Digital Images and Their Signification Process in Nollywood Films Narratives: A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract
This paper theorized the way digital images such as Visual effects, Computer Generated Images, Animated images are manipulated in film narratives. With the need for continuity editing in construction of visual narratives, it appeared that the digital effects are manipulated and infused in a narrative in a way it communicates visual message and Igbo cultural ideologies. Therefore application of digital images in a narrative is dependent on the mode in which it is constructed to represent the ideologies to be construed. This paper looked at the meaning making process of digital effects applied in select films, hinging this study on semiotic theory to explain the communicative impact visual in film narrative and technical possibilities in this 21st century.

Introduction
The Nollywood film industry, like its counterparts in other parts of the world, has arguably improved immensely in the use of Computer Generated Images (CGI) in film narratives. Whereby CGI characters are easily identified as animated images. This notwithstanding, it still gives an illusion of what it represents which allows the spectator to retain focus on the narrative elements of the film. In this respect, CGI as a device is used in Nollywood films to enhance visual narratives which promote the thematic preoccupations in the films. In this regard, the magical illusions, supernatural iconography of abstract characters and gory ritual representations seen in almost all the genres of Nollywood these days point to the relevance of visual effects in enhancing storylines.

The use of CGI in films can instigate fear of uncertainty in the audience as the narrative unfolds due to the careful composition of images and synchronized sound structure that help to drive the narrative plot. CGI in any genre affects the audience depending on how the filmmaker applies his or her skill in creating suspense, heightened tension, or inducing excitement, and intrigue.

The application of CGI in Nollywood is culturally driven. It projects the belief system of a particular people. The recent technological advancement in the world has enhanced believability in various forms of visual effects. This technological advancement has equally enabled flexibility in the design and application of various forms of effects in film production. Thus, designers with the right computer software can do creations and modeling of creatures, objects, and compositing of these images into proposed shots cum the distortion of shots from the original footage to achieve a desirable representation that is believable even when it is an imagined image. In this regard, computer-generated images refer to specific images infused and alterations in film narrative through the use of computer software.

For effective creation and application of visuals and CGI in Nollywood, there is a great need for synergy between the effect designers and the directors. In this regard, Benedetti, Brown, Laramie, Williams, P (2004, p, 47) stated that "it is uncommon for the effects designer to visit the set and even to provide early drafts of each effect for the director and D.P to use when establishing the composition and flow of the related shots." Thus there is a great need for the effect designer to visit the production set to supervise the shot construction. Likewise, during post-production, choosing the right computer tools,

determines to a great extent how he actualizes his imagination to blend with the entire narrative. In both foreign and Nollywood films CGI and visual effects were not present during the production and are mostly generated during post-production. Therefore, the filmmaker and the actors involved have no idea of what the end product would look like during production. For instance, films like *Mad Max*, *King Authur*, and several other films made use of CGI to create believable effects that would be difficult, impossible and very expensive to build. As such, in the film Mad Max (the fury road), the desert scene with cloudy effects was shot during the day, which the cloudy areas were manipulated with the aid of CGI. And one of the reasons why Mad Max looked convincingly believable is that the CG images were concealed by the desaturation of the cinematography.

In digital media, therefore, visual effects and CGI are used to create signs which are recognizable by the audience which makes them experience an illusion of life. Thus, images are created and animated not only to make movements but to spur the audience to react to stimuli while the creatures show expressions that are human-like and life-like. In this regard, it is right to say that the use of visual effects and CGI in Nollywood film narrative relay specific emotional response to the viewer, if effectively applied in the narrative. Thus, the images are recognizable signs which trigger previous cognitive experiences and stimulate the viewer to react emotionally or otherwise. In applying this form of mediation in Nollywood, the CGI application depends on how the filmmaker's ideology is conceived within his or her socio-cultural values. Thus, cultural perception on which signs are used to represent objects and characters in a narrative determines the extent of mediation. As aforementioned, it is attributed to the prevailing belief system and mindset of Nigerian society.

Film images are representations of what the filmmaker sees which indicates that nothing real exists independently of the use of codes. The filmmaker uses cultural codes to construct reality. In this respect, Russell Daylight argues that the semiotics of Charles Sanders Pierce largely overlaps in function and meaning with the "semiology" of Ferdinand de Saussure. Among scholars that provide their views concerning each system of semiotics are, Sebeok, Deely, and Eco. Thus, semiology occupies the part of semiotics which relates either to conventional communication, international communication or some other subset of semiotic acts. This implies that semiotics infer meanings from societal expectations, cultural values and individual experiences.

Roland Barthes (1915-1980), as a follower of de Saussure's semiological programme and a leading structuralist, is recognized for his contribution to test semiotic studies of myth, theology, literature and narrative. He became famous also for his contribution to the semiotics of various types of visual communication, and for his systematic model of signification, a Saussurean term that Barthes defines as "a process: it is the act which binds the signifier and signified, an act whose product is the sign" (1964/67, p. 48). Barthes sets up two orders of signification, which he refers to as denotation and connotation. His particular usage of these terms derives directly from Saussure's dyadic (signifier-signified) model of the sign. Huhtamo, (2003, p. 5), highlights the difference between denotation and connotation as follows:

> The distinction between denotation and connotation is the guiding idea of Barthes' semiotic theory. He claims that when we read signs and sign complexes, we can distinguish between different kinds of messages. Denotation is the "literal or obvious meaning" or the "first-order signifying system". For example, the denotative meaning of an image refers to its literal, descriptive meaning. Connotation refers to "second order signifying systems", additional cultural meanings we can also find from the image or text. Barthes identifies connotation with the operation of ideology (which he also calls "myth"). According to Barthes, "ideology or "myth" consists of the deployment of signifiers for the purpose of expressing and justifying the dominant values of a given society, class or historical period (the signs express not just "themselves", but also all kind of value systems that surround them). As myths, signs tend to appear "natural" and self-evident

> (although they are basically always artificial, coded), hiding the operations of ideology.

Eco widens the subject and role of semiotics in the exploration of reality of human existence when he writes that, "semiotics is concerned with everything which can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands in for it" (Eco, 1976, p. 7). Moreover, it can be visualized as an approach to a wide variety of systems of signification and communication or it can be visualized as a description of those various systems focusing on their mutual differences or their specific structural properties such as the transformation from verbal language to gestures or from visual images to body positions. It can investigate those various systems either at the elementary level of their sequential units such as words, colour spots, sounds or at the more complex level of the texts which is, narrative structures or figures of speech (Eco, 1977).

Filmic codes are a form of technical code because filmic equipment is needed to create them, e.g. cameras, microphones, lighting, etc. In semiotics there are three basic types of signs and codes:

- Iconic signs and codes are created to appear exactly like the thing they represent, e.g. an image of a Bird looks like – signifies – a bird. But… importantly, iconic codes always act to represent more than the thing itself, e.g. when we see an image of a cowboy, our culture associates ideas of toughness and action with this particular iconic code (which also acts to reinforce what masculinity 'means' in our culture – an ideological meaning).
- Indexical signs are different. They are signs that are physically connected with the object. They have a logical, common-sense connection to the thing or idea they represent. Their interpretation takes a little longer than iconic signs since we learn them through our everyday experiences (Jacqueline, (1983, p.136). They act by indirectly "pointing" or suggesting what they mean by acting as 'cues' to existing knowledge, e.g. smoke signifies fire, sweating suggests hotness or exercise. These codes are a kind of media shorthand. They are very common and useful to media producers. Based on a phenomenological understanding of the semiotic term index, Jockenhövel furthermore agrees with Bazin's understanding of "realism", by dismissing the classical concept of the "representation of reality" and instead focusing on the results of experiencing a (possible) reality—an "illusion of reality."
- Symbolic codes act as signifiers of meaning totally disconnected from what they denote, example, a red heart shape acts only to symbolize love; a white dove symbolizes peace; red symbolizes danger, power or sexuality, white symbolizes innocence, etc. Jacqueline (1983, p.136), states that "Symbolic signs stand for something through a process of consensus. They have no logical connection and so have to be taught. These signs are greatly influenced by social and cultural considerations symbols may be complex but once the meanings are learned, they are less subject to idiosyncratic interpretation." As Lester (2000) puts it, symbolic signs usually evoke stronger emotional responses from viewers than the other types of signs because the symbols have deep roots in the culture of a particular group. In communication production and reception, the meaning of signs may shift from one type of sign to another as the communication act progresses. An important realization is that the meaning a code communicates is always culturally determined, either we learn the meaning as we grow up in a particular group, society or culture, example, the national flag means much more than its denotation of a piece of coloured cloth; it also acts to connote patriotism and pride. An important filmic and media code is the enigma code which works by creating an intriguing 'question' that the media text will go on to answer. Cinema trailers and posters use enigma codes to tempt the viewers.

To buttress the above explanation of signs and codes, John, (2014, p. 13) stresses the importance of signifiers in the construction of meaning:

> The major way that new signifier/signified relations come into being is through relationships either between signifiers or between signifieds that already exist. The primary forms of relationship are metaphor and metonymy which are known as "tropes" within linguistics and literature.

Thus, "codes are the meaning systems shared by the members of a culture; codes consist of both signs and the rules and negotiations determining the context and the style of those signs as well as the possible

combinations to build up more sophisticated messages (Parsa & Parsa (2002, p. 36). Signs are strung together in codes. A code is a set of conventionalized ways of making meaning that is specific to particular groups of people. Thus, the use of Indexical, symbolic and connotative signs convey wider systems of meaning. These wider systems can be characterized in several ways. According to Rose (2001, p. 88), "they have been called 'codes' by Stuart Hall (1980), 'referent systems' by Judith Williamson (1978), and 'mythologies' by Roland Barthes (1973). Each of these terms means something rather different, and each has somewhat different methodological implications" (as cited in Parsa, p, 849).

Anna Cabak Rédei describes icons in film from Metz's point of view, thus, "when Metz accounts for his iconic approach to film semiology–previous to the essay "Problèmes de denotations dans le film de fiction"– he expresses it in terms of "analogy". In Metz, one might find hints of hypoiconic elements in describing the three levels that cinema consists of; 1) the film in itself (which cannot be misunderstood), 2) the film as an oeuvre and; 3) the film as ideology and rooted in a socio-cultural context (2 and 3 may be misunderstood by the viewer) (Metz 2003, p. 76). One also feels the presence of some insights done by the Prague school (which Metz might have been familiar with in a broader sense through his readings of Roman Jakobson) and its development of cultural semiotics. In the Prague school model for analyzing cultural and artistic artifacts produced in a specific socio-cultural context, norms and conventions replace "codes" (Sonesson 1992, p.108). Whereas, Constance Panley (2004) stipulates that "in Film Language Metz' cine semiotics leans heavily on linguistic models. The enterprise of semiotics arose out of the methods of structural linguistics, formulated by Ferdinand de Saussure in the early part of the century. Also, linguistics has become one of the most rigorous and fruitful sciences of this century."

When applied to film theory, the film montage can be defined similarly. It reveals the images as words in a sentence. The images that are sequenced together produce a certain meaning. The governing factor of those images is what society considers "normal". Christian Metz writes in his article "Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film," that although cinema is constructed of many different codes; it is not "located at the very center of the perceptual analogy between the object and the image" (p. 39). Metz applies de Saussure's model of semiotics to film images. Film images are "infinite in number . . . like statements, which can be formulated in a verbal language" (p. 40), and together these images formulate a coherent whole, much like the linguistic sentence.

According to Jacobson's view on six elements of communication, "the content is the actual meaning, and any information that it carries (Mingers, 2013), which the producer is aiming to provide for the consumer. The content could be expressed or represented in different ways – what we will call here is the message. The message is the set of signs, symbols and signifiers that is used to represent the content on a particular occasion (p. 4). The message will have overt or intended meanings, but it will also carry with it latent and perhaps unintended connotations as well. "The message/text has to be embodied physically in some way so that it can be transferred from producer to consumer – this is the medium. It could be audible, visual, tactile, face-to-face or virtual, physical or electronic. The medium is not simply neutral, however, as its particular characteristics, in terms of affordances and liabilities, has effects on the meaning and the codes that can be used." Thus Jacobson believes that meaning resides in the total act of communication. It is not a stable, predetermined entity which passes, untrammeled, from sender to receiver" depending on the situation, one of the elements of the speech act may dominate over the others, but all contributing factors should be considered (Huhtamo 2003, p. 1). Thus communication is culture and culture is communication. In this vein, communication is effective in the film by harnessing different aspects of visual elements in a single unit within a cultural background to communicate meaning to the audience.

Character Animators

Every narrative, especially film, is supported through the portrayal of characters. There are two main types of character, the protagonists who are generally represented as 'normal', human and who either dies or survives. Most film narratives whether magic, horror, love and other film texts rely on a small group of characters. The narrative follows their recognition of the threat, their destruction by it or their

attempts to survive or defeat the threat. They are used to encourage identification with their situation and their motivations: this links to the idea of affect: we recognize their peril, and we identify with their struggles and their reactions to the threat: this is where an emotional identification allows us to fear and release, central ideas of these films.

Cutlery, &Coleman (2014, p. 8) explain that digital characters are common in animation, visual effects, and real-time applications using computer graphics. As the use of digital character technology has spread approaches to rigging, deformations, and simulations continue to share a foundation of best practices, but have also evolved in unique ways specific to the exhibition format. Thus, creative artists use their infinite imaginative powers to portray their imagination and fantasies of the world around them in film narratives. The characters created by these artists reveal a lot about our notions and knowledge about our environments and culture. Some of these characters such as magical or supernatural characters have been questioned for their believability and also been associated with uncertainty of arguments. The diversity of animated characters ranges from photo-realistic syn-thespians, such as the sea-creature pirates in the feature film series, *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2006& 2007), the visually abstracted characters in the *Kung Fu Panda* animated features (2008 & 2011), and the avatar-athletes, -soldiers, and -animals in video games such as the Madden Football series and Fight Night (2011).In this regard, Darely (2000) states that:

> Films represent a renovation and intensification of the potentially disruptive power of spectacle within narrative. The contradiction – ever present in special effects – between knowing that one is being tricked and still submitting to the illusory effect is operative here. Yet, particularly (though certainly not solely) in those scenes involving computer imaging discussed here, the more photographically perfect or convincing the images, the more – paradoxically– does their sutured and suturing aspect seem to recede and their fabricated character come to the fore. In these moments of heightened spectacle (within films that are already spectacular), the sheer perfection of the simulation encourages a curiosity or fascination with the materiality and mechanics (artifice)of the image itself, which tends to wrest it even further from narrative subordination. (p.113)

Austin (2014) asserts that narrative is supported through the portrayal of characters: we can argue that there are two types, the protagonists who are generally represented as 'normal', human and who either die or survive. Most horror texts rely on a small group of characters, and the narrative follows their recognition of the threat, their destruction by it or their attempts to survive or defeat the threat. *Snow White* and *the Seven Dwarfs*, *Lilo & Stitch*, *The Secret of Kells*, and *Fantasia* employ hand-drawn cell animation. *Coraline* and *Fantastic Mr. Fox* using stop-motion photography. *Happy Feet and Up* use CGI animations…. Most of *Beauty and the Beast* was drawn on cells, but the ballroom scene is a good example of early computer animation. CGI was used to create the stampede scene in *The Lion King*, and otherwise hand-drawn film. McLaughlin& David (2011), highlights that "despite the variety of performance expectations for computer-generated characters in visual story-telling, a common fundamental technical core is shared between visual effects, feature animation, and interactive game projects." Despite this shared terminology and approaches, there is still a great difference between visual effects in film narrative and pure animation. Kaba states that:

> In the motion capture technique, the digital data of performances of real actors in special costumes -including their facial expressions- are adjusted, cleaned and then loaded onto virtual characters to realize the animation. Bodies-walking, standing, running, slouching, brawling-turns out, I was being assured, that these are all quite doable, no longer that big deal. Hands-grasping, signaling, stroking, idling at rest-granted, they're a bit more of a challenge, but not all that much more, and at least conceptually within reach. But a believable human face -a credible face-in motion, and what's more, *emoting*-damn, that was proving tough. Real actors base their performances on their current feelings. How they lift

> their eyebrows and the way they look all develop naturally in association with their talents, whereas such feelings and moves are created by animators for the virtual characters. Actions like how much to lift the eyebrows and how to look are not easy in terms of reflecting the real feeling. Such facial expressions may appear odd or unnatural and can adversely make a character appear life-less as opposed to life-like. (2013, p.191)

In this regard, DeRose and Kass (2014, p.1) submit that the creation of believable and endearing characters in computer graphics presents several technical challenges, including the modeling, animation and rendering of complex shapes such as heads, hands, and clothing.
Visual effects artists can enhance the achievements of makeup artists, cinematographers, costume designers, and stunt actors. Flaws on the film itself, such as light leaks and scratches, can also be cleaned up using visual effects techniques. Makeup, costumes, color, and lighting can all be perfected on the computer, and physical effects, such as explosions and stunts, can be fine-tuned.

In *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), digital effects were used to keep actor Jim Caviezel's makeup wounds consistent from day to day. Except for handles that were held by the actors, the sticks and whips used by the Roman soldiers to beat Jesus were also created on the computer. The effects crew can touch up makeup mistakes, correct makeup colors, or create makeup, for example, for Imhotep's decomposed face in The Mummy or the demonic visions in Emily Rose.

Traditionally, these shapes have been modeled with NURBS surfaces despite the severe topological restrictions that NURBS impose. To move beyond these restrictions, we have recently introduced subdivision surfaces into our production environment. Subdivision surfaces are not new, but their use in high-end CG production has been limited. McLaughlin, Cutlery, & David Coleman (2011), highlight that:

> Powerful and agile software is highly valued, and there would be no use for digital characters without their puppeteers, as authors of this course we are collectively interested in promoting awareness of the field and the spread of knowledge therein. We have seen software come and go. We are comfortable with and accommodating of uses of key-framing, motion-capture, and procedural animation. We believe that the ability to assess performance requirements and production limitations is a skill that can be learned and one that transcends changes in tools and visual styles.

In essence, no matter how sophisticated the tool for animation is, without good skills and creative credibility, the perception of encoding and decoding an Animated Character will be vague. In this regard, designers should be conscious of creating believable images and appropriately infused into the live-action environment. Therefore, they should be concerned with how CGI objects and characters are made believable. Similarly, McLaughlin, Cutlery, & David Coleman (2011, p.1) explain that,

> Integration with live-action photography is the primary concern for all computer generated elements in a visual effects project, including digital characters. Digital characters in live action projects are surrounded by a real environment full of objects, people, animals, and actions that are constrained by the natural laws of physics and evolutionary allometry. The photographic elements provide constant visual touchstones for viewers marking the boundaries of the willing suspension of disbelief. It is within this constrained space that digital artists must work including those responsible for the rigging and deformations of digital characters. (p.2)

Thus, character Animation for a live-action movie is surrounded by real environments and objects which gives it a better feeling when animated characters such as supernatural animals are well infused into the real environment to suit the Narrative. Therefore, designers are always conscious of the placement and its movement to replicate a real-life image for a believable viewing. Thus, plans of shots

that will give space and timing for the Animated Character to be infused are considered during production before post-production.

Okun, and Zwermanp (2010, p.285) argue that "though the explosion of digital effects has replaced the use of some miniature effects in today's filmmaking, the combination of digital and miniature effects has made it far more practical in cost and post-production manipulation. With the advances in digital technology, particularly regarding tracking and compositing, miniatures have become more easily integrated into sequences, truly blurring the lines between the old and new techniques, giving audiences a hyperreality in visual effects." Thus, successful creation of a character using CGI warrants a solid understanding of anatomy, range of motion, and kinematics. And gaining good control of the design system requires an in-depth understanding of how artists interact with a character model. As well as the capacity to make appropriate designs that are aesthetically balanced with another visual element. Therefore, the animator must be equipped with the technical know-how to enable him to solve the possible problems in merging a live-action shot with a CGI character. In this wise, McLaughlin, & David (2011, p.3) state that visual effects companies employ a standard rigging toolset accessed through a 3D animation program, the toolset must accommodate the form of motion input, variety of artists using the rig(s), and the capacity to output files or forms of data required by other parts of the production pipeline. A rigging toolset varies based on the type of rig to be built and used. Typical rig types used in visual effects production include:

- Motion capture rig -a motion system onto which data from performance capture sessions is keyed; usually used as an input to the performance rig.
- Motion tracking rig -a motion, control, and deformation (sometimes) system used by artists responsible for rotoscoping the action of a digital character over the action of a live actor in a filmed shot [Monks *et al*. 2004].
- Performance rig -a motion and control system providing control of the character to animation artists [Monks *et al*. 2004].
- Simulation rig -a motion system built of dynamic objects such as pins, springs, and soft- and rigid-body objects, designed to work with a dynamics solver; usually used as either an input to the performance rig or as a receiver of motion from the performance rig.
- Deformation rig -a motion and control system used to provide refined input to the deformation system for the behavior of the character's skin relative to the motion of the performance rig; sometimes combined with sculpted shapes keyed to activate with skeletal motion. (McLaughlin & David, 2011, p.3)
- Facial rig -a motion, control, and deformation system for the expressive areas of a character's face that may be composed of joints, deformers, simulation objects, modeled shapes, or any variation of these techniques (McLaughlin & David, 2011, p.3).
- Muscle rig -a motion and control system that can be composed of joints, simulation objects, or a mixture that defines how the muscular system of the character will work relative to the motion of the performance rig (McLaughlin & David, 2011, p.3).
- Clothing and accoutrements rig -a motion and control system of joints, simulation objects, or a mixture of both that defines how objects such as a character's wardrobe, jewelry, and dangling tools or weapons, will move relative to the motion of the performance rig (McLaughlin & David, 2011, p.3).

Conclusion

This paper discusses the manipulation of visual effects in Nollywood narratives how these composited images such as Visual effect images, and animated images are manipulated to produce meanings in films. It further points out that the images produce meanings and they are categorized into three semiotic terms which include; Iconic, indexical and symbolic signs. These visual effect images in Nollywood are seen as signs that are culturally bound and best understood within the context of the culture in which the narrative revolves.

In conclusion, this paper reaffirms that the manipulation of visual effects and animated images in a narrative is dependent on the mode in which it is constructed to represent the ideologies to be construed. This paper looks at the meaning-making process of visual effects applied in Nollywood films, hinging this study on semiotic theory to explain the communicative impact of visual effects in film narrative and technical possibilities in this 21st century.

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