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Aesthetic Labour and Production Design in Nollywood Cinema: Reconfiguring Mise-en-scène across the Film Production Stages

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Abstract

This study questions the aesthetic and production design in Nollywood films as an area of creative work that is disseminated throughout the pre-production, production, and post-production processes as opposed to being an aesthetic added to an existing script. It claims that the visual regimes of Nollywood, such as sets, locations, costumes, props, colour, and soundscapes, are a complicated system of signification, formed by limited infrastructures, transnational genre demands, and local moral imaginaries. The article, based on the film-theory of style, semiotics of cinema, and media-infrastructural accounts of Nigerian screen culture, suggests a multi-staged approach to studying production design in terms of making historical judgments between economy, technology, and ideology. The research synthesizes the close reading of a representative sample of neo-Nollywood films with a synthetic overview of the current scholarship on mise-en-scène, the formation of the Nollywood genre, and screen aesthetics of Africa. The analysis shows that the pre-production procedures, specifically the location choice, art direction, and costume design, encode the aspects of class, religiosity, and gendered aspiration in a manner that predicts the subsequent cinematographic and editing choices. In principal photography, the low-budget zone strategies of space, blocking, and camera positions reorganise classical norms of continuity into a pattern of hybrid appearance, and post-production colour grading and sound design are retroactively stabilizing, or sometimes conflicting with, previous aesthetic indicators. The article argues that the perceived weak points of Nollywood style can be seen more as adaptive aesthetic reasoning that appeared as a result of certain infrastructural circumstances. It makes the conclusion that the production design in Nollywood is at the center of the visual imagining of African urban modernity, spirituality, and precarious neoliberal subjectivities, and that a more granular analysis of African film production practices ought to be done through the stage.

Keywords: *Nollywood, production design, mise-en-scène, aesthetics, media infrastructure, film production stages.*

Introduction

Since the 1990s, Nollywood has become a paradigmatic example of low-budget, high-volume film production and has therefore attracted considerable scholarly attention to its genres, markets, and cultural politics; however, its aesthetic and production design practices have yet to be adequately theorised (Haynes, 2016). Critical discourse has been between celebrating Nollywood's entrepreneurial

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vitality and forgetting its visual style as technically deficient, "crude," "unrefined", and thus further occluding the creative labour through which filmmakers construct meaningful worlds within severe economic and infrastructural constraints (Larkin, 2008). This paper addresses that lacuna by looking at production design not as an afterthought to narrative, but as a structuring principle that works across the interlinked stages of film production.

The research problem emerges in the three debates at the intersection. First, it has to do with whether Nollywood's visual regimes can be measured against classical Hollywood standards or whether the films must be handled in terms of local aesthetic logics; second, it explores the assumption that African popular cinemas are mainly verbal and story-driven as opposed to visually organized; and third, it critiques tendency in production studies to reduce the stages of filmmaking to technical phases rather than as discursive spaces where aesthetic and ideological choices are made (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010). When Nollywood films are condemned as having "flat lighting" or crowded frames or seemingly arbitrary decor, such judgments often assume a universalised model of film art that does not account for conditions such as unstable power supply, limited access to purpose-built studios, and markets historically geared towards domestic video consumption as opposed to theatrical projection (Larkin, 2008).

The focus of this discussion will be that the aesthetic and production design in Nollywood cinema will be best understood as a multi-stage, collaborative process, which includes decisions made in the pre-production, production, and post-production of a film, and this results in a distinctive visual style, which is influenced by media infrastructures, genre conventions, and moral teachings. Instead of asking why Nollywood "fails" to conform to Euro-American standards of photographic realism or continuity, the article argues that its production design encodes specific relations to urban space, spirituality, and social stratification that have to be analysed using a combination of film-stylistic, semiotic, and media-anthropological frameworks (Larkin, 2008; Inyang, 2013).

The importance of this study is in three interventions. First, it re-centres production design as a crucial analytic entry point into Nollywood, challenging the assumption that African popular films are interesting mainly for their narratives or sociological themes and not their visual form. Second, by situating aesthetic labour within the canonical stages of film production (i.e., pre-production, production, and post-production), it brings the temporal and collaborative nature of aesthetic design decisions into the fore, moving away from authorial-centric accounts of style toward a more processual understanding (Nyong Inyang, 2018). Third, it places the Nollywood within the broader discourse in film theory about mise en scene, the lack of specific details, and the politics of uneven infrastructure, which demonstrates that the insights of global film theory need to be reexamined in the application to the African media landscape (Bordwell, 1985; Andrew, 1976).

Literature Review

Nollywood Aesthetics and The Issue of Evaluation

Early Anglophone studies of Nollywood often focused on genre, audience, and distribution more than a sustained study of visual style (Haynes, 2016). Haynes's synoptic account of Nigerian video film genres, for instance, provides some great descriptions of recurring narrative patterns and character types but largely subordinates questions of cinematography, set design, and colour to questions of thematic interpretation (Haynes, 2016). Such work gave creative legitimacy to Nollywood as an important area of scholarly inquiry, yet often produced an implicit hierarchy in which aesthetic issues were treated as secondary to sociological ones.

Subsequent interventions began to problematize this imbalance by bringing aesthetic categories like beauty, spectacle, and "visual pleasure" to the foreground in Nollywood video films (Inyang, 2013). Inyang's semiotic analysis of images, light, and sound in selected Nollywood productions purports that filmmakers strategically deploy conventionalized signs and codes (zoom-ins, sound effects, casting stars, etc.) to produce affect and fix moral meanings for

audiences. Instead of condemning sound design as "overdramatic" or zooms as "excessive," these elements are viewed as culturally relevant and useful tools that connect with local viewing habits and genre expectations, in a way that identifies a particular aesthetic style that understands artistic decisions as related to Nigerian moral and spiritual values.

A separate strand of scholarship has been concerned explicitly with elements that are conventionally grouped under production design: costume, set, scenery, and location. Nyong Inyang's semiotic analysis of costume and setting in Tchidi Chikere's Worlds Apart. In this essay, costume and spatial decor represent agents of the narrative in the novel, Worlds Apart, and signify class differences, cultural identities, and relational dynamics beyond dialogue. The study argues that such elements work as systems of signification in their own right rather than as neutral backdrops, bringing Nollywood analysis more into line with a body of work in film semiotics that takes mise en scene to be a rich network of signs.

At the same time, critical reflections on "neo-"Nollywood" higher-budget, cinema orientated productions emerging from the mid-2000s have directly addressed the problem of mise-en-scène . Iwowo, for example, deconstructs the "problematic mise-en-scène " of neo-Nollywood, arguing that long lockdown shots and static staging create "a visual distance between audiences and diegetic space" which undermines the immersion of the audience in the narrative. In reaction, the article offers a more fragmentary visual style, which stresses depth staging, lighting to create three-dimensional space or more complex blocking of the performers to establish motifs. Crucially, Iwowo presents production design as a fundamental part of mise-en-scène, alongside cinematography, performance, blocking, and sound design, and therefore at the centre of debates on aesthetic renewal in neo-Nollywood.

Mise-En-Scène , Auteurism and African Popular Cinema

The question of style in Nollywood has also been approached within the framework of the theory of authorship and mise-en-scène construction. Studies of "auteur" Nollywood directors attempt to find recurring visual signatures of

framing, decor, colour palettes, and spatial organization that could possibly justify the application of auteurist categories usually reserved for European or Hollywood filmmakers. Such work challenges notions of the industrial conditions of work of Nollywood, where tight schedules and low budgets, along with collaborative scripting, resist individual directors maintaining consistent stylistic control. The text is somewhat critical of the role of production designers, art departments, and cinematographers in creating recurring visual themes: despite the importance of these roles in filmmaking, they are somewhat overlooked in film marketing and mainstream discussions.

The existing body of scholarship on Nollywood suggests that we should consider it within the broader framework of African popular cinema. and to approach the study of Nollywood from the perspective of examining its socio-economic context, as well as its aesthetic style, we see that the narrative style of filmmaking, its visual style, and the storytelling choices made by filmmakers are influenced not only by artistic vision, but by a range of infrastructural and economic factors. e.g., the challenges of quality of production, the availability of technology, and the economic limitations experienced by filmmakers all play significant roles in shaping the films that we see. Larkin's exploration of media in northern Nigeria makes a strong case about the relationship between cinema and the surrounding environment and how it is not just a separate form of entertainment, but actually a reflection of the social and physical landscapes in which it exists. Larkin focused on the importance of infrastructure like roads, electricity, and urban spaces, and how these factors directly impact the production, distribution, and consumption of Nigerian video films. Scratched lenses, unstable lighting, and improvised sets are thus interpreted not so much as shortfalls but as evidence of participation in an informal global economy and as a demonstration of failures of colonial modernising projects. From this perspective, production design is a negotiation with infrastructures: filmmakers use domestic interiors, rented hotel rooms, and public spaces as sets, and the choices made with regard to these spaces are expressions of general social relations and aspirations.

Within film theory more generally, the works of Dudley Andrew and David Bordwell offer conceptual tools for analysing the mise en scene of Nollywood films without imposing a normative aesthetic measure. Andrew's overview of film theory emphasises mise en scene as an expression of the "imaginary" and the tumours of affects such as nostalgia and desire, and the psychological and ideological roles of decor and the arrangement of space. In contrast, Bordwell looks at style as dealing with choices and the limitation of style, and focuses on cinematography, staging, and production design to advance a clear understanding of the narrative and understanding for the viewer (Bordwell, 1985; Bordwell & Thompson, 2010). When we consider Nollywood, these notions of how certain staging practices are working, e.g., using direct address to the audience, little background space, using the same rooms repeatedly, etc., are shaping what viewers are paying attention to; these practices are also inferring moral values, even if they are not following traditional rules of storytelling.

Production Design and Stages of Film Production

While there are extensive accounts of production stages in the general film studies literature, such as in the books pre- production, production, and post-production, the specific role of production design during these stages of production is often treated in passing with a focus on the movie production workflow in Hollywood. Guides to the "stages of film production" usually refer to pre-production as being the period of script breakdown, budgeting, casting, location scouting, and set construction, in which production design is built into decisions regarding props, costumes, and sets, and to post-production as being the stage where editing, sound design, and visual effects polish things up. Most of the accounts about filmmaking assume that filmmakers have access to controlled studio spaces, specialised crews, and stable financing, but this is often not the case in Nollywood. Filmmakers are often working on location, taking on multiple roles and operating under tight deadlines (NairaProject, 2024).

Nollywood-specific studies of production processes have observed these divergences but have seldom theorised their impact on aesthetic and design outcomes. Analyses of the "challenges and prospects of film production" in Nigeria list the logistical challenges of limited funding, piracy, and a lack of training, and a canonical tripartite division of pre-production, production, and post-production (Igwe in NairaProject, 2024). Yet they seldom interrogate the impact of, e.g., truncated pre-production schedules on the sophistication of the design of sets, or of reliance on naturally available locations on the recurring visual motifs of urban and rural life in Nollywood films. We need to pay more attention to when design decisions are taken.

Semiotics, Costumes and Set Design as Agents of Narrative

The semiotic analysis of costume and set in Nollywood provides one of the most developed accounts of production design as narrative agency. Drawing on cultural semiotics, Nyong- Inyang shows how choices of clothing, domestic decoration, and the arrangement of space signify information about class, region, and moral status in Worlds Apart, a popular film in Nigeria's Nollywood. The contrast between fancy houses with European furniture and simple village houses indicates economic inequality and different values. is clear without having to tell it in words. In this context, production design is not only an average environment but a rich fabric of images and symbols that audiences understand according to shared cultural understandings.

Another important strand deals with the borrowing of foreign production aesthetics in Nigerian films. Maku, in her recent analysis of clothing, scenery, sound, and language in selected Nollywood productions, suggests that many films begin to imitate global (especially Western) visual styles more and more through semi-nude dressing, fashionable urban interiors, and polished colour grading, either to appeal to cosmopolitan audiences or to signal aspirational modernity. This adoption, which is so often considered a manifestation of cultural alienation, can be better understood in terms of a hybrid aesthetic approach, influenced by the intermingling of local moral economies and global

media flows, as suggested by Maku: this approach focuses on the dynamic negotiation of influences and values in our increasingly interconnected world. Production design thus becomes an important site where conflicts between "indigenous" and "foreign" aesthetics are enacted.

Despite these contributions, there are still some gaps in the scholarship on the aesthetics and production design of Nollywood. First, there is relatively little work that relates design decisions systematically to various stages of the production process. Studies often focus on completed films and don't reconstruct the way limitations in the pre-production stages, or modifications in the post-production stage, have influenced the final look and feel of a film. Second, though semiotic and auteurist analyses foreground symbolic and stylistic functions of sets, costumes, and locations, they hardly touch upon infrastructural approaches that reflect electricity, urban planning, and availability of studios as co-determinants of design choices (Larkin, 2008). Third, much of the existing literature implicitly compares and judges Nollywood in accordance with classical norms of Hollywood film, even in the process of seeming sympathetic, and thereby risks the re-inscription of a deficit model.

The present article is therefore situated at the intersection of these debates by suggesting a stage-based analysis of aesthetic and production design in Nollywood using frameworks from film-stylistics, semiotics, and media-infrastructural. It considers pre, during, and post-production not merely as phases of time, but as separate but overlapping fields where visual and sonic worlds are conceptualised, negotiated, and re-configurations take place. By doing so, it aims to reconceptualize the contested visuality of Nollywood as the effect of distributed creative labour rather than the legacy of technical inadequacy.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Neo - Formalism and Film Style Analysis

The first theoretical pillar of this study is neo-formalism as developed, in particular, by Bordwell's perspective on narration and film style. Neo- formalism treats film form as a system of choices made under constraints, and the focus is on the ways in which stylistic devices such as camera movement, framing, lighting, and production design guide spectators' cognitive processes in constructing narrative meaning (Bordwell,1985). Rather than viewing style as a decorative element, neo-formalism views it as central to the way films cue attention, organise space and time, and communicate information.

When applied to Nollywood, this point of view gives one the opportunity to consider how frequent frontal staging or long immobile takes are not merely a technical restriction but also a means of enhancing legibility on small domestic screens and predetermining verbal exchanges that are appreciated by viewers (Bordwell and Thompson, 2010). Design of production, therefore, is an important element of style: the depth of objects, the decision of either noisy market place or quiet office space, the location of characters in relation to the decor and so on influence the way that spectators process narrative information. The focus of neo-formalism on the functional aspect of stylistic devices contributes to the transformation of the critique of Nollywood aesthetics not on the issue of rightness but on the issue of functionality of specific solutions in specific circumstances.

Sign System Semiotics of Cinema and Mise-En-Scène

The second pillar is based on semiotic perspectives of cinema, according to which images, sounds, and space organization are signs in codes and conventions. Semiotics has been applied in terms of Nollywood, wherein the system of costume, set, and sound is picked up and read to present moral, spiritual, and social contexts (Inyang, 2013). The viewpoint is especially applicable to production design in the sense that it preempts the communicative functions of relatively ordinary objects such as furniture, accessories to clothing, and the colours of walls in a bigger cultural symbolism.

Reflections of mise-en-scène as structuring the imaginary that Andrew gives are a complement to this approach by stressing the affective and ideological aspects of decor and staging. In this context, mise en scene does not merely refer to the material positioning of objects in front of the camera but to a visual economy that creates desire, fear, nostalgia, or reverence by means of certain combinations of space, light, and objects. The details of the settings of a Nollywood movie, such as the pastor sitting in a richly decorated office in a church with gold coloured curtains and leather seats, convey more than just wealth, but also a challenged theology of prosperity and spiritual power. The semiotics of these visual decisions allows us to consider them as significant sign clusters, and the focus on affect by Andrew brings to the fore the impact of these decisions on the spectators.

Infrastructure, City Culture and Limitations of Media

The third theory pillar is the theory of the media infrastructural approach, which was developed by Larkin in Signal and Noise. Larkin suggests that the Nigerian media have to be contextualized when it comes to roads, electricity, and spatial planning within cities, and that the boundary between media and infrastructure becomes unclear. In the case of film production, this implies that the possibilities of aesthetics are directly determined by the availability of locations, reliability of power, and informal economies of equipment rental. Poor infrastructure and uneven development can be seen in the scratched lenses, poor lighting, and the makeshift sets, which are not simply minor issues.

In the case of Nollywood production design, there are two implications of this framework. It undermines romanticised conceptions of pure creativity at the beginning by asserting that aesthetic choices are always mediated by material infrastructures, and it makes the idea of noisy or imperfect-looking images at the end, themselves, subject to analysis as indicators of involvement in a global and local economy. The aesthetic and production design, therefore, emerge as sites where infrastructural precarity and aspiration can be observed at once: a rented mansion serving as a film set in various movies can be seen as the symbol

of a class aspiration as well as an effective way to resolve the lack of access to facilities in the studio.

Aesthetic Design of Pre-Production

Design Visual Scripting, Budgeting and Location

Preproduction is traditionally perceived as that period during which scripts are put into tangible shooting plans, budgets, and schedules, where the production designers and the art departments theorize the appearance of the film in consultation with the directors and producers. This step is a trial in Nollywood, where funding is usually tenuous, schedules are tight, and aesthetic aspirations are forced to match the resources at hand, resulting in a characteristic set of patterns of location-based production design (NairaProject, 2024).

Many Nollywood films use existing locations, such as personal homes, hotels, offices, and churches, which the producer acquires through personal contacts or temporary rentals, unlike Hollywood productions, which often set up on sound stages. The selection of scenery during pre-production, as such, therefore serves as de facto set design; choosing a specific kind of house, office, or street already adds to the aesthetic universe of the film a certain specific decor, a spatial arrangement, and even a connotation of class. As it is explained in the analysis by Nyong Inyang, lavish interiors furnished with imported furniture and light colours tend to represent the high-end lifestyle, whereas the modest, little-decorated ones reflect the rural or working-class lifestyle. Decisions concerning the location of shooting during the pre-production stages thus pre-programme the visual expression of the social hierarchy and aspiration inherent in the film.

This level of budgeting also limits and influences the design options. The available budget might not allow for elaborate set dressing or bespoke furniture, forcing them to select filming locations that already resemble what they want in some way. On the other hand, neo-Nollywood movies with larger budgets might feature pre-production involving more careful development of thematic colour

systems and decorative patterns, to match interior design to character lines and generic anticipations. Aesthetic labour, in either instance, is undertaken with an economic rationale: the production designers are required to strike a balance between the demands of the script and economical solutions, which in turn tend to lead to pragmatic concessions, but with a very specific visual signature.

Conception, Costume and Character

Pre-production costume design is also involved in the visualization of class, morality, and gender, way before the cameras roll. The semiotic interpretations of Nollywood have revealed that clothing styles are highly genre-coded: in a lot of evangelical thrillers, e.g., worldly characters, who are related to sin and temptation, are dressed in more revealing or provocative clothing, whereas good, home-based characters are clad in more conservative or traditional styles (Inyang, 2013). According to the research on foreign production aesthetics by Maku, the growing use of Western fashion styles and semi-nu styles, in particular, among female characters, is both a symptom and an object of challenge to the existing moral sensibilities.

During pre-production conferences, wardrobe talks can therefore be ideological positioning talks. To dress up a pastor in a very puckish suit and to set him in a very well-endowed office with foreign decor is to cut a theology of prosperity and a certain conception of Christian modernity into the visual text of the movie. On the other hand, dressing a village elder in traditional clothes and placing him in a courtyard with meager pieces of furniture expresses an anti-image of authenticity and roots in a community. These aesthetic decisions are not only descriptive, but argumentative, putting viewers into some position of agreeing with some value systems and affective position prior to dialogue elucidating the narrative.

Arranging Visual Consistency and Use of Genre Structure

There is also pre-production, including the conceptualisation of visual continuity throughout the film: decisions regarding general colour palette,

repetitive motifs, and space pattern that will create the skeleton of the spectator's experience. This is more incentivised in the neo-Nollywood, where release in theatres and international distribution have more prospects, thus creating a unified visual identity to be harnessed in the marketing materials and film festivals. There is increased use of storyboards, shot lists, and mood boards, which are well covered in the world literature of production, to bring a collective aesthetic vision together with the directors, cinematographers, and designers, frequently working under severe time demands.

However, Genre has a great role to play in this process. Nollywood has produced comparatively stable visual genres: royal epics, featuring palaces and royal gear, urban melodramas, featuring office desks and contemporary houses, evangelical thrillers, featuring churches and spiritual spaces, and all of them have their own set of design conventions (Haynes, 2016). Pre-production design, therefore, works in genre templates that provide the required forms of location, costumes, and props. The artistic dilemma is to give such conventions a new twist without losing the recognisability among the audiences.

This section highlights the role of aesthetic and production design in visualizing worlds of social imagination, propagating moral value, and locating viewers in Nollywood films by conceptualising pre-production as a stage of visual scripting, prior to a single scene being shot. There are also the spatial Strategies in Production.

Staging on A Time and Place Limitation

In principal photography, pre-production design plans face the challenges of time, space, and labour. The famously short shooting schedules in Nollywood, which are sometimes a matter of days or a few weeks, put a great deal of strain on the directors, cinematographers, and designers to work quickly, recycling the locations and reconfiguring available space to imply different spaces. What can be seen in this economy of reuse is the fact that the same living rooms or hotel lobbies are repeated across several different films with only slight modifications.

The critic Iwowe uses the mise-en-scène as an example of how these restrictions have been historically used to argue that the elements that led to the widespread use of long lock-down shots and little blocking have led to static scenes where the camera and the actors remain distant. However, as neo-formalists would see it, the strategies may also be interpreted as functional solutions, which focus on coverage and continuity in the case of little rehearsal time and equipment. Fixed camera positions decrease the chances of technical failures and make editing less difficult, whereas small rooms with tight frames enable the crews to hide light equipment and unnecessary items. This may be production design by on-the-job improvisation: rearranging pieces of furniture above the walls, or introducing symbolic props to otherwise generic spaces.

Frame Composition Block, Performance and Decor

The strategy of obstructing the choreography of actors to each other and to objects is a key connection between production design and performance. Most Nollywood movies feature scenes that are shot with the actors seated or standing in a symmetrical composition with the furniture positioned in the centre and the characters, highlighting dialogue and face-to-face confrontation purposes. Although it may lead to comparatively flat images when captured with a minimal depth, this is also a performance tradition, which has its origins in the theatre and TV, where face-to-face dialogue and verbal communication are the key aspects.

Production design is in contact with blocking as it offers the axes of movement and focus points on the frame. The entrances and exits should be organized with a well-located doorway, staircase, or ornament, which can organize the power relationship or lead the eyes of the viewers. In domestic melodramas, as in the case of a wedding photograph or a religious icon on the wall, a conspicuous image tends to serve as a visual center to which conflictual relationships are attached, and which strengthens the themes of faithfulness in marriage or spiritual struggle. There are cases where designers and directors work together

informally on set to make such objects visible at crucial camera angles to make the objects a part of the emotional narrative in the scene.

When neo-Nollywood movies have ambitions of being more energetic in their cinematography, there has been a progressive move towards increased application of tracking shots, over-the-shoulder shots, and depth staging, which necessitate a more complex combination of camera movement and set design. In this case, the production design should be able to support the movement paths with furnishing and lighting systems, as well as props, without obstructing the camera paths, while creating the necessary atmosphere. The concession of beauty desire and space utility is especially sharp in congested city points that cannot be changed considerably.

Sound and Physical Attributes of Space

Sound recording during the production process is a very important factor in influencing the perceived materiality of space, though it is sometimes analytically divided by visual design. The use of location sound by Nollywood (particularly in the urban buzz) creates soundscapes in which ambient sound, traffic, and voices in the distance interfere with conversations. Although some of this is later removed in post-production, noise still tends to be left behind, giving the impression of porousness between the filmic space and the surrounding city. In a media-infrastructural sense, these auditory blemishes constitute an aesthetic signature of Nollywood, which marks the density of the urban environment and insufficiency of infrastructures.

Production design is in contact with sound in the choice of locations to use in a scene with dialogue, the placement of actors so that they do not create echo or disturbance, and in the set dressing. Surfaces like tiled floors and bare walls might reflect more reverberation, whereas curtains, carpets, and soft furnishings are able to absorb the sound; however, the latter might be economically or logistically difficult to access. In such a way, acoustic concerns, hardly considered in the analysis of production design, constitute an invisible

stratum of aesthetic labour in the production process, where they are mixed with material and economic possibilities of shooting in Nigerian cities.

By anticipating the interaction between blocking, decor, space, and sound in the case of time constraint and infrastructural constraint, this section underlines the fact that this production phase is a place of improvisation continuously, whereby planning and design are altered and redesigned during the filming process.

Post-production Aesthetics

Re-organisation of the Designed Space, Editing

The phase of post-production editing, sound design, and colour grading involves the synthesis of the material that has been accumulated throughout the production into a unified piece of audiovisual output. At this stage, the choice of shot sequence, length, and cut-up restructures the spatial and time relationships, which have been planned earlier, either supporting or destroying the original purpose. The continuity editing, as analyzed by Bordwell, brings to light the role of shot-to-shot relationships in guiding the viewers to construct narrative space in order to create coherent space and causal time (Bordwell, 1985).

The editorial techniques within the context of Nollywood cinema can be seen to have a range of strict adherence to classical principles of continuity and more idiosyncratic approaches that exaggerate the presence of reaction shots and close-ups to the detriment of space. These methodological inclinations overlap significantly with production design. Very frequent quick cutting of close-ups may make sets and decor less visible, thus shifting the attention to expressive face acting and dialogue. The use of the longer medium shots gives the viewer a chance to absorb background information that enhances characterisation and aids world-building. In some neo-Nollywood films, the editors intentionally switch between the close-up and wider shots to preground the carefully designed interiors or symbolic urban exteriors, which is why production design is used as an independent spectacle.

Color Grading and Having a Coherent Appearance

Colour grading is becoming a more significant process within the neo-Nollywood post-production process, used to balance the footage shot in non-homogeneous lighting conditions, and to define particular moodistic or genre-specific tonalities. In previous video productions, there was often a mismatch in white balance and saturation; in modern productions, it is customary to use so-called graded looks that give the shadows depth, increase contrast, or emphasize a particular color at the expense of others. These interventions may retroactively rearrange the production-design factors: a cool blue color, for example, can reorganize a general office into a more clinical or corporate space, and warm grading can endow a home interior with the increased feeling of closeness or nostalgia.

It is especially relevant to note that producers have been making the observation that foreign production aesthetics have been adopted; that colour grading often follows the conventions of various genres globally, with desaturated colour schemes being used in gritty crime films, high-saturation colour schemes in romantic comedies, and teal-and-orange colour schemes in action films or thriller films. This post-production work plays off previous decor and costume decisions; particular colour choices of wardrobe and wall surfaces might either pop or flatten when using a given grade, therefore pre-empting signs of class or signs of emotion in ways not entirely considered during pre-production. Grading is, therefore, one of the spaces where local design decisions and global standardistic stylistic templates come together, creating hybrid visual regimes.

Sound Design, Music, and Effective Re-coding of Space

Sound design during post production also assists in developing our perception of production design. Inyang notes that Nollywood producers intentionally use sonic effects and musical score to enhance fear, suspense, and moral revelation, which are often followed by zoom-ins or even visual focus on the prominent props and decorations. A small domestic scene, say, can now be transformed into a seat of spiritual battle with the presence of drones of evil, effects of echo, or

sudden hits of the musical instrument that coincides with the working of something like a charm or a Bible.

This acoustic re-codification of the space representation is particularly vivid in such genres as the evangelical and horror-infused ones, where the sound signals the existence of unseen spiritual forces. The post-production also gives the designers and sound editors the ability to overlay ambient audible noises, such as wind, whispers, and reverberation, which is more than the acoustic reality of the original location, extending the power of the production design to the corporeal world. Simultaneously, the integration of popular music songs into the montage scenes or establishing shots supports the feeling of modernity of the urban space or the romantic desire, thus relocating designed spaces to a broader cultural soundscape.

Explaining how editing, colour grading, and sound re-work are done before design decisions, this section intensifies the necessity of thinking of production design as an active, multi-phase process, as opposed to a phase of pre-production.

Counterargument and Critical Discussion

The Lack of Aesthetics and The Lack of a Model

One dominant counterargument in the popular and selective scholarly discussions holds that the aesthetic and production-design activities in Nollywood are inherently deficient when compared to the Euro-American standards. Flat lighting, lack of continuity, crowded sets, and crass decoration or extravagant costuming are regarded by critics as indications of technical incompetence or artistic lack of seriousness. This lack of professionalism often supports calls to have Nollywood professionalise so that it can adopt Hollywood-style production pipelines, invest in purpose-built studios, and develop designers who can copycat global best practices.

Under the theoretical approach that is used in this article, these criticisms run the danger of equating difference with deficiency. Neo-formalism is a reminder

to scholars that stylistic systems should be judged as having an efficacy to cue and reward spectator inference in the contextual frame that they are meant to do, but not against a perceived abstract ideal (Bordwell, 1985). Semiotic methods also focus on the idea that decor and costuming may make sense based on regional codes and moral economies that are not necessarily in line with minimalist or make-sense design practices dominating the Western art film industry. A Nollywood interior can seem physically cluttered with a variety of colours, text, and religious iconography, which can indicate quotidian aesthetics in urban homes in Nigeria, and where the show of wealth and religious piety are both prized (Haynes, 2016).

The Foreign Aesthetics Criticism

In other opposing positions, explained in works about the aesthetics of foreign production, it is argued that the acculturation of Nollywood in terms of Westernised decor and fashion and colour grading is damaging internal visual identities and catering to cosmopolitan preferences (Maku, 2024). In these perspectives, the growing trends of semi-nude attire, smooth furnishings, and global appearance are interpreted as cultural parody and self-colonisation of films, cutting off films, and severing them from local realities.

Even though such a critique makes a rational advance prediction of the power asymmetries in global media flows, it can tend to overlook the hybrid, aspirational nature of modern urban cultures by idealizing a static idea of what can be called an authentic African aesthetic. A case in point is Larkin's infrastructural analysis, which reveals that the Nigerian media spaces have long been under transnational influence, such as Hindi films or American TV, and that urban viewers have been used to the mixed aesthetic experience of registering between different aesthetics. The production design that brings in imported furniture or international fashion brands can thus reflect the real social activity and wants, and not just a movie fantasy. The question to ask is how these influences are negotiated, contested, or re-signified within the very generic and moral frameworks of Nollywood itself.

Re-Centring Process and Constraint

In response to the deficit and purity argument, the one offered here is more process and constraint-based. Paying attention to the functioning of aesthetic and production design in the pre-production, production, and post-production under certain infrastructural and economic conditions, Nollywood can be interpreted as not only failing to conform to the external standards or betray cultural purity, but also as a way of elaborating a sequence of adaptive visual practices. Reused locations, use of improvisational set dressing, and heavy use of costume and sound to create meaning are not accidental but rather solutions to budgets, time, and available spaces.

This does not mean that we can justify and make all stylistic decisions effective. The lighting and energy of staging demanded by Iwowo in neo-Nollywood points to actual constraints in the way particular productions approach depth, movement, and visual focus. Nevertheless, it cannot be cured by foisting Hollywood conventions on it; it needs to come up with critical vocabularies and training that builds on the existing strong points, the rich semiotic use of costume and props, and also increases the repertoire of spatial strategies that filmmakers can resort to. Placing production design in the framework of media infrastructures in Nigeria is another promotion of scholars and practitioners to understand aesthetic enhancement as framed in the context of larger investments in studios, training, and urban planning, as opposed to individual talent.

With this in mind, it is possible to consider the stage-based model of production design presented in the article as both an analytical tool and a critical intervention in the sense that the belief that aesthetics can be assessed should take into consideration the distributed, collaborative, and constrained character of aesthetic labour throughout the filmmaking process.

Conclusion

The aesthetic and production design of Nollywood cinema, as discussed in this paper, becomes a complex distributed practice that cuts across the planning of pre-production, improvisation of on-set, and the re-configuring of post-production. Instead of considering the decor, costume, and spatial organisation as minor decoration of the pre-determined stories, the analysis argues that these elements are one of the main ways through which Nollywood films envision and negotiate Nigerian social realities, including urban stratification of classes and Pentecostal spirituality as well as aspirational cosmopolitanism. The three-way emphasis on pre-production, production and post-production indicates that decisions about design are temporally buffered and revisitable: the relationships between design and geography are shown through places selected in pre-production pre-determining classed and moral geographies; the relationships between design and media are shown through blocking and sound recording adjusting those plans to the constraints of time, space and infrastructure; the relationships between design and affect are shown through editing, colour grading and sound design recalibrating the affective and symbolic value of designed spaces.

The conceptual framework that relies upon neo-formalism, cinema-semiotics, and media-infrastructural approach has offered the means to rewrite the contested visuality of Nollywood beyond deficit discourses. Neo-formalism predicts the functionalism of the stylistic devices, such as production design, in orienting its viewers towards cognition, whereas semiotic approaches emphasize the richness of meanings inscribed in the costumes, objects, and decor. The media-infrastructural theory, in its turn, dictates that the aesthetic forms cannot be separated from the material conditions of the Nigerian media production: unreliable electricity, undeveloped studio space, or informal economies of site usage. Combined, these attitudes lend credence to the gist of the article, that what some might think of as weaknesses of the Nollywood style, bad lighting, congested compositions, and interiors that are reused, are more effectively conceived as adaptive visual logics that are created out of both constrained conditions and desire.

Through critical examination of counterarguments that either criticize Nollywood aesthetics as lacking or condemn its use of visual regimes of the foreign as cultural betrayal, the article defends a process-based approach to evaluation that is historically informed. It is not a method that idealises current practices and blindly glorifies all forms of hybridisation; it requires that critical consideration be given to how exactly production design has been involved in the process of articulating Nigerian modernities and subjectivities. In the case of humanities scholarship, this means that Nollywood studies will need to be re-focused on the work of design and the timefulness of production, and that film theory, media anthropology, and production studies should think more closely.

Further studies would continue this research by conducting some ethnographic studies with the production designers, art directors, and location managers in various sectors of the industry, such as Yoruba-language and northern Nigerian cinemas. It might be further elaborated by comparing (and contrasting) production design in relation to other African and Global South film industries, including Ghanaian video film, South African television drama, or Indian regional cinemas. Finally, consideration of aesthetic and production design along the production phases of film production not only helps to enrich the knowledge of Nollywood; it also compels the humanities researcher to re-evaluate the very category by which aesthetic critique of world cinema is assessed, using the infrastructural conditions and collaborative labour as the primary location of critique.

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