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Analysis of Set Design as Narrative Agent in Jerry Ossai's "*Ms. Kanyin*"

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Abstract
This research investigates the pivotal role of set design as an instrumental storytelling tool in Jerry Ossai's film, "Ms. Kanyin." Moving beyond its conventional perception as merely a visual backdrop, this study contends that set design actively shapes and propels the narrative, influences character development, establishes the mood, and highlights thematic elements. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the methodology involves a detailed visual analysis of the film's distinct settings, semiotic interpretation of their symbolic meanings, and the application of narrative theory to understand their functional contributions. Key findings reveal a compelling juxtaposition between the historical, untamed jungle setting of 1892 and the structured, modern environment of Sterling Academy. The recurring motif of the cursed tree, seen across both timelines, acts as a key narrative element, linking past and present conflicts. The careful use of period-specific props improves authenticity and provides subtle storytelling cues. The study concludes that the intentional and contrasting set designs in "Ms. Kanyin" are purposeful, playing a vital role in conveying the film's complex themes, advancing its plot, and engaging viewers, ultimately emphasizing the importance of production design in storytelling within the Nollywood industry.

Keywords: Set Design, Narrative Agent, Ms. Kanyin, Nollywood, Production Design, Symbolism, Semiotics.

Introduction

Set design, a critical component of cinematic production, extends far beyond the creation of aesthetically pleasing backgrounds. It is a fundamental element of visual storytelling, responsible for constructing the tangible world in which a narrative unfolds. As Figueiredo (2015) suggests, the cinematic narrative immerses the viewer in a fictional reality, and the design of this reality is a planned and intentional act of communication. The structure, form, and attributes of the represented spaces, their lighting, color, texture, and architecture are inseparable from the events that transpire within them (Figueiredo, 2015). This immersive experience is meticulously crafted to evoke specific emotions, thoughts, and feelings in the audience, making the fictional world feel authentic and believable. The authenticity of a set, as noted by D'Arcy (2019), is paramount; it is not about achieving absolute realism but about creating a world with its own internal logic and truth that serves the dramatic needs of the story. Therefore, set design is not merely decorative but is an active participant in the narrative, shaping the audience's perception and understanding of the film's world and its characters.

The concept of set design as a narrative agent proposes that the physical environment of a film is not a passive container for the action but an active force that contributes to the storytelling process. The set can reveal crucial information about a character's personality, socioeconomic status, and psychological state before they even appear on screen (Figueiredo, 2015). It can establish the mood and atmosphere of a scene, foreshadow future events, and symbolize the underlying themes of the narrative. Swenberg and Eriksson (2018) argue that film and television production should be viewed as a form of audiovisual design, where every element, including the set, is part of a conscious process of creating meaning. This perspective highlights the communicative function of set design, emphasizing its role in conveying information and shaping the audience's interpretation of the narrative. The strategic use of visual elements such as color, light, and props can transform a physical space into a dynamic narrative tool, capable of influencing the plot and enriching the thematic complexity of the film.

Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry, has emerged as a global cinematic powerhouse, known for its prolific output and its unique storytelling traditions. As Okwuowulu (2016) notes, Nollywood films often explore themes deeply rooted in Nigerian culture, utilizing visual and narrative strategies that reflect the nation's social and historical context. The industry's approach to production design, while often constrained by budgetary and logistical challenges, is characterized by a remarkable ingenuity in adapting and transforming real-world locations into compelling cinematic settings (Okafor, 2020). Jerry Ossai's "Ms. Kanyin" serves as a compelling case study for examining the narrative function of set design within this vibrant cinematic landscape. The film's narrative, which spans different time periods and settings, offers a rich visual environment that is ripe for analysis. From the untamed wilderness of the 19th-century jungle to the structured confines of a modern boarding school, the set designs in "Ms. Kanyin" are not merely backdrops

but are integral to the film's exploration of themes such as tradition versus modernity, the supernatural, and the enduring power of the past.

Theories of Production Design and Scenography

A substantial body of scholarship positions set design within the broader conceptual terrain of production design and scenography, emphasizing its constitutive role in cinematic meaning-making. Figueiredo (2015) articulates the notion of cinematic space as a communicational project in which scripting, production design, lighting, directing, and editing are "premeditated syntactic communication strategies" that operate together to induce immersion and authenticate a fictional universe for the viewer. Within this schema, set design is inseparable from character performance and camera composition; spaces are organized to guide attention, modulate affect, and foreshadow narrative turns (Figueiredo, 2015). Complementing this, D'Arcy (2019) reworks key concepts in set design via semiotics, narratology, and architectural thinking to argue that design is not "wallpaper," but a primary vehicle through which audiences read film and television. He insists on approaching design from the audience's interpretive vantage point, treating space as discourse with its own lexicon of signs and codes (D'Arcy, 2019).

Swenberg and Eriksson (2018) frame film and television production as audiovisual design, arguing that design-as-problem-solving and design-as-meaning-creation converge in production workflows. Their account underscores how cross-departmental design decisions (e.g., cinematography, art direction, sound) communicate messages to audiences and to collaborators within the production chain. The implication is that production design should be theorized as a design process, iterative, constraint-aware, and user-oriented (the "users" being both audiences and fellow practitioners) rather than as a supervised craft silo (Swenberg & Eriksson, 2018). Deutelbaum (2022) adds a complementary perspective by demonstrating how set design's latent geometries, such as grid-based composition in widescreen CinemaScope structure performance and camera placement, produce a legible spatial order that gratifies the audience's search for coherence. Such hidden architectures attest to the set's active governance over staging and narrative legibility (Deutelbaum, 2022).

Semiotics of Space, Symbolism, and Narrative Function

Semiotic approaches offer a framework for understanding how sets signify. Drawing on Eco's and Barthes's semiotics, studies of Nollywood horror and fantasy demonstrate how visual signs, icons, indices, and symbols operate within culturally coded systems to communicate meaning (Ajiwe & Bature-Uzor, 2021; Ajiwe & Iloma, 2024). Lighting functions as a semiotic resource as well: its intensity, color, direction, and contrast encode emotion, narrativity, and character interiority (Ajiwe & Iloma, 2024). In film semiotics, denotation and connotation coexist: while a set denotes a school, shrine, or jungle, it also connotes power hierarchies, moral values, and psychological states (Barthes as discussed in Ajiwe & Bature-Uzor, 2021). In interactive-narrative research, kernels (cardinal functions) and satellites (catalyst functions) structure branching possibilities, with spatial organization cueing choice points and narrative

stakes (Daryani et al., 2016). Although "Ms. Kanyin" is not an interactive film, this framework is instructive for identifying how spatial motifs (e.g., a cursed tree) anchor cardinal narrative functions across timelines, while auxiliary spaces (e.g., cafeteria, dorms) supply satellites that modulate pace and mood.

Production Design in Nollywood

Nollywood scholarship consistently foregrounds culturally saturated iconographies and the pragmatic ingenuity of production design under material constraints. Okafor (2020) examines historical accuracy in costume design, highlighting the tension between verisimilitude, documentation gaps, and budgetary limitations; while focused on costumes, the study's insights generalize to sets, where authenticity is pursued as internal coherence aligned with narrative purpose rather than as exhaustive historical reconstruction. Studies of Nigerian supernatural iconographies show that computer-generated imagery and practical effects extend indigenous mythic sign systems into contemporary screen language, often embedding symbols, shrines, masks, and serpentine totems within spatial compositions to elicit culturally specific affect (Ajiwe & Nwofor, 2022). Auteur-focused work in Nollywood emphasizes mise-en-scène as a domain where directors imprint stylistic signatures that communicate ideology and psychology through framing, props, and spatial design (Okwuowulu, 2016). Across these contributions, a consensus emerges: set design is a primary narrative agent that, through composition, materiality, and cultural codes, organizes audience attention, conveys backstory, externalizes conflict, and scaffolds plot progression. This study applies these insights to a focused case analysis of Jerry Ossai's "Ms. Kanyin," arguing that its environments both signify and causally drive the narrative through carefully orchestrated juxtapositions and motifs.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative case study approach, focusing on Jerry Ossai's film "Ms. Kanyin" as the primary subject of analysis. The case study method is particularly suitable for in-depth exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). In this instance, "Ms. Kanyin" provides a rich and specific example through which to investigate the complex interplay between set design and narrative function in Nollywood cinema. The analysis will be based on scenes of the film that show distinct and contrasting settings, a historical jungle, and a modern boarding school, offering a unique opportunity to examine how different environments are crafted to serve specific narrative purposes, making it an ideal candidate for a detailed case study.

Film Analysis Techniques

The analysis of "Ms. Kanyin"'s set design will primarily utilize visual analysis, semiotic interpretation, and the application of narrative theory. Visual analysis involves a close examination of the film's visual elements, including composition, color palette, lighting, and

the arrangement of objects within the frame. This technique allows for the identification of recurring visual motifs and how they contribute to the film's aesthetic and thematic coherence. Semiotic interpretation, drawing on the theories of Eco and Barthes, will be employed to decode the symbolic meanings embedded within the set design elements. This involves understanding how specific objects, spaces, and their configurations act as signs that convey messages about characters, plot, and underlying themes (Ajiwe & Bature-Uzor, 2021). Finally, narrative theory will be applied to understand how the set design functions as a narrative agent, influencing plot progression, character development, and the overall storytelling arc. This includes examining how environments create suspense, foreshadow events, and reflect internal states of characters.

Analysis of Set Design in "Ms. Kanyin"

Jerry Ossai's "Ms. Kanyin" masterfully employs set design not merely as a backdrop but as an active participant in shaping the film's narrative, character arcs, and thematic depth. The film's visual storytelling is significantly enhanced by the deliberate contrast and symbolic weight attributed to its primary settings: the historical jungle and the modern boarding school, unified by the recurring motif of the cursed tree.

The Historical Jungle Setting

The film opens in 1892, immersing the audience in a dense, untamed jungle environment. This setting is characterized by lush, overgrown foliage, towering trees, and a pervasive sense of ancient mystery. The most prominent feature is a significant, ancient-looking tree marked with a distinct spiral carving. This tree immediately establishes a connection to a mystical or supernatural force, hinting at a deep-rooted history and an impending conflict. The jungle, in its raw and wild state, serves multiple narrative functions. It establishes the historical context, transporting the audience to a pre-colonial or early colonial era, where nature holds a dominant and often formidable presence. The untamed quality of the environment immediately signals danger and the unknown, setting a suspenseful tone for the unfolding events. This primal setting is where the initial conflict of the narrative is born, directly influencing the motivations and actions of the characters. The vastness and isolation of the jungle emphasize the vulnerability of the human characters against powerful, unseen forces, thereby shaping their initial struggles and decisions. The spiral carving on the tree acts as an early semiotic cue, suggesting a cyclical nature of events or a mystical connection that transcends time, foreshadowing its later significance.



Fig. 1&2: show the old cursed tree and the Jungle, where the whole story began

Sterling Academy - Modern Boarding School

In stark contrast to the historical jungle, the narrative shifts to the contemporary setting of Sterling Academy, a large, well-structured boarding school campus. This environment is meticulously designed to convey order, modernity, and a sense of institutional control. The academy features a comprehensive array of spaces, each contributing to the narrative in distinct ways: classrooms, a library, a cafeteria, a staff room, and student dormitories with lockers. These conventional academic settings ground the film in a recognizable reality, providing a stark contrast to the supernatural elements introduced in the jungle. The presence of extensive recreational facilities, including a swimming pool, tennis court, and basketball court, further emphasizes the modern, organized, and seemingly idyllic nature of the school environment. The expansive school grounds, including a botanical garden or farm area, suggest a self-contained and controlled world. The modestly furnished apartments for teachers and the principal reinforce the functional and somewhat austere nature of institutional living. Narratively, Sterling Academy represents the contemporary world, a place of reason and structure, which will inevitably clash with the ancient, mystical forces unleashed in the past. The organized environment of the school serves to highlight the disruption caused by the supernatural elements, making their intrusion more impactful. The interactions between characters within these structured spaces reveal their personalities, relationships, and their initial obliviousness to the looming threat, which will soon shatter the academy's tranquility. Symbolically, the academy can be seen as a microcosm of modern society, attempting to impose order and logic on a world that still harbors ancient, inexplicable forces.



Fig. 3&4: show the School gate and the overview of the Dormitory



Fig. 5&6: show the dining hall and play arena

The Cursed Tree as a Recurring Motif

The cursed tree emerges as the most potent and visually significant recurring motif in "Ms. Kanyin," serving as a powerful narrative anchor that links the past and present timelines. Its appearance in both the 1892 jungle and the modern-day academy, depicted in both daylight and nighttime scenes, underscores its enduring and pervasive influence. In the historical context, the tree is the site of the initial curse, its spiral carving marking it as a focal point of mystical energy. Its gnarled branches and ancient appearance immediately convey a sense of timelessness and deep-seated power. In the modern setting, its continued presence, often appearing in ominous lighting or during pivotal supernatural events, acts as a constant reminder of the past's intrusion into the present. The tree's visual transformation from a seemingly ordinary ancient tree to a symbol of dread and supernatural activity is crucial to its narrative function. It is not merely a static object but a dynamic element that visually represents the enduring nature of the curse and its impact across generations. The tree becomes a character in itself, a silent witness and an active participant in the unfolding drama, drawing the characters back to the source of their predicament. Its presence during both day and night scenes further emphasizes its omnipresence and the inescapable nature of the supernatural threat, blurring the lines between the natural and the mystical, and between the past and the present.



Fig. 7, 8, and 9: show the tree in the early days, and in modern day

Use of Props and Period Details

The meticulous use of props and period details in “Ms. Kanyin” plays a crucial role in establishing the film’s distinct timelines and enhancing its overall authenticity. In the 1892 jungle sequence, the presence of an old-fashioned tripod camera immediately situates the scene within its historical context. This prop not only serves as a visual marker of the era but also subtly hints at themes of observation, documentation, and perhaps the capturing of events that should remain unseen. The camera, a symbol of scientific inquiry and technological advancement, stands in contrast to the ancient, mystical power of the jungle and the cursed tree, creating a thematic tension between modernity and tradition. In the modern-day Sterling Academy, the inclusion of a CRT computer monitor, though seemingly a minor detail, effectively places the narrative in a specific contemporary period, likely the late 1990s or early 2000s, before the widespread adoption of flat-screen displays. This prop, along with other subtle elements of modern technology and everyday objects, contributes to the realism of the school environment, making it relatable to the audience. These carefully selected props are not just decorative; they are functional elements that provide subtle narrative clues, reinforce the distinct temporal settings, and contribute to the overall immersive experience of the film. They demonstrate how even small details in set design can significantly impact the audience’s understanding and engagement with the narrative, solidifying the film’s ability to transport viewers across different eras and realities.



Fig. 10, 11, and 12: show the old camera, the CRT computer, and the old telephone used by the principal’s assistant

Set Design as a Primary Narrative Driver

In "Ms. Kanyin," set design transcends its traditional role as a mere backdrop, emerging as a primary narrative driver that actively propels the story forward, reveals character, and establishes thematic depth. The deliberate construction and juxtaposition of the 1892 jungle and the modern Sterling Academy are not incidental but are integral to the film’s narrative

machinery. The jungle, with its ancient tree and spiral carving, immediately establishes a foundational conflict rooted in history and the supernatural. This environment is not just where the curse originates; it is the visual manifestation of the curse itself, its wildness and mystery reflecting the untamed and inexplicable forces at play. The characters' interactions with this environment, particularly their initial encounter with the cursed tree, directly trigger the narrative's central conflict. The tree, as a recurring motif, functions as a visual anchor, constantly reminding the audience of the enduring impact of the past on the present. Its transformation from a natural element to a symbol of dread underscores the narrative's progression and the escalating threat. The modern academy, conversely, represents a world of order and logic, which is systematically disrupted by the intrusion of the ancient curse. The contrast between these two meticulously designed environments amplifies the narrative tension, highlighting the clash between tradition and modernity, and the vulnerability of structured existence against primal forces. Each space, therefore, is not just a location but a dynamic character in its own right, actively shaping the plot and influencing the characters' journeys.

Juxtaposition of Settings

The effectiveness of contrasting the wild, historical jungle with the structured, modern academy in "Ms. Kanyin" is central to conveying the film's central themes. This deliberate juxtaposition serves to highlight the enduring power of the past and the pervasive nature of the supernatural. The jungle represents the ancient, the untamed, and the source of the film's central conflict, embodying a primal force that defies modern understanding. Its visual elements, dense foliage, ancient trees, and mystical carvings create an atmosphere of mystery and danger, creating a world where ancient rituals and curses hold sway. In stark opposition, Sterling Academy embodies modernity, order, and scientific rationality. Its clean lines, organized spaces, and advanced facilities symbolize an attempt to control and rationalize the world. The shift between these two settings visually articulates the film's core thematic tension: the struggle between ancestral beliefs and contemporary skepticism, between the inexplicable and the logical. This contrast is not merely aesthetic; it is a narrative device that underscores the film's exploration of how historical events and supernatural forces can penetrate and disrupt even the most ordered modern lives. The visual dissonance between the two environments amplifies the sense of unease and vulnerability as the ancient curse begins to manifest within the seemingly safe confines of the academy.

Symbolism and Metaphor in Set Elements

The set elements in "Ms. Kanyin" are rich with symbolism and metaphor, contributing significantly to the film's message and thematic depth. The cursed tree, in particular, stands as a powerful symbol of the enduring past and the cyclical nature of the curse. Its spiral carving suggests a continuous, inescapable loop of events, linking generations to a shared destiny. The tree's appearance in both timelines, often accompanied by ominous lighting or during moments of supernatural manifestation, reinforces its role as a focal point for the film's mystical energy.

The various facilities within Sterling Academy also carry symbolic weight. The classrooms and library, for instance, represent knowledge, reason, and an attempt to understand the world through logical frameworks, which are ultimately challenged by the supernatural events. The recreational facilities, such as the swimming pool and basketball court, symbolize a veneer of normalcy and youthful innocence that is gradually stripped away as the curse takes hold. The staff room and principal's office, as spaces of authority and control, highlight the characters' initial attempts to manage and contain the inexplicable, only to find their rational approaches inadequate. Even seemingly minor props, like the old-fashioned tripod camera and the CRT computer monitor, serve as metaphors for the passage of time and the evolution of technology, subtly commenting on humanity's changing relationship with the unknown. Through these symbolic set elements, the film communicates its deeper messages about the clash of cultures, the power of tradition, and the limitations of modern understanding when confronted with ancient forces.

Nollywood Context and Global Relevance

The findings from the analysis of "Ms. Kanyin" are highly relevant within the broader context of Nollywood filmmaking and demonstrate the universal applicability of set design as a narrative agent. Nollywood, often characterized by its rapid production cycles and resourceful approach to filmmaking, frequently utilizes existing locations and adapts them to serve narrative purposes. "Ms. Kanyin" exemplifies this ingenuity by transforming familiar environments into potent narrative spaces. The film's ability to create a compelling and immersive experience through its set design, despite potential resource constraints, underscores the creative power of Nigerian filmmakers. This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that recognizes Nollywood's sophisticated storytelling techniques, moving beyond simplistic characterizations of the industry. Furthermore, the principles observed in "Ms. Kanyin" regarding the narrative function of set design are universally applicable to cinematic analysis across different cultures and film industries. The idea that environments are not passive but active participants in storytelling, capable of conveying complex themes and driving plot, is a fundamental concept in film theory. "Ms. Kanyin" serves as a powerful illustration of this concept, demonstrating how a film, regardless of its origin, can leverage its visual spaces to create a rich and engaging narrative experience for a global audience. This analysis reinforces the notion that effective set design is a crucial component of cinematic artistry, capable of transcending cultural boundaries and enhancing the universal language of film.

Conclusion

This research has meticulously examined the role of set design as a narrative agent in Jerry Ossai's "Ms. Kanyin," demonstrating its profound impact on the film's plot, character development, and thematic depth. The study revealed that the film's two primary settings, the historical jungle of 1892 and the modern Sterling Academy, are not merely static backdrops but dynamic forces that actively shape the narrative. The untamed jungle, with its ancient,

cursed tree, serves as the genesis of the film's central conflict, establishing a primal and mystical atmosphere that permeates the entire story. In stark contrast, the meticulously organized Sterling Academy represents the modern world, its structured environments providing a compelling juxtaposition that amplifies the narrative tension and highlights the clash between ancient forces and contemporary life. The cursed tree, as a recurring motif, functions as a powerful visual and symbolic link between the past and present, underscoring the enduring nature of the curse and its inescapable influence. Furthermore, the strategic use of period-specific props, such as the old-fashioned tripod camera and the CRT computer monitor, effectively grounds the narrative in distinct temporal contexts, enhancing authenticity and providing subtle narrative cues. These findings collectively affirm that set design in "Ms. Kanyin" is an indispensable component of its storytelling, meticulously crafted to convey complex themes and drive the film's compelling narrative.

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