NARRATIVE COMMUNICATION IN CAMEROON FILMS: A CASE STUDY OF NEBA LAWRENCE'S JUNGLE OF HEIRS

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of narratives in Cameroon films, using the case of *Jungle of Heirs* by Neba Lawrence. The film here is seen as a communicative act in which the filmmaker takes the position of the emitter and the audience that of the receiver. The exposure of the narrative in Cameroon films, the use of narrative elements and the uniqueness of the narrative are explored through a narratological and semiotics lens. From the analyses, it is portrayed that Cameroon films are rich in narrative and have a great respect for the elements that build up good narratives. Costumes, sound, dialogues, mise-en-scène and characterisation are proven to be the major communicative elements that bring out the uniqueness of the narrative in Cameroon films thereby enabling the meaning-making process to be accessible to receivers.

Keywords: Film, narrative, semiotics, communication, meaning-making.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, works of art communicate vital and important aspects of the areas from which they emanate. Be it paintings, sculpture, theatre, drawings, music or film, there is always an element of it that will identify it and link it to a particular place, being its origin. With each form of art as well, there is an aspect which allows for a smooth and undisturbed consumption of the art work by its consumers. Films, through their form and content entertain, educate and inform its viewers. The narrative of a film which is seen in both its form and its content is one of those vital elements which aid the consumption process.

If, as an audience, you were to pick up a movie with a concealed title and start watching it, it will only take a few minutes to make near-perfect guesses on its origin or the cultural background from which it is emanating. One thing that enables you to make out this identity is the narrative. A Bollywood film will differ in form and content from a Hollywood film and the narrative in a Ghanaian movie will differ from one in a Nigerian movie, despite the fact that they are all West African countries and have quite a great deal in common. This comparison can become difficult to state between Nollywood films and Cameroon films of English expression because of the near copy-and-paste tendency which many Cameroonian filmmakers adopt. The narrative in films is an area of interest to film scholars because with the help of the narrative it is easy to identify whether the film tells a story of its origin.

Cameroon was one of the first African countries to engage in movie production. The sector gained much attention although the country gained independence from its colonial masters Britain and France a few years ago. Despite this long history of involvement in film, several questions have popped up on reasons why the industry failed to hit the international scene or for Cameroonian films to appeal to the average Cameroonian audience as much as foreign films did. One of the reasons for such a situation may be because the narrative in the films does not go down too well with the expected domestic audience (COOK, 1981).

A bad narrative is the most discouraging element of any film. And a bad film only takes one viewer's comment to discourage a whole community of film lovers concerning it. What then is the reason why in Cameroon, you would not find in every home a Cameroonian film? This research among the many things that may play down on a given genre of film or on films from a particular industry has picked out the element of the narrative. With these, it is working with Neba Lawrence's '*Jungle of Heirs*' as a representative unit of Cameroon films through which an analysis is made of the narrative.

From the inception of motion pictures, the primary objective has been to tell stories through a visual means. Prior, even to the telling of stories through the use of visual abilities at the disposal of the storyteller, a keen look into every society, culture or race will have a rich background of myths, folktales, sacred legends and riddles. Storytelling therefore can be considered as part of the maturation processes of humanity which characterise our everyday lives. In conversations, at work with friends and family and even during leisure moments, our activities go along with one form of stories or another. The way subject, method and organisation of the information that come together to build up what we will regard as our stories has from the 20th century come to be baptised with a name, narrative, to which anyone in the world of storytelling will not fail to accord it with the importance it deserves.

Like every other field of life which asks for curiosity and concern, narratives have come to have rules, spices and basic dictates that characterise them. In order to understand what the narrative of any movie is, an in-depth analysis needs to be done and only a few researchers are ready to do so. This may sound disconcerting to the ordinary viewer because unlike in the past when theorists and film viewers took off time to do what originally was meant to be film analysis, everyone sitting in front of the screen today thinks and feels as though their impressions had become the best critique for the movie they have just watched and with the openendedness of the internet, all gets worse. Right ups surface on a daily basis on one film or another and all are captioned as 'An Analysis'.

The first impressions you get when you watch a movie or film, after checking out the level of comfort you felt by watching it, is that there will be issues you will have with either how bad the acting went or how poor the production of the movie was. Consciously or unconsciously, the greatest part of our problems with movies after watching them lie in the narrative. This paper analyses the narrative in Neba Lawrence's 'Jungle of Heirs' in order to bring out its particularities or intricacies which serve as a backbone to the understanding of narratives in Cameroon films.

2. FILM NARRATIVE

Using the words of Toolan and Amerian & Jofi, a narrative represents a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events, typically involving, as the experiencing agonist, humans and quasi-humans, or sentient beings, from whose experience we humans can learn (TOOLAN, 2001; AMERIAN & JOFI, 2015). Contextualising narrative to film, the *Critical Dictionary of Film and Television Theory* defines a narrative as "a filmic representation, using both pictures and words, of a series of events, such as those making up the life story of a biographical subject".

A film narrative is defined by the story arc, plot, popular formulae and dialogue. The threeact structure for instance, had for sometimes been the universal measuring rod for the structure of films (PEARSON & PHILIP 2000). This was an inherited structure from theatre and contemporary filmmakers manifested a rebellion against this with zeal to tell stories in ways other than what was hitherto seen as a standard. Most often than not, an audience can have the feeling of watching a very long scene. This is as a result of the act being too long and boring or better still, that the previous acts were short and abrupt. Filmmakers are therefore expected to equilibrate their acts so as to have a first, second and a third part. The first, commonly referred to as the beginning, is the exposition. The second, the main telling of the story, often referred to in modern times as a rising action extending to the climax and the third, being the falling action to the resolution which on the conventional arc is the conclusion. With all three parts, properly timed and fed in with appropriate information relating to the story being told, much junk is not left to be condemned about the film.

The plot, considered to be the heart of every narrative is one of the most important parts of filmmaking to take into consideration. It is the crux of the story, the intrigue, its twists and turns and how it gets woven. If these components of the plot don't flow well and feed the viewer with sensation, a catharsis may never be achieved, and the film immediately gets graded as failure. If a viewer cannot find himself or herself identifying with the world of the film he or she is watching, or is visibly getting confused by the story, the problem is most certainly not with the viewer but the plot. There is a good point in making a film's plot very simple as it is the case with comedies. It makes the story easily digestible and the narrative of the film too vacant. On the other hand, an overcomplicated story line or plot spoils the sauce as well with the infliction of confusion on the viewer and most of the time, it results in the rushing of the last act (the conclusion) in order to end the unending twists. When we watch films today, we are tempted to go with the impression that filmmakers have run out of stories to tell since a wide range of films tend to tell almost the same story: Love, Rescue, Gangster, Politics, Feminism and a few other themes. There are actually not many subjects on which to produce films, but many ways of telling the same story and only when a story is well told, shall it stand out as unique from the others that share its characteristic theme. Therefore, when we watch and do an analysis of a film's narrative, we ask ourselves questions about the plot, such as: Is the plot working? Has this plot been used and used better before? What makes this one unique from the lot? Or is it original in itself?

Dialogue is another element upon which a narrative can base. It is worth noting that there is no dialogue so bad that it cannot be fixed. Even when a script with the worse dialogue ever hits the hands and ears of a good director, it can always be improved. This nonetheless, is not a green light for script/screenplay writers to write poor dialogues which can later be fixed by the director. It is therefore important that when doing an analysis of a film's narrative, and considering its dialogue, some questions should pop-up on our minds: How bad, good or awful is the dialogue? Why our choice of grading? Was it too stylish or did the actors fail in delivering it properly? And did the director misread the scenes with improper dialogue?

The terms narrative and storytelling may not be synonymous, but having so much closeness in meaning, they is considered in this study as synonymous. If we go by the assumption that the narrative or story in a film can contribute to its being spread, then, there is reason to be worried about the narrative or stories and storytelling techniques used in Cameroon films. We should expect every household to chant the names of Cameroonian actors and actresses and children to recite excerpts from Cameroon films in schools or gatherings, but that is far from happening. Rather, children and families invest their time or leisure in discussing foreign movies. Whether we love it or not, the narrative in Cameroon films contributed a great deal to this situation. If filmmakers could take out time to work on the narratives in the films they make, there would likely be a change. This research work, which at the moment limits itself to engaging viewers into the process, does well to explore the narrative of films. Out of the lot of films produced by Cameroonians, many of which the ordinary Cameroonian does not even know anything about, this study focuses on one Jungle of Heirs', a 2013 film produced by Neba Lawrence.

3. PRESENTATION OF CORPUS

When a ruler has enormous wealth and a good intention of taking the best to the doorsteps of his inhabitants, the community becomes loyal and loving towards the palace, but not everyone loves peace and progress which will not result in their personal gains. Such dislike and greed become worse when it emanates from within the house. The king of the Bayang kingdom, a kindhearted and loving man who is interested in the development of his village, sacrifices much for his community, but some people who are interested in his wealth are bent on bringing him down. Surprisingly, the one who is planning his downfall is right under his nose - his second wife, whom he married after the death of the first. The Queen (Janet) sees her stepson and stepdaughter as stumbling blocks to her enjoying the wealth of the King to full potential. She decides to pull the king away from royalty, where he sacrifices a lot, as a successful millionaire, for his people in order for his wealth to be tilted more to his household where it will be easier for her to manipulate. She does this with the help of hired thugs who derail her husband and lure him into abdicating the Bayang throne. She also succeeds in schooling her own children, whom the king is doing all within his power to educate, guide and motivate towards

the attainment of a fulfilled life, to take sides with her against their father. After a number of drastic decisions with a series of abnormal behaviours in his house, and having the sight of an impending danger, the king moves to Nigeria to bring back his eldest son (Maxwell) in order to come and start acquainting himself with the affairs of his investments so as to be able to run them well in his absence. A calculated conspiracy amongst the Barrister (Julia), Dr. Oben and Janet, with the complicity of an assassin result in the death of the king and the burial ceremony which is being rushed by the conspiring three is objected by princess Felicity who ends up in the hospital, due to an attack from the same strange man who killed the king. The burial is yet halted by Maxwell who arrives in time from Nigeria to put a stop to the rushed burial. A string of stories and revelations lead to Maxwell's pulling of a frustrated and disappointed Janet to court and her later arrest and detention. This is the happening of events in Jungle of Heirs.

4. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As mentioned earlier, two main theories are used to analyse the narratives in this paper. Considering that the focus of the paper is on narratives, it is natural for this section to start with a brief view of narratology and semiotics before looking at its application on the texts proper.

Narratology puts the literary pieces of language under investigation and yields an understanding of the components that make up the language. Some authors offered various views as to what it is all about, but for every view point, interest is on what makes up a narrative and how they express aspects of commonality and difference. Prince defines narratology as "the study of the form and functioning of narrative" and Huhn holds that it is a "humanities discipline" which is dedicated to "the study of the logic, principles and practices of narrative representation" (PRINCE, 1982; HUHN, 2009). Whether a theory or a discipline, narratology is interested in not only the story or the narrative, but in the components of the narrative and how they weave together

to put forth a complete structure. In narratology, a narrative is analysed from the viewpoint of its constituent components. Jahn suggests three broad categories of narrative components (JAHN, 2005). The first of them comprises of the narration, (which is the voice) focalisation which deals with the mood and the narrative situation. The second is made up of the action, the analysis of the story and its tellability and the third category is about the tense, time and the narrative mood. Narratology therefore focuses on the exploitation of these elements within a narrative and how these elements blend in to put out a complete story or narrative. These elements are called signs which themselves, fall under the considerations of semiotics (HUHN et al., 2019).

For Pierce, there are multiple types of signs classified in three categories: the icon which is similar to what it signifies; the index which is affected by what it represents and the symbol, a sign that is connected to what it signifies by a law or convention. In this light, Pierce defines a sign as something which stands for something and does not have a definite meaning, since the meaning must be continuously qualified (PEIRCE, 1955).

The basic tenet of semiotics is that a sign has two parts: the physical or the sign as object, and the psychological or the sign as concept. Filmmakers show and we understand visual signs such as smiles, scars, guns, badges, hairstyle etc. These signs join together to make up a film narrative. Applied to film, these signs and codes are like grammar to a language (auditory signs) and are used to construct meaning in a process of co-construction of meaning according Helbo (HELBO, 1981). In this way, semiotics compliments narratology in facilitating understanding.

5. NARRATIVE ELEMENTS IN JUNGLE OF HEIRS

After watching a movie the viewer firstly develops interest in the story's characters and their motives. Then at every instance, he/she begins to imagine the next plot twist. The much difficult part is when the viewer wants to analyse the narrative in the text, because it involves the examination of elements of narrative and how they collectively develop meaning. In this discussion of narrative elements in our corpus, focus is on the plot, character journeys, language – figurative speaking, time and place setting, theme development and shots.

Plot

A plot is said to be the way in which a writer develops a series of events in a text. It is a series of events put together by the author to create a story. In a plot, the exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution are key moments. Neba Lawrence in Jungle of Heirs uses the first fourteen minutes of the film for the exposition wherein all major characters are introduced. From the eleventh minute, in the scene at Oben's house where Janet engages him in a dialogue, viewers begin to experience a rise in the action of the movie with the presentation of the problem. Janet's objectives are exposed here, and it is around her selfish ambition that everything in the narrative is centred. Through several twists and turns, but not derailing from the storyline, we notice that the story is gearing towards the climax somewhere around the sixtythird minute and extending to the end of part one of the movie. The movie which is in two parts sees the climax stretching from the first part into the second. Extending right up to the eighth minute of part two, we see the most drastic decisions taken by the antagonists (Janet, Julia, Oben) to device ways of pulling down the protagonist (king Albert). It is at this climax that we witness the highest turning point in the story - the death of king Albert. The king's funeral arrangement pours out a bunch of twists and turns which mark the start of the falling action.

The resolution of the movie takes up the last fifteen to twenty minutes. It begins with Maxwell's dramatic decision regarding his father's corpse and funeral convoy to return to the mortuary. This clearly sets a new twist of events and sets the pace for justice. Maxwell's decision stands out as the main element that sets confusion in the enemy's camp. This boils down to the scene of the enlarged meeting in which we find almost every character except Oben. The scene is characterised by the exposure of a number of secrets which pave the way for actual justice on the antagonist.

Neba Lawrence, in this proleptic plot (a straight running storyline) does a great job in the structure. Time distribution gives just the appropriate durations of each stage of the plot as it runs through the three parts of the story-arc. The use of a short time for the exposition and the swift introduction of the problem give a firm grip on the attention of the audience. The trend of events leading to the climax are also well organised and the shocking revelations at the climax raises anxiety in the viewer, making the falling action and resolution a suitable trend of relief (LAWRENCE, 2012).

Character Journeys

The personality of a character, his or her behaviour and relationship with other characters are very instrumental in the analysis of the narrative. Actions, appearance and mannerisms of a character are aspects to be considered when analysing the narrative in a film. The manner and extent of change in a character as a result of events in the story is also of great interest to a narrative analyst.

In discussing characters in *Jungle of Heirs*, two groups are taken into consideration: the flat and the round characters. Flat characters are those who maintain a particular behavioural pattern throughout the story and are hardly influenced into change by the turn of events in the narrative. They are also known as steadfast characters. These characters, despite the twist of events in the story, remain focussed on a given idea or resolve. Conversely, there are round or change characters that evolve with the story.

Dr Oben, Barrister Julia, Macdonald and Quiniva are presented as round characters. Form the opening of the movie, Barrister Julia and Dr Oben are the most trusted collaborators to the King. They initially present potentials of justice, trust and love. By the time we attain the climax of the movie, they are both converted to total villains who will even kill to have their way to wealth. Two gullible characters, Macdonald and Quiniva, join this trend of deceit from their original standpoints of love and understanding. It is the changing nature of these characters that pushes forward the development of the plot and the narrative as a whole. The change in these characters makes the story dramatic and therefore enriches the narrative element of characterisation.

Those who make up the flat characters include King Albert, Maxwell, Felicity, both Elders Ewube and Tanyisong, and Janet. Their various resolves may differ, but they are steadfast in their plans from the start to the end. Janet is aiming at inheriting King Albert's wealth after his death. This is the point she carries from the start of the film to the end, when all the odds turn against her. This is the only antagonist who presents herself as a flat character. King Albert, Maxwell and Felicity, the other members of the royal family, maintain their stance as flat characters and they are presented in the movie as the protagonists who stand on the side of protecting the family's wealth.

Language (dialogue)

The language used in any film influences the progression of the narrative. Tone, accent and diction represent language elements which can influence the flow of a narrative. The language used in Jungle of Heirs is simple Cameroon English. This makes it easy for the audience to understand the narrative. The tone and accent of the characters is one which the Cameroonian audience will easily identify with. The film's language uses many African proverbs and idioms with each going a long way to spice up the narrative of the film and identify its cultural background. Characters like Elder Ewube, Elder Tanyisong and Felicity stand out as the main users of the culturally related proverbs and idioms. One characteristic runs through these three characters: they are the main characters in the movie interested in the culture of the people. This is seen from their strong resolve to stand by the King as the sole heir to the throne and even when he is assassinated, they out rightly oppose Janet's attempts to take over the throne.

The use of these proverbs and idioms represents an element of style and they are all very metaphorical. They use non-related stories and descriptions to draw insight into the existing situation. This comparison of concrete events to some abstract situation metaphorically helps in the development of the story and the plot. The language used equally situates the film within time and space. The metaphoric way of describing situations and the choice of the words used makes the audience understand that this is a twenty-first century Cameroonian story.

Setting the time and place

The time and place where a film is set helps the understanding of the narrative. It is agreed that a narrative will always reflect the origin of its authors, and therefore, the images used by the director will most likely add to the narrative, aspects of physical location accompanied by elements of time, period, weather and even season of action. An understanding of the time and place of a narrative enhances understanding, whereas considerations regarding the era and location helps in the understanding of characters, their actions and their experiences. The setting of a narrative will give a broader understanding of the idea or theme within a narrative.

Situating *Jungle of Heirs* within time and space for an understanding of the narrative will be an exciting experience. Beginning with the time, we read this narrative in terms of the epoch in order to grasp the reason for some of the characters' actions. This film is set in a twenty-first century African society. In this era, everyone does everything within their power to acquire wealth. Bringing this societal trend into the world of the film we understand the reasons for some of the decisions taken by some of the characters. Janet for instance sees her marriage to Albert as an investment, and cannot be on the losing side of the bargain. To achieve this, she has to pull her children into the chase for property and inheritance. Dr Oben and Barrister Julia are not just being gullible by following Janet's idea and aiding her in it. They are actually being smart in playing their cards as they even have a secret agenda with eighty million francs each to benefit, of which Janet as the master planner, is not aware. Elders Ewube and Tanyisong are both strict at their jobs because of the financial benefits that come from it. All these aspects characterise a twenty-first century Cameroonian society and are well captioned in the film thereby fulfilling one of the main functions of art as a mirror of the society according to Danesi (DANESI, 2004).

The place also plays a role in the development of the plot in the narrative. *Jungle of Heirs* has as primary setting the palace of the Bayang people. If we take a deeper look into Janet, Oben and Julia's actions and decisions, we understand the object of their motive through the setting. The palace is a place of enormous wealth and the king is worth so much. No naturally sane person will go fighting over crumbs, explaining the fact that what the antagonists in this movie stand to benefit from their conspiring actions is quite enormous. With such understanding, the plot is strengthened, characters become appropriate and the narrative is enhanced.

It is evident from these illustrations that as an arm of narratological studies, narratives may encompass a wide range of genres. In fact, there are as many different narratives as we can possibly imagine. This is in line with Roland Barthes who states that "the narratives of the world are numberless" (BARTHES, 1977). This implies, as many as there are ideas in humanity, so are there narratives. The film here primarily represents a composition of images otherwise called visual narratives which are simply complemented by sound or auditory narratives in order for the message or narrative to be consumed with relative ease.

Thus, it will be right to say that any film narrative must possess the potential of holding the audiences' attention for as long as the narrative unfolds. The nature of a narrative should also be a call for concern. Any form of art basically presents two major aspects embedded in it: the form of the art and the content being expressed by the form. Chatman makes it clearer when he states that "structuralist theory argues that each narrative has two parts: a story (histoire), the content or chain of events (action, happenings), plus what may be called existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (discours), that is the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, the story is the what in a narrative that is depicted, discourse is the how (CHATMAN, 1978).

It can therefore be concluded that the form or discourse of a film narrative for example is what carries the content or the story. In analysing a film, although consideration must be made on how the form of the film or narrative conveys the content of the narrative. With this, aspects such as shots, sound, lighting and aspects such as characterisation should be taken into consideration. But besides the idea of the form telling the story, there originally needs to be a strong story or narrative which the form comes in to build. Contrary to this, most films which attract a lot of attention tend to be those with much feeble stories.

Geoff King, discussing Thomas Schatz's article "the new Hollywood", realises that there is a lot of attack on the narrative not because of the absence of a narrative, but because the narratives seem not to tell as much as is expected of the person narrating (SCHATZ, 1993). This is seen when he comments that "the accusation (against Hollywood blockbuster) is of lack of narrative depth, rather than of the narrative itself" (KING, 2002). Though King does not go deep into explaining details related to this aspect, it is nonetheless an important point in the contemporary nature of narrative vis-à-vis the standards.

The introduction of digital technology has equally had an impact on the narrative abilities of films. Some technological components of films are used to hypnotise the audience while bringing in the real narrative as a second option in the movie. Like in African and Cameroon films where there is still a high level of amateurism in the use of digital software, which still due to its low level of use, are forced to build on strong narratives, there is the desire to stun audience with digitally animated images in films produced by the technologically advanced industries and regress the narrative. In this light, Sobchack states that "the raison d'être of (many contemporary films) is to thrill, shock, stun, astonish, assault, or ravish an audience, now less interested in 'developing situations' than in the 'immediate' gratification offered by a series of momentous - and sensually experienced -'instants' to which narrative is subordinated" (SOBCHACK, 2016). The primary objective of a movie is to tell a story. It is this story that constitutes the narrative and the narrative is what should guide the way a story is told. When the telling of a story makes use of the method in which a story is told, more than it lays emphasis on the story being told, there is bound to be a lapse at one point or the other. Fortunately

enough, *Jungle of Heirs* stays clear of this lapse and tells the story without concentrating on the method. The story comes first and this enables the making of the film to be guided by some preexisting notions about what the film is all about.

6. CONCLUSION

The long history of Cameroon films, from the early days of independence, saw the production of a great number of films. In its metamorphosis, film production went through years of glory and difficulty. Through these years, Cameroon films explored different themes, varied forms and characters and numerous techniques to tell stories in diverse ways, partly because of the natural evolution of the industry and also because of the diverse nature of Cameroon's cultural heritage. The evolutionary nature of society's moral tenets and the responsiveness of Cameroon's social structure to this evolution have equally proven to be one of the variables that have influenced the Cameroonian storytelling landscape. It is these cultural, economic, political and social tendencies which characterise Cameroon that have influenced the narrative in Cameroon films (NASH, 2005).

It results from this study that narratives in Cameroon films follow the linear method of exposition, climax and resolution. In *Jungle of Heirs*, which begins with the introduction of the characters and moves to a rising action building up to a climax and a falling action ending in a resolution, the filmmaker stays faithful to this tradition. This structure without being a prescribed rule is the best advisable trend in filmmaking. The filmmaker however, has the liberty to follow it or not and in the case of our corpus, he follows it to the latter.

Other elements like language (verbal), characters and plot compliment to enhance a film narrative. In doing so, topical issues plaguing the Cameroonian society are successfully intertwined into an audiovisual storytelling process called film. Within this frame, issues like royalty and kingship as addressed in *Jungle of Heirs*, are handled without taboo and with respect to the culture and tradition of the people. This is the power of the film and Cameroon filmmakers do not hesitate to exploit this to treat topics such as love, power, business, politics, cultural diversity, migration and education.

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