

Pathbreaking Experimental and Technological Directing Aesthetics in Kunle Afolayan's *October 1*

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Abstract

*Nigerian film directors have in recent times taken film productions to the next level with various blockbusters and large-budget films made, using state-of-the-art audio-visual digital technologies to frame their narratives. Their cinematographic inventions have been responsible for the aesthetics that trail the new achievements, which culminated in the projected big screens in cinemas and at film festivals across the globe. It is on this premise that this study examines the directorial and performative experimentation of Kunle Afolayan in the film, *October 1*. This study employs descriptive and analytic methods of research, in which in-depth descriptive analyses of the various experimental approaches in the production of *October 1* were used. The study finds that the directorial style used in the movie is indeed experimental in technological exploration, which is a departure from the usual styles employed by most Nigerian film makers. Again, the narrative method used in the film is a novel method of revealing mysterious stories by withholding pieces of information in a cinematographic work. The study concludes that the film *October 1* is directorially unique based on the experimentations in cinematography and designs. It is therefore recommended that film directors should employ technology that will enable them to tell their film stories in a more fascinating manner that will remove boredom and monotony that have characterised most Nigerian movies.*

Keywords: Cinematography, Directorial, Aesthetics, Experimentation and Film-making

Introduction

Scholarly attention devoted to Nollywood in the recent times is not only timely but interesting; especially with scholars' curiosity at examining approaches used by some directors in film making. Among the film directors in Nigeria that employs creative ingenuity is Kunle Afolayan. He had become notable in the industry because of his uniqueness and approach to film making. Perhaps, this was due to his family heritage as Haynes (2016, p.292) observes that: "when he decided to become a film director, he already had a rich family heritage" Haynes added that "he also studied digital film-making at the New York Film Academy for a year and that gave him a level of sophistication that is rare among other Nollywood directors".

It is an incontrovertible fact that a creative dramatist either known for stage performance or film making is expected to possess the ability to imagine, evolve and actualise new theatricalities and styles as Adeoye (2012, p.29) affirms that experimentation in directing means “the artistic skill and gift to wanting to do it radically, uniquely, differently and specially”. Adeoye (2012, p.29) also citing Roose-Evans (1989, p.1) pungently stated that “experiment has implied something very different. Also, Bower (2003, p.77) stated that “the focus of experimentation in film making primarily deals with the exploration of new cinematic techniques and visual expression”.

No doubt, directing is the art of controlling the development of a play from inception to the final stage and while directors vary in their orientation and training, a good director remains consistent and relentless to the mission of realizing the vision of a play and no matter how utterly illogical it may appear to others, the allure of the directing profession is primarily about creating new realities and, as such, it is inextricably linked to reinvention and redefinition.

Literature Review

Film directing is a wide venture and various scholars over the years have documented different styles and patterns that film directors can follow. For example, Katz (1991, p.9) opines that “the first phase of filmmaking must include script development, production planning, casting and hiring” while the production phase itself which is the primary focus of this study “involves the actual shooting of the film”.

Therefore, a film director performs a great task by making all production decisions and choices even by making clear his vision to everyone involved in the production hence Arinde (2012, p.100) describes the personality of such director as a “creative artist” who “gets inputs from all production participants (crew and actors) even though he retains the final say on what to incorporate or not in the production”.

Ekwuazi (2002, p.11) while defining film-making states that “a film is created by photographing actual scenes with a motion picture camera; by photographing drawings or miniature models using traditional animation techniques; by means of CGI and computer animation; or by a combination of some or all of these techniques and other visual effects”. Consequently, film-making and cinematography remains entwined which explains why Ekwuazi (2002, p.12) submits that: “The word “cinema”, short for cinematography, is often used to refer to the industry of films and film-making or to the art of film-making itself and the contemporary definition of cinema is the art of

communicating ideas, stories, perceptions, feelings, beauty or atmosphere by the means of recorded or programmed moving images along with other sensory stimulations.” This explains the recent demand for African films (particularly Nigerian films) globally even on major platforms like Netflix. This global demand has put a great deal of strain on the quality of films to be produced which was the reason why directors to improve on the boundaries of conventional film making styles in Nigeria with enthusiasm for non-linear storylines, world-class filming equipment with unique visual compositions sauced with CGI, VFX and other digital effects, to attain global acceptability and circulation.

The study employs Andrew Sarris’ (1962) *Auteur theory*, which holds that a film reflects the director's personal creative vision, as if they were the primary "auteur" (the French word for "author"). Peter (2004, p.556) in his review of the theory notes that “within the context of Cinema, the word *auteur* is used to describe a director who exerts a high level of control and involvement across all aspects of film making”

Features of Auteur Theory.

- i. Technical Competence: This feature explains that auteur directors also have major knowledge about the technicalities of film making including vast capacities to use various filming equipment.
- ii. Distinguishable Personality: This feature discusses the unmistakable style and consistent pattern of the director in his various works. One can easily see consistent themes and technical patterns in the body of their work.
- iii. Interior Meaning: Auteur directors make films that have layers of meaning. Films made by Auteur directors go beyond the pure entertainment-oriented spectacles to instead reveal the unique perspectives and ruminations about life.

Okwuowulu (2012, p.220) notes that “*auteur theory* has spawned several academic interests most especially with various film scholars querying the position of the director in different film cultures across the world”.

In the same vein, Okwuowulu (2018, p.117) also observes that “with the advent and development of Nollywood, few directors such as Teco Benson, Izu Ojukwu, Tunde Kelani and Andy Amanechi have always been identified as Nollywood auteur-directors in academic parlance.” Okwuowulu (2018, p.118) while citing Ihentuge (2008, p. 212) who was presumably the first scholar that attempted to contextualize auteur theory in Nollywood noted that “auteur theory could be applied

to any film industry irrespective of its stage of development. It then means that it will amount to great disservice to continue to deny Nollywood auteurial intentions considering its recent international high ratings”.

Furthermore, Okwuowulu (2016, p.36) citing Ihunwo (2009, p.4) stated categorically that “the executive producers who dictate to directors does it just for economic reasons and only independent directors who are not tied to the apron strings of the executive producers can freely practice auteurship in Nollywood”. Again, Okwuowulu (2016, p.12) conceptualizes three peculiar auteurship practices in Nollywood, mentioning Teco Benson, Izu Ojukwu and Tunde Kelani as models. He stated that “Nollywood auteurs can be categorized based on their ideological, dramatic and technical penchants”. He explained that “while the auteurial interest of Kelani is focused on ideological auteurship majorly because of his seeming obsession with the Yoruba cultural heritage, which he often portrays in his films”, Teco Benson’s films on the other hand propels dramatic content filled with high suspense motifs”. Finally, he noted that “Izu Ojukwu can be said to be obsessed with the visual language in his films and this situates him as a technical auteur-director” which is also the best description for Kunle Afolayan who is also a cinematographic mastermind. However, Nwafor (2013, p.43) believes that “a director is an auteur if he makes the final decisions on what is seen on the screen. He added that “the director’s dominance has been relatively accepted in different film production cultures all over the world” While this paper does not dispute this notion, it should be stressed that a film production involves an army of personnel, and it is rather the personality and the dominance of the director in the decision-making process that should characterise him as an auteur.

Kunle Afolayan is indeed a creative artist, with several films credited to his directorial expertise. Kunle Afolayan manifests in his directorial principles and techniques that he experiments in his filmmaking approach in diverse capacities. There is no doubt that his mastery of the art of filmmaking makes him an outstanding auteur.

Biography of Kunle Afolayan

Kunle Afolayan is an actor, movie producer and director. His contribution to the Nigerian movie industry has been exceptional. Currently, he is adjudged one of the best movie directors in Nigeria. Kunle Afolayan is the Founder/CEO of Kunle Afolayan Productions Television (KAPTV) and Golden Effects Pictures; he has been able to reach far and wide with his company and all thanks to his God-given talents and skills. Kunle Afolayan was born on the 30th of September 1974 into

the family of Mr. and Mrs. Adeyemi Josiah Afolayan (aka Ade Love) in Ebute-metta, Lagos State, Nigeria. His father Ade Love was a popular movie producer in the traveling theater of the 20th century. The family hails from Agbonda Igbomina Settlement, a Yoruba town in Kwara State, South-Western region of Nigeria. Kunle Afolayan also has well-known siblings like Moji Afolayan, Gabriel Afolayan and Aremu Afolayan who are also deeply into media content, acting, singing and so on.

Kunle Afolayan attended African Salem Primary School; Ebute Metta and his secondary school education at Denton Grammar School, Agbamu, Kwara State, Nigeria. He furthered his education to the University where he bagged his bachelor's degree in economics. After graduating from the University, Kunle Afolayan in 2005 enrolled for Digital filmmaking at the New York Film Academy in the United States of America. Kunle Afolayan after his education worked in the bank for a while and did some part-time acting before making up his mind to quit banking to debut in the movie industry. In 2011, he was selected to represent Nigeria at the Subversive Film Festival alongside Zeb Ejiro. Kunle has worked with prominent movie producers, directors, actors and actresses in Nigeria, the likes of Zeburudaya, Joke Silva, Wale Ojo, Ramsey Noah, Nse Ikpe Etim and many others.

It is important to note that one of the movies that projected Kunle Afolayan is his multi-million dollars *October 1*. Interestingly, the movie is the second highest-grossing Nigerian movie of all time, and this has boosted his career and making him one of the best movie producers in Nigeria till this present day. Kunle Afolayan has also produced many movies that recorded success; he is married to Tolu Afolayan and the marriage is blessed with 4 children. His Golden Effect Pictures is also a registered company, and they are known for unique scripts, content development, TV commercials and documentaries. The company also has a modern state-of-the-art studio used by various advertising agencies and independent producers.

Synopsis of October 1

October 1 is set at the threshold of Nigerian independence. Inspector Danladi Waziri is summoned by the District Officer Robert Winterbottom, who saddles him with the task of unraveling the mystery behind the murder of two women in Akote Town before the Independence Day. The inspector and his Assistant, Sergeant Sunday Afonja on many occasions reach dead ends even as the murder plague rises to five. It then dawns on them that they are dealing with a hardened serial

killer. During the events that follow, many innocent lives were lost; including a British-bound, Corporal Omolodun who eventually was killed by the serial killer during a trail-pursuit along the bush-path. Also, a suspect from the north who finds himself in the middle of the quagmire was also wrongly killed. All clues point to an unsuspected person; Prince Aderopo, Oba Akote's only son who during his final attempt to rape and kill the last victim Miss Bisi Tawa (a schoolteacher and former classmate) leaves tracks that reveal his potential hideout. In the process of trying to escape, he held Koya (a farmer and childhood friend) by the neck as a shield; but inspector Waziri was able to get a clear shot at his head after he refused to surrender.

Kunle Afolayan's Directorial Experimentation in *October 1*

Filmmaking is a collaborative effort of several artists and technical experts known as the creative team. Nevertheless, the production ideas remain the prerogative of the director, although the production template must be well communicated to everyone in the creative team to excite the uniqueness of the director. Consequently, this study examined the directorial and experimental ingenuity of Kunle Afolayan as the director of the film, *October 1* under the following hub areas.

- i. Experimentation in Camera Operations
- ii. Experimentation in Set Designs
- iii. Experimentation in Lighting
- iv. Experimentation in Props
- v. Experimentation in Costume and Make up

Experimentation in Camera Operations

Directors are often interested in how the audience feels watching a particular scene, possibly because different shots convey different tones in a scene, so emphasis is often placed in detail that aids specific narratives. *October 1* was shot using the RED EPIC. Though Afolayan's Director of Photography earlier suggested to the director that a camera with 35mm be used because of "the feel" but the director felt otherwise. Therefore, understanding the director's preference for the RED EPIC is very crucial to this study



Fig 1: The image of an Epic RED camera (Photo credit: Indiamart.com)

As regards Epic RED cameras, indiamart.com noted that “to shoot an IMAX blockbuster; an Epic RED will definitely fit every facet of the production because the camera is precisely engineered to exceed even the highest technological standards”. Furthermore indiamart.com noted that “with the DSMC (Digital Still and Motion Camera) type 2 and 3 upgraded functionality, one can capture a breadth of a video at once with any lens.

Also, the sophistication of the camera includes various in-built software like the RED Adobe Photoshop Installer and QuickTime proxy tabs that enable prompt shot editing. This means while film shooting is on, necessary shot adjustments can be made and shot errors can be minimized. The REDCine-X in-built software also aids the immediate conversion of recorded footage to other video formats. It is also important to note that cameras like this are not regular equipment that are often used in film locations in Nigeria. Therefore, the directorial experimentation of Kunle Afolayan in the film *October 1* begins with his choice of sophisticated camera equipment.

Sam (2001, p.19) on visual shots and compositions noted that “shots are best described by the distance of the lens to the subject, be it Close-up Shots, Medium Shots and Long shots. He also added that: “these three basic shots can be further declassified based on framing into ECU, MCU, MLS, and ELS”. In *October 1* the director used close up shots on several occasions to pick facial

reactions, uniquely not as cut-away shots like is commonly seen in most Nollywood films but as significant shots to the narrative.



Fig 2: A close-up shot of Miss Tawa blushing to a comment from Prince Aderopo at a local restaurant during a hangout with the Prince. The shot emphasizes a definite increase in the ISO to focus on Miss Tawa for quick grain filter and amplification during recording

Photo Credit: *October 1*

In the opening scene where Prince Aderopo sexually assaulted a young lady, a close-up shot was used to reveal the pain and tears of the victim. This kind of shot helps the audience to appreciate the mood value that the victim of the rape and sexual assault went through.



Fig 3: An image of the hand of Prince Aderopo pinning down a victim to rape her. The close-up shot also captures the tears and pain of the girl (Photo credit: *October 1*)

Nwanwene (2002, p.96) notes that long shot “is a camera shot from a great distance, usually showing the characters as very small in comparison to their surroundings.” Specifically, the director used LS in most parts of the movie to establish locales in the films such as market, church, forest etc.



Fig 4: A long shot of Inspector Waziri and Coporal Omolodun walking with their bicycles around the village during an on-going investigation. The long shot was used to establish how stressful village-policing can be (Photo Credit: *October 1*)

Furthermore, use of medium shot (MS) was also identified in the production. Sam (2001, p.20) noted that “the medium shot is a great way to capture both the details of an actor’s performance and their surroundings” He added that “a medium shot can frame up multiple actors at once and capture everything they are doing in the scene.



Fig 5: An image of a medium shot taken during the independence celebration scene.

The director focuses the shot on Sergeant Afonja and Inspector Waziri; perfectly framing other characters in the scene without capturing them subjectively. (Photo Credit: *October 1*)

The ingenuity of Kunle Afolayan in the production of *October 1* is justified by the sophistication and cinematic capacity of the Epic RED that was used to shoot the film. Emphasis here is not for shots-to-shots sake but on the creativity of the director to accurately utilize these various shots, angles, perspectives and framing to properly aid the film narrative.



Fig 6: An image of a motion shot. The director makes the camera to follow Prince Aderopo on the horse and simultaneously with the hawking girl. The director was able frame the prince's stare at the village girl. The shot was relevant in revealing how the killer (the Prince had been capturing her victims) (Photo Credit: *October 1*)

According to indiamart.com, the Epic RED has ‘a dovetail plate mounting including a 15mm baseplate enabling you to move your semi-auto gimbal and tripod’ This implies that the Epic RED is designed specifically to make spatial and non-spatial shots easy.

Experimentation in Set Designs

Cecil (2007, p.2) asserts that “the look and style of a film is created by the collaboration between the Director, Director of photography and the Production designer.” Cecil (2007, p2) also added that “the three parties are called the ‘**trinity**’; however, the Production designer and the Director of Photography have to create an atmosphere which the director can use to direct the cast”

Ajibade & Effiong (2014, p.17) explains that “a design is a carefully planned arrangement of all the materials and objects of set, props, costume, makeup, special effects and other visual elements that help realize a production.” Munari (2008, p.164) also added that “while the term “design” may refer to the contemplation of an item for production such as a prop or costume, it also refers to the arrangements of all the items produced or acquired in achieving the specific visual dimensions of the productions.”



Fig 7: An image from the scene of the visitation of Inspector Waziri to Agbekoya's farm. The set furnishes the viewer with the basic information about the Yoruba people in the Western Region of Nigeria as farmers of cocoa in large quantity for export. The cocoa tree at the background presents a realistic impression of a typical Yoruba Farm (Photo Credit: *October 1*)

As earlier said, the film *October 1* has an historical connectivity which the director was interested in its actual representation through the set designs in a realistic form



Fig 8: An image from the office scene of Officer Winterbottom which includes the picture frame of Queen Elizabeth II at the background as the symbol of authority then in Nigeria
Photo Credit: *October 1*



Fig 9: An image of a cut-away shot which includes an architectural building used in the then Lagos colony

Photo Credit: *October*

Experimentation in Lighting

Allyn (2001, p.1) assert that “lighting is fundamental to film because it creates a visual mood, atmosphere and sense of meaning for the audience”. If we consider what light is able to add to the spectator’s consciousness; we can deem lighting to be the first special effect in a production base on its ability to create a wide range of emotional state and a change in the message of a shot. In the film the director portrayed Prince Aderopo with a dark effect as a backdrop against his usual white suit using an enhanced contrasting effect to depict the fact that it was life situations that turned him to an evil person”



Fig 10: An image of Prince Aderopo with a dark shadow framing. The director made

him look more terrifying with a deem light effect (Photo Credit: *October 1*)

Normally in cinematographic lighting, the night scene is usually depicted with blue or purple hue. However, from the prologue the director instead used a dark crimson to represent the night hours for other narrative effects which include creating atmosphere of fear and horror.



Fig 11: An image from the prologue which includes a dark crimson shot which could be further interpreted as a warning sign of the impending doom that is to befall the villagers

Photo Credit: *October 1*

The lighting effect is also identified during the narration, using the technique of revealing the experience within the unfolding events. The Director used a sequence of black and white frames to bring in a series of flashback sequences. The major of such flashback was the inserted sequence of how Aderopo and Agbekoya were entrusted to a clergy man, Rev. Dowling.

Dowling rather than advance their educational standard, sexually abused the two boys and turns one of them into a vindictive serial killer and rapist.



Fig 12: An image of a black and white shot used as a flash back to narrate how Prince Aderopo ended up as a serial killer and a rapist (Photo Credit: *October 1*)

Experimentation in Props

Prop, which is a short word for “property” is an object that functions as parts of the set or as tools used by the actors to enhance the believability of the viewers. *October 1* is a narrative that is dated back to a particular period in the history of Nigeria. Even though the film narrative itself is fiction still the director made use of names of real people, locations and dates. Consequently, the director represented the facts as factual as possible using props.



Fig 13: The right-hand antiquated model of Volkswagen for example rightly reflects the type of Automobile in the 1960s (Photo Credit: *October 1*)

Other props in the movie which lends credence to the era portrayed include an old stopwatch, transistor radio, gramophone, land telephones, typewriter, paraffin lanterns, crucifix, whistle and local guns. Etc

Experimentation in Costume and Make up



Fig 14: An image from the scene of inspection of the Guard of Honor by Officer Winterbottom.

The police costumes are visual documentation of the colonial period in terms of the fashion style and clothing materials that was in vogue then including the long stockings

Photo Credit: *October 1*

It is imperative to state that the profile of a character is substantiated by the appropriate use of costumes. The Director ensured that all the characters were provided with relevant costumes. Sumonu, a character in the film also had to barb this hair in a way that really portrayed him as a palace guard. Miss Tawa's dress all through the film represents the style of garment that was in vogue for young ladies in the 60s while the three-piece white suit worn by the European characters stood them out as foreigners.

The historical outlook would not have been complete without the complimenting make-up. For example, the aesthetic effect of Sergeant Afonja and Agbekoya's tribal marks establishes the background of their characters. However, Miss Tawa and the fiancée of Corporal Omolodun had simple lipstick on a few occasions. The two ladies had makeups that made them look pretty which

also differentiates from other female characters in the film as they were the only educated ladies in the village with a good level of fashion modesty.

Findings

Kunle Afolayan's visual imagination is very crucial to his directorial experiments and his inventive directorial approach in *October 1* can be justified majorly from the dramatic expressions of the actors including balanced emotions, body and psychological gestures. Also, the incorporation of various shots composition, camera angles, props, contrast etc. all gave a remarkable dramatic rhythm to all the scenes. The most fascinating part of the movie was the prologue which the director was able to achieve in fast tempo needed for a sequence of action that a prologue demands; thereby creating an intriguing suspense on the viewers, which was established in the first rape scene. In that first sequence, viewers were treated to contradicting images of a frightened village lady running for her dear life and a male chaser corporately dressed. The sequence ends up with the revelation of an act of rape and a cold-blooded murder.

The framing of the shots in film were nothing less than an exceptional cinematographic ingenuity. Mainly, the director employed a unique approach in telling the story. For instance, the nature of a mystery plot is required by holding back certain pieces of information at the initial stage and then revealing these pieces of information at the later stages of the narrative. The deployment of this technique of storytelling in the movie is meant for the purpose of using suspension of disbelief thereby maintaining the suspense throughout the film.

Kunle Afolayan also maintains emphasis on aesthetics and his penchant for a unique film tradition has clearly driven him to understand all the relevant aspects of filmmaking including the infusion of his technical competence. In terms of his personality, as a director, Afolayan incorporates facts into fiction, and he is not scared of exploring new artistic patterns. He takes his time to understand the people he is making films for, and he readily experiments with the diverse tools of his actors. According to Afolayan in one of the documentaries on *October 1*, he noted that "care had to be taken during casting as it is one of the key areas that could make or break a film". The audition for the film's lead character of Dan Waziri posed a challenge because a Northerner is needed to play the role and Afolayan stated that there is a particular "look" that has been associated with people of the sixties. He also pointed out that he wanted an actor who could not only speak Hausa, but would represent the ethnic group

Finally, the interior meaning of *October 1* establishes Kunle Afolayan as an auteur director who is concerned about his audience when making his films. *October 1* has a brilliant, thought-provoking and timeless storyline that preaches the truth about our history, culture and ethnic diversity from an artistic point of view.

Conclusion

Kunle Afolayan is adequately informed on directorial principles and techniques. In this regard, he readily experiments with diverse cinematographic tools. Again, *October 1* tells the story of the night life experience of a community around the eve of Nigerian independence in 1960 and one of the major techniques of the director was to restrict the plot information and increase the suspense creatively with the cinematography. Also, Kunle Afolayan invested on quality research in the areas of costume and makeup, including the usage of historical props for the authentic representation of the film. Furthermore, the thrust of the film in terms of aesthetics and the historical leaning of the narrative were totally sustained with visual elements and appropriate set designs in all the scenes. Finally, it has been noted that Kunle Afolayan is one of the major figures in new Nollywood and he does not only produce but also direct his films with special skills.

Recommendations

Where challenges abound, gains are much more when surmounted. This was the case with the production of *October 1*. The efforts and directorial ingenuity of Kunle Afolayan made him a respectable film director in Africa. He did not limit himself to the conventional film making approaches in Nigeria and that stood him tall among his peers. Also, the popular Yoruba adage that says “a delicious soup is costly” implies that a good movie will require a lot of funding. As earlier said, the production of *October 1* was estimated to be over \$2 million. Therefore, the government must improve on its funding of film projects that are likely to improve our positive image to other nations and also promote our cultural heritage.

Finally, a movie that will go far in circulation and impact the society cannot be patched up. The culture of using standard and sophisticated cinematographic equipment must be well established. Film directors like Kunle Afolayan and those who aspire to be like him in directing must therefore continue to deploy all necessary expertise and involve filming mechanism in achieving a production that can be projected at major film festivals and cinemas globally.

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