

**Historical realism and thematic simplicity in selected
video films of *Biyi Bandele*, *Steve McQueen* and *Lancelot
Oduwa Imasuen***

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Abstract

*As a technology and an art form perceived to be capable of proliferating over the world, it has long been thought that film has a natural affinity with reality. It has established itself as a powerful and popular art form. Film producers have creatively exploited the techniques that give film its narrative power while expressing emotions and ideas. In general, films are both created and produced in the contexts of their social and economic conditions. Traces of historical facts remain evident in the works of most Nigerian and African Film producers/directors. Past events such as war, colonial rule, and struggle for independence and so on, have been adapted to form storylines with thematic emphasis on socio-political and economic effects on the people. Biyi Bandele's *Half of a yellow Sun* (2014), Steve McQueen's*

Twelve Years a Slave (2013) and Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen's Invasion 1897 (2015) explore stories of Biafra War, Slave Trade and Colonization respectively. Resting on this foundation, this paper takes a critical look at the element of truth and simplicity of themes and also finds out the aim and purpose of these themes in video films. The qualitative method of research formed the bases of this paper. As a qualitative method, inferences were drawn from relevant books, academic journals, magazines to further validate the research work. Despite the global attention currently received by some historical films, it has also come under harsh criticism for the quality of its productions and the content of its stories. This research work recommends future research into the historical realism and narratives of specific films and on the themes and categories that dominate the film industry. Hence, the research work explores the History, Realism and Theme as evident in the three video films.

Introduction

Film builds on the value system of a society, for the purpose of enlightening, educating and motivating the people. It presents the society with a wide range of cultural influences that affect almost everything from attitude to perception. One might opine that African film is a didactic one, because its aim is to instruct and inform, while providing entertainment. This is because it is pungent in its treatment of the national question.

The above statement by Tracie Utoh Ezeajugh drives home the points that thematic preoccupation in cultural and historical dramatic work go a long way in enlightening the masses on issues of the past so as to keep them abreast of the present and in turn sharpen their minds and perception about the future hence, the place of history in the formation of the dramatic plot remains indelible if national consciousness and patriotism is to be re-awakened. However the unanswered questions are what is history? What is the place of realism in historical films?

History according to the new universal dictionary is an action of facts and events, which have taken place in the lives of nations and individuals in their chronological order. E.R Carr on the other hand posits that "history is a dialogue between the present and past"(123) from the two definitions stated, one can deduce that history is a record of past events-these events could range from transactions, war, politics, agreement between two countries or individuals, etc.

Realism on its own is one of the early movements of the modern theatre. In fact, Oscar G. Brockett in his book *The Theatre: An Introduction* states that:

By 1850 a conscious movement towards realism in art was emerging. It developed first in France, and by 1860 its advocates had proclaimed the following precepts: the playwrights should strive for a truthful

depiction of the real world; he should write about the society around him; he should strive to be as objective as possible. (612)

Realism is an objective movement seeking the presence of a "general" truth in a work of art (drama). In furtherance, realism is a historical product, because far from the writer's talent for writing they need to be influenced by a cause and pushed by surrounding factors that lead to their creative productions. Hence, works are based on a real, truthful and accurate event in addition to involving their ideologies and comments to give the work power and not just reduce its documentary act of historical recording. In France where it originates, writers were influenced by the socio-historical changes that took place due to the emerged scientific discoveries, industrial revolution and the search for wider knowledge in every field in life.

Historical realism: An archetype of a truthful lie

“To bring about the truthful lie; He uses real names, real sense and real characters(historical personae) but his plot is not as chronological as the historical story line” (Stanley Obuh, 116)

This statement by Stanley Obuh presents historical dramatic works as an archetype of a 'truthful lie' because

though there are traces of verisimilitude in them, there are still traces of lies. While history moves in a linear progression, literature may not. In an earlier study Longinus states that: "the employment of art is in every way a fitting aid to nature; for it is the conjunction of the two which tends to ensure perfection". (82) Historical facts obtained in a film are approximation of reality. The transfer of historical facts into drama is a critical process of interpretation and transformation when it is transformed into film it ceases to be history, but dramatic a presentation in a film medium.

However, historical realism requires the writer's critical knowledge of the original material (History) so as to aid interpretation during transposition and transmutation. Adaptation loses its value when there is no similarity between the Derivation and the Original material, the history adaptor strives to detect the adaptable and the inadaptable elements as well as the dominant codes in the original material. This detection aids him in the creation of situations and characters that bear resemblance with those in the original material. In Ola Rotimi's *The God's are not to Blame*, the characters in the original bear close resemblance with characters in the Derivation; Oedipus and Odewale share characteristics and progression. The plots of *The Gods are not to Blame* has a similar development with that of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, hence the idea of evidence of truth. As a matter of fact, history is of a great deal to

literature and many literary artistes preoccupy themselves with historical materials in the treatment of history, Realistic writers have accused society, of being responsible for the confusion and contradiction in which their heroes find themselves, often typical for suffering individuals who struggle against mainstream ideas. Brockett agrees with this in his book, *The Theatre: An Introduction*; "If blame is to be assigned, much of it must go to the society that has allowed undesirable hereditary and environmental factors to exist." (312). The artiste exposes the environmental factors that affect people and values that dominate the very spirits of the individuals. Moreover, literary works tend to reflect specific historical facts that are of great significance to the writer or the world in which he lives. In writing a good historical film, a writer researches his or her chosen period thoroughly and strives for verisimilitude. This requires an accurate and detailed knowledge of the political situation, the social stratification and the economic circumstance of the given historical society. Brockett points out one way these could be achieved: "...however, spectacle was used primarily to idealize place, historical period or characters. It was a simple task to extend these earlier practices to meet the demands of realism". (313). So according to Brockett, an artiste who strives to depict verisimilitude in his historical piece should employ spectacle In order to paint a perfect picture. Hence, his scenes in order to make them

comprehensible and true must connect situations as well as dramatic personae with contemporary historical circumstances (symbols, colour, language, etc.). Obuh buttresses the need for these connections; "Art for art's sake has now traced its footsteps back to the dunghill, for art is a function of society. The creative writer in pursuance of his commitment to society heed to an inner calling which makes the socio-historical frame work of his writing depict the pulsating characteristics of the echo's of age" (111).

Realism and film history

Acknowledging the confusion yet another application of the term 'realism' brings to the field of film studies, Allen and Gomery propose a Realist approach to film history that they claim offers the prospect of fashioning an approach to history which preserves the notion of an independently existing past, while taking into account the necessity and complexity of theory in historical explanation. They define film history as a project that 'attempts to explain the changes that have occurred to the cinema since its origins, as well as account for aspects of the cinema that have resisted change.' They argue that the Realist approach is 'particularly applicable' to the history of the cinema as film is, a complex historical phenomena (an art form, economic institution, technology, cultural product) which, since its inception, has participated in many networks or relationships.

In other words, film is an open system. It is not just a set of components forming a whole, but an interrelated set of components that condition and are conditioned by each other. Allen and Gomery view history as being torn between the opposing poles of empiricism (the collection and arrangement of data) and conventionalism (the theoretical explanation of historical events). Though they acknowledge the importance of each of these approaches to historical research, they consider neither as a suitable approach to history in its own right and seek to negotiate an intermediary position for Realism. They take the fundamental principle of empiricism to be the existence of a world independent of the historian, and that the goal of historical inquiry is the exploration of that world. Theories must be assessed by reference to the real world. Realism departs from empiricism over what constitutes explanation of the real world.

Empiricism, according to Allen and Gomery, conceives of reality as the one-dimensional realm of observable phenomena, and ends with the observation of regularities among those phenomena. Realism seeks to go further than this in order to explain how and why regularities emerge over time, to reveal the generative mechanisms that cause observable phenomena. Realism joins with conventionalism over the role of the historian as an active theoriser and interpreter, and takes theory to be not the unnecessary intervention of subjectivity but the indispensable application by the historian of

discernment, judgment, and reasoning to the raw data of historical evidence. Realism recognises that theories are value laden and carry with them implications and assumptions derived from culture, language, and the dominant theoretical paradigm at a given time. Realism diverges from conventionalism on the grounds that it does not follow that we must assume an ‘anarchistic theory of knowledge and presume that one theory cannot be more valid than another. Realism argues that a theory should be internally logical, coherent, and consistent, but that this does not guarantee the success of a theory; that success may only be established by testing a theory against external criteria. Allen and Gomery base the validation of their historiography on the principle of non-contradiction. Frequently the same phenomenon will be investigated by scientists with differing philosophical orientations, theories, and methods. On most points we would expect the resulting explanations to differ as well. Where they do not, where there is non- contradiction among them, there is evidence of a finding that is valid: one not merely a product of the theoretical model imposed by the scientist. They cite Terry Lovell in arguing that where differing theoretical positions agree we find a residue of theoretically grounded observations which may be taken as the testing ground for any given theory at any given point in time. As Realists, they insist that historical explanations can and should be tested by

reference to both historical evidence and to other, competing theories.

Theoretical framework

A prolific critic, Andre Bazin is best known for his defense of cinematic realism. For Bazin, what filmmakers as different as Robert Bresson (1901–1999), De Sica, Renoir, Rossellini, and Orson Welles (1915–1985) had in common was a desire to put cinema at the service of what Bazin called a fundamental faith in reality. The credibility of a film did not come from its verisimilitude but from the identity between the photographic image and its object. In *The Ontological Realism of the Photographic Image* (1945), Bazin sketches a brief history of art, in which he identifies cinema as the fulfillment of the human craving for realistic representation. Cinema's mission was thus to fulfill this goal. For Bazin, realism was a style whose chief elements were the long take, deep focus, limited editing and when possible, the use of non-professional, or at least relatively unknown actors. Realism for Bazin was the essence of cinema, its ontology and a rhetoric whose keys were simplicity, purity, and transparency. In 1960, two years after Andre Bazin's death, Siegfried Kracauer continued and radicalized Bazin's project in his book *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Like Bazin, Kracauer argued that of all the arts, film is uniquely qualified to record physical reality.

Kracauer conceded that many films combine realist with formalist tendencies, but he concluded the films that make us "experience aspects of physical reality are the most valid aesthetically".

Philosopher Stanley Cavell also has argued for the ontological realism of cinema, even though his main references are the films of classical Hollywood. For Cavell as for Bazin and Kracauer, the basis of the film medium is photographic. A photograph, and by extension film, always implies the presence of the rest of the world. Film 'displaces' people and objects from the world onto the screen. This is not only proof, for Cavell, of film's ontological realism; it is also the beginning of our reconciliation with the world. Movies permit us to view the world unseen, at a distance, and this sets in motion the intellectual process that will bring us back to the world and will reaffirm our participation in it and because of the relevance of the Ontological Realism of the Photographic Image on historical film realism, this study is hinged on Andre Bazin's theory.

Historical realism and thematic Simplicity in Biyi Bandele's *Half of a yellow Sun*, Steve McQueen's *Twelve years a Slave* and Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen's *Invasion 1897*

Historical Realism deals with knowledge of history of any work of art which reflects on the society. In this same light, history is of great essence to literature and

many literary artists pre-occupied themselves with historical materials. The film *Half of a Yellow Sun* comes from the historical novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Ngozi Chimamanda Adichie as an emblem of historical realism, which is also an adaptation. Thus, historical literature consists of some basis of truth used in reflecting reality. History of Nigerian/Biafran War, Nigeria Politics and Tribal differences are all reflected in the film *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Realism is a historical product because far from the writers' talent of writing they need to be influenced by a cause and pushed by surrounding factors that lead to their creative production. Since it is so, they base their works on a real, truthful and accurate event in addition to involving their ideologies and own comments to give the work a power and not just reduce it to a documentary act of historical recording. Realism in film relies on both narrative and visual realism by this the researcher mean that the story must be grounded in reality and the visuals must match. The movies under study are grounded in reality with none of the escapist fantasy of the typical Nollywood films.

The film *Half of a Yellow Sun* recreates a seminal moment in modern African history. Biafra's impassioned experiences during the Civil War outbreak characterized by hunger, poverty, unduly migrations, sabotage, etc. the major crisis for the war in the country is due to ethnic superiority and exercise of control of government by the

three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. Biafra is a Sovereign State created by its Head of State Col. Ojukwu who declared Biafra as a means to liberate Ndi Igbo of the Eastern Region of Nigeria from the hands and fangs of Colonial bondage.

The film quite begins from the independence of Nigeria from the hands of its White masters in 1960 Oct. 1st. Though Nigeria has liberated herself from their masters, but the White men influence was still flourishing its government. The problem here is that they adopted the system of government instituted by the Europeans. The major attribute of the film *Half of a Yellow Sun* is the elaborate effort of history witnessed in the film. Every scene, movement and a times dialogues from the characters all depicted history. Even documentaries of Ojukwu's speech which sometimes interrupted the film progression also helped to boost the history in the film.

The director Biyi Bandele made all his human effort to enhance meanings in the film. The scenes actions and even the diction were all related to history of all that happened from the Independence Day to the period of the civil war outbreak. The history of class difference in Nigeria with the poor and the rich in the society is also witnessed.

Ugwu is disclosed to us at the end of the film as the writer of the Biafra War. Odenigbo is a well renowned Professor who despite all odds remained steadfast as an

Igbo and also as the Biafra secessionist when he said to a character Miss Adebayo, thus, "But I was an Igbo before the White men came". This statement was in response to the speech made by Miss Adebayo when she called Odenigbo "a selfish tribalist". The film had characters who were mainly based on the Eastern part of Nigeria; Ndi Igbo; they were the ones deeply affected by the war. They were in support of the revolution but unfortunately were not well equipped, prepared or financed as the Hausa. That is why Ndi Igbo suffered tremendous losses. Furthermore, the film is more than a history lesson. In the processes, the viewers learn at least one side of this particular time in Nigeria history.

Twelve years a slave is a film whose plot and story line was a reality and a true story of Solomon Northup. The film is set during the slave trade era in the 16th century, the period witnessed the Trans-Atlantic slave trade between Europeans and West Africans. Massive numbers of Africans were sold into slavery to work in plantations in the West Indies, Caribbean Island and America (North and South). The film was shot in location in the Southern State of Louisiana America where slavery is vibrant due to plantations and farms which required slave labour continued to buy slaves even though slavery has been abolished in other parts of the world and America.

These farm and plantation owners ignored the law and patronized the kidnapping of freemen (Africans) and

force them to work in their plantation, example Mr. Epps. So the film adopts a historical approach in telling the story of Mr. Solomon Northup thereby throwing light on history of slavery. These historical events triggered or prompted Steve McQueen to plot the story in other to expose the dark history of slavery in America and the film also reveal the cruel, wicked, inhuman and sufferings of Africans in America during the slave period which have left a scare on Africans till present day. In film, viewer is asked to accept many kinds of imaginary worlds and the term Realism denotes a special application of what we consider genuine or real in presentation.

Twelve Years a Slave, a film directed by Steve McQueen which explores the theme of slavery centers on the life of Solomon Northup, A new York state born free African-American man who is kidnapped in Washington D.C in 1841 and sold in slavery. Northup works on plantations in the state of Louisiana for twelve years before his release.

In reality, Northup's memoir was co-edited in 1968 by Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, carefully retraced and validated the account and concluded it to be accurate. It is also worthy of note that other characters in the films are real people, including Edwin, Mary Epps and Patsey.

Twelve Years a Slave is a typical example of Historical Realist film; a juxtaposition of the Original Material and the Derivation proves this. The film's plot

though a little bit distorted to achieve artistic aesthetics follows almost the same chronological progression with the Memoir (the Original Material). The arrangement of events in their cause and effect order - the kidnapping of Northup in Washington D.C, the sale into slavery, the twelve years enslavement and the eventual release after twelve years, which is the motivation for the title. Another important element of realism in the film is the character creation. A study of Northup's Memoir (Original material) reveals that such characters like Edwin, Mary Epps and Patsey are also present in the film. Their action in the Memoir is almost an exactitude of their actions in the Original Material remain the same in the derivation.

From research, the locations used were four historical antebellum plantations: Felicity, Bocage, Destrehan and Magnolia. Magnolia is almost exactitude to the actual plantation where Northup was held in real life. *Twelve Years a Slave* from the perspective is an archetype of a historical realism which pictures the historical fact in Northup's Memoir to certain acceptable standard.

Steve Mc Queen on thematic simplicity in the film focuses on the major subject matter as spot lighted in the Original Material. Hence the Original and the Derivation project this theme of slavery. Here the Blacks are sold into slavery and lorded over by the white who place themselves as superior beings. The metaphorical

undertone of the 'whip' used by the whites slaves masters depicts reproach, the body scars depicts stigmatization. However, the central theme - slavery encapsulates subjugation, impediment and tyranny - both in time and space. Northrup becomes tyrannized in time and space as his movement becomes restricted and he loses the value of time in his personal life activities. McQueen condemns slavery and slave trade through his thematic fixation. Though slavery/slave trade is not obtainable in today's society especially in America yet the issue of Racism which was also a motivation for slave trade still stands. The White race believes that the Black race are lower beings and as such must be subjugated hence the idea of slave trade in America; the white purchases some blacks for the sole purpose of enslavement and hard labour. *Twelve years a Slave* becomes an archetypal contemporary theatrical movement that satirizes the racial discrimination which is still obtainable even in the present day America.

In analyzing this film, the questions of relevance especially to the contemporary society arise. McQueen presents this film with a simplified theme to tackle the existing racial discrimination in America today. Although, slave trade has been abolished but the mentality of slave trade still lives, today the White American's see themselves as superior to the Black Americans even in the political arena. Since the independence of America, Barrack Obama remains the

first and only black American President. The yearning of the Black Americans is captured in the words of Martins Luther King: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream today". Martins Luther King applies rhetoric to awaken the people's mind urging them to strive and think along line as he does but unfortunately, the racial discrimination in America though conquered to an extent but still exist. The level of rivalry and antagonism witnessed by Obama in his current administration still reflects the mindset of the White about the Black, they see him as incompetent and incapable to rule the America States.

In summary, McQueen reminds Americans of the ghastly effects of the long years of slavery the Black American suffered under the white Americans and the continuous existence of stigmatization of colour suffered by the Black in today's politics in America however advising the blacks to take revolutionary approaches as been attempted by Barrack Obama in his governance of America. Thus, *Twelve Years a Slave* becomes a mirror reflecting the truth in a people's past and present as well as suggesting revolutionary movement as an approach to break the jinx of racism.

In discussing the thematic simplicity evident in the movie *Invasion 1897*, the film tells a lot at what the producer thinks about the conquest at Benin in 1897 by

the British government. The themes that can easily be picked out include:

- **Colonization:** The Whiteman by all means wanted to make Benin an annexation of the British territory. They selfishly wanted access to all of the natural and manmade resources deposited within the territory. It is quite unimaginable to the Oba and his subjects because according to the Oba, Benin has been trading with the Whiteman prior to that and such trade was done on equal terms, but now the British wanted to be the sole dictators of the prize of the commodities they are buying. Another thing that probably angered the King and his people was the Whiteman by insisting on forcing his way into Benin at the time of the Ague cleansing ceremony thereby desecrating the ceremony, because the people were forbidden from receiving strangers into that domain at that time of the year. The Oba also was a Colonizer. He conquered neighbouring communities and makes them his vassals while insisting that they receive direct orders from him and also manipulating their trade, this is seen from his treatment of the Itsekiri and Akure people.
- **Intimidation/Exploitation:** The British are definitely most guilty of this. They come to a man's land, covert his property and make

conscious efforts to deprive him of his property. The researcher believes that in general trade terms, one is free to opt out of any trade venture that is not favourable to him, but not with the Whiteman. When he comes to trade, he fixes the price at which to buy the product and definitely does not expect you to say no, even when he is offering just peanuts for the service.

- **Cultural Differences:** The Benin has a total contrasting culture to that of the Whiteman. It is obvious from how the King felt when the portrait of the Queen was shown to him as the ruler of the people of Britain. To him it was a laughable experience because in Benin a woman's idea is never to be reckoned with. Women are not duly considered for such positions of authority. The British were obviously alarmed by the beliefs of the Benin people. For instance, Hamilton accuses the Oba of executing his people simply because he thinks the Oba is fetish, since he practices the African Traditional religion. The Whiteman obviously felt his culture was superior when compared to the Benin culture which he thinks is barbaric.

Conclusion

History and Realism have long been the dominant paradigm in film studies, and there are always more

scholars to leap to the defence of the real. However, as John Hill states:

There is probably no critical term with a more unruly and confusing lineage than that of history and realism. ... its continuing use-value as either a descriptive or explanatory concept would often seem to be in question. Amidst this plurality of uses, one consistent implication does appear to survive: that the distinctive characteristic of history and realism resides in the ambition to, in some way or other, approximate reality, to show 'things as they really are. (32)

It is the ambition of realism that is most problematic; no realist theory has yet proposed what operations may be performed by an observer – such as the cinematic spectator, or the historian of the film – to allow them to know a world that exists independently of the mind of that viewer. If it remains trapped within a 'critical realist epistemology,' the history of the film will prove to be of limited use, unable to establish the validity of its most basic claims in its most essential particular. Radical Constructivism offers an alternative coherent model to the Realist approach to film history, which requires historians to rethink the nature of facts, the processes involved in constructing historical knowledge, and its

relation to the past. Historical poetics, in the light of Radical Constructivism, is a basic model of research into film that uses concepts to construct theoretical statements in order to explain the nature, development, and effects of film as the historian experiences them.

The foregoing requires more research into the historical realism and narratives of specific films and on the themes and categories that dominate the film industry. We must begin to think of history on film as closer to past forms of history, as a way of dealing with the past that is more like oral history, or history told by bards, or griots in Africa, or history contained in classic epics. Perhaps film is a post literate equivalent of the preliterate way of dealing with the past, of those forms of history in which scientific, documentary accuracy was not yet a consideration, forms in which any notion of fact was of less importance than the sound of a voice, the rhythm of a line, the magic of words. One can have similar aesthetic moments in film, when objects or scenes are included simply for their look, the sheer visual pleasure they impart. Such elements may well detract from the documentary aspect, yet they add something as well, even if we do not yet know how to evaluate that something.

The major difference between the present and the preliterate world, however obvious, must be underscored: literacy has intervened. This means that however poetic or expressive it may be, history on film

enters into a world where scientific and documentary history have long been pursued and are still undertaken, where accuracy of event and detail has its own lengthy tradition. This tradition, in a sense, raises history on film to a new level, for it provides a check on what can be invented and expressed. To be taken seriously, the historical film must not violate the overall data and meanings of what we already know of the past. All changes and inventions must be apposite to the truths of that discourse, and judgment must emerge from the accumulated knowledge of the world of historical texts into which the film enters.

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