

AN APPRAISAL OF VISUAL EFFECT APPLICATION IN OLD NOLLYWOOD EPIC REPRESENTATIONS: A READING OF KEN ANUKA'S ZAZZI (2016)

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Abstract

This paper appraises the way Visual effects are being used in communicating African ideologies in Nollywood epic genres and further buttresses that the application of visual effects in Nollywood narratives is a construct of Nigerian cultural representation. Hence, this paper places emphasis on Igbo cultural norms and beliefs. Semiotic theory is used to interrogate the use of visual effects in Ken Steve Anuka's *Zazi* (2016) by pinpointing the meanings of cultural representations in the selected movie as regards Igbo cultural realities. At the end, this paper submits that the application of visual effects in Nollywood helps to serve narrative purposes depending on how the filmmakers encode the ideology of Nigerian society.

Introduction

Nollywood as an industry is a highly placed commercial industry that is developing rapidly. Its film narratives are characterized by Nigerianness, which is easily understood from the perspective of the Nigerian context. Nollywood films are produced in different genres, which include ritual genre, the vigilant genre, comic genre; epic genre, religious genre, love, and other genres. This notwithstanding, there are films which display aspects of more than one genre. In all, these films are representations of different ideologies of the Nigerian society. As such, their visual images are constructs of cultural representation in which meanings can only be deduced from the context of culture. Most recently films employ the use of visual effect images to construct meaningful signs which present objects and images that are larger than life and possibly events that give illusion of representations of one's cultural belief. These visual effect images are created and made to be believable. The point here is that, filmmakers create these images especially in Nollywood epic films to create ideological and acceptable cultural beliefs which communicate meaningful ideas within the context of the narrative. To understand how images created with poor technological equipment in the old Nollywood narratives, it warrants a Semiotic reading of those visual images applied in the selected narratives.

Therefore, this warrants a critical understanding and application of film semiotics to the reading of the select film's visual effect images.

Film semiotics is the study of sign process or any process that involves signs, including the production of meaning, as these signs pertain to moving pictures, Visual effect images and animations. Film semiotics is used for the interpretation of many art forms, often including abstract art. It has its root in Semiotic and semiology theory.

Semiotics can be referred to as the study of sign processes, signification, or the study of signs and symbols. However, there exists the formal and social aspects of semiotics, the former (semiology) abstracting signs from the contexts of their usage while the latter (semiotics) examines semiotic practices that are specific to Nigerian culture." In this regard, Saussure (1966, p. 16) expressed in his semiotics that;

The signifier calls up a mental image, not a material object. We see the signifier and think about the object it stands for; we do not experience the object directly. What is signified is not the object, only an idea of the object. As Saussure put it, "Both parts of the sign are psychological" (Saussure 1966, p. 16), (as cited in Chandler 2002, p. 25).

Therefore, 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, semiotics infers meanings from the societal expectations, cultural values and individual experiences.

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 which Barthes defined 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.

Umberto 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 that 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).

A semiotic analysis of a film seeks to find out how the messages are formed and given meaning. In a semiotic approach, the meanings of images designed in film by their creators give shape and significance to our experience of reality. To study film may mean to decipher the framing of meaning since they are always produced in a social context and are always contextual. Without a context, no meaning can be produced because the image will stand for nothing, so films compose connections between the meanings and images produced. These images as codes assembled by the filmmaker are also deciphered by the viewer. Moreover, understanding of the different codes assembled by the filmmaker as a unified entity depends on the viewer's level of interpretation of the image seen and his/her familiarity with the cultural codes. In this regards, visual effect in film, TV, and games as tools for connotation produces meanings to the film story and to the audience. William notes that, "Awareness of the operations of the devices may also be part of the pleasure of the spectators" (as cited by Shilo T. Mc Clean, 2004, p.37). Much as this assertion seem true, it should be noted that some genres are dependent on action, suspense and visual effects, especially computer generated imagery are the vehicle through which tension are heightened and as well elaborated in film's narrative.

Bordwell states that narration is a process whereby films furnish cues to spectators who are interpretative schemata to construct ordered intelligible stories in their minds, from the point of view of reception, spectators entertain, elaborate, and sometime suspend and modify their hypothesis about the images and sounds on the screen. However, representation of reality plays a crucial role in understanding literature and art as a whole since ancient times.

In this wise, Lawant, (2013, p.13) explained that human intervention in rotoscoping cannot be denied. The semiotics of this human intervention are a little more explicitly noticeable in the iconic aspect of the rotoscoped image than in the indexical. As with the indexical aspect the iconic is anchored within the live-action image." Thus visual effects (CGI) tend to make use of allusive and elusive references to individuals and objects which are iconically or metaphorically identified by the audience. Therefore, visual metaphor could provide subtle means for identifying some references; because visual metaphors

generally have much impact than verbal metaphorical expressions in terms of understanding the relayed visual messages and their influence on the audiences when used in appropriate and specific contexts. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have argued that metaphorical language is pervasive and universal, which is not arbitrary but remarkably systemic. Their argument was based on the fact that people's ordinary conceptual system is metaphorically structured helping them to comprehend complex or abstract experiences in terms of concrete concepts which they are more familiar with. From this perspective, cognitive metaphor is the term used to refer to the understanding of a particular idea that is the conceptual domain in terms of concrete or real experience. Thus metaphor has been described as a mental process of "understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain" (Kovecses, 2002, p.4).

Lawant (2013, p.13), explains that,

Semiotically rotoscoping obviously works in a matter close to live-action: after all, the image is directly traced over from live-action footage. This means that here the iconicity and the indexicality of the image behave differently from the forms of film previously discussed. The signs of the live-action image become fully incorporated into the animated image. While the indexical aspect of the drawn image is in part simply contained within the brushstrokes on the canvas (or whatever the material used), the indexical aspect of the live-action footage is also incorporated. The live-action image has an indexical aspect of registering the light that shoots through the lens and in return the final rotoscoped image registers that image.

Animated images and live action images, both make use of indexical and iconic signs, and both produce better messages were merged or fused together. Thus, Hisham Bizri, Andrew Johnson, and Christina Vasilakis (1998, p.12) highlight that, "the quintessential rule of art is its ability to suspend disbelief and create the illusion of art. Through convincing representation, the illusion in art manifests itself, forcing the viewer to become psychologically involved." Thus viewers are psychologically involved in a film narrative which is imagined as a complex web of signs. The viewers are given series of narrative codes which can be deciphered at multiple levels of meaning. Each deciphered thread embodies a network of signs leading to other signs. If the viewer fails in his initial task he confronts another set of signs to choose from which will lead to other sets. The viewer's psychological inquiry into the narrative and her attempt to decipher its puzzle often times yield desired and new meanings as well.

In this respect, the application of visual effects as a narrative device is subjectively utilized in Nollywood film narratives by filmmakers to create magical, ritualistic images and supernatural characters that are indexical representations of its real objects or imaginations that are culturally accepted. The relevance of a variety of images created i.e. transformations of the photographic image like motion blur, diffusion or lens flares - which are created by digital means in visual effects applications as essential aspects of photorealism which are composed to align with the narrative and give meanings that are culturally bound. In this regard, Uwah (2013, p. 53) in explaining views on the integration of magic and witchcraft in Nollywood film narrative points out that these films represent

and portray themes with existential significances for ordinary Nigerian." Nollywood's depiction of supernatural iconographies and powers indicates the interactivity that the digitally manufactured characters and shots interplay with time and space which communicates with signs that are either overtly exaggerated or basically of the filmmaker's imagination which often are suggestive realism. This demonstrates that CGI, digital visual effects are infused in Nollywood films to serve narrative purposes depending on the filmmakers encoding ideology of Nigerian society. This is why Omoera (2009, p.197) states that what the filmmakers "in turn produce are concrete reflections of the society." In other words, the society and culture propel the images used as signs created with the use of Visual effects in any film genre/narrative.

Benagr (2012, p. 69) explains that "sociopolitical, economic and socio-cultural considerations usually determine the nature and shape of technology and consequently its application in solving the particular problem it is designed to solve." This implies that social ideologies, culture and values are proponents from which visual effect objects are designed and composited in a film narrative with intent to infer illusions cultural realities. And the analysis of such images are also decoded and analyzed within visual narrative culture and social elements to arrive at a desirable and suitable scientific explanation. Benagr reiterates that it "eventually leads too technological innovation." Therefore, depending on the filmmakers' encoding of Nigerian society's ideology, the use of visual effects in Nollywood narratives not only serves narrative purposes but also communicates specific cultural beliefs and ideologies.

According to Chow and Harrell (p.5) "the director or animator can infer the sensation by cognitively projecting her or his own experience to the perceived action. This act of "inference" seems to be suggesting that the projection takes place at a higher cognitive level, demanding conscious mental operation." Thus, the filmmaker especially the visual effects designer blends his or her past experiences and perceived action thereby yielding an inferred sensation. The blend is so tight that the Visual effect images are associated with the sensation. In this regard, use of visual effects to recreate past experiences bring visible and invisible images and events for us to re-experience. This is based on a perceptual perspective but also as a narrative category, because visual effects offer a vast range of visualization strategies. These visualizations convey dimensions beyond the scope of human perception, imagination, thought or magical phenomena. Magic is not only a content of representation but refers to the technology itself, providing it with a mythic enhancement. Uwah (2013, p. 269) reiterates that "movie encoders often dramatise people's everydayness and bring in some elements of their mythical and real history to imbue resonance that connects with viewers in the films." Thus, these images encoded in Nollywood film narratives elicit pleasure and trigger reactions of fear, emotions in the narrative and on the viewer.

From a film cognitive-semiotic perspective, most Nollywood films produced with the use of CGI tend to distort images in comparison to their real socio-cultural images and roles. Thus, CG images in Nollywood films are manipulative representations which are equipped with good or bad morals, to convey the necessary messages encoded in a narrative. This

instance is seen in Igbo movies. Likewise, in Yoruba movies, representation of ritual practice or witchcraft often presents a society comprising of both good and bad, shown in dark and white symbolisms. This depiction of good and bad is to present the view that the good supersedes or wins over evil actions. Likewise, the Igbo film narratives through the CGI xray depictions of retribution in which the culprit after confessing his sins either dies or goes crazy to serve as deterrent to the viewers. Therefore, Nollywood tend to portray CG images of magical, ritual and witchcraft simulations that are either suggestive or exaggerated and rests on retribution. The CGI simulations in both Igbo and Yoruba movies are based on their beliefs and sociocultural backgrounds.

Synopsis of Ken Steve Anuka's Zazi (2016)

Ahanna is a prince of Umudike kingdom who is betrothed to the princess of Amankwo kingdom as a peace offering. The Prince, on the other hand, dislikes the Princess because of her pompous behavior and irrational treatment of her subjects.

Zuru is a very wicked father who treats all his daughters and wives like slaves; he goes as far as having sexual intercourse with his daughters and impregnating them. He is a god and never wants any male child to exist in his land. On the other hand, his community has been punished for the atrocities they committed, and they are now depending on another community to salvage them, but not without a price. Zazi from a far land overpowers her father (Zulu) and kills him after taking his talisman, using her father's talisman to strike him with a lightening that burns into black ashes and evaporates. She does this in anger since Zuru killed her younger sister for not being brave as well as killed her new-born child after childbirth. On a faithful day, as Prince Ahunna takes a stroll, he sees a young maiden being beaten by two boys, and he ordered them to stop and reprimands them. He asks his guards to help the young maiden up. He then walks her to where she resides despite her refusal. The Prince gets to know that her parents died in their farm as a result of thunder and lightening that struck them while it was raining. Before the Prince leaves, he invites her to the palace. The next day after she had finished her daily fetching of firewood for people, she went to see the palace and the guards that were on guard at the entrance of the palace prevented her from entering and pushed her away. When the Prince found out what happened he asked her to describe the guards so that he will sack them from their duties as guards, but she pleaded with the prince not to take such a drastic decision.

The Princess of Amankwo visits her betrothed and proposed husband and she stayed for days in the palace. The Prince dislikes her arrogant nature and maltreatment of her subjects. Each time the Prince goes out to visit his friends that he rescued from being beaten by two boys, the Princess of Amankwo keeps wondering why he goes on a stroll. Unfortunately, a messenger who had seen the Prince and the maiden he saved playing, informed the Princess of the maiden that the Prince often goes out to visit. She goes and give the girl a serious warning to stay away from the Prince. She did not stop at that. She plots against the girl with the help of one the elders and accuse Mma of stealing from someone's farm. She is arrested and detained at the palace where she is flogged and kept in a cage. When the Prince hears this he is furious and goes to release her.





One faithful day the prince went hunting with some guards in the forest and they all went in separate directions in the bush to hunt. Then the Prince meets Zazi in his direction of the forest. He tried to find out whom she was but lost her when she ran. While he is shouting in beckoning on her to come back and not to be afraid, the guards heard his voice and came to his rescue, thinking he is attacked or injured. He explains that he saw a stranger from a far land loitering in the bush path. Later on chaos arose between Zazi's people and Umuddike people which resulted into war, and Zaazi terrorizes the people of Umudike.

A Critical Analysis of Ken Steve Anuka's *Zazi the Amazon Warrior* (2016)

At the beginning of the narrative we are made to see the wicked nature of Zaazi's father. He prevents any of the maidens from going out from the village and impregnates them. In protecting any visitor from discovering that such people existed he ensures that hunters and wanderers are kept away. We see how his spirit moves away from his body when he looked through his magical pot to see a hunter lurking around the bush nearby hunting. When his spirit gets to hunter he questions him and he strikes the hunter with light flares from his arm. The hunter shouted and dies. The move away of his image from his body is a photo trick which has been used in several Nollywood films right from *Living in Bondage* though more enhanced with time. The drifting away from his body symbolizes his powers as a strong man in charge protecting his family. And any kill he makes he conjures the blood to fill the sacred calabash he also uses as his medium seeing through and around his vicinity. As a matter of fact, these symbolic supernatural displays show cases the prowess of the king. And these techniques have been used in different genres in Nollywood. Especially in Voodoo genre such as occult and witchcraft movies. These genre visual images that are naturally unseen but are believed to be in existence. Thus filmmakers employ and infuse these supernatural and magical images based on their imaginations and cultural experiences. As such that the magical and supernatural images are the appealing effects of the narrative. Therefore, these surreal images with its synchronized sounds horrifies the audience.

Then when Zuru (Zazi's father) observed that Zazi had taken his protective charm as a god, he started pleading with Zazi, Zuru is struck with fire and he gets burnt alive. This action describes the ascending of Zazi as the goddess. It shows the automatic transfer of power from Zuru to Zazi who leads the people. The entire scene is edifying and educative to any viewer that when one is in power he or she should be mindful of his or her action which can change and if he/she is wicked on his or her subject such action can reserve towards him. Therefore, CGI is infused in the narrative which stands as a narrative device to convey main idea or intended meaning of the entire narrative.

Pictorial Representations of Supernatural Power with the use of CGI in *Zazi* (2016)

Pictorial representation	Visual effect interpretation	Sound effect interpretation
	<p>Superimposition of a scene into Zuru's eyes to give illusion of a god seeing all things within his vicinity</p>	
	<p>The drifting of Zuru spirit back from killing the hunter into his stationed body. (ghost effect)</p>	
	<p>Lightening flare effects and Flares of light signifying that the subject has been subdued by burning from lightening.</p>	<p>Lightening sound Effects and Flares of light signifying that the subject has been subdued by burning from lightening.</p>
	<p>Sparkling lighting flares are placed at strategic points of Zuru's body to give an illusion of being inflamed through magical means by Zazi.</p>	<p>Sparkling lighting flares are placed at strategic points of Zuru's body to give an illusion of being inflamed through magical means by Zazi.</p>

From the above pictorial representation, the narrative at the beginning showcases some supernatural powers which are culturally acceptable. However these surreal images are subjective ideas of the designer though there were some inconsistencies in the representation when Zuru got burnt. But the CGI representation communicated symbolic

ideas. As such, the magical and supernatural representation are acceptable and can be easily construed.

Most filmmakers are happy to fulfill only the first challenge to make a relevant story relevant, or at least accessible. But the makers of *300*, basing their film on the graphic novel by Frank Miller and Lynn Varley, take the second challenge seriously. They take pains to show the strangeness of Sparta, at least from our perspective, its brutality, its fanatical obsession with warfare and its code of manhood. The movie thrusts us into this bizarre warlike culture and then, just as we are beginning to get our balance, it surprises us by quickly establishing that the Spartan soldiers, in fact, are the good guys. The invading Persians are worse, mythical, cruel and autocratic, with no proto-democratic traditions. The visual and sound elements are not softened for our benefit but are presented with accuracy. As a result we get to feel every move made by the key actors and what prompted their move. The film *300* was a studio production which has its realistic effects on the film and the audience. The film *300* is like watching marble turn to flesh and blood, and the effect is fascinating. Significantly, this hyper-stylization of *300* is limited to its visuals. The performances are played straight, and this combination of straight performances and stylized visuals produce uncanny effect. It is as if the movie is reminding us that we are seeing history as it truly appeared, even if this is history as it happened. We are getting it through the lenses of memory, or legend. Whereas in Nigerian films, filmmakers have been able to project African cultural identities, they have a long way to go. For instance, in the film *Mountains of Evil*, a good plot is technically marred due to poor sound synchronization. Sometimes the visual images tend to lack coherence with the sounds synchronized to them. Some of these faults are mainly the result of the sound designer not being precise. And some are the result of piracy and dubbing. Some sounds were able to decode some information about the scene and the theme of the film story.

Conclusion

This paper explored the use of visual effects to convey specific Igbo cultural ideals in realistic and significant ways throughout Nollywood epic film storylines. Despite the poor representations as a result of available visual effect tool, it still uphold African cultural beliefs especially the Igbo cultural beliefs system. Visual effect designers create and infuse images in tandem with film narratives based on inferred sensation. As afore mentioned these Visual effect images are associated with the sensation. In this regard, use of visual effects to recreate past experiences bring visible and invisible images and events for us to re-experience. This is based on a perceptual perspective but also as a narrative category, because visual effects offer a vast range of visualization strategies. These visualizations convey dimensions beyond the scope of human perception, imagination, thought or magical phenomena. Magic is not only a content of representation but refers to the technology itself, providing it with a mythic enhancement. Therefore, the use of visual effects in Nollywood Narrative aids in achieving story objectives based on the directors' encoding of the Igbo cultural ideologies.

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Filmography

Title: Zazi (2016)

Screen Play: Ernest Obi

Producer: Martins Onyemaobi

Director: Anuka Steven

Starring: Rachea I Okonkwo, Gentle Jack, Diamond Okechi

Company: Onye-Eze Production Ltd