

Chapter Three:

ENHANCING THE NOLLYWOOD MOVIE NARRATIVES USING COMPUTER-GENERATED VISUAL EFFECTS: A STUDY OF *IJE OMIMI IKENNA* (2009)

Contributed by

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INTRODUCTION

Visual effect entails manipulating images outside the framework of live-action shots. It also involves both live-action effects with HD cameras, taking shots of actors on set, atmospheric effects, explosions, and computer-generated imagery. Slow-motion, fast-motion, and time-lapse photography are some of the simplest effects. Hence, scenes filmed at slow speed move faster than normal when projected at regular speed... it also makes it possible for car chases and other risky stunts to be performed safely at a slow speed (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2007). Traditional matte painting is another form of visual effect, which is usually a painted representation of an expanse of land and milieu that would otherwise be too expensive to visit or build. This is the physical, onset type of visual effect. Lighting effects and texture are also the physical aspects of visual effects in filmmaking. Those physical aspects are also known as special effects. The non-physical visual effect is the computer-generated imagery of the 21st century.

Consequently, “one reason visual effects took off in the 20th century was the revolution of Personal computers and the ease with which computer software generated special effects. It helped visual effects experts better to combine real images filmed in studios and on location with digital images produced using sophisticated software programs” (Discovery, 2011). Interestingly, the trendy computer-generated visual effects have been passed on to the Nigerian movie industry, Nollywood, which has “churned out thousands of titles and brought many producers, marketers, and technicians into the limelight since the early 1990s as Ebewo, (2011) observes.

Many of the computer-generated visual effects experts in the Nigerian movie industry can be said to be self-trained. As a result, the level of unprofessionalism and haste is seen in many of their productions. Despite this, Nollywood visual effects artists have secured a place for themselves on the international level. Over time, they have developed a notable style that has become the signature of many Nollywood movies. In line with this, Omoera (2009; 196) avers that “Nigerian films are known for such special effects as humans transforming to animals, witches flying through the night and money being magically produced”. It has been observed that some of these themes were tapped from the socio-cultural milieu of Nigeria and films already in the market, thus leading to the reoccurrence of such themes over and over again.

The focus of this paper is to evaluate the computer-generated visual effects in a selected Nollywood Igbo movie titled *Ije omimi Ikenna* (The Adventures of Ikenna), and to project the efforts and input of Nigerian filmmakers in the use of visual effects in their movies. Frames from

scenes of the film will be extracted using the *Adobe After Effects CS6* editing suite. Discussions will be made on the function of the various generated visual effects concerning the theme of the movie, actions, and their level of photorealism. Recommendations will also be made based on the findings.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to ascertain the effective use of Visual effects, such as fish eye, astral smoke, and teleporting effects, to portray the transcendent in *Ije Omimi Ikenna* (2009)

Computer-generated visual effects and their importance in films

Computer-generated visual effects or imagery (CGI) are enhancements created by specialists in films to make accomplishments that cannot be attained in live-action shots. The art of visual effects usually takes place at the post-production level after the primary image capture is concluded. To achieve this, it involves the transfer of raw video data from the camera to the computer and the use of various hardware, peripherals, software, and plug-ins by visual effects artists. Given this, Nwana (2013; 25) rightly asserts that “the emergence of computer graphics opened the doors for several experimental and underground films that are still going on to date.”

The affordability of computer-generated visual effect software allowed many self-taught computer users to delve into the field in recent times, resulting in an abundance of Nollywood films with computer-generated imagery. It is special effects artists who make things happen in movies that might not normally occur in real life. When the real thing becomes too dangerous or impossible to shoot, special effects artists are brought in to make it possible through computer-generated effects” (AMPAS, 2007).

Visual effects software like *Adobe After Effects* has various manipulative filters that transform images into spectacular stances. Among such filter effects are blur, invert, fade, dissolve, pans, superimpositions, matte, and twirls, among others. Taylor in Laybourne (1998) agrees that; *After Effects* is a place where basic raw materials- picture, story, and sound are fused into a final product. You can, for example, import artwork created in Sound Edit 16, and marry them into a single digital file that can become a *QuickTime* movie or be exported to videotape- or even film” (128).

Certain visual effects software, like *After Effects* and *Particle Illusion*, etc., are programmed to generate volumes of particles and explosions, rain, snow, fireballs, thunderbolts, smoke, and millions of human characters, among others.

Motives behind the use of computer-generated visual effects in modern Films

There are so many reasons why computer-generated visual effects are prevalent in films today. It is employed to link impossibilities and live-action situations. Hence, documentation in *Discovery* (2011) reveals that, “filmmakers use visual effects to provide a wide range of enhancements to the movie of every genre. It is a part of the entertainment that began even before the movies... though most people associate visual effects with the creation of fantastic or imaginary characters, props, and locations for science fiction, animation, and other non-realistic film genres, there are other reasons to use visual effects. Perfecting a scene by correcting colourisation is one example.

Film colours are measured by RGB (Red, Green, and Blue) light components. For instance, there are some occasions where shots would appear to have more green than red and blue. A simple

colour correction will create a balance between the three components. Other colour effects in editing are *levels, curves, HSV (Hue, Saturation and Variation), desaturation, exposure level and invert effect*, etc. Other visual effects generated by computers range from sound enhancement and filtering, matte effect, particle generation, green-screen effects, and noise reduction to characters teleporting, blasting of thunderbolts and characters stopping or moving through time, and so on. Aghanya (2012) marvels at the handiness of visual effects in films when he articulates that:

“computer graphics, in some respects, are necessary for today’s films...there are numerous examples where computer graphics and special effects enhanced a film, including the creation of fantasy worlds of *Lord of the Rings* (2001)...they had beautifully depicted scenery, from the snowy mountains to the cozy village of the Hobbits, which were all generated by computer (53).

All such superb digital imagery was generated to accompany live-action shots and to create photo-realistic scenes in the minds of those who appreciate movies. Compositing is a process of merging all separate visual elements into one single source to give an illusion of ‘oneness’. Visual elements such as sounds, live shots, and visual effects are merged through the compositing process. Live-action films shot for compositing are usually known as *blue* or *green* screenshots. In such types of shots, green or blue fabrics are stretched on the background of the subject and removed by the editing specialist to replace the blank background with suitable images.

Critical observations in *Ije omimi Ikenna* (Selected Scenes)

Ije omimi Ikenna is an Igbo-themed movie with no English subtitles, produced, marketed, and distributed nationwide by Remy Jes Productions (RJP). The captions were written in Igbo. The screenplay or storyline was interpreted as “Ejije nke onye kwuru ka esi see ya by Anayo Uzo Philips”, which literally means “The storyline was told by Anayo Uzo Philips”. The visual effects designer employed more than one typeface for the pre-casting captions. Arial and a Roman typeface were used.



Plate 1: A few frames show text animation effects in the opening of the film. Source: Film (*Ije omimi Ikenna*)

The animation effects for the captions were inconsistent. The background music was western orchestral, which was opposed to the theme of the movie. However, the unique effect on the background is that each character's name appears with his or her action in slow motion. Captions and visual effects for both cast and crew suggest lighting effects. As the texts pop out in a random direction, they appear as if they were written with light.

Scene One



Plate 2: Frames from scene one. Ikenna's experience with the elemental being.
Source: Film (*Ije Omimi Ikenna*, 2009)

Medium shot. Ikenna is at rest while the elemental being, or an entity appeared through a cloud of black astral smoke. The smoke was generated from *After Effects* software. Visually, it is photorealistic, achieved through compositing. Even though such events may not be seen by human eyes. The elemental being or an entity, with a wave of an arm, transformed Ikenna into a spectacular adventurous warrior, including his garb. This drives home the magical capabilities of the animistic being that is obliged to Ikenna.



Plate 3: Frames from scene one. Ikenna's experience with the elemental being. Source: Film (*Ije Omimi Ikenna*)2009

He took a leaf from the pot held by the elemental spirit and rubbed it in his eyes as instructed, and began to see beyond the physical eyes. The effect applied here is fade, popularly used for flashbacks. In the new scene where earth-bound spirits are dancing around Nworie, the bulgy fish eye effect was applied to suggest the vileness of the situation. The fisheye effect elongated the legs of the demons dancing around Nworie while she was asleep. The elemental spirit opens a portal in the tree, and he teleports into the realm of earth-bound spirits. Both special and computer-generated effects were used here. Motion blur effect on the z-axis was used to suggest movement into the tree. Such an effect suggested the illusion of depth in the 2-dimensional film.

Scene 2



Plate 4: frames from scene two, the evil forest. Source: Film (*Ije Omimi Ikenna*)

The witch opens her palm, and dried oil bean seed bark appears on it. She used it in binding the unconscious Nworie more in the transcendent world. Lens flare effect was employed in between sequences here, which was accompanied by a flash and sound effects.

Scene 3



Plate 5: A scene in the king's palace. Source: Film (*Ije omimi Ikenna*)

Mix effect was used to interlace the king's palace scene with the following scene, where the camera focuses and revolves on palm leaves. Camera effects and computer-generated images are sometimes combined for powerful results. In this scene, there is an obstruction in Adaeze's speech as a result of her proximity to the microphone. There are professional constraints in some home movies, as Ebewo (2011) agrees that "the noisy nature of many of the films calls attention to the need for proper equipment and training in the area of sound mixing."

Scene 4



Plate 6: The evil forest. Source: Film (*Ije omimi Ikenna*)

Behind an Iroko tree, transcendent grey smoke puffs out, and Ikenna staggers out of it. The sound was not well filtered; there are obstructions in the sound effects. In Igbo society, the Iroko tree is highly regarded. That is why it appeared in many of the scenes. Because of this, Adibe (2008; 211) agrees that the Iroko tree is a symbol of life and greatness and functions as an abode of the spirits and earth-bound ancestors.

Scene 6



Plate 7: Captured here is the effect created to suggest the use of mystic powers entrusted to him by the elemental being. *Source: Film (Ije omimi Ikenna)*

In this scene, demons pursue Ikenna, and he hurriedly stops to defend himself. He dips his hand into his side bag and then sticks it out when they are red-hot and smoky. A clap from his hands made a powerful shockwave that dissolved the demons into dust. Ikenna covered his eyes to prevent their particles from entering his eyes. The demons were probably a manifestation of his fears in the spirit land. The lens flare effect is common in Nollywood to depict the supernatural and has been the most common visual effect employed by most Nigerian artists over the years.

Scene 7



Plate 8: Evil forest. *Source: Film (Ije Omimi Ikenna) 2009*

The appearance of the witch of the evil forest lens flare effect was employed here also. The witch summons her acquaintances as she screams. They appear, and the same effect was applied when they disappeared from the scene.



Plate 9: Cut to scene eight, where the witch takes Ikenna to a part of the evil forest where Nworie is tied to a stake. His machete vanishes from his grip. Source: Film (*Ije Omimi Ikenna*).

Suddenly, a demonic rope stretches from nearby and ties Ikenna to the tree through its pulsating movement. After chanting some incantations, he ordered the rope to tear apart, and then the astral smoke burst out from within him and dissolved the ropes. The mumbling noise of the crew members was audible in this scene.

Scene 8



Plate 10: Cut to the witches' hut. The witches are holding a meeting in a compound, and the background is a small hut with a perpetually flaming roof. Source: Film (*Ije Omimi Ikenna*).

Scene 9



Plate 11: The camera cuts to a pathway in the evil forest. The camera pans to a very tall Iroko tree. The fisheye effect was used to create a bulging effect on the tree, suggesting mysticism. Source: Film (*Ije Omimi Ikenna*).

Scene 10



Plate 12: The witch in front of her hut chants an incantation. There is a flash of red in her eyes as she commands the flute of death to appear. Source: Film (*Ije Omimi Ikenna*).

Seeing that Ikenna and Nworie have escaped, the witch stretches her hand out, and a mysterious flute appears. The mystic flute should lull Ugonna to sleep when the witch blows it. The continuous use of the smoke effect has made it common and monotonous, although it is white smoke particles that the effects artist-generated here instead. After blowing the flute, she raised her hand and sent out a magical light to stop Ugonna. Subsequently, the witch teleports into the scene and strikes Ikenna with the flute.



Plate 12: Evil forest. Source: film (*Ije omimi Ikenna*)

The teleport effect was probably a masking technique or Chroma key effect. The ground shook when he fell to portray the impact. Such an effect is applicable in *Effects CS6*. She (the witch) spreads her hands and teleports them back to their former location. The effect employed here was lens flare.



Plate 13: The camera opens in front of the witch's hut. Source: Film (*Ije omimi Ikenna*).

She is dancing to celebrate her victory. The roof of her hut is still in perpetual flame. There lie Ikenna and Nworie, sleeping. The fisheye effect was created to suggest the transpiration of magic. Meanwhile, Ikenna sings the supernatural song that should wake them up while asleep. That shows the effect of his fortification with charms by an entity in scene one. Magical smoke puffs out of an Iroko tree, and the witch staggers out of it. The portal leads to the compound. She found out that her captives had escaped, she immediately blew the whistle and its sound lulls Ugonna to sleep once again.



Plate 14: The escape of Ikenna and Nworie. Source: Film (*Ije omimi Ikenna*)

Ikenna blows his flute to wake her up. Immediately, she is freed from the spell of the witch. Smoke was employed here to suggest the action. Ikenna drops Nworie near a pond, dips his hand in his bag, and brings out the *atakata agbuo* leaf, which has the power to do away with food poisoning. He chants an incantation, and the lens flare effect is used to portray the effectiveness of the leave. The lens flare did not reflect on the water like the trees and shrubs because it is astral. A visual effect was used to make it visible to the audience.



Plate 15: Last skirmish between Ikenna and the witches. Source: Film (*Ije omimi Ikenna*)

In this scene, Ugonna is exhausted and cannot move. Ikenna lifts her, and all the witches appear for an engagement with him. The use of the lens flare effect has been overstretched in the movie. Out of anger, the mistress of the witches strikes Ikenna with a ball of fire. He staggers a bit, but resists its effects because of the charms he has been fortified with. Aerial shot; one of the witches disappears and reappears behind Nworie and takes her to her former position. As they are about to leave with Nworie, Ikenna hurls fireballs back at them, the witch mistress blocks it and fires back at Ikenna, he blocks as well and impeded multiple streams of fireballs shot by the witches. The constant deflection of the balls of fire sent the witches back to their abode.

Observations

Given the findings of this research, thoughtful observations reveal that:

1. The editor thoughtfully generated visual effects in some scenes of the film *Ije omimi Ikenna*, which conveyed the context of the theme of the film. The visual effects employed in the entire film helped to add life to the film, thereby making it more realistic. The effects portray the seriousness of the actions in the scenes.
2. There was the constant use of smoke particle effects as a result of the need to suggest movement through time by some of the major characters, such as Ikenna, the Witch mistress, witches, and the elemental being.
3. The lens flare effect was also used continuously in various scenes to suggest the use of magical powers in movie scenes. At a point, the effect became monotonous.
4. Many scenes had acoustic problems, especially where there were close-up shots. Such can be attributed to poor audio equipment attached to the camera, like microphones. Even the sound made by crew members echoes into the actors' speech and cannot be filtered away during editing.
5. The film is limited to Igbo speakers only because there are no English subtitles in the entire film. A wider audience would not be interested in purchasing copies of the films.
6. We have observed certain flaws that needed to be resolved, particularly the obvious overuse of a particular effect, even when not necessary.

Conclusion

We embarked upon this research to ascertain the viability of visual effects in Igbo genre Nollywood movies, regarding form, meaning, and content. A 2009 Igbo-themed movie, *Ije omimi Ikenna* (Adventures of Ikenna), was employed as a case study. We observed that the predominant visual effects generated from the After Effects application by the artist were smoke and lens flare. Although the effects were overused, even in unnecessary circumstances, they added flavour to the entire film, giving it an extraordinary outlook that contradicts the cliché in Nollywood traditional genre movies. Without computer-generated visual effects in *Ije omimi Ikenna*, the film in its entirety would appear blank with the camera effects only. Computer-generated visual effects have influenced the quality of some Igbo Nollywood movies. It has aided the filmmakers in achieving the portrayal of the Igbo worldview and their belief in the supernatural. Therefore, the computer-generated visual effect is the only medium to project such actions to the audience. Finally, more personnel and professionals are required in the area of visual effects design and production. Professionals in the art will pave the way for more upcoming artists to execute more experiments with various materials, software, and improvised hardware.

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