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Visual Storytelling and Cultural Communication In the Use of Mise-En-Scène In Nollywood Films

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Abstract
This paper explores the idea of visual storytelling and cultural communication through the application of mise-en-scene in Nollywood films. It questions how filmmakers use mise-en-scene as aesthetics and visual components to convey meaning and improve viewers' interpretation by undertaking a critical examination of two movies, *Shanty Town* and *Idemili*, thus highlighting how Nollywood directors use mise-en-scene to convey cultural values, social commentary, and emotional appeals in movies. The paper emphasizes the urgency of communicative mise-en-scene in the dialect of Nollywood cinematography, showing how it establishes the specific aesthetic and narrative image in cinematic works. The theory of Semiotics by Ferdinand de Saussure is adopted as the tool of analysis in the interpretation of diverse meaning and cultural representations in the two films. Content analysis and comparative paradigm are deployed to discuss the aesthetics, visual, cultural and symbolic compositions used in both films. This helps to assess the narrative techniques and storytelling approaches of film-makers and their effects on the way the audience interprets it. It restates the importance of mise-en-scene in film production by indicating how it can be effectively used to convey ideas, feelings and cultural relativity to film viewers.
Keywords: Mise-en-scene, visual storytelling, cultural communication, Nollywood films.

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Introduction

Mise-en-scene is a critical aspect of film production that encapsulates the visual elements and design choices made to create a cohesive and captivating movie. It involves the arrangement of actors, sets, props, costume, lighting, sound and other elements to convey the intended mood, atmosphere and storytelling in the script. Whether the audience realize it or not, there are many elements that are infused in movies that help to guide a viewer's attention. The power of the scenic design often goes unrecognized as a key part of the storytelling in film production processes. The set design helps to sweep viewers into a different world on screen. In film, the art of scene arrangement and its elements come together to create unforgettable experiences. Robin Franson Pruter, a pop culture enthusiast having studied screenwriting in film writes in her article '*Writing about Film'* admonishes thus: "Remember that the important part of a mise-en-scene analysis is not just identifying the elements of the scene, but explaining the significance behind them" (6).

In such enchanting realm, each scene is meticulously crafted to transport the audience into a different time, place, or emotion. By carefully orchestrating the arrangement of scenes and harnessing the power of key elements such as lighting, set design, and sound, theatre artists strive to ignite the imagination and stir the deepest emotions within every spectator. It deals with appreciating, understanding and explaining film as a representative art form with various meanings and expressions. In essence, mise-en-scene can be described as an indispensable element or component of cinematic representation. It is the first step in understanding how films produce and reflect meaning. The director is the master of mise-en-scene; he bears the vision and plan it all out carefully. Every little visual detail in the frame has to be intentionally composed by the director to create certain feelings and determines how the audience understands what is happening. For example, a director may choose to film a happy scene outside on a bright sunny day to lift spirits, but films an argument between characters at night in a dark room with harsh shadows thus building tension and unease.

The setting directly influences the tone and emotion of a film. Costume and props also provide so much useful context. If a character wears fancy clothes from a certain time or period, viewers know something about their wealth or status. Then the presence of everyday props in the background, like newspapers or brand logos, subtly suggest important details without words. Mise-en-scene is so clever because so much storytelling happens without the characters ever speaking. It is done visually through the director's artistic choices. As explained by a Nigerian film director and writer, Amy Aniobi, mise-en-scene also deals with the composition of how a story can be told through visual elements. It is the ability of a director to tell a story with what can be seen and not what is said through character dialogue (5).

Based on these clarifications, this study addresses the following questions: How has Nollywood's visual style evolved over time, and what impact has this had on the industry's global recognition? In what ways do Nollywood films represent and express Nigerian culture and identity through mise-en-scène? What narrative techniques and storytelling strategies are employed in Nollywood films to engage audiences and convey cultural values?

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Synopsis of *Shantytown*

Shantytown is a movie directed by Dimeji Ajibola that tells the story of Scar, also known as King of Shantytown, a drug dealer and an owner of a prostitution house and his several associates and workers. The movie focuses on a police officer, Idong who disguises as her twin (Inem), who worked for Scar. It is through such disguise that Idong is bailed by Ene from the police station and taken to Shantytown (unknown to the workers) where she meets Shalewa, Mama T, and other men and women who work for Scar. Unfortunately, while she is in a club as Inem (prostituting for Scar) she attracts Chief Fernandez, a politician with an abnormal sexual preference who abuses her. As the movie unfolds, Scar is stuck between Chief Fernandez and Dame (two opponents and former lovers) as they both need his help politically. Double-crossing Chief Fernandez, Scar instructs Shalewa to pretend to fall in love with Femi Fernandez, Chief Fernandez's son, in order to gain her freedom. Idong on the other hand continues giving out information about Scar and his actions to her fellow officers. Ene later discovers that Idong has been pretending all the while and after questioning her and some truths are told, the women plan to outsmart Scar and leave the town.

Synopsis of *Idemili*

The film *Idemili* tells the story of Ekema, a woman from the lineage of Osimili, who is an offspring of Idemili, who is set to marry a Prince. In the process of her marriage with the Prince during a virginity testing ritual, something occurred which eventually reveals that Ekema comes from a lineage of powerful priestesses. This incident and the series of dreams she keeps having, lead her to question her real identity and background. With the help of a letter passed down to her by her mother through Kamsiyo (the son of Ekema's nanny) she mets with an aunt that directs them (Ekema and Kamsiyo) to the people who can provide answers her questions. Meanwhile the Prince (Afam) with the help of his mother is set to marry another woman (the Princess of Ohamba) who failed the virginity test but the queen manipulated everything causing him to choose the other woman instead of Ekema. The result is that the Prince lost his manhood and is given fourteen days to get to Ekema who is the great Priestesses of Idemili (the river goddess) to forgive him or he shall die. The Prince embarked on the journey with his new wife and a very dangerous priest who is also helping the Queen in her quest to kill the King and make her son the new King. Eventually the Prince catches up with Ekema, the dangerous priest kills Kamsiyo. This provokes Ekema to kill the priest and the Prince runs back to the palace leaving his wife behind. Ekema revives Kamsiyo who later tried to stop her from becoming the Priestess of Idemili because of his love for her and the fact that a priestess of Idemili would never get married but can give birth to a child. Having completed her task and ritual as the Priestess by blessing the nine (9) villages the made-up Ama-itenani, Ekema discovers that Kamsiyo has given his life in exchange for her freedom. She is free to get married and leave her life the way she likes. Meanwhile back in the palace, the Queen is exposed and it is discovered that Afam is not the biological son of the King. With this, the price Ekema and Kamsiyo paid in exchange for their marriage is the promise that their daughter would become the Priestess of Idemili while Afam and his mother are chased out from the palace.

Visual Storytelling, Cultural Expression and the Use of Mise-en-scene in both Films

The use of mise-en-scene has a serious effect on the understanding of the two films. Although this research makes use of specific scenes, Mise-en-scene can be extended to the whole films rather than a selection of scenes in order to create an ecstatic feeling from start to finish. In the words of Gibbs John, "Mise-en-scene involves a combination of what the audience views on screen as it is and the way they are invited to view it." (5). In the same vein, Emeka

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Aniago opines that watching a film with proper composition of mise-en-scene messages activates the imagination, ideologies and inclinations of the viewers (2). In the same view Emmanuel Iyang (2017) and Nancy Udoakah (2000) submit that, Nollywood filmmakers often explore the post-production process of editing to create effects that communicate beyond the actions of actors and other elements of film making. These aesthetic elements aid the viewer in sharing meaning from a movie as intended by the producer. The process of evaluating how aesthetic elements is employed in movies can be viewed as reading a movie; it requires looking at the movie in detail to see how it is put together. (Inyang 295-296). Generally, mise-en-scene is deeply rooted communication that goes beyond spoken words, it is the understanding of a movie through make-up, costume, props arrangement, locations, set designs, body language, facial expression, gestures, lighting, camera angles, colour and other elements that are not words.

Shanty Town is one of the most talked about Nollywood films in the year 2023 because of the striking storyline that is peculiar in some Nigerian societies where evils are carried out without any form of sanction due to the involvement of the "high and mighty". It is within this premise that this research analyses such situations through the analysis of the use of communicative mise-en-scene in the film *Shanty Town.* Mise-en-scene is constructed with different elements. These elements are setting and props, costume and makeup, the position of the characters or objects within the frame, facial expression and body language and lastly the lighting and the colour. These elements basically aided the construction of meaning in any film.

Setting is the first element in any film analysis when it comes to the understanding of mise-en-scène. It creates a mental picture of location in the mid of the audience or viewer thereby enhancing the story telling processes. For example, an audience or a viewer would consider the interior of a character's bedroom in one scene, rather than a broad setting for an entire film. The setting also includes any props or the set designs visible on-screen.



Fig. 1: Scar in his office S1E1 29:9

In the film, Scar is the male Antagonist, a ruthless leader, who handles several shady deals. Also, he is regarded as the king of a community called Shantytown. Taking a close look at his office, we observe the set props like the frame on the wall with a skull, the vintage wallpaper,

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the dusty centre rug, the lamps and set lights, wooden table, shisha pot, calculator, the long gun on the wall, these set is a typical representation of a Ghetto Drug Lord. The office gives a serious and tense mood, a "don't play around" mood, giving this sense of illegality. The set and props used have a specific theme to convey and will make the viewers indulge in deep thoughts to develop interpretations. The office does not look flashy; it has a broken ceiling which gives it the picture of a trench. The audience can understand that the owner of the office is not interested in having a beautiful office. It also shows the owner of the office as one who is into illegal activities and possesses the qualities of a drug kingpin. With Scar walking across the centre table with a cigarette in his mouth further establishes this concept of underground dealings. As earlier stated, set can be shot indoors or outdoors, the above analysis shows an indoor set design. An outdoor set design is filmed to establish a sense of location, for example in *Shanty Town's* Prostitution House, the Designer used paintings to depict the kind of activities that goes on in the building. This is illustrated in the picture below:



Fig 2: Sex workers sitting and applying cosmetics outside S1E5 19:53

Also, settings can be used in a variety of symbolic and figurative ways. They can act as an indication of a character's personality. Fig 2's set design shows who the characters in the frame are. There is a painting of a girl smoking with her breasts slightly exposed around the chest that tells us the girls in the frame have a common personality (prostitutes or drug addicts). It also shows the world of the characters, since the earliest days of motion pictures, setting the scene has been crucial for creating worlds. Half of the battle of creating the World of the film can be won by giving attention to the setting.

Similarly, a character's costume says a lot about the world they inhabit, who they are in a society, occupation and statues as well as their emotions and beliefs. Fig 2 shows the characters in skimpy outfits, coloured wigs and heels. This further establishes who they are and what their occupations are in the movie. Hair and makeup are the physical elements that help the actors transform into their characters. The hair and makeup styles can help establish an era or age, reveal a character's traits, and support the audience in understanding a character in the case of double-characterization. A significant example is when Inem switch's role to impersonate her Twin sister in *Shanty Town*, her hair style is changed from a wig to a gold tinted low cut to disguise as her twin sister.

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Fig. 3 Mummy Tornado (Mama T) S1E1 29:54

Costume and make-up are applied to boost the appearances of the character. In many cases, students do not even think about the significant role of costume and makeup in film, as they appear so natural in the film set. Nonetheless, filmmakers are highly specific to the costumes and make-up of the character since they can influence the audience to think in a particular way about a character. Fig.3 Mama T, as a Fetish woman who works for Scar and is responsible for initiating the girls into the ring and spiritually fortifying the Gang. She is abnormally dressed and looks diabolical. From the choice of hair and makeup it is evident that she communes with the spirits.

An actor or actress can make or ruin a movie by the acting skills or techniques of how interesting the story is or how well the post production work has been done. It is the responsibility of the actor to make his/her character to come alive in the context of the story and ensure his emotional contribution which determines how much the audience will be attached to the movie. Mise-en-scene is givien life by actors. They are the people who act as described in the script, and their acting is necessary in creating the visual representation of the film. The art of acting relies on gesture and movement, expression and voice. Below is an illustration:

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Fig. 4 Chief Fernandez after he receives a call that his son had been kidnapped. S1E6 15:13

Fig. 4 clearly shows Chief Fernandez's reaction upon receiving the news of his son's kidnap. The kidnappers are requesting for his presence or else his son will be killed. His reaction is not exaggerated; he still maintains his calm nature but is deeply disturbed by the news and he stares sternly ahead. The actor's emotional situation is expressed through words and actions thereby projecting the substance of the scene to the audience or viewers. Basically, he /she has to be that character to the extent that they are no longer identifiable. On the other hand, non-method or stylized acting is based on a more obtrusive manner to communicate the point of the director. Actors do tend to go over the top and exaggerate some traits by dramatizing or undercutting in an effort to achieve a specific effect.

Lighting as a communicative mise-en-scene is another factor that provides illumination, highlight or contrast. It tends to bring out certain aspects regarding a scene, object or actor. This helps to leave the audience with something to pay attention to, something to memorize. This is the reason why light, be it a spot-light or a lamp, is so important in filmmaking. The picture below exemplifies this:



Fig.5 Scar captured by Dame Damola S1E3 06:45

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Fig.5 above shows the use of lighting to establish focus on actors. In this scene, the director uses an overhead lamp above Dame Damola to illuminate and set her out of the dark background, same as Scar who she is talking to. In the pictorial excerpt above, lighting is used to let the actors see each other. Again, the actor's movement and positioning which implies where and how an actor is placed in a scene communicates relationships and power dynamics beyond spoken words. Fig. 5 shows the position of Scar who is in captivity and a bodyguard at the back in case of any smart move. The frame tells the audience that the bodyguard works for Damola and Scar is in custody.

The director artistically and creatively employs several elements of Mise-en-scene in *Shanty Town.* Another incredible mise-en-scene application in the movie is the choice of location. The location of the movie gives a mental picture that communicates to a viewer instantly. The director takes the viewers to a Ghetto setting in Lagos Nigeria, exploring the people, some daily activities, and their way of life. The film begins with a small boy hanging onto a moving bus and taking off a wig of a girl as he passes her. These activities already help the viewers relate to the environment of the film therefore positioning their minds for what comes next.

In *Idemili,* the importance of setting in epic cinema is made manifest as it helps to usher in the other elements explored in the production processes of the epic movie. The setting of *Idemili,* is an ancient village in the Igbo area of south east Nigeria. The film begins with Ekema running in the forest. Most of the scenes in the movie are shot in the forest. This brings the mood of the audience to a village setting. Setting in most epic movies are filmed on-location just like the picture below illustrates:



Fig.6 Ekema people and the Priest of Oshimili. Season 2 36:22.

Colour is an integral part of mise-en-scene that relates to semiotics, many films use colours to convey mood or information that is never externalised through acting or dialogue. Colours do not have stable meanings but they do have wide-spread associations. The next image shows how flashbacks are filmed with the use of colour to take the viewers back to a certain time years ago. The director uses coloured shots in present times and then uses a slightly black and white colour to show the priest's flashback.

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Fig. 7 Flashback of the priest of Oshimili. Season 3, 55:43.

As earlier mentioned, many Nollywood movies of earlier times had no cues of Mise-en-scene. Most epic movies of Nollywood have poor application of communicative mise-en-scene. Seeing such captured moments like those the one in Fig 6, may not relate to the current mood or messages in the scenes. One can only describe the setting as a village with the elders standing for what looks like a ritualistic activity. The position of the actors is not clearly defined and the activities therein are ambiguous.

Comparative Analysis of Visual Storytelling and Cultural Expressions (mise-en-scene) in *Shanty Town* and *Idemili*

Epic films draw its raw materials from historical or mythical events, followed by elaborate setting and expensive costumes, plus an expansive musical score with a star-studded cast, which make them among the most expensive of films to produce. In spite of these factors, it is also important to highlight that little or no attention is given to Mise-en-scene in epic movies and actors are burdened with the need to intensify their performances in order to pass a message to their viewers. Some key challenges include carefully designing sets, props, costumes and lighting plots that realistically portray the time period and location while also serving the narrative and themes efficiently within physical production constraints. Additionally, blocking and choreographing actor movements provocatively yet practically is a delicate balance. Directors also consider how mise-en-scène directs audience focus and manipulates their emotional experience without being overly obvious or intrusive. While mise-en-scène techniques have been developed and refined over the decades, new productions still face challenges navigating these visual storytelling issues. Given mise-en-scène's vital role and multifaceted nature, further research studying specific techniques across different productions could provide broader insight and guide best practices. Examining real world case studies may help elucidate the intricacies of utilizing mise-en-scène strategically and strengthening its subtle power in theatre. Editing is also used to exaggerate performance in epic films especially when the story involves Magical Realism. Idemili is embedded with lots of editing to help achieve the magical realistic action. Fig.6 shows Ekema running, there is so much dust around her to emphasise that she is not a normal person and it is a spiritual race. In season 1, Ekema is running and there are splashes of water around her feet. This semiotically connotes that she is a river goddess. Fig. 8 below showsa python swimming out

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of the river and coming close to Ekema. Lighting in *Idemili* is poorly designedas epic films do not use lighting to aid actors understanding but makes use of general set lighting basically for character illumination.



Fig.8 Ekema and the python at the River for Fortification demanding the soul of Kamsi Season 3. 1:47:11

Unlike *Shanty Town* where lighting helps to convey mood, makes shots look natural and realisticin Fig. 9 below, the light designer used a soft light to give a reflection from a window, thus lighting one side of the characters that is closer to a window. With this, viewers can assume that this action takes place close to a window.

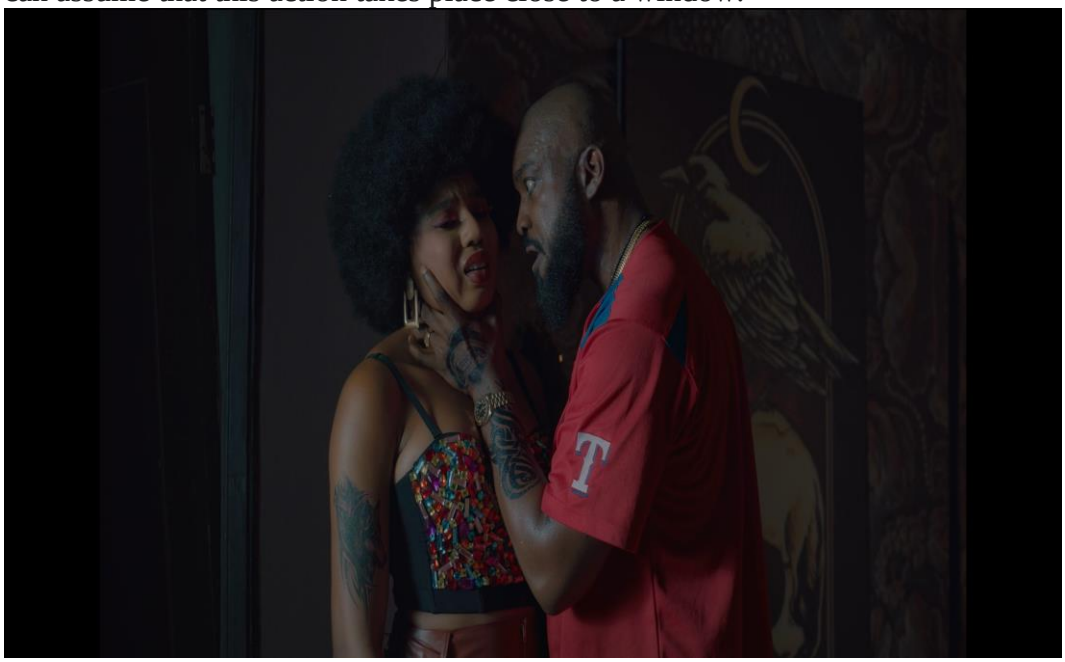


Fig.9 Scar threatening to kill Shalewa if she leaves Shanty Town S1E1 28:28

It is important to note that Nollywood directors often consider African culture first in location and setting and bring other elements to match these two This research therefore, emphasizes the role of mise-en-scene elements like setting, lighting, space, costumes and acting, in understanding the mood and meaning of the film. The study discusses how these elements are

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used in the Nollywood films *Shanty Town* and *Idemili* to analyse the role of interpretation in effectively narrating a film. It also highlights the shortcomings in the execution of Mise-en-scene in Nollywood especially epic films.

Conclusion

Mise-en-scene is to the film makers what formula is to mathematicians and hypothesis is to scientists. From choosing a befitting location which is dependent on whether the movie is an epic or contemporary movie to sourcing adequate costumes to carry messages to the mind of the viewers as well as placing various props for emphasis some elements of mise-en-scene are indispensable in telling a story and expressing culture while others serve as embellishments or ornaments. But the combination of all these mise-en-scene elements enhance storytelling and keep the mind of the viewer focused on at least one aspect of the movie. It may be the props, costume, makeup, lighting, actor's position, camera angle and others. One of these elements often captures the attention of the viewer in line with the intention of the filmmaker. This study acknowledges that understanding the place of mise-en-scene is not easy for most filmmakers in Nigeria due to lack of professionalism in the profession. Many filmmakers lack basic knowledge of film production processes; they approach the profession from a money-making venture. This is because filmmaking is one of the most lucrative ventures in Nigeria in recent times. The study concludes that it is possible to construct meanings by interpreting mise-en-scene elements. These aspects in film could be carefully observed and studied to get a very enriched movie-watching experience. Mise-en-scene gives out concealed muted thoughts together with the dialogue and the plot on a different plane.

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