like Onitsha.

Film festival plays a pivotal role in the world of cinema, serving as platforms for film makers, film actors, producers, and enthusiasts to showcase their work, engage in discussions, and celebrate the art of film making. One of the primary functions of film festivals is to provide a platform for emerging filmmakers to exhibit their creations to a wider audience. For many aspiring film directors, film producers and script writers, these film festivals offer an invaluable opportunity to gain exposure and recognition for their film. In an industry often dominated by major studios and established names, film festival serve as democratic spaces where talent can be discovered regardless of budget or connections. Film festivals serve as hubs for networking and collaboration within the film industry.

As film festivals promote the culture of a people, it also has a significant impact on the communities in which they are held. These events attract filmmakers, film industry professionals, tourists, and media from around the world, generating revenue for local businesses, hotels, restaurants, and cultural institutions. The influx of visitors during these festivals generates enough money and gives opportunity for people to get jobs. In addition to providing cultural experience for the local community, and providing economic benefits as a tourist draw, film festivals provide a service to the film industry by supplying a forum for filmmakers to show their films and film buyers and distributors to view them.

Theoretical Framework

This work is hinged on Peter Brook's *Empty Space* theory. The theory of *Empty Space* is defined by Brook as, "any space in which theatre takes place" (1). According to him, he can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. He starts by describing theatre as simple as the action of "a man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (3). Community screening and film festival is a typical example of what Peter Brook tries to explain about empty space. The implication is that any space can be converted and used as space for the screening. It must not be in a cinema hall or theatre building, but any place or space that can accommodate the audience.

The work is further supported by the social change theory also known as the evolutionary theory of social change as propounded by August Comte. According to Comte, society always evolves into higher levels. Like organisms evolve from simple to more complex, so do societies. Societies that do not adapt fast enough will fall behind. Social evolutionists asserted that all societies must go through the same sequence of progress. Modern theorists believe that change is multilinear. Societies can evolve in different ways and different directions. This led many sociologists to conclude that Western societies must be "superior" because of their advanced state.

Social change is defined by sociologists as a transformation of cultures, institutions, and functions. Most change is not instantaneous. In society, change is often very slow. There are variety of parts and forces at work, many of which resist disruptions of the status quo. All societies go through these types of changes at one point. Thus, social change occurs when societal institutions, structures, and cultures undergo a significant shift. Social change often coincides with, and is driven by the idea of a possible future society different from the current one. This is the case with Onitsha which evolved to an urban metropolis and therefore needs to tap the benefits of film screening.

Onitsha as an Urban Metropolis

Onitsha is a city located in Anambra State, Nigeria. It is situated on the eastern bank of the River Niger and is known for being a significant commercial and economic hub in the region. The city has a rich history, with evidence of human habitation dating back to ancient times. According to an article published by *DEMOGRAPHIA* titled *Demographia World Urban Areas*, "Onitsha urban metropolis has been duly recognized as one of the most populated and builds up urban (not necessarily the most developed)" (1). To them, the rankings by the World body put Onitsha as the 49th largest built up Urban Areas in the world in 2023 with an estimated population of 7,850,00 million people. A built-up area is an area such as a town or city which has a lot of buildings in it built-up Area. The Onitsha metropolis urban area includes: Onitsha Urban (Onitsha North and South LGAs) Fegge, Inland Town, Omagba, Akpaka, GRA, Okpoko, Nkutaku/Ogbaru Metro, 3/3 Area, Obosi/Awada/ Ugwuagba/ Oduma Layout, Nkpor Area up to Ugwunwasike/ New Tarzan, Nsugbe Urban, Nkwelle Ezunnaka Urban, and Ogidi Urban.

Population and urbanization are usually key criteria investors put into consideration when studying a location for potential investments. According to Igbo History, "Onitsha is home to the legendary Niger Bridge, a vital link connecting southeastern Nigeria to other regions..." (1). The Onitsha River Port, established 1950, remains a key gateway for foods entering and exiting the region. Onitsha is well known to be the economic nerve of South Eastern Nigeria and the second largest Trade and Commercial city sub-Sahara Africa after Lagos despite limitations of minimal governmental presence in the city especially at the Federal level.

Onitsha City annually embraces the spirit of celebrations with the Golibe and Ofala Festivals taking center stage. These lively occasions provide a captivating window into the vibrant tapestry of local traditions and customs, ensuring they hold an irresistible allure for visitors. Through vivid parades, traditional dances, and time-honoured ceremonies, these festivals paint a vivid picture of the city's rich cultural heritage. Culturally, Onitsha is known for its vibrant arts and literature scene, with notable writers and poets such as Okoye Chukwudi Charles, Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo, Onuora Nzekwu and lots more, all hailing from the city. The Igbo culture is deeply rooted in Onitsha, and traditional festivals, ceremonies, and customs are integral part of the city's identity.

Now, the problem is that despite the rich cultural heritage that Onitsha people enjoy, there is a part that they have been lagging behind. And that is the area of using film screenings and festivals to influence the populace. From the forgoing, it is indisputable that the Film medium provides a platform for the people to enjoy the latest movies and entertainment in a social setting. It serves as a modern cultural outlet, enabling individuals to unwind, relax, and share experiences with friends and family. Lagos, for instance has a lot of film festivals that they enjoy like: Eko International Film Festival, Africa International Film Festival, Nollywood Week Film Festival, etc. but such does not exist in the Onitsha Metropolis. And because such entertainment centers is not found around Onitsha, people have tagged Onitsha a local place for fun and a city that anything is bound to happen.

Previous studies have consistently shown that film festivals and community screenings have a significant impact on social change in various contexts (Bloom, 2015; Gupta, 2018). However, these events have been largely overlooked in urban centres, such as Onitsha, Nigeria. This neglect is regretted because of the potential of these events to bring about positive social change in such areas.

Research Design/Data Sampling/Findings

The research process employs the survey approach of the qualitative research methodology for the realization of the research objectives. It further incorporates library research, interviews and analysis of primary fieldwork data. Focused group discussions were used to analyze the data. The survey done is on the whole of Onitsha which is a stratified society, following the information given earlier. For the fact that every society is made up youths, men and women, these set of people form the basis for the analysis. According to an interview with Mr. Chukwudi Chekwube, "Onitsha people are not well orientated, and that is their major problem. Everybody, even children in Onitsha are concerned so much about making money and not interested in any entertainment matter." To him, people prefer relaxing in bars where they eat and drink and possibly hope to meet a business partner in the process. He goes further to argue that even if such a thing as film festival will happen in Onitsha, it will be poorly attended by people because of the state of insecurity which poses a big threat to anyone or persons that will be interested in going for such events. According to him, People will rather go to places like Asaba or Enugu where they believe there is security for such an event.

Furthermore, the focused group discussants enumerated factors leading to the neglect of Community Film Screenings and Festivals in Onitsha urban. According to them, the neglect of community film screenings and festivals in Onitsha can be attributed to a combination of socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural factors.

1. Economic Constraints

According to Aniago Okechukwu, one of the Focused Group Discussants, "the economic situation in the country since the past eight year has been very debilitating that what everyone thinks about is how to sustain his family and not about film and entertainments"(np). This view is also in line with the submission of Obinna Nwabueze that, "One of the primary factors contributing to the neglect of film screenings and festivals in Onitsha is the economic hardship faced by the population. The high rate of poverty and unemployment in the region limits disposable income, which in turn affects attendance and financial support for cultural events" (12). Many residents prioritize essential needs over recreational activities, making it difficult for community film screenings and festivals to thrive without substantial external funding or subsidies.

2. Infrastructural Deficiencies

The FGD unanimously agreed that Onitsha lacked necessary infrastructures to host film festivals and screenings as the only cinema house that once existed in the town has folded up because of harsh economic, security conditions. This fact is also accentuated by Ada Uchewho believes that, "Onitsha suffers from poor public facilities, including limited access to modern cinemas and suitable venues for large gatherings" (45). The absence of such infrastructure not only discourages organizers but also diminishes the overall viewing experience, leading to lower patronage.

3. Cultural Factors

Okolo Nkechi, another member of the FGD, believes that Cultural attitudes towards film and entertainment also play a role. According to her, "most indigenes believe that film corrupts and adulterates our cultures and so may not have anything to do it but would prefer the staging of local festivals for the unification of the indigenes and social bonding."(np). To Nnamdi Okafor "In many parts of Nigeria, including Onitsha, there is a preference for live performances and traditional forms of entertainment over film"(67). This cultural inclination can reduce interest in film screenings and festivals, particularly those that showcase genres or themes not aligned with local tastes and traditions. Additionally, the dominance of Nollywood films in the Nigerian market means that community screenings often struggle to attract audiences unless they feature popular titles.

4. Inadequate Promotion and Support

Ude Ifeanyi believes that the major challenge against film screenings in Onitsha is lack of sensitization of the populace. He recalled Cinema under the Bridge" project failed because the people were not properly

sensitized. Concluding, he emphasized that “adequate promotion and publicity through the old and new media be carried out to arouse the consciousness of the inhabitants of Onitsha and environs on the usefulness of film festivals.” (np). This is inline with the submission of Ifeanyi, who states that “The neglect of community film screenings and festivals is further compounded by a lack of effective promotion and institutional support. Local governments and cultural organizations often do not prioritize film as a vital aspect of cultural development, leading to minimal investment in promotional activities and sponsorships” (98). This lack of visibility and support limits the reach and impact of such events, making it difficult to build a consistent audience base.

5. Security Concerns

According to Chikelu Ike, “it not an exaggeration to state that the security situation in the country has degenerated badly that no day passes without one gory story or another from most parts of the country and Onitsha is no exception. So people will first consider their safety before venturing to watch a film exhibition or show” (np). This view is in agreement with the opinion of Emmanuel that “Security issues also pose a significant challenge. Onitsha has experienced various degrees of social unrest and crime, which can deter people from attending public events, especially in the evenings” (34). Organizers of community film screenings and festivals must navigate these security concerns, which often require additional resources for safety measures, further straining limited budgets.

Recommendations for Policymakers, Community Leaders, and Cultural Organizations

Arising from the outcome of the focused group discussions, the following recommendations were made to harness the potentials of film festivals and community film screenings as catalysts for social change in urban areas like Onitsha; believing that a coordinated effort among policymakers, community leaders, and cultural organizations is essential to promote a vibrant film culture that can drive social transformation.

Enhance Economic Support and Funding

Policymakers should allocate dedicated funds for cultural activities, including film festivals and community screenings. Establishing grants and subsidies can alleviate financial constraints faced by organizers and make it easier to plan and execute such events. As Nwabueze points out, “economic hardship and limited disposable income significantly affect attendance and support for cultural events” (12). Community leaders can facilitate fundraising efforts by engaging local businesses and philanthropists to sponsor cultural events. Encouraging community ownership and investment can create a sustainable model for supporting local film initiatives.

Improve Infrastructure

Policymakers must prioritize the development of public venues equipped with modern film projection technology. Investing in multi-purpose community centers that can host various cultural activities, including film screenings, will provide essential infrastructure for such events. Uche emphasizes that “the absence of suitable venues and technology is a significant barrier to the success of film screenings in Onitsha” (45). Community leaders should advocate for the maintenance and upgrading of existing facilities. By working with local governments and private entities, they can ensure that venues are safe, accessible, and well-equipped.

Promote Cultural Awareness and Appreciation

Policymakers should integrate film education into the school curriculum and support extracurricular activities that expose students to the art of filmmaking and film appreciation. Educational programs can foster a new generation of film enthusiasts and creators. Okafor suggests that “promoting local storytelling through film can enhance community identity and cohesion” (67). Community leaders can organize community discussions and workshops that highlight the cultural significance of films. By promoting local storytelling through film, they can enhance community identity and cohesion.

Strengthen Promotion and Visibility

Policymakers can support the creation of a centralized online platform to promote cultural events, including film screenings and festivals. This platform can serve as a comprehensive resource for residents to stay informed about upcoming events. Chukwuemeka Ifeanyi notes that “effective promotion and visibility are

crucial for the success of cultural events" (98). Community leaders should leverage social media and local media outlets to raise awareness about film events. Word-of-mouth campaigns and community bulletins can also be effective in reaching wider audiences.

Address Security Concerns

Policymakers must ensure that security measures are in place for public events. This includes coordinating with local law enforcement to provide adequate security personnel and infrastructure during film festivals and screenings. Agu Emmanuel highlights that "security issues pose a significant challenge to the organization of public events in Onitsha" (34). Community leaders can organize volunteer security groups to assist in maintaining order and safety at events. Training volunteers in basic security protocols can complement official efforts and enhance overall safety.

Bridge the Technological Gap

Policymakers should invest in improving digital infrastructure, including high-speed internet access, to support the digital aspects of film distribution and promotion. ChidimmaEze argues that "limited access to digital infrastructure hampers the ability to organize and promote film screenings effectively" (23). Community leaders can advocate for digital literacy programs that equip residents with the skills needed to engage with digital content and platforms. This will enable broader participation in online promotional activities and virtual film events. Cultural organizations should utilize digital tools to enhance the reach of their events. Live streaming screenings, virtual film festivals, and online promotional campaigns can attract a wider audience, both locally and beyond.

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers, community leaders, and cultural organizations can transform film festivals and community film screenings into powerful tools for social change in semi-urban areas like Onitsha. Through enhanced economic support, improved infrastructure, cultural promotion, strengthened visibility, robust security measures, and technological advancements, these stakeholders can foster a thriving film culture that enriches the community and drives positive transformation.

Conclusion

The neglect of community film screenings and festivals in Onitsha is a multifaceted issue influenced by economic, infrastructural, cultural, promotional, security, and technological factors. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from local authorities, cultural organizations, and the private sector to invest in infrastructure, promote cultural diversity, and provide financial and logistical support to reinvigorate the local film industry.

To this end, policymakers, community leaders, and cultural organizations must work together to provide support for film festivals and community screenings. This support can include funding, infrastructure, and promotion of these events. Additionally, potential partnerships and funding opportunities, such as collaborations with international organizations and government agencies, must be explored.

The Empty Space Theory supports the use of any space for theatrical functions. It should not be held as an excuse that the lack of screening houses or cinema in Onitsha resulted to none screening of films. Any available space can be converted and used for film screening, exhibition and shows. Finally, neglecting the impact of community screenings and film festivals as catalysts for social change in urban centres is a missed opportunity for positive social change. These events have the potential to promote social cohesion, challenge harmful stereotypes, and raise awareness about social issues. Therefore, it is essential that policymakers, community leaders, and cultural organizations prioritize support for these events.

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