

# SEMIOTIC DISCOURSE ON NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN NOLLYWOOD

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## *Abstract*

*The poor narrative techniques of Nigerian video films have led to crises of meaning in Nollywood. Many, who rush into production, do not have the basic narrative skills that are required, thereby applying stage narrative techniques to film production. This has hampered the semiotic narrative impact in video film productions. This work examines semiotic impact on narrative techniques in Nollywood films and suggests how semiotic monotonous applications and stage narrative techniques can be diversified for effective communication. To achieve this, the study examines scholarly works on semiotics and relates it to narrative techniques. Robert Scholes' theory of narrative provides the theoretical formula for the research work. A Nollywood video film with high level of semiotic impact is analysed to explicate the contributions of semiotics to film narratives. It thus concludes that although narrative techniques in Nigerian films are influenced by theatrical traditions, if film semiotics is adequately applied to the narrative concept, Nollywood productions will become filmic rather than stagy. This will thus improve the quality of video film productions in Nigeria.*

## **Introduction**

Narrative techniques are greatly interwoven with semiotics. Nollywood movies have not paid adequate attention to the semiotic

implications of narrative techniques. Narrative techniques can be said to be a method and system through which a film's story is communicated to the viewers. Semiotic narratives involve the dramatic and the technical contents of video films. The dramatic content involves the plot structure, characterisation and its interpretation by actors while the technical content involves the application and execution of a film's technical equipments by the crew members and also the visual transmission medium to enable the dramatic contents of the film. Nollywood films have failed to harness both the dramatic and technical narrative forms of semiotics for effective communication. This gives rise to stereotypical and archetypal interpretative nature of Nollywood films. Studies on Nollywood show that poor narrative techniques pose a major problem. This study, apart from drawing attention to these problems proffers semiotics as a solution towards the diversification of narrative techniques in Nollywood. It examines semiotic impact of narrative techniques in Nollywood. Though much research has been carried out on area of semiotics in different aspects of theatrical and film production, nevertheless this work takes a holistic look at semiotics from its narrative value towards enhancing the narrative techniques of Nollywood. It traces the misinformation and poor narratives in Nollywood video films to poor knowledge and application of film semiotics and concludes that semiotics is the bedrock of narrative techniques.

### **The Concept OF Film Semiotics**

The word semiotics comes from semiology, though both are used interchangeably and mean the same thing. Semiology is the theory of signs that was propounded by Ferdinand de Saussure who was born on November 26, 1857, in Geneva, Switzerland, to a

family with a long history of contributions to the sciences (Iregbu, 2010, 11). Guzzetti in tracing the origin of semiology asserts that semiology derives its linguistic framework from Ferdinand de Saussure, who furnished the indispensable distinction between the general language such as French, English, Russian, etc as a system within a language that comprises such elements as the phonetic, syntactic, and semantic sub-systems, which together permit the intelligibility and multiplicity of utterances (1973, 185). However, following the death of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, an American philosopher Charles Sander Peirce, coined the word semiotics “as a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society. As such it is equally concerned with processes of signification and communication, which is the means whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged. Nevertheless, Harman narrows the definition of semiotics to film as the theory of film-as-a-system-of-signs. It involves the idea of looking at a film as a kind of language with its linguistics attributes (1977, 204).

However, most Nollywood producers do not understand this language of film semiotics. This dearth of knowledge accounts for poor composition of shots and a wrong use of visual effects and components. These have resulted in the production of films that fall short not only of local standards, but also and to a greater extent, of the international standard. The importance of film producers to understand and apply semiotics in production was highlighted by Eco who doubts possibility of understanding the social relevance and the aesthetic functioning of a movie without focusing on it from a semiotic point of view (1977, 217). It goes without saying therefore that the producers’ knowledge and competence in various aspects of cultural and psychological semiotics advances the production of meaning in a film. Shaka

affirms that “the picture, however, is meaningful depending upon the cultural background of the viewers and their level of visual literacy... a picture is worth a thousand words. But that is if the picture is understood. If a viewer cannot decode a visual message, the picture becomes worthless” (2007, 130). This complementary role of semiotics to visual narrative could be exemplified with a symbolic sign which is normally pasted in every modern rest room that connotes either male or female usage. There is a complete visual narrative in establishing such signs in a shot sequence and following up with a character coming out of the rest room. Without any dialogue from the actor, the symbol on the door of above the rest room connotes a rest room. Human beings are concerned about the production and significance of meaning in society. Film semiotics has thus attracted much research work because of its iconographic nature.

Semiotics of film can be conceived of either as a semiotics of connotation or as semiotics of denotation (Metz, 1974, 173). Semiotics of connotation can be seen as the meaning embedded in particular information while the semiotics of denotation can be seen as the meaning of information face value. Connotation is thus what is signified by a sign when the sign combines aspects of the basic materials of the film and the story that those aspects denote (Harman, 1977, 205). We have three types of denotative signs which include icon, index and symbols. We must develop semiotics in accordance with the theory of sign envisaged by the American philosopher C.S. Peirce. In particular, we must recall Peirce’s distinction between three aspects of sign: iconic, indexical and symbolic (Harman, 1977, 209). An iconic sign is similitude. It is noted for high resemblance to what it represents such as a photograph. Indexical signs are casually connected with their

objects such as the horn and a car, the smoke and fire. Symbolic signs, on the other hand, do not have any semblance or connection with the objects. They are just signs that are decoded by a particular set of people. These various aspects of signs are interwoven and interact to produce meanings. Eco reviewing Peirce says that “in every sign phenomenon, those three modes interact and that there is never a pure iconic or a pure indexical sign, but that every concrete occurrence of an act of signification relies on all these three modes (1977, 226).

### **The Theory of Narrative**

Narrative systems in Nollywood mirror society. Firstly, they are influenced by the rural/urban migrating patterns in developing societies. Secondly they are influenced by the narrative techniques in Nigerian video soap operas. The soap influences are seen through the glamorisation of Lagos through establishment shots and also through superfluous use of theme music on video films (Haynes and Okome 1997, 26, Shaka, 2002, 21). Robert Scholes’ theory of narration and narratives provides the context upon which this research is anchored. In defining narrative, he made a distinction between narration, narrative, narrativity and story.

A narration is a process of enactment or recounting which is a common feature in our cultural experience. When this process is sufficiently coherent and developed to detach itself from the flux of cultural interchange, we perceive it as a narrative. As a perceived narrative begins to imply a special kind of pointedness or teleology, we recognize that it is a story... and the level we recognize as story is distinguished by a certain structural feature in

presentation which in turn required of the perceiver an active participation which I should like to call “narrativity” (1976, 420).

Citing Christian Metz, he affirms that film and narrative have hugely powerful affinity. Scholes observes that, “A narrative then, may be recounted orally, committed to writing, acted out by a group of actors or a single actor, presented in wordless pantomime, represented as a sequence of visual images with or without words, or as a cinematic flow of moving picture with or without sound, speech, music and written language”(1976, 417). He acknowledges different modes of narration and posits that narration depends on the presence of the narrative medium (actors, book, film etc) and the absence of the event narrated. Citing the Russian formalists and the Prague school of structuralism and in particular, Roman Jakobson, he explicates the theory of narrative. Roman Jakobson had defined literariness as language calling attention to itself. Scholes now posits that if narrative may be considered to be literary, it must be literary in a way which is purely narrative. The distinction between the literary narrative and the recital of the day’s events for instance thus constitutes a subject of query. Is it on performance technique such as language, voice, gesture as opposed to those of a literary raconteur or is it a matter of the events themselves? He further admits that narrative, which is embedded in these forms, is classified into representational and presentational forms. While presentational form is immediate (language, gesture etc), the representational form is at one level removed from performance itself. He exemplified these forms thus:

In a novel, for instance, there is the language of the author at one level, and the representation of the character situations and event at another. In a play, there is the language of the author, the performance of the actor and the deeds for the character to consider; three easily discerned levels at which form is perceptible. And films add at least one level to these, just through the process of photography itself; camera angle, lighting focus, etc. (1976, 419).

The fourth level added to film narrative in its technical content justifies that the technical content which includes the camera, lighting, focus, editing, and others stand as the adjunct language of motion picture generally referred to as visual language which has semiotic implications. The third level which is the dramatic content combines with the last level which Scholes added to constitute the bedrock of film narrative and forms the theoretical formula upon which this research is anchored. Good film depends on good narrative techniques which involve the ensemble synthesis of the Scholes third and fourth levels, the dramatic and the technical contents. Deep semiotic approach of these two respectively accounts for a good narrative production.

### **The Contributions of Film Semiotics to Narrative Techniques**

Every aspect of film production in Nigeria is known for its archetypal semiotic interpretative nature. In the dramatic content, every pregnant girl must vomit or spit before the viewers know that she is pregnant. Every dying man must vomit a white substance before we know that he has finally died. Every mad man must be excessively mad. Every drunk must stagger home. The plot

structure of the chance for two lovers to meet will always be that the lady's car is spoilt and she needs male assistance, which is readily available; or the man mistakenly steps on the young woman and feels sorry and emotional about it or the young woman breaks the plate or glass cup in a restaurant which attracts the man's assistance. These intentions cues and human emotions will have more impact if represented with semiotic diversity. On the technical content, most producers do not pay particular attention to the visual effects of narrative techniques, which involves the connotative implication of the visual effects such as dissolve; fade out, high angle shots, low angle shots and so on. Similarly, film colour and lighting, which should depict the mood and tone of the scenes, are left to the stroke of chance by the nonlinear film editor or light technician. Some shots on location are not motivated and therefore send out wrong signals on a particular character in a film. Most Nollywood producers do not fully understand semiotic forms of narrative techniques which Metz identifies as "montage, camera movements, scale of the shots, relationship between the image and speech, sequences, and other large systematic units..." in film production (1974, 171). Similarly, Ekwuazi's film time technique which involves flashback, flash forward, arrested time (whereby time is either frozen or repeated) and time lapses (the cut, dissolve, fade, defocus/refocus, wipe, flexitron and the swish pan) are handled arbitrarily (2007, 159). It is only in the understanding and application of these visual narratives through semiotics that a perfect narrative ideology in video film can be attained. However some other non-verbal dramatic semiotic components such as facial communication, proxemics, body synthesis and synchronisation are adequately examined for effective application to achieve narrative diversity in Nigeria video films.



Facial communication is one of the major non-verbal narrative techniques. The first major scientific study on facial communication was published by Charles Darwin in a book entitled, *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Darwin concludes that many expressions and their meanings are universal. Sylvan S. Tomkins also conducted a research on facial emotions. Tomkins' studies support Darwin's research findings that many expressions are universal. Tomkins goes a step further to identify these universal emotions as: (1) Surprise (2) Interest (3) Joy (4) Rage (5) Fear (6) Disgust (7) Shame (8) Anguish (Philip, 1990, 61). It is these eight basic emotions that form the bedrock of facial communication. For instance, the feeling of surprise could easily be seen in one's face when one's eyelids widen. Facial communication reflects inner attitudes; unvoiced opinions and emotions as they are aroused. However, there are exceptions to facial communication. This is because research has proven that some people's facial expressions are deceptive. For instance, an angry man expected to have frown brows, in some cases, have normal brows. A good narrative must obey these techniques of facial communication. Any misuse could be very deceptive to the viewers. Mastery and use of these semiotic expressions aid narrative to actualize its purposes.

Proxemics is the study of people's appreciation and use of space. The term "proxemics" was coined by E.T. Hall in 1963 when he investigated people's use of personal space in contrast with "fixed" and "semi-fixed" feature space (Ford, 1970, 71). Etymologically, proxemics comes from the word "proximity" which is "nearness". People are highly territorial but we are rarely aware of it unless our space is somehow violated. Spatial relationship and territorial boundaries directly influence our daily encounters. Producers should be sensitive to proxemics in blocking actors as violations

would send wrong semiotic signals and result in unnecessary tension and suspicion. Anyanwu grouped proxemics into four zones:

- A. **Public zone** This is a spatial arrangement that allows distance that stretches from 12 feet back to the limits of sight. For example, a public speaker gives a considerable distance from his audience. Likewise, there is always spatial delineation between high and low classes of society in any occasion.
- B. **Social zone** This recommends a distance of 4-12 feet. It is mainly for social interaction. It does not give room for a high level of intimacy.
- C. **Personal zone** This advocates a distance of about 2-4 feet apart. It helps in face-to-face contact or personal business. It offers a significant amount of privacy. Facial expressions could easily be interpreted in this zone. It should be noted that personal zone varies from culture to culture.
- D. **Intimate zone** Between 0-2 feet, this zone enables a significant level of privacy. It enables the individual to probe into the inner psyche of his partner to externalise the feelings therein (Anyanwu, 2000, 63).

Good narratives make adequate use of the semiotics of spatial dramatic actor-to-actor relationship to represent narrative intentions and avoid crisis of meanings. It is good to know that seating arrangements equally have psychological semiotic values. Ford notes different seating arrangements such as, side by side, corner to corner and across the table positions (1970, 71). People are conscious of their seating arrangements. In an occasion, for

instance, the chair of the occasion is expected to sit on the high table. On territorial boundary, people are so conscious of their territory that they can go all out to fight when they feel their territory is being invaded. It is important to note that parties may subconsciously decrease their proxemic distance from social zone and to the intimate zone as the case may be.

Synthesis and synchronisation is also a dramatic semiotic concept that studies the combination and agreement of human speech and actions in speed and time (Anyanwu, 2000, 94). It looks at how words and actions are combined to compliment narratives. In synthesis and synchronisation, our facial expressions, words, eye contacts and gestures must either be synchronised with our speech or be synthesised before or after it to produce complete meaning. Anyanwu noted that body synthesis and synchronisation are classified into three groups.

- A. ***Action before words:*** This is a synthetic situation where somebody does a particular action before expressing it in words. Example, nodding before saying “yes”. Most of the times, it shows deep reverence and fear.
- B. ***Action together with words:*** Here, the action and words synchronise at the same time. An example is when somebody says “come” and at the same time beckons on his subject.
- C. ***Action after words:*** This is also a synthetic situation where an action comes after the spoken word. For example, pointing at a car after saying “look at that car” (Anyanwu, 2000, 104).

The complementary role of these techniques to visual narrative is apt in a deductive visual approach where extreme close-up shot for specifics could be induced by the narrative. The synthesis or agreement can be employed for special effects. Proper understanding and application of these semiotic concepts will have a positive influence in the narrative techniques of the Nigerian video films.

### **SYNOPSIS OF *DOG OF WAR***

*Dog of war* is a tragic video film that centres on the character of a dog, Uli. Mezie Mmadu having died, his kinsmen gather to hear his will. Dissatisfied that only an average of five million naira was willed to them in Mmadu's multi billion naira estates, Mmadu's relations decide to kill his only son Ken who has just returned from abroad for the burial ceremony.

Nathy, the late Mezie Mmadu's gardener who is also willed the sum of five million naira continues his duties in Mezie Mmadu's house diligently. While working, his daughter Rose brings him food on a faithful day. Seeing and admiring her, Ken sends Uli (his dog) to give a message to her in a piece of letter. Ken and Rose finally fall in love. Different plots by Ken's uncles to kill him are flawed by Uli through semiotic language. His uncles, led by Oba Ejike, invite Ken for a family meeting, in the process of which they put poison in his drink. Ken is distracted by Uli just as he is about to take the poison. Oba Ejike also poisons his drink in their next meeting but his plans equally fail because of Uli's distractions. Further attempts to take Ken's life fail. Oba Ejike's hired assassins could not find Ken because Uli communicates semiotically to him of the impending doom. Oba Ejike further engages Udoka to kill Ken with food poison. Uli throws the food away. The second attempt through food

poisoning by Ejike takes the filmic action to a climax as Ken ignoring Uli's semiotic warnings, eats the poisoned food. Following this, he dies instantly. Uli takes revenge by killing Ken's uncles for killing Ken.



**Figure 1.** Ken being distracted by Uli not to take a poisoned drink in *Dog of War*



**Figure 2.** Uli delivers a letter to Rose

### **An Analysis of Narrative and Semiotic Techniques in *Dog of War***

The choice of this particular video film for semiotic analysis is predicated by the fact the main character; Uli is a dog that cannot communicate verbally. The narrative centring on the character Uli, a Rottweiler dog, is thus marked with great dramatic semiotic components. There is a high level of sign language between the central character Uli and other actors in the narrative film. The extension of the semiotic language of the dog's character in relation to human characters propels the narrative to a climatic state where Ken's flaw in failing to decode Uli's semiotic signs leads to his death.

The narrative technique which is realised through the semiotic activities of the dog is very impressive. Uli is used comprehensively in the narrative. He delivers letters from Ken to Rose and vice versa. This function becomes intensified when Rose's father, Nathy, afraid of being branded a gold digger, confines his daughter Rose to house arrest to stop her seeing Ken. The video film's narrative point of attack is wonderful. It has a late point of attack as Mmezic

Mmadu and his wife, Ken's supposed parents, are dead before the inception of the narrative. The narrative employs character dialogue to establish that Ken's uncles, who want to kill him in the belief that he came back to disinherit them, also killed his parents, to inherit Mmezies Mmadu's estate.

Characterisation however, is not properly developed. Ken's motivation for leaving his studies abroad is not adequately stated. He never looks moody as might an only son who just lost the parents. Besides, his uncles' characters are not properly delineated, thus they do not have character depth. However, Uli's character is properly defined and remains consistent throughout the narrative. The film projects the feminist concept in the negative manner through the character of Lolo (Patience Ozokwor). Lolo believes that Ken's kinsmen, her husbands, are light hearted and lack the ability to carry out their threats of killing Ken.

The Nollywood sitting down narrative syndrome is very prevalent in the video film. This is a narrative technique that is noticeable in most Nigerian video films. Most actions by Ken's uncles are when sitting down in Oba Ejike's parlour. This reduces the narrative tempo and makes it less engaging. However, the aesthetics of the film's narratives technique depend on Uli, the central character. Unlike the metaphysical narrative techniques in most Nollywood films, as seen in *Ghosts' Conflict*, Uli, is used to resolve the dramatic conflict. Uli, a tragic character with a tragic spirit, fights the killers of his owner Ken.

Nevertheless on technical semiotics, the techniques of shooting Uli a dog is very wonderful. There are a lot of visual effects with Uli which sustains the tempo of the narrative. Though Uli would have been properly trained, most shots are realized through visual manipulations. These visual manipulations though successful in many scenes, were mechanical in few scenes. The scenes where Uli distracts Ken from taking poisons are wonderfully realized. However, Uli's revenge shots are mechanical. Similarly, the scene of sending the first letter to Rose, starts smoothly but the dropping of

the letter on the ground is very mechanical. Besides no adequate attention is paid to semiotic narrative techniques which involve the connotative implication of the effects of dissolve, fade out, colour and film lighting in the video film. The narrative implication in the film's use of a dog as the central character is a western influence in Nollywood films. Rose's unborn baby signifies hope for both Mnezie and Nathy's families.

### **Conclusion**

This study has expounded that film as an illusion of reality anchors on dramatic and technical semiotic attributes. Nollywood producers should key into this study and manipulate the denotative and connotative signs to achieve good narrative. The intentions cues of human emotions will have more impact if represented with proper semiotics. Such semiotic concepts as suggestive and selective realism will expound the creative ability of the producers and the interpretative ability of the actors. This will generate creative semiotic non-verbal communicative skills rather than dwelling on archetypes. Producers should therefore pay particular attention to semiotic narrative techniques which involve the connotative implication of the effects of dissolve, fade out, colour and film lighting as they depict the mood and tone of scenes and establish time sequence. Similarly, character diversification to semiotic models will enhance deep characterization in Nollywood. These will surely improve the quality of Nollywood video films.



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## **Videography**

*Dog of War* (2008). Directed by Uzee Madubogwu, with Desmond  
Elliot, Ini Edo, Enebeli Elebuwa, Patience  
Ozorkwo, Mcdonald Oti.