

# Film Language and Power Manifestation: Exploring the Place of a Woman in Victor Viyouh's *Ninah's Dowry* (2012)

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**ABSTRACT:** *More and more, the discourse of film as a vehicle through which messages are communicated is taking centre stage. Its use necessitates an understanding not only of the vocabulary, but also of the content. Cameroon filmmakers exploit language to expound and portray how the society is still constantly faced with the problem of power manifestation and most especially, the marginalisation of women. Limits are set as to where and what a woman can say in the presence of men. Considered a cultural marginalization, a woman's words are not to be heard in public spaces where men are. As such, language in traditional settings, sets limitations for the woman in almost all aspects of life. Through a semiotic reading of Victor Viyouh's *Ninah's Dowry* and circumscribed by feminist criticism, this paper attempts to portray the role of the sign in promoting male domination in Cameroon. The woman is constructed by words and images as the weaker sex and subjected to the men.*

**KEYWORDS** - Film language, power, communication, marginalization, patriarchy

## I. INTRODUCTION

Film language is seen as a means of communicating various messages from the sender to the receiver. The sender uses it to express inherent meanings which require an interpretation of the meaning for comprehension to be derived. In every speech act, there is the basic communication trio of sender, message and receiver. The sender or addresser is the originating source of the message while the receiver or addressee is the party to whom the message is directed. The message is understood as the utterance sent and received. According to Jakobson, this trio is governed by an additional three dimensional elements. In the first instance, the sender and receiver must share a code which determines and correlates individual messages and which remains constant across a diversity of practices and messages.

In addition, for a message to be shared, there must be a contact. The contact extends from the sense of an original face-to-face verbal exchange to more indirect forms of communication. This can also be understood as the channel of communication. For a message to be communicated, there must be a context. This refers to the events in the world. In other words, in every communicative act, the sender and receiver have a common code, and can send a message via channel between them, about the context or world.

Film as a discipline, has not been immune to the intricacies of semiotics and communication. The language-like character of film is linked to its non-verbal nature, its status as what Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis call "visual Esperanto" transcending the barriers of national language [1]. In the same vein, the authors cite Eikhenbaum who considered film from a formalistic perspective as "a particular system of figurative language, the stylistics of which would treat filmic syntax, the linkage of shots into phrases and sentences" [2]. to understand this language-like nature of film therefore, is to analyse the film shot-by-shot. The language of film is used by filmmakers to express various viewpoints of the society which most of the time, inspires the sender and to whom the message is also destined. It is in this light that this study seeks to find out

the nature in which film language is used to portray power manifestation in Cameroon. In this quest, focus is on the cinematic sign, which is smallest meaning making communication vehicle used by the filmmaker to pass across a message. Based on Viyouh's film *Ninah's diary*, this qualitative study expounds the intricacies of film language in either fortifying male domination of the woman in most traditional societies in Cameroon or presents this latter as a practice to be abolished. In this light, two main theories are used: film semiotics or language and feminist film theory.

## **II. Film language and semiotics**

Understanding a film is a process which entails a comprehension of the language which it uses to communicate. This language per se, was born when filmmakers became aware of the difference between the loose joining together of small images in various states of motion, and the idea that these series of images could be related to one another. According to Arijon [3], this was as a result of the filmmakers' discovering that "when two different symbols were combined, they were transmitted into a new meaning and provided a new way of communicating a feeling, an idea, a fact [...] as in other systems of communication". It is considered that all languages are types of accepted conventions by people living in a given society to interpret some symbols in a uniform manner to obtain meaning. In such societies, storytellers, men of ideas, have first to learn the symbols and the rules of combining them. This though, alters as philosophers or artists can influence the group by introducing new symbols or rules and discarding the old ones. Film as a medium of communication is not alien to this.

The progress of film as a medium of audiovisual communication is directly related to the ability of film language to grasp reality. But reality is an ever-changing concept, ever changing form of perception which can be understood from two film-related theoretical perspectives: semiotics and linguistics.

From a film semiotic perspective, questions like: is film a language system; a language or like a language can be asked. From the linguistic standpoint, the focus is more diverse. Does film syntax function in ways analogous to verbal language? Do we know the world through language and if so, how does this fact inflect the cinematic experience? What is the link between the broad intertext of verbal recounting and the conventional modalities of filmic recounting? What role does language in its diverse forms, play in film? How does language itself enter film? How does the fact of cinema's involvement with a variety of languages impinge on film as a discursive practice? From all these questions, one truth is revealed: film is a process of communication in which messages are passed from a sender to a receiver in a particular manner, combining not only the visual elements but also the audio. In this way, film is not limited to the domain of linguistics but goes beyond the linguistic code to communicate. It is a multi-level discursive practice understood from perspectives as those elaborated by Christian Metz [4] and [5].

To distinguish the metaphor of film language from an actual language system, Metz turned to Saussure's distinction between "langage and langue". The concept of cinema as a "langage", language in the sense of a communication process, presented little difficulty. To examine cinema as a "langue", a specific language system, would be to identify and define the system of signs involved and the syntax and semantics governing them. In this light, Metz concedes the difficulty of applying a purely linguistic analysis to film by stating that "when approaching the cinema from the linguistic point of view, it is difficult to avoid shuttling back and forth between two positions: the cinema as a language; the cinema as infinitely different from verbal language. Perhaps it is impossible to extricate oneself from this dilemma with impunity" (as in [5]).

Film language can therefore not be appropriated correctly if montage and narrativity are separated. These are notions related to a perceptual phenomenon peculiar to motion pictures. In this way, there is a logic implication that an image in a film inevitably becomes language. Cinema or film is language, also because of the stories it has to tell. Be it through visual or auditory codes.

Film semiotics is based partially on Metz's notion of syntagmatic axis. This latter to him is at the centre of the problems of filmic denotation and connotation. Without dwelling on the "grande syntagmatique", it is

important to note that film or cinema is “a specific language” (as in [5]). It is approached from the standpoint of signs which themselves, constitute a system of codes. These codes are transmitted to the viewer/audience through mechanisms or procedures of production that are discipline specific: that pertaining to cinematography. In this regard, the growth of semiotic theory and the presence of its vocabulary “confirms the importance of the science of signs, sign system and signifying practices as a tool for addressing the semantic riches” (as in [1]) of film analysis.

Semiotics can be defined as the general study of signs systems. It is the study of meaning in its most general sense. From this perspective, language, is a kind of semiotics. It is an aspect of the study of meaning. This, however, is not to say there are not other ways of meaning other than language. Language may be, in some rather vague, undefined sense, the most important, the most comprehensive, and the most all-embracing of meaning making which can be derived from visual signs like painting, sculpture, dance and other modes of cultural behaviour.

From a more technical perspective, film language is a notion designating a purely cinematographic process of communication. It refers not only to a linguistic syntax, but also to a rudimentary set of conventions that are routinely used to structure motion picture sequences to preserve continuity, coherence and comprehensibility. There are macro elements like genre and narrative (representation) and micro elements of film language like cinematography, sound, editing, mise en scene and special effects. Some of these, which are used in *Ninah's Dowry* are examined in the next part of this paper. It is however, necessary to look at another guiding theory that is used to portray the manifestation of power in film.

### III. Feminist film theory

Feminist film theory, such as Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies, and the American Dream* [6] and Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in Movies* [7] analyses the ways women are portrayed in film and how this relates to a broader historical context. The elements taken into consideration are; representation, ideology and stereotyping as well as tradition and the overriding system of patriarchy. Ideology, representation and stereotyping are three of the most important theoretical aspects of film because as Kaplan [8] holds, “most women, no matter where they are in the world, still live in heavily misogynist and racist cultures”, a view echoed in *Ninah's Dowry*.

As long as people continue to buy into stereotyping in film, the representations continue to be norms and thus patriarchal hegemony occurs. Linked to film and ideology is representation and linked to representation is stereotyping which inevitably links to marginalization.

#### 3.1. Ideology

Ideology is a concept that can be used to explain aspects of life considered 'normal' or things that have, by some means or the others become 'normalised' [9]. Ideology is a term used to describe a worldview that is held and followed by people differently. For example, a scholar of Marxism would have a Marxist ideology of the world, which entails action and thought that is deemed appropriate for a Marxist. By the same token, one that has a patriarchal ideology of the world carries out his life in that manner. According to Carl Marx, film can be categorised to fall under a patriarchal ideology when the “ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, since those who controlled economic production and distribution could also regulate the production and distribution of ideas” [10]. This view seems to be justified in the Cameroonian context in which the 'ruling class' is dominated by 'Men' who also own the production houses.

This is evident in the number of acclaimed male directors and producers as opposed to female ones. Ideology is a human construct. It is a system of beliefs which is created by the ruling powers of a society, be they in the majority or not. Religion and culture is very much embedded in ideology and Cameroon films are embedded in religion and culture in the same way. It is a language which people conform to. McLellan claims that “ideology is someone else's thought seldom our own” (as in [10]) and this enables the owner of the ideology to perpetrate it through power. Ideology can sometimes be “functional for legitimising an unjust social order”

[11]. For the purpose of keeping the ruling ideology in place, it is rationalised, enforced and naturalised. Rationalisation is “an explanation that is either logically consistent or ethically acceptable for attitudes, ideas, feelings, etc.” (as in [11]). Naturalisation on the other hand, refers to the way in which an act is made to be the way of being through time and consensus. Both rationalisation and naturalisation are facets of ideology that make whatever ideology is being communicated not only make sense, but become a way of life. In cinema, this is done through constant depiction of the ideology in a certain manner with engaging, emotional stories that make it seem real. In Cameroon films in general and in *Ninah's Dowry* in particular, the ideology of patriarchy is depicted through religion, the upholding of family values and traditions.

### 3.2. Representation and Stereotyping

Images and sound in film are considered to have an important impact on how the world is perceived and the representations used are inadvertently a comment on society. However inadvertent, though, these representations add greatly to the worldview and how society is perceived. It is of common to find issues of gender represented in films all the time. More often than not, the images used are those that perpetuate the patriarchal system in which the film maker lives, as well as dictate the way gender roles are perceived. Branston & Stafford [12] speak of representation as “how the media re-present events, and how the media represent people and groups”. This is equally true for film since it is a medium of transmitting information from the filmmaker to the audience and serves as a mirror of/to the society.

Representation is, on a deeper level “the social classification of particular groups and people as often highly simplified and generalised signs, which implicitly or explicitly represent a set of values, judgements and assumptions concerning their behaviour, characteristics or history” [13]. Here, the viewer is seen as an active participant and not merely a passive recipient of information and images. This understanding is closely related to the semiotics of communication concepts developed by André Helbo under the notion of enunciating collective [14]. The viewer has the ability to accept or reject and form an opinion on images portrayed. As de Lauretis [15] argues, cinema has been studied as an apparatus of representation, an image machine developed to construct images or visions of social reality and the spectators' place in it. But, insofar as cinema is directly implicated in the production and reproduction of meanings, values, and ideology in both sociality and subjectivity, it should be better understood as a signifying practice which justifies why ideology is imperative to studies of cinema and to inquiries into gender and film.

An aspect of representation that is imperative to the study of film is Hall's idea of classificatory systems and keeping roles of society at a common denominator and in their boxes, so that there is no disruption in the order of society. He argues that “culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to different positions within a classificatory system. The marking of 'difference' is thus the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture” [16]. This also applies to all types of stereotyping in film as it makes it easier for the rulers to control society and thus maintain power and ensure a constant spectatorship as long as people are not questioning what they see on the screen.

Intrinsically linked to representation in cinema is stereotyping. Stereotyping is the labelling of something or someone as a general, two dimensional figures that shows limited and specifically selected aspects of what or whoever is being represented. Stereotyping the 'other' is a way in which communicators gain and maintain control over the subject which is being portrayed as 'other'. Reducing a woman to her bodily attributes alone is a stereotype that gains attention and maintains control. Sircar [17] seems to concord this view by stating that “stereotypes dehumanise women into erotic commodities for the satisfaction of male sexual desire”. In the backdrop of this view, film viewers seem to accept and entertain this form of stereotyping as portrayed in *Nonah's Dowry*.

Holt [18] purports that the term stereotype is now so generally used in media studies, with the presumption that its meaning and implications are unproblematic. The term has acquired a meaning and focus that will not satisfactorily be replaced by other available conceptions. It is a term particularly relevant to visual media (as film) and mass communicative processes of standardised information. The stereotypes set up by the media have become the accepted norms and this is very difficult to change because beliefs such as these are so

deeply entrenched in language, culture and life. *Ninah's Dowry* provides culturally oriented linguistic and thematic strategies of representing the woman and thus, constitutes a staging ground for speaking about film representations of the woman in Cameroon.

#### IV. Manifestation of Power and Marginalisation of the woman in *Ninah's Dowry*

Film language as upheld in this study, is a process through which a filmmaker passes across information on/about his society. The information embedded in the film can either be a true reflection of the society or a fictionalised/imagined story and location. Various film elements are put at the disposal of the filmmaker to communicate to the audience. These are considered as the film's narrative, comprised of story elements (plot, dialogue, character, theme) and production elements (camera angles, lighting, costume, acting, etc).

##### 4.1. Story/dialogue, power and marginalisation

In *Ninah's Dowry*, [19] the woman is considered to be weak, inferior, vulnerable, mentally unproductive, and a subaltern in the society. She is voiceless and denied access and participation in certain job positions. Her place is in the private sphere, notably the kitchen, her role being to get married, bare children and take care of the family. Early into the film's crux, particularly on 14mins, 29 sec., Ninah escapes from the torments of the husband and returns to the father. In a verbal exchange, she questions him on her plight as a woman: "Dad, I want to ask you ...what is it that I did that made you sell me to Memfi? Is this zinc over your head... more valuable than me? Than, my life? Is a roof over your head... more valuable than your own child?" (14:29-58). It can be deduced from her questioning a feeling of frustration from obnoxious cultural practices which are predicaments of the Cameroonian girl child in particular and Africa at large.

The Dowry is seen as that cultural tool used by men to sell their girl children into early marriages where they have no rights to question any decision taken by men. It is considered by some as a form of subjugation, enslavement and marginalisation of women. In the film's world, culture and words construct the woman. Ninah, who symbolically represents the woman folk in this film, can be considered as a brainchild of words. This is portrayed through her dialogue with her dad when she states: "was I a bad student? I had dreams when I was growing up... but you killed them. You killed everything. But worse than killing me...you sold me to an animal" (15:14-34). These words, considered as a call for the awakening of the woman through an internalisation, deconstruct the already internalised production and thus prepare the way for the liberation and emancipation of the woman.

In one of her moving questions that send down tears from the father's eyes, Ninah eloquently puts her point (questions) in the following words: "was I a difficult child? Was I bringing shame to your name? ...you sold me to an animal. You knew he was violent... Yet...you took his money. And every time I ran back home, you sent me back. What kind of a father sends his child into the hands of a cruel wife beater? If he kills me or any of my children, our blood will be in your hands" (14:29-16:34). This portrays the extent to which power is manifested by the men over the woman folk. The men are considered as superior to women and their decisions are final. This is fortified by custom and tradition which favours the man and disowns or disinherits the woman now considered as a stranger with no rights to anything including inheritance:

**Ninah:** ... this is my compound too.

**Robert:** No, it's not

You are a woman.

Does a woman, a married woman

... ever claim rights in his father's house?

You have run away from your home. (24:33-25:00)

Culture has made Ninah's younger brothers to reason and behave as superior beings and lord over their elder sister. Communities with patriarchal ideologies also exhibit aspects of marginalisation on the woman from a social perspective. This is represented in the film through the story and dialogue. Power is manifested through



this canal to subjugate and marginalise the woman by Memfi, (Ninah's husband) and his friends where she is treated in terms considered to be completely inhumane.

**Memfi:** She has a bad attitude .... Has no motherly instincts when we get home, I will put her up on auction.

**Mike:** Don't talk like that.

**Memfi:** The highest bidder can have her. She cost too much to maintain.

**Mike:** You can't do that.

**Fuh:** Why can't he auction her off? Why not?

**Mike:** She is the mother of your children.

**Memfi:** What do you suggest, genius?

**Mike:** I don't know. Maybe tie her up indoors for a week. Teach her a lesson.

**Memfi:** This one cannot be softened.

**Ninah:** Am I right here or what?

**Memfi:** She would love for something bad to happen to her so she can blame me.

**Ninah:** Am I an animal?

**Memfi:** I am sorry.

**Ninah:** Auctioning me, tying me.....

**Memfi:** You are worse. Animals fight to protect their children.

**Ninah:** Yea time

**Memfi:** But you are trash. Even the despicable opportunistic hyena... is better than you.

**Ninah:** Then let me go

**Memfi:** You are still my property. Even trash like you, I will not throw out (33:28)

The above pejorative nouns; dog, property, trash, animals, vermin, portray the treatment reserved for the woman in the film world. These nouns put man at a position of manifesting power (Memfi and other men) as the proper self. According to Metz, a defining universal feature of verbal language as applied here, is the property of 'double articulation'. This implies that languages have two levels of structural organisation. The economy with which a limited number of sound units can be combined to produce an indefinite number of sense units is the key to the productivity of verbal language. From this, he posits that "the cinematographic language in itself exhibits nothing resembling the double linguistic articulation" (as in [5]). This implies, the set of possible images is potentially open since the elements in an image can be continuously varied to produce an indefinite number of different images which pertain to the domain of visual signs.

#### 4.2. Visual Signifying systems, Power and Marginalisation

Film language is seen to be at the service of filmmakers to exploit in various ways. In *Ninah's Dowry*, dialogue and story elements which are all part of the narrative are used to portray the place of the woman and how the man folk manifest power to marginalise women. These elements however, are not exhaustive in putting to lime light the nightmare of a woman in Cameroon films as more illustrative elements of filmmaking like visual signs can also be used.

In this light, visual signs are considered to be more dynamic, open to multiple interpretations from viewers. This dynamic nature of visual signs demands a certain degree of commitment on the part of the emitter (filmmaker) to ensure that the encoded message clearly transmits what is desired. According to Roland Barthes [20] and [21], the meanings we attribute to visual signs are not natural, based on what we see. They are not self evident and universal in how we understand what we see or what we think we see. Since images and words are fundamentally different, the commonplace view of film language that compares the shot with the word and the sequence with the sentence cannot be upheld. Metz argues instead that the shot is a unit of equivalent magnitude to the sentence, while the sequence is a complex segment of discourse. To justify this position, Metz defines five differences between the filmic shot and the linguistic word:

1) Shots are potentially infinite in number, unlike words since the lexicon is in principle finite.

- 2) Shots are the invention of the creator and have no pre-existence, unlike words which pre-exist in lexicons.
- 3) Shots present the receiver with an undefined quantity of information. They cannot be completely described in natural language.
- 4) Shots are assertive, actualised units. The image of a house does not signify the concept of a house but must represent a particular house.
- 5) Shots depend only to a small extent for their meaning upon the paradigmatic contrast to other shots that might have occurred at the same point along the syntagmatic filmic chain (since the other possible shots are infinite in number).

If each shot is equivalent in magnitude to a statement, the 'grammar' of cinema would appear to be rhetoric, since it is concerned with the ordering of minimum units that are free in length and internal composition. In line with this, Metz further concurs that "cinema begins where ordinary language ends: at the level of the 'sentence'- the filmmaker's minimum unit and the highest properly linguistic unit of language... it is immediately and automatically situated on the plane of rhetoric and poetics" (as in [5]). In confronting the problems of narration, cinema produces a body of specific signifying principles at which point "cinema became narrative and took over some of the attributes of a language ... the filmic procedures are in fact filmic narrative" (as in [5]) represented in a process classified under cinematography.

#### 4.2.1. Cinematography

Cinematography refers to the visual aspects of a film's language. It consists of camera shots, angles and movements. It is considered that the most complex set of practices in filmmaking is the manipulation of the camera. This consists of the film stock used, the angle of the camera, and the depth of the field of its focus, the format of screen size, movements, and framing. In film language, the positioning of the camera has a particular message to pass across. The use of overhead, helicopter, drone or crane shots can turn a film into performance art, exhilarating the perspective it offers to the audience.

The camera can be directed either squarely or obliquely toward its subject, with the rotation of the camera possible along vertical axis (panning), its horizontal axis (tilting) or its transverse axis (rolling). If a camera is, looking down on its subject, its position is one of power. In *Ninah's Dowry*, a confrontation between the Cattle owner and the Memfi is played in a shot-reverse shot pattern which has the servant (or camera) looking up to address his Boss in a one shot and the Boss (or the camera) looking down to address the servant in the next shot. The servant is oppressed and diminished by the camera angle while the Boss' stature is magnified. This same shot type is used in many other scenes including those between the Memfi and Ninah, Ninah and the Population at the end of the film when she flees from the husband's home. In these sequences, the manipulation of the camera angles is the major means by which the audience is informed about the changing relationship between the characters.

Camera angles can identify a shot with a character's point of view by taking a position which corresponds to that which we imagine the particular character would be occupying: we see what the character would be seeing. For instance, when Ninah flees from the husband's house, she finds herself at the village square, lying on the ground and people surrounding her. The camera shows the people from a perspective of the character (Ninah).



**Figure 1: Camera angle with Character's Point of View**

This shot type can be compared with an example from Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), where the camera adopts the point of view of a character who is about to shoot himself; when the gun fires, the screen goes blank showing the point of view of the character.

In cinematography, it is required that point of view shots should transmit a language that is comprehensive to the audience. This implies as in the above illustrated camera angle with character's point of view, the subsequent shots are required to express the point of view of the characters looking down at Ninah. This is not the case. The next shots are haphazard and counter shots are misplaced.



**Figure 2: Counter shot of a character interacting with Ninah**

This shot presupposes that, the other character is looking up to this dominating character. In the next shot, the protagonist is expected to adopt a similar position vis-à-vis the antagonist but it is noticed that the former is facing a different direction.





**Figure 3: Counter shot of Ninah facing a complete different direction from the previous shot**

This shot, taken from the side does not follow the intended counter shot process. As such, the audience is misguided as to the exact meaning of the previous shot. These two illustrations are to highlight that, film language, if misused, carries the potential of transmitting an information which is not that desired by the filmmaker or which is going to cause the audience to encounter difficulties in interpreting the signifier.

The height of the camera and its distance from its subject can also have an effect on the meaning of a shot. A conventional means of narrative closure is to slowly pull the camera back so that the subject disappears into its surroundings. This technique can enhance the ambiguity of emotional response, or invite the audience to project their own emotions on to the scene, or serve as a distancing device. It can do all of these because it signifies the withdrawal of close attention – the end of the narrative. It is however, worth noting that the filmmaker has the choice of using this technique or not. This is the case with *Ninah's Dowry* wherein this technique was not employed. Other techniques of projecting marginalisation are however employed.



**Figure 4: Close-up shot**

This close-up shot at the 11<sup>th</sup> minute communicates to the audience, the predicament and subjugation of the Cameroonian woman and the girl child. This, buttressed by other shot types that intervene in the film, consolidates the fact that the woman is marginalised.



**Figure 5: Medium shot of Ninah's predicament**



**Figure 6: Close-up portraying torture**

Figs. 4, 5 and 6 convey the message of marginalisation and power manifestation in ways words cannot. The woman here is considered as a property to her husband and by culture, no one, not even the girl's family, has any rights over her once the dowry has been paid. Ninah's image and her co-woman tied on ropes by their husbands, and the society remains silent to it, reduces women to animals since they have no choice and depend solely on the mercy of their masters. Here, society and culture conspire with men, and women are treated as animals without any thinking capacity thus trampled upon, suppressed, subjugated and marginalised by the thinking beings (men).

Film is considered to be one of the best tools to conscientize and draw attention to the ills perpetrated by some culture patriarchy. This explains why Victor Viyuoh in *Ninah's Dowry*, shows that the world can be well informed about the predicament of the woman and the marginalised in some African societies like Cameroon and the Babanki-Tingoh community in particular.

#### 4.2.2. Sound

Surprisingly, little attention is given to the role of sound as a form of language in Cameroon cinema. As a constituent aspect of film language, sound is everything that can be heard in a scene with key elements that make being: location sound, musical score/soundtrack, dialogue, sound effects and voice over. Some sound is considered to be diegetic while other is non-diegetic. Diegetic sound in film language has a physical origin in the film world (a character coughing or a radio playing) and non-diegetic sound has no direct origin in the film world (soundtrack or voice over).

In Cameroon films, dialogue seems less important than the image, and in many cases seems to be used to 'fix' the meaning of the image rather than to motivate the image itself. Yet, as the quality of sound recording and its reproduction in the films have improved, more and more, focus is paid to the better understanding of sound's contribution to the signifying system of communication. At the most obvious level, the film soundtrack enhances realism by reproducing the sounds one would normally associate with the actions and events depicted visually; this is referred to as diegetic sound. The sound of a whip is heard when Ninah is beaten while her crying or wailing words uttered synchronise with the movement of her lips. The film's illusion of realism is seen to be quite dependent upon the diegetic use of sound.

Other kinds of sound can serve narrative functions. In *Ninah's Dowry*, music is routinely used as means of providing accompaniment to the film's dramatic or narrative high points, and it is in fact the first form of sound to be introduced into the cinema. Music is also used as an important component of the construction of the world of the film, as a source of atmosphere, or as a reference point to the relevant subcultures, in this case, Babanki-Tingoh.

Unlike the realist diegetic use of sound, music in films is usually non-realistic (and non-diegetic) in that its source is rarely seen in the frame or even within the world of the film as in *Ninah's Dowry*. Simon Frith [22] argues that the reality music "describes/refers to a different sort of reality than that described/referred to by visual images". According to him, music amplifies the mood or atmosphere, and also tries to convey the emotional significance of a scene: the true real feelings of the characters involved in it. This is the emotional reality of film music and its aim is to deepen the sense of the film's realism, to give it an emotional texture otherwise lacking.

Another aspect of music's signifying function within film is its capacity to invoke whole areas of cultural experience. The cultural background audiences bring to such films as *Ninah's Dowry* is crucial to their response to what they see and hear. That cultural background or what André Helbo calls horizon of expectations [23] specifies a range of musical, as well as cinematic, contexts that privilege certain kinds of meanings and pleasures; audiences recognising the references to these inscribed into the world of the film. In this regard, Frith holds that music and images have a lot in common as media of communication: they are not understood in a direct, linear way by the audience, but irrationally, emotionally, and individually.

Film music, like image, can have physical effects: it sends shivers down the spine or makes one tap one's feet. It has been said that film music 'feels for us', by telling us when a powerful moment is happening and indicating just what we should feel about it through the mood of the music. Frith describes this better:

One function of film music is to reveal our emotions as the audience ... film scores are thus important in representing community (via martial or nationalistic music, for example) in both film and audience. The important point here is that as spectators we are drawn to identify not with the film characters themselves but with their emotions, which are signalled pre-eminently by music which can offer us emotional experience directly. Music is central to the way in which the pleasure of cinema is simultaneously individualised and shared. (as in [22])

So the convention of music swelling at the point of a romantic clinch is not manipulation but recourse to even more direct means of communicating with the audience.



Further ways of marginalising the woman through sound in *Ninah's Dowry* is when Ninah forcefully attempts to visit her sick father and is brutally beaten by her husband. The sound produced when she is screaming portrays her helplessness in the hands of her husband. In sympathising with her mother, the daughter produces an aural sound from the background. The two sounds (mother's wailing and daughter's aural sound), enforce the suffering of the Cameroonian woman and the girl child. Even in the absence of the visual images, just getting the sounds (aural/oral) from the audio passes a message of oppression, suppression, subjugation and marginalization of the woman and the girl child in *Ninah's Dowry*.

#### 4.2.3. Editing

This is process of the construction of the relationship between shots. Editing is used in a film to create the illusion of reality, without the intervention of the filmmaker. It is more or less invisible, seamlessly connecting shots so as to give the illusion of continuity of time and space. There are exceptions to this – action sequences, highly dramatic moments – but in general, the craft of the editor in realist films is to remain invisible and knit the shots together according to realist aesthetics. Susan Sontag, writing on 'Theatre and Film', provided a refreshingly simple statement of the mechanism of filmic construction or editing. She saw the connection between shots, rather than the shots themselves, as units of cinematic construction “the distinctive unit of films is not the image but the principle of connection between the images, the relation of the shot to the one that preceded it and the one that comes after” [24]. She further holds that this principle of connection operates through spatial relationships “Cinema (through editing, that is, through change of shot-which is the basic unit of film construction) has access to an alogical or discontinuous use of space” (idem). At each cut, a question is posed in the mind of the viewer: “In the cinema, narration proceeds by ellipsis (the “cut” or change of shot) ... but the change of shot can provoke questions, the simplest of which is: from whose point of view is the shot seen?” (idem). Editing is hereby considered as a language which filmmakers employ to communicate with their audiences.

A multitude of editing techniques is used for this purpose. The most popular are fade-out and the dissolve. There is also the wipe, in which one image replaces another preceded by a demarcation line moving across the screen. The most used editing method in *Ninah's Dowry* is the simple cut from one shot to the next. As with most simple techniques, the cut requires great skills which was however lacking to the editor. Because of this, many continuity errors are recorded in the film but are not highlighted here as this is not the focus of this paper.

Another editing method employed in *Ninah's Dowry* is the short establishing shots above new locations to place the narrative within a physical context; and the observation of an imaginary line across the film set which the camera never crosses so that the viewer is given a consistent representation of the spatial relations between the actors and their surroundings. This is call the 180° rule.

### V. Conclusion

It can be said that film language is a complex of systems of signification and its meanings are the product of the combination of these systems. The combination may be achieved through systems either complementing or conflicting with each other. No one system is responsible for the total effect of a film. It is evident that, for a film to be understood, its syntax should be preferred to the film. Film language should be understood as a totality. The inherent intelligibility of a dissolve cut (editing) cannot in any way clarify the plot of a film unless the audience has already seen other films in which dissolves are used intelligibly. On the other hand, the narrative force of a plot, which will always be understood only too well (since it communicates with the audience in images of the world), will automatically lead the audience to understand the dissolve, if not the first time the film is watched, at least the third or fourth time it will be watched.

In this way, film language has the advantage of being written out in actions. It is a combination of visual and audio signs which functions in a non-caricature manner by saying things without manipulating images like words, arranging them according to the rules of a pseudo-syntax whose necessity seem less evident.

It facilitates themes to be handled with tact, permitting the audience to see 'themselves' in the characters' emotions and actions. *Ninah's Dowry* stand out as one of the films in which power manifestation is handled through film language to portray the place of the woman in most Cameroonian societies.

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