



Denotation-Flexibility Nature and Mobility of Dramatic Functions of Costume in “Thunderbolt: Magun”

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Abstract. Over the years the basic nature and functions of costume had been identified and known as any material wore by the actor/character to cover his/her body or part of the body actor on stage or on screen. Even though costume is not just about clothing the performer; it is the process of studying who and what the character in the scripts is. In this study attempt is made to demonstrate three secondary functions of costumes serving as props, costume serving as a component of the sitting and costumes playing other causality roles in the plot of a narrative with practical samples/analyses of selected shots from a Yoruba narrative film: “Thunderbolt: Magun”. In carrying out its tasks, the paper used the research approaches of content and studio analytical methods while the theoretical yardsticks are based on David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s Neoformalist theory and Keir Elam’s transformability or mobility of the sign on stage structuralist principle. With the conceptual frameworks the notions of costume and props are established. With practical demonstration, the findings revealed not only the basic functions of costumes in each selected shots from “Thunderbolt: Magun” but went ahead to analyse samples with denotation-flexibility nature and mobility of dramatic functions of costume in serving as props, components of the sitting and playing other causality roles in “Thunderbolt: Magun”.

1. Introduction

The basic nature and functions of costume had been identified and known as any material wore by the actor on stage or on screen to cover his/her body or part of his/her body. Even though costume is not just about clothing the performer; it is the process of studying who and what the character in the scripts is.

In this study attempt is made to demonstrate three secondary functions of costumes: costume serving as props, costume serving as a component of the sitting and costumes playing other causality roles in the plot of a narrative with practical samples/analyses of selected shots from a Yoruba narrative film: “Thunderbolt: Magun”

The research approaches to be used are based on content/studio analytical methods while the theoretical yardsticks are based on David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s Neoformalist theory and Keir Elam’s transformability or mobility of the sign on stage structuralist principle. The conceptual frameworks will look into the notions of costume and that of props.

2. Content / Studio Analytical Approach

According to G. V. Zito (1975:27) quoted in Asa-Berger (1998:23) content analysis approach is defined as:

...a methodology by which the researcher seeks to determine the manifest content of written, spoken, or published communications by systematic, objective and quantitative analysis.... Since any written communication ... is produced by a communicator, the intension of the communicator may be the object of our research. Or we may be interested in the audience or receiver of the communication and may attempt to determine something about it.

On his part Asa-Berger (1998:23) explains further that content analysis is a means of trying to learn something about people by examining what they write or produce on television/movies. “Content analysis assumes that behavioural patterns, values, and attitudes found in this material reflect and affect

the behaviour, attitudes and values of the people who create the material.” While adopting the studio analytical approach for his study, Ola-Koyi (2019) explains, “In this case, relevant shots/frames from the selected films are identified and selected with the aid of editing machine for necessary diagnosis and evaluation.”

3. Theoretical Yardsticks

3.1 Neo formalist theory

Neoformalism theory as propounded by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson has been described as a method of film criticism that moves away from the interpretive theory going towards a more empirical analysis of film. In contrast to specific types of Humanistic Grand Theory interpretive approaches within the humanities, Neoformalism operates as an empirical approach to examining film and seeks wholly to identify “facts” about the film.

In deploying this theory for film scrutiny Bordwell and Thompson constructed three expository models for the Neoformalist heuristic and these include: (1.) Rational-Agent Model – The purpose of which is to reconstruct the historical conditions present at the time of the filmmakers’ employment of his/her agency. (2.) Institutional Model – the social and economic system of filmmaking examines the filmmaker’s “constraints” in filmmaking. These would include, labor, economics, and technology available to the filmmaker. (3.) Perceptual-Cognitive Model – This model attempts to explain the effects of film as it is constructed and against the inferences of the viewer. These include elements of style, narrative norms and technique, as well as continuity editing.

Of all these three models that allow Neoformalist poetics to move away from thematic interpretation towards dynamic systemic constructional effects of film criticism, the third model of Perceptual-Cognitive Model will be deployed in this paper.

3.2 Transformability of the sign theory

Keir Elam’s (1981) believes that the transformability or mobility of the sign on stage might follow the structuralist principle, but it is by no means a recent discovery. Quoting Bogatyrev, a Prague school structuralist, who implies that transformability of the sign deals with ‘generative capacity’ of theatrical sign that is enhanced by a quality variously described as *mobility*, *dynamism* or *transformability*. In Elam’s words:

The sign-vehicle may be semantically versatile (or ‘over-determined’) not only at the connotative level but also on occasion, at the denotative – the same stage item stands for different signifieds depending on the context in which it appears

While in Bogatyrev (1938:519) opinion, “each object sees its signs transformed in the most rapid and varied fashion.” For instance, an item such as a dress or a chair on stage may be used as a costume or part of the set on stage (/in a scene) while in other scenes the same dress or chair might be used as props. The denotational flexibility in this case is complemented by the mobility of dramatic functions which that single physical item fulfils. And for any signified class of phenomena there are no absolutely fixed representational relations. In Elam’s (1981:13) view:

The dramatic scene, for instance, is not always figured analogically through spatial, architectural or pictorial means, but may be indicated gesturally (as in mime) through verbal indications or other acoustic means (the acoustic scenery ...is clearly essential to radio drama). By the same token, there is no fixed law governing the customary representation of dramatist persona by the human actor. If what matters is that something real is able to assume this function, the actor is not necessarily a man; it can be a puppet, or a machine...

Basically, from Elam’s theory it is established that the sign-vehicles are perfectly interchangeable (Elam,1981:14). Therefore, Elam claims that “the ‘transformation rule’ of the stage representation – depend not only on the interchangeability of stage elements but still more on the reciprocal substitution of sign-systems or code. For example, the replacement of scenic indicators by gesture or verbal reference involves the process of transcodification: a given semantic unit (say, a ‘door’) is signified by linguistic or gestural system rather than by the architectural or pictorial as often occurs in mime.

4. Conceptual framework

4.1 Costumes

According to Odule (2008), costume is simply defined as any material wore by the actor on stage or on screen, while Ola-Koyi (2020) believes, costume manifests under different names and forms and these include: garments, dresses, clothing, leather, metal and any other material wore by the character to cover his/her body or part of the body. Going by the view of Kwakye-Opong and Adinku (2013):

Costume is not just about clothing the performer; it is the process of studying who and what the character in the scripts is. In character description costume plays an important role because, what the audience sees gives a more immediate impression of who the character is, than what he or she says; that is what they (the audience) hear from the characters speech. Consequently, costume naturally gives a form of expression about an individual either of his or her social status, culture, religion, profession, sex, age and so on. It reflects in the daily life of the people because it is closely related with festivities, culture, pleasure, fashion and basic religious practices in Africa and the world over.

In giving a broader perspectives and contemplation to Barton (1963:23)'s concept of costume, which Albert Dennis (2014) quotes thus:

Barton (1963:23) notes that "it is the outward and visible sign of the inner spirit which informs any given period and nationality". By Barton's delineation, it is clear that the external and discernible sign of an individual is influenced by his or her inner spirit. To this end, the internal character traits of an individual are made manifest through the costumes he wears. Additionally, Barton's view on costume equally touches on the uniqueness of every period. This is because every period is characterized by certain traits that make it distinct from the other. The kind of costume worn in each civilization is peculiar to its nationals as it differentiates them from others. Another point worth considering from Barton's elucidation is the communicative role that costumes assume in a non-verbal form. This implies that the costume an actor wears on stage portrays his or her inner spirit, which is made manifest to the outer world. It communicates, therefore, to the audience the mood of the actor. To this end, costumes serve as one of the non-verbal ways of communicating to the audience.

4.2 Props

Props according to Mick Alderson (2002), "...is everything that is not part of the set, the lighting, or costumes." It is on record that what exactly properties mean keeps changing from users/critics/acting context/condition to users/critics/acting context/condition. Broadly speaking props in acting worlds covers the following variations, types and areas: Hand props, Personal props, Set props, Set dressing and Greens. There are other types of properties such as mechanical special effects and atmospheric props which include: fogs, smokes, snow, etc. These props are parts of the prop department but in this paper, these other props will

not be discussed further. For the purpose of this paper, each of the required variations/types of props will now be succinctly introduced.

As defined in Mick Alderson's (2002) study, the *hand props* are anything handled or carried by an actor. They include staffs, food, weapons, lanterns and candles, canes, staffs, parasols, and practically anything else an actor could or might pick up. *Personal props* are props worn or carried by a particular actor and/or restricted/issued for his usage alone rather than being stored on the prop table. *Set props* include most obviously furniture and other element on the set. These are objects usually add to the look of the setting and the actor interacts with them.

Set dressing on the other hand consists of similar items, but which the actor doesn't usually handle. According to Alderson's (2002), "Some set dressings are "practicals", props like lamps or chandeliers that perform on stage as they do in real life." *Trim props* are a type of set dressing that hang on the walls, such as pictures, window dressing and curtains, and so on. The props that are regarded as *Greens* are any plant, live or artificial used by the actor on set or placed somewhere on the set without actor interacting with it.

Basically, props are deployed for so many functions on screen or stage production. Some of these purposes which props are used include: dressing the scene, contributing to look and feel of scene, help in filling the space appropriately, use in interpreting the play, contributing to the style and mood of the play, adding info about characters, aiding and helping actor in character, movement and business.

5. The Denotation-flexibility nature and mobility of dramatic functions of costume on scene

As demonstrated in Keir Elam's (1981) theory, that an item on stage such as a dress in a scene may be used and perceived as props or as a part of the set while in another scene, the same dress might be used as any other things (such filling up the screen or stage space appropriately, deployed in understanding/interpreting the play, contributing to the style and mood of the play etc.), but a costume which is what it really is. This changing nature of the stage/screen items (costume/props in a scene) has been regarded as the *denotation-flexibility*. Thus the flexible nature is complemented by the mobility of dramatic functions in which a single physical item

fulfils and performs on stage/screen other functions as the director desires/directs.

In attesting to how costumes are deployed to perform other functions in narrative films, Bordwell and Thompson (2004:187) opine:

Film genres make extensive use of costume props – the frontier six-gun, the gangster's automatic pistol, the dancer's top hat and cane. In every major film, comedian has turned a specific costume into a panoply of props...

Based on the forgoing, the common roles of costume could be summarised as follows: serving as an outward and visible sign of the inner spirit which could also inform any given period and nationality, depicting the internal character traits of an individual/actor, performing communicative role/serving as one of the non-verbal ways of communicating to the audience. Costume equally shows/touches on the uniqueness of every period, that is, shows the kind of costume worn in each civilization that is peculiar to its nationals as it differentiates them from others.

Aside from the basic functions of costumes which had been established above, the main concerns of this study are on the secondary functions such as costume serving as props, costume serving as a component of the setting and costumes playing other causality roles in the plot of a narrative. Here a critical examination of the various secondary roles which costumes had been made to perform in the film: “Thunderbolt: Magun” will be carried out in this paper.

Synopsis of the film: “Thunderbolt: Magun” (2000)

The story in this film – “Thunderbolt: Magun” is based on the relationships that exist between an attractive young lady – Ngozi, [Uche Obi Osotule] a teacher, and two different men: the first is her husband Yinka [Lanre Balogun] – an engineer and the second her admirer Dimeji [Wale Macaulay] a medical doctor.

In summarising the plot, one could say that, Yinka comes across Ngozi during his NYSC orientation period. There and then he proposes to her and she instantly falls in love with him at the expense of her betrothed. Due to her love and marital engagement, she defers her service year till after the birth of her first baby.

During her service year at *Oleyo* village, there is a rumour that Ngozi is promiscuous, where she is teaching in a community high school. That she is

flirting around with men who include her Vice Principal and a village doctor in *Oleyo*. For this reason, Yinka decides and laces Ngozi with *Magun* (a deadly spell) as an anti promiscuity charm. As faith would have it, a supernatural force comes to Ngozi’s rescue to sensitise her on the impending danger hovering on her. By the time Ngozi returns home, she narrates her encounter at the market to her Land Lady – Mama Tutu, [Bukky Ajayi] who takes her to consult an Herbalist [Adebayo Falati] as a way of finding solution her supernatural problem. In return the herbalist reveals the meaning of her encounter and identifies the existence of the deadly affliction on her body after due diagnoses.

On learning of the cost of *Magun* affliction’s cure however, in annoyance Ngozi flees the Herbalist house. For her elderly wisdom and love for Ngozi, Mama Tutu she informs Ngozi’s father of her affliction and the old man is willing to pay for the cost of the cure that will save Ngozi’s life. Thus, Ngozi is compelled to undergo this costly curative therapy. As soon as she commences her treatment, she goes through a lot of unpleasant experiences. At the end of her treatment, she is expected to undergo a final test where she will copulate with a man that will obtain a spiritual sanctification for her.

After two failed attempts to persuade Dele Ibraheem (Yemi Sholade) and Yinka her husband to copulate with her, she finally contacts Dimeji, her admirer whom she had embarrassed on so many occasions. Dimeji accepts to copulate with her not only because of his love for her but for his own scientific inquisitiveness and a motive of demystifying the phenomenon called *Magun*. In order for his experiment to be accepted in the medical world, Dimeji sets his own standard on a venue and the condition under which the act will occur.

On the day of the expected test, Dimeji has sexual intercourse with Ngozi, but as soon as the act is over, Dimeji summersaults, and starts to vomit blood until he becomes unconscious. However, with the assistance of the three herbalists who invoke some incantations, make incisions and apply some charms on Dimeji’s head, he is revived and he becomes conscious again. In appreciating Dimeji for saving her life and for his heroic deeds, Ngozi decides to marry him.

6. Analysis and discussion

The examination of denotation-flexibility nature of costume and its mobility functions in a dramatic/cinematic presentation required analysing

and discussing with practical demonstrations on secondary/additional services which costumes are deployed in a video film production. That is the exploration exercise that will be carried out in this paper will be based on “Thunderbolt: Magun” a film by Tunde Kelani of the Mainframe Productions. Through this narrative film, a critical scrutiny and practical demonstrations of selected shots that depict how costumes perform the various secondary/additional functions of serving as props, serving as components of the sitting and playing other causality roles in this film will now be carried out. However, for clarity purpose, a piece of background information might be given on some of the selected shots that will be critical analysed.

Starting with the first sequence where the two shots on figs 01 and 02 are taken from the film: “Thunderbolt: Magun”, one could see that these two shots are from a sequence where Ugozi is woken up by her husband, Yinka with the intention of having a sexual intercourse with her and she flees from her husband in her bed room, to the sitting room for two good reasons. The first is out of annoyance with her husband for failing to trust her loyalty or her movements which are not promiscuous. The second is out of fears of infecting/contaminating her husband with Magun spell which she has on her and this could lead to her husband’s death.

With these selected shots on figs 01 and 02, attempt will not only be made to reveal the basic functions of costumes in these shots but demonstrate as well how costumes in these figs fulfilled the secondary roles of serving as props, as component of the sitting and perform other causality roles. In identifying components of costumes figs 01 and 02, one could point out Yinka’s under wears of singlet and boxers, Ngozi’s nightgown and an Ankara clothing/covering material/duvet on her body, the bed spread and the pillow cases as costumes in this shot.

In diagnosing how some of these identified clothing/costume materials in figs 01 and 02 performed some basic roles of costumes and three auxiliary functions of serving as props, as component of the sitting or playing other causality roles in this sequence of the film, one could start by identifying the basic functions of Yinka’s under wears of singlet/shorts and the nightgown on Ugozi reveal these two as a couple in modern under wears/garments which are deployed to cover their bodies. In serving as an outward and visible sign of the inner spirit, their costumes and the setting in which this couple is placed reveal their status as educated individuals/couple, living in a flat apartment. On the issue of their costumes revealing a given period and nationality, one could say this couple live between the period of 1975 and 1985 and they are from a southern part of Nigeria.



Fig.01. Components of costumes in this shot include Yinka’s singlet and boxers, Ugozi’s nightgown and an Ankara covering material/duvet, the bed spread and the pillow cases. On performing a causality function, the Ankara fabric plays this causality role when Ugozi’s attention is drawn to her husband’s intention of



Fig.02. The pillow cases perform the basic function of covering the pillows inside them and they also become props when Ugozi carries these pillows from her bedroom into the sitting room. More so, by holding on to these pillows, the pillow cases become elements of the causality in her attempt to calm her

In considering the flexible nature and other secondary functions which some of these identified costume materials are deployed, it could be stated that the covering Ankara wrapper/duvet on Ngozi’s body is meant to perform a dual purposes of a props and a causality role in these two shots. The property/props role of this duvet could be identified

when Yinka holds on/contacts Ugozi in fig. 01, through this Ankara fabric that covers her body. There the material becomes a prop (i.e. a material which an actor makes use of in the course of acting/performing his role). The same Ankara fabric performs a causality function when Yinka holds on to it and with it Ugozi's attention is drawn to her husband's intention of making love with her or in seducing her.

While the bedspread renders a single service of/as a component of the bedroom sitting, i.e. covering the bed which Yinka and Ugozi lie on in fig. 01, the pillow cases in these two shots performs triple roles of serving as the components of the bedroom sitting in fig 01 and serving as properties and elements of the causality in fig. 02. In other words, the pillow cases are not only performing the basic function of covering the pillows inside them, but they become props when Ugozi carries these pillows from her bedroom into the sitting room. More so, by holding on to these pillows, the pillows/pillowcases become elements of the causality in her attempt to calm her perturbed mind down.

The background info on the shot in Fig.03 is that Dele Ibraheem (Yemi Sholade) is the first of Ugozi's past admirer that comes to her mind when she gets to a point where she needs to copulate with a man as one of the conditions in the going therapeutically treatment she is receiving for the cure of Magun spell cast on her. There and then she went all out to invite this man Dele with the intension of copulating with him but Mama Tutu would not allow Dele, her nephew to fall victim of Magun spell hence the process of her warning act is captured on fig.03.



Fig.03. Mama Tutu is captured in the process of warning her nephew Dele to stay away from Ugozi a woman suffering from a Magun spell as she would not allow her nephew to fall victim of Magun. On the secondary function, the buba top on Dele becomes a prop, the moment Mama Tutu gets hold of it in order to force a firm warning into



Fig.04. Yinka's costume - trousers fulfils in this frame multiple functions as directed. In other words, Yinka's costumes covered his body while performing other mobile functions such as serving as props (a material held at hand while playing a role) and playing other causality roles (such as serving as a means through which Ngozi holds on to Yinka

The identifiable costume/clothing materials in this shot on fig.03 are Mama Tutu's Iborun gele (headgear), her female buba (top) and Iro (wrapper) on one hand and Dele's male Buba top and a pair of sokoto trousers on the other. The two identified set of costumes in this shot on fig. 3 fulfilled the basic functions of covering the figures' bodies and identifying their statuses of an older aunty and her young educated nephew. On the secondary level, the buba top on Dele serves as a prop, the moment Mama Tutu gets hold of it in order to force a firm warning into Dele's mind that is beclouded with desire to make love to Ngozi.

Although none of these two sets of costumes serve as component of the bedroom sitting, but the buba top which Dele is wearing and which Mama Tutu holds on to plays another secondary / causality role as it becomes a means through which Iya Tutu is able to wake Dele Ibraheem up from a lustful fantasy/desire/dream into facing the possible reality of suffering from Magun charm, once he goes ahead to copulate with Ngozi – a women living with Magun spell.

The background info on fig.04 is that when Ugozi's plan to copulate with Dele Ibraheem fails due to Iya Tutu intervention, she turns to her husband in order to copulate with him but knowing full well that Ugozi has Magun spell on her and the consequent on a man who dare to have sex with her while she is still under this spell, Yinka blatantly refuses to have sexual intercourse with his wife.

The identifiable costume materials in the shot include a native blouse top, the outer skirt and the underwear skirt on Ugozi, the shirt, belt, a pair of trousers on Yinka and other garments/clothes hanging on the wall of this shot. While the costumes on Yinka and Ugozi performed the basic function of covering their bodies and in identifying their personalities/statuses, the other garments hanging on the wall in this shot serve as components of the room sitting.

In exploring further, the mobile and dramatic functions of Yinka's belt and a pair of his trousers, one could see that these two items fulfil/performs multiple functions as Yinka's belt/trousers do not only cover his body as mentioned but perform secondary/mobile function of serving as props (a material an actor held at hand while playing a role) and a secondary/ causality role. In performing the props functions Yinka's belt and trousers serve as a means through which Ugozi unveiling her actions – these two materials are used to hold on to Yinka while Ugozi is pleading with him to consent to her request in this scene.

The second function of performing causality role is revealed through Yinka's actions of not heeding to his wife advance for sexual intercourse. There, he forcefully freeing himself from his wife's grip on his trousers. This forceful action eventually betrays him as the person who laced Ugozi with deadly magun spell.

7. Summary and Conclusion

In this study, the research approaches used are based on content/studio analytical methods there Zito (1975:27)'s ideas quoted in Asa-Berger (1998:23) is deployed to explain content analysis approach while the theoretical yardsticks are based on David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's Neoformalist theory and Keir Elam's transformability or mobility of the sign on stage structuralist principle. The conceptual frameworks defined the notions of costume not just as a material worn by actor that shows the outward and visible sign of the inner spirit but as that which informs any given period and shows the nationality. In addition, the notion of props is seen as any material used in the course of acting that

is not part of the set, the lighting, or the costumes. The Denotation-flexibility nature and mobility of dramatic functions of costume on stage or screen is seen according to Keir Elam's structuralist principle where an item on stage such as a dress in a scene may be used and perceived as props or as a part of the set while in another scene, the same dress might be used as any other things.

The analysis and discussion in this study is preceded by the synopsis of the film: "Thunderbolt. Magun". The findings show the components of costumes in fig 01 to include Yinka's singlet and boxers, Ugozi's nightgown and an Ankara covering material/duvet, the bed spread and the pillow cases. The aside from the primary function of covering the actors' bodies, the secondary role of costume in this frame which is causality function is performed by the Ankara fabric. This occurred when Ugozi's husband holds this fabric and her attention is drawn to the man's intention of making love with her. The analysis on fig.02 shows that the pillow cases perform the basic function of covering the pillows inside them and they also perform the secondary role of props when Ugozi carries these pillows from her bedroom into the sitting room. More so, by holding on to these pillows while ruminating on events occurring in her life, the pillow cases become again, elements of the causality in her attempt to calm her perturbed mind down.

In fig.03, Mama Tutu is seen holding on Dele's buba top thus this costume becomes an element of causality in her attempt of warning her nephew Dele to stay away from Ugozi – a woman suffering from a Magun spell and because she would not want her nephew to at his prime age as a victim of Magun. Again, on another secondary function, the buba top on Dele is also demonstrated as a prop, the moment Mama Tutu gets hold of it in order to force a firm warning into his mind. In fig.04, it was demonstrated how Yinka's costume - trousers fulfils in the frame multiple functions: which include covering Yinka's body while performing other mobile functions such as serving as props (a material held at hand while playing a role) and playing other causality roles (such as serving as a means through which Ugozi holds on to Yinka while pleading with him.

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