Towards a Theory of Film Acting: The Nigerian Experience

by Hyginus Ekwuazi*

Abstract

The Nigerian film culture is the background against which this examination of the theory of film acting is done. This film culture's peculiar relationship to the stage makes the stage referrential in two crucial respects. The first of these is in using *mise-en-cadre* and montage/editing, two basic structural elements in the mosaic of filmic construction, in working out the possibilities and limitations of the film medium. As regards *mise-en-cadre*, three essential correlates are deleanated: the physical relationship between the camera and the actor; the issue of point of view; and the frame as a crucial factor in the composition of the visual imagery and in the interpretation of the role of the actor. The other significant area in which the stage becomes referrential is in isolating the basic requirements for effective film acting.

*Dr. Hyginus Ekwuazi teaches in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Vers une théorie de la cinématographie: l'expérience du Nigéria

Résumé

La culture nigérianne du film constitue la base de cette étude de la théorie de faire du cinema. L'étrange rapport entre la culture de ce film et la scène fait de celle-ci une référence sur deux points de vue cruciaux: Le premier consiste en une utilisation de la mise-en-cadre et le montage, deux elements structurels de base dans la mosaïque du montage cinématographique, pour déterminer les possibilités et limitations du milieu du film. Concernant la mise-en-cadre, trois relations principales sont soulignées: la relation physique entre l'appareil et l'acteur; la question du point de vue; et le cadre en tant que facteur crucial dans la formation des images visuelles et une interprétation du rôle de l'acteur. L'autre aspect important dans lequel la scène devient référentielle est la définition des besoins élémentaires pour aboutir à une cinématographie efficace.

Introduction

Between 1972 and 1990, at least 100 indigenous movies were licensed in Nigeria for public screening. The films neatly subdivide into two: the English language films and the Yoruba language films, otherwise known as the folkloric films. In one essential respect, however, these films are similar: the skein of the acting is woven out of the nuances of stage acting.

There are two reasons to account for this. In the first case, one immediately thinks of McLuhan's theory of the rear-view mirror: the tendency for a younger medium to explore its possibilities in the light of the media that preceded it. Before the film in Nigeria, there was the stage: the one had to seek its legitimacy or fulfilment within the ambience of the other. Indices of this 'litter *Kongi's Harvest* (1972), Nigeria's first independent movie. The cast is drawn from the stage: Soyinka, Adedeji, Adelugba, Femi Johnson, etc: all already associated with the stage, play prominent roles in the film — which, incidentally, is a stage adaptation. The acting is stage-induced. Even in the camera movement one notes a stage-induced paralysis.

The other reason has to do with the geographical distribution of film-making in Nigeria. Most of Nigeria's film-makers come from the south-west of the country, with its virile theatre tradition. In the main, the bulk of the films come from stage adaptations. This underscores Soyinka's point at the 1979 Film/Culture Seminar:

... the two (film and theatre) are inter-related and mutually complement each other so often, both in practice and theory, that new-comers to the cinema, which include all of us, tend often to transpose the form of theatre directly unto film with of course stagey, static films (Opubor and Nwuneli, 1979: 98).

What we find from the Nigerian experience is a corps of film-makers from the stage: film-makers who have made the transition from stage to film not only with the same story but also with the same cast. Acting in most of the films is therefore essentially stage-acting. The larger than life acting demanded of stage-acting is carried into film. At times, there is a conscious attempt by the actors to adopt a low-key acting technique. One sees the actor straining and striving to liberate himself from his stage-bound self/role. The result is an agonized acting style: acting with tears, as it were.

When we see a new-born babe, we see a wholeness, a beauty and a promise of flowering out. We do not see the sweat, the blood and the agony of the birth. And it is precisely this that we demand of the actor: not the pains of rethinking his role in terms of another medium, but the beauty of seeing this role already rethought in terms of the medium. The point we have been leading to is simply this: film-acting is different, is

totally different, from stage acting. We can make identical claims for both the stage and the screen: they are both the language of images. In both media, thought and language exist, but image is primary: it takes precedence over thought. Unlike in literature where we extract the 'image from the thought', on stage/screen we extract the 'thought from the image' (Murray, 1972:11).

And for both media, the image exists in the eternal present, in the binding present: the verbs are always in the present tense; the image on the screen/stage is in the act of happening, we are given the gesture itself, not an account of it. So, the stage/film director's preoccupation is with the image. However, the stage is less dynamic, more static; the screen image less static, more dynamic. For both media, the image, therefore, is directly mediated via the process of production.

In creating the image (with his actors, set, etc), the film-maker's preoccupation boils down to three inter-related questions:

(a) What persons, objects, situations to shoot in order to capture the right image.
(b) How to shoot such persons, objects, situations in order to get the most effective image; and
(c) How to join the various shots for maximum effect.

Whereas the last of these belongs to the province of montage/editing (which is a post-shooting exercise), the first two belong with *mise-en-cadre*: and, specifically, this applies to

(a) that which is enacted before the camera;
(b) camera position in relation to the actor/action;
(c) (camera) lense properties used (Monaco, 1981: 441).

In other words, to everything that is done right there on set.

'Mise-en-Cadre'

Once on set, and production has commenced, the camera becomes anything but inanimate. The point in Becket's screen play, *Film*, is that the camera is possessed of life and vigour; it is a living, vigorous presence with the all-seeing eye of Big Brother. Once on set and in production, the camera comes to life, and in no small measure it becomes a key factor in the definition of film-acting. The camera 'walks' by dollying; it raises or lowers its 'head' by tilting; it surveys a scene by panning or climbs and descends by craning; it gets dizzy by swish-panning and faints by going out of focus (Huss and Silverstein, 1982: 106). In other words, the camera becomes human. It can move in and out of the action. It can adopt the point of view of any character. It can become an active witness, a detached witness or even a self-conscious witness of the action it records. Throughout, whatever role the camera assumes, the relationship

between it and the object (in this context, the actor) is physical: the actor and the camera relate to each other in purely physical terms. This relationship, however, changes as soon as the film has been made. At screenings, camera position is taken by the audience: and the relationship between the audience and the actor becomes essentially psychological.

The difference between this and what happens on stage is immediately obvious. From casting, through rehearsal to production, stage actors relate essentially in physical terms. It is this sublimitation of relationship, inherent in film but lacking on stage, which gives the discordant note to even the very best of stage-acting on screen. From the audience point of view, this sublimation finds its co-ordinate in the idiom of point of view. The stage actor is trained to project an objective point of view: if he is acting in a Greek or an Elizabethan drama, the only way he can break out of this is by the use of a chorus or a soliloquy (Murray, 1972: 11). The realistic theatre of modern times has, of course, done away with these — to replace them with the use of a narrator *(The Glass Managerie)* and expressionism *(Death of a Salesman)* (Murray, 1972: 11). Even where the stage actor can vary the point of view, the degree is far less than in film: the film actor can and does move from objective point of view to subjective point of view and to an infinite number of subjective point of view. The effect is that the audience, as it were, is 'pulled directly inside the frame of the picture' (Murray, 1972: 11). Film-acting, then, is predicated on the premise that a hightened sense of intimacy must be achieved with the audience.

One final point on *mise-en-cadre*. In Athol Fuggard's theatre of the oppressed, visual imagery, like meaning, is the product of the actor and his three dimensional medium:

... the actor and the stage, the actor on the stage. Around him is space, to be filled and defined by movement and gesture, around him is also silence to be filled with meaning, using words and sounds, and at moments when all fails him, including the words, the silence itself (Fuggard, 1979: 1).

The parallel with the two dimensional frame is obvious: the actor and the frame; the actor within the frame (in the closed form, where the areas outside the limits of the frame do not exist for the audience): the actor without the frame (in the open form where the shot is arranged/composed in relation to areas outside the limits of the frame). The actor with the frame, the actor without the frame: around him is silence to be defined with all possible elements of sound, including silence; all round him, also, is space, to be filled with meaning, using the image, and in moving this image 'throughout the staged foreground, middle ground, and background in order that the illusion of depth, and thus, reality or believability, be present on the two-dimensional screen' (Klinge and McConkey, 1982: 65).

The frame is consequently unavoidably referential not only in the composition of the visual imagery, but in this context, in the interpretation of the role of the actor. The inherent stasis or dynamism of the visual imagery is reinforced, neutralized or counterbalanced by its relative position on the frame (Klinge and McConkey, 1982: 25). The left and bottom parts take precedence over the right and top. The bottom connotes stability; the top, tension and instability. The farther away a character/an object is to stability, the more significance it assumes. Persons/objects moving horizontally in either direction assumes more importance/prominence than those whose movement is located on the vertical plane.

When Edmunds (1983) argues that 'truth is not so much a matter of facts as it is of relationship', he is, like Eisenstein in his definition of *mise-en-scene/mise-en-cadre* as 'inter-relationship of people in action', in effect underlying one of the important structural elements in the mosaic of filming construction/acting. In both contexts, relationship/interrelationship becomes a loaded term: referring simultaneously to the inter-relationship among the actors and objects within the scene/shots *(mise-en-scene/mise-en-cadre)* as well as to the relationship among the scenes/shots themselves (montage). The true to lifeness of (the acting in) film derives from this two dimensional relationship:

> ... in a motion picture, we can create a complete population, we can re-enact every scene, we invent the locale and the incidents, thus, there is no 'actuality'. No fact at all, yet, if the relationships between those people and their environment, are true, we have created a work of fiction that exhibits truth indeed. This is what we mean when we say that such a work is 'true to life' (Edmunds 1983: 23).

All along, we have been examining this in relation to *mise-en-cadre;* let us now see how it applies to montage.

Montage/Editing

Montage is used to denote:
  (a) the ability 'to find the requisite order, of shots or pieces and rhythm necessary for their combination' (Pudovkin. 1958: 169);
  (b) a dialectical process that creates a third meaning out of the original two meanings of the adjacent shots; and
  (c) a process in which a number of shots is woven together in order to communicate a great deal of information in a short period of time (Monaco 1981: 183).

Montage, therefore, is at the heart of editing. In modern film lexicon, both terms have become interchangeable.

A few examples should serve to clarify the nature of montage, and how

it functions. The examples are all classical: drawn from the experiments conducted by Kuleshov, Pudovkin and Eisenstein. In one of the experiments, the picture of the White House was cut from a magazine and filmed. Shots of two Russian actors were taken differently from two different locations. The shots were edited and what we see in the film is the actors actually meeting, shaking hands and entering the White House together. A similar experiment was the synthetic creation of a woman from composite fragments of shots of various women.

Another experiment comprised three shots:

> Shot 1: a smiling actor
> Shot 2: close-up of a revolver
> Shot 3: the same actor, frightened.

When the shots were presented in this order, the audience saw the actor as an abject coward; but when the order of the shots was changed to 2, 3 and 1, the same actor emerged as brave.

The most famous of these experiments is the one involving the Russian actor, Mosjukhin: neutral, that is, static or quiet close-ups of him were intercut with other shots: first, a bowl of soup; then a dead woman in a coffin; and finally, a little girl at play. The result: the audience was immensely impressed by the fine acting of the artist: 'They pointed out the heavy pensiveness of his mood over the forgotten soup; were touched and moved by the deep sorrow with which he looked on the dead woman; and admired the happy smile with which he surveyed the girl at play' (Pudovkin, 1958: 168).

The basic conclusion drawn from these experiments is that 'The film assembles the elements of reality to build from them a new reality proper only to itself' (Pudovkin, 1958: 90). In this filmic reality:

(a) The limitations of empirical time and space do not apply;
(b) Signification or meaning resides in sequencing: in which image/sound is placed in what context within the celluloid strip; and
(c) Every shot is possessed, first, of an ideological-temporal content or value which it derives from the reality which it represents and which is therefore peculiar to it; and then the ideological-temporal value derived from the context of other shots in the celluloid strip.

Peter Brook, whose experiments, especially in his Shakespearean films, with the distorting power of the medium, bear out the emotive/associative force of montage, holds that 'when you cut a film, you really do find that actor's performance change and not just because you are concealing things' (Dawes, 1971: 470). The main reason, no doubt, is that in the cutting room a celluloid strip becomes possessed of life, it acquires within it a moving life: 'a living nameless shape ... that is, there in a sort of continual turmoil and movement' (Dawes, 1971: 470). No wonder, the possibility of interpretation changes in relation to just

how the editor cuts into this 'living piece of actoplasm' that is the celluloid piece (Dawes, 1971: 470).

It was not till I actually made my first film that I came to appreciate fully the meleability of the actor's role. It was a project film of about 10 minutes (in colour) and consisted of three sequences. In the first sequence, I filmed a woman sitting at a writing table; then, in close-up, the same woman writing a letter, folding it and enveloping it. For the second sequence, I got a woman to go through her daily routine of bathing her baby, breast/bottle-feeding it and tucking it into its crib. The third sequence was not filmed by me: I merely got the stock footage of a mortuary/funeral parlour. I edited the three sequences together and had a voice-over (the letter read by a female voice) over the whole thing. I called the film: *Deep Down a Mother's Heart.*

The whole film works on two levels. On the one level, there is the woman's palpable fear (what the poet would term her unsettling intimations of mortality) for herself and for her child. On the other level, there is her alienation in a strange culture: back home in Africa, a death in the street or community is a death in the family; but in (predominantly white) America, with its culture of funeral parlours, death has been anaesthesized to the point of indifference among mourners.

Basic Requirements For Effective Film-Acting

The cutting room's infinite potential for distortion has given rise to the Kuleshov-Pudovkin school's belief in the relative unimportance of the actor. However, all things considered, perhaps Pudovkin overstated the case when he saw the actor's performance as mere raw material to be endowed with the 'special, specific, filmic powers' possible only in montage (Pudovkin, 1958: 137). Kim Stanky's oracular 'Good cutting can make a good actor out of a donkey' (Hunt, 1974: 100) is well taken, but with the proviso that only if such a donkey be equally good in its donkiness. This is an intrinsic, not extrinsic quality.

So one of the first requirements for effective film-acting should be the ability to internalise rather that externalise the role. Note that in the Hollywood idiom, tragedy, for instance, calls for a multiplicity of close shots, for more close shots than long shots: close shots make for identification with the audience, but the pertinent reason here is that the playground of tragedy is the human face: the emotions and reactions of the character are effectively conveyed by the camera via close shots. The first basic requirement must, therefore, be the ability to internalise a role.

The second requirement calls for the reconciliation of opposites: the ability to be conscious and, at the same time, unconscious of the camera. Zettle states the case well:

> (The screen actor) must be camera-conscious but ... should never reveal his knowledge of the camera's presence. The viewer (represented by the camera) does not remain in one viewing position, as he would do in a theatre: he moves around (the actor), looks at (him) at close range and from a distance, from below and from above; he may look at (the actor's) eyes, ... feet, ... hands, ... back (at) whatever the director selects for him to see. And at all times (the actor) must look completely convincing and natural; the character (he is) portraying must appear on the screen as a real, living, breathing human being (1974. 362).

This entails that the character should take his cue from the camera, from the role assigned to the camera. If the camera is a (detached) witness of the action, the actor so relates to it. If it is involved in the action, the actor relates to it accordingly.

The third, but by no means the least, of these requirements should be a thorough understanding of the medium, of its range of possibilities and limitations. Film is film, even when it insists on remaining most faithful to its source of adaptation. Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor play the lead roles in both the state and film versions of Edward Albee's *Who is Afraid of Virnigia Woolf?*, but their acting in the one is vastly different from what it is in the other. In discussing the film version, Albee notes that

> Whenever something occurs in the play on both an emotional and intellectual level, I find in the film that only the emotional aspect shows through. The intellectual underpinning isn't as clear ... Quite often, and I suppose in most of my plays, people are doing something on two or three levels at the same time. From time to time in the movie of *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* I find that a level or two had vanished. (Cited in Edward Murray, 1972: 15).

That, of course, is in the nature of the intrinsic limitation of the film medium: stage characters can be more intellectually and psychologically complex than their film counterparts. The implication of this: Burton and Taylor simply had to re-realise their stage role/s for the film. The success of their role/s in the film is in direct proportion to the depth of their rethinking of their stage role/s in terms of the limitations (and possibilities) of the film medium.

And here, precisely, is the whole point, especially as it relates to the Nigerian actor. This phase of the development of the Nigerian film implies a dependent relationship with the stage. However, actors who make the transition from the stage to the screen must necessarily adapt to the possibilities and limitations of the medium.

References

Dawes, Carol (1971). *Peter Brook and the Living Event.* Unpublished DFA thesis, Yale University.
Edmunds (1983). *Anthropology of Film.* Unpublished mimeograph.

Fuggard, Athol (1979). *Statements*. London: Oxford University Press.

Hunt, James (ed) (1974). *Focus on Film and Theatre*. N.J: Spectrum Book, Prentice-Hall Inc. Inc.

Huss, Roy and Silverstein, Norman (1982). *The Film Experience: The Elements of the Motion Picture Art*. New York: Dell Publishing Coy. Inc.

Klinge, Peter and McConkey, Lee (1982). *Introduction to Film Structure*. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America.

Monaco, James (1981). *How to Read a Film*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Murray, Edward (1972). *The Cinematic Imagination*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Coy. Inc.

Opubor, Alfred and Nwuneli, Onuorah (1979). *The Development and Growth of the Film Industry in Nigeria*. Lagos and New York: Third Press Int.

Pudovkin, V.I. (1958). *Film Technique and Film Acting* (translator: Montagu, Ivor) London and Bradford: Percy Lund, Humphries and Coy. Ltd.

Zettle, Herbert (1974). *Television Production Handbook*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Coy. Inc.