

Elements of film language: The Cinematographer's tools for visual communication

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Abstract

Film is an art form and a popular medium of entertainment whose visual basis makes it a world-wide power of communication. The Nigerian film industry has achieved tremendous progress over the years on both the economic and cultural platforms. However, the problem is that the aesthetical and professional dimensions are plagued by technical glitches regarding competence in the area of cinematography for visual communication. Nigerian films have too much dialogue; rather than show visually, it is dialogue that tells the story. Early films of the silent era 1890s were one static shot from a bulky camera as actors performed within that camera frame. David W. Griffith is credited as the film director who invented the close-up shot which moved the audience on to the stage. Thus the language of film was born. To achieve effective visual communication in film, this work focuses on the technical elements of film production highlighting the import of visual communication in film, namely; shots, shot sequences, shot composition, lighting, use of colour, sets and editing to communicate ideas, emotions and themes just as written languages use alphabets, words, sentences and paragraphs to create meaning. Furthermore, the work examines selected works of Nigerian filmmakers and evaluates the extent to which they use these cinematic elements to tell a visual story. The research design of the paper is descriptive using qualitative research method. The thrust of this paper is anchored on the fact that films convey meaning through use of codes and conventions similar to the way other languages construct meaning in communication and filmmakers should employ visual language using pictures to show and communicate in a more informative, meaningful and subtle manner. The major findings of the paper support the popular mantra "film is a visual medium" which is a truism as words tell while a picture shows and communicates reality hence the aphorism a picture is worth a thousand words. In conclusion, the paper recommends that since the visual language of film transcends geographical boundaries enabling stories to be presented with a universal appeal by the simultaneous signification of film syntax, camera work, mise-en-scene, film techniques, montage, content and style, filmmakers should adopt this approach to enhance their skills with the knowledge of the psychological, creative and communicative impact of these cinematic and theatrical elements which are some of the most useful tools film directors employ to speak the visual language of film in order to communicate with a heterogeneous society.

Keywords: *Film, Language, Cinematography, Communication, Shot, Composition, Camera Angles.*

Introduction

The word language generally refers to human system of communication which consists of words used in a structured and conventional way. A language is believed to be more than a collection of words, written or spoken based on religion or ethnicity. According to the free dictionary (www.thefreedictionary.com) language is a communication of thoughts and feelings through a system of arbitrary signals, such as voice, sounds, gestures and written symbols and syntax to generate and communicate meaning. Language as a means of communication has attained different dimensions over the years. The sign language for instance employs manual communication to convey meaning using hand shapes, movement of the hands, arms or body including facial expressions to convey meaning, which are the thoughts of the speaker. Sign Language is most common among deaf cultures. It is also used by people who can hear but cannot physically speak with words. Similarly, technological advancements have given birth to a programming language designed to communicate instructions that would control the behavior of the computer to express algorithms. In like manner, the language and grammar of mathematics is very logical and can be analyzed grammatically as stated in this wise; "two plus two equals to four expressed thus; $2+2=4$. It is from these simple symbols and the rules for manipulating these symbols that the language of algebra, quadratic equation and trigonometry developed in mathematics. Esty (2017) emphasizes how mathematical thoughts, methods and facts are expressed in symbolism in order to read and write mathematics and how mathematical reasoning works. For example;

- a) 7 is the square root of 49 expressed as follows $7 = \sqrt{49}$
- b) 7 is less than 13 expressed as follows $7 < 13$
- c) 7 is a prime number List of prime numbers 2,3,5,7,11,13,17,19,23,29

To understand and apply the language of mathematics is key to high performance in the subject at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education.

From time immemorial, man has excelled in visual storytelling through his cave paintings. Thus, the visual language of painting during the ancient period is more universal than spoken words as modern man

can interpret and understand the motif of such paintings. If these primitive cave paintings complement the adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” then a motion picture shot when built up into scenes and sequences is worth even more. This paper looks at film language as a visual means of cinematic communication.

A Brief Review of Film Language

The language of film developed several years after the advent of the cinema in the 1890s. (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_film) The one reel and short dramatic films of that era were shot and exhibited as if through a proscenium because the camera was positioned in a fixed spot and all actions took place within the purview of that stationary camera lens. The attendant consequences were that it created a missing link between the audience and the action on the screen. This communicative vacuum existed until the American film director David W. Griffith made vital contributions to the syntax of the motion picture film that shaped the foundation of the language of film. To this end Brownlow (1968) infers that;

Griffith’s films changed the whole course of American cinema as some directors imitating him discovered that they were breaking new ground themselves. Included in the innovations which he introduced and which are now generally followed by the most advanced producers are; the use of large close-up figures, distant views as reproduced first in *Ramona*, the “Switchback”, sustained suspense, the “fade-out”, and restraint in expression, raising motion picture acting which has won for its recognition as a genuine art.

Furthermore, Griffith’s cinematic exploits are captured by Drew (2016) who states that;

Working in partnership with his brilliant cameraman, G. W. “Billy” Bitzer, Griffith demonstrated a singular genius in developing previous experiments in camera effects and movement, lighting, close-ups and editing into a cinematic technique that transformed film as an art form... his use of close-ups and medium shots enabled the spectator to emphasize with the emotions expressed by the characters; his panoramic long shots created an impression of epic grandeur; his innovations in lighting with the help of Bitzer added mood and aesthetic quality to the images.

These innovations in cinematography liberated the camera from the initial static position and as a result camera movements became popular and the audience could be moved to the stage into the scene to make the story more interesting and more dynamic. Films like *For Love of Gold* (1908) *The Lonely Villa* (1909), *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), and *Birth of a Nation* (1915) were composed of a series of different shots which when edited together created meaning for the audience as opposed to a single camera set-up. The edited shots were like complete sentences hence the emergence of film language. Every language deals with semantics and vocabulary that underscores the meaning of words and sentences. In order to communicate effectively with the audience, the filmmaker uses language as cinematic structure. That is to say;

Cinema uses shots, shot sequences, scenes and dramatic sequences to communicate an idea in the same way that written language uses letters, words, sentences and paragraphs. Using language as an organizational structure can give your video greater narrative, impact and broader appeal... visual language allows us to record ideas in a way that is more universal than spoken words. (<https://www.videomaker.com/article>)

Like the writer’s pen, the cinematographer uses the motion picture camera as one of the technical elements to communicate with his audience. The different camera shots contain visual information such as: point-of-view, reaction shots, continuity, over the shoulder shots, cross-shooting and cross-cutting as well as dissolves and montage which are all parts of the technical codes in film that describe the ways that the viewers read visual information contained in a film. Other production elements that a film director employs to affect the feelings, reactions and thinking of the audience includes camera angles, lighting, acting, costumes and much more. These are very much similar to sentence structure and the grammar used in spoken and written languages.

Deep focus cinematography employs the use of ‘fast’ lens and creative lighting to keep objects in focus from positions very near the camera to points at some distance from it. Pramaggiore and Willis (2006) acknowledge that this technique permits many planes to remain in focus to accentuate the interplay among several levels of meaning. Lighting plays a very significant role in determining exposure. It is an essential requirement of film making because it illuminates the sets and actors and can be designed to create an atmosphere, mood and effects. Most importantly, without lighting the camera lens cannot record any image. Zettl (2000) explains that:

Like the human eye, the camera cannot see without a certain amount of light. Because it is not objects that we actually see but the light reflected off them, manipulating the light falling on the subject/object influences the way we perceive them on the screen. Such manipulation is called lighting.

It therefore follows that any object or character not properly lit when recorded on film will not convey the desired message hence the need to understand and put to creative use the communicative impact of lighting when lighting a scene.

Construction of the shot

It is evident that in English Language, the basic unit of meaning in written texts is the word. In film however, it is the shot which is the smallest building block of an action or event recorded by one camera at a time from camera-start to camera-stop. Like the written language which building blocks are made up of words, sentences and paragraphs, film uses a series of shots to make a sequence, several sequences to make up a scene and several scenes when edited together make a narrative. These series of connected shots when edited together create meaning which is the visual language of film. Whitaker (1970) opines that;

The shot then is seen as the basic indicator of visual content. It contains all the visual data of the frame plus the potential for movement and sound; and it endures. A great part of what one can say about the film language is organized under the heading of “the shot”.



Bird's eye view/Aerial Shots

The grammar of film language is evidenced in its systematic arrangement, an organic development in a rather descriptive form rather than prescriptive. The structure and precision of a film serve as a veritable tool of communication using syntax, symbols and connotations which are common codes. The technological developments in the growth of cinema have contributed tremendously to this organic evolution and development of Hollywood film grammar. James Monaco (1972) qualifies film syntax as being “primarily concerned with the frame which is the pictorial elements within a given “shot” or “take” popularly referred to as mise-en-scene; a French phrase for “putting in the scene”. The contents of each shot require careful consideration as how the narrative is to be structured visually. Morison and Nwazue(2014) opine that:

Shots composition is vital in film making because it strongly determine what the film looks. As such, it is the duty of the director to ensure that the director of photography captures as much as possible, the images or shots that would creatively express his composite picturization of actions, ideas, idioms and other cultural / aesthetic milieu he intends to portray in the film. The same dexterity should be applied in all elements of the production be it costume, make-up, set design etc.

Similarly, the opening shot of any scene should start with an establishing shot which enables the viewer have an orientation or a sense of the location where the action is taking place.



Long Shot (LS) – Establishing a Potato Plantation

In a general sense, mise-en-scene is the staging of a scene through careful arrangement of actors, scenery, lighting and props within the film frame. These visual contents determine to a large extent how the story is told; what the shots consist of is therefore crucially important. According to Monaco (1981), the codes of mise-en-scene are tools with which the filmmaker alters and modifies our reading of the shot. The elements covered by the mise-en-scene are props, setting, costume, performance, colour and lighting. In addition to choosing what is to be included in the shot, the director also has to decide how the elements are to be arranged. This simply means that shot composition is also central to mise-en-scene. The film director is therefore confronted with hard decisions as to what to shoot, how to shoot it and how to present the image in a shot. Thus, Abrams et al (2001) opine that:

A director needs to take a number of decisions when deciding on shot content and arrangement. It needs to be recognized, however, that though the director is the person ultimately responsible for such matters, film conventions established over time can also play a large part in shaping mise-en-scene.

Other elements within the mise-en-scene that set-up expectations for the viewer and can produce instant meaning and signify certain things are the setting, props, costume, performance, lighting and colour. The performance of an actor makes significant contributions to meanings produced. There are situations where an actor's performance would communicate panic, confidence, friendliness, hostility and in other situations the audience is able to read an actor who may show facial expressions of fear, anger, sadness or joy. Set design is another essential element of mise-en-scene which not only creates the mood or atmosphere for a production but also provides the actors with a working environment. To this end, Wurtzel (1983) explains that:

Sets and staging are used to create the physical environment in which a show takes place. On most shows, the audience's first impression of the programme comes from the set. A set which is well designed and effectively staged instantly communicates the show's intentions, tone and atmosphere to the viewer. It really sets up the audience for the production.



Objective Close-Up (CU) Shot

The use of costumes not only embellishes the setting/location but speak volumes about the production. A film set in the 1950s would definitely have costumes, hair cut, lifestyle transportation and music etc. reflecting that period. The environment, homes – urban and rural, clothes that the actors and actresses wear in a film, colours, designs help to signify characters, make clear distinctions between characters, portray richness or poverty. Kunle Afolayan’s film *October 1* released in 2014 stands out as a master display of life in pre-independent colonial Nigeria. The film depicts the various aspects of culture and values cherished by the people in Akote, a typical village in south Western Nigeria. The use of local traditional costumes and props like antique vehicles, television sets, antique shotguns, other weapons and police uniforms, use of locations and the ancient architecture make the film have an overwhelming appeal and acceptance at local and international levels. From the foregoing, it is possible to assert that film language has developed over the years almost exclusively along visual lines.

It is believed that Nollywood could be more successful by overcoming the limitations that rob the videos of the quality and production standards expected by its viewership at the national and international levels. Krings and Okome (2013) in a chat with one of Nigeria’s renowned film makers Mahmood Ali Balogun confirm that ‘Nigerian producers are not doing the right things and that they should be more concerned with quality rather than quantity’



Costume for Purma Chamba cultural festival Donga, Taraba State

Composition of shots as film language

It is possible that most people who go to the cinema to watch movies see film as a story in a pictorial form and not a specialized medium with its own language. Composition is one of the most important visual elements of motion picture production. It entails the artistic and meaningful positioning of all of the pictorial elements within the frame of the shot. Roberts and Sharples, Jr.(1979) stress that “it should be aesthetically pleasing to the eye – proper balance, proper use of line, mass, colour and movement and it should visually provide the proper dynamic emphasis, significant relationships, the mood and meaning of the scene”. The purpose of composing a shot is to focus the attention of the audience on the point of the shot where there is need for emphasis. Braddley (1975) observes that:

The composition of every shot in a film contributes something to the impact and effectiveness of the film as a whole. Filling the frame with significant patterns, taking advantage of an interesting foregoing object, varying the angle and looking from below and above; all these help to bring the screen to life. There is an old maxim, “it is the close ups that tell the story”, that is worth keeping in mind. Too many long shots and medium close ups that do not come to grips with the subject can make a film seem remote and impersonal.

One other creative person in a film production project is the director of photography, or lighting cameraman popularly known as the cameraman. The professional relationship between the director and the cameraman is to creatively use the language of film to interpret the film script and it is the camera that is the instrument which serves as the narrator of these stories. Camera placement, the choice of camera angle, framing, and control of lighting and operation of the camera are the main duties performed by the cinematographer to achieve visual communication. The artistry of cinematography which is visual

storytelling comes in controlling what the viewer sees or does not see and how such images are presented for maximum impact. Shot composition offers the director many possible choices to convey different tones to a scene mindful of the fact that the camera is a surrogate for the audience. According to Mascelli (1979):

Good composition is arrangement of pictorial elements to form a unified, harmonious whole. A cameraman composes whenever he positions a player, a piece of furniture or prop. Placement and movement of players within the setting should be planned to produce favorable audience reactions. Since viewing a motion picture is an emotional experience, the manner in which scenes are composed, staged, lighted, photographed and edited should motivate audience reaction; according to the script's intent.

Medium Shot (MS)



The Extreme Long Shot (ELS) also called the establishing shot is primarily an informational shot that depicts vastness of setting the scene with its elements in order to acquaint the viewers with the characters and location. An aerial perspective shot gives enormous depth, though it can dwarf the characters as they seem almost swallowed up by the vast landscape. This shot can awe the audience by beauty, vastness or grandeur of setting conveying proper mood and atmosphere.



Extreme Long Shot (ELS) Rock

In a Long Shot (LS) the camera is at a distance that allows general recognition of the subject matter but prevents the identification of small points of detail. The distance of the camera from the subject reflects an emotional distance; the audience do not get as emotionally involved in what is going on as they would if

it were closer. The viewer is therefore a casual bystander, an observer, somewhat aloof to what is happening. In a medium shot, a midway position between the long shot and the close-up, the viewer begins to engage with the characters on a personal level. The close-up shot is a visual element that the camera lens stresses only one main part of the subject. It is an intimate shot where the expressions and emotions of an actor are more visible, affecting, and it is deliberately structured to engage the character in a direct and personal manner. The viewer gets clearer visual information about the character's actions with intimacy and impact. Thompson and Bowen (2009) believe that extreme close-up shots amplify emotional intensity because the shot puts the audience directly in the face of the subject. This shot brings out the smallest emotional cues and raises the intensity of the problems behind them. It is an important shot because it directs the audience attention on to the screen.



Extreme Long Shot (ELS)



Long Shot (LS)



Medium Shot (MS)



Medium Close-Up (MCU)



Extreme Close-Up (ECU), Big Close-Up (BCU)

All camera shots are structured in such a way that their effectiveness should direct the viewer's attention on the screen. These shots appear to be talking to the viewer as if to say "Look here, look there, this is what I want you to see". Heiderich (2016) affirms that each film shot is meant to draw the viewer deeper into the scene by narrowing their focus. A close-up on a good character will let the audience identify with him just like a close-up of a bad guy is a given chance for the audience to dislike him. When the audience gets closer to a character on the screen, it helps to identify who is in the scene and why the audience should care about what happens to them.

Camera Angles

Camera angles are very important in visual storytelling. They determine both the audience viewpoint as well as the area covered in a given shot. The director has the prerogative of choosing the most suitable camera position to view players, setting and performance in accordance with his interpretation of the script.



A carefully chosen camera angle not only heightens dramatic visualization but puts the audience on edge as they become either objective or subjective participants. The subjective camera angle takes the viewpoint of one of the characters, a personal viewpoint that places the viewer in the picture by establishing a performer – viewer eye-to-eye relationship. The objective camera shot on the other hand places the viewer as a third- party neutral observer watching an event happening as a bystander. The audience can derive meaning from the use of high and low camera angles. It is common practice in human communication that people relate with one another subconsciously at horizontal eye level contact. The same eye contact is made in film however when high or low angle is used, a character is portrayed with different interpretations.

A high angle shot is any shot that the camera is placed above the subject looking downward to view the subject. The choice of a high angle shot may be for aesthetic, technical or psychological reasons to influence the viewers' perception or reaction. The high camera angle position usually has the effect of making the subject look smaller than normal, giving him or her appearance of being weak, powerless and trapped or enslavement. Consider a courtroom scenario where the court is in session trying a woman accused of murdering her husband. A low angle shot from the woman's viewpoint looking up to the judge; this makes the judge appear to be larger than life, the almighty, power and a symbol of authority. A quick reversed cut to a high angle point of view shot of the judge looking down at the woman makes the woman look small, powerless, miserable, condemned, sorrowful and insignificant. This visual communication no doubt tells volumes about the personalities mentioned.



High Angle Short



Low Angle Shot

Commenting on “Camera Angles and Embodiment” whether an object in a picture is shown from above or from below Meyers-Levy and Peracchio (1992) relied on research by several authors - Kraft (1987);

Mandell and Shaw (1973); Tiemens (1970) in their assumption that when an object is photographed from a low angle, the viewer would seem to be looking up at it, the object was judged more positively larger, stronger, bolder than when the same object was photographed from a high angle. The low angle shot therefore presents the character as powerful, a symbol of authority dominating and threatening. The above analysis points to the fact that each camera angle is a grammatical interpretation of the subject as the same figure can be defined as either powerful or weak according to the angle of the set-up. One may therefore assert that camera angles indeed contradict the belief that the camera cannot lie. Wolf Rilla (1974) authenticates that a camera can really lie. "It can make small people appear tall and tall people small; it can, according to the lens used increase or diminish the actual dimensions of a room". If it can be assumed that a camera can lie, then that capacity is part of its grammatical equipment.

Camera Movement

Camera movements are most exciting choices available to the film director as they can be dynamic and energizing depending on whether the movement should be stabilized by putting the camera on the tripod or handheld. A handheld camera can capture with jerks commotion or a crisis situation where people are running helter-skelter for their lives; or in case of brake failure (truck, car) resulting to an accident. Dolly shots (tracking shots) have the camera mounted on a dolly to enable the audience see the action and the set from different angles while the crane shot enables the camera to be raised and lowered and moved horizontally. In the vertical and horizontal pan or tilt shot, the camera is in a fixed position and it is used to direct attention to a particular subject or object as well as follow movement. The tracking shot is one way of directing the audience attention to a shot as it brings the subject closer by physically moving the camera closer while for the zoom in and out technique, the camera does not physically move but the lens alters its focal length to bring the subject closer or away from the viewer.

Editing

In film, editing is a term used as a synonym for cutting. It is the decision taken regarding alterations needed in respect of a film production as the editor separates and joins together the various film shots taken from the different locations to produce the final sequence to achieve the film director's vision of the script. This process involves viewing, selecting and assembling the picture and sound "footage" captured during production into a coherent and meaningful story or visual presentation in line with the original intent of the work which is to entertain, educate, inform and inspire. To achieve this, the film editor must ensure that all 'good takes' when assembled consist of matched cuts in order to have continuous action from one shot to another in a smooth flow of ceaseless series of images. Annette Kuhn quoted in Cook and Bernink (1999) writes that continuity editing establishes spatial and temporal relationships between shots in such a way as to permit the spectator to read a film without any conscious effort, precisely because the editing is invisible. To actualize Kuhn's postulation, it is important that the shots flow smoothly from one to another and that edit points are not noticeable. An edit is the actual cut point between two different shots in order to assemble all the motion picture components of shots from disparate visual and auditory elements into their length and final order. Thompson and Bowen (2009) note that;

When you write, you select words from your vocabulary and string them together in a particular fashion to construct sentences that will inform, entertain and evoke emotional responses from the reader. When you edit a motion picture, there is a similar process. You have to select shots and string them together in edited scenes to inform, entertain and evoke emotional responses within the viewer. For your written language - spelling, word order, phrase, structure, tense etc. There is also a similar visual grammar for the language of motion pictures – how they are shot and how they are edited together.

It therefore becomes very clear that the order of images (shots) is important in cinematic syntax as much as they are important in making a sentence. Film scenes sometimes start with a Long Shot to establish the location and gradually move into show talent and action. Film uses a variety of codes as critical constructions to express meaning. Some of these codes are culturally derived as in mannerisms and gestures which are artistically shared with the theatre. In film however, montage stands out as prime example unique to the cinema alone.

Montage is a series of separate short shots edits of an event or events put together in a sequence which are condensed into a unified whole. Arnheim (1964) looks at an American classic comedy *Gold Rush* (1925) starring Charlie Chaplin where the contrast between the rich and poor is symbolized in a striking

graphic manner, an astounding similarity of a rich man and a hungry poor man's meal linguistically presented in a filmic visual tradition as Charlie Chaplin cooks and eats his boots.

Charlie Chaplin's meal	Cut to	Rich man's meal
Leather of Boot	=	Carcass of fish
Nails	=	fish bones
Boot laces	=	spaghetti

The illustration above is an indication that shot and montage are the basic elements of cinema as the collision of independent shots that are even opposite to one another give rise to the dramatic principle.

Let us consider another physiological effect when a murder scene is reconstructed in montage fragments the sum of which will be an all embracing complex of emotional feeling. Jay Leyda's (1949) separate shots which are montage pieces when cut together thrill the audience.

- | | | |
|---------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| 1. A hand lifts a knife | 2 The eyes of the victim open suddenly | 3 His hands clutch the table |
| 4. The knife is jerked up | 5. The eyes blink involuntarily | 6. Blood gushes |
| 7. A mouth shrieks | 8. Something (blood) drips onto a shoe | |

These shots arranged and edited as montage have more impact on the audience as opposed to the use of other transitional devices such as mix, dissolve superimposition or simply showing the entire event in a long shot. The movement from one scene to the next during the editing process is known as a transition. Each type of transition gives a message to the audience in relationship to the style of the film as well as how the passage of time is accomplished as in dissolve, wipe, cross cutting or parallel editing, wipes and fade in/fade out.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the language of film as it relates to visual communication and how both the director and the cinematographer collaborate on a production to use the camera as a "narrator" to tell a visual story. The paper has given a lot of insights in the use of cinematic elements including shot types, camera angles, mise-en-scene, composition, camera movements, montage and editing techniques which are indispensable tools for the actualization of the syntax of film language as they describe the way we learn to "read" visual information contained in a film. In addition, the paper has demonstrated the interconnectivity between sign language and film production by exploring the relevance of Linguistics to film productions and how film language can aid interpretation of films. The different film elements discussed here are visual representations of film language as seen in a montage assembly of rapid shots of different lengths, a juxtaposition of imagery in various sizes which create an idea and give meaning to a film. Similarly, the way the camera is used to tell a story can also be analyzed as a structural element of film language to communicate with the audience. This paper is an addition to the existing literature in film production and criticism and it is expected that this study will serve as a new vista to emerging film practitioners to become more knowledgeable about the film codes and conventions to construct meaning in cinematic visual communication.

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