From the Spectacular to Oral Spectacle: Towards a New Paradigm for Creating the *Mise-en-Scèn*e in Zimbabwean Film

James Gonese*, Peace Mukwara**,
Batsirai Chivhanga*** & Nehemiah Chivandikwa****

Abstract

This article explores the use and adaption of oral spectacle in Zimbabwean film as an innovative measure in filmmaking using Tsitsi Dangarembga's film, *Everyone's Child* (1996) as a case study. Drawing on insights from speech act theory, this article examines filmmaking techniques that incorporate African indigenous storytelling techniques methods to engage the audience's imagination and represent spatialities. The study employs a qualitative research methodology, including critical discourse analysis and semiotic analysis, to analyse the selected film. The researchers explore the use of rich oral spectacle drawn from traditional African as a powerful and inexpensive alternative to expensive Western Hollywood-style spectacular special effects. This represents a radical innovation with both aesthetic and ideological implications. The findings establish that Zimbabwean filmmakers employ indigenous epistemologies that draw on traditional oral storytelling techniques to effectively replace physical representations and locations, such as landscapes. By centring their work on oral spectacle and drawing on narrative traditions, filmmakers are able to engage audiences in a more authentic, relatable and immersive experience of the stories they tell.

Keywords: Orality, Spectacle, Film, Storytelling

*   Chinhoyi University of technology, Zimbabwe. Email: james.gonese11@gmail.com
**   Midlands State University, Zimbabwe. Email: pmukwara@gmail.com
***   Chinhoyi University of technology, Zimbabwe. Email: bchivhanga@gmail.com
****   University of Zimbabwe. Email: nehemiachivandikwa@yahoo.com

Résumé

Cet article explore l'utilisation et l'adaptation du spectacle oral dans le cinéma zimbabwéen comme une mesure innovante en cinéma, prenant comme exemple le film de Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Everyone's Child* (1996). S'appuyant sur la théorie des actes de langage, cet article examine les techniques cinématographiques qui s'inspirent des techniques narratives autochtones africaines pour mobiliser l'imagination du public et représenter les spatialités. Pour analyser le film sélectionné, l'étude utilise une méthodologie de recherche qualitative, une analyse critique du discours et une analyse sémiotique. Les chercheurs explorent l'utilisation d'un riche spectacle oral, inspiré de la tradition africaine, comme alternative puissante et peu coûteuse aux onéreux et spectaculaires effets spéciaux du style hollywoodien occidental. Il s'agit d'une innovation radicale aux implications esthétiques et idéologiques. Les résultats démontrent que les cinéastes zimbabwéens utilisent des épistémologies autochtones qui s'appuient sur des techniques traditionnelles de narration orale pour efficacement remplacer les représentations physiques et les lieux tels que les paysages. En centrant leur travail sur le spectacle oral et en s'appuyant sur les traditions narratives, les cinéastes parviennent à impliquer le public dans une expérience plus authentique, plus accessible et plus immersive des histoires qu'ils racontent.

Mots-clés : oralité ; spectacle ; film ; récit

Introduction

Cinema is necessarily a spectacular art. It relies on heightened visual appeal to convey the imagined story it seeks to tell. Hollywood studio productions began this visual spectacle approach and took it to unimaginable heights, which is why America has undoubtedly dominated world cinema (Bordwell and Thompson 2010).According to Cutting et al. (2010), Hollywood's dominance in film is largely based on visual momentum and the attractive placement of shots.Bordwell and Thompson (2010) assert that the success of the American filmmaking style is grounded in its ability to conjure up diverse scenes and styles, which gives it international appeal. By contrast, Bollywood arguably takes this focus on the visually spectacular, replicates it, and re-presents it using very cheap iconic imagery that is made to *look* spectacular, arguably to compensate for its lack of Hollywood sophistication. Bollywood's re-invention of the spectacular informs the work of African filmmakers who lack the significant financial resources needed to create a technologically rich, visually spectacular look. Instead, they rely on using what Diawara (Diawara 1992; Harrow 2007) calls the 'primary resources' of the performer to present

an *imagined* spectacle. Innovative African filmmakers deploy financially affordable strategies such as the use of the spoken word to 'set' the stage, resulting in *oral* spectacle (Mukwara 2019: 24).

This article examines the use of oral spectacle as an innovative element in Zimbabwean film. Innovation here broadly refers to the introduction of a unique filmmaking technique and valorising it (Palanimurugan et al. 2024). In essence, this means the practical use of oral forms, such as song, dance, speech, folktales, movement, and gesture, in film narratives to create an oral spectacle.

'Practical use' refers to the way the film under study deploys oral forms for aesthetic appeal, dramaturgical purposes, and cinematic appeal. Existing studies on visuality in Zimbabwean films (Rwafa 2011, 2015; Mboti 2016; Mukwara 2019; Ureke 2016, 2020) discuss innovation in the context of technology, but overlook non-technological aspects, such as distribution, production, and consumption. While recognising the interconnections between communication technology and orality, the current article interrogates the use of orature as a radical transformation of cinema as a technology-based art form and the impact this has on the ideological, aesthetic value and ethical aspects of film (Pratt and Gornosteva 2009; Killingsworth 1993).

This article uses Tsitsi Dangarembga's film, *Everyone's Child* (1996) as a case study. The authors of the current article argue that this film employs oral spectacle to imagine spatiality, fantasy, and make-believe, thereby diverging from Hollywood cinema's reliance on technologically driven, expensive visual spectacle to offer a distinct kind of spectacle through the spoken word. In this article, the researchers tried to accomplish three tasks. Firstly, they considered the relationship between visuality and orality in the case study. Secondly, they investigated various forms of oral spectacle used in the case study. Thirdly, they theorised the implications of adopting oral spectacle in Zimbabwean films.

The study postulates that the aesthetics of the Zimbabwean film industry is arguably a poor imitation of Hollywood aesthetics. Instead of using stunt action and extravagant computer-generated images (CGI), such as exploding cars or collapsing buildings, in an effort to be 'spectacular', which requires huge financial budgets, local filmmakers can rely on rich, low-budget local storytelling traditions that utilise the spoken word and accompanying body language for their impact.

The term 'oral spectacle' is conceptualised in this article as an innovative and alternative approach to filmmaking, a process in which observation, knowledge, and creative uses of language are made available to the performer in space. The particular case of *Everybody's Child* was carefully selected for

study because it avoided using expensive stunts and lavish sets to set the scene and tell the story; instead, its power comes from telling the story using oral spectacle.

Film Studies and Debates in Zimbabwe

Film research in Zimbabwe largely focuses on ideological influences and donor-funded initiatives. Specific attention has been paid to the development of the film industry, the state of affairs, and the political economy of the Zimbabwe film industry (Ureke 2020; Hungwe 2000; Mahoso 2000; Mboti 2016; Mukwara 2019) and how these influences have contributed to the aesthetic values and film techniques adopted by Zimbabwean filmmakers. The role of oral spectacle in Zimbabwean filmmaking has not been given much academic attention, despite being the backbone of the filmmaking value chain. To date, very little academic research has investigated the extent to which Zimbabwean filmmakers have innovatively replaced mainstream filmmaking techniques with oral spectacle. The visual text of Zimbabwean film is largely unexplored. Few attempts have been made to look into the visual presentation of films in Zimbabwe. This is a problem because film styles are arguably the most important part of the film production process, as filmmakers have to balance the relationship between visuality, orality and the aesthetics of the film to stand any chance of being successful.

Africans are great storytellers. They have been using storytelling methods, such as dance, song, and poetry, since time immemorial and usually employ the same narrative traditions in filmmaking. Ncube and Tomaselli (2019) argue that pre-colonial Zimbabwe was characterised by participatory communicative models which encouraged rich stories to flourish through oral traditions. Ancient writing traditions do not exist on the African continent, but most Africans today, as in the past, are primarily oral people and their art flows are oral. Taking this study into account, the researchers explore various oral forms practised during *Dariro* and *Dare* in pre-colonial Zimbabwe to compare with the styles used in the film selected as a case study. Film as a storytelling technique, therefore, relies on the spoken word to convey the narrative. The visual world is declared in words and this is supplemented by vocal inflections, vocal emphases, and appropriate gestures.

Film in Africa remains a colonial legacy and a product of Western capitalism (Okome 1996; Haynes 2011). This might be because, prior to the era of colonialism, numerous efforts were made to produce educational, propaganda, and war films (Ureke 2016). This has been made even more difficult by the paucity of critical research on the local film industry. It

is therefore essential to conduct further research on the studies by Rwafa (2011) and Ureke (2020), both of whom have highlighted the lack of identity in Zimbabwean films by exploring the notion of innovation and its ideological, communicative, ethical, and aesthetic implications.

This article stems from a background where film critics, such as Mbewe (2013), contend that there is no Zimbabwean film industry worth discussing. Such Eurocentric, partial and racist claims have since been dismissed by scholars like Ureke (2020) who strongly believe that the Zimbabwe film industry is steadily growing, in spite of economic challenges. Ureke further argues that the small budgets Zimbabwean filmmakers have to work with encourage them to make films differently, using indigenous ideas. The current study aims to expand Ureke's encouragement of local filmmakers remaining grounded in indigenous ideas and means. The present research hence aims to commit what Mignolo (2009) termed as epistemic disobedience by encouraging filmmakers to use rich oral storytelling techniques instead of traditional, expensive Western Hollywood-style visually spectacular ways of making films.

Several Zimbabwean films are thought by some to be of 'poor' quality with very low production values. This may be because some Zimbabwe filmmakers have tried to imitate visually spectacular Hollywood films without the necessary financial backing to do so. The current study aims to contribute to the debate by encouraging filmmakers to employ innovative low-budget filmmaking techniques that incorporate traditional verbal and visual narration elements adapted from African oral culture.

Chivandikwa and Muwonwa (2011) examine the way in which oral spectacle such as song and dramatic performance styles have been incorporated in the construction of engagement with national and ethnic identities in Zimbabwe. In this study, they focused on a local television drama, *Sinjalo,* aired in 2002 by the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation. Through ethno-linguistic tensions within the drama, these oral performances reflected political and social conflicts between Shona and Ndebele people. The scholars examined how this television programme employs oral forms, such as gesture, dance, and song, to promote Ndebele nationalism and identity in Zimbabwe. They observe how the use of Ndebele orature subtly challenged ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front) and Shona hegemony, as can be seen, for example, in the use of a song played during on-screen football matches: "*Ishona ngiyalizonda lile wawa*" (I hate a Shona person). Clearly, the use of this kind of song in this drama showed some of the major differences between Shona-speaking and Ndebele-speaking Zimbabweans.

This study is significant because it shows how the use of orature can be directly and indirectly linked to political consciousness. This is significant for the current study, which seeks to demonstrate the adoption of orature that both tries to preserve the traditional heritage, and is also a deliberate effort to challenge Western film aesthetics in the interests of making Zimbabwean films with limited budgets. The current research seeks to expand Chivandikwa and Muwonwa's findings beyond linguistic performances to enhance knowledge of other oral practices adopted in Zimbabwean films.

Mukwara (2019) contends that emerging Zimbabwean films have been criticised for overusing theatrical techniques. Nevertheless, Zimbabwean filmmakers have adopted the success of oral spectacle as used in the theatre for their films which have restrictive budgets. Zimbabwean films cannot be compared to Western visually spectacular films with massive budgets. The authors of the current article deliberately encourage the innovative use of oral traditions to make powerful local films that do not require huge budgets to be successful.

Conceptualising Oral Spectacle through the Speech Acts Theory

This article uses the speech acts theory to examine the use of oral spectacle in the film under study. In *How to do Things with Words*, Austin (1975: 12) describes the power of orality and explains how words are not just items of speech but, when spoken under certain conditions, 'do things'. In other words, speaking about something can be the same as actually doing it. For example, the words 'I pronounce you husband and wife' spoken by a designated marriage officer in an official marriage ceremony is more than an illocutionary act. It is what makes the bride and the groom husband and wife. This concept can be invoked on the screen, allowing words to set the scene without the need for explicit visual representations. This is possible because people use their imaginations to derive meaning from that which they see and that which remains unseen, but implied, as they tap into the '…remarkable power our minds have to form a mental image of something unreal or not present and to use this power creatively – to invent new images or ideas' (Berger 2008: 13).

The idea of oral spectacle is clearly defined by Bere (n.d.) who introduces the concept of oral spectacle in theatre. The word 'spectacle' was derived from the Latin word *spectare,* which means to look at, as well as anything presented to the sight or view (Bere n.d.). Spectacle refers to the visual elements, including the setting, costume, lighting, makeup, and the action of the character (Bakare 2025). Bere (n.d.) indicates that oral spectacle arises

from the oral dynamics of storytelling using the human body, not necessarily showing objects in the story, but using oral cues. Similarly, *mise-en-scène*, a French term meaning 'place on stage', refers to all the visual elements of a theatrical or film production within the space provided by the stage itself. The current study contends that filmmakers borrow the concept of oral spectacle to present the *mise-en-scène*, and have extended the meaning to refer to the control the director has over the visual elements within the film image. Thus, much of the visual imagery in this study is a creation of oral spectacle, not of explicit visual representation.

Borrowing from African oral practices, which primarily utilise the spoken word and bodily expressions, the speech acts concept can be invoked on the screen, allowing words, rather than visual cues like expensive stunts, to set the scene. Austin showed that language could be used not only to describe states of affairs (as in 'This kitchen is very clean!'), but also to do things (in this case, to note that this kitchen is very clean). This means that, in a film setup, one does not necessarily need to see a particular action or object, but when such an action or object is referred to orally, the audience can imagine it. This article goes beyond this theory by analysing words uttered under certain conditions in the film under study to signify things that could not be shown on screen. It goes beyond examining uttered words by also focusing on other forms of oral practices like songs used in the film.

By making reference to the concept of speech acts and the necessary conditions for performing them, the present study illuminates that to utter a performative sentence is to be evaluated in terms of what we might call the conventionality, actuality, and intentionality of uttering the sentence. Against this backdrop, the speech act theory is important in this study. It is an alternative practice to utilise the power of the spoken word as a substitute for potentially expensive external adjuncts that might be beyond the reach of local filmmakers (Ureke 2020). This means that resources utilised in storytelling go beyond the words, but include paralinguistic practices that accompany words including prevocalic sound, music and movement made by hands, face and the oral performer and actor, thus enabling the audience to recognise an excellent range of film characters.

The use of oral spectacle in filmmaking is possible because people use their imaginations to derive meaning from that which they see and that which remains unseen (Berger 2008). For Berger, seeing comes before words. It is seeing that establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words. The relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled. It gives us an unlimited imagination of the world unseen but explained or spoken about and therefore visualised.

We use our imaginations to derive meaning from what we see and what remains unseen but is implied, tapping into the remarkable power of our minds. The present study contends that people form a mental image of something unusual or not present. Literate cultures stress the visual and store knowledge in written and other kinds of documents made possible by recording and retrieval technologies. By contrast, oral cultures encode knowledge in the popular communal memory, thus giving rise to the idea of oral spectacle, which can evoke imaginative responses beyond oral practices. This is used to identify the various speech acts employed by the filmmaker in the film under study to represent fantasy, spatiality, and sexual encounters that the filmmaker was unable to create in physical space.

Methodology

Since this article is grounded on how society lives, it was designed using the dictates that apply to qualitative research (see Bryman 2012). Case studies are typically preferred when posing how or why questions, when the investigator has limited control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context.

A case study design was best for examining the different spatial-temporal contexts Tsitsi Dangarebwa used in her film *Everyone's Child*, which was chosen as a case, using purposive sampling. The analysis was subjected to visual and critical discourse analysis. Since this study examines the use of oral practices in Zimbabwean film, it was crucial to select a key film for analysis. This type of analysis was explored in this research to uncover meaning in songs and spoken words through an examination of the film under study.

Foucault (1972: 49) introduces a different view of discourse in terms of his concept of knowledge or 'episteme'. He does not think of discourse as a piece of text, but as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'. By discourse, Foucault means 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a way of representing the knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment' (Hall 1981: 291). This account utilises discourse as a type of social practice, including visual images, music, gestures, and the like, that represent and endorse it. On the other hand, socially situated speakers and writers produce texts. The researchers in the current study employed critical discourse analysis to analyse diction in communication applied in the film, and lyrics from the background music in the film. The study findings are presented thematically below.

Representing/ Imagining Spatiality in *Everyone's Child*

The study seeks to establish the extent to which local filmmakers use indigenous epistemologies that arise from storytelling techniques. These methods focus on the performer in space and time, rather than the expensive external adjuncts that are based on the notion of promoting the use of verbal invocation, gesture, mime, and movement. The oral spectacle technique gives prominence to the oral spectacle, identity, and aesthetics of local films, which will then be effected through oral rather than physical means.

This section draws on visual analysis of selected scenes in *Everyone's Child* to argue that the film represents and imagines spatialities in ways that have a profound impact on the aesthetic, technical and ideological aspects of the film. Spatiality refers to how places and spaces are not just physical entities, but 'social' actors in the sense that spaces both inform and are informed by social and political relations such as gender, class and race (see Bhattacharyya 2015). In the current article, the researcher shows how replacing graphic and special effects with oral forms to represent the material or physical aspects of places in *Everyone's Child* enables audiences and critics to experience a much-nuanced exploration of the spatialities of gender, class and religion/ spirituality – that is, the way religion, gender and class relations/ conflicts are reflected in everyday spatial practices.

A plethora of relevant research findings suggest that space and spatial issues have been an important innovation in *Everyone's Child* to stand in for geographic locations and objects that might not be shown on the screen but rather imagined. For example, the analysis shows how urbanisation transforms and complicates gender and class relations relating to sexuality and poverty. Such an analysis involves recognising the deeper aesthetic, ethical, cultural and ideological implications of using orature to take the place of visual images.

Representing the Imagined through Story Telling

Through a description and analysis of the scene at timecode 15:15 in *Everyone's Child*, discussed in the next paragraph, this section demonstrates how the film employs storytelling techniques to represent the physical landscape. This means instead of showing the spectacular physical buildings, the film uses oral images to 'depict' the physical environment in which the conflict takes place. The larger context of the scene is that the urban environment is characterised by significant spatial inequalities in terms of educational facilities, access to modern amenities, and wealth distribution. The oral narratives then serve the purpose of humorously and provocatively bringing out the nuanced relationships between physical space, social decay, and conflict.

Agnew (2002) argues that places are sites where wider economic and political processes are played out. Social and organisational relations develop to mediate micro responses to macro level processes, and spatial imaginaries form to give people a sense of meaning in their particular worlds. This implies that narratives vividly call attention to the reality that people living in specific spaces are exposed to, as well as the impacts of inclusionary and exclusionary politics in relation to markets, employment opportunities and services. In this regard, the substitution of physical urban landscapes with oral images amplifies and reinforces the observation that the formation of urban/ rural poverty and extreme wealth has distinct spatial dimensions (see Grant 2019: 25).

Everyone's Child uses the technique of storytelling on two occasions. The first time is to show how power relations play out between urban and rural dwellers. In the film, it is assumed that rural people view the town as a place where all problems disappear; a place where milk and honey metaphorically flows in the streets. During Tamari's mother's funeral, Uncle Jimmy tells the story of a man who earned a thousand dollars by selling garbage in the city.

Figure 1: Uncle Jimmy narrating Harare stories in *Everyone's Child*

This analysis takes note of the speech act theory, which suggests that some words can be used as actions, and helps the audience members 'construct reality' using their imaginations. From the concept of gestures embedded in the speech act theory, the storyteller's verbal and non-verbal expressions evoked the imagination of his audience. The audience shown sitting around the fireplace in the film imagines being in Harare earning that kind of money, as can be seen from their facial expressions. The audience watching

the film also imagines earning that kind of money in Harare. According to Bere (1999), the role of the storyteller is to evoke thinking and endless imagination in the audience.

Figure 1 shows Itai listening to his uncle talking about experiences in the city. According to Kabira (1983), the oral artist storyteller in the Shona culture focuses on oral composition or performance. The joy on Uncle Jimmy's face as he tells the story about how easy it is to make money in Harare evokes a desire in the audience to also experience the good life in the city.

Figure 2: Itai in deep thought in *Everyone's Child*

Figure 2 shows Itai in deep thought, his mind stirred by the endless possibilities of the city and the good life he could offer his siblings. Berger (2008) contends that people use their imagination to derive meaning from what they see and that which remains unseen but is implied as they tap into the remarkable power of their minds.

This scene did not need to show any scenes of people earning a good living in Harare to evoke the imaginations of the audience gathered in the *dare* (sitting around the fire in the film)*,* and the imaginations of the people watching the film. Simply by telling the story in the film, Uncle Jimmy managed to convince the audience around the fire and Itai in particular that life is very easy in Harare, and that everyone in the city knows him. Following on his telling of this story, Uncle Jimmy hands out business cards to anyone who seems interested in visiting the city to experience a good life.

Figure 3: Itai smiling as he gets a business card in *Everyone's Child*

The look on Itai's face in Figure 3 reveals a sense of relief, as if he is close to winning a jackpot prize. The business card seals what seem to be the 'truths' about what Uncle Jimmy does to earn a living, how his life in the city seems to be established, and just how secure his life is. Itai has confidence in his uncle and a sense of conviction that he has a place to start. Itai is smiling because the business card confirms what he has imagined about the city after Uncle Jimmy's story. His hope now lies in the city.

Figure 4: Uncle Jimmy handing out business cards in *Everyone's Child*

Another person in the audience asks Uncle Jimmy if he can find him a job, and Uncle Jimmy's reply is that he can help when the man gets to Harare. The man should get in touch with Uncle Jimmy upon arrival in the city. This scene avoids the need to explicitly show a visual representation of what life in Harare is really like.

Figure 5: Itai goes to town in *Everyone's Child*

Figure 5 shows Itai hitchhiking to Harare without any luggage. It is clear from this scene that Uncle Jimmy has convinced Itai to travel to the big city, where he believes there are greener pastures. Itai is shown without any luggage, which suggests he has so much faith in Uncle Jimmy's story about how easy life in the city will be that he will get everything he wants. From the preceding paragraphs, it can be seen that storytelling is a powerful tool to evoke imagination beyond what an explicit representation might convey, one that explicitly considers the spatial context within which emotional experiences occur.

Using Song to Stand in for Sexual Encounters

This section analyses the use of various songs to depict sexual encounters that could not be shown on screen for reasons that may include avoiding government censorship, self-censorship on the part of the filmmaker, and avoiding the creation of physical scenes that are expensive to film. Stoler (1995) contends that sexuality is one of the central technologies of both modernisation and imperialism. For this reason, filmmakers tend only to use the spoken word to convey a sexual encounter. In this way,

Zimbabwean filmmakers rearticulate, negotiate and localise Western-invented technologies in the service of African themes, stories, forms of oral storytelling, and cultural expression (Tomaselli and Eke 1995). This technique necessarily entails utilising real events, such as different colours of thread, that metaphorically weave a fictionalised fabric relevant to the people, giving them a sense of dynamic hopefulness and profound identity.

Sexual encounters in *Everyone's Child* have been created by using the oral form of songs to substitute actual representations of such encounters. Rwafa (2011) asserts that song is a tool that creates mood and setting for the audience. The present study expands on Rwafa's opinion about the use of songs in filmmaking by arguing that *Everyone's Child* largely uses songs to evoke emotions. This section focuses on how the director uses songs as a technique to depict the spatialities of sex-related crimes, such as rape, and to demonstrate how space is gendered. The analysis examines the aesthetic, and ethical implications of this innovative venture of oral spectacle.

This section draws on literature (e.g., Bhattacharyya, 2015) that recognises that space is theorised in three categories, namely: (a) spatial practices (subjective, concrete, material and physical space); (b) representations of space (mental representations of space abstracted and conceived by elite urban planners and scientists); and (c) spaces of representation (points of contact between real and mental space). Songs in the film replace the use of physical images in depicting rape or other sexual crimes. In other words, songs replace/ substitute representations of space with spaces of representation in ways that empower the audience to actively assume roles that are ordinarily played by elite urban planners. The songs, therefore, become points of contact between mental/ abstract and real/ material spaces.

Shiri yakangwara (The clever bird) by Leonard Dembo

The lyrics of this song warn people that they should make hay while the sun shines. In the film, the filmmaker uses the song as warning. The song plays in the background of the store while Tamari buys food from Shaggy. This song is warning her that he is a villain. Because it is a well-known song, the audience can relate to its meaning and understand the danger Shaggy poses. Simply by using the song, the filmmaker has depicted the tragedy that lies ahead for Tamari.

Shiri yakangwara inovaka dendere rayo nguva iripo
A clever bird built its nest whilst the sun shines
iyo mwana iwe newewo ngwara iwe eeeh
Be clever like the bird my child
Mujuru unovaka imba yawo mvura isati yaturuka
The termites built its house before it rains
iyo,mwana iwe, newewo ngwara iwe eeeeh
Be clever like the bird my child

The translation shows that a wise bird builds its nest while there is time. In the film narrative, as in real life, people should prepare for future troubles by planning ahead. The song's message is to follow your dreams by being prepared, and this affects the film audience's response to the main characters Tamari, Itai, and Thulani.

Taking note of the speech act theory, most utterances are performative in nature. The song shows that Shaggy is a womaniser and a sex-starved rapist. It represents the spatial spaces where abuses of women occur. Bhattacharyya (2015) contends that violence against women – assault, rape, and sexual abuse – is often considered to be either a private or a public matter rather than both a private and public matter. Explicitly showing Shaggy's attack on Tamari would have been a violation of women's rights. The song depicts the social realities of danger to women in certain social contexts, whose consequences could not be shown on screen, but the filmmaker has left a wide space for the audience to imagine what might happen (see Austin 1975). In this regard, speech act theory is employed to argue that the song "*Shiri yakangwara*" serves as a means to portray the villain character without explicitly showing his aggressive actions on screen, thereby enabling the film audience to imagine what he is like and what he might do.

Character by Tendai Muparutsa

The issue of lust is explored through music lyrics in "*Everyone's Child.*" The lyrics of the song *Character* shows how lustful Shaggy feels towards Tamari as it talks about a man admiring a woman's *'immaculate character'*.

Figure 6 shows Shaggy leering at Tamari. The speech act theory on gestures suggests that gestures or body actions are nonverbal actions which stand in for explicit words in daily interaction. In this scene, Shaggy exhibits a lustful desire towards Tamari without explicitly stating it. When the song is played, Shaggy's thoughts are synchronised with the song lyrics. The song, hence, represents women as objects of commodification.

Figure 6: Shaggy looks lustfully at Tamari in Everyone's Child

Muparutsa's song solidifies the love story and directs the audience's attention towards the love affair that is about to happen. Although the relationship is to be unfair, Muparutsa's song talks about an '*immaculate*' character. Another angle is that the song could be suggesting that the cultural expectations of a woman are based on her character. The singer starts by narrating an ideal woman and later says, '*Your character turns me on…*'. This verse coincides with the lustful eye the shopkeeper casts over Tamari. Shaggy says to Tamari, *"If I was as nice to everybody as I am to you, I would have been out of business'.*

The statement is a clear indication that the shopkeeper is forcefully suggesting to Tamari that he is also a good man with a good character and is making significant sacrifices for her. Austin (1975) explains how words are not just items of speech but, when spoken under certain conditions, 'do things'. In other words, spoken words can be performative; saying them is equivalent to doing the things the words say. In this scene, Shaggy's statement above suggests that he is indeed doing Tamari favours, and that he expects to be 'repaid' in kind.

The above analysis shows how the songs powerfully suggest the extent to which social relations between men and women are reflected, reproduced or challenged in space. In this regard, the use of songs to stand in for physical representations as an innovative articulation of the *space of representation* in which audiences may be encouraged to imagine and map sites of sexual crime. This can potentially empower the audience in two major ways. Firstly, audiences can vicariously assume positions of experts by becoming agents of *representations of space*.

Secondly, by becoming agents of *representations of space*, the audience may be encouraged to challenge the dichotomy of private and public spaces in which there are assumptions that sexual crimes are only committed in public spaces such as streets, when in fact, many sexual crimes happen in private spaces such as homes (Bhattacharyya 2015). The songs invite the viewer to consider a complex spatial context beyond the physical geographies of sexual crimes and to reflect on how social actions are influenced by space and how space, in turn, informs action. Beyond this, there are also ethical benefits of not showing graphic images of sexual abuse since, in some instances, films have presented images of rape that are socio-emotionally damaging to viewers (Bhattacharyya 2015).

Negotiating Censorship through Song
Mugove wangu by Leonard Zhakata

This section demonstrates how the use of the song '*Mugove*' (reward) is employed to communicate the spatiality of poverty, and specifically, to subtly challenge the oppression of workers, given that workers can produce place-specific forms of identity, consciousness, and knowledge). The analysis demonstrates the implications of this strategy in relation to the agency of workers and evading censorship, given that unemployment has significant political connotations. In other words, the use of this song enabled the director to avoid showing specific material places or sites of worker oppression, which could attract the attention of the state and its censorship apparatus. In particular, the song also highlights the disparity between the rich and the poor, and how the wealthy often exploit the less fortunate.

Zhakata's song talks about being used 'like a cloth' by those who have money. The song reveals how the world is unfair to those who have no money and are desperate. In particular, Tamari is used by Shaggy, starting with a scene in a car in which he forces her to drink some beer. Tamari tries to refuse but, because Shaggy has been giving her money and clothes, she believes she can no longer refuse. The song reveals Tamari's perspective on the world and her bitterness stemming from poverty.

Figure 7 shows Tamari dancing with Shaggy whilst Zhakata's song *Mugove wangu* plays at the background. The scene contradicts the lyrics of the song. Zhakata sings about lamentations in Tamari's heart, asking God for a share of her inheritance while she is still alive:

> …Tarirai ndosakadzwa sechipfeko, nevanemari ndisina changu, Ndinongo dzvinyirirwa, ndichingoshandiswa nhando Ndichingofondotswa…
>
> Look I'm being used and abused like a useless cloth by those with money.

Figure 7: Shaggy dances to Mugove wangu with Tamari in *Everyone's Child*

The lyrics review the sexual exploitation that Tamari is experiencing. The filmmaker does not show sexually explicit scenes between Tamari and Shaggy, but the song speaks volumes to the audience without any visual representation of these events being necessary. Furthermore, it is a way of showing Tamari's sorrow. The audience can relate to this song beyond its representation of hegemony in the film because it reflects how the unequal capitalist system has affected people in Zimbabwe. It may be argued that workers worked with no reasonable rewards and many people were languishing in poverty as a result.

In short, instead of showing dilapidated buildings and infrastructure that could be directly linked to specific geo-political sites, the use of song evokes the imagination of the viewer to explore how power and economic resources are unequally distributed in geographical space. At the same time, by having the song sung in a car, the use of song can also suggest that space is also an enabler of human liberty (see Gotham 2008), challenging the poverty and deprivation that is imposed by political elites, without showing the political elites in their usual spaces of oppression. This cleverly evades state censorship. Later in the film, Tamari liberates herself from the oppression of Shaggy by hitting him in the groin with a beer bottle.

Presenting/ representing spiritual spectacle

Drawing from literature on the spatiality of religion and spirituality, such as Kerestetzi (2018) Finlayson (2012) and Bartolini et al. (2017), this section shows how the film under study deploys bodily forms of orality to

replace material objects/ spaces of spirituality in ways that complicate the relationship between spatiality and religion, given that generally, the '… configuration of space gives order to the spiritual experience and constrains interpretation, perception and feeling…." Finlayson (2012: 1763). In other words, religious places do not come from beliefs, beliefs come from places or spiritual sites such as temples, sanctuaries and other material objects (see Kerestetzi 2018). Itai communicates with his dead father in his grave at timecode 06:28 in *Everyone's Child*. By replacing material places and objects with oral forms such as sounds, movement and gestures, *Everyone's Child* facilitates the exploration of the complex relationship between spirituality and material objects and places.

Spiritual traditions produce a variety of sacred ritual materials, and these entities become intertwined in the lived religious experience (Keane 2008). The scene shows a grave which represents the spiritual being of Itai's father. Normally in African tradition religion, certain items and objects are associated with communicating with the dead, for example, drums, clay mugs and traditional beer. As noted above, these objects are creatively substituted by Itai's actions when he kneels down and lowers his head as a symbol of respecting the grave. Thrift (2004) highlights the existence of an affective relationship in this type of situation. If this relationship exists between objects and agents, between doing and becoming, then it exists between effect and emotion as well.

Figure 8: Itai kneels to talk to his dead father in *Everyone's Child*

While it is obvious that the scene takes place in a physical material cemetery, many substantive elements are communicated through movement, sound and gestures. This dematerialised setting ironically resonates with the recognition that religion can take place in dematerialised form through auditory space with sensory effects (see Kerestetzi 2018). In other words, Itai uses auditory space to communicate with his father. Orature then creates the co-presence between humans (Itai) and the deity (*vadzimu*).

This is a space '…where real space and mythical and imagined places meet and interlink, the residence of gods, or the sites of mythical events…' (Kerestetzi 2018: 89). Hence orality creates the existence of Itai in two worlds. More interestingly, while material sacred spaces are expected to have a transcendental quality that evokes powerful feelings that affect human interactions (Finlayson 2012), the use of orature in this scene still manages to evoke aesthetic sensory responses. In this scene therefore, orature arouses sensations that could help the audiences to vicariously see, smell, hear and touch the spiritual experience, giving rise to the complexity that religion can be lived from a sensory as well as a material concrete perspective (Finlayson 2012; Bartolini et al. 2017). This is because auditory spaces can also transform, as they are affective, and thus can move participants and even 'audiences' into another world (see Finlayson 2012). Nhamo distracts Itai just as he kneels at his father's grave. Nhamo asks Itai to tell their father that he needs new tyres for his toy.

It is by the auditory space that one can imagine hierarchy within African traditional religion. From the above it is evident that effectual encounters are often spatially mediated and that individuals attach meaning to and derive meaning from sacred spaces. For this reason, the director avoided showing specific objects associated with African spirituality.

Conclusion

The current study is a significant contribution to film studies of visuality and orality, as it illuminates innovative filmmaking techniques in an African context. Using the film *Everyone's Child* as a case study, this article demonstrates the extent, nature, and impact of 'oral spectacle' practice in the Zimbabwean film industry. This article recognises Tsitsi Dangarembga's deployment of oral spectacle in *Everyone's Child* as a radical transformational reformulation of oral forms into a good product that creates value for African film consumers without having to depend on expensive Hollywoood-style special effects.

In the current study, the researchers explored the movement from Western, external, and expensive adjuncts in filmmaking to rich, traditional, oral spectacle practices as a radical innovation with aesthetic and ideological implications. The researchers focused specifically on the potential for oral spectacle to awaken the filmmaking space in Zimbabwe.

Finally, the study was confined to filmmaking techniques. Given the paucity of studies on visuality and orality in Zimbabwe, future studies could also look at other powerful and inexpensive techniques that can be deployed in Zimbabwean films.

References

Bakare, L. E., 2025, *Costume And Make-Up in Dramatic Communication : The Superstory Example. December 2024*. https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.14552151

Austin, J.L., 1975, *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Bartolini, N., MacKian, S., and Pile, S., 2019, 'Spirit Knows: Materiality, Memory and the Recovery of Spiritualist Places and Practices in Stoke-on-Trent', *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 20, Issue 8, pp. 1114–37.

Bere, W., 1999, *Contemporary Visual Practice and Established Conventions in Zimbabwean Theatre: A Documentary and Analysis*, Unpublished Masters' thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Bere, W., n.d., *Oral Spectacle in Zimbabwean Theatre of the Late 20th Century*. Available online at: https://mville.digication.com/performance_seminar_africana_performance/Papers.

Berger, A.A., 2008, *Seeing is Believing,* New York: McGraw Hill.

Bhattacharyya, R., 2015, 'Understanding the Spatialities of Sexual Assault Against Indian Women in India', *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, Vol. 22, Issue 9, pp. 1340–56,

Bordwell, D., and Thompson, K., 2010, *Film art: An introduction* (10th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Bryman, A., 2012, *Social Research Methods, 4th edition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chivandikwa, N., and Muwonwa, N., 2011, *Vele Abantu Sinjalo: Nationhood and Ethnolinguistic Dissent in Zimbabwean Television Drama'*, in D. Kerr, ed., *African Theatre: Southern Africa*, Martlesham, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer.

Dangarembga, T., 1999, 'The Art of Film: Breaking Taboos', notes from a talk presented at the Book Cafe, Harare, 5 August 1999.

Diawara, M., 1992, *African cinema: Politics and culture*. Indiana University Press.

Everyone's Child (1996). DVD directed by T. Dangaremba. Zimbabwe: Media for Development Trust in conjunction with Development for Self-Reliance.

Finlayson, C.C., 2012, 'Spaces of Faith: Incorporating Emotion and Spirituality in Geographic Studies', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, Vol. 44, Issue 7, pp. 1763–78.

Foucault, M., 1972, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language,* translated from the French by A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books.

Hall, Stuart, 1981, *The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies.* In Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79, edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis, 56-67. London: Hutchinson.

Haynes, J., 2011, 'African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradictions', *Situations,* Vol. 4, No. 1: pp. 67–90.

Harrow, K.W., 2007*, African Cinemas: Decolonizing the Gaze.* Africa World Press.

Hungwe, K.N., 2000, *Narrative and Ideology: 50 Years of Film-making in Zimbabwe*, Houghton, MI: Michigan Technological University.

Kabira, W.M., 1983, *The Oral Artist*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.

Keane, W., 2008, 'The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, pp. S110-27.

Kerestetzi, K., 2018, 'The Spirit of Place: Materiality, Spatiality, and Feeling in Afro-American Religions', *Journal de la Société des américanistes*, Vol. 104, No. 1. Available online at: https://journals.openedition.org/jsa/15529.

Killingsworth, M.J., 1993, 'Product and Process, Literacy and Orality: An Essay on Composition and Culture', *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 26–39.

Mbewe, M., 2013, 'Why Does the Zimbabwean Film Industry Suck?', *Creative Loop*, Available online at: https://www.creativeloop.co.zw.

Mboti, N., 2016, The Zimbabwean Film Industry. *African Communication Research*, *7*(3), 145–172. https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/5RUPD

Ncube, L., and Tomaselli, K., 2019, '"Watch my Back and I Watch Yours": Beyond Habermas' Public Sphere Concept in Democratic and Participatory Dimensions of Pre-Colonial Shona Society Public Spaces', *Journal of African Media Studies*, Vol. 11, Issue 1, pp. 35–50.

Okome, O., 1996, 'The Context of Film Production in Nigeria: The Colonial Heritage', *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 24, Nos. 2–3.

Palanimurugan, P., Sivaprakasam, V., Pooja, M., & Sherlin, S., 2024, The Impact of Technology on Cinematic Storytelling. *IRE Journal*, *7*(8), 138–146. https://doi.org/10.36648/1550-7521.21.66.404

Pratt, A.C., and Gornostaeva, G., 2009, 'The Governance of Innovation in the Film and Television Industry: A Case Study of London, UK, in A.C. Pratt and P. Jeffcutt, eds., *Creativity, Innovation and the Cultural Economy*, London, Routledge, pp. 119–36.

Rwafa, U., 2008, 'Lyrical Film: The Case of Tanyaradzwa', *Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 188–95.

Rwafa, U., 2011, 'Song and the Zimbabwean Film: *Flame* (1996)', *Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 47–58.

Rwafa, U., 2015, 'Re-inventing African Oral Traditions and National heritage[s] Through Film Images: The case of '*Keita! The Heritage of Griot*' [1995] and '*Kare KareZvako: Mother's Day*' [2004]', *Communicatio*, Vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 459–70.

Stoler, A.L., 1995, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Thrift, N., 2004, 'Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect', *Geografiska Annaler Series B: Human Geography*, Vol. 86, No. 1, pp. 57–78.

Tomaselli, K., and Eke, M., 1995, 'Perspectives on Orality in African Cinema', *Oral Tradition*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 111–28.

Ureke, O., 2016, *Cinematic Fact and the Film Services Industry: Production Contexts and Contexts of Production in Zimbabwe (1980–2016)*. Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.

Ureke, O., 2020, 'Locating Sembène's *Mégotage* in Zimbabwe's *Kiya Kiya* Video-film Production, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Vol. 32, Issue 2, pp. 146–60.