

Acting in Nigerian Video Films: A Critique of Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen's Invasion 1897

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Abstract

Acting plays a crucial function in the art of motion pictures. The art advance from making the audience participate in the director's fantasy and take it as actuality. Actors are the most indelible party in a film. It is a fact that people and not technology make film as a form to express the society we live in. A unique act of art acting cannot just be faked. An actor cannot give anything out if the actor has nothing inside. In this paper, we will examine the concept of acting and the role it plays in film. We will then examine it within the context of method acting in Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen's *Invasion 1897* (2014) in order to identify and expose the sloppy acting of the white cast. No doubt, the director's casting is representational by establishing the identity of the actors of the period of the Benin Kingdom over a hundred years ago. Taking note of the above factor, this paper strives to throw the firework on the director as the master craftsman who casts his actor and is the guiding force that make all the decisions. We will then tender hints or clues towards the best bib to harness the actors of period characters by nourishing and nurturing to give a spruce acting.

Keywords: Acting, Actor, Director, God, Master Craftsman, Sloppy



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INTRODUCTION

No doubt, it is a tough knot shooting period motion picture (epic). Nonetheless, the acting must be seen to be exciting in its illumination of character indication and dramatic articulation. "A lot of elements come into play in determining the look of a film. These include the story, the cast, the location, the director and the cinematographer, and how they all interrelate" (William Fraker qtd in Afolabi, 2005, pp. 45-46). Film literally photographs reality. The camera magnates, what the actors act before it, and no software or editor can manipulate the acting to look otherwise. Rather, this approach to film accentuates their ability to create story and emotion through manipulation. Acting have remained important because it is the process that actors are seen to be imitating their character in a film.

In the Nigerian video films, acting have been the vital tool used to lead the audience to a better grasp of the character and the connection among them. Acting has been movements, dialogue, delivery, gestures that can reveal the inner life of a character. It behooves the actor feel comfortable in the character's body and in poise with his physicality. To achieve this is the use of 'Method Acting' approach developed by Konstantin Stanislavski, which we will examine with auteur theory to ascertain their application in the film. We then explore the challenge that the director faced in his efforts within the limits of his budget to cast and hire white actors to enhance believability and plaurability of action, portray mode and realism in the film *Invasion 1897*.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Film making is an art; and the certified human drama of our lives is the chief to filmmaking. Film is more than just a visual action, it is an industry and big business. In fact, it is

a powerful communication vehicle that not only capitulates but capable of influencing the thought pattern and belief of an audience through its contexts. In Nigerian video film industry, the prepondence of epic genre dots its space but not without glaring production flaws and this has been the subject of deep research by scholars. The challenge of shooting period films is intense. So many factors have been featured to this acting flaws yet which still lingers on. A number of theories have been advanced to explain the casting of the actors and the influence of the director in the making of the film. For the purpose of this study, the auteur theory and method acting approach will be used to assess the situation.

The Auteur Theory

It is imperative to note that when Francois Truffaut, critic of the French New Wave published the Auteur theory in the Cahiers du Cinema in 1954, it rocked the world of film criticism. To Truffaut, an auteur transposes the film into something personal, “an expression of his own personality” (Caughic, 1981, p.23). In the same vein the creation of a film is the creation of something in the image of the creator who is the director. The director gives the film “any distinctive quality it may have” (Grant, 2008, p. 31). It is the director that brings the film to life using the film to show their thoughts and feelings about the thematic preoccupation as well as a world view as an auteur. A film reflects a director’s personal creative vision.

Some critique criticise auteur theory’s authorship or authorial role of the director. They argued that film is not the exclusive creation of a single individual but the collaboration of various creative talents that include the writer, cinematographer, designers. Whether for fine art, or novel or film, Paul Sellor claims that authorship is an issue of intention (2007, p. 264). Collaborative Theory proponent, Sellor posits that collective authorship comes from group intentionally moving towards a common goal (2007, p. 268). Grant Keith postulates that the cinematographer and editor contributions in bringing the motion picture to the screen cannot be ignored (2008, p. 111). He insists that a film is not created by a single consciousness – individual (2008, p. 193). Therefore, the world of film is seen as a collaborative all that is authored by multiple creative talents.

Another critic of the auteur theory, Hatfield Maryella posit that film must start with a screenplay (2008, p. 2). They proponents of the Writer Theory argue that a mansion cannot be built without a building plan a blueprint. It is the one who put actions into words to paper creates the story. Simply put, a writer is the architect of the film, while the director and his crew are the foreman and construction workers. Buildings are credited not to their builders but to their architects. Both the collaborative and writer theorists who posit that film have plural authors rather than a singular artistic force (Carfinger, 2001, p. 374). But they are floored by the auteur theory that behind every film lies a director with a vision. Films are extensively guided by a director from script to completion and are considered the work of that director. Writer theory is demystified on account of creative control. A director, is licensed to rework, edit, and interpret a screenplay “nearer to their hearts desire” (McGowan, 1951, p. 307).

Auteur theory provides critics the artery to consort film authorship to a single integer. Impacting the audience with scenes moments and sequences are the opus of the director who is liable for working with the creative talents including cinematographer, designer and editor to tell a story that he deposits or sees in his head.

The Method Acting

When an actor physically or mentally becomes his or her character on and off screen is called ‘Method acting’. It was developed in the early twentieth century (20thC) BC in Moscow by Konstantin Stanislavski. He was a co-founder of Moscow Arts Theatre having developed a

career in theatre when as a 14 years old he acted on stage with his mother, who was an actress. They had a stage built in their house that performances were held for their guests. In developing method acting as a process for an actor to play his or her character, he began to ask question about the ancient art of acting which no one had asked before. Stanislavski asked question such as: how do actors act? What is the process actors go through (undertake) in order to create the simulation of a fully dimensioned, alive-in-the-moment human being? So, he developed exercises both mentally and physically designed to unlock the origin of the actors' aspiration. It is imperative to know that different and separate principles were formulated to form the system which was what was first referred to.

The dominant principles that the system was composed of was essentially relying on "emotional memory" to play a role. The actor was to use his or her memories to vivify emotions that the fictional character is signified to be experiencing. If a character is drunk, the actor might recall a drunken moment in the past that occurred in a pub or at a binge party. The method acting approach bears memory and emotion that are enlaced and that memories of social interactions, feelings and impression management challenges the concept of acting. Thus, while we do eventually react in accordance to our roles and do so with grace or poise, how we maneuver to control the self to do this, is followed by our feelings as long as is an internal reaction.

The concept of 'deep acting', emanates from the concept of method acting. According to Hochschild (1983), who formed the 'deep acting', the individual can handle his impression on others by manipulating how he feels. Here the actor has transpired into the character to an extent where there are no longer acting but reacting to their surroundings. In deep acting, the actor realises on his comportment to act a certain way in a given scene.

Historical Antecedents: An Overview of Nigerian Video Film

Film is basically a moving or motion picture. There are slightly different frames (still picture) passing right before the audience in a sequential order, and at a frequent speed to unveil a story. The rapidity of the movement of the picture frames seems as though they are moving. This illusion of movement in film is an optical trick known as optical illusion (Enwefah, 2009, p. 19). Before technological development, early civilization uncovers some endeavours by "man to capture, re-enact and recreate motion (20)". And because language was still rudimentary, they told these stories in dance and mime, and recorded them in drawings on the walls of their caves" (Wolf, 1974, p. 3). To a large extent the stories were improvised, "If there was any writing, it was done straight onto the screen, with the camera acting as a pencil or as a paint brush (4). While most directors before D.W. Griffiths, a small time actor turned director, the camera was just an instrument of recording images in motion, Griffiths pivot it into a "dynamic and creative tool" (5) using "(a) close-up (b) the moving cameras, and (c) the principle of editing" (5).

In August, 1903 at the Glover memorial Hall, the first film was exhibited by Baboia and Company, a Spanish firm. It was a propaganda film showing the Second World War particularly that of British and Allies defeating the Germans: This line of action continued through 1947, when the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) was taken over by the Federal Film Unit (FFU) and continued in the tradition of mainly producing documentary films which was an obvious carryover of the CFU tradition of the documentary.

The first cinema film, *Freedom* which was shot entirely in Nigeria using the location of the Alake's palace was shown in 1957 with Nigerians taking part in it. Then in February/March 1970, Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* was shot and its release was a great leap in the Nigerian Film Industry. That same year, *Son of Africa* and *Golden Women* were produced. Then in 1991,

the Federal Film Unit (FFU) produced a feature titled, *Bound for Lagos* which was followed by Francis Oluadele made *Things Fall Apart*. There were a few other corporate investments in filmmaking in the seventies. The Nigerian Film Corporation Decree, 1979 established the Nigerian Film Corporation in Jos, Plateau State as a statutory corporate entity saddled with the responsibility for the development of the Nigerian film industry (Oloruntola, 2009). Necessity is the mother of invention so say the adage that is applicable to the Nigerian video film industry. Portable camera replaced main-frame television equipment which opened the vista or space for video based technology in Nigeria in 1975. The economy of the country was plunging headlong into a dangerous precipice whereby the cinemas closed shop as celluloid films became too expensive for the homestead filmmakers. But providence came in the guise of Nigeria's economic policy, Structural Adjustment Programme known as SAP, which as abbreviation was used as a euphemism. The perennial hardship made filmmakers to now turn to an alternative to filmmaking by going videography in the 1980s: When in the '80s the home video made its entry into the entertainment industry as an inferior but welcome substitute to the celluloid, it was received with mixed feelings – of satisfaction and anxiety. Satisfaction, because it had given to Nigerians what neither Hollywood nor Bollywood could give (M'Bayo and Onabajo, 2009 p. 64).

Even without seemingly government support at the teething stage of the emergence of the Nigerian video film industry, individuals took advantage of the opportunity given by the use of portable camera to shoot production. The transition from cinematography to videography is phenomena which is aptly captured by Adesanya (1997, pp 5-10): Parallel to the demise of feature film production was the emergence of "movies", that is feature films shot on video. Just as the genuine filmmakers were heaving a sigh of relief to see their colleagues shooting reversal stock instead of negative stock, some film producers pulled a fast one, indeed and ace card, out of their sleeves. It was never anticipated that they would decent to the video format... But they not only did through their hanky-panky, they have been able to retain the indigenous... after 27 years of hard pioneering labour, film-makers brought a combined harvest of less than 200 titles to the alter, while videographers, for sweet-long labour of three years, garnered a harvest of 454.

The Nigerian video film industry is known by the adoption of the name, "Nollywood". It has come to being when it was first mentioned in Washington post in an article written on the Nigerian video film industry. These writers are of the opinion that the bigger film industries, Hollywood and Bollywood influenced the adoption of the name with the letter 'N' derived from the first alphabet Nigeria to form 'Nollywood'. To this day, Nollywood is revealed the second highest, if not the first film producing industry in the world chumming out titles on weekly basis.

Film: Reality and Anti-Reality

Film as a simulation of reality is seen as an art. Nature is reflected in art when art holds the mirror up to nature. The uniqueness of film is in pursuing the ideal of art which creates an illusion of reality. The realist and anti-realist have subjected to critical evaluation of the ideal of art being simply to create an impression. A leading figure of the realist view of film, Sigmund Freud opines that it is the crystal need and sole boon of film to record and reveal, and thereby fulfill, physical reality. Further believe of Kracauer is aptly captured by Enwefah (2007, p. 30): Kracauer believes that film art actually redeems (literally) the world from its dormant, innate state, its state of visual nonexistence, and perhaps a state of inertia, by endeavouring to experience it through the camera. He believes that film delivers us from technology by technology.

Rudolph Arnheim, a leading advocate of anti-realist concept is of the view that if film were only a mechanical reproduction of real life it could not be an art at all. Other critics like him propagate that film cannot breed reality, instead film like any other form of art, attempts to offer an exegesis of the world, or create an alternative world by manipulation of the camera. The anti-realist tradition argues contrary to the ideal: It believes that film goes beyond merely copying the world or nature, but it is an addition of another and very special to the world. Others believe that the artist's feelings may be expressed abstractly and the result may be purely imagination. The work of art may not allude to nature at all. In other words, it could just be an expression of the feelings and emotions of the creator of an art object. Its value, therefore, may be subject to the fact that the creator's work provides a platform for interpreting and idealizing the world (Enwefah, 2009 p. 29).

Looking at the tradition of the realist and the anti-realist, Perkeni V.F. tries to co-opt both perspectives. He believes the film medium is able of both documentation and fantasy of cloning as well as creation. This is found in fictional narration hanged on the fusion of films of two tendencies 'Realism' and 'expressionism' film, therefore, achieves its unique mix of photographic realism and dramatic illusion (Enwefah, 2007, p. 36).

The God of Film: The Master Craftsman

On film set there is only one voice that gives directives. His word is order. His order is law. He is final authority. He is the director who is the god of a film. He is responsible for all creative factors that transform the screenplay into film as he guides and inspires actors in interpreting the story. According to Domkap (2013, p. 113) the director: Is responsible for providing vision and direction for the film project. This, he does by directing the artistic and dramatic aspect of the film. He determines the look and sound of the film. To achieve this, a director enters into numerous creative relationship with writers, producers, designers, cinematographers, actors, editors, composers and others. The director relies on each relationship and the talent of each partner to contribute to making of the film. This is what we refer to as a director's creative team in which he is the master craftsman.

Film is power! It has the power of pulling audience into direct communication with facts including ideas using the senses of light, hearing and the emotion. To achieve this, a film must be conceived in a very exact way. With the reason of transmitting information or pushing across a specific point of view. Actors are the ones who enact real human drama of our lives which is vital key to film making. As the director on *Invasion 1897*, *Lancelot*, it is his concept that determines the love of the film.

Epic: A Synopsis of *Invasion 1897*

Epic are period, nay historical films that recreate past events. Its story line often hinges on "historical and imagined events, mythic, legendary of heroic figures, and usually portraying extravagant settings and lavish costume, accompanied by grandeur and spectacle and a sweeping musical score" (Enwefah, 2009p. 44). Epic share elements of the more intricate adventure film genre. A story having the universality of myth, the bewitchment of saga qualifies as epic.

Epics have existed since Guazzoni's epic *Quo Vadis* in 1912. This was followed by D.W. Griffith's ground-breaking, *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. The epic genre is synonymous with the Nigerian video film. *Invasion 1897* (2014) is one of the epic films replete in the industry. The *Lancelot* Oduwa Imasuen's film under study is a rewritten history of the invasion of the Benin Kingdom by the British Army who disposed the Oba and carted away in trunks countless numbers of the history of Benin which is represented in the various art works: Ighie Ehinare, a

researcher student on African Art History gets more perturbed about the injustice of the British invasion of Benin. He wants to return the priceless work of history and records to its original owners... but went about it wrongly and the law catches up with him... In trying to justify his action, he narrates the series of events that led to the globally renowned epic story of one of the greatest king of Africa, Oba Ovonramwen of the great Benin Kingdom. Who until 1989 was the only king and kingdom still standing in the whole sub-Saharan Africa, a misunderstanding ensued that leads to deaths, destruction and the carting away of priceless works of arts which in truth was more than decorative pieces (G-Media, 2015). *Invasion 1897* (2014) is a historical fact of events re-written and retold in film.

Critiquing the Act of Acting in *Invasion 1897*

Invasion 1897 as an epic film, no doubt it was tough shooting it. Enwefah (2009, p. 41) states the obvious that: "Epic films are very expensive to produce, due to elaborate and panoramic settings, on-location filming, authentic period costumes, inflated action on a massive scale and large cast of character." The film, *Invasion 1897* has a large cast of character indeed as one of the elements of epic enumerated by Enwefah (2009). The invasion of the Benin Kingdom in 1897 is retold in 2014 by IGIE EHINARE while facing trial in a court in London, UK, which makes the shooting much more challenging and tough. Antoine Fugua aptly writes that, "The real human drama of our lives is the key to filmmaking (qtd. An Afolabi 2005, p. 36). Therefore, casting actors for the character must be rightly done. Casting would either make it or mar it.

One of the greatest attribute of acting is that an actor cannot fake it. If one is good it will show, and if a bad actor the sloppiness will glaringly show. Only the dramatic action can mandate the extent for the use of the camera. Camera magnates the drama before it. Movement, the actor (character) talking and the hot spot of light that the eyes of the audience are attracted to. The director is the God of film who determines the look the film takes and as such he is the sole being who has the sweep of the film right up in his head. In a nutshell, nobody other than the director knows the look of the film from start of shoot to wrap. One of the vital aspects of shooting a film is to capture the acting and the best possible way. And so the director guides the actors to re-enact the drama of the invasion of the Benin kingdom in 1897 as well as the drama in the contemporary time of July, 2014 in London where the story of the invasion is actually retold.

The film poses a challenge of transporting the audience to other world or eras. It combines both the past (history) and present (contemporary). The characters comprise of blacks and whites in both the past and present eras. Lancelot cast both race in *Invasion 1897*. Incidentally, the London characters are mostly security officials apart from EGIE EHINARE, his white girlfriend, ZUOGBE. In the era of the invasion the white character were all British military personnel. Not once was any of them in a mufti wear.

While the black cast paraded renowned Nollywood stars like Segun Arinze, Paul Obazele, the white cast are not known to these writers to have a pedigree in film acting. This is evidently shown in their acting. It is a fact that: Directing actor is the most experiential aspect of the craft of film directing. It is not something you can learn from watching film. It is not something that can be taught from a crash course... We are talking serious directing—means getting performances that are not only believable, but interesting (Nicholas, 2008, p. 123).

The acting of the white actors which is the thrust of this paper is anything but convincing, believable and plausible. It is noteworthy of the fact that non-professional actors can be good if given great attention: Nonprofessional actors need extended rehearsals in which to develop empathy with their character and the confidence and trust in the director that alone give their performances conviction and authority (Rabiger, 2003, p. 11).

A director can turn a bad actor into a good one if he devotes his time to brush off the rough edges of a greenhorn in the world of film acting. Invasion 1897 showed sloppy acting from mostly the white cast. Acting is not just about wearing costume and probably with make-up and mount the stage and face the camera. Acting is enacting the dramatic action that creates the character the actor is imitating. Acting is being convincing, truthful, believable and plausible in the act. In the very first appearance of the white actors which takes place outside the consular office; the dialogue, gesture and movement is a drab of acting.

Ext-shot: consular office verandah day, Disc 1 of DVD Duration: 38:34-40:15

Description of Action: Consular is walking towards the star case holding a folded map under his arm. Mr. Hackney, a staff of the office and consular subordinate meets with him on the staircase. Conversation ensues.

Consular: (Opens the map and shows him a spot). Since J.B Dunlop... the demand for rubber in Europe has expanded dramatically. And here, God has deposited the greatest number of number tries just waiting for us.

Mr. Hackney: (Response). Okay, so what is the use to talk to the Oba if the rubber tires are waiting for us?

Consular: So, this mission conveys with it a lot of political cabbage.

Hackney: (Interfaces).

To understand both actor's voices did not deliver the character's dialogue convincingly and comprehensible to the audience. The actors were struggling with the delivery of their lines (dialogue). In fact, Mr. Hackney has very annoying intersections to CONSULAR's speeches that is not a convincing character trait if that is what it is supposed to portray. To make it worse is the exit of Mr. Hackney who stopped without prodding as he twined to go to his office. It is rather glomming that he was told by the director behind the camera to go ahead before the flame faded out. Both actors are devoid of facial expression in enhancing their lines delivery even as the picture flames are mostly Medium Shot (MS).

The British Military personnel are renowned to be stern and no nonsense when it comes to defending the Queen of England, interest. The essence of talking to Benin bringing lots of gifts for the OBA shows the two British Military officers as not having military gait or possess it. Rather it is the black wide of the British Army that display charisma and gait. The white actors did not apply the method acting approach to interpreting their character neither did the director guide them to give a believable, truthful, convincing and plausible acting. The scene: Ext. shot Bush Path Day. Turns for 57:03-58: 01 on Disc One.

We can also see what looks like good acting in what is obviously a race we of an establishment shot to where in an interior chat: Eat. Shit, British Consular Office. Sapele Day that run for 51:13-51:15 and fades into it. Shot, Consular's officer the action which sees CONSULAR sitting throughout the scene while HAMILTON is standing may be due to the very regal of the office, the director restricted movement. The delivery of their lines (dialogue) is much more articulative than that of HACKNEY in the previous scene and CAPTAIN RUFUS in a scene ahead.

What can be termed a bad scene which looks like hurriedly put together art. Ext. shot – union Jack on Wall. Day. Runs: 1:41:15-1:42:23. The scene opens showing the Union Jack flag gummed to a wall. Whoever paste a flag like that? Flags are usually hoisted are wrapped around the body by a sport person of the running a competition. HAMILTON walks into the shot and stands beside one-end shot and stands beside one-end of the flag. Then another officer walks into shot and stands the other side. After their dialogue bothering on conspiracy to invade

Oba Ovonranwen palace, he walked out of shot in the same direction he walked in. then his colleague, the officer goes out of set same way. The set did not enhance their acting.

The British Military officers embarked on a veto to Oba Ovonranwen but were stopped from entering Benin at the time. World had reached the Oba but who sent word that he will receive them after two months. This did not go down well with the white British officer who saw it as an affront on their personality and the Queen. So they decided to March on into Benin as the British were advancing they were ambushed and seven white British men were killed.

The killing of the British Army personnel approved off reprisal atones and war broke out. Universities commend the acting of the white British soldiers in combat. They lived up to their characters as soldiers in battle and war. But again these same action that are good and convincing on the battle reverted to sloppy acting again. Fighting is an in-built that in human being and so acting it comes natural. Even the worst of a green hound actor would play the role of figures in a war convincingly.

The raping of a woman in poetry personnel by the white actor. For the director to allow the act to be carried out on the battle ground with fighting ongoing is not convincing an act. The actor was too sloppy. The breaking into the art work stone room in the palace by the white British Army and coming upon a treasury chest of out mourns should have elicited a child-like excitement response combine with greedier of grabbing and grabbing of pieces of art works. This action is in part two of DVD at 1:05:53-1:06:55. In the scene: Ext. shot Oba's palace. Day. Rural 1:23:23-1:24:04. OBA OVONRAMWEN is brought out from hiding to stand trial before CAPTAIN RUGUS of the colonial British Arms. The latter's acting and lines delivery was sloppy. While the OBA delivered a Grade-A performance, CAPTAIN RUFUS did not match up to him.

Captain Rufus

Very well, Ovonranwen, you are hereby disposed as the Oba of Benin (decaled people reactions). You, and the others will report hereby 7am to face trial of the murder of seven unarmed white men. His delivery of the line is not that of command and storm warning that is associated with military personnel. To make it worse is his accent is not that of a baton. Invariably, the actor was inappropriately cast for the whole of CAPTAIN RUFUS.

CONCLUSION

We have opined in this paper that the director of the master craft man who determines the look of a film production. The acting of the actor to portray the character he imitates is the creation of the director. Every act in a film is solely the signature of the director. No doubt, casting can make or mar a film but it behooves the actor has what it can give. The white actors in Invasion 1897 by their acting show that they are not as professional as their Nigeria colleagues. The actor should live the character he is portraying to the audience to be truthful, believable, convincing and plausible. The application of Stanislavski's method acting approach helps an actor achieve believability, plausibility truthfulness and convincing character limitation, portrayal or re-enactment.

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