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Audience involvement in creative media for development: Making sense of the semiotic interface

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Abstract: This article explores the role that semiotic communication plays in the generation of narrative affect. It also draws on Suruchi Sood's concept of audience involvement as being capable of increasing self-efficacy and collective-efficacy, both of which are crucial to behaviour change. It therefore, demonstrates how semiotic tropes are used in creative media narratives to elicit affect and in turn generate authentic audience involvement with the subjects of those narratives, a process which eventually has positive consequences for behaviour change communication. Hence, these narratives fueled by semiotics, become the threshing floor where potential audiences are drawn into pro-social discourses and then motivated to reflect upon what they encounter in those narratives; "reflection" being one of the two key factors in Sood's concept of audience involvement. This article also explores the medial spaces between semiotic communication and the creative enterprise. It does this utilising some readings of the concept of semiotics and its corollaries such as; metaphor, allegory, symbolism and vernacular creativity; based on the works of Doreen Innes, Mike Milford and others. Importantly, it seeks to further knowledge on the creative processes within creative industries, using some African narratives as case studies.

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Michael Odichi-Dan Ugorji is currently an independent researcher with a doctorate in *Performance and Media Studies.* He started his education in Nigeria where he obtained Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in English from the University of Lagos and a Professional Diploma in Public Relations before proceeding to get a doctorate from the Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz, Germany.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper demonstrates how semiotic tropes are used in creative media narratives to elicit affect and in turn generate authentic audience involvement with the subjects of those narratives. This is significant because this particular application of semiotics has the capacity for social agency. In turn, social agency in narratives has been proven to possess strong positive consequences in behaviour change communications. This is so because audience involvement with pro-social messages has been proven to lead to self-efficacy and eventually to behaviour change. Importantly, this research paper will immensely contribute to a better deployment of creative media narratives for the purposes of communicating for social and human development. Hence, the primary purpose of this paper is to contribute to the knowledge and sound practice of behaviour change communications and to the larger goal of societal development.

Subjects: Development Studies; Semiotics; Cultural Studies; Popular Culture; Media & Film Studies; Cinema Studies & Popular Cinema; Media Theory; Film & TV Communication; Media Psychology; Media Industries

Keywords: creative media; semiotics; audience involvement; Nollywood; African studies; behaviour change communication; development studies; vernacular creativity; affective narrativity; popular culture

The creative media thrives on positive audience reception for its success both as a collective mode of expression and as a popular industry. In order for it to generate this positive reception, it needs to essentially connect to the audience by way of getting its attention and getting that audience involved in reflection with its narratives. One of the methods of establishing this attention and audience involvement is empathic narration or the narration of affect. This article aims at establishing an understanding of this aspect of audience involvement from the purview of semiotics. In so doing, it will analyse some African films and other narratives drawing on Sood's (2002) concept of audience involvement and the role of reflection in it. It will also draw on the works of Innes (2003) and Milford (2010) to illustrate the character and impact of semiotic tropes on audience involvement using some Nollywood films and other African creative media narratives as primary case studies.

It is important to also establish the concept of creative media in this article as comprising; films, dramas, advertisements, comedy, visual arts, etc. An important cluster of techniques and tendencies of affective narrativity in these creative media, as stated above, is located within the precincts of semiotics. Audiences of creative media of any sub-genre often have certain semiotic markers that convey particular deep meanings to them. These markers are compatible with audience sociocultural backgrounds and perspectives and also represent certain connotations for them when encountered in creative media works (i.e. the semiotics of communication). This observation is strengthened by the submission of Eco (1976) that every cultural phenomenon can be studied in their capacity to communicate; thus strengthening the view that cultural phenomena have always served as tools for communication of ideas and values. This is also representative of African creative media products, which are known to often incorporate and deploy various elements of socio-cultural signification in their quest to reach their vast audiences. In no other sub-genre of African creative media is this tendency more pronounced than in the Nigerian video-film industry, Nollywood. In order to elicit effective identification with the subjects of these works, there are often certain audience expectations which localise the experiences of fictional characters, situating the prevailing discourse within particular familiar audience socio-cultural realities and also speaking to them in their native speak. This sociocultural conditioning brings us to the concept of semiotics and its appeal to both the effective dramatisation of life experiences and the performance of social agency in the creative media.

Despite being a discursive aspect of knowledge with various theoretical stances and methodologies, *semiotics* could still be simply defined as "the study of signs", which in the words of Ferdinand de Saussure (*semiology*), "studies the role of signs as part of social life". It has also been variously linked to terminologies such as signification, analogy, symbolism, *semiosis*, metaphor, among others, and most importantly for this article, communication (Culler, 1976; Elam, 2002). Among semioticians such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes, there is a firm conviction that signs are arbitrary in nature and needed to be unbundled to unveil underlying meanings. This suggests that what we encounter as signs have only assumed their meanings based on those interpretations ascribed to them without much consequence on their actual deep meanings. The influential American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce believes that the original nature of an object as merely itself is instantly lost once it is exposed to an audience on a platform. This he explains is as a result of that object's transformation into a semiotic sign with a signifying function (Peirce, 1986, p. 5).

There are several other important thoughts that elucidate the use of signs and symbols for communicating ideas and values to discerning audiences or "decoders". However, this article is only

concerned with those aspects of semiotics that deal on the pragmatic relations that exist between signs and their effects on people. It will therefore proceed by using them to analyse the framing of pro-social messages in African creative media. This article has therefore sub-categorised these aspects of semiotics under the following subheadings: allegorical and symbolical perspectives, the vernacular voice and the fictional character as an embodied metaphor.

1. Allegorical and symbolical perspectives

In the process of eliciting affect and communicating pro-social messages in creative media, producers have often adopted the allegorical model which lays less emphasis on direct communication, but exploits more imagery and figurativeness in its mode of representation. Allegorical communication itself is characterised by the use of metaphor, personification and moral conflict (Stern, 1988). Communicating with allegories therefore entails the use of symbolic representations and actions, which in turn makes it metaphorical. Therefore, in this essay, both *allegory* and *symbolism* become semiotic models in varying degrees for the communication of ideas and phenomena without making reference to plain meanings and direct representations.

Allegorical composition according to Barouch (2008, p. 2) is a means of highlighting the social structures of meaning and inviting readers (or audience when appropriated to creative media) to extend such structures into their own daily lives. It has also been described as usually denoting a certain practice in which a narrative fiction continuously refers to a different pattern of ideas or events; and which draws special attention to the narrative character of cultural representations and to the stories built into the representation process itself (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, pp. 99–100). The above explications of allegory underscore its intersection with the process of communicating premeditated behaviour change communication ideals to attentive audiences; such as those of fictional narratives in film and other creative media modes of dramatising human experiences. The case is not in any way different with African cultural products which are often very idiomatic and which also in certain instances target their audiences with pro-social messages aimed at mediating positive behaviour change.

To further illuminate the import of allegory as a semiotic element in the modelling of pro-social messages in films and other creative media, it is pertinent to establish an understanding of its nature. Thus, this article would proceed to mention the types, form and functions that allegory assumes in narratives. Therefore, allegory could be classified into three broad categories based on Innes (2003, p. 8) classification namely; allegory as an ornament of style, allegory as a continuous metaphor and allegory as an extended narrative. In the context of social agency and behaviour change communication, allegory could feature in either of the two latter categories: as a "continuous metaphor" or as an "extended narrative", even though it has been most predominantly enacted as a continuous metaphor.

An example of use of allegory as a continuous metaphor could be found in the Nigerian, Sam Onwuka's film, *Stubborn Grasshopper … Loved Power, Died in Power* (2001). This film is a political satire, but its pungency has been mellowed by the vague references made to real characters using pseudonyms and metaphors believed to represent the late maximum ruler of Nigeria, General Sani Abacha and his military junta. The film revisits Abacha's dictatorship and lampoons him over the circumstances leading to his death which was believed to have been masterminded by his hired expatriate Indian prostitutes. For fear of official persecution, Onwuka delves into the dangerous murky waters of Nigerian political critique shielded by the instrumentality of allegory; in which even Abacha's name becomes General Alba; his wife Maryam becomes Sabina and the late billionaire Chief Moshood Abiola, whom Abacha had imprisoned over power tussle, is represented as Chief Kash. Kash is probably a coinage from Abiola's middle name, *Kashimawo,* or simply relating him to physical cash, since he was known to be the richest man in Nigeria as at the point of his death. The filmmaker has succeeded in telling a potentially politically dangerous story to which the immediate audience can relate, but at the same time he has avoided coming into a direct confrontation with General Abacha's loyalists who could be irked by such criticisms considering the pains that his

sudden death had brought upon them. Haynes (2006) regards the use of pseudonyms and metaphors in *Stubborn Grasshopper* as a formal disclaimer about the actual people and events in the film. It is however important to note that irrespective of the allegorical presentation of the story, it remains very recognisable by a discerning audience and sends a subtle message to would-be dictators that if the dreaded General Sani Abacha could end so tragically, a similar fate could equally befall them. It is also important to note that the title of the film derives from a popular Igbo adage, which says "the stubborn grasshopper often finds rest in the belly of a bird". This is a familiar axiom, which teaches the moral of discretion and personal responsibility. This interpretation is perhaps endorsed by the plain rider to the title of the film which reads; ... *Loved Power, Died in Power*.

On the form that rhetorical allegory assumes in narratives, Milford (2010, pp. 17–34), in his article, "Neo-Christ: Jesus, *The Matrix*, and Secondary Allegory as a Rhetorical Form", identifies four elements from a medley of theories of allegory. These include *narrative format, pretext, knowledgeable audience* and an *assumed allegorist*. Applying Milford's elements to creative media narratives; we can identify film, theatre, folk media performances, adverts, etc. as being a representative of the *narrative format*. The vast audiences of these creative media constitute a body of willing and *knowledgeable decoders* of the familiar social discourses that form the *pretext.* Finally, the media producer assumes the role of the *allegorist* who brings everything together to create his narrative.

In the forgoing, these above-mentioned indices provide the necessary precondition for allegory to execute its communicative function. In the instance of the film, *Stubborn Grasshopper* cited above, the medium of film is automatically the narrative format; the Sani Abacha dictatorship in Nigeria becomes the pretext. The discerning audience of the film who are very conversant with the various dimensions of the political drama that ensued under Abacha's reign form a brigade of knowledgeable audiences; whereas Onwuka as the film-maker stands in for the role of the allegorist.

Milford (2010) while reviewing *The Matrix* (1999) as a secondary allegory in Christian circles also highlights the functions of allegory, which he classified into the *epistemological* and the *pedagogical*. Certainly, it is the pedagogical function that it assumes as a semiotic element deployed in the process of communicating pro-social messages to an audience. In this function allegory becomes an agent of moral instruction by which narratives convey messages via representations with objects or abstract ideas. The energy that its indirectness brings to freedom of expression mobilises it as a preferred model for conveying certain messages without the encumbrances of cultural taboos, religious restrictions and political correctness, etc. Thus, the moral agency of the allegory on General Sani Abacha's tyranny enables the film's producer to tell his tragic story and also to pass overt judgements on his characters without coming into direct confrontation with those concerned with his subject.

Another good instance of the use of allegory is in the Nigerian film by Sunny Collins, *King of the Forest* (2003). In this ahistorical allegorical film set in a folklorist ancient Igbo village, the king dies and there arises the need for someone to succeed him. Being that the king has not left any known successor to his throne; the oracle is consulted to determine who steps in to rule over their land. Revelation by the oracle indicates that the eventual successor to the throne will be any warrior who could make a journey to and fro the land of the dead, to the ancestral shrine, to get an essential clay pot containing the magical ancestral cream meant for the burial of the late king. This proposed journey is eventually narrowed down to two volunteers, *Agu* (played by Charles Okafor) and the loquacious *Utobo Nwangele Nwa-Oturukpo* (played by Nkem Owoh). Both of these gentlemen are expected to demonstrate rare bravery and wisdom while on their fatal, but highly essential journey. Out there in the land of the spirits, these two men encounter various challenges and phantoms to which Agu demonstrates absolute discretion and bravery, while Utobo displays his greed, crass obstinacy and utter show of indiscretion. At the end, Agu who is diligent and who displays good virtues and a sense of purpose succeeds in finding the sacred clay pot bearing the magical ancestral cream; whereas Utobo, the boastful and rude warrior, is deceived by the spirits into bringing home a large cache of pots and stolen wares full of trash and dangerous pests. As Agu the positively portrayed character

wears the crown, Utobo is made to bear the wrought of an angry village community that loathes him and his excesses. This story might appear simply comical considering the comical dimensions of Utobo's characterisation and the energy that the actor who interprets it has brought into it, but it has been told in a way that leaves the audience with the moral lessons and the ethics of singularity of purpose, thoughtfulness and show of discretion to others, especially when they appear to be in need. Utobo's undoing is neither a lack of bravery nor a lack of wisdom on his part, but his tragic flaws which include hubris manifesting in an excessive pride in his own capabilities, his distractive greedy desires and his maddening penchant to seek and exert power at any cost.

In the above explication of allegory and its application as a communicative tool, one recurrent feature is that of *representation*, which in turn implies *symbolism*. When one object or idea is used or expressed as an indirect reference to another, we can say that the relationship between the former and the latter is symbolical. Duncan (1962, p. 1) notes that communication of expressive symbols is to be regarded not as an enactment of social order, but as a process of *cathexis*[1] in which meanings are "attached" to objects and persons. While examining "Symbolic Interaction in Freud's Work", Duncan also notes that symbols are modes of expression which are not individually acquired, but are of racial (socio-cultural group) heritage and have fixed meanings (p. 5). One of such symbols of community life as he later identifies is *money* (pp. 348). One can equally apply this theory to the explanation of the use of certain items and objects as signifiers in creative media products. According to Krings (2005, p. 200) colour symbolism is used to depict positive and negative characters in Hausa films of Nigeria. In films where Islam clashes with paganism this colour symbolism is often deployed and Muslims are represented in white, while the pagans are clothed in black or other dark colours to depict their perceived negative portrait. This hinges on the Hausa worldview in which the white colour signifies positivity, the black colour signifies the negative and red signifies danger. The entire repertoire of African creative media narratives is replete with such archetypes and forms of symbolism. They are culturally determined and constitute semantic values among the cultures in which they are produced.

Duncan (1962) also recognises the maintenance and transmission of social bonds from one generation to another, as well as the creation and sustenance of emotional dispositions (on which society depends for its existence) as "the social function of symbolism in great community dramas" (pp. 431). Hence, the synergy of symbolism and allegory as semiotic elements of community narratives, such as evident in African films and dramas, essentially energises the communication of and predisposition to community development messages via those creative media. Still on Duncan's study of symbolism and its relevance to narrativity and social agency in African creative media, this article will further highlight what he identifies as the structure of symbolic social act based on Burke's theory of dramatism. Duncan (1962) identifies five elements (the Burkean pentad) that define this symbolic structure as; *scene, agent, act, agency* and *purpose* and explains that these elements seldom stand alone in symbolic phases of the social act. Some of the synergies that mark symbolic acts and which are relevant to the analysis of my case-studies include the following combinations: scene–agent, scene–agency, act–purpose, agent–agency and agency–purpose (Duncan, 1962, pp. 433–436). These tendencies will be espoused in detail in a subsequent part of this study.

2. The vernacular voice

The concept of the *vernacular voice* is one that could not be ignored as a model of fictional communication. These voices include those of local people or ordinary people doing ordinary things in ordinary familiar settings. Burgess (2007) describes the vernacular domain as that which is "the everyday, the mundane and the in-between". Etymology of the word, *vernacular,* traces it back to the middle ages of the English and European society during which Latin was the elevated code, the *lingua franca* and language of literacy. It was then referent to local languages such as the English language as the 'other' of Latin; connoting illiteracy, superstition, pedestrian speech and a marker for non-distinguished learning. The term has since been expanded in meaning to comprise everything that is local, quotidian, ordinary, familiar and folk-popular. As Burgess (2007) notes, vernacular is now used to "distinguish between 'everyday' from institutional or official modes" of representation within the same language.

Maier (2005, p. 223) while reviewing Gerard Hauser's interrogation of the Habermasian concept of *public spheres* in relation to public relations practice, remarks that public discourses emerge in the vernacular. He earlier reiterated Hauser's conviction that vernacular discourses shape public sentiments. Hauser had argued that daily conversations with co-workers, neighbours, superiors, subordinates, church, community, friends, family and etcetera provide countless opportunities for exchanging views on public matters. Therefore, one can assume that the use of vernacular characters, vernacular events and familiar settings, among others in films, dramas or other fictional works of the creative media enhances their audience identification and discourse-generating capacities; and consequently enhances their capacity for social agency. There is a preponderance of the use of the vernacular voice in the works of African creative media as demonstrated below.

Familiar setting as an aspect of the vernacular voice plays an important role in communication as well as in individual decision-making. In the context of pro-social messaging in fiction, they can be recognised as a type of "social referencing" tool. For instance, in vernacular Hausa culture folktales (also known as tale telling) are notably used by oral artists to provide relaxation and for teaching moral lessons. The telling of such localised familiar stories is used by their narrators to instruct the young and teach them to respect the dictates of their customs. It has also been noted that in many Nollywood Hausa movies, the folktale becomes not only a material resource, but also one that influences the quality of these movies (Usman et al., 2013, pp. 237–238).

Walden and Baxter (1989) while studying the effect of context and age on social referencing, indicate that construction of meaning is affected by familiarity with setting and that behaviour regulation (given a familiar context) increases with age. Their study demonstrated that the presence of familiar persons such as parents affected the behaviour of infants by means of attachment and association and that this behavioural pattern increased with age. Hence, adult audiences may be expected to respond more positively to stimuli or be better disposed to information processed in settings familiar to them. For emphasis, setting in this study comprises physical, affective, contextual and other forms of social and psychological settings. It is therefore pertinent to define this terminology and situate it in the context of my study. Thus, fictional setting can be described as the place, period and environment (social, psychological, etc.) in which any given story occurs. Setting is therefore central to any fictional construction because it gives the background, both physical and social, upon which the story is told. It comes in various types, sizes and categories. Some prominent types of setting relevant to this study include; location, universe, country, dystopia, utopia, etc.

Fictional locations are non-real places located only within the fictional world of the story. They confer on the author, the creational abilities of a "god" who is at liberty to construct his own city in his own terms and to his own purposes. *Fictional countries* just as what they denote refer to fictitious countries; which are often mere allegorical references to real countries, especially when they appear in satire, parody or any other kind of metaphorical social critique. These countries are bound to be easy avenues for reinforcing certain stereotypes, as Jungian archetypal representations appear to be the easiest means of pointing quicker to the actual "real country" being critiqued or lampooned. A *fictional universe* on the other hand is the world in which many locations and countries are constructed. It may or may not have conformity to the real world, but are often almost as detailed as the real world in terms of the completeness of activities in it. It also has its own variants such as multiverse, shared universe. Fictional universes can transcend their authors' original intent and constitute fictional worlds upon which other fictions are created even by other authors. In such shared universe situations, these settings begin to assume a true to life character, even though they remain truly unreal. Similar to the other types of setting espoused above, *utopias* and *dystopias* are equally unreal sites where societal excesses and hyper-optimisms are played out. Representations of life and experience in these sites are extreme; hyperbolically optimistic in the case of utopias and grotesquely pessimistic in the case of dystopias. However, these settings bear certain functional capacities which essentially have fiction-audience communicative value and which are often semiotic in nature. Irrespective of which type of setting is under discourse, they may be described as either

familiar or unfamiliar to the audience. For the purposes of this section, we will dwell only on the "familiar setting" and its impacts on the fictional audience.

Depending on the demographic and psychographic indices of particular target audiences of creative media, their settings are often in tune with the peculiar environments of those audiences. This is even more evident when the creative products bear intended and often explicit pro-social messages. The familiarity of setting therefore facilitates approximations of the storyline to real-life events and also enhances audience identification with the themes and messages borne by such dramas. Still focusing on African film; it is obvious that for the stories to make sense to the audiences, they must be located in identifiable settings and familiar circumstances. For instance, in Fiberesima's *Fear of the Unknown* (2001) and the Camerounian, Bassek Ba Kobhio's *Sango Malo* (1990), the stories are set in the village in its natural state with simulations of actual daily life as it is lived in many African villages. This way, the events appear true-to-life as African village audiences know them. In *Fear of the Unknown*, the filmmaker has made adequate efforts to set the story in a realistic early colonial Igbo society in which the frictions between native religious practices and the invading Christian religion are heightened. This conflict-prone fictional location is made more familiar to the contemporary Igbo audience (and to a large extent the wider African audiences) by means of detailed typical activities common to many African village settings. Similarly, the setting of *Sango Malo* in a little Camerounian village gives the movie an authenticity of voice that resonates with the lives that it is telling: the average African whose improper education or mis-education could lead to a life of misery or limited self discovery. For Sango, the radical village teacher in the film, sociopolitical and economic emancipation could only be attained if African communities began to apply Paolo Freire's model of emancipatory pedagogy, which empowers people to strive for self-reliance. In order to authenticate the organic nature of such an emancipatory ideology, the filmmaker sets his narrative in a vernacular setting that first establishes the status quo which the films aims to positively change. It should be noted that some of these archetypal representations of African village life have become entrenched through African literary canons such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Events and activities ranging from domestic role-playing activities to native rituals, Christian evangelical crusades, village meeting debates, feudal issues, marriage and other rites of passage, etc., are all reminiscent of the African village daily lived-experience and the social dramas that underline it. Exploiting this vernacularism, Fiberesima and Kobhio like other African cultural and creative media producers are able to galvanise the familiar portrait of vernacular life with their stories and their messages in an impactful and interesting way.

It should also be noted that familiar events happening in familiar environments and contexts with a pro-social bias present audiences with alternative ways of interpreting experience and in turn provide them with possible better ways and approaches to their circumstances. In *Yellow Card* (2000), setting large portions of the story in a high school has particular representational meanings to the primary audience of that film; the youths. The characters are portrayed as normal high-school pupils who are engaged in both curricular and extra-curricular activities like every other high-school pupil. The context of their experiences is also a familiar one which resonates across that age-grade. Identification of youthful audiences with the story of the film and its underlying messages is therefore enhanced by this familiarity.

Similar to familiar or vernacular settings is the use of vernacular characters to elicit audience identification with fictional works. This technique is also glaringly evident in African dramas in which elaborate efforts are often deployed to depict characters, even in melodramatic proportions, in such a way that they make meaning to local audiences. In *Yellow Card* for instance, it would not be difficult for young adults to identify with Tiyane, Linda, Juliet and the other high school pupils who are vernacular characters, going through familiar circumstances and bugged down by certain common lived-experiences familiar to many African youths. The lead character, Tiyane, is a regular youth with lofty dreams, good looks, full of life and a sporting talent with the familiar voice of youthful sexual fascination. Tiyane's bosom friend Skido is a fun character; full of youthful zest, playfully boisterous and sexually exuberant. The girls in the film, Linda and Juliet also represent familiar characters in

their teenage; full of romantic love ideas, fantasising of a big love-life with the local champion of their town. This local champion often manifests as one of; a charmingly handsome boy, a fun-loving unruly high school hunk or a brilliant boy who leads the class in academic activities. These two girls fall for Tiyane in the film just like an average teenage girl would in real life. Appropriating their experiences to their real-life contemporaries, these youths' stories have the capacity to instantly connect to empathy of their potential audiences.

Generally, it could be argued that the *vernacular voice* which has the most affinity to popular culture and the arts has been influential in the construction of pro-social dramas and other media in Africa; in view of their closeness to the primary targets and the rising profile of popular arts and performance in entertainment education.

3. The fictional character as an embodied metaphor

Another method of pro-social messaging in creative media works is the use of characters in a metaphoric sense to represent deep social meanings. This could be attributed to the identity of the fictional character as a representation of a real person; therefore creating an illusion of reality by situating this character in a seemingly real world when enacted. The process of characterisation lends itself to the whims of the author who is at liberty to construct characters that serve as agents for realising his own purposes. The author or producer could create his characters as metaphors for particular messages by making them embody certain traits and experiences which point to the goals and issues that he chooses to address. These characters often assume archetypal outlooks which represent certain social categories such as class and group memberships, etc. It is in the process of establishing these specific identities that the author or producer makes profound use of characterisation as a metaphorical motif, thereby energising the message of his work via the portrait of his fictional characters.

The fictional character, whether *round* or *flat*, is best understood in relation to the web of frictions that exists between them and other characters in the same narrative (Aston & George, 1991; Elam, 2002). Hence, the proxemic, pragmatic, proairetic and other oppositions in the characterisation of these fictional persons may be structured so perfectly as to reinforce the author's intended analogies. Gibbs, Costa Lima, and Francozo (2004) observe that metaphor has been demonstrated to be grounded in embodiment; therefore characters as metaphors are constructed to embody certain norms, values, types, personae, experiences, etc. When these characters eventually appear in dramas as metaphors embodying certain familiar and often stereotypical identities and patterns of behaviour, they function as ready semiotic markers which a discerning audience can easily identify with. Having configured this audience identification with the character, audience involvement and reflexivity which are prerequisite for behavioural change are in turn enhanced. In the making of African creative media productions, instances abound of the use of characters as embodied metaphors.

In African stage dramas, plays such as Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975) is a good example in which characters embody attributes of their roles and function as extended metaphors to push the author's message. The play, although it is a comedy, is an allegory built upon a folk performance. It is directly derived from *Anansesem*, the folklore tradition of the spider stories (*Anansegoro*) among the Akan people of Ghana (Agoro, 2001, p. 57). The play which deals on the issue of forced marriage and subversion of the female gender's will features Ananse as its focal character. Ananse is a metaphoric character whose fraudulent ingenuity drives the story and by whose interior monologue much of the background to the story is revealed. He represents the custom which demands the "commodification" of a bride and which cares less about the will of women in arranged or forced marriages. Although his characterisation is comical, he offers and actually renders metacommentary on the custom which he purports to protect.

In many African films, characterisation offers the filmmakers great opportunity to pass their messages or sometimes their verdicts on social behaviour. Haynes (2006) observes that although

Nollywood political films do not make assurances of reforming society as a whole, they nevertheless provide certain emotional satisfaction for the audience which often watches individual protagonists or antagonists of the vigilante films rigorously and severely dealt with. Characterisation in these films is most often melodramatic and character portraits almost always point to identifiable persons or persons of similar character in the society, whose brazen acts are condemned by the stories. As stated above, characters are often archetypal and depict class or group identities. This tendency plays out much in African films, in which economic, ethnic, religious and other identities are boldly underlined by the portraiture of representative characters. In *Yellow Card*, Skido (Sibangani Collin Dube) is portrayed as wayward and carefree. In the film, he represents the extremes of youthful exuberance and sexual fascination. It is not surprising that in the end he becomes the one infected with HIV. Everything about him reflects the high-risk lifestyle which the filmmaker sets out to discourage; hence subjecting him to the repercussions of his flawed character only justifies his role in his own calamity.

In Kelani's (1994) film titled *Ayo Ni Mo Fe* (I want joy), the character of Chief Tomobi as a wealthy man has been made elaborate and his predicament profound to underline his weird action when he sleeps with a mad woman. Chief Tomobi stands on one extreme of wealth and affluence, whereas the mad woman he sleeps with stands at the other end depicting the extremities of abject poverty and destitution. The binaries in their character portraits make the amorous escapades between them even more highlighted, dastardly and opprobrious. This conflict agitates the audience which is left wondering why a respected wealthy man in the society would condescend so low as to having sex with a vagabond mad woman. Chief Tomobi embodies the predicament of an afflicted man whose spell could only be removed by such an arduous and horrendous ritualistic act as having sex with a mad destitute. Irrespective of the odiousness of the actual act of rape, what highlights his action the most as an anti-social behaviour is what he represents to a society which ordinarily would regard him as a role-model. At first, he is a metaphor for an ideal successful life; but in the long run, he turns out a metaphor for anti-social behaviour and a failed life, which seems only redeemable by an abominable sexual intercourse with a woman from the lowest rung of social life. Outright embodiment of what each of Chief Tomobi and his rape victim represents facilitates the ideas that the film producer has set out to project.

Similarly, the characterisation of monsters and diabolical characters in African films is not just an aesthetic issue of magical realism, but is a metaphor often exploited by filmmakers for didactic purposes. These monsters often imbued with the capacity for negative miracles bear spiritual connotations that propel the propaganda of the films in which they appear. In *Fear of the Unknown*, the character of Ajonwa (the priest of the native deity) has been made egregious, grotesque and readily offensive to good society in order to prepare him and his beliefs for outright rejection by the audience. The filmmaker has portrayed Ajonwa as a diabolical, unfeeling priest of a wicked deity which demands the sacrificial killing of an innocent baby born to a Christian family. His various appearances in esoteric robes, a chalk-painted face and bare body sets him at odds with a contemporary society that is fascinated with the trappings of modernity and a society that has gotten used to people dressed in European-inspired outfits, singing and clapping in church buildings. His magical appearance to stand in the way of the Christian Pastor Unachukwu is another manifestation of what he embodies: magic and negative miracles. Whereas Ajonwa and others who believe in maintaining the local customs including the *Osu* caste system are presented as negative, inhumane and offensive, the Christian community is portrayed as positive, humane and resilient against evil. These portraitures go beyond the characters' costumes and actions, but include several other attributes which each side of the polemic embodies throughout the film in a frenzied dyad of traditionalisms and modernisms.

The characterisation of Oyidiya and her husband Nwokoro as longsuffering Christians persecuted by a community of unbelieving heathens and half-hearted Christians also comes to bear on what each member of their family embodies. Nwokoro and his family, defiant of the stigmatisation they receive from their community, carry on with dignity in their newfound Christian faith daring the custodians of the native customs and aspiring to dethrone their pessimism about the circumstances of

his son's birth. In order to dispel the pervading belief that their being *Osu* confines them to the dustbin of history, they are rather magnanimous and strive to demonstrate Christian love and optimism; attributes that they embody throughout the film and which eventually wins them the acceptance of some of the most sceptical faint-hearted Christians. Stigmatised at birth and ostracised by his own community, Onyema grows up embodying a self-liberating resistance which ensures that he performs well at school and attains a good social position in adult life. By his defiance to the tradition-imposed limitation, he embodies positivity in the midst of negativity and prosperity in the face of adversity. The filmmaker's agenda to promote Christian ideals and dethrone what he regards as an inhumane cultural practice (the *Osu* caste system) is eventually advanced by this technique of making his fictional characters embody the particular values that he has chosen to variously address, redress or reverse.

4. Summary

In order to establish an understanding of the process of eliciting affect and consequently identification with the subjects of creative media, this article has discussed a number of methods and tropes by which these are constructed from the semiotic perspective of audience involvement. This perspective can be conveniently described as a potent approach to populist appeal and affective narrativity. The subcategories of the semiotic appeal: allegory and symbolism, vernacularism, familiar characters and the fictional character as an embodied metaphor are all popular culture tropes often exploited to generate mass appeal and affect in the narratives of the creative media. Therefore, the use of semiotic tropes in creative media narratives elicit affect which in turn generates authentic audience involvement with the discourses of those narratives, a process which eventually has positive consequences for behaviour change communication and development. It is instructive to note that some of the above-mentioned tropes can also synergise and overlap with one another to create compelling narratives that engage the target audience and draw them into identification and involvement with embedded messages, while they are being entertained.

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Note

1. *Cathexis* is a process by which meanings are "attached" to objects and persons. See Duncan (1962, p. 1).

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