

Diversity in Visual Storytelling: Nollywood's Transition under Netflix Influence

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Abstract

This paper investigates the transformation of Nollywood's visual storytelling practices, focusing on the increasing diversity of cinematographic techniques following Netflix's entry into the Nigerian film industry. Nollywood, the world's second-largest film industry by output, has historically been lauded for its cultural resonance and ability to tell stories rooted in African realities, but it has also faced sustained critique for technical limitations, particularly in cinematography, where low-budget constraints often led to homogenous shot composition, flat lighting, and limited camera movement. The arrival of Netflix has introduced new protocols, resources, and standards that have significantly shifted the aesthetic direction of Nollywood productions. Through a comparative analysis of *Sango* (1997), a traditional Nollywood film, and *Jagun Jagun* (2023), a Netflix-licensed production, this study examines how global streaming influences have enhanced visual fidelity, lighting schemes, depth of field, and shot diversity, thereby raising Nollywood's competitiveness on the global stage and expanding the diversity of its visual language to allow for more immersive and emotionally compelling narratives. At the same time, this evolution raises important questions around equity and inclusion, as Netflix's high technical and financial requirements elevate certain filmmakers to international visibility while potentially excluding grassroots storytellers. By situating these shifts within the broader framework of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in communication studies, the paper underscores the need to balance global cinematic standards with local authenticity to ensure that Nollywood's visual transformation remains both inclusive and representative of its cultural heritage.

Keywords: Cinematography, culture, globalisation, inclusion, representation, Netflix, Nollywood

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Introduction

The rise of streaming platforms like Netflix globally has had a considerable impact on the production, distribution, and consumption landscape of film (Orankiewicz & Adamczak, 2025). Netflix, being one of the leading platforms in the digital entertainment industry, has not only modernised how audiences consume content but has also impacted the creative and technical aspects of filmmaking across various cinematic traditions (Agina & Hediger, 2025). Nollywood, Nigeria's film industry, which is the second largest film industry in the world after Bollywood and ahead of Hollywood, has also been affected by these changes. Known for its high volume of output and films that resonate with the typical African culture and way of life, Nollywood traditionally has been typified as operating within a framework of low-budget productions, short production timelines, and a focus on less than adequate technical finesse (Ogbonna & Okorie, 2024). However, in recent times, the return of the cinemas and the incursion of Netflix into Nollywood are claimed to have brought about new dynamics, particularly in the practice of cinematography, which is an important component of visual storytelling.

Cinematography is defined not as it originates from the Greek meaning, which is writing with light, but as a process of taking action, emotional subtext, ideas, tone, words, and all other forms of non-verbal communication and rendering them in visual terms (Brown, 2022). This description means that cinematography is the art of capturing animated visual images to tell stories, and this, in essence, plays a critical role in shaping the aesthetic and emotional impact that a film has on its audience. Brown goes on to explain that the elements of cinematography encompass technical aspects such as lighting, camera movement, shot composition and selection, and colour grading, which all contribute to the film's visual narrative.

The aesthetics of cinematography in Nollywood have traditionally been shaped by practical constraints occasioned by low-budget productions that often result in the prioritisation of location accessibility and relatability over technical sophistication (Ogbonna & Okorie, 2024). However, the arrival of Netflix in Nigeria has brought about a noticeable shift in the production and consumption of Nollywood films (Agina & Hediger, 2025). This is because Netflix, being a global brand, lays immense emphasis on high production values by ensuring that even though the creative inputs rest with the Nigerian filmmakers, Netflix shares in its contracts strict protocols to be observed and templates that must be adopted to the letter, thus resulting in more refined and innovative cinematographic techniques.

Diversity in visual storytelling encompasses the multiplicity of perspectives, techniques, and aesthetics used to convey narratives in film. It reflects not only the technical dimensions of production but also cultural inclusion and representational equity. By enhancing Nollywood's cinematography, Netflix has broadened the palette of visual expression available to Nigerian filmmakers, making their work more competitive in the global film market.

By focusing on cinematography as a key element of visual storytelling, this paper explores Nollywood's transition in visual storytelling under Netflix's influence, emphasising the implications for diversity and inclusion in media communication. Using the comparative case studies of *Sango* (1997), a traditional Nollywood production, and *Jagun Jagun*, a Netflix-licensed production, the study demonstrates how visual aesthetics have evolved and discusses their significance within the global EDI.

This study is significant to the extent that it provides empirical evidence of the influence of Netflix's strict protocols and template adoption on the aesthetics of cinematography in Nollywood film productions and serves as a basis for understanding the evolution and transformation of cinematic practices in Nollywood, the changing in the aesthetics of visual storytelling, the cultural implications and identity formation in Nollywood films, and the implications for future filmmaking in Nollywood. Furthermore, it serves as a contribution to ongoing scholarly discourses on the globalisation of film aesthetics and the evolving role of digital platforms in shaping cinematic traditions.

Literature Review

This literature review examines how Nollywood's visual storytelling has evolved, with attention to equity, diversity, and inclusion. The review situates these elements within Nollywood's historical trajectory, from the constraints of the home-video era to the technical advances of New Nollywood and the entrance of Netflix, noting the cultural authenticity of early films despite visual limitations. The review draws on Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, Social Inclusion Theory, and Media Globalisation Theory, offering a multidimensional framework for understanding Nollywood's transition in the Netflix era.

Film Form

A film's shape is the way its different components work together to make a whole (Aondover, Amadi & Whyte, 2025). The narrative and the stylistic are said to be two organising principles that function in the film form. The narrative component deals with the portrayal of the film and the way the audience experiences it, while the stylistic component is concerned with the different film methods employed, including the mise-en-scène, camera movement, editing, colour patterns, music and so on. For a director to captivate the attention of the audience while at the same time fulfilling the goal of the film, he or she must adopt a variety of cinematic approaches and choices, and in so doing, the completed film could be considered to exhibit some unique patterns of choices based on the preference of director. These patterns are known as style (Aondover & Aondover, 2023). In other words, the film style specifically refers to the methodical application of cinematic techniques to a film (Maiwada, Aondover, Adewale, Falobi, & Onyejelem, 2025).

From the above, it can be deduced that form and style are essential components of film narration and that they are used in film to engage the audience's emotions, thoughts and vision by providing experiences that have specific meaning that might evoke fear, joy, provocation or even be perplexing. However, it is often concluded that directors use recognised forms and techniques because similar patterns are seen in different films (Aondover & Aondover, 2023). These similarities in the dominant styles, especially in several distinct films, are referred to as conventions

Cinematography and the Language of Film

The term cinematography, as defined in the introduction of this paper, refers to the taking of action, emotional subtext, ideas, tone, words, and all other forms of non-verbal communication and rendering them in visual terms (Brown, 2022). It has been further emphasised that an image should convey meaning, atmosphere, mood, subtext and tone on its own without regard for voice-over, audio, or other means of explanation. Cinematography has many uses in film, which go way beyond recording what is in front of the camera. Many of these purposes include adding subtext and visual metaphors to a scene in the film. These purposes can be achieved by applying the conceptual tools of cinematography, which are the frame, lens, light, colour, movement, texture, establishment, and point-of-view.

Frame

The frame is the foundation of cinematography since all visual elements are constructed within it, shaping what the audience sees and how they interpret it. Through composition, viewers are guided on where to look, in what order, and with what emphasis. While good composition aligns with natural ways of seeing, filmmakers may deliberately challenge this to add new meaning (Brown, 2022). Composition highlights elements such as shape, size, order, and dominance, giving them significance beyond the obvious.

The frame defines what is included or excluded in a shot, determined first by camera placement, then by lens choice, which affects depth of field, and finally by movement—static or dynamic. These decisions influence how the audience perceives the scene and its emotional undertone. Shots are the vocabulary of cinematic language, the building blocks of scenes (Brown, 2022). While usually filmed individually, complex scenes such as car chases may use multiple cameras.

Shots fall into two categories: framing shots, defined by what is visible, and functional shots, defined by their editing purpose (Brown, 2022). Framing shots include wide shots, full shots, cowboy shots, two-shots, medium shots, close-ups (MCU, CU, ECU), and over-the-shoulders (OTS). Functional shots include establishing shots, cutaways, connecting shots, inserts, and transitional shots.

A wide shot captures most of a setting and characters, while an establishing shot is an even broader view, usually outdoors, situating the story geographically. A full shot frames the subject's entire body, linking costume and environment. The cowboy shot frames from head to mid-thigh, often signalling aggression or readiness for action. The two-shot frames two characters together, useful for showing relationships.

The medium shot (MS) frames from the waist up, balancing facial expression with gestures, and is common in dialogue scenes. The close-up and its variations isolate the face or upper body to emphasise emotion, with the ECU highlighting details like the eyes. The OTS shot places the viewer as a third participant in a conversation, enhancing immersion.

Among functional shots, cutaways reveal details not shown in the main shot, such as an object on a table. Connecting shots visually link characters who cannot be captured in the same frame. Transitional shots, such as the moon before a new day scene, smoothly bridge scenes without advancing the story.

Nollywood and the Historical Constraints of Visual Storytelling

The history of Nigerian film is divided into four eras: the colonial, post-colonial, independent or golden era, the home video or ‘old’ Nollywood era, and the more recent New Nollywood era (Ogbonna & Okorie, 2024). The celluloid boom of the 1970s to the mid-1980s produced between 86 and 109 films (Ekwuazi, 2019). Landmark works included Kongi’s Harvest (1970), directed by Osi Davies, and Amadi (1975) by Ola Balogun, which, despite its technical weaknesses, was revolutionary for its use of local language and cultural representation (Idachaba, 2018).

The golden era declined in the mid-1980s due to economic collapse and widespread insecurity, which brought cinema-going culture to a halt. Cheaper VHS technology soon paved the way for video films, and Kenneth Nnebue’s *Living in Bondage* (1992) is widely regarded as the film that launched Nollywood. Igbo marketers in Idumota financed and controlled most productions, prioritising quick financial returns over quality and resulting in weak technical standards. As director Lancelot Imasuen admitted, most filmmakers learned informally “on the streets” (Ezepue, 2020).

The dominance of direct-to-video production meant limited investment in cinematography, lighting, and colour grading. This is evident in *Sango* (1997), which, though culturally significant, suffered from flat visuals and limited global appeal. Even so, Nollywood films retained a distinctive identity, attracting audiences with stories rooted in local culture and moral values (Ajiwe & Arinze-Umobi, 2023).

Today, Nollywood is divided between low-budget direct-to-video melodramas and newer theatrical productions that use high-budget techniques while preserving Nigerian narratives (Enyindah & Donli, 2023). From an EDI perspective, early Nollywood excelled in cultural inclusion but lacked visual diversity, constrained by limited budgets and technical challenges.

Netflix and the Transformation of Regional Cinemas

In 2015, US media streaming company Netflix started distributing blockbuster Nollywood films like *October 1* and *Fifty* (Salaudeen, 2020), and in January 2019, it was reported that Netflix bought Genevieve Nnaji’s movie, *Lionheart*, for a whopping sum of N1.385 billion (Ayoola, 2020). Netflix, being an international company that caters for a global audience, is known for distributing the highest quality films on its platform. It was noted that all lovers of Nollywood

films, home and abroad, were excited about the reality of watching the latest and most celebrated Nollywood films as they were released (Agina & Hediger, 2025). It was further stated that even filmmakers were delighted at the prospect of benefitting from the licensing or acquisition fee paid by Netflix while at the same time being able to reach global audiences.

Netflix's entry into national film industries often triggers aesthetic and structural transformation. By imposing global technical standards, providing financial resources, and facilitating access to international audiences, the platform influences not only how films are made but also how they are perceived.

For Nollywood, Netflix's commissioning model combines creative autonomy with strict production protocols, particularly regarding visual fidelity. High-resolution cameras, dynamic lighting schemes, and sophisticated colour grading are now prerequisites. These standards contribute to visual diversity by enabling filmmakers to:

1. Employ a broader range of shot types (aerials, dolly shots, extreme close-ups).
2. Integrate varied lighting and depth-of-field strategies for dramatic emphasis.
3. Achieve cinematic quality that competes with international productions.

Netflix's presence also intersects with equity and inclusion. While the platform amplifies the visibility of Nigerian culture, it raises concerns about access and potential homogenization. Only a select group of well-resourced filmmakers can meet Netflix's production demands, potentially marginalising grassroots storytellers.

Theoretical Framework: EDI in Film

This paper draws on three interconnected theories: Cultural Studies and Representation Theory (Stuart Hall), Social Inclusion Theory, and Media Globalisation Theory, to analyse issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion in Nollywood's Netflix era. Together, these frameworks provide a multidimensional lens through which to examine both the aesthetic transformation of Nollywood and its broader socio-cultural implications.

Stuart Hall's Representation Theory

Stuart Hall is widely recognised as a foundational figure in cultural studies, particularly for his influential theory of representation. His work redefined how culture, identity, and power are understood, emphasising the central role of media and symbolic practices in shaping social realities and identities.

Hall's theory of representation integrates structural linguistics, semiotics, and Foucault's discourse on power, forming a unique approach that views culture as a system of signifying practices. He argued that meaning is not fixed but produced through language, images, and media, making representation a site of struggle over meaning and identity (Hall, 1997).

Social Inclusion Theory

Social Inclusion Theory in film and media examines how media can either promote or hinder the participation, belonging, and acceptance of marginalised groups. Media representations shape public attitudes, influence social norms, and can either reinforce exclusion or foster greater inclusion and equity.

The core concepts of Social Inclusion Theory are that mass media often perpetuates negative stereotypes and stigmatising messages about marginalised individuals, which can lead to social exclusion and internalised stigma among affected individuals (Portsmouth, 2021). Conversely, media can be a powerful tool for social inclusion by communicating anti-stigmatising messages, providing positive representations, and giving a voice to those who are often excluded.

Media Globalisation Theory

Media Globalisation Theory examines how media systems, content, and industries become increasingly interconnected and interdependent across national boundaries. This process is driven by technological advances, the rise of transnational corporations, and the global flow of information, culture, and capital.

The core concepts and theoretical approach of this theory are:

1. Transnational Media Corporations: The rise of large, global media conglomerates has led to increased concentration and international dominance in the media industry, shaping both content and market structures worldwide (Markina, 2021).

2. Cultural Globalisation: Media globalisation is not just economic but also cultural, influencing identities, values, and everyday practices. Theories debate whether this leads to cultural homogenization or hybridisation, where local and global cultures mix (Coker, 2023).
3. Digital Platforms and New Technologies: The digital age, marked by platforms like Netflix, YouTube, and Facebook, has accelerated media globalisation, enabling instant global distribution and reshaping how audiences access and interact with content (Demont-Heinrich, 2021).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative analysis to study the cinematic features in the film *Jagun Jagun*, with an aim of exploring its elements through three specific content criteria: shot diversity, lighting, and cultural representation.

1. Shot Diversity: Assessment of framing, camera movement, and depth-of-field usage.
2. Lighting and Colour Grading: Evaluation of how lighting schemes convey emotion and narrative tone.
3. Cultural Representation: Analysis of how visual elements reinforce or dilute indigenous narratives.

Criterion	Description	Indicators Used in Analysis
Shot Type	Examines the range and complexity of camera shots used in each film.	Wide, medium, close-up, aerial, cowboy, two-shot
Camera Movement	Examines the range and complexity of camera movements	Pan, tilt, tracking, dolly (forward and backwards), crane, handheld
Depth-of-field variations	Examines the range of lens focus.	Shallow focus, deep focus
Lighting & Colour Grading	Evaluates how lighting choices establish mood,	Key, fill, and backlight usage

	atmosphere, and narrative tone.
Cultural Representation	Assesses how visual elements depict indigenous culture and identity. Traditional costume and makeup

Table 1: Summarising the comparative criteria

The population for this study is Nollywood movies, while the sample size is two. Purposive sampling was used to select two Nollywood movies that could be compared in terms of cinematic features because of the similarities in the themes of the movies. These films are *Jagun Jagun* and *Sango* (1997).

Purposive sampling is a widely utilised method in qualitative research, offering several distinct advantages. Firstly, it allows for the selection of information-rich cases, providing exhaustive insights into the research question (Campbell, Greenwood, Prior, Shearer, Walkem, Young, Baywaters, & Walker, 2020). This method is particularly effective when researchers need to understand specific subgroups or phenomena within a larger population. Additionally, purposive sampling can be more cost-effective and time-efficient than probability sampling, especially when the focus is on a particular characteristic or feature within a population. Furthermore, a small sample size allows for a detailed and rigorous qualitative analysis, such as a critical discourse analysis or thematic analysis of the visual storytelling techniques, narratives, and cultural nuances within each film. This intensive focus might not be possible with a larger sample.

The analysis involved a systematic review of the film, utilising a qualitative approach to identify and extract themes relevant to the features being focused on. Key features that are examined will include shot composition. Each shot will be explained in a report that captures the visual elements.

Discussion of Findings

Visual Evolution, Cultural Representation, and Inclusion in Nollywood

The comparative analysis of *Sango* (1997) and *Jagun Jagun* reveals profound shifts in Nollywood's visual storytelling, highlighting how Netflix's entry has redefined the aesthetic and cultural possibilities of Nigerian cinema. These changes not only elevate Nollywood's technical

quality but also reshape how Nigerian culture is represented, accessed, and interpreted within global communication networks.

Shot Composition:

In *Jagun Jagun*, the use of aerial shots, extreme close-ups, and dynamic tracking shots produces a cinematic texture absent in *Sango*. In the entire duration of the film, which amounts to 133 minutes, *Jagun Jagun* employed ten different aerial shots in various scenes, including battle scenes, training scenes, and location establishment shots, while *Sango* made use of none. This diversification heightens narrative immersion and allows filmmakers to encode cultural meaning with greater precision, foregrounding elements such as costumes, landscapes, and ritual practices. From Hall's lens of representation, this demonstrates how Nollywood's cultural symbols are now encoded in more legible, globally recognisable visual forms. Yet, audience decoding remains varied: while Nigerian viewers may interpret these images as affirmations of cultural identity, international audiences could decode them as exotic spectacle. This underscores representation as a contested site of meaning.

Lighting Schemes:

Netflix-backed productions employ multi-directional, coloured, and intensity-graded lighting to construct mood and visual depth. In *Jagun Jagun*, for instance, lighting differentiates between sacred rituals, battle sequences, and intimate character moments, encoding layers of meaning into the visual field across the entire 133 minutes of the film, excluding the end credits. By contrast, *Sango* relied on flat, even lighting, which, while functional, restricts symbolic depth and emotional resonance throughout the entire film. This evolution also reflects the influence of media globalisation: global production standards encourage Nigerian filmmakers to adopt cinematic grammars that align with international expectations. While this enhances Nollywood's competitiveness, it raises questions about whether these techniques might, over time, homogenise local visual traditions.

Camera Movement:

The integration of smooth dolly shots, crane sweeps, and drone cinematography in *Jagun Jagun* further signals Nollywood's aesthetic maturity. These dynamic movements create a sense

of scale and energy, situating Nigerian narratives within global epic traditions. For local audiences, such innovations amplify cultural pride; for global audiences, they render Nigerian stories more accessible within familiar cinematic vocabularies. From the perspective of Social Inclusion Theory, however, such advances also highlight inequities: only filmmakers with access to Netflix-level resources can employ these techniques, potentially excluding grassroots creators and narrowing representational diversity within Nollywood.

Overall Implications

These shifts in shot composition, lighting, and camera movement collectively expand Nollywood's representational repertoire, enabling Nigerian stories to resonate across cultural and geographic boundaries. They reflect a growing diversity in visual storytelling that strengthens Nollywood's place in global cinema. Yet, when viewed through the combined lenses of Hall's Cultural Studies and Representation Theory, Social Inclusion Theory, and Media Globalisation Theory, this evolution is complex: the same improvements that enhance visibility and narrative sophistication also risk inequity in participation and misinterpretation in decoding. While *Jagun Jagun* demonstrates how global platforms can project local cultures internationally, questions remain about whose stories are privileged. Netflix's focus on commercially viable narratives risks sidelining experimental, indigenous, or minority voices within Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape.

The study shows that technical advancement does not automatically equal inclusivity. Instead, there is a widening gap between elite filmmakers with resources to meet Netflix's standards and grassroots creators who remain confined to low-budget markets. This raises questions of structural inequity that mirror broader socio-economic divides.

Finally, the global recognition of Nollywood through Netflix is a double-edged sword: it validates African storytelling in international spaces, but also risks reshaping it to conform to global expectations of cinematic aesthetics. Thus, Nollywood's visual transformation must be understood not simply as aesthetic progress but as a site where cultural meaning, global influence, and structural access intersect. Theories of representation, social inclusion, and media globalisation together reveal the complexity of this shift, showing how progress in diversity of form may simultaneously challenge equity and inclusion of practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal that Nollywood's transition under Netflix influence illustrates the transformative power of global streaming on visual storytelling. By enhancing cinematography through diverse shot composition, dynamic lighting, and cinematic movement, Nigerian filmmakers are entering new aesthetic and economic frontiers. This evolution reflects the diversity component of EDI, broadening Nollywood's narrative reach. However, sustaining equity and inclusion requires conscious efforts to protect indigenous narratives from homogenization, empower underrepresented filmmakers, and balance global aesthetics with local authenticity.

Recommendations

1. Capacity Building for Grassroots Filmmakers: Provide training and affordable access to high-quality equipment to democratise visual diversity.
2. Cultural Impact Assessments for Streaming Projects: Ensure Netflix collaborations do not compromise indigenous storytelling forms.
3. Policy Frameworks for Inclusive Film Financing: Establish grants and public-private partnerships to allow mid- and low-budget filmmakers to compete for global distribution.
4. Promoting Local Streaming Alternatives: Encourage Nigerian-owned platforms to adopt Netflix-level technical standards while prioritising cultural narratives.
5. Audience Engagement Research: Invest in studies of how Nigerian and international audiences perceive Nollywood's evolving aesthetics to guide culturally sensitive storytelling practices.

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