

Aesthetics in Igbo Video Films: Critique of the *Battle of Destiny* and the *Son of Soil*

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Abstract

Video film viewership is common among different classes of Nigerians. Such viewing is sometimes followed with discussions on their contents and appeals. This work is an appraisal of Igbo video films. Using formal criticism approach, the *Battle of Destiny* and the *Son of Soil* are evaluated. It is discovered that the serials are culturally rich, artistically designed and aesthetically produced despite some obvious technical deficiencies.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Igbo, Video films, Critique, Battle of Destiny, and Son of Soil.

1. Introduction

There has been academic discourse on whether aesthetics is just a branch of philosophy or an interdisciplinary field of enquiry. Haskins (1988) sees the practice of aesthetics as "...not simply knowledge that comes from collaborations among researchers who share vocabularies, methodologies and even ideologies, but also knowledge that comes from interaction and confrontations among colleagues who do not recognise the legitimacy of one another's work".

He canvasses for collaboration among scholars in similar and different fields hoping that knowledge would definitely come from such interactions. In the same vein, Berleant (2003) posits that the scope of aesthetics has widened to embrace "ethical, social, religions, environmental and cultural concern... Varied traditions have joined with its historically interdisciplinary character, making aesthetics a focal centre of diverse and multiple interests".

Gaskell (2005) argues that aesthetics can be practiced as a philosophy and however warns that it can only succeed when the practitioners also acknowledge it as an interdisciplinary field. He further says that philosophy and critical disciplines have something in common as claims one makes could satisfy scrutiny from the other disciplinary point of view.

Zettl (1990) supports the position of Gaskell by asserting that aesthetics has gone beyond traditional philosophical concept to being the understanding and appreciation of beauty and our ability to judge beauty with consistency. He further maintains that in media aesthetics "art and life are mutually dependant on each other, and essentially interconnected" (p. 2).

Art is manmade, hence no matter how aesthetically an art looks, if it is not made by man, it cannot be considered an art (Akpan and Etuk, 1990, p.6). Film is an art, a creative endeavour of group of artists who perceive order, clarify and interpret a certain aspect of the human condition for themselves and later for the audience (Zettl, 1990, p.3).

A work of an art can be said to be successful when it attracts discussion. In this work, Igbo video films are analysed, interpreted and assessed with a view to seeing how the artists perceive, order and mould ideas to fit the medium's technical as well as aesthetic production and reception requirements.

1.2 Aesthetics

The word 'aesthetic' comes from the Greek word **aisthesis** which means 'perception', from which is formed the adjective **aisthetikes** which means "of, or pertaining to sense perception". The word aesthetics was then coined from the Greek by a German philosopher and educator, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten who lived from 1714 to 1762 (Akpan and Etuk, 1990, p.2).

Earlier, aesthetics was defined as "the science or the study of beauty". This presupposes that it is an organised body of study which seeks to formulate theories common to all beautiful things.

Akpan and Etuk (1990, p. 2) tracing the etymology of aesthetics posit that aesthetics goes beyond beauty in itself to the experiences of enjoyment that the perceiver derive from beautiful things. In other words, anything no matter how beautify it may seem, if it is not perceived by our senses cannot be said to be aesthetic.

Aesthetics at one time was also defined as “understanding and appreciation of beauty and our ability to judge beauty with some consistency”. This is not done haphazardly, emotionally or from personal point of view. It rather shows that aesthetics requires that some guidelines or principles need to be followed.

Aesthetics takes another dimension into what is called media aesthetics. Here, art and life share and depend on each other mutually, secondly, the media including the film are not considered as channels, but have become important elements in aesthetic communication process. Applied media aesthetics gives valid and reliable criteria for the analysis of existing television and film. It further provides optimal synthesis of various aesthetic media elements (Zettl, 1990, p.2).

Zettl (1990, p.3) lists the criteria of analysing television and films as follows: perceiving, ordering, clarifying, intensifying and interpreting certain aspect of human condition/experience.

1.3 Criticism

Criticism has been defined as mediating between a work and its audience. This entails three levels, the mediator, the art/work and its audience. The critic becomes the mediator communicating the work to its audiences.

Nwosu (2001, p. 137), defines criticism as “the appraisal of literary work by a critic”. This definition is narrow as it limits criticism to literary works such as novels, plays, and poems. Okunna and Omenugha (2002, p. 196) brilliantly define it as “the act of making judgment concerning art, literature and a variety of other creative productions”. This goes beyond literary art to include creative productions like drama, fine arts, television and films. It is imperative to state that “making judgment” as the definition implies does not entail fault finding. Okenwa (1998, p. 13-14) puts it succinctly that criticism does not mean “... to attack, pull down or single out for ridicule only the fouls in a piece.... to criticise therefore, will entail balancing out the pros and cons, the merit and demerit”.

Sillars and Gronbeck (2001, p.27) agree that criticism is all about attempting to analyse, interpret and to judge. They opine, rather candidly that “a communication critic makes an argument that describes, interprets, or evaluates the message to which people are exposed in public or collective ways”. To analyse in this context is to examine parts of the work/text and their relationship. Sillars and Gronbeck (supra) describe it as “systematic taking apart” or “breaking down” of work/text. They further state that interpretation means to “set forth the meaning of” a text while judgment is “evaluative assessment of worth of the right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, justness and injustice, goodness and badness”.

Another important thing to note about criticism is that critical analysis should be significant, relevant and coherent if the audience is to take the critic seriously. Furthermore, a critic needs to understand approaches to criticism as rhetorical, social and cultural traditions and use the one appropriate in his work.

1.4 Aesthetics and Criticism: An Interface

A question arises as to whether there is a meeting point of aesthetics and criticism. In other words, do they share anything in common or affect each other in any way?

Haskins (1998), Berleant (2003), Gaskell (2005) and Zettl (1990, p. 2) agree that aesthetics is not just a branch of philosophy that study beauty; it is an interdisciplinary field of enquiry that recognises collaboration with others. This is to say that aesthetics can collaborate with criticism in a creative production, as it can also collaborate mutually with film.

Aesthetics and criticism have valid and reliable criteria and approaches. Sillars and Gronbeck (2001, p.27) agree that steps to criticism include to analyse, interpret and to evaluate a work. Media aesthetics approach on the other hand is about developing significant vision, giving it significant form and sharing it with others. In other words, artists perceive order, clarify, intensify and interpret their experiences to the audience (Zettl, 2005, pp. 1- 3).

Aesthetics and criticism also share analysis and interpretation of the artist/critic experience in common. Film artists in search of aesthetics look for, select essential qualities, highlight and arrange in synergy to communicate a new and quality work. The critic also uses an accepted approach and criteria to assess the aesthetic work of artists.

1.5. The Igbo

The geography of the Igbo is located in the Southeastern part of Nigeria. The Igbo people have boundaries with the people of Ibibio in the east, Ijaw in the south-west, and the people of Idoma in the direction of Northern Nigeria (Ikeanyibe, 1997, pp. 11-12).

Across the River Niger, the Igbo boundary extends to the confines of Benin having Agbor as the outpost. Of the thirty six states structure of the present day Nigerian Federation, Igbo people are found in great numbers within seven states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Delta and Rivers.

Ijoma (1984) traced the origin of Igbos from three broad categories. The Oriental category has it that Igbos migrated from the East (Israel or Egypt); the Migration from the Niger/Benue confluence area; and that early Igbo homeland settlement at Nri/Oka, Olu/Owere and parts of Okigwe from where they migrated to other areas.

Igbos speak Igbo language, which has many dialects. They travel far and wide in search of business opportunities and are highly enterprising, egalitarian and hospitable.

2. The Video Film Format

The motion picture films are the movies that are produced in celluloid roll film. This consists of strips of perforated cellulose acetate on quick succession of still photographs known as frames. They are recorded and screened in cinema theatre for sometimes and syndicated for broadcast on television on a given terms. Thereafter, they are further edited and transferred, copied into video cassettes, video compact disc (VCD), digital video disc (DVD) for home viewing.

Video films on the other hand are “dramatic features shot on video and marketed on cassettes and sometimes also exhibited publicly with video projectors or television monitors” (Haynes, 1997, p. 9). The video camera use in this production started with VHS camcorder to super VHS. There are improved quality production with progressive graduation to Betacam, mini digital video (Mini-DV), digital video (DV), and high definition (HD) format. The equipment needed mainly for video film production include: video camera, monitor/ television, video cassettes, video compact disc (VCD), digital video disc (DVC), video projector, manual editing machine and other accessories such as plugs, cords and stabiliser.

Isiaka (2002, p. 141) argues that video is relatively simple to use and that important information contained in it could get to the intended audience without distortion unlike television that could suffer from channel noise. Other advantages of video over television include its amenability to repetition of instruction (message) as many times as the audience want it; important for teaching illiterate and aged people; gives room for discussion led by a change agent, among others.

Furthermore, feeling, opinion and problems of rural dwellers recorded on video and sent to policy makers, agencies and government officials can yield more favourable decision-making and policy. A case in point is 14 minute video “our vanishing” hatched by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Dominica and seven Ministers on Dominica’s forest. Following this, a national forestry sector plan to protect the forest was immediately passed. Such video letters have also been successfully used in Asia and Latin America with great results (Fraser and Villet, 1994).

The video film format is known for relatively low cost of production. Producers who could not afford the high cost of celluloid production turn to it as a survival option (Adeiza, 1995, p. 6). Beyond this, it offers the director near full control of his production. He could have immediate preview of all production elements and “editing the master tape, scene by scene, shot by shot, starting from the commencement of the production to the conclusion of the like programme” (Chukwu, 2008, p. 129). Hence, the director goes into post production with assurance if he has done a good shooting unlike celluloid format where rushes (or printing of negatives) usually take time and needs re-shooting the entire film where there are anomalies (Ayakoroma, 2010, p. 2).

Nevertheless, the video films have less quality production compared to, celluloid films. The video films so shot are blown up in 16mm and projected for viewing. The production does not have high fidelity of picture and sound like the celluloid films. Also, the cost of celluloid camera is out of reach of even successful filmmakers, hence the option of video format especially in Nigeria.

2.1. Igbo Video Films

Igbo cultural thematic preoccupations constitute a greater percentage of English language video films produced in Nigeria. Ironically, Igbo language video films are few and continue to diminish because Igbo producers found it more profitable to produce in English language (James, 2001, p. 28). Unlike the Hausa and Yoruba, Igbo video producers right from 1992 when Kenneth Nnebue produced *Living in Bondage* till date perceive and pursue video as commercial enterprise.

The themes of Igbo video films are universal such as love, foreign culture, marriage, quest for wealth, power and influence. There are also Igbo cultural contents, subjects and themes which the films address with their cultural values.

Beyond this, the Igbo cultural content/theme video films, though most in English language, are selling beyond Igbo states because of the universality of the themes they address.

2.2. Synopsis of Selected Igbo Video Films

Battle of Destiny I

Battle of Destiny begins with King of Umutogwuma, Igwe Izuegbunam's worries for his inability to have a child after thirty five years of marriage. This leads to invitation of the Chief Priest, Ile Mmuo for rituals with a view to appeasing the gods of fertility (Ukoga) culminating in the two wives of the king conceiving of babies at the same time.

Ile Mmuo also declares the will of the gods and divines that the two women should go to their fathers' houses and remain there until they are delivered of their babies. The women leave the palace accompanied by palace guards charged to report to the king as soon as any of the wives is delivered of her baby.

The first wife, Dibueze on her way to serving food to the king eavesdrops the king joyful disclosing to Ichie Ukadike, a member of his cabinet, his resolved to lavish love and wealth on any of wives who first bears him a baby-boy. She then bribes Ikemba, a guard attached to her co-wife, Ojiugo to first report to her, in her father's house, of Ojiugo's delivery before going to announce to the king.

In a certain morning, Ojiugo is delivered of a baby boy and Ikemba takes off to announce it to the king but midway, he diverts to Lolo Dibueze's father's house. Lolo Dibueze also delivers on the evening of the same day with her maid on hand to announce it to the king. The king becomes overwhelmed with joy and sends Ichie Ngoesina to anoint and pronounce Lolo Dibueze's baby-boy the prince.

Later in the evening, Ikemba is struck dead at Ugwuagba, a village close to Umutogwuma by the god of fertility for conniving with Lolo Dibueze to divert destiny after disclosing his mission to a hunter, Igwebuiké. Igwebuiké delivers the message of Ojiugo's delivery, the following day, and carries the corpse of Ikemba to the palace. The god of fertility further turns the body of Ikemba to grains of corn.

In *Battle of Destiny II*, the king sends Mbanefo, a cabinet member, to Ojiugo in her father's house and brings her and her baby back to the palace; it is followed by Lolo Dibueze's arrival to the palace with her baby.

With conflicting reports of the two births, the king in a naming ceremony prays the gods to take their course in the life of Ejiofor, son of Lolo Dibueze; on Obidie son of Ojiugo he asks the gods to protect and guide his destiny.

In the face of cold war concerning who gave birth first, Ejiofor and Obidie are very close. Seven years after, the maid of Ojiugo dies of food poisoning which Lolo Dibueze set against Obidie. She also visits the spiritualist, Ile Mmuo to enlist his support in the battle of the prince of Umutogwuma. Ojiugo perceiving that the life of her son is in danger quietly leaves for Umunre her father's house with Obidie, her son amidst the king's complaint of her departure without notifying him. Dibueze on the other hand who has been telling Ejiofor from cradle, that he is the prince and that he should hold on to it, takes him round the kingdom, showing him landmarks and boundaries.

Son of Soil I

The *Son of Soil* is a continuation of the *Battle of Destiny*. It begins 20 years where the later stopped. There is famine with its excruciating hunger in the land which makes surrounding villages depend on Umutogwuma for food supply. Parading himself as Prince, Ejiofor enlists warriors to guard the borders of Umutogwuma with directive that no one from neighbouring communities be allowed to come into the town for food supply.

The warriors grow into torture kingpins in the hand of Ejiofor against the people. Occasioned by the series of report of intimidation and harassment the king sends for Lolo Dibueze with a directive to Ejiofor to release the people he has cramped into his torture cell. Dibueze turns down the king's directive arguing that it is a way the "prince" will forcibly earn respect and recognition of the community. Ejiofor's warriors graduate into rape gang against community women; one of their victims, Adaku daughter of Igwebuiké, the hunter escapes after hitting one of the guards on his head as he bends preparing the bush for sexual assault. Igwebuiké who is suffering elephantiasis on account of withholding vital information through the advise of the son, Ebuka goes to the king to report his encounter with Ikemba and the message he (Ikemba) delivers to him that Obidie's birth comes first in the morning. He also discloses Lolo Dibueze's bribe to Ikemba to make him report the birth of Obidie first to her, at her father's house, hence his mysterious death.

The king invites all members of his cabinet including the native doctor (chief priest), Eze Mmuo to share in the story of Igwebuiké. Acting under the influence of the gods, Eze Mmuo afflicts Lolo Dibueze with elephantiasis while Igwebuiké becomes cured of the affliction.

In the *Son of the Soil II*, Ebuka the son of Igwebuikwe is seen being tortured in a detention cell, from there he is led to execution but his father who returns from the king's palace intervenes and secures his release. Ejiofor leads his two guards to kill Igwebuikwe in his house after accusing him of false witness against his mother and receives a pat on his back from his mother. He promises to deal with Obidie the rightful prince who has now returned to the palace with her mother on the instruction of the king.

The king hosts Obidie and his mother to a banquet where he secretly blessed him as his successor. The announcement of the king's death known first by Ejiofor is made and this is followed by the death of Lolo Dibueze whose remains become a mass of corn seeds.

In order to determine who succeeds the king, the chief priest announces that Ejiofor and Dibia should go into an evil forest for a hunt and that any of them that comes out with the head of a buffalo should be crowned king. They gladly accept the challenge. Dibia emerges with it and is crowned the king of Umutogwuma in a colourful ceremony.

3. Methodology

The method employed in this work is formal criticism. It emphasises that the form of a text takes leads to its aesthetic worth. Following this, the formal critics made the following assumptions.

1. Critics should learn the procedure/method of textual analysis.
2. A work is judged by the aesthetic worth within it. In other words, the critic sees the work as standing apart from the artist or audience and its context. However it looks at how it links with other works.
3. It emphasises aesthetic excellence.
4. Form subsumes content. Form here implies all linguistic (and visual) elements through which content is given expression (Sillars and Gronbeck, 2001, pp. 86-90).

The formal critics hinge their works on Aristotle's six-part division of tragedy, namely: theme, structure, characters, style and spectacle and song. This supports Zettl's (1990, p.2) position that applied media aesthetics provides "valid and reliable criteria for the analysis of existing television shows and films".

Under theme the following questions become pertinent: Does the work lead audience to a higher view of a universal truth? What is the level of probability established? Are the details provided adequate to develop the theme? Structure seeks order of events and their relationship. It is also about how well a work has logical connections and achieve unity. For character, does he have an appropriate role? Is the character believable? Style is about speaking according to rules of standard grammar and pronunciation, clarity and appropriateness to the character. Spectacle is about how the artists have performed (Aristotle, cited in Sillars and Gronbeck, 2001, pp. 90-105).

Also, various aesthetic media elements such as light, colour, dimension, space, time, motion and sound are synthesised. Thus, this question, 'has the artists been able to develop significant vision and able to give such vision significant form and shared that with the audience?' (Zettl, 2005, pp. 1-2).

4. Critique: *Battle of Destiny* and *Son of Soil*

The Nigerian video film has added, in 2010, to its catalogue *Battle of Destiny* and *Son of Soil* produced by Marwooly Entertainment Ltd. The films are serial, rich in Igbo cultural content, educative and entertaining. Generally, the works are aesthetically good barring few amateurish acting and unprofessional handling of some production elements.

The theme is crafted in tight plot which is engaging, holding viewers spell bound and in suspense to the schemes of Lolo Dibueze (Patience Ozokwor) in her bid to snatch the destiny of Obidie the rightful prince. The death of King Izuegbunam is timely and paves the way for the heir apparent, Obidie, the destined to succeed him. This supports poetic retributive justice or the law of retribution which not only make good triumph over evil but also metes out punishment for the evil doers such as Lolo Dibueze, the so-called Prince Ejiofor, Ikemba and Ifionu).

The story/plot is also commendable for its synthetic beauty. The death of Ikemba, Igwe Izuegbunam and Lolo Dibueze are not only timely but also the way each of them was announced is properly handled. Ejiofor goes to complain to Igwe and discovers that he is dead, the same happened between Ifionu and Lolo Dibueze and Ikemba whose concealed deaths sustain the film artistically. However, the work of three hours contain in a CD disc is dubiously made in four parts and four CD plates and sold differently. There is also deception from the producer who sharply gives the film two different titles. This is capable of confusing the viewers who may watch one to discover that it is incomplete.

The characters are commendably consistent and believable. Lolo Dibueze is consistent in her schemes all through with her sister Ifionu and Ejiofor. Other characters that are consistent are chief priest, Igwe Izuegbunam, Ichie Ukadike and Ngesina.

In assessment of acting and actors vis-à-vis their character, Igwe Izuegbunam (Olu Jacob), Ngesina (Kofi Adjorlolo) played their roles well as king and as a member of the cabinet. Their body carriage are dignified, and the language impressive. Lolo Dibueze (Patience Ozokwor) lived up to the role of evil genius so also is Emaka (Mike Barnabas) who played the king's guard with precision. However, Igwebuike (Ikechukwu Siryumoh) and Ichie Ukadike (ED Nnasor) could not define their roles properly hence they continued to move in and out of character role assigned to them.

The language of the film is English. Igbo language would have been more appropriate. This will spice the work with Igbo rich cultural proverbs. They are watered down in characters' attempt to communicate them in English. However, the fact that the language use English makes the film also reach out to audiences beyond Igbo speakers. Intermittently, the characters use Igbo words to give emphasis like when Eze Mmuo sends Ejiofor and Obidie to evil forest to hunt for buffalo, he also calls its Igbo name "atu". Other characters who testify to abomination in the land call its Igbo name *atu*. The usages are good and insightful.

Worthy of attention and special mention are songs and spectacle of the film. The film transition and theme song/music is insightful. It states that one's destiny cannot be changed though it could be fought (or delayed). The song, well rendered is also thought-provoking and continues to resonate in support of destiny.

Closely related to the song is spectacle which is seen in children's bonfire play meant to provide entertainment. However, that sequence is not properly rehearsed which rendered it amateurish and insipid. On the other hand, Igwe Izuegbunam's palace is good and appealing, walls being adorned with artistic design, elephant tusk, goat and cow skins. Also commendable is the colourful celebration on the assumption of kingship office of Obidie (Promise Okonkwo).

The film directing is full of mix grill. The picture productions are crisp and shows high level of fidelity of pictures close to what celluloid production gives. A good job is done by director Ikechukwu Odiye in his use of flashback to depict/show the following scenes: Dibueze's bribe to Ikemba, young Ejiofor (Vision Onuoha) recall of Ukadike's obeisance to young Obidie (Promise Okonkwo) and the trap scene involving Igwebuike (Ikechukwu) at appropriate places. However, the director is not sensitive of making the production naturalistic where Ifeonu (Bessie Amaka) and Lolo Dibueze (Patience Ozokwor) point at grasshopper and stream respectively to Ejiofor (Vision Onuoha), camera could not reveal any of the shots. Secondly head of a cow is presented in place of buffalo's head.

Some shots of few seconds are unnecessarily made too long and uninteresting. The children's bonfire scene and wives journey to their fathers' houses stretched to three minutes each, and there is nothing significant about them. Also worrisome is camera work which misplaced dissolved with fade out and cut shots, high angle with low angle and eye angle shots. For instance transition from 7 to 20 years is poorly realised; Obidie (Promise Okonkwo) clearing the bush transmuted to making a mould with a hoe with a dissolve shot instead of a cut shot; a fade out/in are used between arrived of Obidie (Promise Okonkwo) and his mother Ojiugo (Uche Ebereagu) to the king's palace and a sumptuous meat they had with king. This could have passed for a 'cut shot' as 'fade in' and 'fade out' shots are used for opening and closing of scene/film.

Other production elements worth mention are, make ups, props, light, and colour.

The film props, make-up and costume are very artistic and make the characters manifest in their roles properly defined as in King, Igwe Izuegbunam (Olu Jacobs); Ngesina a cabinet chief (Kofi Adjorlolo); Chief Priest, Eze Mmuo (Ojikudo Fidelis) and Queen Lolo Dibueze (Patience Ozokwor). However, the make up of Igwebuike (Ikechukwu Siryumoh) and Ukadike (ED Nnasor) are poorly done revealing in them young men as against old men intended. Also observed is the fact that prop especially hand bags of women like Nkemba (Uju Aroh) and kings wives are leather bags, too modern to fit into the cultural setting of the film. On the other hand, bags of the Chief Priest (Ojekudo Fidelis) and Ejiofor's warriors are made of palm raffia which suit the setting and early 1900s when the film is dated.

The serials '*Battle of Destiny*' and '*Son of Soil*' are rich, artistically crafted and aesthetically produced. To a reasonable extent, the pool of artists have successfully perceived, ordered, intensified, clarified and interpreted their experiences to the audience in spite of some artistic and technical deficiencies.

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