

# **DESIGNING THE SET IN NIGERIAN HOME VIDEO FILMS: A STUDY OF *AMAZING GRACE***

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The Nigerian movie industry has grown to be a very popular art that welcomes any new player so care is not taken to apply all the techniques of good filmmaking. This paper takes a look at designing the set for the Nigerian home movie industry using Amazing Grace as a case study. It also provides the processes and principles of a designing for the film and proffers useful suggestions. It is discovered that though Jeta Amata, the director, utilised some principles of designing the set more need to be done.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The film is a medium of information but this information could be best given if all the aspects of it are properly done. For the film to be complete, it requires the script, actors, properties and scenic background. It is the responsibility of the set designer to create the scenic background. If his job is not properly done the mood, the atmosphere and the final message of the film will not be received by the audience/viewer.

In the Nigerian film industry little attention is paid to designing the set. Filmmakers seemingly depend on 'found' location. Many filmmakers are prepared to adapt their script to fit the location instead of creating the set to fit the script. If the movie must pass the message intended by the script the director and his set designer must create the right world of the film

## **SET DESIGN**

The film set is the space where the action takes place, hence there is need for proper decorations to depict the actual locale that the script requires or the film producers intended. The characters in the film live in a world in which they interact with one another and carry out their actions. That world does not just jump out of the film script; it is created by the set designer. Stephen Prince (129) says that sets which are the physical locations on which the action takes place could be outdoors or indoors in the studio. Creating this environment is set design or scene design as it is known for the stage. Scene design, according to Oscar Brockett (367), is the organisation and appearance of the performance space, he went further to say that the "designer defines and characterizes the

space, arranges it to facilitate the movement of actors”. Parker and Smith say that scene design concerns itself with the total visual effect of a dramatic production (14). Whether for the stage or for the screen the setting has no independent life of its own, it is not created for creation sake but directed toward the general unity of the performance. However the film set is not just a place for actors to play in but part of the unfolding narrative (Bordwell and Thompson, 172). Andre Bazin says:

*The human being is all important in the theatre. The drama on the screen can exist without actors. A banging door, a leaf in the wind, waves beating on the shore can heighten dramatic effect. Some film masterpieces use man only as an accessory, like an extra or in counterpoint to nature, which is the true leading character (12)*

For a good set design in a film, Thomas Ohanian and Michael Phillips aptly opine that:

*The set designer is responsible for overseeing and executing the plans for the set and is responsible for drafting detail blueprints from drawing and verbal description provided by the production designer. The set designer is also responsible for the type of construction elements used to build the set. (7)*

It could be seen that the set designer who creates the set works closely with the production designer who is responsible for the overall look of the film and the set decorator whose job is make sure the ‘visual look of the film is right through the use of furniture, carpeting drapery and the different artefact that a character most likely have’ (Ohanian and Phillips, 7).

## **FUNCTIONS OF SET DESIGN**

The basic function of set design is to create the appropriate surroundings and environment for the action of the film. These are some of the various functions the set design performs in a film.

- **Creating the mood and spirit:** Gillette (106) describes mood as the emotional quality of production and spirit refers to the production concept; that is, the way in which the design team wants the film to look like. Parker and Smith see mood as the quality of play when properly transmitted effects a state of mind and emotional

response of the audience. The setting of a movie put the audience in the proper feeling, it could be fear, a mood of foreboding or a gaily and joyful mood. The painting on a wall or the state of a room could send signals to the viewer that could alter or disturb his or her state of mind.

- **Historical period of the film and locale:** This can also be termed or called time and place, and locale. It shows that a specific time in the historical past can prepare a state of mind in the audience as much as the absence of either time or place. This description shows that establishing time and place affects the mood of the play. Gillette (107) distinguishes between historical period of the play and the locale of the play. He states that, “a scenic design is not a reproduction, it should be a creation that mirrors the essence of a period to provide a physical environment that will enhance the mood of the play”. In describing the locale of the play Gillette states that the locale depends on the historical period of the play to create its certainty. From the definitions we discover a good determination of the time and space of a film affects the mood it transmits.
- **Socio- economic level and personality of the characters:** Gillette (108) explains that sets like furniture in a characters living room describes to a certain level the personality of that character and it can enhance the audience understanding and enjoyment of the play, Smith and Parker (20) explain that a character bears a relationship to the environments of the scene, that the people in an action react in accordance with or in opposition to their surrounding.

## **PROCESSES OF DESIGNING FOR FILM**

Design generally, has been seen as more of a process rather than art. It is a series of steps through which we pursue the goal of creating what we hope will be a work of art or the artistry of an efficiently coordinated production. The principles of design process can be applied to every aspect of life in general. These principles help you discover an appropriate and creative solution to virtually any design problem or challenge you may encounter. The processes include: commitment, analysis, research, incubation, selection, implementation, and evaluation. To have a full understanding of their various functions, we further define each of processes below.

- **Commitment:** This is probably the most important step in the design process. If you commit your energies to an assignment wholeheartedly, you are promising yourself that you will do the best work you can possibly do on your stage or film.
- **Analysis:** The analysis aspect in the design process has two objectives: Gathering information that will help clarify and refine the definition of the challenge you are facing and identifying areas that will require further research. In any production analysis is primarily a search for information and an objective evaluation of the data you discover in analysis would be discussed with other members of the production team either before reading the script or after by the designer.
- **Research:** This means getting information and knowledge where your personal experience and background is weak. After getting this information list them in your notebook as the areas in which research is necessary. Research involves both background and conceptual researching.
- **Incubation:** Incubation provides you with time to let ideas hatch. During this time, you should basically forget about the project, your subconscious mind would use the time to sort through the information you've gathered in the previous steps and may construct a solution to the challenge or point you in a valid direction. You are more likely to produce a quality work if you allow time for incubation.
- **Selection:** Selection is the step in the design process in which you sift through all of the data you've accumulated and decide on your specific design concept. Every designer's choice affect the work of all members of the production design team, everyone's designs need to be discussed in other production meetings.
- **Implementation:** This stage begins when you stop planning and start doing. This time, designers produce all drawings, model plans and instructions necessary to construct the scene.

- **Evaluation:** Evaluation takes place within each stage of the design process and when the project is completed. Evaluation is very important because it helps consider all the aspect of the design process.
- **Pre-visualisation:** this is unique to the film as it entails all those other aspects. What the set designer, the production designer and director do here is to see the whole set from the beginning to the end. Story board, sketches and other visualising aids are used to guide the set designer during the execution stage.

Processes of design as seen above are applicable to every designing work where it is needed and helps the designer come up with the best form of design needed for the production.

## **ELEMENTS OF DESIGN**

Design generally, can be described as the process of conceiving and executing a plan in the theatre or film. Design involves creating a stylistic plan for the production concept and developing the necessary sketch patterns and other visualizations of the design concept. The plans or drawings created by any designer need to be guided by the elements of design; line, shape, mass, measure, position, colour and texture. An understanding of the definition, characteristics and functions of each element and how they combine to work, can lead to the creation of composition that imply specific meanings, which is the ultimate purpose of all design.

(i) **Line:** This can be defined or referred to as a mark that connects two points. There are properties that define the characteristics of that “connecting mark” called line they are dimension, quality and character.

(a) **Dimension:** This refers to the length and width of a line.

(b) **Quality:** The quality of a line refers to several intrinsic characteristics its shape its value, and contrast with surrounding objects. They can be straight, curvilinear, angled, jagged, serpentine, or any combination of these characteristics.

(c) **Character:** The character refers to its emotionally evocative characteristics.

Lines can be noticed through their dimension and quality and give meaning to their character. Lines attract attention as their complexity increases and lines that contrast strongly with their background draw more attention. Designers have more understanding and utilize these principles.

**(ii) Shape:** A line that encloses a space creates a shape. In design, shape defines the form of large elements such as walls, and therefore defining the outline of such details as windows doors. The quality of the line creating the shape strongly influences the connotative meaning of that shape.

**(iii) Mass:** This is the three-dimensional manifestation of shape. Mass gives a feeling of depth in sketches of scenic elements such as platforms walls and furniture.

**(iv) Measure:** This refers to the ability to judge the size of objects and the relative distance between them without the aid of measuring devices, this makes measure an intuitive skill.

**(v) Position:** it refers to the relative location of adjacent shapes or masses. It collectively means both the distance between objects and their placement relative to forms around them.

**(vi) Colour:** This is one of the most important and complex of the design elements. Colour gives different responses in the viewer based on psychological and cultural reactions.

**(vii) Texture:** This is the visual surface characteristic of an object. In design for example costume, where the visual element is fabric, the texture of the fabrics surface plays a vital role in creating the audiences response to understanding the nature of such plays in relation to the season or weather.

The elements of design are the ingredients that the set designer combines together to create his designs which are then executed in the film.

## **ANALYSING THE DESIGN IN THE FILM *AMAZING GRACE***

*Amazing Grace* is directed by Jeta Amata a prolific young director from the popular Amata family a family of filmmakers. This movie financed by Diamond Bank and Virgin Nigeria is one of Nigeria's most expensive films in modern day Nigerian movie making industry. "Amazing Grace" by Jeta Amata, has all the qualities that make film designing realistic. The set designer is Okon Archibong. The film is set in 1748 Calabar and has three basic locations: the village, the ship and the prison or hold where the slaves were kept. The other places in the film are the pen within the ship, and the dense forest in which some of the action takes place.

### **THE SET OF THE FILM**

The set for *Amazing Grace* is elaborate since many of the locations had to be reconstructed and designed to fit the period of the film. The sets in the film are basically exterior, which made it more expensive and time consuming because the sets needed to be created and assembled for shooting to take place. The time represented dates back to events that took place in Calabar in 1748, at the height of the slave trade. The set designer and director try to create a set that depicts the historical period and locale, make it as realistic as possible.

A village was built in a clearing in a forest. The village is made up of thatched huts built in a circle which gives the atmosphere of a typical African village square. This serves as the settlements of the villagers. Most of the actions in the village take place in this square, the muggings, the dances, the races all happen here. The general tempo of the film could easily be established by the events that occur at the square. There were moments when inside the huts was also revealed to help advance the plot of the film.

The prison is created with bamboo sticks. It is generally a series of cages made of poles and cross bars. *Greyhound*, the slave ship had to be built for the sole purpose of the film. According to the director, the creation and construction of the sets took months and was quite expensive. From the village set, the prison, to the ship, all these had to be created by the set designer in order to depict the actual period and locale of the film, even to the candles used and lamps because there actually was no electricity. They had to depict the 1748 era. The village huts were made out of raffia palm leaves for their roof and mud for their wall. The ship and the prison which were made mostly out of wood and

metal objects are really a novel creation. A set as technical as this seems to be the best in the Nigerian movie industry.

### **SHORTCOMINGS**

Like many other Nigerian films, *Amazing Grace* also had some shortcomings in its set design. Most of the actions took place outside giving the notion that most important activities in pre colonial Nigeria are done outdoors. To underscore this point is the size of the thatched huts built by the set designer. They are too small that it is obvious that there will not be enough space for camera to move. The interior action between the hero and his wife clearly does not take place in the hut as any fronds or mud – material used to build the set could not be deduced from the shot in the film.

The prison or cage for the slaves was treated with so light a wood that it makes the characters fools to be allowed to be held in such a feeble and not escape. The rendering of the design is faulty, there are ways wood could be treated with colour to make it resemble a secured forte. What one could see in all these is that Nigerian filmmakers sometimes take the audience for granted thinking that they do not understand sets in a film.

### **CONCLUSION**

In the film, set design is of paramount importance, unfortunately the Nigerian cinema that depends much on the spoken word because of its narrative origins, has neglected it profusely. This is observed as over 65% of shot in home movies are close up shots (CU). Care is never taken to place the character in the environment of the story. There are very few wide shots though and almost absent of the extremely wide or long shot (EWS or ELS), which actually reveals the world the character inhabits.

Of all the techniques in cinema and stage production mise-en-scene is the one we are most familiar with. After seeing a film or watching a theatre production we may not remember the blocking, dissolves or off-screen sound but we will almost surely recall items of mise-en-scene and the set is one of the most important element of the mise-en-scene. For example, we remember the costumes in *Amazing Grace*, the massive ship built to covey slaves; the full crafted setting must sharply be etched in our memories.

*Amazing Grace* by Jeta Amata combines the effective force of mise-en-scene and puts it together to create a complete package. The set is built in harmony with the whole



environment of the film in mind. The design technique as used in *Amazing Grace* has not been fully utilized in the Nigerian movie industry and the idea behind this paper is to reemphasize the importance of this technique to moviemakers using *Amazing Grace* as a clear example of the potentials of the use of proper set design in a film production. Though this technique was not fully utilized by Jeta Amata in *Amazing Grace* but there is a glimpse of its possibilities. *Amazing Grace* seems to be a shining light on the path of movie making. The film has set a standard, which every Nigeria film has to follow in order to meet up with the likes of Hollywood and Bollywood.

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