

Costume, Set/Scenery and Location as Narrative Agents in *Worlds Apart*: A Semiotic Analysis

Nkechi Asiegbu Bature-Uzor¹ PhD

Abstract

Working within the tenets of cultural semiotics, this paper sets out to establish costume, set/scenery and location as narrative agents in Tchidi Chikere's *World Apart*. It is aimed at analyzing the signifying roles of costume, set/scenery and location in this Nollywood video film. The study focuses on the use of these narrative agents as communicative elements to portray the main idea in the film narrative. The study hinges on a critical analysis of these elements to understand how they are used in this film in order to interpret their significations. Previous studies on Nollywood films dwell mostly on the thematic thrust, the use of costume and make-up, marketing and distribution, as well as the viability of the industry, but none has focused on semiotic interpretation of costume, set/scenery and location in relation to the thematic concern of the film. This study will strengthen the semiotic readings and interpretations of Nollywood films. Among its findings is that costumes, set/scenery and location function as signifiers within the context of film narrative and as such, they are systems of signification and communication upon which meaning is constructed.

Keywords: Narrative agent, Costume, Set/Scenery, Location, Signification, Meaning.

Introduction

Costume is the dress of an actor/actress in film narrative, while set/scenery and location refer to the physical settings where the narrative action(s) take place. Costume and scenery complement each other in narratives. When properly applied in production, these elements provide most of the mise-en-scene that the filmmaker uses in encoding his/her messages to the audience. These elements are very important in narration especially in film and stage productions where dramatic representations and re-enactment of the scenarios in the narratives are presented. It follows then that the actor/actress wearing his/her costume definitely needs a place for the action which he/she wants to re-enact. This narrative space which provides the scenery must be appropriate in the diegesis of the narrative to aid the narration and at the same time, the narrativity in the viewers. The role of the narrative space is to place the narrative action within a background for a realistic representation of the narrative. The costumes on the other hand help to establish the actor's action within the environment created through the scenery. On this note, the study centers on how meanings are constructed in *Worlds Apart* through the use of costumes, sets/scenery and locations.

Narrative agents here refer to elements of film production whose purpose is to establish the authenticity of the narrative by making the scenes and actions believable to the viewer. These narrative agents constitute the tools by which a film text constructs meaning. There are actually a whole lot of narrative agents involved in film production. The purpose of narrative agents is to make the narrative authentic by making the scenes as close to reality as possible. Realism is what film art thrives on. The narrative agents include set/scenery, costume, location, make-up, light, props, shots, and electronic effects, among others. The processes of narration and signification in film medium are several and most of the processes are unique to the medium. The film art institute's its meanings by reflecting and even playing on the socially or conventionally established interpretations of situations and objects at its disposal. However, one cannot set limit to the signifying process in film for everything in a film text is designed to signify.

¹ Department of Theatre & Film Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Email: nkechi.bature-uzor@uniport.edu, nkechi.bature2@gmail.com. Phone No. 08033193142, 09024394469

All the elements combine in a mesh with the story to form one inseparable whole. The images on a film screen are images of objects which can exist ordinarily as real situations, but when presented as film images, they not only reflect or reveal a verisimilitude of the situation. They are also constructed for the purpose of bearing meanings for the viewer. Noting on how images in film are constructed, Sparshott (1979) observes that “a photograph of an event or happening is most easily made by finding one and photographing it; but scenes may be enacted and scenery constructed for the purpose” (p. 324). In the case of the latter, whatever images that are produced are made for the purpose of whatever that is intended. This notion is what Sterritt (2008) calls the “physicality” of cinematic narrative; the way in which the physical objects and bodies are arranged to give a sequence a systematic composition (as cited in Bruce, 2008, p.26). The idea of “physicality” is the main feature that distinguishes film narratives from the novel. The physicality coupled with the peculiar technique of the medium heightens the effect of films on the viewer. On this note, Bruce (2008) argues thus:

The essential innovation of cinema (...) is the uniqueness of the visual technique ..., as well as a heightened affectivity of the visual image over the written word: A novelist could give us some kind of equivalent for this, could make us react along the same general lines; but he couldn't make us react in this direct, immediate way, as image succeeds image - he couldn't control our actions so precisely in time (p. 25).

Costume, set/scenery and location provide the visual physical images in film narratives.

Apart from the construction of the images as shots, there are other manipulations which the filmmaker employs in rendering his message to the viewer. These other manipulations, or rather, techniques, that string the images together as one whole narrative are products of technology and the medium. Yet, there are others which are real objects (usually borrowed from reality) used at the services of the medium to actualize the meaning making process. These include the set pieces, costume, make-up, props, and location among others that are used as part of the narrative. However, though they are part of the real world, they are employed purposefully in the narrative to actualize the story. These also aid the narrativity of the spectators. Insofar as they are conscripted into the narrative, their usage in a film follows the conventions of the medium. Though the images are those of real objects, their usage is conditioned by the conventions of the medium within each film text. However, the narrative agents in film medium can be grouped under three categories: narrative shots, technological effects, and the visual elements. The first category comprises shot compositions and manipulations as long shot, medium shot, close-up shot, aerial shot, panoramic shot, shot-reverse-shot, among others. The second category includes all the electronic effects used in film narrative like the lighting, sound, camera movements (pan, tilt, dolly in and out, zoom in and out among others) and other special effects (fades, dissolves, wipes, slow-motion, and superimposition, among others). This category can be seen as “filmic punctuation” (Harman, 1999, p.92; Sparshott, 1979, p.339). Finally, the third category which is the images of physical objects includes set/furniture, costume, make-up, location and properties used to aid the flow of the narrative. They are mostly co-opted into film narratives from the real world.

One of the advantages the film medium has is the use of camera to highlight details that ordinarily one would not have noticed. According to Ododo, Nwazue and Eyo (2015), “film is believed to be a game of details, where every element is earnestly seeking for details.” (p. 51) Noting the use of details in film, Kracauer (1979) cites Leger and Seat thus:

Yet it is a painter – Fernand Leger - who judiciously insists that only film is equipped to sensitize us, by way of big close-ups, to the possibilities that lie dormant in a hat, ... Similarly Cohen Seat: “And I? says the leaf which is falling. And we? Says the orange peel, the gust of wind. ... Film, whether intentionally or not, is their mouthpiece.” Nor should it be forgotten that camera's ability to single out and record the orange peel or the hand marks a decisive difference between screen and stage, so close to each other in some respects. The stage imagery inevitably centers on the actor, whereas film is free to dwell on parts of his appearance and detail the objects about him (pp.267-268).

Costume, set/scenery and location are the major elements used in film production to provide these details for proper diegesis. They function as signs in every film narrative by providing details of characterization, economic/social status of the character(s), age/gender, the character's background/locale of the narrative, the character's profession, mood of the character(s)/the narrative itself and the period/time of the narrative action. Hence, these narrative agents help to provide the details in which film narratives thrive.

A Reading of *Worlds Apart*

World Apart (Tchidi Chikere, 2004) is a Nollywood video film which treats contemporary issues. It has its major theme as romance with other sub-themes of family issues and social justice. The film was produced by Sunny Collins Nwatu and directed by Tchidi Chikere. The marketing and distribution are handled by Great Movies Industry Ltd. The film is a dramatization of the social issues that are always present in our society – such as class and love. The film sets out to criticize the attitude of the class conscious individuals mostly found among the bourgeoisie. The argument in the film is that the perceived gap between the rich and the poor is just the difference in the way we live. Again, the film tells us that love can be found anywhere regardless of class and wealth.

The film tells the story of two different worlds - the rich and the poor exemplified in the world of the family of King Idodo of Awadaland, and the world of Rhoda and her daughter. Ulinma (Ini Edo) and Rhoda (Hilda Dokubo) are poor wretched farmers living in a farm settlement quite out of civilization, while King Idodo (Laz Ekwueme), his Queen (Liz Benson), and their prince (Kenneth Okonkwo) are civilized and wealthy with their connections in the right places. The film opens on the farm settlement where Ulinma broke her mother's only water pot because of her excitement in seeing an airplane flying in the sky, a signification of modernity. This scene clearly shows how naïve Ulinma is. She has never been to the city, not to mention seeing the good things that city life can offer. All her life has been spent in the farm settlement. An opportunity came for her to go to the city to live with an uncle. Rhoda thinks that it will be the best for her daughter to experience the city life. In the city, Ulinma sees another world— people talking on television, cars, and all that. It is her fascination with cars that brings her to the notice of the Prince of Awadaland. The Prince's interest in the naïve girl that comes out at the gate every morning to smile at his entourage later blossomed into love. The uncle (Bruno Iwuoha) and the wife (Geraldine Ekeocha) could not understand the kind of interest the Prince can have on their native and poorly clothed house girl. The conflict in the film started with the presence of Ulinma at the airport where she followed the Prince to go and welcome his parents from their holidaying in Australia. Queen Mirabel could not hide her disgust for the tattered-looking girl who came with her son to welcome her. At their opulent mansion, the Prince appeared with the same girl at the dining. The insult will have to stop. So, the Queen and the King had to dismiss Ulinma from their presence. The Queen actually made it clear by telling Ulinma to go and wait in the servant quarters, which is a signification of where she placed Ulinma. But the Prince has found love in a place the parents least expected- the gutters. The Queen sought for details of the girl and used her status to send Ulinma back to the farm settlement in the pretence that she is dead. Rhoda and the uncles in the village were proud of Ulinma because her only crime for being sent back to the village is her poverty status. The Prince is devastated by the news of Ulinma's death. He mourns her for months. Through his benevolence to the gateman, Gabriel (Charles Awurum), the Prince learns the truth. He confronts the parents and decides to go and look for his love wherever she is. The Prince finds Ulinma and decides to live in the farm settlement with his love. The King of Awadaland goes in search of his son, and the Prince makes a proposal to him. The plan is to transform Ulinma and her mother into whatever class that the royalty deems fit for their proposed in-laws. After some months, Ulinma and her mother's transformation was complete and perfect as high society personalities. Ulinma now bearing Lillian and the mother are presented to the Queen as the daughter and wife of an ambassador respectively. She is happy and the marriage rites are performed. At the end of the film, the Queen is made to understand that her daughter-in-law, Lillian, is actually Ulinma the poor, tattered-dressed girl she rejected initially.

A Semiotic Reading of Costume, Set/Scenery and Location in *Worlds Apart*

In the video film text, *Worlds Apart*, costume set/scenery and location played signifying roles in the delineation of characters and the different worlds represented. Costumes in this narrative text are used to signify the following: age/sex of the characters; social and economic status of the characters; the occupations of the characters; geographical background/locale of the characters/narrative; characterization itself; mood of the actions; and the time/period of the actions. At the same time, set/scenery also aided the visual representations of the different worlds in terms of location and properties. Other visual elements used in this narrative include make-up, directing, acting, camera-works, lighting, and to some extent, language. The bulk of the analysis will be on the use of costumes, set/scenery and location in the signification of these worlds and also on their role in the overall semiosis of the narrative theme.



Image 1a



Image 1b

The two pictures above tagged images 1a and 1b show two different worlds in *Worlds Apart* as represented through costume and scenery. The images provide direct opposition to one another; that of wealth and poverty. The opposition is obviously orchestrated through costume, set/scenery and location as meaning construal codes.

In terms of set and scenery, the filmmaker is able to capture the thematic preoccupation in the narrative through the visual representations of the different classes in the narrative structure, placing the characters and actions within the appropriate background of set, furniture and architectural designs that suit their economic and social status as contained in the narration. The set and scenery are provided by the location and properties found within the shots as can be seen in the shots below tagged Images 2a and b, 3a and b, and 4a and b respectively. Images 2a and b are interior shots of King Idodo's palace showing shots of spiral staircases that cascade down from probably the bedroom areas to the living room and the dining section of the mansion, with all the exotic draperies significant of upper class and royalties in Nigeria. The furniture, the décor and the props help to forcefully project the image of grandeur and opulence associated with people of similar status as the inhabitants of this house within the narrative context. Also significant in meaning realization is the grandeur created by the spiral staircase and the draperies. Noting on the role of scenery in establishing socio-economic level and personality of the characters, Gillette (1997) asserts that most designers normally use set and decorative props as tools to achieve the required effect. (p.117)



Image 2a



Image 2b

A further stratification of the worlds in *Worlds Apart* through set and scenery is presented in images 3a and b below. These are shots of scenes in Mr. and Mrs. Ben's living room. Mr. and Mrs. Ben are obviously middle class, educated and with an average income as the set and scenery signify. The set represents the home of a working class middle income earner. The scenery of the Ben's household supports the ideology of middle class setting as prescribed by the narrative.

In the Ben's family, the furnishing represents lower level of wealth compared to what is seen in the shots of the interior of King Idodo's mansion, and another level of affluence compared to the world of Ulinma and her mother.



Image 3a



Image 3b

Similarly, Images 4a and b below are interior shots of Ulinma's farm house and the dining set in King Idodo's palace respectively. Significant to the ideology in the narrative is the binary opposition of wealth and poverty as seen in these images. The shots below show the representations of the different economic/social class in *Worlds Apart* as delineated through the set and scenery. In image 4a, the world of Ulinma and her mother in their farm house is seen depicted through the visual iconography of poverty as can be perceived through the composition of the image. Here in this interior shot of Ulinma's farm house, the presence of kerosene lamp, the hearth and in fact the entire mise-en-scene signifies the idea of poverty. Furthermore, the set serves all purposes- sitting room, dining set and bedroom among others. Image 4b on the other hand is an interior shot of dining section of the living room of King Idodo. The pictorial composition of the dining set, the furniture, floral arrangement on the table, the draperies and the beverages signify wealth and affluence in opposition to image 4a.



Image 4a



Image 4b

According to J. M. Gillette (1997), sets give some indications of what sort of characters will inhabit the environment of the play. ... A living room that is decorated with inexpensive but reasonably tasteful furnishings suggests one type of occupant, and the same room furnished with expensive but incredibly gaudy things indicates that a completely different sort of person lives in the room. (p.117)

In the film narrative *Worlds Apart*, the filmmaker is able to signify the different worlds of the characters using the appropriate set that defines the characters' social and economic status. This is achieved through the visual representation of ideologies of wealth and poverty in the society. The presence and absence of indicators of poverty and wealth in the images above provide the ground for the categorization of the different worlds. Poverty, wealth and royalty are signified through costume, set/scenery and location.

Following Gillette's assertion above, the oppositions necessitated by the presence and absence of wealth indicators in the images becomes a semiotic guide to reading the film.

Similarly, the geographical background and locale of the narrative and characters are provided by the physical locations used in the film. Like set and scenery, location also indicates the personality of characters that inhabits the environment. Images 5a and b below show the exterior shots of the hinterland, Ulinma's home. The thatched roof and mud house in image 5a combining with the green vegetation of the farmland as seen in images 5a and b represent the ideology of poor illiterate farmers in an underdeveloped environment. Significant is the dichotomy created by the presence of King Idodo and his entourage in image 5b.



Image 5a



Image 5b

The airport setting is also a signifying element of class and opulence. In reality, the poor as signified in Ulinma and Rhoda will hardly have access to air travel, not to mention the welcome party of chiefs and maids. Images 6a and b below are shots of King Idodo and Queen Mirabel disembarking from an airplane. The airport location heightened the perception of class and wealth of the Idodo family.



Image 6a



Image 6b

In image 7b, Ulinma's presence at the airport in her servant's costume also intensified the thematic preoccupation of the narrative. This image is the exterior shot of the arrival section of the airport where the prince and the chiefs are awaiting the arrival of King Idodo and Queen Mirabel. Image 7b on the other hand is an exterior shot of the Bens family house. The airport location played a significant role in heightening the class difference which is the main theme of the narrative.



Image 7a



Image 7b

In terms of costume, the filmmaker used clothes and accessories to stratify the different worlds in the narrative. For Ulinma and Rhoda, costume played significant role in realizing the characters and the ideologies in the narrative. Because of their status in life, the characters have no options in terms of their environment and what they wear at any particular time. The dresses serve as both day and night wears. Images 1a, 4a and 5a present Ulinma and Rhoda in their austere and poverty condition represented through costume and accessories. They cannot afford many clothes or standard apartment, so, they use what they have as often as it is possible. This idea may have stemmed from conventional belief linking austerity to poverty; however, it served its purpose of signifying poverty in this film text. When Ulinma moves to the city as seen in images 3a and 7b, there is a remarkable transformation in the clothes she wears and a perceivable difference in her general appearance. Here, she drops the tattered and dirty farm settlement clothes for the clean but still ill-fitting clothes of her house girl status in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ben. The contrast in the costumes of Mr. and Mrs. Ben and Ulinma's costume in image 3a is also remarkable.



Image 8a



Image 8b

Ben's household can be described as middle class and it is reflected in what they wear as seen in image 8a and b above. Ben always dresses in kaftans and jumpers, while his wife dresses in bou-bou gowns, kaftans, and trousers of adire material with blouse tops. These clothing signify simple middle class family with average income. On the part of the royal family of Awadaland, the costumes are significations of the exotic and opulence which they represent. Modeled in the Benin royalty and culture, the visual impression of grandeur and opulence is represented through the use of sceneries, clothes and other accessories of dressing in the costume. The first appearance of the royal family in the narrative in images 1b, 2a and 2b clearly define this opulence, not only in terms of the setting, but also through what they wear. The costumes and the spiral staircases in images 2a and b helped to project the status of the characters. According to Roger de Piles in *Principles of Painting* (1743),

Every person must be clothed according to his quality; and in painting, it is only the dress that can make a distinction of persons. But, besides keeping to the rank and quality of the person who is drawn, his drapery must also be well chosen and well cast (as cited in Umukoro 2004, p. 178).

Though the above citation is on the use of clothes in painting, it also relates how scenery and costume can be used in film narrative to define characters, locations, actions, and the entire thematic concept of the text. Above all, costume is a marker of dichotomous categories in film narrative. In images 9a and b below, costumes are used by the filmmaker to differentiate social status of the characters. Image 9a shows Gabriel, the gateman at the Bens' household appropriately dressed; while image 9b shows the palace guards at the Idodos' courtyard in their regalia as guards.



Image 9a



Image 9b

In *Worlds Apart*, the sceneries, locations and costumes are signs which clearly define the character and the thematic preoccupations in the narrative. Ulinma and her fellow farm settlement inhabitants; the Bens's household; as well as those of the royalty are each represented according to their status within the narrative context. For instance, the velvet draperies and George materials of King Idodo and his Queen in images 6a and 6b; their beaded crowns and head-pieces in images 1b and 2a and the other accessories and props, all symbolize the royalty they represent. Likewise, the Prince's costume is not left out of the opulence and grandeur of his family. As a young man, his costumes remove him from the ordinary character especially when compared with other young men in the narrative. We see the difference between him and the head guard, Jekwu.

Furthermore, the role accessories played in realizing the visual impressions must be noted. Geoffroy-Scheneiter in *Ethnic Style: History and Fashion* (2001) notes thus:

The art of finery is as old as the hills (...) men and women have always adorned chests, wrists, and earlobes with the baubles we call jewellery (...) Whether made of silver or gold, feathers, mother-of-pearl, hair, bone, or pigs teeth, an ethnic jewellery should in fact be read as a wonderful ideogram of the habits and customs of peoples for whom it often represents their sole wealth (...) (p. 24).

The quality and quantity of beads and other accessories used to depict the royal family of Awadaland in the film text represent their wealth, class, and the general grandeur associated with royalty in our culture. However, it is worthy to note that the jewelries of King Idodo and his family would be out of place if placed on a different setting or costume in the narrative under study. The visual ideologies represented portray the conceptions the society have for the different worlds as represented in the film text. Visual ideology, according to Nicos Hadjinicolaou, is "the way in which the formal and thematic elements of a picture are combined on each specific occasion. This combination is a particular form of the overall ideology of a social class" (1982, p. 244).

Another remarkable point to note in the costume of the film *Worlds Apart*, is the change in status which is achieved through the use of clothes. Costumes are used to signify the new economic and social class of the characters. Ulinma and Rhoda, following their movement to the city, are transformed mainly through their clothes and accessories. Removed from the farm settlement, and clothed in the right clothes, the characters transformation is remarkable, even to the extent that they were not recognizable to Queen Mirabel and Ben's family. Costume and accessories played important role in achieving the new identities of these character as seen in image 10a and 10b.



Image 10a



Image 10b

Ulinma's costumes turn her to a sophisticated charming girl, the daughter of a late Ambassador. So also is Rhoda's transformation. This transformation is explicit in image 11a and 11b which is the last scene of the film where Lillian is asked by the Prince to go and change into her airport scene costume. Even with all the sophistication of Lillian, Ulinma's clothes immediately throw her back to the character, Ulinma. Jean-loup Bourget (1986:54) discussing George Cuker's *My Fair Lady* (1964) notes the implication of such situation or scene thus:

That there is nothing in high society that a good actor or dancer should not be capable of achieving through imitation. Again, it should suggest a reversal of the apparent roles and functions ... is both a satire of actual social solidity and an indication of possible social fluidity.



Image 11a



Image 11b

In images 11a and b, Lillian is transformed back to Ulinma with the help of her costume here. This images establish the power of costume in placing characters in different economic and social status in narratives. It is also worthy to note the effect of image 11b which is the last scene of this narrative. Here is an image of Lillian in Ulinma's costume in a tight embrace with Queen Mirabel in her gorgeous Queenly costume and apartment. These images visually establish the use of scenery and costume in the signification of the different worlds in *Worlds Apart*.

Conclusion

This study has examined the roles of costume, set/scenery and location as narrative agents in *Worlds Apart* in the construal of meaning and social experiences in the film under consideration. The study revealed that costume, set/scenery and location played significant roles as narrative agents towards the realization of the ideology that underlie the narrative. Following this argument, the artistic success of any film narrative is dependent, to a large extent, on the proper use and application of these narrative agents.

The filmmaker should bear this in mind while planning and shooting so that the message he/she encodes through these signs will not be lost to the viewer. This study therefore recommends the following:

- (a) Nollywood filmmakers should make use of appropriate costume, set/scenery and location in the shooting of film narratives.
- (b) The use of trained personnel to handle such technical areas like costume and scene design for effective application of these areas as signs of communication.
- (c) Narrative agents should be harnessed to impart on the narrative idea.

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Videography

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