

## NARRATIVE AND STYLE IN NIGERIAN (NOLLYWOOD) FILMS

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**ABSTRACT** At a little over 50 years of age, film is a relatively new medium in Nigeria. Despite its youth, however, it has established itself as a powerful and popular art form. Nigerian film producers have creatively exploited the techniques that give film its narrative power while expressing emotions and ideas. In general, Nigerian films are both created and produced in the context of their social and economic conditions. Resting on this foundation, this paper takes a critical look at the story and style of contemporary Nigerian films. Employing the concepts of film form and style as the theoretical background, we consider issues such as the organization of film narrative, the cohesiveness and relatedness of scenes (the progression of plots), and the techniques used for presentation and character development. The paper also provides recommendations to improve the quality of productions.

**Key Words:** Nollywood; Narration; Style; Film Techniques; Film Form.

### INTRODUCTION

Nollywood, a term coined following the style of Hollywood (referring to the US film industry) and Bollywood (referring to the Indian film industry), is the generic name for the Nigerian film industry. The global attention currently enjoyed by Nollywood is due to efforts to create a distinct film tradition. However, in spite of its prolific and legendary output, which has made Nollywood the second largest (after Hollywood) film industry in the world, the Nigerian government has contributed very little to the growth of this industry in terms of funding or the provision of a favorable environment. Thus far, the industry has advanced by virtue of the individual efforts of dominant producers and marketers. Although, Nigerian films have been viewed as cultural products of the nation, the indifference of the government toward the industry has denied it the status of a foreign-exchange cultural currency that enhances our country.

Recently, Nollywood has also come under harsh criticism. These criticisms, which are centered on modes of production, quality, and professionalism, are indicative of the importance placed on the industry. Although many of the critics have questioned the content of stories, others have concluded that Nigeria cannot yet claim to have a legitimate film industry because it primarily uses a video format for production. As we have argued elsewhere, digital filming, which is now in vogue in the industry, has somehow reduced the premium hitherto placed on celluloid (Alamu, 2010: 3). The high-definition digital production of the Video Compact Disc (VCD) and the Digital Video Disc (DVD) is fast becoming a global alternative and an acceptable format for film production. This format is also more economical and commercially viable than is the celluloid format. Home theaters, which are also designed for digital films, afford people the opportunity to watch

films in the privacy of their own homes, thereby rendering theater or cinema attendance a matter of choice. Moreover, digital films can also be screened at cinemas with the aid of projectors.

Film critics such as Akande (2009), Balogun (2005) and Iroh (2009) have condemned the overall quality and narrative value of Nigerian films for several additional reasons. Iroh, for instance, condemns the “poverty of creativity, ideas, innovation and a coordinated strategic plan” in the industry. Akande, on the other hand, believes that the content of Nollywood films is predictable and always revolves around topics like “conflict between mothers-in-law and their son’s wives, scenes dealing with police battling criminals, burial and consultations with native doctors, and so on.”

However, we have observed that most of these comments rest on personal preferences rather than an objective evaluation of the industry. The use of personal preferences in judging films constitutes a subjective rather than an objective approach. A relatively objective evaluation would consider factors that contribute to a deep analysis rather than a discussion about the fulfillment of personal expectations; these factors would include issues related to cultural realism, didacticism, originality and the coherence of plots. This paper will incorporate these issues or criteria into a framework for evaluating the story and style of contemporary Nigerian films to produce an objective evaluation. It is first necessary, however, to review the principles of film form and style to ground our understanding of how films function and derive their meanings.

## THE CONCEPTS OF FILM FORM AND STYLE

This section reviews how film form and style function in relation to narrative strategies. The relationship between the various parts of a film to create a whole can be referred to as its form. Two related organizational principles operate in film: stylistics and narrative. Whereas stylistics are concerned with the various film techniques such as *mise-en-scene*, editing, camera movement, color patterns, sounds, music and so on, narrative is the actual representation of the story and the form in which the spectator encounters it. Every story contains a set of narrative elements, which represent the story. The totality of a film or the organization of the story depicted in the film comprises its form. The producer must consider the various film techniques and cinematic choices in order to present his or her story and to engage the minds and emotions of his or her audience, as well as to realize the vision underlying the film. Because it is based on the filmmaker’s preferences, a finished film can be said to display distinctive patterns of choices. These patterns are referred to as style, used in the sense we use this term to refer to patterns of language usage in a novel or poem. Thus, whereas the relationship between various parts of a film to form a whole can be referred to as its form, the use of techniques chosen by the filmmaker or visual artist to create an impressionistic work is regarded as its style. In support of this view, Bordwell and Thompson (2008: 50) claim the following:

Style also constitutes a system in that it too mobilizes components—particular instantiations of film techniques—according to the principles of organization. Style simply names the film's systematic use of cinematic devices. Style is thus wholly an ingredient of the medium.

From the foregoing, one can conclude that form and style are crucial for film narration, and that it is through these factors that a film draws us into moment-by-moment engagement.

Films engage our vision, ideas, and feelings. Capitalizing on the power of the medium to capture the environment and reality, many producers create structured experiences that involve us deeply and sometimes change our perceptions or feelings about our lives or the things around us. As an art form, film offers experiences that carry particular valances and meanings that can be provocative, puzzling, or euphoric. The emotional function of film also helps to teach the audience to adjust their emotional responses and reactions to certain aspects of their social lives. The overall form and style of presentation of the story's development work harmoniously and move us into a new experience.

The form of a film is understood best in relation to the person viewing the film (i.e., the viewer or spectator). According to Bordwell and Thompson (2008: 45), perception is an activity that occurs during all phases of life because humans always remain vigilant about salient aspects of nature and their surroundings. As the human mind constantly seeks order to create significance, film relies on this dynamic quality of the human mind and attends to evoking an emotional response from the human environment. Similar to a novel, a film leaves something to the imagination.

The argument that all films borrow ideas and storytelling strategies from other movies and other art forms challenges the concept of originality in film. Similar patterns in different films frequently lead us to conclude that directors work with familiar conventions of form and technique, particularly given that aesthetic form has not been defined as a pure activity that is isolated from other experiences. Because works of art are human creations and because the artist lives in history and society, it is the case that he or she cannot avoid relating his work, in some way, to others that came before it and to general aspects of his or her contemporary society. A tradition, a dominant style, a popular form, and some common traits, usually called conventions, will therefore be shared by several different films. A director who strives to be original can only hope to create new conventions that will characterize a highly innovative work. It is possible that such an exceptional or extraordinary style that does not conform to conventional norms can at first be seen as odd and attract criticism from the audience on the basis of their previous encounters. They can later learn to recognize and respond to the creation of an unorthodox work as ingenious after it has led to new conventions and expectations.

## NARRATIVE AND STYLE IN NOLLYWOOD FILMS

This section discusses the particular characteristics of Nigerian films in relation to their stories and styles. Although Nollywood draws on many cultural influences, both domestic and foreign, it remains fundamentally unique (Haynes, 2005: 132). In terms of personnel, production techniques, administrative structure, and narrative elements, Nollywood is not homologous with foreign traditions. The Nigerian film industry is instead defined and sustained by Nigerians. The commercial success and popularity of Nigerian films stem from their stories, which the audience finds fascinating and consonant with their expectations. The thematic and aesthetic choices of Nollywood are determined to a large extent by the preferences of its audience, which is why the recurring themes in these films are those with broad appeal. These themes are based on subjects such as infidelity, treachery, lust, hypocrisy, armed robbery, marital problems, murder, cultism and occultism, witchcraft, polygamy and so on. The themes are indeed broad and mirror Nigerian society. To the filmmakers, therefore, Nigeria itself is a narrative entity and their (the filmmakers') films are the agents in this narrative act.

Due to their status as among the society's primary mass media, Nigerian films are stabilizing forces that contribute to the maintenance of social order. They reinforce the collective mentality of Nigerian society, educating large audiences along certain established lines: developing collective memories of the past, maintaining a distance from the threatening present, and projecting life in the future. For these reasons, films display a range of ideological and cultural positions that are consciously portrayed by filmmakers in their stories. Nigerian films are therefore responses to the transformational needs of Nigerian society offered through the aesthetic possibilities of film technology. Although critics have condemned several recurrent themes such as witchcraft and the proliferation of black magic, which they find repulsive, it is also true that these themes have roots in popular cosmology. Furthermore, such themes are only employed for didactic purposes to show that good always overcomes evil.

The didactic elements in Nigerian films are somewhat similar to the moral and cultural ideology of the Nigerian people. This parallel is consistent with Parson's sociological theory of structural-functionalism, which centers on cultural systems and the overall integration of societies (Parson, 1964: 22). The thrust of Parson's theory is that culture and the social actions of individuals, which result in social institutions, involve choices based on values and norms that are specified within the cultural system of a society. In other words, people behave as they are expected to behave in a given situation because they have internalized the norms and values that comprise the culture of their society. Durkheim (1971: 15) also referred to this phenomenon as "morality," which ensures the stability of both the individual and the society.

The use of this approach by Nigerian filmmakers underlies the creation of films conveying the intense feeling that urbanization and industrialization have created an excessively volatile and unstable Nigerian society. Films present the crimes and tragic incidents that have resulted from these changes and that should be repressed through the power of the medium of film. According to the perspective

of filmmakers, they must use their films to rescue contemporary Nigerian society from the erosion of its value systems caused by decadence; hence, they employ ethnographic and cultural relativism as a framework.

As a microcosm of society and as an important institution in the life of any nation, the family has been a major focus of Nollywood films. Issues pertaining to the relationship between husband and wife, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, children, stepsons and stepdaughters and so on, have been emphasized in Nigerian films. In addition to the family, Nigerian films also emphasize important contemporary social problems such as HIV and AIDS, cultism and ritual killing, armed robbery and more recently, kidnapping. Films such as *Goodbye Tomorrow* and *Jenifa*, for instance, use the HIV scourge as their focus. These films admonish teenagers to abstain from non-marital and unprotected sex and to avoid having multiple sexual partners to prevent this dreadful disease, which is catastrophically killing the youth of our country while it exerts exponentially damaging effects on the socioeconomic fortunes of the nation. Related to AIDS is the issue of prostitution, which has led to devastating health problems for many young men and women. *Domitilla* and *Prostitution* are two of the films that focus on this issue. The twin issues of cultism and ritual killing have also been severely critiqued in films such as *Blood Money*, *Living in Bondage*, *Rituals* and *Abuja Boys*. These phenomena are additional evils that have deeply penetrated into the fabric of Nigerian society. The high level of corruption in Nigeria and the “hero” worship and recognition accorded the “wealthy” have conveyed the false idea to many youth that becoming rich through whatever means is only the way to be relevant. The killing of humans by cultists has therefore become rampant in contemporary Nigeria. The films mentioned above have condemned this hateful practice by demonizing the cultists and their “cult of celebrity.” The films generally portray the culture of venerating questionable or illicit wealth, a culture involving many Nigerian youth, to be reprehensible. The problem of armed robbery is also not ignored. Filmmakers depict armed robbery as a menace that contributes to the current general insecurity in the country. Thus, films such as *Rattlesnake*, *Owo Blow* and *Outkast* placed armed robbery at the center of crime. The criminal characters in the films, although later apprehended, killed, or punished, disrupted their societies and killed innocent victims. Films on rituals and armed robbery, therefore, present a cataclysmic maelstrom of violence in Nigerian society and suggest ways in which these menaces may be addressed.

Although Nollywood has traditionally defined its products as entertainment, the industry has also relied on topical issues for acceptance and commercial success. The audience responds to compelling topical stories, provided that the subjects of such stories have genuine and salient points that are presented within an interesting narrative form. *Issakaba* and *August Meeting* are examples of films that have adapted topical materials. Whereas *Issakaba* focuses on the reign of the dreaded Bakassi Boys, a vigilante group that was formed as a spontaneous reaction to armed robberies in Southeast Nigeria in the late 1990s, *August Meeting* centers on the tendency of Igbo women to act flamboyantly and flaunt their wealth during their annual summer meeting. This film attempts to condemn the corruption engendered by this attitude.

However, the political themes in Nigerian films have not been very strong. The industry does not possess a vibrant tradition of political filmmaking. One can argue that contemporary films in Nigeria do not have any interest in shaping current political discourse and situations, given that little or no effort has been devoted to these issues by the producers. In the context of Nigeria's fledgling democracy and the apparent failure of the political class to establish enduring and quality rule, one would have expected filmmakers to create, for instance, political satires aimed at deriding misgovernment by the Nigerian political class. Indeed, we have a need for a national critical cinematic movement that attempts to influence the political agenda. Such a development would signal a shift away from the efflorescence of familiar stories and encourage a young antiestablishment audience who are already becoming impatient with conventional films. The issue of commitment and art has been discussed by literary critics. In general, artistic commitment has been viewed as a matter of orientation, with the artist perceiving sociopolitical realities and making such perceptions available in his work to either promote the understanding and preservation of current social norms and values or to facilitate the criticism and alteration of such norms and values (Chinweizu et al., 1980; Nwoga, 1973). Similar to writers, filmmakers who use their films to promote a political cause can show commitment through the subject matter chosen and the treatment accorded to the relevant issues. If art complements commitment, or vice versa, in a way that makes life within a given society more meaningful and satisfying, then commitment should be embraced by Nigerian filmmakers. Moreover, literary political satires abound in Nigeria and filmmakers need to adapt some of these for film.

By contrast, American cinema has succeeded in creating a vibrant tradition of political and social filmmaking. Films such as *Blade Runner*, *Escape from New York* and *Robocop*, for instance, picture a quasi-fascist America with a crumbling infrastructure under authoritarian political control (Dixon, 2000: 65). On the other hand, *John Q* and *On Deadly Ground* are devoted to social causes and justice. In *John Q*, an African-American (played by Denzel Washington) protests the inequities in the US healthcare system by taking hostages in a hospital that denied a life-saving operation to his dying son due his inability to pay for this procedure. Although this character is jailed for his actions, the film underscores that, without these actions, his son would have died. Indeed, his actions are portrayed as a major victory for health reforms that benefit poor people and African-Americans. In *On Deadly Ground*, Stephen Seagal fights and wins a struggle against a cabal responsible for illegal oil exploration and environmental degradation. His efforts free the people and their environment from exploitation by members of this cabal, who had been operating with the support of powerful people in government. Thus, despite preferences for gangster movies and thrillers, frequent themes in American films, some major Hollywood producers devote their films to front-burner political issues in a sustained and ambitious manner. Considering the depth of the sociopolitical misery in Nigeria, Nigerian filmmakers should devote their films to condemning the inequities and corruption in the political class that have weakened the ability of democracy to make much difference in the lives of the people. We have a serious need for nationalistic fervor in the products of Nigerian film producers.

Several technical deficiencies have been noted in some films produced in Nigeria. These can be partially attributable to a lack of competence and the absence of the sort of sophisticated equipment required for quality production. Indeed, the industry lacks certain equipment, especially cameras, which could provide sharper images, better resolution, more efficient lighting low-light situations and improved sound technology. Post-production laboratories for editing are also not generally well equipped. One might also agree that the use of video cameras, which some producers still employ for recording, and the attendant technical limitations contribute to these problems

Apart from the inability of producers to procure good equipment for filming, modest budgets have also led to the production of films lacking in special effects. It is common knowledge that good equipment including computers and software can be used to generate many special effects, produce high-resolution images, enhance color fidelity and range, and produce digital sounds that enhance the quality of films. Low budgets cannot guarantee the purchase or rental of such equipment for the number of days required for production, let alone enable paying members of the cast. This problem has also affected how supernatural characters are depicted and presented. Photographers, due to obsolete equipment, cannot employ a great variety of optical or special effects in presenting the supernatural. Thus, we have been witnessing amateurish presentations. Given that the esoteric world of the supernatural is a common theme in Nigerian films, filmmakers should create a unique way of presenting these phenomena to enhance their realism, perhaps by following the example of Hollywood films that deal with the same themes or with science fiction. Mastering high-level computer-generated images (CGI), which enables technicians to create characters, objects and settings that are composites of real images, can provide additional assistance. Nigerian filmmakers should look into the production of animated (cartoon) films, which has become a popular genre among children in many countries of the world.

The Nigerian film industry is controlled by the market. Unlike the film industries in some other countries, such as the US and India, where professionalism is respected and the government provides an environment in which the industry can flourish, the Nigerian government has shown little interest in the development of Nollywood. Without much-needed funding from the government and private businesses, producers have had to rely on marketers for the funding of film projects. Thereby empowered, many marketers dictate to producers and contribute to production decisions. The practice of producers influencing casting and story is now rampant in the industry. Because he who pays the piper dictates the tune, many directors do not have the courage to challenge this undue influence. Indeed, the production of films in Nigeria is driven primarily by the goal of marketers to recover their investments, and little consideration is given to the thematic or structural quality of the products. This accounts for the many indifferent, mediocre, poor or uneven films in circulation.

However, not all Nigerian films are of poor quality. Although many films are not thoughtfully constructed or are haphazardly produced, a few with good story lines, impressive character development, and sophisticated film techniques that enhance their quality are also available. *Diamond Ring* is one such film. The film

can be segmented into 19 scenes, all of which relate to one another causally, temporally, and spatially. Smaller units of action also occur within these scenes. The first scene sets the plot in motion and introduces the conflict. Following most classical narratives, a conflicted situation, which the characters struggle to resolve, is created. The clash, between the spirit of Mrs. Gladys (Liz Benson) and Chidi and members of his cult group who stole a diamond ring from her corpse, propels the story in a step-by-step process of cause and effect. Chidi, a university undergraduate and the only child of Chief and Mrs. Ijeoma Dike (played by Richard Mofe Damijo and Shola Shobowale, respectively), joins a cult, XG, in school. Members of the cult decide to rob the vault containing Mrs. Gladys, who was buried with expensive jewelry. As the movie progresses, members of the cult begin to die in rapid succession. Chidi also suffers from a strange illness that defies medical solution. The processes involved in healing Chidi introduce suspense that renders the narrative interesting. The development of both individual characters and their relationships contributed importantly to the success of this film. The search, journey, limited time for returning the diamond ring to its owner (the restless ghost), and difficulties preventing the accomplishment of this task combine to create suspense. This film involves shifts between the probable and the unexpected and between surprise and suspense as the director manipulates our perceptions of the moment-by-moment events on the screen. *Diamond Ring* clearly reveals how our experience can be shaped by a narrative that governs the flow of information about the story depicted.

In the absence of film studios such those in Hollywood, Nigerian films are shot at different locations. Cities such as Lagos, Enugu, and Abuja are used most frequently. As Haynes (2005: 133) observes, however, Lagos stands out for many reasons:

Lagos is where Nollywood is primarily located and, for budgetary reasons, its films are always shot on location, most often in Lagos, which serves as the ground of the films, not just in the immediate sense that when cameras are turned on, they capture images of Lagos (or one might even say, Lagos imposes its images on them), but also that the films are a means for Nigerians to come to terms—visually, dramatically, emotionally, morally, socially, politically and spiritually—with the city and everything it embodies.

The city of Lagos and its striking landscape, which is dominated by flyovers, buildings with towers, the Lagoon, and the Atlantic Ocean, appears to be a favorite location for film directors (Alamu, 2010: 79). The orchestration of actions, which occur in tandem with the themes emphasized by the producers, also leads to the selection of Lagos for filming. As the commercial hub of Nigeria and the seat of the film industry, it also allows producers to be close to “where the action is” to market their products.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Thus far, we have critically reviewed the narrative and style of Nollywood films. We have observed that, despite the global attention currently received by Nollywood, it has also come under harsh criticism for the quality of its productions and the content of its stories. Using concepts of form and style as our theoretical foundation, we examined some of the stories and styles of Nollywood productions and investigated the specific features of this industry. We contend that a few high-quality films can be found in the midst of the mediocrity that generally dominates the Nigerian film industry. Most importantly, the Nigerian government and the private business sector must intervene to provide funds to facilitate the production of quality films and the development of the industry so that it can equal the professionalism characterizing these industries in other parts of the world. This paper recommends future research into the narratives and styles of specific films and on the genres and categories that dominate the Nigerian film industry.

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