

Afrealism: A Proposed Indigenous Directing Style to Decolonise African Film Narrative Techniques

Akinola Abdul-Qadir

Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti

akinilops@gmail.com

08067665713, 09033044337

Abstract

It is a known fact that filmmaking is not an indigenous African performing art. Indeed, filmmaking is an imported entertainment art that became prevalent in Africa during the colonial era. However, despite the numerous transformations that African film narratives have witnessed, films produced in the region have not been disengaged from colonial influence/western ideology in the production process. This contrasts with play directing in Africa which has been enjoying series of theoretical and practical experimentations, and performance philosophies relating to indigenous directing styles and techniques from different African theatre scholars. Consequently, this paper is proposing Afrealism as a directing style for African films. By so doing, the contention of this paper is that if this style is adopted by African filmmakers, African films will enjoy originality instead of copying western directing style which is not the best to explore Africanism in our film productions. This style will also create a good model for the criticism of African films and portray our societal reality, culture and tradition in the best way possible.

Keywords: *Afrealism, Decolonize, Film Directing, African Film, Narrative Techniques.*

Introduction

Nollywood industry which is also called Naija film or Nigerian film industry is recognised as one of the fastest growing movie industries and second largest film producer in the world (Witt, 2017, p.128). This is due to the effort of individual stakeholder guilds and association in the industry. It has arguably contributed and still contributes to the national economic growth of the country, cultural policy and propagation, political landscape of the country, and the national image in the global world. Nollywood industry is a holistic industry which comprises numerous creative personae such as Director of photography, Continuity manager, Costume designer, Sound director, Stunt and effect director, set designer, Actors, and Director to mention but a few. These various creative artists always collaborate to achieve an artistic finesse (Film). In the filmmaking, no creative desire can be achieved in isolation of artistic ingenuity of a Director who is the creative leader of the production. The reason is that the director is the primus inter pares whose creative ingenuity with the cooperation of his collaborators forms the main pillar of the production.

There have been a lot of constructive criticism on Nollywood films and the practicing mode of the industry due to the popularity of the Nigerian film industry. However, with all the critical works written in the Nollywood industry, some practitioners in the industry remain uncritical about their works and produce films that lack substance and creativity. Akinwale (2013, p.30) submits that “Several films in Yoruba, shot by members of the Association of Nigerian Theatre Practitioners (ANTP), lack texture in content, theme and structure.” Akinwale’s opinion is substantiated by Olayiwola (2007, p.59) that:

The point is worth stressing that 90 percent of those who straddle the video film industry in Nigeria today have no formal education in related disciplines like theater arts, film studies, broadcasting, or cinematography. Some of them have no formal education at all. They are only involved in a game of trial and error, leading to shoddy productions. Most films are poorly directed because the present practitioners think that all it takes to be a movie director in Nigeria is money and a handful of people. Armed with a camcorder, you are already in the business. Better still, wait until your face appears in a couple of home videos and you will be instantly transformed into a star director. In essence, the actor-producer-director practice of the early pioneers still reigns supreme in Nigeria. The rare combination of talent and training that make a good director is yet to be understood by the Nigerian industry. Present day filmmakers lack the technical know-how needed to direct a film.

Even though majority of Nollywood practitioners were not formally trained in the field of filmmaking and that a handful of the filmmakers have put commerce as priority over content of production, Nigeria still has some Directors who were trained filmmakers, and their films are representing us in the global entertainment community. Directors like Ola Balogun, Tunde Kelani, Tecu Benson, Lancelot Oduwa, Kunle Afolayan and Kemi Adetiba fall under the category. In credence to this, Olayiwola (2007, p.60) opines that:

... despite these roadblocks, a few filmmakers have proven the value of training. The list includes Tunde Kelani, director of successful and technically accomplished video films like *Ti Oluwa Ni'le* [The Earth is the Lord's] (1992), *Thunderbolt*

(2001), and *The Campus Queen* (2004); Tade Ogidan, director of *Owo Blow* (1996), *Hostages* (1997), *Diamond Ring* (1999), and *Dangerous Twins* (2004); and Niji Akanni, with *Ewe Oju Orni* [A Restless Run of Locusts] (2002), *Jogunowmi* [Cease Fire] (2004), and *Boju Boju* [Hide and Seek] (2005).

Consequently, for Nollywood industry to continually producing substantial films that are rich in content and context, aesthetically substantial, there is need for creative ingenuity of the director to be critically dealt with and reconsider in the industry. Therefore, the essence of the art of directing and the director cannot be overemphasised in the creative process of any film production. This is largely due to the nature of his duties and functions which span through the artistic, creative, analytical, sociological, philosophical, managerial, psychological, technical and directorial functions, to mention but a few. The art of directing has been conceptualised and re-conceptualised by scholars such as Ododo (1999), Musa (2006), Arinde (2012), Johnson (2017), Adeseke (2019) and so on.

The Art of Directing and the Nollywood Filmmaking

The complexity and dynamic nature of the duties and functions of a director within the experimental cum technical space of filmmaking is borderless. In fact, Musa (2006, p.232) describes a director as, “a metaphor in the theatre”. Undoubtedly, a director has many artistic responsibilities to perform and for him to diligently execute these duties he needs to adopt an appropriate style for the production. In fact, the duty of a director is more complex in the filmmaking because a director in the production is the narrator who has conceived a vision within himself and must narrate his vision to his collaborators who indeed also have their vision within themselves which they also intend to exhibit. Meanwhile, he must blend his vision with that of his collaborators before narrating them in a holistic vision to his audience. Therefore, there is an ample need for the film director to design an appropriate and highly effective production style to exhibit his artistic vision without absolutely throwing away the vision of his collaborators. This is reiterated by Ododo (1999, p. 65) that:

The director has omnibus responsibilities, a very wide range indeed. If he is to oversee all that goes into the production, that means he should be knowledgeable in all the areas of the play production. He should be well versed in the art of the stage

and should have a sharp visual and auditory sense coupled with a high artistic intuition.

Drawing from the above, the production style employed by the director will either make or mar the production. This means that, if an appropriate style is employed, the final look of the film would be aesthetically pleasing and vice versa. In foregrounding this, Musa (2006, p.230) in his submission states succinctly that:

a good and well formulated production philosophy will give theatre performance a clear-cut artistic, intellectual, dramaturgical, theatrical and ideological direction. Production philosophy allows a performance to satisfy the feelings of the audience, conforms with the playwright's intention/thematic concerns and activates the theatre director's vision. However, if a production fails, the director has either fail to formulate a good production philosophy or refuses to carry out his formulated production philosophy to the process of production articulation.

Production philosophy in the above submission means directorial style or put in another way, creative ingenuity that helps an artistic director to use his work to create a lasting impression in the mind of his audience. Consequently, the director as an artist who has a great duty to discharge in the theatrical performance must have a unique artistic style known as directorial style. This is why some Nigerian movie directors adopt styles that are unique to them when discharging their directorial duties. As a matter of fact, these film directors employ different styles and approaches in their quest for artistic direction, vision and identity for them to produce aesthetic films that will interest their audience. Corroboratively, since the inception of cinema, home video, television series and films on the Nigerian Screen, the development level of this media art is largely immeasurable. In fact, its impact on religion aspect and cultural securities cannot be downplayed. Idogho (2016, p. 56) asserts that: “film is a popular genre endowed with the ability to transform, super impose, socialise and create a new social order in the receiving ground”. In affirmation of this, Lawal (2015, p.53) submits that:

Nollywood has done a lot in responding to social issues in Nigeria like its counterparts in other climes. It has served as a medium of cultural consciousness,

political awakening, and educational tool, among others. Thus, Nollywood plays many functions in Nigeria.

Lawal's position validates the fact that, before a film production can discharge these functions and become an acceptable product in the market, it requires the total presence of a film personnel who will painstakingly furnish it into an aesthetically pleasing product, whose is called Auteur director.

In the process of striving to achieve an aesthetically pleasing film, it is very pertinent for the director to choose an appropriate style for him to optimally discharge his directorial assignments during the production. Musa (2006, p. 234) states that, "it is the spirit of production that determines the final output of a production, and a production spirit can be determined through the script, the director style or approach to the theatre".

Musa's opinion above reveals that a director's style or approach has high ability to contribute significantly to the success or otherwise of the entire production. Despite the fact that the art of directing is an indispensable art in the film industry, the art to us has received little or no attention by the film scholars in area of production style. It is in view of this that this paper decides to embark on proposing Afrealism as an African directorial style which will also serves as a model for African film criticism. This lacuna is perhaps the reason for most of the sub-standard films produced in Nollywood that cannot compete with her Hollywood and Bollywood counterparts. It is arising from this that this study opines that for Nollywood films to compete with western films, adequate attention must be paid to the area of directing styles employed by the Nollywood directors and the style must be indigenous which will suit African ecosystem and modus vivendi of Nigeria.

Considering the above, this paper raises the following critical issues:

- i. Can film directors improve the quality of films produced in the Nollywood?
- ii. If a director can improve the quality of production through his auteur power, how important is his directing style in the production?
- iii. If directing styles are of great essence in film production, can the indigenous directing styles strengthen Nigerian film production in terms of content, form and narrative

techniques?

Consequent upon the questions above, this study proposed Afrealism.

Afrealism, Nollywood Films and Nollywood Directors

Afrealism is a directing style/theoretical construction coined by the researcher for African film directing and criticism to close the lacuna and deficiency in African film directing style and African film criticism. Mohammed-Kabir and Ferdinand's (2021, p.1) asserts that:

Since the emergence of theory in the literary circle, right from the time of Aristotle till date, there has been changing phases of theory. That is theories wearing a new garb. There has been nothing really new since the ancient time rather, we have witnessed new dressing theories. These trends gave birth to a mother movement or theory like Afro-postmodernism. This emerges because most literary scholars till recent time believe there is dearth of African theories that can help in the interpretation of African plays. This is because western theories may have not really help in the interpretation of African plays.

In a similar perspective and the need for indigenous directing style in African filmmaking is the submission of Ali Zakky, that:

African film directors did not look into our own culture to direct film from our own indigenous point of view. In fact, we are more interested in the European's directorial concept and the people's value, culture and tradition must reflect in their directing style instead of copycatting the west. (Personal interview)

In a counter opinion is the view of Obi Okoli that, "film is not an African entertainment culture it is an imported entertainment culture. Therefore, we cannot do without copying the style(s) of Hollywood filmmakers". (Personal interview).

However, African playmaking or directing and criticism later witnessed the contributions of African theatre scholars such as Wole Soyinka, Ayo Akinwale, Sam Ukala, AbdulRasheed Adeoye, Mohammad Ben-Adallah and many more who saw reasons to proffer solutions to the deficiency in African production or directing styles and African play criticism and propounded different African production and directing styles cum theories for African playmaking. In fact, Adeseke and Akinola (2022, pp. 122-123) submits that:

African Directors should adopt more African Directing style in their production instead of adopting European's production styles which is nothing but neo-colonialist in nature. African Film scholar should therefore, work with African Film Directors to propose Directing styles that would be suitable for African Films and also serve as model and yardstick for African film criticism then pave way for more African directing styles and approaches in filmmaking the way we have potpourri of Directing styles in playmaking such as Ukala's folkism, Adeoye's neo-alienation style, Ben-Abdullah step aside, Ayo Akinwale's Straight take, Owusu's cyclic presentation Style, Ola Rotimi's variegated action and pressure cooker to mention but a few.

It is also stated in Akinola (2023, p. 61) that:

culture and religion have posed as part of the major threats to film directing in Nigeria. Furthermore, Nigerian Film Directors lack indigenous directing styles, and only few of them have their unique directing styles. However, consciously or not, majority of them often adopt eclecticism as their directing style.

Corroboratively, film is an art with a thousand of functions among are the primary function which is the entertainment and others are but not limited to cultural preservation, propagation and societal commentary. There are millions of Africans living in diaspora and they know no or little about their culture and the only means some of them have is to see themselves to films that is exported to their country of residence from Nigeria. However, it would be painful to theme if what the can see in their so call indigenous film is the style and culture they are living with. The struggle to deconolise African film narrative has led to some pro Africanist theories like Africanism, Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism and Afrocentrism which is an alternative theory or opposition theory to eurocentrism.

Therefore, in view of the observation above, it is necessary for us as African filmmakers and scholars to put our house in order by craving our indulgence towards indigenous film theories and start propounding favourable indigenous directing styles or production styles for African film as this would incorporate our culture, tradition, and ethics into our films and avoid misrepresentation of our society in the global space.

It is worthy of mention that, Afrealism is rooted in African performance space. It gives room for African film directors to explore African indigenous performance mode including African prehistory performance idioms and mode. Afrealism affords us the opportunity to discuss African realities as a subject matter of the film and allow film critiques to criticize African films within the abeyance of African performance mode and production idioms. This is because using western directorial style(s), for African film production or adopting western parameter(s) as factor for African film criticism is nothing but neo-colonialism. This is validated by Emasealu (2022, p. 247) that “the colonial experience has undoubtedly resulted in destabilizing pocket of hitherto evolving African socio-political system. However, emerging voices have begun to acknowledge that the African deserve his space in the scheme of things.”

Eight (8) Organic Principles of Afrealism

- i. Principle of African Culture and tradition
- ii. Principle of African Indigenous Performance Mode(s) and Idiom(s)
- iii. Principle of Director’s Signature
- iv. Principle of African Indigenous Language
- v. Narrative Principle
- vi. Principle of African Reality(ies)
- vii. Adoption/Adaptation of African Historical Material(s) Principle
- viii. Principle of Zero or No Tolerance for Nudism.

In order to propose this directing style/theory that we believed it is capable of solving directorial and technical issues in the Nollywood film industry, this study conducts a critical and comparative study on the directorial styles and approaches adopted by some celebrated Nollywood directors, we visited some of their film location to understudied them, we interview some and did a critical and visual reading of some of their films. The directors we understudied are Tunde Kelani, Abbey Lanre, Lancelot Oduwa, Kemi Adetiba, Adebayo Tijani and Kunle Afolayan. Thus, from the examination of directorial styles and works of the above directors, one can surmise that,

- i. Directors can improve the films produced in Nollywood.
- ii. The directing style(s) adopted by the Directors can influence other Film Directors in Nollywood.

- iii. Realise that indigenous directing style is capable of enliven film production in Nollywood.
- iv. A good formulated indigenous directing could serve as a foundation to the promising budding directors to build upon.
- v. A yielding directing style can attract international recognition to Nollywood industry for critical review.

Visual Analysis of Directing Styles Adopted in the Selected Films of the Understudied Directors

Our intention in this segment is to engage in a visual analysis of the directing styles of some of the films of the understudied Directors. While examining the directing styles of these film directors, we discovered that there are some similarities and differences in their films. From all indications, all these film directors have distinguished themselves as the best among the equal in the field of film directing also known as film narrative in the Nigeria Film Industry. They achieved this through their distinct artistic creative ingenuity that serves as our motivation for this research. However, directing styles of these film directors were influenced by sociological background, cultural value, education, exposure, experience on the job and individual ideology.

Abbey Lanre incorporated some features of the Italian Neo-realist style in his films as seen in the pictures below:

- i. Natural Set
- ii. Historical epics
- iii. Natural light

The use of these natural sets plays a double role in the production. This is because they help in achieving historical reality and reduce the production cost of set construction.

Tunde Kelani leverage upon the use of Narrator theatre as seen in *Saworo Ide* and Adaptation of historical materials or Novel as seen in most of his films. He also makes use of natural light which represents moon in African tales in the moon light.

The following principles were discovered in the works of Kunle Afolayan, Adebayo Tijani and Lancelot Oduwa.

- The use of narrative technique
- Adaptation of historical epic
- The use total theatre idiom

- The use of historical realities
- Exhibition of African pride and tradition
- Propagation of indigenous language principle
- The use of historical artefacts.

The pictures below are some of the pictorial and visual evidence of the African performance components listed above that were discovered in the selected films of the understudied Nollywood directors.



Total theatre aesthetics in Kunle Afolayan *Anikulapo*
Photo credit: Kunle Afolayan



Masquering and mask theatre in kunle Afolayan *Anikulapo*
Photo credit: Kunle Afolayan



Indigenous historical Artifact in kunle Afolayan *Anikulapo*
Photo credit:Kunle Afolayan



African indigenous craft (local pot making) in Kunle Afolayan *Anikulapo*
Photo credit:Kule Afolayan



African feasting and food culture Aeasthetic in



Projection of African culture and African theatre idiom in

Tunde Kelani Ayinla Omowura
Photo credit: Tunde Kelani



Indigenous artifact in Lancelot Oduwa *Invasion1897*
Photo credit: Lancelot Oduwa

Tunde Kelani Ayinla Omowura
Photo credit: Tunde Kelani



Indigenous artifact in Lancelot Oduwa *Invasion1897*
Photo credit: Lancelot Oduwa



Indigenous artifact in Lancelot Oduwa *Invasion1897*
Photo credit: Lancelot Oduwa



Aesthetic of African tradition(Ipebi) in Adebayo Tijani *King of Thieves*
Photo credit: Adebayo Tijani



Celebration of African total theatre aesthetic in Adebayo Tijani *King of Thieves* . Photo credit: Adebayo Tijani



Aesthetic of African communal celebration in Adebayo Tijani *King of Thieves*. Photo credit: Adebayo Tijani



Natural light(Sun) in Tunde Kelani's *Dazzling Mirage*.



Odo Osun groove as Natural set in *Odundun* as natural set

Photo credit: Tunde Kelani

Photo credit: Researcher



Odo osun suspended bridge as natural set in Abbey Lanre
Odundun

Photo Credit: Abbey Lanre



Odo osun groove as Natural set in Abbey Lanre
Odundun

Photo Credit: Abbey Lanre

However, it is worthy of note that it does not necessarily mean that all these elements must appear at once in a film production but most of them must be present in the film before using this production style/theory as parameter of criticism of any African film. Therefore, Afrealism is adopted for this paper to enable us to discuss our societal issues as societal realities in the films under examination.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that African film can dominate the global entertainment market if African film scholars and practitioners begin to pay attention to the area of directing and other technical aspect of the film. If we observe very well, we will discover that theatre keep receiving attention on the area of directing from both theatre experimentalist and theatre theorist. Therefore, it is has become a challenge to all film scholars and film practitioners to start theorizing Nigerian films with indigenous parameters as this will promote our culture and negotiate a place for African culture, norms and tradition at the global community. This study observes that if indigenous style is adopted many marriages would be safe instead of broken home that is becoming norm to the present-day film practitioners due to the unnecessary romance which also put our teenagers into the emotional danger. This paper also observes that if this directing style/theory is embraced it will prevent Nollywood films from cultural misrepresentation at global space. It recommends that Afrealism should be embrace and more indigenous styles should be propounded.

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