



Music and sound in documentary film communication: An exploration of *Une Affaire de Nègres* and *Chef!*

Paul Animbom Ngong, The University of Bamenda

panimbom@gmail.com

Volume 8.1 (2020) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2020.265 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

Abstract

This paper examines the function of music and sound as important elements of documentary film communication. It considers the soundtrack to have equal value as the visual track. This is even more appalling when sound is viewed as an aesthetic constituent of a film or as acoustic signs with equal communicative value as visual signs. Two films are used to show the role music and sound play in facilitating comprehension in a documentary film. Focusing particularly on testimonies, narrative commentary, filmic silence and music, the study shows how documentary films provide a unique medium to engage an audience in a story of facts and provides a unique vehicle for information transmission. The success of these two films among mainstream audiences indicates the power of a thoughtful and intentional soundtrack which accentuates the subject without dictating it and provides examples of a utilization of music to build an emotional connection between the audience and the film's subject matter.

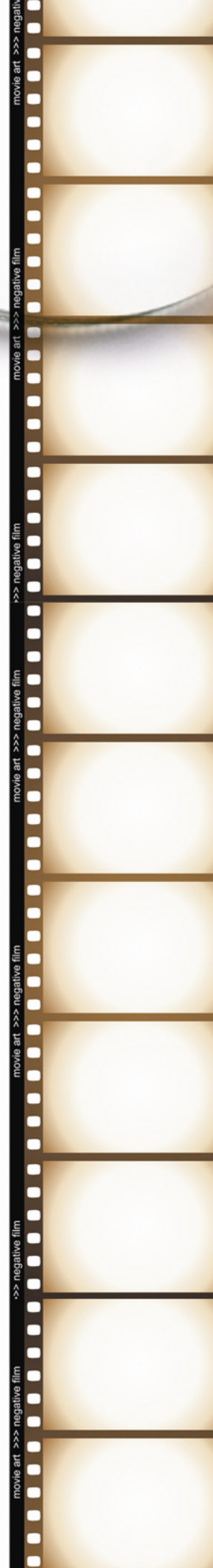
Keywords: acoustic signs, communication, documentary film, music, sound



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)



Music and sound in documentary film communication: An exploration of *Une Affaire de Nègres* and *Chef!* Paul Animbom Ngong

Introduction

Information transmission or communication can be channeled in various ways from an emitter to a receiver. From time immemorial, the traditional tools of communication such as drums, xylophones, gongs and other forms of verbal communications were used as means of information transmission. This later evolved to include forms like written press, television or radio and many other forms of expression like art. It is in this light that, film as an art form came to be used as one of the main channels through which information could be conveyed.

Film is considered as an art form which combines visual and auditory communicative mechanisms to channel messages to receivers. In this process of communication, the two moods: visual and auditory are expected to complement each other. This implies, the visual track of the film is only complete when the audio track is associated to it. This affirmation is true, only to some film genres as the first films were silent (though this position is usually argued as to how silent was the silent film). In this light, many studies on film analysis have focused on text and image (Zhu et al. 2015; Rohrbach et al. 2015; 2017; Tapaswi et al. 2015) but few on the role of music especially in documentary films¹.

Documentary films explore the visual and auditory signs in a special way to pass across messages. In the course of producing these films, attention is supposed to be paid to the way auditory signs are utilized because three components combine to bring out the auditory sensation of the film. Dialogue, noise and music are components of the sound track of a film and each plays an important role in the communication process. This paper explores the place of music and sound as constituent elements of a film's sound track, in fostering communication. This is an inclusive consideration of film music which according to Lipscomb and Tolchinsky (2005), is one component of a sonic fabric that includes the musical score, ambient sound, dialogue, sound effects and silence. To better exemplify this, a semiotic analysis of two documentary films: *Une affaire de Nègres* and *Chef!*, permits the decoding of signs that have been put together by the filmmakers.

Documentary film more than other related forms of communication (written press, feature film, television or radio), puts the audience at ease without any mystification of the techniques used or creating a distance between them and those sending the message. The process of communication in documentary films takes into account an interplay of semiotic signs from the poles of production and reception. Following Peirce's (1955) observation that a sign is always a sign for somebody, the interpretation of this sign is considered as part of the sign itself. This implies, semiotics is made situational, activated only by people in actual situations. Each act of

interpretation begets another and leads to what Peirce calls ‘unlimited semiosis’, the endless play of meaning and regeneration of signs in time. This paper explores the role of music as a sign in documentary films and how meaning is begotten by the audience.

Film semiotics

It is generally considered that semiotics is employed in the analysis of the text. The text here, does not necessarily limit to written language. In the broadest sense, anything that carries a message can be considered as a text. This includes written language, movies, films, or pictures etc. and can exist in any medium: verbal and non-verbal.

Much has been written on film text since its creation. The writings look at film as communication, as art, as a new social phenomenon, and as the herald of a new sensory civilization. Conceptions from philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and linguistics have been used to discuss film. Film is hereby seen as a medium that offers itself to various disciplines. Should it be looked at from the point of view of art, questions as what art is do arise. Is film an art form like painting, theatre, storytelling or music? If examined as communication, it presupposes a definition of communication. Film can as well be looked at as a language. In this case, it becomes a subset of linguistics, using verbal language as a paradigm for its analysis.

This complexity of looking at film can be handled with semiotics. Semiotics here seen as “attempts to develop a language in which to talk about signs ... whether or not they themselves

constitute a language; whether they are signs in science or signs in art, technology religion, or philosophy; whether they are healthy or phatic, adequate or inadequate for the purpose for which they are used” (Morris 1955). A film therefore combines the filmmaker as a sender and the film itself (product/message) and at the extreme end, the viewer (receiver). Here, film is a form of communication that makes use of signs to transmit its information.

The study of signs is the study of construction and maintenance of reality. In this light, Peirce (1931) holds that “We only think in signs.” Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, favours, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning. No sign makes sense on its own but only in relation to other signs, because its value is determined by the relationships between it and other signs within a system as a whole.

Saussure (1986) defined this sign to the relationship between signifier, which carries or produces meaning and the signified, which is the meaning itself though the relationship that exists between these two is arbitrary. Arbitrariness is one of the unique properties of language. The arbitrariness of the sign is a radical concept because it proposes the autonomy of language in relation to reality. In semiotics as conceived and developed by de Saussure, there is no one-to-one

link between the signifier and the signified. This implies signs have multiple meanings. Signifiers change from culture to culture. Convention is the social dimension of signs; it is the agreement among the users about the appropriate uses of and responses to signs. The relationship between one's concept of fishes and the physical reality of fish is signification; it is one's way of giving meaning to the world of understanding it.

From another perspective, Peirce classified signs in terms of symbol, icon and index. Signs can be classified in terms of this triadic mode without reference to the purpose of their users within particular contexts. A sign may consequently be treated as symbolic by one person, as iconic by another and as indexical by the third.

In any case, all signs have at least two types of meaning: denotative and connotative which correspond to two orders of signification. Roland Barthes (1977) called the immediate visual impact of a sign, the denotative meaning and the cultural meaning connotative. In line with this, Eco (1979) affirms that the difference between denotative and connotative meaning is not (as many authors maintain) the difference between the "univocal" and "vague signification."

In this light, denotative meaning is the first, inherent, literary meaning of a sign. What we discern in our minds when we hear a word is denotative meaning. Denotative meaning describes the relationship between the signifier and signified and the external reality. In

terms of visual images, a photograph is a sign and the denotative meaning is what is photographed while connotative meaning is how it is photographed.

The connotative meaning of a sign is secondary, associative, reflected meaning. Although each sign may carry a single denotative meaning, the same sign carries more than one connotative meaning. Connotative meaning is the second order of signification which uses a denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified.

In sum, semiotics is the study of sign system and in order to have a semiotics of the cinema or film semiotics, one would therefore assume, film must have something to do with signs or sign systems. The cinema, insofar as the basis of the art is photochemical reproduction, is in fact unique among communicative media because it does not use signs to convey its meaning: it uses reality, or an analogue of reality, itself especially when it comes to documentary films. The question of signs in the cinema, then, becomes fundamental to the establishment of a semiotics of the cinema. It is also a fundamental philosophical question, insofar as it raises the issue of the relationship between reality and this particular art form. In this art form, other constituent elements are used to reinforce the meaning-making process involved. This is the case with the use of music which itself is a sign. The understanding of film semiotics developed from the theories of Christian Metz, Peter

Wollen, Peirce and Umberto Eco, permit the understanding of how music is effectively merged with visual signs to transmit information in documentary films.

It is in this light that Eco (1979) states that

The semiological investigation starts from the principle that if there is to be communication, it must be established and governed by the way the emitter organizes a message. He does this according to a system of rules socially conventionalized... which make up the code ... if the addressees understand, it means that below their understanding exists a code. If we can't manage to get a hold of it, that doesn't mean that there's no code at all, but rather that it still has to be found.

Eco (1979, 16) defines the sign as “everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else.” He adopts a dyadic conception of the sign-function à la Saussure, as opposed to Peirce's triadic conception of sign, object, interpretant, but he replaces Saussure's *signifier* and *signified* with the terms *expression* and *content* to convey their greater generality. Looking at music as a sign will be considering that “the signifier of a sign is not a sound but an acoustic *image*, a sensation, a psychological not a physical entity, and the signified of a sign is a concept, not an object.” Film semiotics in this case looks at music in the same capacity as any other sign in the filmic communication.

Background of Music in Documentary films

It is generally considered that music is found in every single culture in the world. Music is an art form consisting of sound and silence expressed through time. Elements of sound used in music are pitch (including melody and harmony), rhythm (including tempo and meter or gauge), and sonic qualities of tone, articulation, dynamics, and texture. Music may also involve generative forms in time through the construction of patterns and combinations of natural stimuli principally sound. It may be used for artistic or aesthetic, communicative, entertainment, ceremonial or religious purposes and by many composers purely as an academic instrument for study. Its inclusion in film is seen as a move towards making film a complete art form. Though from the beginning of filmmaking around 1890, cinema was silent; the importance of music was already felt as it was usually included during the live performances in theatres. The role of this music was already set from the onset. For example, Lang and West (1920) note that a string accompaniment with tremolo (trembling) effect is appropriate for “suspense and impending disaster”; an organ tone with heavy pedal is appropriate for “church scenes” and for generally connoting “impressive dignity”; flutes are fitting for conveying “happiness,” “springtime” or “sunshine.” This was soon to change with the arrival of the talkies in the 1920s. Music was now incorporated into the film production process and composed specifically for the film in question (Slowik 2012).

In a film therefore, two types of music can be used: a pre-existing music or music specially composed to accompany a given scene. Composing an original music strip for a documentary film necessitates keen attention to the topic been treated and thus requires a lot of creativity. If an onslaught of images is edited and is rapidly changing on screen without sound, the viewer begins to feel arbitrary and inconsequential. But the reception of this same film changes if a soundtrack is created and attached to it. This gives a life force and coherence than just being a visual cascade without any soundtrack. Composing an original soundtrack or music for a documentary film does not take off any of its originality since the music composed will be as original as the documentary film itself. Instead, it adds more aesthetic value to the film and reinforces the message embedded in the visual signs.

A study like Holly (2015) provides a rich and detailed relationship between music and image in documentary films. It brings out its role in the genre and its subsequent impact on an audience's perception of reality and fiction. In this vein, a filmmaker correlates visual signs with music in order to create the desired impression. Following the same trend, Paggi (2011) examines voice over in documentary films as part of the soundtrack. The treatment of the soundtrack concomitantly with music is important as both are merged with the images in post-production as a storytelling mechanism. In light with this, Glover (2009) holds that "music and storytelling, traditional methods of communication and education, historically employ rhythm to structure their

message and capture the attention of their audience in order to convey a message or lesson.” Music is hereby seen as a means of communication.

In a documentary film with virtually no voice-over, music guides the story, leading the audience from scene to scene and defining the story segments. Music provides a similar function in any film but has particular importance in documentary films. Documentary film, being an educational, informative and propagative genre, demands that music and sound be given great attention because even silent scenes are not silent but have a lot to give out. The focus of this paper is to explore the interplay between music and image in the case studies which proves the peculiarity of documentary films in Cameroon.

Data presentation

Chef! is a 61 minutes documentary chronicle produced in 1999 by a Cameroonian filmmaker, Jean Marie Teno. Jean-Marie Teno made his first film, the documentary short *Schubbah*, in 1983. Since then, he has directed both documentary and fiction, most often working in the form of the cinematic essay. His films, frequently shot by himself, bear the trademarks of first-person cinema. Lyrical and provocative, Teno’s cinema is rooted in post-colonial experience and attempts to come to grips with societal issues facing contemporary Africa. He has tackled such

topics as cultural censorship: *Africa, I Will Fleece You*; emigration trends: *Clando*; human rights and equality between the sexes: *Chef!*; the impact of a global economy on the developing world: *A Trip to the Country*; as well as polygamy and ritual: *Alex's Wedding*. The corruption found in various sectors of the society (government, business, tribal leadership) is an underlying theme in much of his work. With his latest film, *The Colonial Misunderstanding*, Teno presents a sharp critique of the role of nineteenth-century German missionaries in Africa, which led to colonial conquest.

As for *Chef!*, it treats the trials and tribulations of the lives of Cameroonians under dictatorship though the country is considered as a democracy. This amalgam, the director calls democrature. It is a film that treats several troubling events in Cameroon, one of which is the lynching of boys by inhabitants of a village because of theft. The film also touches on the exploitation of women and the lack of freedom of the press. Teno paints a society that is filled with inequalities and is hierarchical. A country where law and justice have become goods that can be marketed to the highest bidder. A country full of chiefs at every level of the scale of life (chef de famille, chef du village, ministre en chef, chef d'état, un pays des chefs). In short, the importance given to the title of 'chief' is the prime motivating factor that pushes the director to call the film 'chief'.

In a similar view, Osvalde Lewat's *Une affaire de nègres* produced in 2007, epitomises dark moments in Cameroon history in the early 2000. It recounts incidents that occurred in the country as a result of resolutions taken by the 'Chef' who is the guarantor of all state matters. In effect, on March 20, 2000, a decree by the President of the Republic of Cameroon set up an Operational Command Unit to tackle rampant banditry in the Littoral region, precisely in Douala. The Unit introduced what amounted to round-ups with over one thousand six hundred people in one year disappearing or were allegedly killed. One year after, nine young men disappeared. The matter was submitted to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The accused were found guilty of "failure to follow orders" and released but legal proceedings have not come to an end. The families of victims have to live between the desire for justice and the pressure for the crimes to be wiped forever from the collective memory. Through a combination of visual and auditory signs, the 90 minutes documentary thrills the viewer through this sad side of history. This present analysis, however, focuses only on music and sound considered here as acoustic images that serve as a narrative technique used by the filmmakers.

Data analysis

The importance of sound in film in general and in documentary film in particular cannot be over emphasized. This affirmation though, is contrary to the 1933 formalist position in which

some theorists held that the introduction of sound in film signaled the death of cinematic art. Despite this claim, sound introduction in film came along with many renovations and important communication implications in filmmaking. In this light, the acoustic sign brings to film, an additional value to meaning-making in documentary films. It should be noted that the acoustic sign is made up of dialogues (testimonies, commentaries), noise and music.

Testimonies

This is part of the soundtrack and dialogue and a common documentary technique that allows filmed subjects to speak directly about events, prompted by questions asked by the filmmaker. The interviews in a documentary film give the viewers a sense of realism, that the documentary maker's views are mutually shared by another person or source, and thus more valid. Documentary films being the representation of real events, testimonies are used as measures to make the story more credible. This is because the people called up to testify are either victims or witnesses to the story itself. Lanthier (2011) writes "to label a film 'documentary' is in one sense to burden it with the responsibility of veracity." This implies documentary filmmakers have the task of reproducing reality as best as they can. Testimonies in the sound track are just one of the methods through which the filmmakers can achieve this.

A view of *Une affaire des nègres* reveals the utilization of testimonies as a storytelling technique. This begins with a testimony from Richard Nzamyo's who testifies on his son as a victim during the "Commandement Opérationnel". As a parent, he gives first-hand information on what effectively happened to his son.

Richard Nzamyo testifies how he saw his own son shot in cold blood. His grieve and sadness is expressed in his testimony to portray the difficulty in wiping this painful memory. He confirms this by stating that he notices people physically but the same is not felt in his heart "physiquement tout le monde est là mais dans le cœur c'est autre chose". His testimony makes us to understand that the "Commandement Opérationnel" was not just a repressive regime but also a medium that the regime used to extort money from people. The regime was never there to serve the purpose for which it was created; instead the people who suffered were those who could not afford what was asked of them. "Si tu veux qu'on libère ton fils, tu amènes cent mille francs. Il a passé quatre jours ici et une journée c'est vingt-cinq mille". This practically shows that only the poor suffered the effect of this regime because the rich who could bail themselves did not go through what people like Nzamyo went through. Just because he could not afford the one hundred thousand francs that was demanded from him, his son was murdered in cold blood without any judgement.

Another remarkable testimony in this film is from Denise who was a witness to her husband's abduction during the same period without a crime. The men of the special unit came into her house, carried away all musical appliances. Her testimony indicts the members of this unit because they break their door without any search warrant. To her, "ils ont forcé la porte. Je me disais que c'était les bandits".

In a similar way, Jean Marie Teno through testimonies, treats the problem of injustice and inequality in *Chef!*. Suzane Kala-Lobe for instance in a testimony says the culture of having a single chief is not democratic. This is a taboo subject and if spoken in normal life, it becomes treason to the state. Through documentary film therefore, the subjects are able to voice out their worries and address important issues in their society. In this same testimony, the director illustrates the aspect of dictatorship when Kala-Lobe states, "Le chef qui a droits de vie et de mort sur l'ensemble de ses sujets". This statement simply qualifies the Chief as a god who holds the life of his people in his hands.

The director somehow choses to use Kala-Lobe's testimony first because as a journalist, she is the voice of the people and thus makes her analyses on this subject more credible to the spectator. And as a woman, she represents a nation and the men who are called "chef de familles" are the heads of state. In another testimony, Njawe qualifies the chief as "le prince". In our context we know princes always decide and their people only obey on their decisions. This implies that

Cameroon is dwelling in the hands of a single man. “Le prince décide un jour de me jeter en prison...et un autre jour il décide de me libérer”. This statement is a way to show that the chief wanted to prove how powerful he is and that he is the only chief on board.

In all of these testimonies, little or no music is used but in Njawe’s case, the director decides to distract or digest it with background music. Music here is used as an acoustic sign to reinforce the message in the visual sign.

Narrative Commentary

Narrative commentary is part of a documentary film otherwise known as voice-over made by the filmmaker or added to the sound track during the post-production. Through this voice-over, the filmmaker can speak directly to the viewer, offering information, explanations and opinions (Nichols 1983).

In the film *Une Affaire des Nègres*, the voice-over plays an informative role to the spectators. The director Osvalde Lewat uses it to expose the injustice that Cameroonians faced during the period of the “Commandement Opérationnel”. Through commentaries the director condemns the regime and emphasises on how powerless the people are when their voices are not heard. It is revealed in the film that Cameroon is where there is no division of power. Nobody has the right to say anything after the president has decreed. In Cameroon, the people are not supposed

to talk of a president but instead of a prince or better still a king. This is because all power has been concentrated on a single individual who has become the sole decision maker of the nation. The director Osvalde Lewat comes back with the issue of the “Commandement Opérationnel” to question the role of every individual in a democracy.

In a similar manner, Jean Marie Teno in *Chef!* does not follow any chronology in the narration of his story. It is only through the help of narrative commentary that the spectator can better understand the message of the film. The message transmission in this film is done with the use of many sub stories that only the narrative commentary comes to link all of them to put the audience on track. An example of a sub story in this is film is that of the issue of theft which the director narrates: “Pour une poule et 4 poussins, ce jeune-homme aurait pu perdre sa vie”. Through this narrative, the filmmaker draws the attention of the audience to the injustice in the society. This little boy instead of being tried in a court is almost stoned to death by the angry mob which shows the predominance of mob justice. This story is different from the main idea that traverses the film and is only linked to the plot by narrative commentary.

During the narrative commentary of this film, the filmmaker brings out the people’s love for power. This is manifested through the abundant availability of the chief at almost every neighbourhood: “Des chefs, encore d’autres chefs, toujours des chefs”. This incessant presence of chiefs seems to pass across a message: he who is not a chief is marginalized. Therefore, everyone

is fighting to climb that pyramid so as to have power and dominate others. This is supported by the assertion that “au sommet de la pyramide où se trouve le chef des chefs avec le pouvoir absolu”. The absolute power at the helm has become an obsession for Cameroonians which in effect, is an indicator of the absence of real democracy.

Silence

Silence in film otherwise called filmic silence can be defined as the lack of sound in a scene where only a quiet ambient track is present. Silence is used to create suspense and to activate certain parts of our brains to trigger different emotions. Filmic silence is used to generate an amount of intrigue and to calm the spectator. A scene is never completely silent because no matter how silent it may seem, there is always something hidden behind it. It may seem silent but there should be a message behind the silence and there are ambient noises even though they cannot be heard. Michel Chion (1990) affirms that “Silence is never a neutral emptiness. It is the negative of sound we've heard beforehand or imagined; it is the product of a contrast”.

In *Une affaire des Nègres*, silence is used by the filmmaker to show the rate at which people stayed dormant and asleep regardless of the massive killing that was going on. The population filled with fear had so much to say but stayed mouth sealed. Considering that silence is an element of sound, it can be used to reinforce the meaning of a visual image. In this light, a

situational shot in the film makes use of filmic silence as an aesthetic measure as illustrated in figure 1.

This shot, accompanied with a panoramic movement from the right to the left presents the whole city of Douala. One thing that is peculiar about the shot is that it is completely silent. The filmmaker uses silence to show that even though people's hearts were filled with grievances, nobody could voice a word. The time of the shot, night, also points to another hidden truth: during this period, any verbalisation of the frustrations in the city were made at night and by a restricted few who felt courageous enough to do so. This is also exemplified in the anniversary ceremony of the Commandement Opérationnel where only a few are courageous to attend. The filmmaker uses this silent scene as an emotional and metaphorical expression on the tyrannical state in which Cameroon found herself in during the "Commandement Opérationnel".

Also, it was mentioned above that filmic silence is the lack of sound in a scene, a moment wherein only a quiet ambient track is present. In *Chef!*, the filmmaker does not incorporate this in his film. Moments of silence are absent or rare. This implies the filmmaker categorised this documentary as a revolutionary instrument thereby avoiding moments of silence which in effect are consoling, reconciling or peaceful. By avoiding to use filmic silence, the audience is directed towards the recognition of a complete absence of peace in the community. The audience is pushed to become aware of this absence and therefore to take action.

Music communication in documentary film

It is generally considered that music is an artistic expression that is very cinematographic and emotional. It is worth recalling that from 1926, Eisenstein, Poudovkine and Alexandrov, came up with the possibility of sound cinema. To them, sound should be a new film editing element. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (2012), music is the art of combining songs in a way to be pleasant to our hearing. This art become a science when we start looking at the principles of this combination and the reasons for the affections that it causes on us.

Before the era of recorded sound in motion pictures, efforts were put in place to provide a suitable music for films. This was usually done through the services of an in-house pianist or organist and, in some cases; the entire orchestra was hired to play for the projections. A pianist was present to perform at the Lumière Brothers' first film screening in 1895. German cinema which was very influential in this era of silent movies, provided some original scores such as Fritz Lang's movies *Die Nibelungen* of 1924 and *Metropolis* in 1927 which were accompanied by original full scale orchestral and leitmotif scores written by Gottfried Huppertz. When sound came to movies, directors like Fritz Lang stopped using music for their movies. One of the rare times music appeared in his movies, was a song sang by a character. Lang used this song to emphasis on man's insanity. In France, before the advent of the talkies, Erik Satie composed what many

consider as first “frame by frame” synchronous film score for director Rene Clair’s avant-garde short *Entr’acte* in 1924.

Music used in documentary films therefore can either be original soundtrack or synchronised sound which can either be diegetic or non-diegetic. Diegetic music refers to that which belongs to the filmic narrative and non-diegetic denotes that which is not part of diegesis. An original music is that which is fashioned for a film taking into account the latter's theme otherwise known as diegetic. The original music does not only apply to fiction films, but also to documentaries.

Documentary films use music to varying degrees of success. Looking at some of the most popular and successful documentaries, music typically plays a subtle yet crucial role. Documentaries aim to educate and entertain people, and in order to do this they must hold the attention of the audience and engage them in the film’s subject matter.

In *Une affaire des Nègres*, music is used as a transitional tool. The transitional shot to Mme Etaha’s house is accompanied with music. This music is played from a single instrument which is the flute. It conveys the spectator to a solitary woman since the arrest of her husband. The sorrow expressed in the music depicts the character’s emotional state and this runs through the entire film. Music only appears again at 56’ 15’’ with a panoramic situational shot that presents petit business persons along the road side. This non-diegetic music introduced at short intervals provides quick

switches to the director between shots. The director uses music while presenting these traders at night fall to show that the calm nature they found themselves in could change at any time into a capture and slaughtering scene.

The scarcity or sparing use of diegetic music to the detriment of non-diegetic music in this film prompts one to question if the filmmaker is ignorant of the power that the former has in documentary film communication. Without trying to provide fallacious answers in lieu of the director, the argument here is that, *Une affaire des Nègres* would have made more success if an original soundtrack was made for the film.

The situation is somehow different in *Chef!*. From the opening scene, traditional music is used. Through drumming, the setting of the story is located and an alert spectator will identify even the cultural background in which the film is set. Throughout the film, the use of diegetic music drawn especially from traditional music, filled with background noise, proofs the filmmaker's desire to integrate music as a constituent element of film narrative. At the sequence of Njawe's testimony for instance, the director uses this background music as a narrative technique. Instead of allowing the character to narrate the happenings in the village, music is used.

In effect, though this film is praised to have made use of diegetic music, quality is not assured. This is because the music used is from the field. There is no original composition and this

causes reverberation when the music plays in the film. It will be less costly and stressful if the same music is recomposed and produced in post-production to accompany the visual narratives. As a film that treats trials and tribulations as theme, filmic silence should be used to condole with the bereaved. In addition, leaving the spectators to end the story with a revolutionary rage or an emotional suspension that has not been de-rolled or discharged may radicalise some. Therefore, filmmakers should learn how to resolve conflicts raised in their films and the director of *Chef!* should have used silence to blend the end of this.

From the analyses of these two documentary films, it can be noted that there is a lack of mastery of music communication techniques. In effect, for a film to be successful, the soundtrack should be given an equal value as the images. The introduction of original scores into a film should be taken seriously and music should be discussed with a composer before shooting a single frame. Music occupies such an important place in a documentary film such that when the filmmaker runs out of words and runs out of pictures, he/she should run to music. It is advisable to figure out how to colour a scene with music either in a metaphysical rhyme or emotional undertone.

These films are two of the most popular and well-known documentaries films in Cameroon. They however, fail to employ dramatic music, which serves to complement and enhance the visual picture. Music in the films is supplementary yet with a foundational role that becomes explicit. The music does not dominate, it merely accentuates the natural sounds depicted by the characters

and their actions which we observe. It emphasizes the important scenes but never does the music overpower the picture, allowing the pictures to tell the story, while serving to underscore the story they tell.

Conclusion

The advent of sound in cinema came with many changes which in a way, also affected the use of music. This rule has evolved as time goes by. It is recorded that in classical Hollywood cinema, music was used as a signifier of emotions, a narrative cueing mechanism and a means of interpreting events on screen (Gorbman 1998). Apart from these functions, music in film can also serve as a formal and rhythmic continuity between shots and in transitions between scenes. It is a narrative technique which many filmmakers use in telling their stories. Cameroon filmmakers are not any different and they have drawn from the rich musical repertoire that Cameroon has, to make music a complete part of their films.

While music is often used in conjunction with natural sound, the emphasis is typically on one or the other. Either the music dominates or the natural sound dominates. This holds particularly true in wildlife documentaries, which often have rich natural sound with which the director can work. Both films in this analysis have virtually no voice-over, and the music is supposed to guide the story, lead the audience from scene to scene and define the story segments. This is however

absent but it is noted that in scenes without music, natural sound, which is also part of the soundtrack is used. In the course of enhancing the story through other acoustic signs, the filmmakers employ other narrative techniques to communicate.

Testimonies, narrative commentary and filmic silence are combined to guide the audience to emotionally connect with the scenes. These techniques are also used to connect disparate scenes, and facilitate transition from one scene to another. Acoustic signs in these films orchestrate emotion and convey facts. Once audiences emotionally connect to the story, they are more susceptible to the narrator's presentation of facts. The facts, in conjunction with the moving images and music, impart a particular message to audience. It can be said therefore that, the utilisation of acoustic signs to garner an emotional connection between audience and the story serves to capture their imaginations, leaving them with a well-established interest in the subject matter. They effectively serve as communicative mechanisms in collaboration with visual signs.

Bibliography

Barthes, R. (1977). *Images, Music, Text*. Trans., Stephen Heath, London: Fontana Press.

Chion, M. (1990). *Audio-Vision: sound on screen*. New York: Columbia University Press

De Saussure, F. (1986). *Course in general linguistics*. Translated by Roy Harris. La Salle, IL: Open Court.

Durak, D. (2013). Nostalgia for the light: a 'documemory' and the conflict between history and memory. *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, 2(2), 126-139.

Eco, U. (1979). *A Theory of semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Glover, K.L. (2009). *Making sense of the world around us (the use of music in documentary films)*.
Montana: Montana State University.
- Gorbman, C. (1998). "Film music." In *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, edited by Hill, John and
Gibson, Pamela Church, 43-50. Oxford: OUP.
- Helbo, A. (1981). "The semiology of theater or: communication swamped." *Poetics Today* 2(3):
105-111.
- Holly, R. (2015). *Music and sound in documentary film*. London: Routledge.
- Lang, E. and George West. (1920). *Musical accompaniment of moving pictures; a practical
manual for pianists and organists and an exposition of the principles underlying the musical
interpretation of moving pictures*. Boston: The Boston Music Co.
- Lanthier, J.J. (2011). "Do you swear to re-enact the truth? dramatized testimony in documentary
film." Accessed November 20, 2019, [https://www.documentary.org/feature/do-you-swear-
re-enact-truth-dramatized-testimony-documentary-film](https://www.documentary.org/feature/do-you-swear-re-enact-truth-dramatized-testimony-documentary-film)
- Lipscomb, S. D. and David E. Tolchinsky (2005). "The role of music communication in cinema."
In *Musical Communication*, edited by D. Miell, R. MacDonald, and D. Hargreaves, 383-404.
Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Metz, C. (1977). *Le signifiant imaginaire: psychoanalyse et cinema*. Paris: Union Generale
d'Editions. (*The Imaginary Signifier*.) Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1982).
- Morris, C. (1955). *Signs, language and behavior*. New York: George Braziller, Inc.
- Nichols, B. (1983). "The voice of documentary." *Film Quarterly* 36(3): 17-30,
DOI: 10.2307/3697347

- Paggi, S. (2011). “Voix-off et commentaire dans le cinéma documentaire et ethnographique.” *Cahiers de Narratologie* 20, URL : [http:// journals.openedition.org/narratologie/6321](http://journals.openedition.org/narratologie/6321) ; DOI : 10.4000/narratologie.6321
- Peirce, C. S. (1931). *The collected papers of charles sanders peirce*. Vols. I-VI. Edited by C. Hartshorne, and P. Weiss. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Peirce, C. S. (1955). *Philosophical writings of peirce*. Edited by J. Buchler. New York: Dover Publications.
- Rohrbach, A., et al. (2017). “Movie description.” *International Journal of Computer Vision*. 123 no.1: 94–120. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11263-016-0987-1>.
- Rohrbach, A., Marcus Rohrbach, Niket Tandon, and Bernt Schiele. 2015. *A dataset for movie description. CVPR*.
- Rousseau, J.J. (2012). *Dictionnaire de musique*, VOLUME 9, in Collection Complète des œuvres, Genève, 1780-1789, vol.9, no.4, édition en ligne, <https://www.rousseauonline.ch/Text/volume-9-dictionnaire-de-musique.php>
- Sikand, N. (2015). Filmed ethnography or ethnographic film? voice and positionality in ethnographic, documentary, and feminist film. *Journal of Film and Video*, 67(3-4), 42-56. doi:10.5406/jfilmvideo.67.3-4.0042
- Slowik, M. J. (2012). *Hollywood film music in the early sound era, 1926-1934*. Iowa: Iowa Research Online.
- Tapaswi, M., Martin Bauml, and Rainer Stiefelhagen. (2015). “Book2movie: Aligning video scenes with book chapters.” In *The IEEE Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition (CVPR)*.
- Yeung, L. (2016). Spectator engagement and the body. *Film Studies*, 15(1), 81-96.

Zhu, Y., et al. (2015). *Aligning books and movies: Towards story-like visual explanations by watching movies and reading books*. ICCV.

Filmography

Lewat, Osvalde. 2007. *Une affaire de nègres*. Documentary Film.

Teno, Jean-Marie. 1999. *Chef!* Documentary film.

Figure



Figure 1: Situational shot on the town of Douala

ENDNOTES

¹ Indeed the level of impact of sound and music in documentary film is rarely studied to the level of depth of analysis as in this article see (Durak 2013; Sikand (2016) and Yeung (2016) [Editor's note].