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## Navigating Nollywood Filmmaking in Covid-19 Pandemic through New Technology

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### Abstract

Despite the challenges posed to film production by the lockdown during the pandemic and post-pandemic period, some filmmakers still explored new technological media to express their creative ideas about the situation in which the nation and world were enmeshed. With the need for continuity editing in the construction of visual narratives, it appears that the psychological effect of a narrative is dependent on the mode in which it is constructed to represent the ideologies to be construed. This paper examines the communicative potentials of shots in Obi Emelonye's *Heart 2 Heart* (2020) shot within the Pandemic era with the use of phones, coordinated and collated with the zoom communication application before editing. It highlights the aggressive psychological and emotional impact of the pandemic as x-rayed in the narrative anchoring on Kipendoff's and Urajav, Begum & Pavadai's cognitive semiotic theories to explain the communicative impact of the film narrative and technical possibilities in this 21st century brought together through film. It is hoped that the paper would provoke film scholars and filmmakers to explore new ideas in film and the need for more study on cognitive semiotics.

**Keywords: Pandemic, post-pandemic, continuity editing, shots, cognitive-semiotics**

## **Introduction**

There is no doubt that the recent pandemic outbreak hampered a lot of growth in most aspects of human life globally. Film production is among the many industry closures as a result of the rules applied to curtail the spread of the virus, as most theatres and live entertainment worldwide went dark and film productions that were going on at the time stopped and everything became static. As such, creative minds were shot down in expressing their views through film. Before this development, however, emerging Nollywood films had shown tremendous improvements in the mode and style of narratives. The image representations in Nollywood films tend to portray better pictures and promote our cultural ideologies to the world. How these narratives are structured is not without consideration of the fact that technological mediums of recording creative ideas are tools that warrant an experienced cinematographer to handle since it requires a whole lot of persons coming together to harness the ideas conceived by the filmmaker/director. The disparate artists' creative inputs are seen in the synchronization of the visual and sound composition of the narratives. The images and sounds assembled communicate lots of meanings based on how the filmmaker/director perceives the world. As such, his image constructions of codes are pointers to what and how the viewer perceives the narrative. This was difficult to achieve during the pandemic as people were not allowed to access their possible comfort zones to cluster for creative outputs. However, with *Heart 2 Heart*, Obi Emelonye demonstrated that creativity warrants thinking outside the box – going a little bit avant-garde

in producing images that depict the world the way it is perceived, regardless of the environment or cultural background. Charles Okwuowulu has described Obi Emelonye as a Nollywood director who has unique narrative techniques. As such, the film *Heart 2 Heart* is an avant-garde mode of the usual technological process of film production in Nigeria; starring only two characters, yet having all essential elements of film narrative explored through shots and editing to convey the ideology of the short film. Uwah & Okwuowulu , reinforce the impact of technology in this emerging creative revolution process in a film by stressing that it:

lends credence to how visual effects can significantly contribute to the meaning-making process of storylines. [Also,] Starting with the forerunners of film editing such as Edwin S. Porter, D.W Griffith, Alfred Hitchcock, Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Ilarionovich Pudovkin, editing is one [other] aspect of filmmaking where creativity is made to count. (23) [Additional emphasis]

Thus, the strength of a film narrative is determined by the creative input no matter how sophisticated the technological tool and editing applications that are used; at most the sophisticated machine makes the creative job easy. This is evident in the narrative selecting process and type of shots and editing applied in Obi Emelonye's *Heart 2 Heart* amidst the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The producer/director constructed images of his perception of the world at the peak of the pandemic crises using Android phones at different locations at the same time and collating the footage through zoom and yet produced good quality pictures and narrative through a creative assemblage of shots.

This only reinforces the film's ascription as a creative expression of different shots conceived by the filmmaker which he synchronizes with sounds through editing, no matter the technological medium. Thus, through images and sounds, the mood of the narrative is heightened/exerted. As such, the manipulation of shots and stringing of the different shots sequentially and its synched sounds to give a coherent and meaningful idea of a narrative flow stimulates certain moods within the context of construct and stimulates audience emotions as well.

Film semiotics tends to study meanings based on the total visual composition and visual effects used in a film story, bearing in mind the codes, conventions, myths, and ideologies of the culture. Thus, Film production as a communicative art communicates to the viewer using visual images of codes, myths, conventions, and ideologies within its culture as sign vehicles bearing different meanings in the film text. These codes assembled by the filmmaker are deciphered by the viewer. Moreover, understanding 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; and the images within the shots are codes to be deciphered by the viewer. Therefore, the harmonization of both images and appropriate sounds strongly affects the viewer's emotional reactions. Thus, the filmmaker uses camera apparatus and editing applications to create images, providing a wide range of enhancements to movies of every genre. Aesthetically, the audience is in permanent motion as the eye identifies itself with the lens of the camera, which is

ever in motion, explaining, though in non-verbal terms, the goings-on in the film and aiding understanding of the whole message. It puts the audience in the feeling of what has not been noted or what has been ignored as part of the visual make-up. This means that film has the power not only to expose the physical but also the psychological state of the human mind. Moreover, the organization of material things and people into a composition that receives good style, which might be realistic or symbolic, depends on the interpretation of the artist's mind/imagination by his manipulation of physical objects and camera. Since film is a signifying process, it uses denotative and connotative images within the cultural context in which the film revolves.

Every film story has a sequential flow, be it live-action, computer-generated, or traditional hand-drawn animation. They are made up of several shots that are merged during film editing and video editing to form a concrete single film that is viewed by the audience. In stringing these shots together, there are techniques used, notably encapsulated in shot transitions. The filmmaker uses these techniques of the medium to signify ideas in the process of his/her communication. These techniques express ideas in the visual film narratives. These transition effects are fade (in/out), cut, dissolve, wipes, superimposition, and slow-motion. In film production and film study, these techniques function just as conjunctions in the production and study of language. They have been referred to as “filmic punctuations” (Harman 92), and “connectives”. Thus, connectives in film as described are transition effects used for stringing different shots together as a continuous whole in the meaning-making process. Hyginus

Ekwuazi asserts that bits and pieces of time are made visible by the mode of transition, which (visually) ties one shot/sequence to another. In other words, shots are manipulated and connected in film narratives through cuts, dissolves, fade-ins and fade-outs; as such, these transitions indicate the beginning of one shot and the introduction of another shot. These transitions are tools for creating a sequence in any visual narrative and signify different sequential meanings in a narrative which often is dependent on the editor's mode of construct. For instance, a fade-in in film signifies the beginning of a sequence, while a fade-out signifies the end of a sequence. For a filmmaker, a fade-in is the beginning of a sentence, while a fade-out is a full stop as in linguistic syntax. Likewise, a cut signifies a pause in the sequence like a comma in a sentence. Furthermore, Ekwuazi emphasizes that a slow fade-out to a blank screen, slowly fading in the new shot is an effective use for short time lapses which indicate seconds, minutes and hours. Following the same line of argument, a dissolve signifies a passage of time just like wipes. Dissolves are used to signify a longer passage of time, while wipes are used to signify a shorter passage of time. Dissolves can also be used in differentiating the past from the present as in flash-backs, dreams, or recalling a memory. In this regard, Bellour reaffirms the above-described transition effects as punctuations in a narrative. He thus states that:

... the segmental nature of the shots is reinforced by an element which, for all that it is not inherent in its definition, is often consubstantial with it in the classic narrative; the twelve shots open and close on lap dissolve

– a punctuation that here functions as a sign of demarcation. (68)

Thus, transition effects have functional purposes which denote and connotatively add meaning to the narrative and create a continuous flow. Thus, dissolve is perceived as a filmic punctuation that delimits the passage of time. Dissolves in film narratives can also produce what Bellour terms “a folding effect” (74). The folding effect can be seen in scenes marking dreams, flash-backs, or where past is recalled in the course of narration. Zoom in and zoom out also marks the same dream effect to achieve a flashback. Thus they are used as filmic punctuations in recalling memory situations. It also produces a folding effect as dissolve, but on a sharper and limited space of time.

Thus, the application and understanding of a series of shots stringed with filmic punctuations (visual effects/transition effects) are based on cognitive and perceptive stand points. The director and editor perceptively construct images to be construed by the audience. Thus, constructions of meaningful visual images are based on the filmmaker’s perception of his environment as well as the state of mind of the occupants. This warrants a cognitive-semiotic reading of shots in the selected narrative. Uvaraj, Begum and Pavadai state that, cognitive is an interdisciplinary study of the mental phenomena involving the human mind in terms of perception, memory and language. Semiotics is the study of signs or symbols and cognitive semiotics studies the relations between signs and language. Cognitive semiotics (in Peirce’s, not in Saussurean sense) is a realist theory that takes the facts of the matter – that there are objects of signs – to determine the

propositional content. Yet the content needs not to be represented in symbols of natural language which can be iconic, which analytically means the precision provided by diagram/topological forms of representation. Objects not external to the signs: both internal and external relationships obtain under a pragmatic interpretation mediated by signs. Thus a realist cognitive-semiotic theory is neither subjectivist (“meanings are in the head”) nor objectivist (“ain’t in the head”). It caters for a comprehensive theory of meaning lacking in current-day cognitive semantics.

The meaning of signs or representations is dependent on social, cultural, and historical contexts. We construct meaning based on the physical appearance of the sign, our previous personal and cultural experience, the time to time we live in, and the context or place it occurs. There is not one meaning or interpretation of each sign. There are multiple sides and points of view to each sign. According to Mangan, learning through pictures provides interesting examples to illustrate both communication and cognitive limitations to the ability to understand pictures. These limitations must be taken into account when designing learning materials not only for rural villagers but the global villagers in the world. Mangan, therefore, stresses that communication differences in perception are more subtle and numerous than most educators suspect. Similarly, Krippendorff asserts that:

understanding is a cognitively autonomous process. It arises within individual cognition. It is personal and private. It can be neither transmitted to someone else nor imposed from the outside. (Any "influence" is a matter of



one's causal constructions on how different experiences are connected, and how one chooses to explain them). Understanding is not something outside, understanding is, an ongoing, process. The Eigenvalue of understanding (where the process converges to with time) may be the feeling that one's reality constructions are coherent, sufficiently complete and viable in practice" (quoted in Krippendorff 12).

The filmmaker creates images based on his perception, memory and understanding of his cultural experiences as influenced or affected during the production. Thus, visual perception is affected by culture, words, expectations and one's experiences. In this regard, Elsaesser et. al explains that "film is of the mental schemata and cognitive processes which makes it possible for us to understand moving images as representations". The main objective of cognitive film semiotics is to construct unobservable underlying structures shared by all films based on semiotic models. Urajav, Begum, & Pavadai buttresses that cognitive-semiotic studies the relation between signs and language. As such, the theory appreciates that the human mind is complex and there is a meaningful connection between what people see and how they use those images. Jacqueline Rose highlights the mental process of cognitive theory, noting that:

If an image looks like one that a viewer has seen before then the viewer will rely on memory to accurately perceive the image. Looking at a visual image every person projects his/her mental state onto that image which in turn affects what they see. Most viewers unconsciously select what they want to see from a wide

field. The mind selects the familiar and significant parts of an image and completely shuts out the rest. Expectation is another mental process that affects visual perception. We all have preconceived expectations or mental pictures about how certain things should appear and this can lead to a false or missed visual perception. Using stimuli that have meaning to a viewer in a visual image will make the image be noticed more and have meaning for the individual. When there are too many signs in a visual image competing for the viewer's attention, the images run the risk of not being understood by the viewer. This is because of the mental activity of dissonance which does not allow the mind to concentrate on too many things. (Rose 138)

A Film not only takes for itself materials from local and global spheres but, more specifically, gives new directions and fresh meanings to them. The directions that popular imagination gives to the video film is not obliged to conform to overbearing local legislations or strict global media principles. Amana and Omale argue that:

The video films as a new medium in Nigerian cultural mise en scène remediate the old but relevant tradition of storytelling. The logic of remediation in this instance like the multilayered nature of convergence is multifarious. Storytelling experience is remediated in and through the script, the actors, the plot, the montage, VCD or DVD technology and finally through viewership. Through these varied forms of remediation, the storytelling experience is refashioned and repurposed. Because media is never a mirror of reality, the representation of the video film must speak the language of the video film not of the print or orality (12).

According to Ajibade and Williams, as far as local know-how and popular imagination are concerned, there is no relevant difference between celluloid and video: both are motion picture technologies (207). Both media are called “films” by Nollywood producers and consumers. In essence, it is not the technologies themselves that are important, but the images they mediate. Thus, if as Meyer suggests, popular “video films are inspired by and woven into the texture of everyday life, then we may expect that the texture of Nigerian social life and history has given direction to the form and content of Nollywood’s video culture” (quoted in Ajibade and Williams 207). As much as the above assertion may be true, it still boils down to the fact that Nollywood filmmakers need to merge cultural ideas with the available technological developments such as CGI (Computer Generated Image) to enhance the image they produce in their film narrative. To buttress this view, Odoh and Nwazue highlight that, “technological innovations have shown that even the job of the actor can be manipulated with the use of technology” (37). An example is James Cameron’s *Avatar*, which has more animated images than human characters. A quick look at the film will reveal that all major departments of a film are technologically enhanced: light, sound, scenography, costume, makeup, and equipment.

### **Synopsis of Obi Emelonye's *Heart 2 Heart* (2020)**

The story centres on a couple separated during a pandemic, the lady in London and the young man Ojo who is in Lagos. The narrative is a video call conversation between two characters (Ada and Ojo) who are supposed to perform their nuptial union but are prevented from doing so by the pandemic crisis. The narrative starts with Ada coming back from picking up fruit juice, drinks

and some groceries from shops on a deserted street in London. Meanwhile, her phone rings, she takes a look at her phone and smiles and picks up the call. She promises to call back and goes into the house. The duo during their phone conversation after exchanging pleasantries, lament about their challenge with distance and not being able to express their marital vows as planned. They console each other and agree to express their marital vows on phone as well as a dance together in their imaginary world even though they are wide apart from each. They can eventually devise a means of bridging the gulf between them as occasioned by the lockdown and make themselves happy.

### **Critical Appraisal of Obi Emelonye's *Heart 2 Heart* (2020)**

The director, Obi Emelonye, narratively explains the goings-on and psychological state people are facing due to the lockdown occasioned by the pandemic, to curb the increasing death rates. The narrative has a sheer linkage to (portrait of) the series of events, businesses, and schedules that were put on hold which inflicted lots of psychological trauma on people.

He tells the narrative from the perspective of the two main characters. The narrative started with a wide-angle shot of the bride, Ada, coming back from picking up fruit juice and drinks from shops in a deserted street in London. Then, her phone rings, she takes a look at her phone and smiles and picks up the call. She promises to call back and goes into the house. Then we are made to see a medium shot of Ojo (JideKene Achufusi) agreeing to her calling back. Then, the camera pans from the right-hand corner of Ojo's (Jidekene) house to the left, giving us a medium shot to a distant shot as it pans, showing us the deserted streets of Lagos

(Nigeria). The wide-angle shots depict how tattered and deserted the streets in most areas of the world appear.

### **Pictorial reading of Obi Emelonye's *Heart 2 Heart* (2020)**

**Images**

**Type of shots**

**Sound effect**

**Interpretation of images**



Wide angle shot

Chirping of birds, Then the Piano playing soft music which stops abruptly. As the ringtone rings. This is an establishing shot used in the narrative. It describes how lonely and deserted every street in the world appears during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis.



A medium Shot of Ada going inside.

The shot describes the loneliness that surrounds the character, Ada, which gives credence to her moody state since it was supposed to be her happiest of days but is rather disrupted by the crisis.



Medium- close-up shot of Ojo in the corridors of his house in Nigeria

The shot used here by the filmmaker drew the viewers closer to see the state in which the caller on the other side was as a result of the crisis.



Medium shot panning to show the environment.

The shot started with a medium and ended with a panoramic wide-angle shot of the deserted city where Kene resides in Nigeria. It also suggests the loneliness caused by the lockdown which surrounds Ojo.



Medium-long shot of Ojo's deserted neighbourhood.

This panoramic medium long shot shows that the streets were deserted and suggests that Ojo is lonely and unhappy, yet finds solace in hearing Ada's voice.



Medium shot of Ada chatting with Ojo..

This image shows certain objects that signify that Ada is talking with Ojo on phone in her sitting room. It also describes the environment as a simple and polished. Then comes a symphony musical tone in the background.



POV close-up shot of Ada.

Symphony musical tone in the background while they are talking. Close-up shot of Ada's sudden change of mood. This shot draws the viewers closer to share in Ada's predicaments concerning her collapsed wedding plans.



Close-up shot of Mr Ojo.

Close-up shot of Ojo worried about Ada's sudden change of mood. This shot draws the viewers closer to share in Ugonna's feelings.



**A long medium shot of Ada holding her ring for the supposed wedding.**

A medium-long shot of Ada holding her ring. This suggests how the two lovers are dealing with their loneliness and psychological



state caused by the pandemic crisis. Ada is made to put on her wedding ring as instructed by Ugonna. The ring on her finger describes her expectations for her wedding which was supposed to be happening the moment they are talking. The mise-en-scene describes how simple Ada is; it also shows that she is down to earth.

Thus, the editor harmonized the shots, infusing appropriate sounds where necessary. The way the narrative shots were sequentially strung was instrumental to the narrative shots in explicating the message of the narrative. The way the shots were structured externalizes Ada and Ojo's moods. The POV shots employed were means through which narrative is perceived from the perspectives of the characters. It encapsulates an audience into the two characters' worlds and stimulates empathic and nostalgic feelings which reinforces the universality of the reality of the situation at the moment. At intervals, the filmmaker draws the attention of the viewers by panning away into the interior of the characters' environments. This technique plays two significant roles, aside from drawing away the audience from the two lovers, it tells the emptiness that surrounds the characters which give a chilling effect and understanding of the trauma the characters are experiencing. Hence, the shots and x-rays the psychological trauma people were experiencing during the Covid-19 pandemic and in a way sought to bring forth smiles on their faces as well as hope that things will come back to normalcy. Again, it was observed that in most of the shots, the rule of third (2/3) was applied. This was used to create a narrative flow between the two main characters. It was also used in exposing the character's environments which also portray the hopelessness and the

emptiness of their predicaments and situations. Also, medium-long shots are used in the narrative to detach the attention of the viewers from the actors' point of view and make the (viewers) catch a glimpse of their crazy way of affirming their love for each other and triumphing over their traumatic and challenging experience at that moment.

### **Conclusion**

Although researches abound on film studies and criticism in Nigeria, not much has been done in the area of cognitive semiotic impact shots in Nollywood films. Anchored on cognitive semiotic theory, the paper's major thrust was to, beyond highlighting the novelty of its production style, x-ray the communicative potentials of shots in Obi Emelonye's *Heart 2 Heart* shot within the pandemic era with the use of phones, coordinated and collated with zoom communication application before editing. It captured the general mood and traumatic state under which people were enmeshed (and alienated) during the Covid-19 lockdown, as encapsulated in the dominant mood of the two lovers (main characters) separated by this development on a day that was supposed to be a happy one for both. Emelonye's novel effort here only reinforces popular parlance within the 'artistic fold' – "THE SHOW MUST GO ON!" – at such challenging moments like the one encountered during this pandemic; as well as Nanci Carr's sheer optimism about "... Bringing Back Live Theatre After COVID-19 Closed the Curtain", no matter the odds. Hence, for Emelonye, in all, "Beyond the novelty of its production style, *Heart 2 Heart* had an uplifting narrative that became a little ray of hope and positivity at a time when the entire world was

subsumed in doom and gloom”. The success of Emelonye’s novel artistic experiment within the pandemic era, only left him “wondering, why didn’t someone think about it before?” (Excerpt from Obi Emelonye, interview in *Vanguard*, 14 June 2021, and in response to the question: “In 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic, which shut down businesses globally, you became the first film director to make a movie via Zoom. How did you make it happen?”).

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**Filmography**

Heart 2 Heart. (2020). With: Obi Emelonye, actors: JideKene Achufusi (Swanky JKA) and Enobong Iyang (London)