

Cinematography as Distinction: *Ebun Pataki* and the Visual Aesthetics of “Beyond Nollywood” films

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Abstract

This paper examines Ebun Pataki (Damilola Orimogunje, 2018) as a key case for understanding cinematography as a strategy of distinction in contemporary Nigerian cinema. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production (1996), I argue that visual form—particularly as developed through the creative collaboration between director and cinematographer—serves as a tool for position-taking within a contested cinematic field. The film departs from the aesthetic and industrial logic of mainstream Nollywood and New Nollywood, aligning instead with what Jamaican curator Nadia Denton has termed “Beyond Nollywood”: a constellation of low-budget, author-driven films that circulate through international festivals and curated streaming platforms, often remaining peripheral to Nigerian commercial screens. Grounded in an interview with cinematographer David Wyte conducted in Lagos (2024), the paper explores how visual choices—such as long takes, soft lighting, and controlled composition—emerge from a collaborative process that contrasts with industrial production dynamics. These decisions shape the film’s tone and reinforce its symbolic position in the Nigerian film field. By placing Ebun Pataki in dialogue with other Beyond Nollywood titles such as B for Boy, Eyimofe, and Mami Wata, the paper explores how cinematography operates as both an aesthetic gesture and a statement within systems of cultural legitimacy. The analysis contributes to broader discussions about authorship and recognition in African cinema, foregrounding the role of cinematographic choices in reshaping the visibility and circulation of Nigerian films.

Keywords: Cinematography, Nigerian Cinema, Beyond Nollywood, symbolic distinction, *Ebun Pataki*.

Introduction

This paper emerges from my postdoctoral research on cinematography as a strategy of distinction in contemporary Nigerian cinema, a project that draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of cultural distinction (1996) to investigate how visual style—particularly the role of the director of photography—contributes to aesthetic and symbolic hierarchies within the Nigerian film field. My focus is on how non-industrial films reposition themselves both within and beyond the national cinematic landscape through deliberate visual choices, marking a shift from the conventions of Nollywood and New Nollywood toward a more introspective, author-driven cinema. Informed by Nadia Denton (2014), I identify these films as “Beyond Nollywood”.

One of the films that grounds this investigation is *Ebun Pataki*, directed by Damilola Orimogunje and released in 2018. The film tells the story of Derin, a young woman who experiences postpartum depression and emotional isolation following the birth of her child—a subject rarely treated in Nigerian cinema. With a minimalist approach to dialogue and an emphasis on mood, stillness, and silence, *Ebun Pataki* follows Derin’s internal struggle in the domestic space, highlighting how mental health remains largely invisible and stigmatized in the country.

My interest in *Ebun Pataki* lies specifically in how the film uses cinematography as a primary expressive tool. Shot by David Wyte, who had already collaborated with Orimogunje on the short film *Losing My Religion* (2018), the film is marked by a strong creative partnership that informs every aspect of its visual construction. This relationship offers a rich case for examining cinematography as a site of authorship, where the visual language of the film emerges from a collaborative, intentional process. Refusing to reinforce familiar genre conventions of Nollywood films, *Ebun Pataki* positions itself through its imagery—its lighting, colour palette, and framing choices—as a film invested in alternative modes of storytelling and visibility.

I see *Ebun Pataki* as a milestone not only for the way it addresses postpartum depression, but also for how it constructs a visual language that distances itself from Nollywood and New Nollywood aesthetics. The collaboration between Orimogunje and Wyte invites us to consider authorship as a collective process and cinematography as a key site where that authorship becomes legible. This distinction reflects a strategic effort to navigate the cinematic field through specific aesthetic and institutional alignments, engaging modes of filmmaking and circulation that diverge from dominant industry norms.

My understanding of distinction here draws directly from Pierre Bourdieu (1996), whose framework I have used in previous work (Esteves 2022, 2023, 2024) to analyse the Nigerian film field. As Bourdieu explains, distinction is not merely a question of style, but “a manifested difference of position within a space of positions,” a strategic operation that signals symbolic autonomy within a given field (Bourdieu 1996, 231). Applying this to Nigerian cinema, I see cinematography—especially in *Beyond Nollywood* films—as a crucial tool for aesthetic and symbolic repositioning. It is through camera work, lighting, colour, and compositional choices that these films signal their disalignment with the mainstream industrial logic of Nollywood and their investment in alternative forms of

cinematic value. In this sense, the visual language of *Ebun Pataki* exemplifies a broader aesthetic turn that reimagines what Nigerian cinema can be, where it can circulate, and who it can speak to.

Beyond Nollywood and the Visual Turn in Nigerian Cinema

The emergence of the term *Beyond Nollywood* as a recognizable framework within Nigerian cinema coincides with significant shifts in the country's audiovisual production landscape. Coined by Jamaican curator Nadia Denton (2014), the term refers to a constellation of films and filmmakers that reject the industrial logic and aesthetic conventions of mainstream Nollywood. Instead, these works align with independent production models, often made with low budgets, and circulate primarily through international film festivals and curated platforms, especially in Europe and North America. They are characterized by formal experimentation, narrative restraint, and an authorial concern with underrepresented themes such as mental health, abuse, gender identity, migration, and diasporic life.

As I have argued previously (Esteves 2022), drawing especially on the work of Jonathan Haynes (2014, 2019), the emergence of what we now call *New Nollywood* was also marked by an ambition to access international film festivals and other spaces of cultural consecration. However, its defining feature was the significant investment in higher production quality. In practice, this meant that *New Nollywood* films—particularly from the 2010s onward—continued to rely on the same genres and narrative formulas as *Old Nollywood*, but were now made with bigger budgets and driven by a strong star system logic. These were films more concerned with production value and box office success, both within and outside Africa (Adejunmobi 2015; Haynes 2019; Miller 2016), financed through co-productions with various Nigerian investors, and released internationally—some premiering at film festivals and securing licensing agreements with streaming platforms for global distribution.

By the late 2010s, the key struggle for creative agents—especially directors and stars—was to produce films with greater technical sophistication in order to expand their commercial appeal to the Nigerian mass audience while also increasing their chances of entering the “global commercial cinema” circuit; in other words, securing selections at major festivals and theatrical distribution in the U.S. and Europe. More concretely, filmmakers working within *New Nollywood* had to negotiate with industry producers to ensure profitability while also striving for recognition in global film consecration arenas.

What we now understand as *New Nollywood* emerged from this context of aesthetic and institutional disputes: a redefinition of Nigerian cinema not only for local audiences, but also for non-African viewers

and new channels of distribution beyond the informal market. Filmmakers and producers within *New Nollywood* sought to implement new production models without abandoning commercial logic. However, these new models quickly consolidated into a mainstream, blockbuster-focused industry.

This is precisely the point at which *Beyond Nollywood* diverges. Films under this label are necessarily independent, produced on much lower budgets, but with a deliberate focus on aesthetic form and narrative quality. Their priority lies in authorship, visual experimentation, and thematic depth rather than in celebrity-driven marketing or mass entertainment. *Beyond Nollywood* cinema departs from this model. Although it shares the ambition of reaching global audiences, it does so through a fundamentally different aesthetic and institutional logic. These are independent films, often produced by Nigerian filmmakers based in the diaspora, and are marked by a strong commitment to visual style and narrative depth. According to Denton (2014), the defining characteristics of *Beyond Nollywood* include narratives grounded in everyday, slow pacing, minimalist dialogue, a rejection of the star system, and above all, a deliberate investment in cinematographic innovation.

One of the earliest feature films to signal this aesthetic shift was *B for Boy* (Chika Anadu, 2013). Set in contemporary southeastern Nigeria, the film centres on Amaka, a successful and independent Igbo woman in her late thirties who is under intense social and familial pressure to bear a male child—especially from her in-laws. When a personal tragedy strikes, Amaka is forced to make a morally complex decision that challenges patriarchal traditions and her own sense of autonomy. The film explores themes of gender inequality, family obligation, and reproductive rights through a quiet, emotionally contained narrative. Visually, *B for Boy* is marked by naturalistic lighting, long takes, and a predominantly handheld camera style, which reinforces the sense of intimacy and internal tension. It avoids melodramatic exposition, opting instead for visual minimalism and narrative restraint.

The film premiered at the BFI London Film Festival in 2013 and was widely praised by critics for its understated yet powerful direction. Reviewers noted Anadu's refusal to rely on musical cues or emotional manipulation, instead allowing the strength of the performances and the realism of the *mise en scène* to carry the story (Nicholson 2013; Halligan 2013; Felperin 2013). These choices—along with the film's low-budget, self-funded production and focus on social realism—positioned *B for Boy* as an early and influential example of what would come to be known as the *Beyond Nollywood* aesthetic.

In the same year, *Mother of George* (Andrew Dosunmu, 2013) premiered on January 18, at the Sundance Film Festival, where it competed in the U.S. Dramatic Competition. The film garnered critical acclaim

for its poignant narrative and striking visual aesthetics. Directed by Nigerian-American photographer and filmmaker Andrew Dosunmu, the story follows a newlywed Yoruba couple in Brooklyn grappling with intense familial pressure to conceive a child. While the narrative is intimate and culturally specific, the film's formal composition—particularly its cinematography by Bradford Young—drew significant attention. Young's use of saturated colour palettes—deep purples, golds, and greens—and natural light constructs a tactile visual world marked by texture, warmth, and interiority. The cinematography employs shallow focus and careful use of shadows, often framing bodies partially or through soft blurs, inviting viewers into an almost dreamlike emotional space. Critics noted that the film's deliberate pacing, described as meditative or hypnotic, might challenge mainstream viewing habits, but this temporal restraint was affirmed as essential to the film's immersive affective experience (McCarthy 2013; Chang 2013; Edelstein 2013).

These two films share significant formal, thematic, and contextual traits. Both were directed by Nigerians living abroad—Chika Anadu in the UK and Andrew Dosunmu in the United States—and are set in Nigerian or Nigerian-diasporic contexts. As Nadia Denton (2014) has emphasized, *Beyond Nollywood* is deeply shaped by diasporic perspectives: filmmakers who, while based in the UK, US, or Europe, return to Nigeria (or look at it from afar) with distinct cinematic sensibilities and critical distance. Many of these directors began their careers making short films, and it was through Denton's curatorial work that their early projects gained visibility on the international festival circuit and within cultural institutions worldwide.

B for Boy and *Mother of George* were both praised for their visual economy and meditative pacing, which critics described as deliberate and emotionally resonant. The cinematography in both films plays a central narrative role: in *B for Boy*, the use of naturalistic lighting and handheld camera amplifies a sense of internal tension, while in *Mother of George*, Bradford Young's lush, saturated palettes and shallow focus immerse the viewer in an emotionally textured atmosphere. Crucially, both films place women at the centre of the narrative and address the sociocultural expectations surrounding motherhood in Nigeria. These films approach such pressures through a quieter lens, emphasizing the emotional weight carried by their characters and the ways in which reproductive expectations are woven into everyday forms of power and social regulation. This focus on women's affective experiences around motherhood has since become a recurring theme among *Beyond Nollywood* filmmakers—including in *Ebun Pataki*—pointing to an emerging female-led untold stories undercurrent in the storytelling.

Since then, other films have expanded and consolidated the *Beyond Nollywood* concept. *The Delivery Boy* (Adekunle Adejuyigbe, 2018), which

premiered at the New York African Film Festival, was praised as “better directed, shot and edited than 90% of Nollywood films with significant budgets” (Ososanya 2018). *Eyimofe* (Arie and Chuko Esiri, 2020), which premiered at Berlinale, drew comparisons to New Taiwanese Cinema for its patient pacing and textured 16mm cinematography (Betancourt 2021). *Juju Stories* (Surreal16 Collective, 2021), debuting at Locarno, stood out for subverting Nollywood genre conventions through eerie, mind-bending tales of African mysticism (Asankomah 2021). *Mami Wata* (C.J. Obasi, 2023), winner of the Sundance Special Jury Award for Cinematography, was described as “hypnotic” and “arresting” in its visual power (Bradshaw 2023). *All the Colours of the World Are Between Black and White* (Babatunde Apalowo, 2023), winner of the Teddy Award at Berlinale, was celebrated for its “subtle beauty,” balancing vibrant colour and emotional delicacy in exploring queer identity (Jenner 2023). Most recently, *My Father's Shadow* (Akinola Davies Jr., 2025) premiered at Cannes, where its “almost poetic” cinematography by Jermaine Edwards was singled out for praise (Hammond 2025).

Their cinematographic choices are diverse but share an intentional departure from the amateur style of Nollywood, and the blockbuster style of New Nollywood. *Eyimofe* uses handheld camerawork, natural light, and a grainy 16mm texture to evoke intimacy and realism; *Mami Wata* employs stark black-and-white imagery to build a mythic, almost surreal atmosphere; *All the Colours of the World Are Between Black and White* uses muted colour palettes and tight interior framing to portray queer longing and vulnerability; *The Delivery Boy* frames urban Lagos with dark, saturated tones and long takes that prioritize stillness over exposition. In these films, cinematography functions as a site of authorship and a vehicle for articulating a distinct cinematic vision. The emphasis on visual form aligns them with evaluative frameworks shaped by global cinephilia and critical discourse. Their circulation tends to occur outside Nigeria's commercial theatrical system, reaching audiences through international festivals, curated streaming platforms, and diasporic screening networks.

This is the context in which *Ebun Pataki* emerges—not only as part of this visual lineage but also in active dialogue with its peers, contributing to and expanding the aesthetic vocabulary of Nigerian independent cinema. The film reflects a natural evolution in Damilola Orimogunje's trajectory as a filmmaker, building upon his previous collaboration with cinematographer David Wytte, and deepening their shared commitment to cinematography as both expressive medium and strategy of distinction.

Case Study: *Ebun Pataki* and the Cinematography of David Wytte

Released in 2020, *Ebun Pataki* is the debut feature film directed by Damilola Orimogunje. The film tells the

story of Derin, a young woman who, after a traumatic childbirth resulting in the loss of her uterus, becomes emotionally withdrawn and struggles to bond with her newborn daughter, Maria. Set almost entirely within a modest Lagos apartment, the narrative unfolds in Yoruba, employing a minimalist aesthetic marked by silence, shadow, and stillness to evoke Derin's psychological isolation. The film premiered at Film Africa in London, where it won the Audience Award for Best Narrative Feature, and was subsequently screened at festivals including the New York African Film Festival. It became available on Netflix in several African countries in 2022. *Ebun Pataki* received widespread critical acclaim for its sensitive portrayal of maternal mental health, earning six nominations at the 2020 Africa Movie Academy Awards, including Best Nigerian Film and Best First Feature Film by a Director.

One of the most remarkable aspects of *Ebun Pataki* is its cinematography, crafted by David Wyte, who had already collaborated with Orimogunje on the short film *Losing My Religion* (2018). In both projects, the duo developed a visual language rooted in emotional density and expressive restraint. Wyte's cinematography plays a central role in shaping the film's atmosphere, with temporal control, restrained lighting, and carefully composed shots that draw the viewer into the protagonist's emotional state. This visual coherence does not emerge from individual authorship alone. As Wyte explained in an interview I conducted with him during the S16 Film Festival in Lagos (December 2024), his approach is grounded in sustained collaboration with the director.

Wyte described his process as one of careful alignment with each filmmaker's aesthetic instincts. In his words, "Every director has a personality that shows in their work. My job is to understand that — what films they watch, how they think visually." In the case of Damilola, he noted, the collaboration began long before the shoot: "For about a month, we exchanged messages, references, ideas. It's not a mechanical relationship. We build something together." He emphasized that Damilola is extremely meticulous and often conceives scenes in terms of extended takes. "If you leave him alone, he'll try to shoot everything in one shot. For him, a good long take must convey multiple layers of information — it all must happen inside the frame."

This close creative bond, grounded in mutual trust and a shared cinematic vocabulary, informed the restrained and carefully composed visual language of *Ebun Pataki*. Wyte described how elements like blocking, depth, and framing were designed in close relation to the actors' movement and emotional cadence. The cinematography favors continuity and subtle shifts in tone over elaborate setups or accelerated editing. "We didn't use a lot of different angles," he noted. "If a scene felt too long, we might capture a reaction shot—but only if it served the rhythm."

Wyte also clarified that his contribution was not about inventing the film's look from scratch, but about enhancing a vision that Damilola had already clearly articulated. "Dami already knew exactly what he wanted. My job was to make it look as good as possible." This clarity allowed for a more fluid collaboration, even under difficult production conditions. As he put it, "Once the director and I are aligned, everything flows. We need to be the best collaborators, so we are always on the same page. If the production wants to make things hard, they'd have to get rid of me — but that would mean losing the director too."

His reflections shed light on cinematography as a space of shared authorship in non-industrial cinema. In *Ebun Pataki*, visual choices arise through an ongoing creative exchange, where the cinematographer plays an integral role in shaping the film's emotional and narrative texture—far beyond the limits of technical execution.

In our interview, Wyte also emphasized how he and Damilola sought to express Derin's internal state through the film's visual language. From the earliest stages of pre-production, they conceptualized a cinematic atmosphere marked by silence, emotional opacity, and psychological detachment. Their aesthetic approach relied on long takes, off-centre framing, and the avoidance of bright or high-key lighting. These choices, Wyte explained, were designed to "suspend the viewer in Derin's emotional atmosphere."

This approach reflects a working environment shaped by steady collaboration and attention to process—conditions that are uncommon on New Nollywood sets, where the pace of production and the concentration of decisions in the hands of producers often leave little room for sustained artistic dialogue. As Wyte explained, based on his large experience working in the mainstream Nigerian film environment, even when projects have strong scripts and sufficient budgets, the industrial pace of production often undermines the possibility of creative collaboration. "Sometimes the scripts were good—better than some big-budget Nollywood productions," he noted, "but the problem was how fast everything moved. There was rarely time to revise or discuss ideas." Directors would take on multiple projects simultaneously, and cinematographers were often brought in at the last minute, leaving no room for shared vision. "You'd get a call at night: 'Hey, we're shooting tomorrow. Your payment's ready, just show up.' That used to happen all the time. But I am not open for this kind of environment anymore."

Wyte contrasted that frenetic pace with the kind of space he requires now to engage creatively. "These days, if a big production wants me to shoot something, they need to give me at least a month or a month and a half, so I can get to know the film, read the script and plan accordingly." He underscored how important it is, in narrative filmmaking especially, to have the time

and openness to build a visual approach in dialogue with the director. Otherwise, as he put it, “there’s no collaboration—it’s just execution.”

Ebun Pataki illustrates a mode of filmmaking shaped by long-term artistic dialogue and a commitment to visual intention at every stage of production. The film does not follow a rigid industrial model; it grows from a process where collaboration is integral to how meaning is constructed. In this context, the director-cinematographer partnership becomes a structuring force—opening space for experimentation and emotional nuance, often constrained in mainstream production environments. This relational mode of authorship contributes to the distinct position these films occupy in the Nigerian cinematic field, both aesthetically and symbolically.

Wyte was especially clear about the structural differences between independent film sets and the blockbuster-driven productions of *New Nollywood*. In his view, the creative freedom and intentionality that shape *Beyond Nollywood* films are largely impossible in high-budget productions, where executive producers and production managers retain control over most decisions. “Sometimes, even the script can’t be changed,” he noted. “They’ll tell you: ‘This is what we want. Just shoot it this way.’” The DOP is rarely invited to contribute ideas, and there is little space for aesthetic experimentation. By contrast, on independent sets like *Ebun Pataki*, he emphasized how directors are genuinely open to collaboration. “There’s always that question on set: ‘Are you satisfied with the scene? Do we need to adjust anything?’ That level of care makes a huge difference.” He also pointed out that independent directors tend to bring their trusted crews—ensuring synergy between camera, lighting, production design, and direction—whereas in bigger productions, team members are often assigned arbitrarily, with no time to build rapport. “Sometimes you don’t even know who your assistants are until the day of the shoot,” he said. “It all becomes very mechanical.” In independent settings, by contrast, the emphasis is on building a creative environment where every decision is deliberate, and every contributor is part of a shared vision. This, for Wyte, is what distinguishes the filmmaking process in *Beyond Nollywood*.

One of the key visual references for *Ebun Pataki* was the work of Hong-Kong filmmaker Wong Kar Wai. As David Wyte shared during our interview, it was director Damilola Orimogunje who introduced him to Wong’s films during the early stages of their collaboration. Orimogunje encouraged him to pay close attention to how cinematography could evoke emotional states without relying on dialogue. That influence is perceptible in *Ebun Pataki*, where the pacing of shots, the modulation of colour, and the spatial framing shape the viewer’s experience. The film develops a quiet, immersive atmosphere, shaped through visual cues that sustain the emotional tone and guide the viewer’s engagement. These visual decisions

operate as strategies of distinction, connecting the film to a lineage of transnational art cinema concerned with mood and subjectivity.

The expressive visual approach of *Ebun Pataki* sets it apart from the dominant aesthetic of Nollywood and New Nollywood, where lighting, editing, and camera work often follow a standardized format. Films like *King of Boys* (Kemi Adetiba, 2018) and *The Wedding Party* (Niyi Akinmolayan, 2016), to mention two of the most successful New Nollywood films, while technically refined, tend to replicate the fast-paced, brightly lit style associated with television dramas and built around celebrity presence. Orimogunje’s film moves in another direction, embracing a visual language that shapes the narrative’s emotional core. In this context, Wyte’s cinematography plays a formative role in shaping the film’s meaning. It emerges from a collaborative process anchored in artistic intention, becoming a defining element of the film’s visual strategy and its position within the contemporary Nigerian cinematic landscape.

Distinction, Reception and Circulation

The visual strategies adopted by *Ebun Pataki* and its peers go beyond matters of style; they operate within a broader economy of visibility and value that shapes both Nigerian and global cinema. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production (Bourdieu 1996), these strategies can be understood as symbolic acts of position-taking in a field where value circulates through forms of symbolic capital—prestige, recognition, legitimacy—produced and validated in spaces such as international festivals, critical discourse, and cinephile communities.

As Bourdieu argues, symbolic capital—unlike economic capital—accrues through distinction, through the recognition of one’s peers, and through alignment with the aesthetic values validated by institutions of cultural legitimacy. In this framework, the cultural field is structured around a tension between what he describes as the “autonomous pole” (where symbolic capital dominates) and the “heteronomous pole” (where economic capital prevails). The Nigerian film field reflects this dynamic clearly: on one side, the industrial productions of Nollywood and *New Nollywood*, concerned with mass appeal, profit, and speed; on the other, a growing group of filmmakers positioning themselves radically within the autonomous pole through investments in style, form, and authorship.

In previous work (Esteves 2023), I have argued that this tension structures the very emergence of *Beyond Nollywood*. Films such as *Ebun Pataki*, *Eyimofe*, or *Mami Wata* do not rely on box office revenue or celebrity-driven marketing to assert their cultural value. Instead, their legitimacy is conferred through symbolic capital: selection at major festivals like Berlinale, Locarno, Sundance, or Cannes, commercial distribution worldwide at arthouse cinema circuits, or inclusion in curated collections such as the Criterion Collection.

The symbolic weight of *Eyimofe*, for example, was reinforced not only by its Berlinale premiere but also by its unprecedented acquisition by Criterion—a powerful marker of transnational artistic recognition.

Bourdieu's framework helps us make sense of these dynamics. The struggle for symbolic capital by *Beyond Nollywood* filmmakers is, in itself, a transformative force within the Nigerian film field, signalling a shift away from purely commercial imperatives toward a concern with form, narrative complexity, and cinematic authorship. This struggle is also a negotiation: rather than rejecting the Nigerian audience altogether, many of these filmmakers seek to remain legible at home, even as their primary circuits of validation lie abroad. Even though the symbolic capital gained through international recognition is not necessarily convertible into domestic visibility, it reconfigures what is possible—and what is valued—within Nigerian cinema.

However, this symbolic distinction comes with structural challenges. Films like *Ebun Pataki* often face limited access to commercial screens in Nigeria. Their local reception is typically confined to festival spaces—such as the African International Film Festival (AFRIFF), which has historically favoured *New Nollywood* titles but has more recently included more author-driven works, or to smaller, cinephile-oriented initiatives like the S16 Film Festival. Their availability on streaming platforms often targets niche audiences rather than the broad public traditionally reached by Nollywood. Since 2015, many of these films have been licensed by Netflix, though restricted to the African continent. In some cases—*Ebun Pataki*, for instance—this regional availability significantly boosted the film's visibility among Nigerian audiences, offering an alternative route to circulation outside commercial cinemas and festival circuits.

A telling example is *Mami Wata*, Nigeria's official submission for the Academy Awards in the Best International Feature Film category. Although the film achieved critical acclaim and travelled widely on the international festival circuit, it remained largely inaccessible to Nigerian audiences at the time of its Oscar submission. Its marked departure from New Nollywood conventions—both in form and in tone—meant that the country's main distributors and commercial cinema chains, often under the same ownership, showed little interest in supporting its release. Marketing efforts were virtually non-existent, screening times were poorly planned, and many sessions were either cancelled or miscommunicated. These barriers point not merely to logistical failures but to a deeper struggle over legitimacy and visibility within the Nigerian cinematic field. In Bourdieu's terms, what is at stake here is a contest over symbolic capital, where dominant agents seek to maintain their position by marginalizing aesthetic and institutional forms that disrupt established hierarchies of value (Bourdieu 1996).

This dynamic reinforces a symbolic divide between industry-driven productions designed for mass appeal and a growing wave of author-led cinema that circulates internationally yet struggles to secure space in domestic exhibition networks. *Mami Wata*'s Oscar submission becomes especially significant in this light: until then, only films that adhered to the aesthetic and narrative logic of New Nollywood had occupied that space of global representation. In contrast, *Mami Wata* proposes a radically different vision of Nigerian cinema—stylistically distinct and structurally independent. Its selection signals a shift within the cinematic field, acknowledging the legitimacy of visual languages that have historically been excluded from this kind of strategic visibility.

This is not about establishing a hierarchy between Nollywood and Beyond Nollywood but about marking a shift in aesthetic priorities and the frameworks through which films are legitimized. At the core of this tension lies the ongoing negotiation over what constitutes "Nigerian cinema"—a category constantly redefined by filmmakers who seek to broaden its expressive range. Their commitment to cinematographic craft and alternative modes of circulation suggests a different cinematic horizon, even as their work remains peripheral to the structures that dominate production and exhibition in the country.

Final Notes and Research Horizons

This paper has been a first step toward thinking about cinematography as a marker of distinction within the contemporary Nigerian film field—an approach I have previously developed in my doctoral research (Esteves 2022). Rather than treating visual style as an aesthetic accessory, I have framed it as a strategic intervention within a contested cinematic landscape, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital and field dynamics. In doing so, I have argued that *Ebun Pataki* exemplifies how cinematography—through mood, framing, pacing, and lighting—operates not only as an expressive tool but also as a means of repositioning films and filmmakers within global and national hierarchies of value.

As part of the methodology, I foregrounded the interview with cinematographer David Wyte—not simply to report his statements, but to construct an interpretive dialogue about how creative decisions emerge on set, particularly in relation to the director-DOP collaboration. My goal was to understand, through Wyte's own reflections, how the visual language of *Ebun Pataki* was shaped, and how this process differs from the industrial, producer-driven logic of *New Nollywood* sets. What emerged from our conversation was less a testimony and more a co-thinking exercise on authorship, visual intentionality, and creative autonomy.

The term *Beyond Nollywood*—although useful in describing a set of films that depart from dominant

industrial conventions—remains open to critique. Many of the filmmakers associated with this label reject the term *Nollywood* altogether, preferring to identify simply with “Nigerian cinema.” This semantic tension is itself indicative of the symbolic stakes at play: what is being contested is not only a visual grammar, but the very name and scope of Nigerian cinema.

Despite the symbolic capital these films accrue through international festival circuits and cinephile recognition, they often struggle to gain traction within local exhibition infrastructures. This disconnect raises ongoing questions about audience, access, and the politics of visibility. Nevertheless, what these films do offer is a broadened horizon for what Nigerian cinema can be—not just in terms of aesthetics, but in terms of process, authorship, and the forms of collaboration that sustain them.

As the Nigerian film field continues to develop, attention to cinematography—as both expressive form and social strategy—will remain key to understanding how filmmakers position themselves, their work, and their audiences in a dynamic and often contested cultural space.

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