

Cinematic Space in Contemporary Ghanaian Narratives: A Re-Reading of the film *Sinking Sands*

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Abstract

Film is the replication of real-life which employs visual elements apart from dialogue and sound effects to communicate effectively to an audience. An aspect of using such visual elements includes setting, sets and props to define a character's social status, geographical location, period, and other circumstances. In addition, such visual elements in the cinematic space can present significations, meanings and visual metaphors in the story. These visual elements are signs and symbols perceived as film language and used to communicate in films. The explication of this communication apparatus and its study as signification is known as semiotics. As observed, very little scholarly attention has been given to research on setting, sets and props in Ghanaian films based on semiotics. Therefore, this paper focuses on setting, sets and props in the Ghanaian film titled *Sinking Sands* (2010). It employs the qualitative approach and framework. Based on the semiotics theoretical anchorage, this paper attempts to analyse how some settings, sets, and props are used in the selected Ghanaian film *Sinking Sands* (2010) to make meaning and present visual metaphors in the cinematic space. It is observed that the use of visual elements such as setting, sets and props in films, in addition to their functional or utilitarian purposes in society, also display different dimensions of meanings and visual metaphors in the cinematic space.

Keywords: Cinematic Space, Props, Settings, Sets, Semiotics, *Sinking Sands*

Introduction

The emergence of film was influenced by several experiments, innovations and technological advancements in the Nineteenth Century (Guynn, 2011). According to Thompson and Bordwell (2010), this particular century saw the spread of several visual forms of popular culture across the globe. The industrial revolution gave way to the invention of lantern slides, photographs, and visual fiction in mass production. Several cohorts of people both middle and working-class had the opportunity to visit places with painted scenery of three-dimensional images showing past events. Also, circuses, music halls, and amusement parks displayed other forms of entertaining shows at a cheaper rate. Particularly, in the United States, numerous theatre dramatic troupes toured different towns, cities, and performed in theatres and opera buildings. Subsequently, the movement of theatre productions from town to town became very expensive. Likewise, people had to travel from far distances to visit major places of entertainment. As a result, film became an alternative that provided a simpler and low-priced way of entertaining the masses. The filmmaker could record actors performing that was shown to people across the world (Cook, 2016). Initially, it all began with the experiment of basic optical devices used to entertain the masses which metamorphosed into sophisticated apparatuses that were able to present an illusion of reality in motion. The idea behind these novelties in the likes of toys and machines was based on optical notions of *persistence of*

vision and *phi phenomenon*. The terminology *persistence of vision* refers to the idea that the human brain can recollect images cast on the eye's retina for some couple of seconds before it is taken off from their view whereas the *phi phenomenon* describes the notion that allows human beings to see individual moving still images as a whole.

Therefore, the two phenomena which enable human beings to view the succession of still images together as a whole and not fragmented permit an illusion of motion is the root of cinematography (Cook, 2016). With several inventions by filmmakers, two film pioneers known as the Lumière brothers invented the *Cinématographe* in December, 1895, which became the term that is attached to the film medium to date (Cook, 2016). This particular device served as a camera, projector, and film printer. It was built to run at a speed rate of sixteen frames per second and became the norm for shooting silent films. Lumière brothers as early film pioneers told their stories by recording daily happenings of life. In execution, the camera was positioned in a static manner and several scenes were recorded continually. One of the popular films shot by the Lumière Brothers was known as *Workers leaving the factory in Lyon* (Lumière, 1895). The films of the Lumière Brothers were mostly exterior scenes. Going forward, came another eminent filmmaker, bearing the name, George Méliès, who also contributed to the visual narrative storytelling. Méliès was famously known as the “magician” in film history. In his narrative, he experimented with several camera tricks such as stop motion and other special effects to create difficult scenes and fantasy to surprise his audience. Among his films was a popular one titled *A Trip to the Moon* (Méliès, 1902) which marked the first science fiction film in history. His style was a build-up from what the Lumière brothers

had started. Also, he explored several genres such as comedies filmed on locations. He owned his studio and constructed several sets in telling his stories. The core reason for constructing his studio was to be able to handle the *mise en scène* of his films (Thompson & Bordwell, 2010). To date, shooting in the studio and on location has remained the standard of filmmaking. Later on, early filmmakers realising that their audience got bored with viewing films shot in a static position decided to change from that to moving the camera around a scene to create a three-dimensional feel or *look*. The idea was to explore the telling of stories from different angles. This served as a progression over the shooting of films earlier on that gave the impression of a two-dimensional feel on screen. It must be noted that the two-dimensional *look* gave the notion of the Proscenium arch effect in the theatre.

Film is known as a powerful audiovisual medium of communication since its emergence after theatre. Film has the ability to create an impression of three-dimensional spaces on two-dimensional surfaces. To date, film audiences across the world have been intrigued with the portrayal of real locations and illusory worlds through several narratives onscreen (Brine, 2020). According to Bordwell et al. (2017) filmmaking as a means of communication presents us with several facets of life. It depicts unique kind of experiences that gets us emotionally attached to most characters in films we either fall in love with or hate in the end. Again, film as an art form enables the filmmaker to create emotions and awe through visual means in the viewer's mind. Further, they assert that every film world is built around experiences centred on characters in the cinematic space. That is a character's wants in the film world and what he or she encounters

till the end of that journey. Thus, settings, sets, and props in films play pivotal roles in achieving the aforementioned visually to the viewer on screen. These visual elements are known as aspects of Production Design in filmmaking. As explained by McClellan (2020) Production Design is the creative use of art, light, and locations to tell a story on screen. The locations refer to real environs and physically constructed sets in films to tell a story that is complimented by the lighting design and style provided. Ultimately, the lighting design and style would further illuminate whatever is placed in the cinematic space that serves as a form of enhancement and aesthetics. In filmmaking, the Production Designer is responsible to interpret the film script into visuals. As the head of the film art department, he or she hires design personnel in the likes of a Set Designer/ Scenery Constructor to design and construct physical sets or choose realistic locations to enable tell a story. On the other hand, props are handled by “property men” who are supervised by the Production Designer to select varied items and objects to be positioned on film sets or handled by characters in performance (Rizzo, 2005). Similarly, Petrie and Boggs (2018) explains that:

The production designer first makes elaborate and detailed sketches and plans for the set and then supervises, down to the last detail, the construction, painting, furnishings, and decoration until he or she achieves the exact look intended. In every stage of filmmaking, the production designer consults with three other people directly responsible for the visual texture of the film: the director, the cinematographer, and the costumer (pg. 82).

Owing to the above submission, Petrie and Boggs highlights on the core responsibilities of a Production Designer in collaboration with the Director and Cinematographer. This collaboration is very relevant because the Director and Cinematographer contributes to the visualisation of shots, compositing and framing. Cinematography refers to the capturing of moving images as part of the filmmaking process by creative use of camera and lighting equipment to tell stories visually on screen (Brown, 2016). In filmmaking, the Director, Cinematographer in the collaboration with the Production Designer set the tone and colour palette of every film. The Director brainstorms and plans how the scenes in a film can be executed by suggesting several shots, camera positions and camera angles, lighting style and colour which are agreed on by the Cinematographer. Also, the Production Designer interprets the film script into visual elements by choosing plausible settings or sets to enable tell the stories in film.

Corrigan and White (2012) notes that these visual elements as part of the *mise-en-scène* in films. It is also known as the totality of every element seen on screen in a film by the viewer. They explain the term as the elements placed in front of a camera before filming. It must be noted that these are material elements borrowed from theatre performance employing basic concepts of picture composition of photography and painting. Examples of some of the *mise en scène* elements are in the likes of set elements, props, lighting, acting, costume and make-up. They further explain that the buildings of a city can be referred to as public *mise en scène* whereas decoration in a person's room can be termed as private

mise en scène. Further, an array of flood lights in a city may be described as atmospheric *mise en scène*.

In the opinion of Corrigan and White (2012), settings refer to fictional or real locations where an action happens in a film world. On the other hand, they explain sets as physically constructed spaces usually done on a studio soundstage or locations for a narrative. Hence, the selection of sets and settings in feature-length films is very relevant because the chemistry between characters and these spaces are essential to every narrative on screen. LoBrutto (2002) considers film sets as spaces which consists of real locations or physically built environments with walls, flooring, ceiling, windows, doorways and doors. These are enhanced with certain decorative elements that form the entire scenery. In my view, these two terminologies can be used in any filmmaking conglomerate to describe backgrounds in films. The only difference is that the former refers to real locations and the latter describes physical constructions. In reiteration, Bergfelder et al. (2007) presented that the filmmaker must always endeavour to create backgrounds for characters in films that keep memories on the audiences' minds. Bordwell et al. (2017) further posits that settings in films can play the major element that moves the story forward and not just spaces created for narrative characters to perform. Despite the film been shot in studios against real locations or constructed sets, it must always add to the authenticity and believability of the film. Petrie and Boggs (2018) postulates that settings reveal characters' identity, create their believability in the narrative world, and serve as symbolism representing other meanings.

Props represent items or objects handled by characters or placed in films to ignite a performance. As explained further by Corrigan and White (2009), a prop also known as "property" is an

item placed in films based on functional purposes and as objects handled by characters in executing their roles on screen. For instance, guns, cigarettes, cars, flowers, trees, and books. Further, Corrigan and White (2012) presents the main forms of props in films as “Instrumental”, “Metaphorical”, “Cultural” and “Contextual” props. They explain “Instrumental props” as objects used based on their functionality. For instance, the use of a car as a means of transportation in films. “Metaphorical” props are used as a means of symbolism in films. Also, “Cultural” props refer to the use of objects in films associated with a particular society.

The latter known as “Contextual” props represent items used as its common function and used to present other meanings in the same film. According to Hart (2013):

Film and theatre technicians have developed some widely accepted categories of props to help distinguish who is responsible for what. Props are often divided into two major categories: hand props and set props (pg.3).

Hart categorises props generally into set props and hand props. He further explains that set props are objects located on the set and hand props are referred to as objects handled by actors in performance. Hart gives other examples of types of props such as background props, stunt props, dummy props, working props and static props. In the opinion of Nelmes (2012), props can play a metaphoric significant role depending on how attention is drawn to them in the narrative through choice of shots and image sizes. Also, he posits that sets and props may signify different meanings aside their form of realism. LoBrutto (2002) echoes that this depends on

the script provided by the filmmaker who specifies certain props according to the narrative and portrayal of characters. In my opinion, this would add to the plausibility and imagination of the story.

Cinematic space in films can be explained as a space represented on screen through the camera's lens viewed by an audience. In other words, the space represented here is a product of what an audience sees on screen. Elden (2004) mentioned Henri Lefebvre, a French Marxist philosopher, and sociologist best known as a scholar in the definition of spaces, who considers space as an area within a frame that can be identified by the producer who created it. Therefore, the filmmakers attempt to tell a story with several shots and image sizes with specific lenses enable to define space in a frame. This allows the frame to act as a window engaging an audience in the film space. As echoed by Giannetti (2014), every frame on screen contains an image that describes the story world. Viewed as moving images, film is known as a sequential and three-dimensional art form that can be enjoyed by an audience and for analysis purposes based in context. It can be noted that cinematic space in this regard presents the imagination in which the screen frame act as the opening or window viewed by an audience. These are spaces we see on the screen as the story unfolds in the narrative. Moreover, Grosoli (2018) reflects on Éric Rohmer's notion on the expression of cinematic spaces as spaces represented by individual shots, assembled space of combination of series of shots in one whole and the spatial illusion replicated by sound in a film. Thus, all the building blocks that make a frame defines the cinematic space. For instance, the single and individual shots combined to make meaning. In that perspective, Rohmer's explanation suffices since several shots defining images are enhanced by sound to tell a

story on screen. The sound could be the dialogue between characters, effects, source and background music.

Numerous studies have been done on sets, settings and props in films based on semiotics (Akpan & Ikuelogbon, 2023; Anggraeni & Hellystia, 2022; Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014; Buckland, 2003; Okoye, 2022; Van Ooijen, 2011), however there is a scarcity on it in the Ghanaian cinema scholarship.

Semiotic Theoretical Anchorage

According to Colbey (2010), semiotics can be defined as “the study of the sign” (pg. 3). It is basically referred to as the study of signs and symbols. Hasanah (2014) explains that semiotics has an ability to study how meanings of signs and symbols are created. Semiotics as a terminology is described from the Greek word *semion* which means a *sign*. Some studies involving the explanation of semiotics as the study of signs have been attempted by philosophy scholars in the likes of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, Roman Jakobson, Charles Morris and Umberto Eco (Berger, 2014; Chandler, 2002; Daylight, 2012; Eco, 1976; Hurwitz, 1993; Joseph, 2004; Kiparsky, 2019). However, for the benefit of better understanding let us begin with the explanation by Eco (1976), as a premise for this paper which is quite understandable and broad. Eco, clarifies semiotics as the entirety of things viewed as a sign. In that sense, a sign represents everything that has a different meaning or represents something other than itself. As emphasised by Denesi (2004), semiotics refers to anything that is considered as a sign or anything that forms a sign. For instance, he mentions the colour red which is seen as a sign since its meaning is not based on its pronunciation r-e-d but representing a certain kind of colour and other things. It is also noted that the

colour red connotes different meanings in every society or country. According to Antubam (1963), the colour red invokes danger in most societies in Ghana which is usually worn by a bereaved family during a lost member to signify aggression. In contrast, the colour red in China represents a sign of luck and victory (Shutterstock, 2020). Therefore, it may not be the diverse in meanings of the colour red *per se*, but once it means something else it could be considered as a sign.

Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, who is known as the father of pragmatism, views semiotics as a sign that focuses on three structures. The three classifications are known as *representatum*, *referent* and *interpretant*. The first one known as *representatum* depicts the meaning of physical things. The second known as *referent* simply refers to the representation of something by a sign. The third, tagged as interpretant shows the sense made out of explaining physical things which are different from their physical meaning. Peirce was more concerned with tasking human beings to attach serious thinking to any sign they come across (Chandler 2002).

In addition, Key (2017), mentions that Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist considers semiotics as a science that goes beyond linguistics and includes analysing and teaching the characteristics of signs and their roles in our cultural sphere. Therefore, Saussure's understanding of signs considers a sign as *Signifier* and the *Signified*. In view of that, *Signifier* represents the physical appearance of a sign whereas the *Signified* is the idea the signifier symbolises. In other words, how human beings understand or make meanings of what they see or hear. To Saussure, a sign becomes a sign when it is explained with a meaning by someone deliberately. In other words, a sign can be viewed as a sign when it

is explained as such. For this paper, the study focuses on Saussure's understating of semiotics to analyse the images captured from the film *Sinking Sands*.

Bordwell et al. (2017) posits that in filmmaking, visual elements like sets, settings and props placed in the story world are not placed there for fun, but rather represent different meanings. As a result, these elements are viewed as the language of film that makes meanings. Metz (1999) echoes that film can be viewed as a language that signifies meanings. It is therefore seen as a non-verbal form of communication not only through dialogue but the visual images it presents. The sets and props viewed as signs in that context function as signification in the film text or language. It is noted that language in this context represents the signs and symbols. According to Mitry (1977) as cited by Aumont et al. (1997) there is a difficulty in viewing film as a form of language since film does not present itself solely as a system of signs and symbols but rather comprises of images, objects and characters. It is a system of images that presents an occurrence or event in the cinematic space. Meanwhile, despite the narrative style, the visuals presented on the screen become an organised system of signs and symbols. In this way, they become symbols and metaphors representing other things. In other words, film becomes a representation that provides several meanings in the form of symbols. In addition, every film can be defined as a language since it is made of numerous images that replicate real-life seen as a signifier. As a result, when an image in a film symbolizes something else it becomes signified (Denesi, 2004). In that light, every image viewed on-screen can be viewed as a basis for representation and interpretation. Semiotics in films either imply or signify images, texts and signs used by filmmakers

in films. In reiteration, Metz (1976) explains semiotics in films as the study of these representations and significations in films which define film as an art. In that perspective, for viewers to be able to identify the signs and symbols in films, they must be screened severally and viewed critically to notify the meanings they generate in the cinematic space (Reeper, 2013).

Moreover, Chandler (2017) posits that semiotics is known as a sign found in language and speech, body language, and visual communication. In contrast, Chandler (2007) as cited by Tahir et al. (2020), presents that semiotics cannot only be linked to signs but, to words, sounds, movements, images, and objects. Therefore, communication between human beings can be viewed as a subtext that gives certain meanings. In the same vein, images and objects are also regarded as signs and symbols that transpose into meanings. Therefore, film settings, sets and props involve items, objects, colours and images that can be used in several ways to represent other meanings. Again, semiotics serves as a basis for examining and interpreting all signs and symbols used in communication such as dialects, images, traffic signs, sounds, music, buildings, fashion, poetry and painting (Parsa and Parsa, 2004; Rifat, 1996).

Synopsis of *Sinking Sands*

The film *Sinking Sands* (2010) is written, directed and produced by Leila Djansi. It is a family drama set in the year 1998 based on domestic violence. The entire film's Production Design was executed by Tony Tomety. The film was shot in the Volta region and other scenes in Greater Accra, Ghana. Pabi (played by Ama K. Abebrese), a middle school teacher meets Jimah (played by Jimmy Jean-Louis), a bank teller and falls in love with him. They

enjoy fond moments together as the unfortunate happens when Pabi's ill foster mother, Mama May (played by Akosua Agyapong), dies in her bed-ridden state. This becomes a grievous blow to Pabi as Jimah tries as much as possible to console her till he gets it off her memory. Jimah introduces Pabi to his beautiful family who is received openheartedly as Jimah promises Pabi and marries her to affirm his love for her.

Later on, during a usual routine of preparing house chores together, Pabi, fries plantain in the kitchen whilst Jimah washes dishes and later mops the floor as a way of helping his beloved wife. After frying the plantain, Pabi lifts the saucepan with the hot cooking oil from the fire which accidentally pours on Jimah's face who is kneeling close by mopping the floor. This leaves a huge scar and mutilates Jimah's face. As a form of first aid Pabi pours water on the area with the burns on Jimah's face. Jimah gets admitted at the hospital for a couple of days. The doctor in charge, Zach Mathews (played by Yemi Blaq), suggests a skin grafting surgery to be done on Jimah's face since it is a second-degree burn when the wounds heal and tries to encourage Pabi to be optimistic about Jimah getting healed with time. Pabi gets worried and takes some days off from her job to have enough time for her husband.

Since then, Jimah experiences stigma by the people around him especially at his workplace in performing his official duties as a bank teller. To prevent him from scaring off customers, he gets demoted to the position of one who shreds papers. As a result, he quits his job out of frustration and blames his wife Pabi as the cause of his damaged face. Jimah abuses Pabi continually daily which leaves scars and bruises on her body.

Pabi confides in Miss Dodou (played by Doris Sackitey), her headmistress, of the situation. Miss Dodou, advises her to leave the husband since she feels Jimah is using his guilt against her. Reluctantly, Pabi, desists from leaving Jimah, since she believes circumstances would get better as time elapses. Miss Dodou continues to persuade her and cites an example of similar reasons why she divorced her drunken husband who molested and mistreated her. In resistance, Pabi, reveals that she is pregnant with Jimah's child and cannot leave him. Later on, Pabi goes on to share the good news about her pregnancy with Jimah. Unfortunately, Jimah expresses his unpreparedness to father a child and urges Pabi to terminate the pregnancy. Pabi opts for a menial job to keep her pregnancy but later leaves her marital home after Jimah insists she aborts the baby with several physical abuse and treats. Pabi, finding the situation unbearable leaves her matrimonial home with the unborn child.

Analysis of Sinking Sands

Some visuals in the film *Sinking Sands* were executed magnificently and appropriately to enable tell the story and also project meanings in the cinematic space. Design personnel such as Gottfried Palm (Art Director), Albert Aidoo Bervell (Set Designer), Eric Abbey (Scenery Painter), and Issifu Teekay (Property Master) in the "film art department" headed by the Production Designer, Tony Tomety, were able to select real locations, built physically constructed sets and chose meaningful props to enable tell the story in the cinematic space. As seen in figure 1, are school children gathered at a morning assembly receiving instructions from Miss Dodou (played by Doris Sackitey) principal of the school, Pabi (played by Ama K. Abebrese), and other teachers. Typically, in the

Ghanaian lower and upper primary school setting, pupils are expected to attend morning assembly sessions before a day's activities begin. This marked a major scene used in the film to define the geographical location and serve as a major landmark by the filmmaker. The natural setting of the school used by the filmmaker added to the realism achieved in the film. Besides, the entire façade of the school block represented an architectural building design and style of how some schools are constructed in some rural areas in Ghana. It is embellished with minimalistic design elements without ornamentation. Again, the building is decorated with several traditional operable windows and doors for ventilation. These served functional purposes and added some form of natural beauty to its entire design. Also, the Ghana national flag hoisted in front of the school premises served as a set prop that hinted on an act of nationalism portrayed by the filmmaker to the viewers in the cinematic space. In addition, this connotes unity and bonding as one of the traits in the Ghanaian culture and traditional setting. In Ghana, the morning assembly organised by lower and upper primary schools enables to pass on important information to the pupils or students by the authorities. Also, it serves as a daily formal routine where everybody gets to see each other and remain together as one family.

As established by Corrigan and White (2009) the flag as a set prop in the cinematic space confirms and represents their submissions on cultural and metaphorical props.



Figure 1: Miss Dodou, Pabi, teachers and pupils at the school's morning assembly.

(Source: *Sinking Sands*)

Seen below in figure 2, is Pabi attending to her sick foster mother, Mama May (played by Akosua Agyapong) who is bed-ridden. The simply designed and physically constructed set representing a single room is decorated with props such as bible, bed, calendar, an old picture frame and medicine in the form of syrup. It has a single window with louvre blades that facilitates ventilation during hot temperatures. The dull painted wall colours and props in the cinematic space revealed that Mama May (played by Akosua Agyapong) was not that wealthy. Besides, its claustrophobic space connotes panic and fear in the cinematic space. Later on, Mama May is confirmed dead in the film.



**Figure 2: Pabi checking on her sick foster mother, Mama May.
(Source: *Sinking Sands*)**

Below in figure 3, is Pabi in the classroom teaching her class pupils on the subject of regions in Ghana and their traditional dances such as *Agbadza*, *Kete* and *Adowa* belonging to some ethnic groups. In the frontal view of the classroom, we see props such as a portion of the wall painted with black paint serving as a blackboard, T-square, white chalk, table, chair and pupils' desks. These enabled to define social class of the school in the Ghanaian society. Also, the filmmaker employed this *look* to portray a natural classroom learning space.



Figure 3: Pabi, teaching her pupils a new lesson in class.
(Source: *Sinking Sands*)

Below in figure 4, are Jimah and Pabi, enjoying an evening time out listening to soothing live band music. This scene marked the first date between the two love birds in the film. As they sit listening to some good live band music, they enjoy some sips of fresh coconuts. The coconut water symbolises the fresh beginning of a relationship for both lovers and a sign of an energised intimacy. Also, the torch lamps which served as set props arranged spectacularly in the background behind the musical band in performance showed an ignition of love between Pabi and Jimah.



Figure 4: Pabi and Jimah enjoying a date night outing. (Source: *Sinking Sands*)

As shown below in figures 5a and 5b, is Jimah and Pabi, by a riverside having an intimate conversation and catching fish. In the cinematic space is a canoe parked by a coconut tree. Typically, in Ghanaian societies, canoe is for fishing and travelling. The catching of fish in *Sinking Sands* by Jimah for Pabi, represents a symbol of affection for her that lasts forever. On the other hand, the parked canoe by the riverside tied around a coconut tree beside them connotes Pabi's safety in the relationship. The canoe, which is immobile, tied around a coconut tree symbolises Jimah's love for Pabi as immovable.



**Figure 5a: Pabi and Jimah expresses their love for each other with soothing words.
(Source: *Sinking Sands*)**



Figure 5b: Jimah attempting to catch a fish. (Source: *Sinking Sands*)

Below in figure 6, are Pabi and Jimah as they enjoy their evening supper in style whilst she breaks the good news of her pregnancy. The two white candles placed symmetrically opposite each other served as props and “practical lights” in a form of illuminating the cinematic space. The brightly lit candles and the white dining table cloth represent a sign of good news and victory for the couple. Besides, it connotes some kind of harmony presenting a peaceful atmosphere. It also signifies a sign of welcoming a new baby. This is complemented by the bright coloured flowers with the red petals in the green vase. As confirmed by Parsa and Parsa (2004), objects and images in films can be used as emphasis to represent the concepts of semiotics.



Figure 6: Pabi serves Jimah supper and breaks the good news of her being pregnant. (Source: *Sinking Sands*)

The grey painted walls together with a shade of blue and tint of red floral patterns in the drapery create contrast between the brightly lit couples placed in the foreground of the cinematic space. This is usually achieved by the use of different colour tones on-screen (Block, 2021). In addition, it shows the importance of the conversation between the two couples and the relevance of that moment in the cinematic space. As supported by Nelmes (2020) props are given a lot of emphasis in films when they represent several meanings.

Below in figure 7, is the burial service of Pabi's foster mother at the cemetery. The officiating minister is standing in front a podium opposite the coffin as he delivers his sermon before the body is laid to rest. Family members of the deceased, well-wishers and sympathizers have surrounded the coffin in a semicircular form to participate in the burial service. Typically, this represents one of the ways in which dead bodies are laid to rest in most societies in Ghana. It also represents a formal way of how Ghanaians mourn and bury the dead. According to Sullivan (1995), Mitford (2011), as cited in Shanunu and Alhassan (2023), when people die, they are buried properly because if that is not done, they could become a wandering ghost who cannot survive after death and endanger the lives of others who are still alive. For instance, in African societies, the goal of life is to pass away and become an ancestor. The African perspective on death is supported by the idea that death signifies the physical separation of the individual from other humans. Funeral rites are performed with extra care to avoid causing unjustified offence to the deceased. Funeral ceremonies and rituals help to emphasise this irreversible separation. The living might consider the life they formerly shared with the deceased and get ready for life without them by paying a visit to their grave or other final resting

place. In *Sinking Sands*, the ceremony of the burial service at the cemetery gives the audience a clue about Pabi's late foster mother's religious background as Christian. In addition, the wooden coffin and other tombs seen in the foreground in the frame as set props add to aura of the space as a grave yard in the film. In *Sinking Sands*, Mama May's coffin represents death and the passing on from life to eternity. Baloyi and Makobi-Robothata (2014) posits that cemetery spaces can be considered sacred since it serves as a gathering place for loved ones and is shielded from actions that are considered disrespectful. Thus, the tomb created to bury Mama May also represents sacredness.



Figure 7: Burial service for Mama May at the cemetery as sympathizers gather to bid her soul farewell. (Source: *Sinking Sands*)

As seen in figure 8, is Pabi attempting to hide her face from Miss Doudou to prevent her from noticing the bruises as a result of Jimah's numerous physical abuses. In the room, is a divider, a picture frame of Jimah and Pabi smiling together beautifully placed on the video cassette player on one of the shelves. Video cassettes are arranged at the left corner and a TV set in one of the shelves. The picture frame represents their identity as owners of that sitting-room defining their social status. Also, it serves as a prop adding to the lived-in look of their sitting room.



Figure 8: Pabi hides her face with the bruises upon seeing Miss Doudou as she feels embarrassed. (Source: *Sinking Sands*)

Below in figure 9, are Pabi (Bride) and Jimah (Groom) and an elderly woman, a guest at the wedding reception assisting them to cut their wedding cake. Usually, most wedding receptions in Ghana are held with the cutting of cake either at the beginning or towards the end of the programme. During this moment, an elderly woman helps in cutting the cake after a short speech on the essence of cake. Subsequently, the groom and bride feed themselves with the cake and rest shared among members present at the reception. Although, literature may be silent on its significance in Ghanaian

culture, it represents love, affection and commitment among the couple. Also, It represents that marriage is not all that glowing and this manifests itself when Pabi accidentally pours the hot cooking oil on Jimah's face. Jimah needs to find a way to forgive his wife, Pabi, but rather rescind and revenge in a form of abusing her. Moreover, in *Sinking Sands*, the cake as a prop connotes Pabi and her fertility.



Figure 9: Jimah and Pabi cutting a cake at their wedding reception.

(Source: *Sinking Sands*)

As seen below in figure 10, Jimah is in a pensive mood as his father, visited him to offer a piece of advice to stop molesting Pabi. The sitting room had furniture set such as a three-in-one sofa and a single chair. Also, there is a centre table with books beautifully placed on a table cloth. This gives a believable feel of the living room and represents the social class of the characters who lived in that cinematic space.



Figure 10: Jimah is in his sitting room pondering on his father’s advice to quit mistreating Pabi. (Source: *Sinking Sands*)

As seen below in figure 11, Pabi, expresses shock as the hot cooking oil was accidentally poured on Jimah’s face. In this scene, Pabi had finished frying plantain and after she lifted the hot saucepan, the hot cooking oil which slips off her hands and pours on Jimah’s face who was mopping the floor. The cooking oil represented an ingredient for cooking as well as an agent that began Jimah’s hatred for Pabi when his face was damaged. In addition, the gas stove, cupboard, cooking utensils, and the washing sink represents a kitchen and also defines their status in society.



Figure 11: Pabi accidentally pours the hot cooking oil on Jimah's face.
(Source: *Sinking Sands*)

Below in figure 12, is a gathering between Jimah's family and Pabi, as they had dinner which served as an initial meeting and introduction between the two parties. Pabi introduced herself as an orphan who grew up in a foster home. The three-quarter view and the *look* of the house represented their class in the society. There is a cross-bar screen door on the left of frame as depiction of entrance to the main hall. A similar door design is repeated at the right which is not in view. This represents the unity and stability of Jimah's family. There are several windows arranged in order and square pillars that form part of the view of the house. The architectural elements of the frontal view of the building and props available depicted the social class of Jimah's family.



Figure 12a: Jimah’s family welcomes Pabi to their abode over a dinner.

(Source: *Sinking Sands*)

In figure 12b, Jimah’s family includes Obed, his father (played by Eddie Coffie), Grandma (played by Grace Nortey), Patience, sister (played by Daphne Akatugba) and cousin (played by Chris Atoh) and shares pleasantries with Pabi after the dinner. At this same gathering, a toast was proposed by one of Jimah’s cousins, Mensah (played by Chris Attah), for the bride and groom to be in advance of their wedding for a successful marriage. The dining tables and chairs depicted the occasion in the film.



Figure 12b: Verandah depicting the frontal view of Jimah's father's abode.

(Source: *Sinking Sands*)



Figure 13: Pabi looking into the mirror staring at the bruises on her lips.

(Source: *Sinking Sands*)

Above in Figure 13, is Jimah lying in bed and Pabi inspecting the bruises on her lips. Closer to Jimah, is Pabi sitting in front of a dressing mirror. Pabi engages Jimah in a conversation and enquires from him on whatever she has done wrong to deserve all the molestation. This scene is lit beautifully with a bedside lamp serving as “practical light” in cinematography terms. The lamp serving as a set prop provides a glowing effect that partially illuminates the subjects in the cinematic space. It creates a harsh contrast between light and darkness representing some tough decisions to be made by Pabi. She is in a state of dilemma, contemplating whether to leave or stay in the marriage. Again, the lamp is strategically placed in the middle separating the two couples that explains their opposing states. Pabi thought Jimah needed help

to get over the hurt and pain out of his damaged face. On the other hand, Jimah thinks Pabi has not expressed a sign of remorse enough for him to forgive her.

Below in figure 14, is Pabi seen working at the cornmill in order to survive and keep the pregnancy. Due to her husband's situation, she quits her job in order to take care of him. As the pregnancy came up, she did not have any option than to involve herself in menial jobs. This represents the poor state of living conditions of Pabi since she was out of job.



Figure 14: Pabi works in a cornmill shop to earn some money to keep her pregnancy.

(Source: *Sinking Sands*)

Below, in figure 15 is Jimah, strangling Pabi in order to prevent her from leaving their marital home. Pabi's main intention was to leave and free herself from all the torture and molestation

she was facing. Again, this symbolised the pain Pabi was going through after their fond moments at the beginning of the film.



Figure 15: Jimah struggles with Pabi on the bed and strangles her neck in order to prevent her from leaving their marital home. (Source: *Sinking Sands*)

As seen below in figure 16, is Jimah holding a wire clothes hanger stretched out into a form of straight rod and threatens to whip Pabi. This was as a result of several attempts made pressurising Pabi to abort their baby. Jimah's main reason in taking this particular action was to inform Pabi that he was not ready to father a child considering his situation.



Figure 16: Jimah threatens to use a metal clothes hanger on Pabi.

(Source: *Sinking Sands*)

Conclusion

In this paper, it is evident that the filmmaker used visual elements such as settings, sets and props in the film *Sinking Sands* to depict direct and symbolic meanings. In terms of cinematic spaces provided in the film, the background, middle and foreground were filled with visual elements that complement the narrative as well as make meanings. It is observed that the use of visual elements such as setting, sets and props in films does not only present their functional or utilitarian purposes as viewed in the society but they also display different dimensions of meanings and visual metaphors in the cinematic space. The paper has attempted to analyse some settings, sets and props in the cinematic space in *Sinking Sands*. Such visual elements known as the production

design are used to make meanings and serve as signifiers which represent or replicate other meanings in the film.

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