

Chapter 17

From Stage to Screen: Towards a CineThematic Exploration of Hagher's Dramatic Oeuvre as Visual Literature

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Premise

Theme is a broad idea in a story, or a message conveyed by a work. This message is usually about life, society or human nature. Themes are usually implied rather than explicitly stated. Deep thematic content is not required in literature; however, some readers would say that all stories inherently project some kind of outlook on life that can be taken as a theme, regardless of whether or not this is the intent of the author. Analysis of changes in dynamic characters can provide insight into a particular theme. Whereas, film is spectacularly physical, note: Spectacle. It is a succession of physical images which move the audience to become involved. Unlike the novel, there are no pages to fill; there is only a rectangular screen to be filled with images, physical images! The director places images on the screen and out of these, we get story and character. Film is therefore, the first medium to offer mankind, in such detail, the opportunity to respond to an artist the way we respond to people we see and deal with everyday. Believability or plausibility, albeit, is the aim in working on the story and the character.

Film is also a term that encompasses individual motion pictures, the field of film as an art form, and the motion picture industry. This

chapter suggests that Hagher's plays are eligible for screen adaptations as films are produced by recording actual people and objects with cameras, or by creating images using animation techniques or special effects. They (films) are cultural artifacts created by specific cultures, which reflect those cultures, and, in turn, affect them. Film is also considered to be an important art form (especially art film), a source of popular entertainment, and a powerful method for educating-or indoctrinating citizens. The visual elements of cinema give motion pictures a universal power of communication; some movies have become popular worldwide attractions, by using dubbing or subtitles that translate the dialogue. Films are made up of a series of individual images called frames. When these images are shown rapidly in succession, a viewer has the illusion that motion is occurring. The viewer cannot see the difference between frames due to an effect known as persistence of vision — whereby the eye retains a visual image for a fraction of a second after the source has been removed. Viewers perceive motion due to a psychological effect called *beta movement*.

The theme of any drama or film is its intellectual content, its subject. Since a motion picture is a method of communication between the filmmaker and the audience, it has a language and vocabulary of its own. The filmmaker (or scriptwriter) usually has something to say, and it is this content that is the theme of any film. However, contemporary film has become fragmented and often seems to lack cohesion and a recognizable form or structure, that it is easy to assume that theme is either absent or unnecessary. This writer finds this amply and robustly demonstrated by the dramatist under study, hence, the suggestion of his oeuvre for the screen adaptation in order for the messages (themes) to reach a much wider audience, for impact.

Framework of Analysis

Narrative is a general term indicating the construction, development and telling of a story. Film as a narrative genre presents a story. Some scholars hold that we are all storytellers because we tell stories everyday of our lives, and that our lives are stories, unfolding in layers. However, not all of us can tell a good story, hence, the recourse to adaptation: of an epic narrative, drama, prose, or a film

narrative created out of an original idea. Adaptation, therefore, presupposes the ability to make something suitable for a new use, situation, etc. A curious but critical mention needs to be made of Laura Mulvey's now-classic essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Mulvey, 1975), was the feminist claim that men and women are differentially positioned by cinema: men as subjects identifying with agents who drive the film's narrative forward, women as objects for masculine desire and fetishistic gazing. With regards to Hagher's feminism or feminist handling of themes in his works, Mulvey's contention is apt.

Exploring Iyorwuese Hagher's *Mulkin Mata* and other plays for screen adaptation, one can see the manifestations of the cinethematic makes the factional drama flexible for re-make, re-use or adaptation- whichever side of the spectrum one looks at these two forms of communication. Since film as a medium is intensely decision-based, using the narrative theory and relying on the intertextuality/intermediality theory simultaneously, this chapter argues for the possibility that each scene from the dramatist equates each shot lined up by the filmmaker that results from a dozen of choices about the elements and conventions such as camera placement, lighting, focalization (focus), casting and framing.

From the late 1960s when Julia Kristeva (1941-) first introduced the term "intertextuality" in literary linguistics, through Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) to Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), the theory of intertextuality assumes that meaning and intelligibility in discourse and texts is based on a network prior and concurrent discourse and texts. Every text is a mosaic of references to other texts, genres, and discourses. Every text or set of signs presupposes a network of relationships to other signs like strings of quotations that have lost their exact references. The principle of intertextuality is a ground or precondition for meaning beyond "texts" in the strict sense of things written, and includes units of meaning in any media. Expanding the theory for cross-media symbolic activity, we could call this "intermediality" or "intersemiality" (the structures of meaning presupposed or embedded in any set of signs like nodes in a network). The notion of "intersemic" describes the interdependence and implied relation of any unit of signs (like a movie) to a network of

other texts, genres, artifacts, documents, and symbolic works (images, artworks) in a culture.

The Relationship between the Stage and the Screen

The relationship between the stage and the screen is amply evident in the plays and videos which are derivative, because the playwright is in the same vain communicating this phenomenon through his dramatic creation that the societies has the potential of bringing forth change in all spheres of the society from the pages to the screen. As products of both dramatic forms inherited from the west and indigenous to Africa, and which the preceding generations built upon, these playwrights have projected their own creative vision. Their pre-occupation is with the way and manner the opportunities available for their individual and collective development as citizens have been eroded by a system that does not believe in the youth or their empowerment. Idoko (2013:43) contends that:

Of course, without doubt, literature and film share a common interface with society. The fact that both mediums can reflect, refract and mediate society underpins their relevance. Irrespective of hoe they are juxtaposed, literature and film will remain a paradox given their capacitiesfor mutations. Within the boundaries of common sense, there are levels of relationships between film and literature. It is not that the two share the same features but sharing similar characteristics does not make them the same either.

The development of the motion picture from a purely narrative storytelling entertainment to a genuine art form capable of communicating profound themes with subtlety and depth took place over a span of some three decades. Despite the wide variety of film styles and movements within the past twenty years, there is a common trait and trend running through artistically successful films, which is a discernible theme that is both intellectually and philosophically arresting. Film, the last century's most original, popular and compelling art form with its unique representation of human action in time and space, we want to contend, is ideally suited to the portrayal of the most basic of all human drives – the quest for meaning in one's personal life and for the meaning of the existence as

such. The influence of the movies on individuals in the society is most profound and to a large extent, the life of an average youth in today's world is mediated by entertainment mediums notably motion picture and television.

We have argued in another space that: Of all the things that distinguish us, humans from other animals, story-telling is the most unique. And we do it to help make sense of our lives, to make our lives more meaningful than just a simple sequence of events, ending in extinction (2019: 224-225). The drama of Hagher as storytelling, therefore, provides answers to the "Why?" of our existence, especially, the feminine gender. His articulation and interrogation of the contradictions in society in a good number of his plays tend towards the education of his readers and viewers (in the theatrical performance), and this writer believes that the dragnet can be expanded if some of these works, if not all, can be adapted for the screen. To the extent that we understand how stories work, we can construct them with greater clarity and deeper meaning. This is what we are primarily concerned with and interested in in this paper, as the events unfold in the plays and how they tend to alter society in many crucial ways.

It suffices to state that films are just mere stories from some people's imagination, which help the consumer/spectator have a better understanding of the past, perhaps in order to shape the future. The emotional connection films invoke through the visual and moving image make the medium hold fond and special memories for individuals, and it has done that, entertaining generations for more than a century. This is what *Mulkin Mata* and other plays like *Lifetimes*, *Aishatu*, *The Masquerade and the Elephant*, *We Protest* and *Mulkin Matasa* do as one reads the drama as a historical documentary book or historical narrativisation of the unconscious yearning of the Nigerian, nay African woman. Inasmuch as film has now been classified as the most important historical document in existence today, a reading of Hagher's plays reveal a commitment to the affirmation of the feminist positions of the relationships between the female characters in his drama and the agents of oppression, suppression and marginalization, represented by the male. He appears a defender of female rights, "caretaker of relationships,

conveyor of cultural practices, and sustainer of meaning” as Sarah Clark Miller observes (Miller 2009, 513-514).

Interrogating the *CineThematic as Visual Literature in Iyorwuese Hagher's Oeuvre*

When reading a film, the reader or critic is expected to interpret the text as captured by the filmmaker and why the filmmaker made certain choices and the thematic preoccupation of the film. Film studies have been perceived from various viewpoints and they are understood within specific theoretical models of analysis (Ossai 2013: 29) Visual literature, in corroborating the contention of Tom Sherak, as film is (literature as) a reflection of society, both present and past, and serves as a medium of escape. He says:

I think the film and it's innovations sometimes has to catch up to society but sometimes it leads society too. Movies are stories, movies are people who come out with ideas about something they want to say, something they want to tell someone. Movies are a form of communication and that communication, those stories, come from societies- not just where society is presently and what it's doing now- but where society has been... Movies are different things to different people, that's what is so incredible about them. To me personally, movies are about escapism. Movies are about sitting in a theatre, watching something- watching a story unfold with people I don't know- watching that happen and emoting an emotion knowing that for those two hours, when I walk into that theatre, I don't have to worry about what is going on outside. I lose myself in what I'm watching. Movies can educate too. They tell us things we never could have known. They tell us things we might not know, and they give us a way to explore the past, the present and the future (2011).

Hagher has done justice to the visuality of the literature, for instance, in the scene construction in *The Masquerade*... The picturesque stage directions here:

[Seeing Kuyila, Abonjo gives her a strong I – love – you stare and Kuyila looks down. Abonjo folds a currency note and

puts it between her breasts through her blouse neckline. She pushes his hand away, but pats back the money in place between her breasts] (35).

provide an ample opportunity for the filmmaker to deploy dramatic forms such as movement, improvisation, speech, and scene work, (that is picturization and pantomimic dramatization in directing), before the camera for his storytelling. Drama, we must be reminded, is composed for performance, confronting the audience in the public, sociable confines of the theatre (Worthen 1). This theatre can as well be the cinema theatre! After all, the filmmaker is a mind surgeon.

The cinematic tools of storytelling such as close-ups, fast cutting, sophisticated modern make-up and special effects and the heightened use of music and sound effects can combine to produce an impact no other medium can create (<http://www.filmeducation.org/secondary/concept/film-ideal/docs/frameset.html>). As we have said in another space, film, however, is a visual medium in which dialogue cannot be judged or experienced on its own (Parker 176). Van Sijll (2005:1) is instructive here, talking about the exploration of the cinematic tools of storytelling, to advance your stories. What any filmmaker can do with the plays as films, just as *Son of a Chief, Half of a Yellow Sun*, is to call attention to the emotional trauma(tic) stories inherent in almost all of Hagher's female victims in his drama, using the cinematic narrative of hubris, the Aristotelean concept of weakness or fault in the tragic hero or heroine.

The sources of raw materials are already there in Hagher's plays. For instance, ideas, current affairs, history, personal experiences, myths and legends and adaptations, and of course, *imaginations* are inherent in all his drama. Some of his plays are historical in nature, while others are froj imagination, and the rest are products of ideas and adaptations. These and more reasons make the plays qualify and suitable for screen exploration, given the fact that film and literature share some drama components, such as story, plot, setting, dialogue, narrative and characterization, even though conversely, literature and film do not share filmic components (Idoko 49). When the drama components are collocated against the filmic components of camera angle, camera distance, camera movement, camera time and modes of transition, we can the see the differences. The filmmaker can

depict the scenes as described by Hagher when we take any of the plays into the medium of film, using the narrative, description, dialogue, internalized monologues and figurative language - as in images and metaphors - when translated into pictures, employing in shooting, angles, movement, scale, etc., the use of lighting, colours, contrasts, etc.; *mise-en-scène* for props, costumes, setting, make up; actors and acting - movements, gestures, expressions and looks; language, music and sound, ambience sounds, sound effects as necessary, and of course, editing and post-production are the other cinematic elements needed to turn the plays from the page to the screen.

The theme of a play is the point or argument the playwright is trying to make. Often it springs from a relatively universal concept, such as the evils of power or the virtues of protecting the weak. We can write to protest against happenings in the society, oppose ideological standpoints, and question the oppression that is meted out to/against the low class of the society, among others. Thus, theme is the broad-based philosophical underpinning explored by the story. Thematic strands go beyond the subject matter in a play which can be narrowed to the intrigues at work by the playwright, and the themes can be variegated. It is in this light that the would-be filmmakers can explore the *cinethematic* possibilities in the plays. This is with a view to demonstrating their own ingenuity as creative co-creators to drive home the contemporary relevance of the drama and thus find a wider audience for Hagher.

Conclusion

In attempting to interrogate the *cinethematic* possibilities of Hagher's dramatic oeuvre, we have been considering the huge potential of his body of works and the monumental gain the world is waiting to benefit from the creative interpretation of his vision for humanity, going by his array of thematic preoccupations. We have said in another space that:

Cinema might be the "dream factory" or a culture industry of mere entertainment. It might be our rational, conscious, objective stories we tell ourselves, or our dreams and nightmares - but we always need these representations to help

construct our identities, past and present, and to understand them. The filmmaker usually lines up things to appear on the screen (i.e. images) at the expense of others not shown, but that the manner in which they appear depends on a selection of one perspective that eliminates, at least temporarily, all others in what this writer sees as subordination of story to style (Ademiju-Bepo 237).

Hagher has constructed an identity for the female in most of his plays, against the backdrop of women's oppression and the women as victims. As the world aches from this reality while the feminist movements and rights advocates are unrelenting, it suffices to gift the world the screen versions of the topical *cinethematic* pre-occupation in his vast oeuvre.

We are throwing the challenge to our filmmakers, as we did in another space for Femi Osofisan's oeuvre, to arise to the challenge and pick up the complete works of Harry Iyorwuese Hagher for exploration.

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