

Aesthetic of Choreographic Stunts in the Nigerian Nollywood

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Abstract: The Nigerian Nollywood has validated itself through the recent ranking by placing second to Bollywood of India and third to Hollywood of America in its popularity positioning. This acceptance is as a result of its rich content, treatment of social vices and the celebration of Nigeria’s multi-plurality. However, most of the films are bereft of rich choreographic stunts. Indeed, choreographic stunts are seen as ingeniously deployed creative additions that spice up the overall aesthetics of film. Consequently, the study examines the aesthetic of choreographic stunts in the Nigerian Nollywood through the theoretical framework of realism as propounded by Siegfried Kracauer complimented with content analysis of five purposively selected films out of a sample population of fifteen. The aim was to spur Nigerian filmmakers into a more quality production in action scenes, while the objectives were to find out if this lacuna is caused by lack of stunt coordinators in Nollywood and if it has stunted the industry. In this line, the research adopted the causal-comparative methodology analysis to review existing data and some popular Nollywood thriller movies. It also explored an interview with one of Nollywood’s actor/producer. The findings were that this vacuity resulted from insufficient professional trained stunt choreographers and low budget allocation to stunt performance which excludes the genre from audience with action interest worldwide. The article concludes that the void needs urgent intervention and suggests that stunt coordinator department be a standard part of Nollywood crew.

Keywords: Action-Sequence, Choreographed-Stunts, Filmmakers, Multi-plurality, Stunts, Stunt Coordinator.

Introduction

Nollywood film industry is finally coming to its own through a composite narrative of hybrid aesthetics. From aesthetic of Nigerian oral story-telling and folktales to Shakespeare, aesthetic of American pop and Nigerian juju music, aesthetic of Yoruba talking drum and Western drum sets, aesthetic of African traditional dressing and European fashion, Nollywood has adopted and appropriated whatever it deems useful from wherever it can to carve a niche for itself by fusing several different genres to create a unique cultural identity for its movies. These days, its narrative plots are getting better and tighter, while general aesthetic contents are also improving due to deployment of better technological equipment, as technical improvement and human capital development of the industry are also growing.

However, one critical diminishing aspect of Nollywood’s movie genre is the aesthetic of choreographed violence through stunt simulation. This lacuna has created a vacuity that results in limitation to full development, which may be preventing the industry from benefiting from the global entertainment box office that its cousin in the Nigerian music industry is known for and thereby, unable to be on par in terms of total quality aesthetics of production with Hollywood and Bollywood. Since film is an art that mimics societal reality, it is not only expected that some of these insane moments of collective madness would be replayed in Nollywood narratives, but portrayed realistically. Armes (2006:158) quotes Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, a Chadian filmmaker residing in France on film’s duty of true representation when he states that “because cinema, more than any other arts, is above all national, a filmmaker is often the mouth-piece of his community”. In essence, what is required of Nollywood is not only true representation, but also in a realistically entertaining way.

Unfortunately, the reverse is the case in many of Nollywood portrayals. It is also the norm for a script to be written with the aim of creating some kind of fiction-friction between the protagonist and antagonist where such issue will develop to a total brawl by the climax of the film, to be finally resolved at the end. In Hollywood and Bollywood, such final resolution plot may consume either of the feuding party and occasionally both. While Nollywood understands the above process and do try to follow such formulaic narrative, the means by which it goes about achieving it is often unreal and unbelievable. In other climes where due process and the rule of law are strictly enforced to curb excessive youthful exuberance in the society, heinous crimes are still committed by some criminal elements. When such happens in the plot of Hollywood and Bollywood movies, the depiction of such crime and confrontation is displayed for all to see. In Nollywood, many such a scene is only totally understood with the collaborative suspended-believe of the audience.

Therefore, this study is about the dearth of action scenes and stunts that are realistically choreographed in Nollywood films. The aim is to spur Nollywood to address this void, while the objectives were to find out if this gap was caused by dearth of professional stunt action coordinators in Nollywood and if it has stunted the development of the Nigerian film industry and affects the total acceptability of Nollywood films by a larger audience. In this line, the research adopted the causal-comparative methodology analysis to review existing data and five related movies that include some action scenes in their features and are among recent popular Nollywood films. The scope covers an analysis of five recent popular Nollywood "action" films of less than ten years old.

Several articles have been published about stunt performance in the past. Teo (1997) dwells on Hong Kong cinema and the extra dimensions of Kung Fu fights. Thomas (2006) introduces fearless Nadia as the queen of stunts in Bollywood India. Nearer to Nollywood, Nwogu (2022) focuses on sixty year old Tom Cruise and his stunt performance in *Mission Impossible 7* (2023) by hanging on a flying plane. Granderson (2024) also expresses the critical contribution of stunt coordination to the overall success of many best picture category of Oscar Academy winners mostly due to their stunt performance. These articles are not obscure by any means. However, all the above studies and more point in the direction of Hollywood, Bollywood and Hong Kong movies and their intersection with stunt performance. There is little evidence, if any, found during this research about Nollywood films and stunt performance. That is why this study is significant to the development of Nollywood films.

Importance of Stunt and Choreographed Violence in Film

Stating the power of stunt choreography, Buscombe (1997:287) declares one of the earliest stunt choreographed action movies when he proffers that: "Conventional film history has identified *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) as the first Western fiction film. It certainly contains many elements which we now associated with the Western genre: a train robbery by gunmen, outdoor locations, a chase on horseback, and a final shoot-out."

The movie is one hundred and twenty years old by now, but on the power of its formulae, it has created a genre that has been defined and refined all this while. Bordwell and Thompson (2013:339) also corroborated the importance of action when they state that: "The Western is one of the earliest film genres, having become established in the 1900s. It is partly based on historical reality, since in the America West there were cowboys, outlaws, settlers, and tribes of Native Americans." Similarly, the Chinese martial arts genre grew not out of popular drama, but due to its action and stunt choreography for the major part. Describing the general characteristics attraction of martial arts movies, Teo (1997:87) states that: Leaping swordsmen and knight-ladies, whirling, somersaulting and free-falling in mid-air as they cross swords and exchange punches, radiate an exhilarating sensation of pure movement and scarcely give the eyes time to rest before beginning another dizzying sequence of action and reaction. This popularity of martial arts movies only got its breakthrough from the "action choreography" by "two young martial experts."

The above two examples of genre creation by Hollywood through its westerns and Chinese martial arts show the power and relevance of stunt choreography. Although some may consider stunts as a peripheral issue to total film production, this study suggests it is a critical necessity to cinema story telling. When executed well and rightly mixed with the story narratives, action sequence in movies can take a movie to a higher level of drama aesthetic satisfaction. It is so vital that several movie genres have grown out of stunts. Kung Fu and martial arts, karate movies and westerns are movies that readily dwell on the nature of violence. In fact, many Hollywood films have won the best picture Oscar award based on their stunts.

It, therefore, follows that due to the current internet connectivity that results in a border-less global community, Nigerian audience have access to all kinds of entertainment including Hollywood, Bollywood and Hong Kong movies, which make them to crave the best of entertainment. On the other hand, the same technological trend has also exposed Nollywood films to a global audience that have been otherwise unreachable before now. These audiences are used to, and also want a believable

cinematic experience regardless of where it originates from. It can thus be a hindrance, if Nollywood films are not able to raise their game level in terms of action sequence. Ergo, when a movie comes to its climatic moment that leads to physical combat, the audience wants it to be believable and as real as possible. The wide canvas of a movie is not a restricting stage where audience's imagination needs to be unduly tasked. In addition to this, the voyeuristic-nature of the audience often heightens their anticipation during such confrontation between protagonist and antagonist. It is, therefore, a let-down when the audience has to painfully stress their imagination in order to suspend-believe because such scenes are not realistically executed. The above is the current situation of many Nollywood films during action sequences, which is restricting total and full development of its production process.

When Bollywood started its movie industry in the early 20th century, it copied and appropriated all the elements of production from Hollywood and then adapted it to Indian culture. Thomas (2006:39) avers of this process when he states that: "It has been documented that the arena of Indian cinema in the early decades of the century boasted very real exchanges between Bombay and the cinemas of Hollywood and Europe. Indian audiences had been exposed to Hollywood from the earlier years: the stunt and action films and serials of stars." Unfortunately, the evolution of Nollywood had its origin from the theatre, where stunt performance can be hazardous.

About fifty years after Bollywood debuted, and another fifty years since Nollywood began its foray into commercial cinema experience, the Nigeria film industry is yet to fully embrace the cinematic process of stunt choreography. The Nigerian society is a socially dysfunctional environment, where the term self-help is very apt. This is because of the various inadequacies of its political elected officials, several of who come to political offices with sugar-coated silver tongues that are full of empty promises which they never intended to, nor are able to keep. The effect for citizens every four years after each election cycle is to result to individual financial and manpower resources to resolve infrastructural deficits promised to be developed by these politicians. This goes on until another cycle of election comes around with new sets of hollow promises from different or often, same set of politicians who may have morphed to another political party. Truly, all these various challenges are enough to make the citizens very cynical.

From lack of motor-able roads to water supplies, electricity power to hospital beds, railway lines and safe airports, the list of infrastructural decay is long and seemingly endless. However, the scarcity of government provisions is not limited to tangible materials that results in individual water borehole drilling on each property or acquisition of electrical power generating set for power supply with all the attendant risk involved, but also include intangible and crucial services such as security of life and property, medical service provision, education opportunities and justice for all. The resultant effect of the absence of these services is for those who can afford it, to fence off their properties with brick-walls and rent a cop, including going on overseas medical checkups and private or foreign studies for their children.

With the above realities on ground, it is no wonder when there is a serious disagreement that occasionally leads to a confrontation where the parties, especially the youthful population which comprised the highest demography, consciously or unconsciously decide to settle their differences one on one without going through any lengthy legal procedure. Sometimes, depending on the grievousness of the purported misdeed that may have been committed whether through accidental occurrence or willful negligent, especially leading to the death of an innocent person, prompt violence of heavy proportion may be visited on the accused through an impulsive emotional mob-attack. At times, all it required is saying something wrong about another religion before all hell breaks loose. Innocent lives have been lost through this "jungle justice" syndrome in some major cities of Nigeria because some people were wrongly accused, sometimes for instance, just to get off paying back a legitimate debt. Feeling oppressed by the political class who display wanton wealth in the mist of prevailing poverty, some youths become an embodiment of opportunistic outlaws that resolve their issues through violence and criminality. One of such group in various Nigerian cities is called "area boys" and girls occasionally. These are young people in their physical prime, whose lives revolve around particular neighborhoods wherein they control all the illicit activities of these areas. They do these through violence and are mostly ignored by the law.

Considering all the available instances of real life violent occurrences visited on Nigerians on a regular basis, one would have thought Nollywood is best suited to deploy stunt performance as a means of catharsis effect to purge the nation of its natural violence. This is because there is no other art that is as close to real life as the art of film. Stage drama and literature are also up there, but these other two have more limitations than film in portraying realism. In stage drama for example, some natural occurrence like the ocean, a flowing river and a full scale war are very hard to show for the audience without their imaginative collaborative participation. For one, the stage itself is a confined limited space. If it's too big like it does occasionally when

moved to a stadium for a musical concert, some of the audience would need an interceding medium like projector screen to be able to see the whole action going on, thereby defeating some of the advantages of a stage drama production. By the same token, literature requires being educated to capture the author's story including a very vivid imaginative mind to be able to fully comprehend and interpret the meaning.

Film is the only art whereby what you see, is what you get. Film is not limited by space, time or ability to read and write, but only requires the ability to see and hear. By using different locale and settings, film is able to transcend most of the limitations imposed on stage drama and is therefore, able to create and re-create reality for personal experience of the audience. Explaining audience fascination for fights and action in films, McGee (2022:xi) suggests that:

It is this element of danger that has constantly allured moviegoers from the get-go. As early as 1916, the job of stunt professionals was the subject of a profile in the New York Tribune in which the writer declares that "the audience never know their names, or whether they have any, but the stunt men are the anonymous heroes who fall off the palisades, or skid into the river and keep on whistling.

McGee's explanation clears the debate on how long ago the profession of stunts has been in Hollywood, which is at least over a hundred years old. This is also confirmed by Banks and Steimer (2015:147) who state that, "American cinema (1895-1929), film directors discovered that creating exciting action sequences necessitated the use of stunt doubles, as actors' skills at stunt work were not always up to the needs of a sequence". Stunts importance to movie storytelling is also buttressed by Libbey (2021:1) who avers that "when a script calls for a character to do something dangerous, the star usually steps aside while a stunt double takes the punch". Yet here in Nollywood, there is hardly any film that has a wide range of basic stunt performance, while the industry of stunt choreography has even evolved further through technology in the rest of the world.

In addition to the basic stunt choreography discussed above, by deploying some of its available technology such as time-lapse photography and chroma-key compositing visual effects, film art is not only able to hasten or slow reality, it is also able to create an alternate reality by fusing two different video-streams together as one sequence of action. In other words, a gorilla video-shot acquired in the jungle of Congo rain forest could, for instance, be edited together with a character in Lagos, Nigeria and the two may be having a physical combat that never really took place in New York with the aid of a green screen. The influence of technology in our daily lives has increased over the years and this effect is being felt in stunt choreography too. For the enduring relevance of stunts even in a changing world, McGee (2022:xiii) opines that: "During the golden age of Hollywood, stunt professionals numbered in the hundreds. Now there are thousands who specialize in climbing, driving, falling, fighting, swords play, diving, motorcycles, full body burns, wirework, and stunting for motion-capture technology."

To emphasize the period we are presently experiencing, Allison (2011:325) also corroborates the fusion of technology with stunts when he avers that:

With Gollum, Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003) created one of the most memorable and emotionally complex computer-generated characters to date. In the process, the films brought attention to the technique of "motion capture" (or "mo-cap"), which records a performer's movements and applies them to a 3D digital model.

This is the level of development that film-making has attained, using a combination of art and technology. Many other notable sub specializations have grown out of the initial art of filmmaking and stunt performance. The days of point and shoot cinema is over, with several new specialization created even within the subsection of stunt coordination. Ray (2014:117) posits that "one of the most significant phenomena of our time has been the development of the cinema from a turn-of-the-century mechanical toy into the century's most potent and versatile art form." Ray's observation was expressed over fifty years ago in mid-twentieth century and further developments have been gained since that time.

In view of the above technical and artistic developments in film-making, it is no wonder how realistic physical fights and war scenes are portrayed in movies these days, using choreographed stunts developed by stunt professionals. At times, many of these violent fights maybe a fight to the death and it behooves on the director of the movie to get good advice and help from a professional stunt coordinator in order to make the scene realistic and believable. Teo (1997:104) posits that:

Even with skimpy plots, kung fu movies continued to draw audiences on the strength of their action sequences which were a marvel to watch. Many of the stars were genuine practitioners of the art. They were required to execute the choreography, but many were also choreographers themselves, such as Bruce Lee, Sammo Hung and Jacky Chan.

The point of Teo's observation is that directors are supposed to get good advice from other professionals that would enhance their projects including stunt coordinators. Even before the current advancement in technology that enables a director to create non-existing space and other tangible beings, stuntmen and choreographed fights have been fully developed. One of the

earlier popular stuntman in Hollywood was Jock Mahoney. Narrating the first experience of the legendary stuntman in 1946 at work for the camera as a stuntman, Freese (2014:22) states that:

Jocko's first Durango Kid stunt called for him to drive a buckboard with two horses up to a house to deliver a message. Jocko had never driven a buckboard before, and the filmmakers wanted him to bring the horses around a fencepost at a fast clip. Although he was a bit nervous, Jocko was determined to make a solid first impression and got as much speed out of the horses as he could.

Over many years of experience as a stuntman later, Mahoney eventually played the antagonist to Tarzan in 1962 version of the franchise which Freese (2014:104) describes thus: "The film concludes with a memorable fight scene between Jocko and Scott, with both men giving the nearly five-minute battle their all. The fight scene was shot at Kenya's Fourteen Falls." The attention to details paid by the Director on this version of Tarzan saw the five minutes action shot in three countries of Kenya (major fights shots on the waterfalls), England (underwater shots were at a swimming pool in Brighton Beach, England) and South Africa (Beach with sand fight scene was filmed on a soundstage at Sutherland studios).

Therefore, it is the task of a director to know what is required of him in achieving particular shots either through his artistic talent, or understanding the technicalities of his equipment. Gross and Ward (2007:150) support this point when they opine that "Directors must be able to handle the technical as well as the artistic aspect of a movie. They must understand cameras, lights, microphones, and all other equipment used in the process of movie-making." Although some critics may frown at the macho image presented by action hero genre movies as expressed by Cohen (2016:101) when he posits his concern about all the attention "given to the heroic ideal of masculinity in Hollywood cinema, revealing the ways in which films, as cultural products, may indicate patriarchal ideas and beliefs in spectacles of physical prowess and heroic endeavor". Nevertheless, there are also millions of audience who loves these stunt oriented action movies. In addition, stunt ladies also abound all over the world as observed by Banks and Steimer (2015:145) when they suggest that: "The subtle erasure of the stunt person, or the downplaying of her role in the creation of the heroine, is not unique to women. We believe stuntmen equally experience this same erasure". This clearly shows that women are also involved in the stunt performance profession.

In early 1970s, Bruce Lee was a martial artist phenomenon whose movies are based on physical combat alone and most of the climaxes always end with the death of his antagonist. Teo (1997:110) further affirms Lee's popularity when he states that: "No other figure in Hong Kong cinema has done as much to bring East and West together in a common sharing of culture as Bruce Lee in his short lifetime." It is also interesting to note that after Lee's death, the most popular kung fu actor alive is Jacky Chan, one of the two fight choreographers mentioned with Lee earlier. Lee passed away in 1973, but his legacy still lives on through these movies. Fifty years after Lee, however, Nollywood cannot boast of a very good action sequence, even when many characters die in several of its films. It's as if Nollywood have decided that death, yes, but not by physical injury. Even when a villain dies, Nigeria film directors would often use charms or disease to wipe the character out.

As earlier stated, there are a lot of morbid incidents going on in Nigeria on a daily basis and violence is not a stranger to the citizens. The social media is awash with pictures and videos of physical mutilation and gory images constantly and Nollywood is privy to these occurrences too. One of such incidents happened just recently when a young university female student was burnt alive on her university campus. Of this incident, Ochogwu (2022:1) states that:

A female student of the Shehu Shagari College of Education in Sokoto State was on Thursday burnt alive over an alleged comment against Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). DAILY POST gathered that the incident, which triggered tension in the school environment, occurred on Thursday morning. The student, identified simply as Deborah, was, according to reports, beaten to a pulp before she was set ablaze. In a video trending on social media, some young men were seen hurling stones at the victim. When the victim fell to the ground unconsciously, the attackers gathered tires around her before she was set ablaze.

The above tragedy elicited uproars from almost everybody, with some politicians trying to straddle the fence to avoid offending either of the two major religious beliefs which may cost them votes in an election. Others used the opportunity to warn of Nigeria's ills by condemning the extra-judicial murder in strong terms. Nsikak (2022:1) states that: "A former Minister of Education, Dr Obiageli Ezekwesili and popular sociopolitical activist, Aisha Yesufu, has condemned the killing of a Christian student in Sokoto State, identified as Deborah Samuel." The irony is not lost on Nollywood, that while Nigerians are getting brutally murdered in broad daylight on a daily basis due to general insecurity with gory details posted to the social media, the industry is unable to depict such violence realistically if only to counter such criminality in its narratives.

Unlike Nigeria however, the Indian cinema industry has also mastered the art of stunt choreography to create Bollywood stars. Cook (1990:810) describes Bollywood as a star system industry when he states that: "The Indian film industry is dominated today by a star system similar to that of Hollywood's early years, and the cinematic quality of the star vehicles matters little to either the producers or their unsophisticated audience."

One of such is the most popular star of Bollywood, Amitabh Bachchan. Like Bruce Lee with his martial arts stunts, Bachchan became the number one star of Bollywood for several decades from the 1970s and he achieved this through his action films. At that time, he was usually referred to as the “Angry young hero”. Speaking of two classic Bollywood movies that made Mr. Bachchan a movie star, Banerjee (2006:164) observes that: “It is the techniques as much as the narrative solutions suggested by both films – *Sholay*, *Dewaar* – that allow for the sympathetic construction of ‘rogue’ masculinities – the outlaw, the outsider – at a time when to be an outsider posed considerable political risks.” *Dewaar* (1975) and *Sholay* (1975) were the two films that gave rise to Mr. Bachchan’s acting career, from which he never looked back. Incidentally, his character dies in both films which he co-starred with Shashi Kapoor and Dharam Deol respectively but heroically takes out his opponents in the process. These crucial scenes are depicted in gory details. However, unlike Mr. Lee, Bachchan is still much alive and also practicing his craft, while his son has joined Bollywood movies too.

The profession of stunt choreography is a serious one and very often a stuntman performs risky stunts for the actors for safety reason. It requires attention to every detail by professional men and women. If not properly executed, it may lead to serious injury as it does occasionally, or even mortality, which has happened on a few occasions. Mr. Bachchan was hospitalized for some months in Bombay in 1982, during the shooting of his film *Coolie* (1983). Of this accident where Bachchan was declared dead on the surgery table, Malik (2020:1) states that:

It was the year 1982 when Bollywood’s superstar, Amitabh Bachchan met with an accident on the set of his movie *Coolie*. Big B’s injury on the sets of his film is one of the horrifying incidents to date. This happened when Amitabh Bachchan and Puneet Issar were shooting for a fight sequence at the Bangalore University Campus. Amitabh Bachchan had to land on a table but when he jumped, he landed wrong and the edge of the table hit his stomach, leading to a lot of internal bleeding. Big B was immediately rushed to the hospital. Amitabh Bachchan underwent multiple surgeries in Bangalore. 5 days later, he was moved to Bombay where he had another surgery.

It is necessary for the above copious statement by Malik, in order to understand exactly what happened and why stunt doubles are used. The life threatening injury sustained was not as a result of the physical combat stunt and this is dangerous enough in itself, but due to a slight miscalculation of landing on a table from a simple low jump. Millions of Bachchan’s fans were in prayers for months, while thousands took up residence for weeks outside of his hospital to continue praying for him. Although he lived, others were not so lucky.

In October of 2021, several international news outlets reported the death of a crew member on the set of Alec Baldwin’s film in America. It is only in February 2022 that detail of the tragic event was revealed to the media in full. Nardino (2022:1) states that: “While filming his movie *Rust* on Thursday, October 21, Alec Baldwin fired a prop gun that injured the director and killed another crew member”. Still on the set of *Rust*, Astor, Jacobs, Lukpat, Romero, Taylor and Thrush (2022:1) also report that: “In October, a gun being used as a prop by the actor Alec Baldwin went off on the set of “*Rust*,” a Western being filmed in New Mexico, killing the film’s cinematographer and wounding its director.” In between the two mentioned cinema stunt accidents above, there have been several others that have happened to lesser known actors which have gone mostly unnoticed by the public. Brandon Lee (Bruce Lee’s only son) died on the set of *Crow* (1994) in 1993 through a malfunctioning prop gun. Even Tom Cruise was involved in a stunt related accident just a couple of years back on the set of his *Mission Impossible 6* franchise and was hospitalized for several weeks.

Set injuries have become an occupational hazard for action genre stars and especially their stunt-doubles. Tom Cruise’s stunt picture was recently released by *Mission Impossible 7* director Christopher McQuarrie to mark Cruise’s 60th birthday. Nwogu (2022:1) states that “in the new teaser image shared on July 3, 2022 Tom Cruise who reprises his fan-favourite Ethan Hunt character, can be seen hanging off a flying plane.” This movie was released in 2023. All the above accidents point to the seriousness of work for the stunt men and women including anybody in charge of coordinating any movie stunt choreography, as it can turn deadly very quickly for any little error if adequate preparation and care is not taken. To protect the bigger stars and also reduce insurance cost of their stunts performance, most stunt coordinators use stunt doubles to execute stunts for major them. Unfortunately this title of “Stunt Coordinator” and its impact is glaringly missing in most Nollywood movies, thereby leading to wonder how much stunts go into Nollywood films.

Theory

This study is anchored on the theoretical framework of realism as propounded by Siegfried Kracauer (1960). His concern is a clear departure from most early theorists whose hypotheses arose from other arts such as painting, music and sculptures with a focus on form. This set of theorists focused mainly on the art form, whereas he dwells on the basic properties of

film and to a lesser extent, the technical properties of film. In essence, Andrew (1976:107) states of Kracauer's beliefs and concept of realism as elucidated in the latter's book that "in the Preface to his book, he distinguished his work from all previous theories, claiming that his was a material aesthetic founded on the priority of content, whereas all other theorists had been primarily interested in artistic form." The priority given to content over form by Kracauer (1997:33) is also highlighted when he proffers that: "In following the realistic tendency, film go beyond photography in two respects. First, they picture movement itself, not only one or another of its phases." This implies that the activity within the film is alive and hence, it is realistic. He further explains the second aspect of film's realistic tendency as the use of staging, not only the action, but the surrounding as well.

Clearly, this content driven realism concept reinforces the importance placed on the aesthetics of choreographic stunts in the Nigerian Nollywood by this study and the use of Kracauer's version of realism for its theoretical framework. The major focus of this research, therefore, is on the abysmal level of choreographic stunt contents of Nollywood films. To an extent like Kracauer's realism, these choreographic stunt contents are of equal importance as his realistic contents within the film frames. In adopting this theory for choreographic stunts, his basic properties would apply to the stunts themselves, while the basic technicalities will match the means of safely actualizing those stunts. One major criticism of Kracauer's realism theory is basing the hypothesis only on black and white films, while neglecting animated films too. Although this minor issue may pose some difficulties for other studies, it is of no significant relevance in the current context of study of aesthetic of choreographic stunts in the Nigerian Nollywood.

Analysis of Stunt Performance in Nollywood Films

This study did a content review of some recent Nollywood movies that have become popular on the strength of word of mouth and through the social media by some of the audience who raved about their action scenes, in order to see why the audience seems to like them and find out if there is any correlation between the stunt aesthetics and the popularity of these films. The films examined are *Amina* (2020), *King of Boys* (2018), *King of Thieves* (2022), *Dark October* (2022) and *Shanty Town* (2023).

Amina (2020) is directed by Izu Ojukwu with Natty Bruce Idigblu as the Stunt Coordinator. It is one of the few Nollywood films that embrace the deployment of most aesthetics of film production, including the aesthetic of stunt choreography. *Amina* is an epic drama, with a lot of male braggadocios and warfare scenes. The protagonist is also a princess (Amina) who tries to reform her very conservative society from their parochial mindset, albeit unconsciously. In the process of fulfilling her destiny she breaks many cultural taboos, thanks to her father the king, who indulges her various curious demands during her teenage rebellious years like a benevolent father. As an adult, her father expects her to be more responsible considering her position as the elder of only two princesses. Unfortunately, however, the die is cast for her life's journey by that time and her course is set. This sets in motion the several conflicts in *Amina*, both with internal and external enemies. These various battles avails the audience many opportunities to witness the stunts embedded in the story of *Amina*.

Right from the opening scene, the audience is introduced to the town of Zauzau in the olden days, with a fight competition in the town's arena. The previous years' champion easily defeats his opponents one by one, through a combination of sword fights, boxing, wrestling and even charms. This happens until a young Igala slave blinds him in one eye with a spear. The pain and lack of coordination of fighting with one eye becomes unbearable for him and he lost his championship in the process. Reviewing the aesthetic of stunts and its realistic execution in the movie, it is observed that the spear throws and hits are realistically captured in this movie. Several fight scenes are also well rendered, including one decapitation on a battlefield. The one part of the movie that needs stunt improvement is the close up contact of swords and knives to the flesh. These are the crucial shots that are otherwise shown in slow-motion for maximum effect to the audience in Bollywood and Hollywood, but are glaringly missing in this film.

King of Boys (2018) is a Nollywood movie directed by Kemi Adetiba with the lead character name Eni also played by a woman of very strong character. She is an outlaw and a responsible mother who sees her crime enterprise as a business and who tries to buy her way into legitimacy through political contributions and affiliation. Eni does the dirty work of the mighty and high politicians of the society and expects to be rewarded with a political appointment. Failure of this expected agreement to materialize results in the conflict that takes the audience through the narrative of this movie. Eni's forceful personality is, in large part, the major contribution to the success of this movie and it has resulted in a sequential movie *King of Boys: The Return* (2022). In the opening scene of the original, she moves from her own birthday party to an interrogation of one of her deviant

boys. When the culprit refuses to name his accomplice, she cracks his skull with a sledge hammer and the victim's blood splattered all over her and others in the room. All these before the introduction credit rolls and all in a day's work.

With such an opening scene, much more is expected from *King of Boys* in the area of action and stunt synchronization. Unfortunately, that scene is the height of stunts choreography throughout the movie. Again, Eniola's forceful personality gave a lot of mileage to the movie, but the threats and counter threats between her and Aare, including the efforts to kill her by setting her cell room ablaze is a letdown. Carefully going through the crew credits, it is observed that there is no stunts coordinator or stunt choreography listed.

King of Thieves: Agesinkole (2022) is a new Nollywood Yoruba film directed by Adebayo Tijani and Tope Adebayo. The movie is described as an epic Yoruba language film with several big names of the Nollywood industry. Its timely theatrical release in April of 2022 affords the research to include the movie in this work, which portends the latest trend of artistic and technological development in Nigeria's film-making. The narrative of the movie is about an ancient Yoruba kingdom of Ajeromi, with a capital city and several surrounding towns and villages. It is a prosperous, peaceful and bountiful kingdom. Unfortunately, this beautiful kingdom is plagued by a group of bandits led by Agesinkole who dares the king and citizens alike with his broad daylight robberies. His bold escapades include robbing the king of his gifts and taxes, as well as looting the residences of the kingdom chiefs and raiding the citizens alike. All efforts to arrest him and his cohorts always ends in defeat for the king due to Agesinkole's extensive knowledge in the art of war and use of magical charms. Meanwhile, the one crime that automatically results in death penalty in Ajeromi is stealing, but here we have Agesinkole who robs and kills with impunity.

This movie is unique in several ways. The first of this is the blending of the physical with the spirituality by the director. In the past, many of Nollywood movies of Yoruba language would either focus their emphasis on either a traditional setting or a modern day story. *King of thieves: Agesinkole* (2022) combines both and the resultant effect is a movie that looks traditional and also has a lot of action sequences, the point of this research. In addition to this, there is also a lot of mobility in this film through physical running and horse chasing in the pursuit of Agesinkole's criminal enterprise.

Another unique aspect of this movie is the timely theatrical release of the movie just weeks after this research began and yet to be released online or on disc as the work is wrapping up. The significance of this is that the movie is still so new to the public and can indicate the direction where Nollywood is heading. In this process, the movie is a good demonstration of better things coming to Nollywood both in general aesthetics and aesthetics of stunt choreography. There are many physical fight scenes in the movie, including killing citizens during robberies and a lot of horse riding in the process of these looting. In addition, the movie is also complimented by several special effects scenes that strengthened the stunts through their juxtaposition.

Dark October (2022) is directed by Toka Mcbaror and it's a film that came about from the real jungle justice peculiarity of Nigeria earlier discussed. In what was carried by several local and international news media as *Aluu Four* when it happened in October of 2012, four students of University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria were lynched by an irate mob and burnt to death. *Dark October* retraces their footsteps within the last days of their lives and ultimate death. The film's release in 2022 is like a tenth year commemoration of the sad events which unfolds in our eyes. The theme of the movie is to shun such barbaric violence and refrain from the popular jungle justice. When the incidence happened a decade ago, this researcher could not bear to watch the circulating video of the real event, but paid very close attention to the violence in the movie.

In a real life mob justice of pure murder which the movie depicts, one would have expected nothing less than bringing in an expert in the field of stunt coordination. Unfortunately, the closest to this credit in the film is called Special Effect Makeup by James Akaie. Akaie did a great job of his role as a makeup artist for special effect, which reveals the after effect of being beaten to a pulp and burnt alive. However, as the violence is going on, each supposedly blows to the head, the stabs to the torso and the punches in the face are all unrealistic. The director even show several of these scenes in slow motion, which affords the audience a very clear view of the rubbery nature of the four by four piece of wood (rubber) used to hit the victims. The lack of stuntmen and coordinator in this movie is very glaring.

Shanty Town (2023) is a Netflix original miniseries directed by Dimeji Ajibola with six episodes so far. The plotline is about two sisters separated during their bid to escape their shanty village in a dingy motored boat, when one was shot and left for dead. The gang that takes over the shanty runs drug and prostitution rings for wealthy influential owners that cleverly acquire the place. As can be expected of such narratives, there are a lot of vulgarities in the movie including nudity and violence. In an effort to portray the lifestyle of gangs and prostitutes, the movie employed top professionals that aid in the process to make these scenes

very real. There is a scene where a van is hit on the broadside by a truck that lands the van on its side. There are also many scenes of violent kicks and fights all of which are believably depicted.

In the climax scene, the use of knives, axe and guns are seen several times with believable results. This is one of the latest Nollywood action genre movies that was released in early 2023, although sponsored by Netflix. That may be what influenced all the professionals who worked in the movie with convincing results. There is a title for Stunt Coordinator/Choreographer in the person of Pierce Mgboke, with an assistant coordinator too. In addition, the movie also has five names with the title Body Doublers, apparently for the actors fighting. The title for Special Effects/Pyrotechnics goes to Hakeem Onilogbo with six assistants.

Of the five movies explored for this research, *Shanty Town* (2023) is the best in terms of action sequence and choreographed stunts. This is no wonder considering the deep pocket of Netflix that funded the movie, which attracted international crews in their various expert fields. The result speaks for itself as all the action sequence in the film is rather well executed. *King of Thieves: Agesinkole* (2022) also did well even if missing the expected close-up shots of the death blows. There are so many action scenes (from one on one fights to collective mayhem) that enabled the film become the biggest box office ticket sales of Nigerian films within a few weeks of its release in 2022. With all these action sequences in the movie, it is surprising that the credit for Stunt Coordinator title is glaringly missing, a development that may be due to the lowly status for which such a crew is relegated in Nollywood.

Conclusion

This study examined the development of Nigeria film industry and its popularity as an alternative to foreign made movies with its own original voice. The research also points to the fact that many of the previous technical production issues have been resolved to the extent that the problems are in the past and does not inhibit its audience from enjoying Nollywood films at this time. However, there is a segment of likely audience that is still missing from Nollywood production consumption due in large part to the paucity of action genre within its fold. It is in this bid that the study has focused its searchlight, by examining the cause of such deficiency and also appraise if such also affects the total audience capacity for Nollywood films.

The findings were that the paucity of believable action sequences in Nollywood films resulted from lack of availability of professional stunt choreographers in the industry which may be connected to low budget. *Shanty Town* (2023) and *Amina* (2020) are the only two of the five examined movies that have a crew credit for Stunt Coordinator in the person of Pierce Mgboke and Natty Bruce Idigbogu respectively. The consequence of this is obvious in the various types of believable action sequences performed in the two movies. It is also noted that the stunt coordination staffs in these two films have foreign affiliation based on their names and the company names, which also implied more production fund required.

Another popular movie examined with many action scenes is *King of Thieves: Agesinkole* (2022), which has no crew credit for stunt personnel. In order to be sure this credit was not missed in the theatre during the review especially since the movie is no longer in theatres and yet to be online, this researcher put a call through to the producer of the movie (Femi Adebayo) to inquire why no credit was given in terms of stunts. He admits there is no stunt person in the film and asked if the researcher knows one who might be able to help him in his ongoing project. On a closer observation, it is noted that the mix of SFX and stunts in *King of Thieves* (2022) may have confused the audience from knowing which is which. The fact that the movie is also yet to be released to home viewing audience either through monthly subscription platforms or DVD prevents full scrutiny of these various scenes. The box office record breaking of these three popular movies at their time of release from 2018 to 2023 suggests that among other considerations, there is a correlation between their audience popularity and the various action sequences in the movies. The fact that many other Nollywood released films within the same four year period were not as popular, nor break box office proceeds record during their release also suggests that those other movies may not have enjoyed the patronage of action genre audience in addition to Nollywood regular audience.

The research, also finds that the absence of a good believable choreographed action sequence has diminished the composite value of several Nollywood films by excluding the genre from audience with action interest worldwide. The research, therefore, concludes that the void needs urgent intervention especially among the upcoming students of film. It suggests that stunt coordinator department be a part of Nollywood crew and Universities with film training courses should include stunts and safety in the curriculum, as there are better chances for a young graduate with quick physical and mental reflexes and athleticism to rapidly climb the professional ladder in the film industry through this avenue. Some Hollywood and Bollywood Stunt Coordinators got their directorial debut through stunt work experiences.

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