

African Research Review

International Multi-Disciplinary Journal

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

AFRREV Vol. 13 (1), Serial No 53, January, 2019: 62-76

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print) ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrev.v13i1.6>

Narrative Power of the Shot: A Reading of Izu Ojukwu's Cindy's Notes

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Abstract

The ability to tell a convincing story on screen lies in the expertise and mechanics of the director's coordination while on the film set. Whereas film is a collaborative art, it takes a director who has a grasp of almost every aspect of the art to properly galvanize other collaborators to achieve what he intends to interpret as the film. Many film sets have been bedevilled by the presence of directors whose only expertise is in calling a shot already planned out by a competent director of photography. This misfortune is further extended to the editing suite. Finally, the film is released without the director having to see how the story has been told. As a result, some films in Nollywood are replete with boring scenes which would rather pass as a recorded stage play. This study shows uses the analysis of Izu Ojukwu's film text to show a director's passion in plotting and executing a scene to achieve good picture in the overall film while telling a good story. It further recommends that if the director must claim ownership of a film, then it becomes imperative for him to plan, call and see to the execution of shots on the film set. This way, it becomes easy to manipulate the picture during editing as a result of the many shot that have been taken on set.

Introduction

The primary focus of filmmaking is more on the visual than the dialogue which goes beyond what Vsevelod Pudovskin refers to a "merely a method of the junction of separate scenes." He insists that in telling a story on screen, editing should be a method that controls the psychological guidance of the spectator. This is what Hitchcock calls "charging the screen with emotion." The narrative ability of the filmmaker lies in the use of five key factors. These include, Camera

Placement, Lighting, Composition, Motion and Editing. These can also be referred to as the primary storytellers. These technical properties of filmmaking are employed in advancing the story of a film. What differentiates one director from another is not in knowing how to create a shot; rather it is in knowing why the shot should be created. This has made many high budget films in Nollywood a mere technical exercise where we see dazzling effects, technical wizardry and style at the expense of the story. Examples abound as we get to see a promise of great movie-making when behind-the-scene clips are shown as part of media hype for a new movie. Oftentimes, we get disappointed when the actual movie is released in the cinemas.

Many directors have attributed these shortcomings to meddlesomeness on the part of the producer and executive producers who see themselves over and above the directors. As a result, the directors are shut out of the post production process and only get to see the movie after it is released. Others blame it on the director's fees. These set of people claim that producers prefer to hire stars and celebrities at any price and then turn around to pay peanuts to the director. As far they are concerned, it is the face and not director's name that sells the movie. This leads to a situation where the director feels detached from the job and merely calls the shot whether or not it enhances the story.

Izu Ojukwu is one filmmaker who is also affected by his meticulous nature. Because he is not one to cut corners and must always insist on a near perfect technical plan, not many producers want to engage his services as director since he may not be able to meet their target of making a movie in three days. This is why most films directed by him are commissioned projects where he has freedom to use his directorial license.

Narrating with the shot

Hitchcock worries that today's films have lost cinematic style and have been turned to "photographs of people talking." He is of the opinion that film stories must be told with a succession of shots and bits of film in-between. According to him, dialogue should only be used when the filmmaker cannot do without it. This was the practice with silent films before the introduction of sound which have contributed to the theatrical form of film. To corroborate Hitchcock's position, Robert Evans in his essay, 'The Biggest Mistake Writers Make,' audaciously puts the blame on the table of writers who he accuses of putting too much dialogue in the script. As he puts it,

I can pick up a screen play and flip through the pages. If all I see is dialog, dialog, dialog, I won't even read it. I don't care how good the dialog is – it's a moving picture and it has to move all the time (qtd. in Sillj, 2005: ix).

Gill Bettman believes very strongly that the primary responsibility of a filmmaker is the look of the finished film and not the script as posited by Robert Evans who would not bother to read the script. The look of the finished film depends on camera movements, angles, shots, lenses, costumes, make-up and other aspects of the art that the filmmaker has successfully coordinated in the interest of the overall film. According to him, "in order for a director to communicate with his audience using the film language of the present day he must know as much about shot making as the cinematographer." (2013:6) Camera movements are meant to energize the film while enhancing the story. However, they must be seamless or invincible in such a way that it does not detract from the story of the film.

As a follow up, Bob Zemeckis suggests three kinds of camera movement that provides for seamlessness and invincibility in what Bettman refers to as 'Bob's Rule.'

1. Externally Generated Camera Moves

These are camera moves that never call attention to themselves but are shot to keep up with the story in order not to let it slide off the screen. This type of camera movement sustains the momentum of a story. It is achieved with the use of car clamps especially for drive scenes and other equipment such as the Gimbal, Steadycam, Dolly or Tracks to keep the subjects in frame.

2. Externally Generated Camera Moves – Seamlessness and Eye Candy

The art of seamlessness is the ability of the director to maintain a moving shot without a cut. Such shots can last for over three minutes without a boring moment unlike static shots which are not meant to last beyond four seconds. Achieving a seamless shot takes a lot of planning, shooting and re-shooting. Eye candy refers to visual images that are highly attractive to look at without necessarily adding value to the scene. This happens when camera moves to keep the central object or subject in frame. During such moments, any other subject or object that passes through the frame blurs or strobos slightly. This energizes the frames and makes it interesting to watch. This is so because the blurred subjects provide a momentary distortion to the main subject in the frame.

3. Internally Generated Camera Moves

This type of camera move is achieved through a moving Point of View (POV) shot. It is used to express simple, common emotions. The point of view shot is an invincible shot that shows us what the character sees and feels without showing the character this however is subject in nature. The objective point of view shot accommodates the character in the frame (10-14).

Achieving a Moving Master Shot

The master shot is the template that determines the visual design of the scene. The key to understanding how to move the camera is learning how to shoot a good 'moving' master scene. Bettman describes the master as that shot "that logically lends itself to camera movement because it is almost always the shot with the biggest scope" (33).

In furtherance to this claim, he outlines the tasks that a master shot is set to achieve;

1. It shows the audience everything it needs to see in order to understand and believe what happens next.
2. It generates an aesthetic of seamlessness by curtailing the need to cut.
3. It generates eye candy.
4. It concentrates the audience's attention to the centre of the drama.
5. It picks up some coverage (33).

Bettman however points out that the application and achievement of these tasks are flexible and unique to the scene and location. The best place to design a good master is at the actual location. This design can best be achieved at the location during reeve or any other day before filming.

This is an exercise that has become a herculean task and one of the major challenges in the practice of filmmaking in Nollywood, the other being during the editing process. Not many directors have an idea of what location looks like until the day of actual filming. This according to Bettman comes with consequences. As he puts it,

If you do not lay out each moving master at the actual location, the chances are good that your master will not strike the perfect balance between motion and drama. If you detect a shortcoming on the set the day of shoot when you are talking the cinematographer through the shot, and then try to correct the problem on the fly, in all likelihood your last-minute solution will not solve the problem. Do not even go there. Your chances of breaking into the ranks of working directors are slim. Do not diminish them further out of laziness. Go to each location before the shoot day and do your homework. You will be glad you did (68).

A Critical Reading of *Cindy's Notes*

Cindy's Notes is a commissioned project by Amstel Malta used to project winners of the Amstel Malta Box Office reality Show. It is a story about a spoilt child who becomes humbled by the harsh realities of life when she is exposed to them during National Youth Service year as a Corps member. The story also underscores the main aim of the National Youth Service programme as that which exposes the youth to the experience of life outside the comfort of home and independence in school.

The film opens with Corps members scrambling to pick up the materials they need in camp. Within the busy environment, Cindy is seen trying not to get herself worked up. She believes that she has just a few weeks to spend in the camp and then get redeployed from Taraba State back to Lagos as she had been promised by her mother. On the contrary, she could not get redeployed as she hoped. In her disappointment, she moves to Usse Local Government Area where she is posted. The filmmaker reveals the place with a crane shot and pulls out to a panoramic shot to show the beautiful and natural landscape. Shot mixes to her arrival at the Community Secondary School and entrance to the Principal's office. In order to achieve what could best be described as class distinction, the shot reverse shot used during the dialogue is varied between a low angle shot of Cindy and a high angle shot of the Principal using an over-shoulder shot (oss).





Plate 1: Shots showing the shot reverse shot between Cindy and the Principal. Eye levels are used to reveal the high and low angle shots.

As they move out of the office and walk around the compound, the wobbling movement of the camera and the Principal is used to connote that the school is in a state of flux. As she decides to get used to the environment while waiting for her letter of redeployment, her attention is drawn to a student who was sent out of class for not having a textbook. She receives a rude shock when in a bid to intervene; she discovers that the teacher, Mr. Kiyafa (Clem Ohameze) who can best be described as a ‘local champion’ could not even get his tenses right. She insists that the girl stays in the class, a decision Mr. Kiyafa interpreted as rebellious. The filmmaker also makes another statement using connotative shots here as a close shot of Mr. Kiyafa as he asks a rather rhetorical question, “Who is that Girl?” is succeeded by the cut-away shot of a hand ringing a bell. The answer to that question now lies in the ringing of the bell which signifies a wake-up call and so could be interpreted as “Wake up and smell the coffee.” This is also explained further in the next scene where the Principal tries to verbally query Cindy for coming late to school,

Principal: Do you realize that a minute spent on any job could mean a whole life time....

Cindy: (cuts in) ... why is it that you have such potent philosophy and Usse is still backward? I saw more than enough rottenness, unserious, badly mannered students, near empty classrooms, dilapidated classrooms and students engaging in unwholesome activities when in fact they should be in the classrooms. Why can't your school be different?

The above dialogue is filmed using a shot reverse shot interlaced with reaction shots of two other teachers who are observing the scene in utter amazement as they had never seen anyone challenging a higher authority.



Plate 2: Shot of Principal on medium close up shot. The blurred subjects at the background serve as eye candy.



Plate 3: Reverse shot of Cyndi on a medium close up shot.



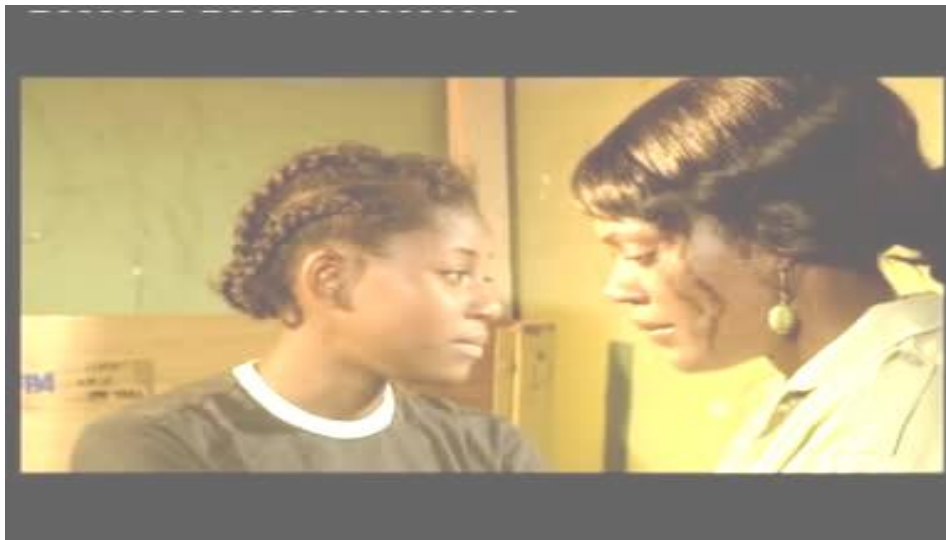
Plate 4: Wide shot revealing other subjects and overall ambience of the scene.



Plate 5: Reaction shot of Wilson and another teacher on a medium shot (ms2).

Cindy however resumes classes with the students and discovers that the children are willing to learn but are victims of an inept system characterized by corruption and mediocrity as exemplified in the character of Mr. Kiyafa. The Principal is impressed with the efforts she is putting in to return some sanity to the school but does not fail to advise her to learn to find out the problem in a place, try to be part of the solution before running away from it. According to him, “anywhere you go, do not talk down on the people until you have contributed your own quota.”

Cindy gets her letter of redeployment at last and is set to go back to Lagos. She is however made to change her mind as she discovers that the students’ countenance changed. The hospital scene where she visits a sick student is also used to drive the point home. The filmmaker achieves emotional intimacy using extreme close up shots between the two subjects.



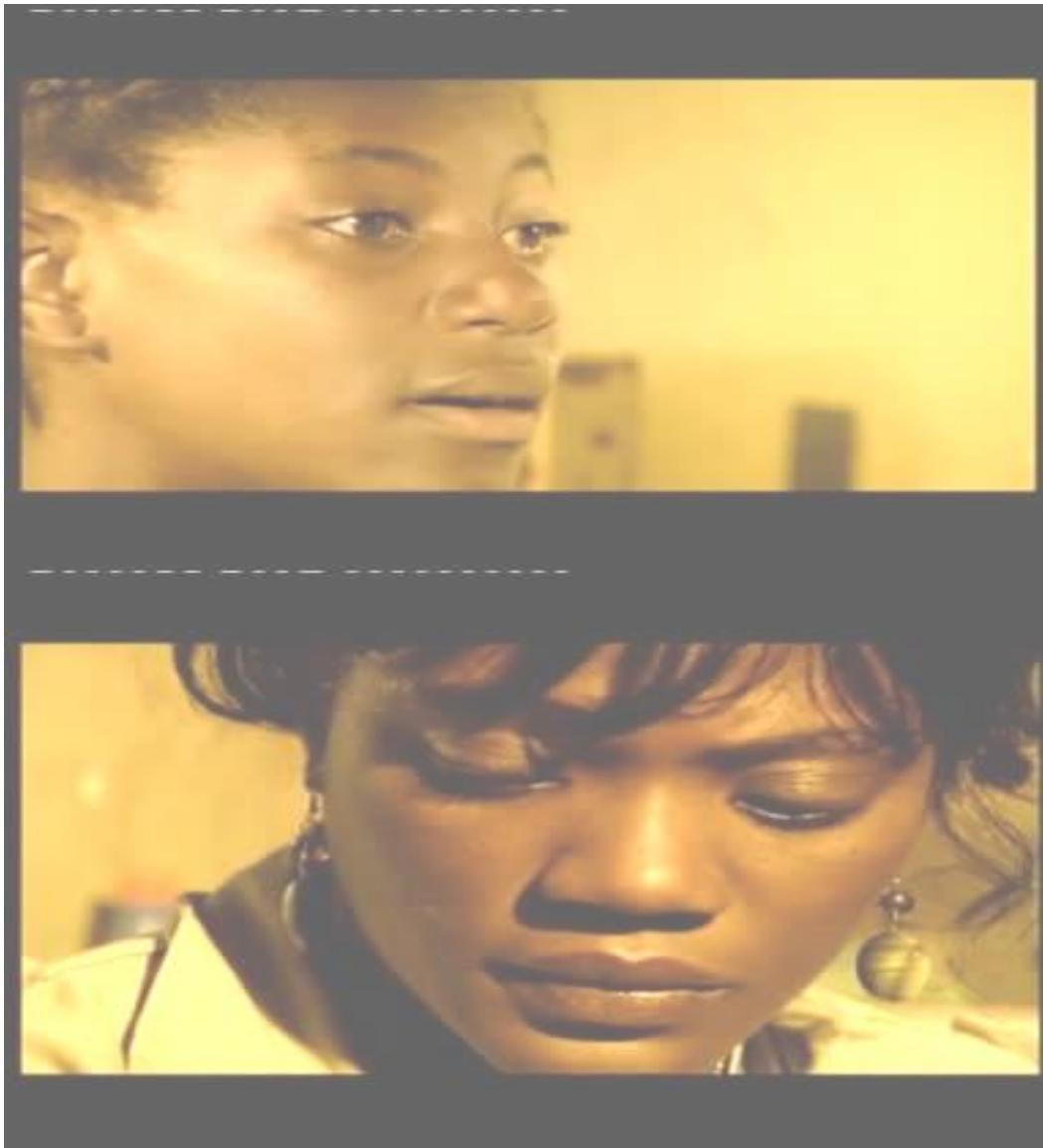


Plate 6: *Picture frames showing shot reverse shot between Cindy and Wendy in hospital.*

As part of the reintegration process, Cindy is made to feel at home in Usse. She wakes up to find that Wendy has done her laundry and swept the compound. She is also introduced to their local delicacy and made to experience life and fun at the market and town square. The negative aspects are not left out as she witnesses a pick-pocket in action. This causes some pandemonium as the victim shouts for help and people try to chase and catch the thief who is later apprehended by a fellow Corps member, Wilson (Nonso Diobi).



Plate 7: *Pack shot of crowd at the town square to accommodate Cyndi as she is being taken around by Wendy*

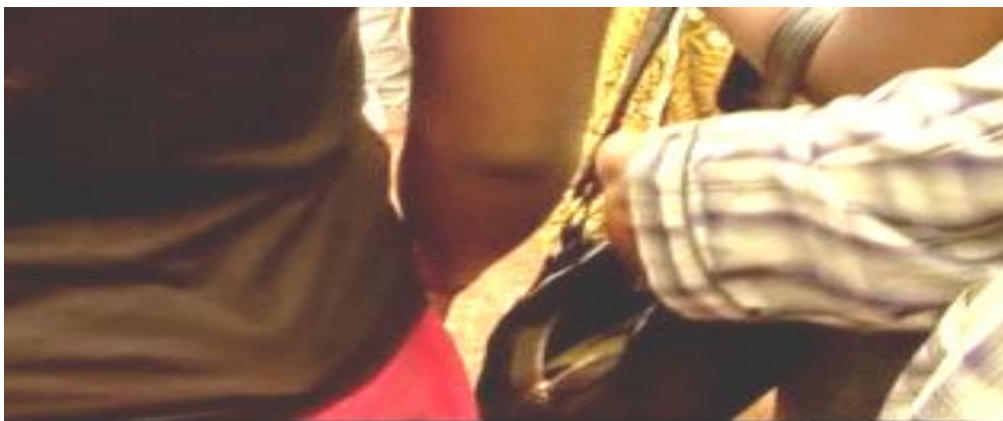


Plate 8: *Cut-away shot of a hand trying to steal from someone's bag.*



Plate 9: *Pack shot of crowd to accommodate Wilson as he notices the strange movement.*

Cindy's emotional life is also x-rayed in her relationship with Wilson who is a fellow copper. Shot reveals him on his first visit to Cindy on a medium shot foregrounding the lantern as source of light. Wilson gets what he feels is a cold reception as Cindy tries to berate him for risking his life to catch the pick-pocket. She thinks the money is too small for the kind of risk Wilson took to chase the thief especially knowing that they are not natives of the community.



Plate 10: *Shot of Wilson's entrance foregrounding the lantern to reveal source of light.*

Wilson does not find it funny. He expects a pat on the back from Cindy who is also an advocate and stickler for doing things right. He walks out in anger and for some days, there is communication breakdown between the two. In their silence, the desire for each other's company is so loud. This is communicated through the use of point of view shots as they go about their business in school. Wilson gets carried away each time Cindy walks past his classroom and he can't help staring at her. Subsequently, the progress of the relationship is communicated through the use of point of view shots, reaction shots and strobe effects.





Plate 11: Shot showing sequence of Wilson from an objective point of view shot to a subjective point of view shot and a reverse of the point of view.

To further tell the narrative from Cindy's perspective, shot dissolves intermittently to a cut-away of hand writing on a diary. We are also made to see Cindy's experience as she joins in the farm. The director employs the use of montage to achieve a whole day as shots mix from one farm activity to another until sunset. The scene is concluded having the subjects filmed against the setting sun to achieve silhouette pictures.



Plate 12: Medium Close up shot of Wilson trying to dial Cyndi's number



Plate 13: *Picture frames showing shot sequence of telephone conversation between Cindy and Wilson. Dialogue is achieved using background and foreground composition.*

As part of her efforts to make a positive impact on the students and the community, Cindy begins free tutorials to the consternation of Mr. Kiyafa who took money from them for the tutorials. Wilson thinks she is becoming too daring and tries to advise her to calm down and avoid stepping on Mr. Kiyafa's toes. This dialogue is done through a telephone conversation where the director employs the use of background and foreground composition in place of a cut. Again, the use of montage is employed during the volley-ball training session to accommodate many days of the training sessions within a few minutes. As part of the integration process, we observe that Cindy is now able to communicate in their native dialect. She uses the opportunity to encourage the natives to get good education as it would go a long way to boost their economy if they understood the science of mechanized farming.

In another sequence Mr. Kiyafa, obviously frustrated by Cindy's positive move which has taken the shine off him colludes with the natives, invade the school on the pretext that they no longer help their parents in doing farm work. During the scene, a fight ensues as the students try to resist them leading to a fatal accident as one of the natives in an attempt to hit a student misses his step and falls down hitting his head against a tree stump. The fall makes the man unconscious as he is rushed to the hospital. While the man is recovering in the hospital, the villagers think Cindy has caused the near-death experience of one of them. As a result, they treat her with so much disdain. She is also reported to the NYSC officials who threaten to have her punished. In her frustration, she decides to leave but is again held back by her decision to make a positive impact on the lives of the people of Usse. She approaches the Chairman of the Local Government Council with an impressive proposal and is able to secure a tractor for the community.

After a thorough investigation, Mr. Kiyafa is made to retire compulsorily after being found incompetent. The people of Usse community feel blessed having Cindy around. This is aptly shown on their moody faces as Cindy and Wilson are set to leave at the end of the service year. Even as a fellow corps member, Wilson also appreciates Cindy's positive impact on the community. According to him,

There are three types of people. The first set of people see your problem and walk away. The second set see your problem, talk about it and hope that someone or some people will do something about it. But the last set of people see your problem and take on the challenge of doing something about it.

The above line implies that Cindy belongs to the last set of people who do something to affect the lives of people around them. Even as she is leaving, she makes a firm promise to fund Wendy's university education if she succeeds in gaining admission into the university.



Plate 14: Shot showing a reaction of Wendy on a medium close-up shot



Plate 15: *The previous shot is followed by a long shot revealing her point-of-view with her at the background.*

The film ends on a positive note with a shot of Cindy as she reads a note from Wendy informing her of her admission and picture of her in a matriculation gown.

Conclusion

Every successful director must be armed with three crucial skills in making a movie. He must understand how to tell a story on film. He must be able to bring out the best in his actors in order to elicit great performances. And he must master the art of directing the camera to create the most powerful visual expression of his story through his images.

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Appendix
Interview with Izu Ojukwu
21st July, 2014



Ques: What drives your passion for filmmaking?

Ans: It started with my hunger for folk tales and then my fascination with the Camera.

Ques: Are there any intellectual, psychological, social or political standpoints you always want to imprint in your films?

Ans: I have a penchant for thematic issues, and filmmaking provided the platform for my voice to be seen.

Ques: Most Directors are influenced by producers and star actors which sometimes negatively affect the entire shoot or make director to begin cutting corners. in light of this, what is your style of approach especially when it has to do with relating with producers or star actors?

Ans: This issue is common amongst upcoming directors and directors who are driven by the ambiguous desire to trade creativity for quick cash. I had similar problems in the early 90s when I called my first shot. My set was run completely by actors, I had no say, my star struck executive producer was brainwashed, I was depressed but I realized it was not a battle I can win by brooding or sulking but by earning the trust and confidence of my investors and it wasn't going to happen overnight. So, I took my time: one day at a time. And gradually I began to stamp my feet on the ground, I lost some investors in the process. That was the price I had to pay. However, it soon became obvious to all that I wasn't going to compromise my values and standards. The story is different today.

Ques: Do market forces influence your choice of movies?

Ans: In the past, NO, because I made more art films than commercial films, but now, YES. I have to find the balance if I want to stay in business.