

# THE SEMIOTICS OF LAUGHTER IN TWO NIGERIAN APOLITICAL MOVIE-COMEDIES

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the iconic, indexical and symbolic signs which provoke laughter in two Nigerian apolitical movie comedies, namely: “Nnaa Meen” and “Touch and Follow”. The tendency here is to attempt a poetics of this burgeoning genre of Nigerian movie-comedies. The term ‘apolitical’ suggests that these comedies are not political and do not evoke “contempt, indignation, or scorn” through deriding, but are “comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself” (Abrams 1981). We are confronted with a world of comedy which is a world of delight in variety; even its hardships are not lasting” (Bernet et al in *Types of Drama* 10).*

## INTRODUCTION

Comedy on the Nigerian screen is a flourishing art. It dominates the television entertainment broadcast in English and/or vernacular languages. For instance, in English Language medium alone, it manifests in the form of drama sketches and jokes performed and told as the case may be, by professional and amateur comedians in variety entertainment; it is evident in the frequency of one-hour, half-hour or less than half hour situation comedies which are sometimes farcical like *Jagua* series (starring James Afolabi Afolayan of blessed memory), *Baba Sala* show, *Aluwe* and *Papa Ajasco* series, or others which centre on ridiculous human traits or situations; it is also the form and style of many past and present soap operas on the Nigerian television screen like *Hotel De Jordan*, *The Masquerade*, *Icheoku*, *Basi and Company*, *Samanja*, *Family Circle*, *Everyday People*.

The broadcast of these screen comedies in the federal government controlled Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and state owned television stations across the country is a reliable hypothetical index of their popularity and wide acceptance by Nigerian telespectators.

The household names many of these comedians (in their screen names) have become and the tendency for children and some adults to mimic their antics or allude to them demonstrate, in the words of Jimmy Atte (Executive Director, News, Nigerian Television Authority), how the Nigerian television medium “has made tremendous impact on the society through lampoons, skits and slapsticks on [sic] ...television

comedies” (Timothy-Asobele 1993: vii). The employment of comic scripts and popular TV comedians by Advertising agencies for TV commercials and political campaigns can also be used to gauge the wide positive response of the Nigerian telespectators to screen comedies.

It is also obvious that part of the attraction of these comedies is their local sensibility and indigenously formal and stylistic overlay. For instance, the comic plot foregrounds an aspect of the Nigerian life or society, and dramatic action is advanced by recognizable antics or intrigue whose success or failure produces the desired artistic effect – hilarity; characters in spite of their exaggerated traits exhibit recognizable local nuances. The language medium is Nigerian Standard English or the pidgin (the corrupted form of English language in Nigeria which socially competes with Standard English) or vernacular or mixture of all or two of these linguistic types; any linguistic foregrounding (regular or irregular) helps to create a prominence of the mirthfully abnormal from the normal in the context of the recognizable Nigerian political or socio-cultural reality; the sets are also recognizably Nigerian.

These potentials of local TV comedies are being harnessed by the more recent Nigerian movies (especially known as Home Videos), and the result is an emerging type we have thus labelled ‘Movie-comedies’. This type has become so distinctive that the taste of Nigerian film consumers is divided along two major preferences: (i) the movie comedies; (ii) and the others (sentimental, adventure, detective, musical, classical). There are also ancillary comic performances christened *A Night of a Thousand Laughs* recently being packaged into home videos by some film producers, and which are also sometimes broadcast on Nigerian TV stations. These explore the form of TV variety entertainment shows of old. They are live performances on Nigerian stages which mainly feature professional comedians performing skits and telling jokes with music and dance as side attractions.

The movie-comedies however are a peculiar sort. They have no Western and Hollywood prototype in terms of the nature of comic plot, characterization and language. Only few of these have political undertones, a majority is apolitical. The political movie-comedies combining lampooning tendencies with farce overtly or covertly take a swipe at social injustice, the establishment, government agencies, the politicians or their

misdeameanour. The apolitical ones are highly farcical dramatizing exaggerated human foibles or follies, which provoke the telespectators or cinema audience to “hearty laughter” or “belly laughs” in the words of M.H. Abrams (1981). The laughter, true to Richard Boston (1977), “implies a withdrawal of sympathy from whatever is being laughed at”, because “the comic vision is destroyed the moment we feel sorry for the [comic protagonists]” (464-5).

The primary focus of this essay is the Nigerian apolitical comedies whose nature we subject to a form of semiotic study believing that the appeal of comedy is its nature – that which provokes laughter. This paper contends that there is a system of signification inherent in comedy “whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged” (Keir Elam 1990:1) and whose aesthetic end is laughter. This system of signification we have conveniently called the ‘semiotics of laughter’.

#### **ABOUT SEMIOTICS AND THE SCOPE OF USAGE**

The sign, according to K.M. Newton (1988), is the basis of semiotics, which can be understood as “any configuration to which there is a conventional response” (171). He adds that: Semiotics investigates the various systems of signs that create the shared meanings that constitute any culture (171). As a “systematic study of signs” (Eagleton 1983:100) which is “concerned with processes of signification and with those of communication” (Elam 1980:1), the aim of semiotics is “the better understanding of our own meaning – bearing behaviour” (Elam 1980:1).

Borrowing from Christian Metz’s distinction between film and cinema (Stam et al 1992:34) and Elam’s description of the theatrical performance text (1980:7), the cinema is a culturally coded ‘macro sign’ determined by the institutions of the cinema, conventions, genre, the film text including its inner contributory elements and the audience’s/consumers’ taste. All these determining elements are contributory signifiers which imbue the macro-sign with a meaning perceived or felt in the total artistic exchange, which is measured by the audience’s or consumer’s response. Semiotics therefore avails the cinema or the film text certain processes of signification in a larger communication process, like the two-way communication system of a language. The cinema becomes an audience-conditioned sign-giver while the audience is the receiver of the product measured by its response/reaction.

One of the significant ways Nigerian apolitical screen comedies (and indeed the cinema phenomenon) share kinship with a theatrical performance is in their aesthetic ends, which legitimize the two-way communication process between the work of art and its audience. Contrary to Metz's assertion (see Stam et al 1992:34), the cinema is a two-way communication signs system whether such communication is deferred or lacks the immediacy and spontaneity of the theatrical performance.

However, the semiotic approach in this paper adopted to explicate the signs which provoke laughter in the two comic movie texts – *Nnaa Meen* and *Touch and Follow* – is C.S. Pierce's theory of tripartite functions of signs, namely: the iconic, indexical and the symbolic. Peter Wollen asserts in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969), that, the cinema explores these three categories of sign-functions.

Stam et al (1992:5) explains the Piercean concept as we apply it in this paper. The iconic sign "represents its object by means of similarity or resemblance" and that "the relations between sign and interpretant [the object] is mainly one of likeness, as in the case of portraits, diagrams, statutes, and... onomatopoeic words". The indexical sign is "determined by its dynamic object by virtue of being in a real relation to it", this sign "involves a causal existential link between sign and interpretant as in the case ...of smoke signifying the existence of fire". The symbolic refers to the linguistic sign (words expressed as in speech or writing), which "represents objects only by linguistic convention". This writer is aware of Pierce's caution that the "three types of signs are not mutually exclusive", hence the need to "assume a certain relativity" (Stam et al 6).

The explication of the iconic, the indexical and the symbolic in the two comic movies, *Nnaa Meen* and *Touch and Follow*, is aimed at investigating the nature of Nigerian comedies which are apolitical and to link it to its primary aesthetic object – belly laughs with a quaint moral lesson.

### **SYNOPSIS OF THE SCREEN COMEDIES**

***Nnaa Meen*:** This is the story of three friends, Benji, a shop owner (played by John Okafor), Timothy a chemist (Okay Bakassi) and Onyenza - a jobless loafer (Kingsley Ogbonna). The desire to have a girlfriend/lover is their only aspiration but they are faced with certain handicaps. Benji (the central character) and Timothy are timid and lack the resourcefulness to achieve this aim. Onyenza, who is the most courageous, is poor; he

unluckily gets a female lover with a high taste and an insatiable appetite, so he goes borrowing from his two buoyant friends. Benji finds a lover at last after some bungled attempts by Timothy and himself. His girlfriend, Abigail (Queen Nwokoye), is a modest student with good manners, who does not want to have sex with him. Benji is advised by a student friend, Mammy (Kenneth Chukwu), to drug her in order to succeed. With the help of his chemist friend, Timothy, Abigail is drugged with an overdose of a strong mixture of sleeping drugs. Abigail drifts into deep slumber and Benji, obviously inexperienced, lacks the courage to have sex with her. Abigail's parents, who never like Benji and who have been looking for their daughter, are told they could find their daughter at Benji's place. They go to Benji's house with policemen and find their daughter in deep sleep. They suspect a foul game, and arrest Benji and his friends who are also present in the scene.

***Touch and Follow (TF)***: This is the story of Ojukwu (played by Victor Osuagwu) a mischievous, middle-aged pensioner who has returned to his village from the city with his family: a wife (Apolonia) and son (Chuka). He abandons his responsibility to his home and family and wastes the whole money his rich daughter in America sends to him for the upkeep of his family on young village girls with whom he has illicit love affairs. His escapades are: he tells these girls he is a rich man and can satisfy their needs, wears old, jumpy and tight-fitting suits, dyes his hair to look young, speaks in false foreign accent with a slightly conspicuous bad use of tenses, walks with a swagger. At home, there is an unending feud between him and his wife and son for not paying his son's school fees and ignoring other financial duties at home. Ojukwu has a friend, Ikemba (Larry Koldsweat), who is his partner and accomplice in the womanizing affair. Ikemba who is not as financially endowed as Ojukwu resorts to the use of a charmed ring called "Touch and Follow" (from which the comedy derives its title) to charm village girls to sleep with him.

Chuka (Ojukwu's son), his girlfriend (Ifeoma) and mother plot against Ojukwu. Ifeoma entices Ojukwu and pretends to be in love with him and gets huge sums of money from him, which she passes to Chuka. She denies Ojukwu sex and deceives him into financing and organizing their marriage ceremony only for her to replace the man for his son on the wedding day. Ojukwu collapses and is afflicted with a stroke. His friend,

Ikemba, is also afflicted with madness as his “touch and follow” charm fails him at last and boomerangs when he tries it on a Christian girl.

### **THE ICONIC, THE INDEXICAL AND THE SYMBOLIC IN *NNA MEEN* (NM) AND *TOUCH AND FOLLOW* (TF)**

Nigerian screen comedy is a signifying system. The genre of each screen play is a macro signifier, an overriding sign, which any other sign complements, qualifies or contrasts. The linguistic signs (or words) of the titles for instance symbolically enclose meaning in that they signal a comic overlay. The titles symbolically capture the content in a metonymic or metaphoric form and are the first signs to suggest what to expect.

True to what we affirmed earlier about Pierce’s claim, the tripartite signs are not mutually exclusive in screen drama. In fact, some of the signs perform two or all the three functions. The iconic, indexical and symbolic functions therefore are duties signs perform specifically and/or mutually.

Aristotelian six parts of drama can apply in any analysis of the structure of screen plays, and are potent signifiers in the entire dramatic signification. These six parts – plot, characterization, thought, diction, music (sound track in movies and characters’ songs), spectacle (in film, like montage, dissolves, shots, picturization, sets, props, costumes and make-up) - perform the iconic, the indexical and the symbolic functions specifically, and sometimes mutually. Superficially, characterization and spectacle belong to the iconic because both are photographic in the sense that they represent the images of the object of dramatic event; plot and thought are indexical because they help to create an existential or causal link between actions, ideas or objects in a dramatic (or mimetic) event; diction (verbal or written language) and music (songs, sound effects and sound track) are symbolic – with words, they label, describe, express, realise or represent metonymically and metaphorically the object of the dramatic event. We add here that, in film, sound effects and non-verbal language (like mime, gestures, facial expressions, etc) are part of a film’s spectacle, which perform both the iconic and symbolic functions.

In *Nna Meen* (NM) and *Touch and Follow* (TF), the object of dramatic event is comedy. Because the object of dramatic event is comedy, the six parts or elements of drama as in the two movie-comedies observably constitute comic signs in structure and nature. Everything on stage or on the screen – ranging from action, movement, gestures,

and facial expressions, speech, music, props and effects of all kinds are signs because they communicate and mean something individually and in relation to other signs. The comic signs constitute the semiotics of laughter. They define the nature of comedy and distinguish it from other genres.

Below is a tabular presentation of some of the prominent signifiers which foreground the nature of comedy in the two movie texts:

**A TABLE OF SOME ICONIC SIGNS IN**

***NNAA MEEN (NM) AND TOUCH AND FOLLOW (TF)***

**NM**

**TF**

ICONIC SIGNS	DESCRIPTION	LIKELY COMIC EFFECT ON THE AUDIENCE	ICONIC SIGNS	DESCRIPTION	LIKELY COMIC EFFECT ON THE AUDIENCE
<b>Major Characters</b>			<b>Major Characters</b>		
(1) Benji	Timid, uninformed and stupid	Amusement and unsympathetic	Ojukwu	Crafty, insensitive, greedy, belligerent and promiscuous	Contempt and amusement
Timothy	More informed than Benji, but as timid and stupid	Amusement and unsympathetic	Ikemba	Foolish, jealous and diabolical	Contempt and amusement
Onyenza	Courageous, outspoken but stupid and parasitic	Amusement and unsympathetic	Apolonia (Ojukwu's wife)	Unhappy and outspoken	Sympathetic
Abigail	Modest, innocent, unassuming but naïve	Indifferent but unsympathetic	Chuka (Ojukwu's son)	Unhappy, reticent and scheming	Sympathetic
			Ifeoma (Chuka's girlfriend)	Lively, seductive and scheming	Amusement
<b>Minor Characters</b>			<b>Minor Characters</b>		

Mammy	Informed, worldly and exploitative	Amusement	Native Doctor	Diabolical and fetish	Contempt
Papa Abigail	Arrogant, discriminatory and belligerent	Amused and unsympathetic	Papa Ifeoma	Patient and understanding	Indifferent
Mama Abigail	Modest and submissive	Indifferent	Mama Ifeoma	Patient and understanding	Indifferent
Policemen	Malleable, devious or tricky and brutish	Amusement and feeling of contempt	Other minor female characters	Greedy and sex objects of Ojukwu and Ikemba	Amusement

ICONIC SIGNS	DESCRIPTION	LIKELY COMIC EFFECT ON THE AUDIENCE	ICONIC SIGNS	DESCRIPTION	LIKELY COMIC EFFECT ON THE AUDIENCE
Other minor characters	Some exploitative, some are information channels, some are objects of ridicule and assist in ludicrous activities	Amusement	Christian girl	Humble, serious-minded and religious	Indifferent
Extras	Representational of society	Indifferent	Extras	Representational of society	Indifferent
<b>Spectacle</b>			<b>Spectacle</b>		

<p><b>1. Settings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The open field for keep fit exercises</li> <li>- The drinking bar and eatery scenes</li> <li>- The room scenes</li> <li>- The school scenes</li> <li>- The street scenes</li> </ul>	<p>Represent places of subterfuge, scheming and ludicrous actions which reveal especially failed wooing attempts, gullibility and greed of characters, pratfalls and physical horse play</p>	<p>Amusement</p>	<p><b>1. Settings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ojukwu's home</li> <li>- Papa Ifeoma's home</li> <li>- Fetish Shrines</li> <li>- Party hall</li> <li>- Street scenes</li> <li>- Marriage scene</li> </ul>	<p>Represent places of subterfuge, scheming and ludicrous actions which reveal the desperation, craftiness, insensitivity, stupidity, gullibility and greed of young ladies, and major characters also young as sex objects and other amorously humorous activities.</p>	<p>Mixture of amusement and contempt.</p>
<p>2. Sets and props</p>	<p>Denote themselves and attributes of places of ludicrous actions</p>	<p>Feel indifferent at some, laugh at the use of others.</p>	<p>Sets and Props</p>	<p>Denote themselves and are attributes of places of ludicrous actions</p>	<p>Amusement and contempt.</p>
<p>3. Costumes and Make-up</p>	<p>Though they do not foreground comic characterization, but simply denote ordinary everyday dress</p>	<p>Indifferent</p>	<p>Costumes and Make-up</p>	<p>Ojukwu's and Ikemba's costumes are significant. They foreground these characters as old-fashioned, crafty and foolish</p>	<p>Amusement</p>

**A TABLE OF SOME INDEXICAL SIGNS IN NM AND TF**

**NM**

**TF**

INDEXICAL SIGNS	DESCRIPTION	LIKELY COMIC EFFECT ON AUDIENCE	INDEXICAL SIGNS	DESCRIPTION	LIKELY COMIC EFFECT ON AUDIENCE
<b>Plot</b>			<b>Plot</b>		
1. Motive	The desire to have young ladies as lovers foreground the comic action, the timidity and stupidity of lead characters	Amusement	1. Motive	To replace his middle-aged wife with a far younger girl	Mild Contempt and amusement.
2. Action	Pursuance of goal – young ladies to love – exposing their timidity and stupidity of characters	Amusement	2. Action	Pursues this goal with available resources meant for the upkeep of his family	Mild Contempt and amusement.
3. Intrigue (pranks and lies intended to deceive)	Taking advantage of Abigail's innocence and naivety in order to have sex with her – foregrounds trouble and bad end for the trickster protagonists	Amusement and wishing the tricksters to fail.	3. Intrigue (pranks, schemes, lies)	Ojukwu is deceived into planning a big wedding with the girl whom he thinks loves him, but he is dumped for his son on the wedding ground. He is also tricked of his money by his son and girlfriend	Amusement and satisfaction
4. Contrast	Foregrounds the differences between the	Amusement	4. Contrast in Ojukwu's goal and age with	Ojukwu and Ikemba are sharp contrast in terms	Amusement

	timidity and stupidity of the lead characters and the worldliness and sociability of mammy; the differences between the worldliness of Onyenza's girlfriend, Benji and Timothy's two female acquaintances in the restaurant and the naivety and modesty of Abigail		Chuka's and Ifeoma's	of resourcefulness and endowments. Both are united by a common goal.	
5. Exaggeration of improbable events	Onyenza's girlfriend drinking six bottles of beer; Benji and Timothy's timid and stupid behaviour in their encounter with girls are overblown; a beautiful Nigerian under-graduate from a well to do home like Abigail dating the timid and illiterate Benji is highly improbable in the Nigerian context	No profound concern because dramatic action is highly exaggerated and improbable, they laugh it all away but may retain the lesson – 'timidity and naivety are bad'.	5. Exaggeration and improbable events	The ease with which Ojukwu succeeds with girls; the regular large sums of money sent by his rich daughter from America; the ease with which Ojukwu gives large sums of money to Ifeoma; an educated adult son like Chuka not knowing the address of his elder sister, are highly improbable and exaggerated	The exaggerated and improbable events are likely to make audience feel more amused and show mild contempt for the lead characters, Ojukwu and Ikemba and to expect a bad ending for them.
6. Poetic Justice	bad ending for the tricksters	Amusement and satisfaction	6 Poetic justice	Bad ending for the two mischievous	Amusement and satisfactions

				friends	
<b>Thought</b> (Theme/ subject matter) Human foibles: Timidity and naivety	The underlying principle behind dramatic action	Didactic and amusing	Thought (theme/subject matter): greed	The underlying dramatic principle influencing action, characterization and language	Amusement and satisfaction for the characters bad ending.

**A TABLE OF SOME PROMINENT SYMBOLIC SIGNS IN NM AND TF**

NM			TF		
SYMBOLIC SIGNS	DESCRIPTION	LIKELY COMIC EFFECT ON THE AUDIENCE	SYMBOLIC SIGNS	DESCRIPTION	LIKELY COMIC EFFECT ON THE AUDIENCE
Diction (Language)  1. Title  “Nnaa Meen”	Two stressed and wrongly linked vernacular and English words: ‘Nna’ and ‘Men’. ‘Nna’ means friend; ‘Men’ is an American slang for surprise. The combination of the two exclamatory words is not only a comic overlay. It also achieves a comic purpose. It is also a reminder of the idiosyncratic parlance common among the illiterate and semi-literate Ibo speaking people of Nigeria.	Laugh at the title which suggests the genre of movie	Diction (Language)  1. Title  “Touch and Follow”	The title alludes to Ikemba’s charmed ring for charming girls to his bed. It is also a metaphor for the exploits of both friends who always succeed in taking ladies to bed for sex – one with his daughter’s money, the other with charm. The title is captivating and suggestively comic	Amusement and curiosity.

	It's Benji's common parlance in the movie denoting his tribe and educational status				
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**NM**

**TF**

SYMBOLIC SIGNS	DESCRIPTION	LIKELY COMIC EFFECT ON THE AUDIENCE	SYMBOLIC SIGNS	DESCRIPTION	LIKELY COMIC EFFECT ON THE AUDIENCE
2. Verbal humour	Foregrounds tomfoolery, buffoonery and jokes	Amusement	2. Verbal humour	Foregrounds Ojukwu's greed and Ikemba's foolishness	Amusement
3. Appellations (or nicknaming)	Foregrounds verbal humour and comic action	Amusement	3. Appellations (Nicknaming)	Between Ojukwu and wife, this foregrounds loss of affection	Amusement
4. Distortion resulting in wrong use of words  i. "Do you have polythene bags so that I can cage this thing"  ii. "Who is the managing director of this	Foregrounds humour and clownish characters	Amusement	4. Distortion  - Ojukwu's wrong use of tenses and neologisms like : "Izu you are just smelling America"; "You see, you know you are real mugu... look, guy yoyo is not by age".	Foregrounds humour and clownish behaviour.	Amusement

university ?”					
5. Mixture of vernacular with English	Also foregrounds humour, clownish and dramatic action	Laughter	5 Mixture of vernacular with English	Foregrounds humour, and character’s tribal background	Amusement
6. Sound track – theme song also comic	Foregrounds dramatic action and characters’ antics	Amused	6. Sound track – theme song reveals the craftiness of Ojukwu and Ikemba’s foolish use of charms	Highlights characters’ pranks.	Amusement

The tables illustrate a superficial categorization and manifestation of the comic signs in specific iconic, indexical and symbolic functions in order to identify these signs in the comic superstructure and to validate their relevance. Otherwise the relationship and performance of signs in any dramatic and cinematic signifying systems is much more complex than what the tables have illustrated. Such study will only be devoted to a single text analysis; and it will require a much more detailed explication of signs performing much more than one iconic or indexical or symbolic function. If every idea, every object in the cinema is a sign like Tadeus kowzan (1968) has said of the theatre – “Everything is a sign in a theatrical presentation” (57) – the signs obey the rules of selection and combination in order to communicate and convey sense. The rules governing the selection and combination of comic signs in a stage or screen drama are determined by genre theory, culture, writer’s style, director’s and / or producer’s vision.

## CONCLUSION

The entire motive in this paper is to explain the nature of the art of comedy via a semiotic theoretical concept by focusing on the Nigerian screen and using a particular type of the movie genre as a case study. Semiotics is very relevant to such an enterprise because, according to Jonathan Culler (1988) “... the semiotic programme may be better expressed by the concepts of ‘sense’ and ‘making sense’ than by the concepts of

'meaning'" (175). Semiotics enterprise in this paper attempts a paradigm of signification to justify the nature of comedy through sense making.

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## FILMOGRAPHY

- Nnaa Meen*, 2004, a film directed and scripted by Andy Chukwu and produced by Chukwuka Emelionwu.
- Touch and Follow*, 2003, a film directed by Ndnbuisi Okoh, scripted and produced by Chuks Okpala.