

## Concomitants of Socio-Cultural Exigencies on Narrative Preferences in the Kenyan “Riverwood” Film

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### ABSTRACT

In a report commissioned by the World Story Organization in 2008, Justine Edwards points out that storyline lies at the centre of problems that Kenyan films face in trying to “break down the wall preventing Kenyan films from being shown and celebrated beyond Kenyan borders” (2). This paper goes a step further to interrogate this observation through an analysis of three works by three representative Kenyan home grown film makers: Wandahuhu’s Njohera (Forgive Me), Simon Nduti’s Kikulacho (What Bites You) and Simiyu Barasa’s Toto Millionaire. These film makers have made films under the banner of a Kenyan film industry that has come to be informally known as Riverwood—the Kenyan film industry associated with Nairobi’s River Road Street where cheaply produced independent home videos are made in mass mainly by Kenyan film makers working with a Kenyan crew and cast. By measuring their works against narrative conventions established in classical cinema, this paper evaluates Kenyan home-grown film standards as defined by the narrative choices made by the film makers. In so doing, it is essentially guided by narratological theories developed by the constructivist school of film criticism. Constructivist film theory is founded on the tenet that it is the reader (viewer) of the film text that constructs the story and meanings in the story using the clues that the film maker puts before him or her on the screen. Other relevant theoretical positions are applied as need arises to cater for the multidisciplinary nature of film as an art. The methodology used is textual analysis and interpretation, therefore qualitative in nature.

Keywords: film, Kenya, riverwood



## Introduction

In the period between the 1910s and 1950s, the Hollywood studio system established what has come to be known as “the classical Hollywood narrative structure”. Due to its adoption the world over, this narrative structure has come to be referred to simply as the “classical film narrative system”. According to Pramaggiore and Wallis (2006), this system created a film style “in which the story is paramount,” and all its elements “contribute unobtrusively to the flow of the story” (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 23). Over time, this style has formed the most influential formula of film narrative construction.

The essence of the classical film narrative does not deviate much from the original Aristotelian conception of dramatic structure consisting of a beginning, middle and an end. However, it falls more along the lines of Tzvetlan Todorov’s interpretation of the three-act structure that starts with a state of equilibrium, develops through a period of disruption of equilibrium and ends with restoration of equilibrium (Buckland 2008, 38). This is a kernel form that shapes the story and its plot, and which film shares with most narrative arts, notably the novel and drama. It is therefore in the details of putting together the chain of events along the narrative cause-effect logic that classical film narrative “rules” become apparent—partly due to textual specificity exacted by a photographic image accompanied by a sound track; the basic unit of film language. It is here that Bordwell (2001) locates what he calls “duality” of film narrative; meaning the interplay between plot as *syuzhet* and story as *fabula*. It is here too that Pramaggiore locates five elements of filmic narrative: characters, actions, time, place and causality. For the purpose of this paper, characters, their action and dialogue are considered together as the three are virtually inseparable in the narrative process. To plot and story, time and space, causality and character, this paper adds narration and theme.

The interpretation of the elements mentioned above has been done here according to the constructivist conceptualisation of classical narrative form. The plot (*syuzhet*) constitutes both the diegetic and non-diegetic material explicitly presented on screen regardless of causal order. The story (*fabula*) constitutes the chronological causally ordered diegetic material, both explicit in the plot and inferred from plot cues (Bordwell, 62). Diegesis here simply means “the story world”. Time and space has both general and specific import: general in terms of historical/geographic location and specific in terms of editing/mise-en-scène. Both categories have broad implications on the overall flow and comprehension of a film story. Causality is a pervasive factor that applies to everything in the story and plot as well as to the process of narration. It refers to the cause-effect link between one event and another as dictated by spatio-temporal considerations, character motivation, social reality, thematic concerns or laws of probability and necessity. It also includes the factor of motivation by which any instance of a film narrative is justified by the

function it plays in the overall signification of the story in relation to other elements therein. Character is about causal agents in the narrative, their identity, roles, goals, actions, believability, their psychology and transformation by the end of the story. Theme speaks to the socio-cultural and ideological context within which a narrative operates, mostly at a sub-textual level. Finally, narration includes filmic devices (visual and audio) employed in the plot construction as well as the “voice and eyes” (perspective) through which we view and navigate the story.

In manipulating these elements in the constructivist mould, popular films governed by the classical narrative formula observe the following broad imperatives:

**Clarity.** Viewers should not be confused about space, time, events, or character motivations.

**Unity.** Connections between cause and effect must be direct and complete.

**Identification.** Characters should invite viewer empathy, be active and seek goals.

**Closure.** Third acts and epilogues should tie up loose ends and answer all questions.

**“Unobtrusive craftsmanship”** (Thompson 1999, 9). Stories are told in a manner that draws viewers into the diegesis and does not call attention to the storytelling process (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2006, 46).

Guided by these imperatives, the classical narrative elements are key to communication of meaning in cinematic storytelling. They have not only informed the technological and technical developments in the growth of cinema as a narrative art, they have done so in accordance with the viewer’s response. In a continual cycle of feedback, exposure to the classical style and techniques through the years has created in film audiences certain expectations regarding structural organisation of filmic material (Pramaggiore, 7-11) against which every new film is gauged in terms of how well it re-affirms, modifies or contravenes them. Diawara (1992) traces Anglophone Africa film legacy to this classical film culture via the British colonial regime that did not do much to encourage development of a local film aesthetic and industry in the same way that France did in Francophone countries of Africa. It may therefore be safely surmised that the Kenyan cinema-going public possesses film narrative sensibilities and expectations fairly comparable to any that have been acquired through exposure to classical (American commercial and European art) cinema. This fact is established through an observation of the development of cinema in Kenya over a century.

## Synopses

Following are story summaries (*fabulae*) of the three films treated in this review.

### **Kikulacho**

*Kikulacho* (Nduti, 2008) is the story of Pastor Edwin, a double-dealing man of God who cheats not only on God, but also on his family and the women he befriends. Edwin starts his ministry preaching in the streets. One year later, he is hired by People's Revival Church as the resident pastor. He immediately starts an affair with Sue, the office secretary. Back at home there is tension in the family. Pastor Edwin's wife, Gloria, upbraids him for his absence and lack of support. He lies to her that he has important church functions. Their teenage son and daughter, John and Mercy, exhibit delinquent behaviour that could be attributed to their father's neglect. While he drinks alcohol and jumps from one woman to another, his son is also engaging in substance abuse (cigarettes, bhang, and alcohol) and his daughter in illicit sex. In August 2005, Edwin wins one million shillings in *Bambua Tafrija* raffle, which leads to his dismissal from People's Revival Church (PRC) for setting a bad example by taking part in a contest organized by a brewing company. Edwin goes back to preaching in the street and continues his drinking and womanizing. One day, he is approached by Richard, one of his followers, who entrusts the pastor with his daughter for guidance and counseling. The pastor helps himself to her and soon thereafter, the girl is pregnant. In a revenge mission, Richard teams up with Sue, who happens to have had a child by the same Pastor. Richard befriends Mercy (the pastor's daughter) and sets a date with her at the same hotel room and time that Sue has called Edwin to join her. The story ends with Pastor in bed with his own daughter.

### **Njohera**

*Njohera* (Kimani, 2005) is the story of Wandahuhu, a family man who leaves home to find work in the city where he meets and marries another woman. Driven away by poverty and constant state of need, he leaves behind a family comprising of Wa Gacuma, his wife, and Gacuma, his son. They are all members of *Akorino*, a religious sect that uses a turban as symbol of faith. After three days away, Wandahuhu meets up with Nyakirata, a helpful tenant at a compound in a city suburb where he finds a room to stay. One day, Nyakirata is locked out of her house on account of rent arrears and she takes refuge at Wandahuhu's room where she takes the bed and he the couch. After three days, discomfort on the part of Wandahuhu causes them to share the bed. After a long absence from home, Wandahuhu's wife decides to send Gacuma to search for his father. He finds him living as husband and wife with Nyakirata. The turban is gone from his head. Gacuma fetches his mother and a verbal confrontation ends with Wandahuhu denouncing his rural family. Mother and son go back home. Gacuma is hired by some white folks as a film actor and he makes money enough to raise their standard of life beyond his mother's wildest dreams. Meanwhile in the city, Wandahuhu has fallen ill and is thrown out by Nyakirata, in whose name

he has registered all his property. He ends up a destitute beggar in the street. Hunger and desperation drives Wandahuhu back home where he asks for forgiveness. He is received with kindness by Wa Gacuma against her son's disinclination.

### **Toto Millionaire**

*Toto Millionaire* (Barasa, 2007) is the story of Toto, a little boy who must find money for her sick mother's medication and their upkeep. It all starts in a single-room hotel in a rural village market where a single mother, Mama Toto, is in bed, sick. Her son, Toto, goes around to relatives and friends begging money for medicine and food but is repulsed with hostile insults. One day, a motorist stops by the market and Toto sneaks into the back of his car and is transported to the city. In a city suburb, Toto runs into Supa and his friend Barry G, two disillusioned city council workers with dreams of getting rich through three-million shillings *Drink and Win* raffle. Toto immediately gets into trouble with the two, who take him for a street boy, but a certain prostitute intervenes. Supa hires Toto to sell his groundnuts and disguised *marijuana*. Meanwhile back home, his sick mother sets out in search of him. Soon, the winning number of the raffle is announced and Toto finds the winning bottle-top at Supa's house. He keeps it, escapes the two drunkards (Supa and Barry G) and embarks on a little journey to find Mamba Bottlers, the sponsors of the contest. On his way he encounters a taxi driver who assaults and injures him as he robs him of a bottle-top that later turns out to be the wrong one. Thereafter, Toto meets up with a delusional preacher who takes him to his house and sets about coaching him with the intention of using him to get sponsorship money from white philanthropists. But it is the prostitute who finally helps Toto get to Mamba Bottlers, where he meets Philip, the man in charge of the contest. Philip invites Toto to his house and attempts to steal the bottle-top at night. Meanwhile, his mother arrives in the city suburb only to be robbed of her basket of bananas by Barry G. The next day, Toto is presented with his prize of three million shillings on TV. Mama Toto travels back home and is shortly followed by Toto. Supa and Barry G arrive at the village and their snooping around in search of Toto's home discloses Toto's fortune and exposes the family to parasitic relatives, friends and neighbours.

### **Narration**

The term "narration" in the classical narrative system spans a wide spectrum of strategies and techniques of story delivery, that is, how the narrative puts together story information and relays it to the viewer. In constructivist conception, it is the narration that provides cues for the viewer to form and test hypotheses, and make inferences that help him or her build the story from the plot. It therefore has far reaching implications on aspects of time and space, causality, character, mise-en-

scène, cinematography and post-production processes of image and sound editing. The cumulative effect of the manipulation of these elements in narration, according to a constructivist approach to understanding film narrative, results in different levels of range and depth of information accessible to the viewer (Bordwell, 2001, 70-75). Range of information refers to the extent of knowledge that the narrating agent makes available. This can fall anywhere between restricted and unrestricted depending on the point of view of narration. Depth of information on the other hand refers to levels of subjectivity and/or objectivity of knowledge that is made available in terms of how deep the narrative agent allows us into the characters' psyche. Both range and depth are therefore relative terms that occur at different levels at different points of the narrative. This paper approaches narration as it is prominently manifest in the three Kenyan stories in relation to narrational techniques prevalent in the classical film style whose basic principle is immersion through unobtrusive narration, that is, one that does not attract attention to itself.

### **Point of View and Cinematography**

Point of view primarily means the eyes and ears through which we see and hear the goings on in the narrative—regardless of whether it is the vantage point where the film's narrating voice places the viewer or the optical/aural point-of-view (POV shot) that relays events through the eyes and ears of a specific character. As such, the main component of point of view is the camera, from which we can get varying degrees of restricted/unrestricted and subjective/objective views of events.

The three films under study use omniscient narration. The camera takes us from one place to another, showing us events that happen independently, and without privileging any one character's view of things or psycho-emotional disposition. Characters' internal states are accessed through external monologue, as in the instance where the deluded preacher in *Toto Millionaire* addresses an empty chair as if talking to Toto, who has already fled. The range and depth of knowledge in omniscient narration is therefore largely unrestricted and objective. Only at one point in *Njohera* does the narrating agent get subjective when we penetrate Wa Gacuma's memory of the moment she bode farewell to her husband. This invites the viewer's identification as it intensifies her feelings of loneliness to which we get intimately involved.



A “water drop” dissolve in close-up marks our entry into the memories of Wa Gacuma



**Figure 1:** Subjective narration in *Njohera*

The autonomy of the narrating agent afforded by omniscient narration suits the three stories given their illustrational nature and purpose. Every incident is slotted in to fit into a framework of thematic significance, which is the foremost organising principle of events in the narratives. Differences in narration occur at the level of attitude and nuances of view in what can be termed “camera personality”.

In *Kikulacho* and *Njohera*, the narration proceeds in a way that the camera is largely uninvolved in the story’s goings on. Its only concern is to record characters, their situation and their actions without meddling in or commenting on them or their environment. Whereas in the former it does this in a methodical manner that is sometimes frivolous, in the latter, it does so in a passive and servile manner. But in both, it mostly maintains an almost stand-offish attitude that borders more on observation than on narration. This is marked by a stationary camera whose occasional movement is essentially for a re-framing rather than narrating purpose. The net effect of this method is that we end up interacting with the film in a rather superficial manner that does not delve into details that would engage us deeply with the narrative’s goings on. For instance, this lack of intimacy compels some of the characters to express their intentions and emotions by indicating them externally as evident in the following images.

(Left) Pastor Edwin behaves in a way that suggests ill intention and  
(right) Richard indicates how aggrieved he feels after discovering his  
daughter is pregnant



**Figure 2:** Externalisation in *Kikulacho*

*Kikulacho*'s methodical manner is best exemplified in its use of conventional techniques such as shot/reverse and establishing shots without making more spatial meaning than just to tell us "this is where we are and this is what is going on". For example, the series of long shots of buildings and other objects that depict the Nairobi cityscape at the start of the second part of the film (scene 7) are all at a low angle that establishes little spatial relationship, neither between them nor with the significant action that follows. A classical establishing shot would use an aerial angle that zooms in from an extremely long shot in a manner analogous to literary descriptive passages, to zero in on the significant action in a manner analogous to literary dialogue passages. However, given the illustrational functioning of the sequence in *Kikulacho*, the viewer gets an accurate, though approximate, picture of the location of action the same way he/she does from the transitional shots of a mansion.



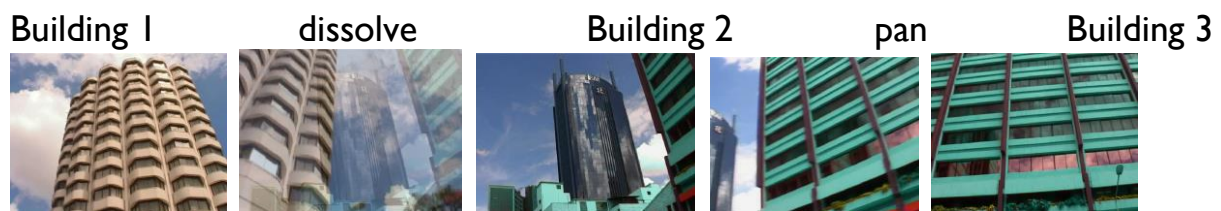


A succession of buildings to mark the cityscape end with Edwin's placement in its general location



**Figure 3:** Transitional establishing shots in *Kikulacho*

A comparison with *Toto Millionaire's* treatment of similar images, indeed starting with the very same building and using the same low angle shots in an establishing-cum-transitional sequence (scene 8), shows what difference conscious narration rather than illustration can make. Here, the shot on the first skyscraper dissolves into the next before a pan takes us to the building in which the significant action is taking place.



**Fig 4:** Transitional establishing shots in *Toto Millionaire*

In *Kikulacho*, methodical narration is also evident in dialogue scenes where characters are observed from three vantage positions in space: together, from character 1's position and from character 2's position. This is the classical shot/reverse-shot convention, but in *Kikulacho* it gives away little of the characters' psycho-emotional relationship by avoiding a direct point-of-view or a close-up reaction shot of any character. In this way, it serves only a spatial function. But in a few instances in *Kikulacho*, the narrating agent acts out of its methodical character

and develops a fleeting identity through editing. An example occurs at the end of scene five and beginning of scene six:

John's receding back is followed by a zoom-in on bottle tops in the dust, a cross-fade to crystal balls bearing a title and a cut to John and Gloria days later



**Figure 5:** Narration in *Kikulacho*

Here, we watch the receding backs of Edwin then John. But we stay behind and the camera zooms in on the bottle tops the two have just discarded on the ground. We then cross-fade. The image then dissolves and we enter the next shot looking at crystal balls of a chandelier imitation that shortly gives way to the characters in the new scene (Gloria, John and Mercy). The narrative conception and artistic intent in this sequence is quintessential classical style especially in the way the image of bottle-tops in the dust transmutes to “chandelier” crystal balls minutes after one of the bottle-tops wins Edwin a million Kenyan Shillings in prize money. It portends a metamorphosis from dust to gems; from poverty to wealth. But this narrative significance is watered down by the sequence’s frivolous execution. Firstly, the camera seems to follow John’s receding back for a slight moment before “changing its mind” and “nosing about” over the trash in search of the bottle tops. A classical camera would remain dead still “watching” the receding figure of the character before smoothly tilting down to “look at” the bottle tops contemplatively. Secondly, the relationship between the “crystal chandelier’s” location in space and the characters is not established in scene six as a cut (instead of a zoom out) links this shot with the next (of Gloria and John). This makes it feel like the crystal balls are there to serve a non-diegetic function (as a nice backdrop to the transition title “August 2005”) rather than a narrative role, since we are left unsure of whether the “chandelier” is in the same room as the characters.

The narrating agent’s identity in *Njohera* is even more lifeless if unintended technical hitches that draw attention to the camera (hand\_held shaky recording, manual light and colour adjustment and other evidences of the camera operator and post-production picture correction) are ignored. Action is viewed from a single camera position in a theatrical fashion. This creates a disinterested or passive narration. Where the camera “fetches” other images to enrich the main action

images, it does so with a servile or what Barthes, as quoted by Thompson, (Rosen 1986, 131) might call obtuse—manner. For instance when Wa Gacuma and Gacuma are through listening to Wandahuhu’s voice-over reading the letter in scene three, we rise from an eye level to approach them from a slightly over-the-head angle, then stoop to a low angle, before clumsily rising again to circle behind their back in a manoeuvre that attracts attention to the camera movement more than to anything else. The intention of the movement is understandably to mimic the mobile frame of a classical tracking shot. But in the absence of a well thought out succession of camera movements, and perhaps the equipment to facilitate its smooth execution, this sequence ends up being little more than a wishful approximation of camera mobility.



Camera movements in *Njohera* start with eye level, through high and low angle (above) to end with a semi-circular movement round the backs of the characters (below)



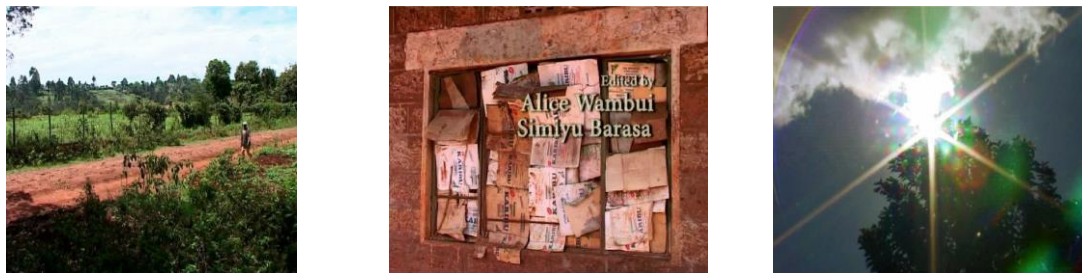
**Figure 6:** Narration in *Njohera*

While the frivolity of the camera in *Kikulacho* may be said to match the frivolity of its main character and the narrative on the whole, the servility of *Njohera*’s camera is not defensible in the same way. It only shows that narration was not considered much of a factor in the conception of this narrative, its end being only to illustrate a moral lesson using recorded images and sounds. But as Andrew (1984, 14) puts it, “the sheer recording of an event...fails to attain the level of *cinema*” because of implications of “the twin experience spectators are given in every film: that of recognizing something they can identify and that of constructing something worth identifying” These two Kenyan films tend to favour recognition at the expense, or to the exclusion, of construction.

A more “constructivist” identity of the narrating agent is crafted in *Toto Millionaire*.

The camera in this film manifests awareness of exactly what it wants to tell by positioning itself strategically and showing us as much significant detail as possible. For instance, it sets the tone right from the first establishing shot of a lone figure against an open field in deep focus. This not only establishes the rural setting, it foreshadows Toto's vulnerability in a wide unfathomable world of the city later in the story. The camera then takes us to another significant image: a window boarded up with old carton papers in place of glass panes. This signifies the poverty and perpetual state of want that pervades the film throughout. The very last shot of the narrative reiterates this feeling of gloom and stasis as the camera leaves the earthly characters and tilts upwards as if in appeal to the celestial. One is led to infer that unlike in *Kikulacho*, the bottle tops in *Toto Millionaire* are not likely to metamorphose into a crystal chandelier, in spite of the latter's sentimental ending title.

The first two images and the last of *Toto Millionaire* that set the pathos of the story



**Figure 7:** Narration in *Toto Millionaire*

A good example of strategic positioning is also noted in the flagrantly low-angled front and rear shots of Toto running to exaggerate his flight through space as indicative of a race against time, both in his quest for a solution to the emergency at home and in his desire to get to Mamba bottlers before his enemies catch up with him. The reverse of these shots can be found in scene six when Toto escapes from the preacher's house. This high angle shot from a stationary camera draws out our sympathy by creating a sad picture of a diminutive Toto against a big, hostile and impersonal world in a way that says "there he goes again".



Toto's flight from the preacher's house from a high angle



**Figure 8:** The running motif in *Toto Millionaire*

The inquisitive character of the narrator in this film has already been established in the analysis of causality. The parenthetical events mentioned are bracketed by a “sneaky” camera that keeps “peeking” at events that are somewhat contingent, though not pertinent to the story. This “nosiness” of the narrating agent explores space better in this film compared to the other two. For instance it takes us through narrow alleyways through which sneaky thieves disappear, like Barry G after robbing Mama Toto. It also reveals details that could otherwise be overlooked unless borne on dialogue. An example is the discovery by Toto of the winning bottle-top at Supa’s house and his treacherous hiding of it in his hip pocket. This could paint Toto as dishonest, but given the way the narrator presents it, coupled with our knowledge of the gravity of his situation, a little dishonesty is a small price to pay and we accept to tacitly collude with the narrator to let Toto keep the bottle top.

(Left) Barry G runs though an alley with Mama Toto’s basket, (centre) the winning bottle top in Toto’s hands and (right) Toto hides the bottle top in his pocket.



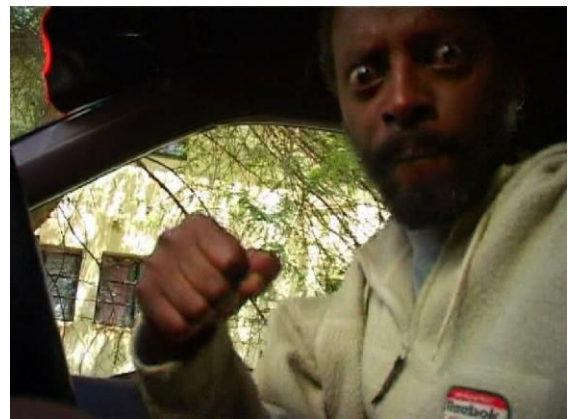
**Figure 9:** Prying camera in *Toto Millionaire*

However, this prying personality of *Toto Millionaire's* narrator is exaggerated in certain scenes. The most obvious is at the award ceremony in scene eight when Philip announces Toto the winner of three million shillings. The narrator positions us behind a diegetic television crew recording the event, over whose shoulders we view the action through the feedback screen of the crew's camera operator. Its narrative and artistic intent would serve as an exemplary instance of the way a film narrative can circumvent classical conventions in a way that is novel, fresh and enriching. For instance, it creates a distancing that allows Philip to look straight into our camera with the illusion created being that this is mediated by the diegetic one, hence acceptable. But the length of time this scene is allowed to run (including the diegetic post-recording comments by Philip) is meant to "rub in" this ingenuity, greatly watering down its effect by calling attention to itself. A classical rendition of such an instance would show a brief part of the live recording event and, using a match-on-action cut, take the viewer to the television footage reporting the event in the pub and at the preacher's house.

*Toto Millionaire* also uses the conventional shot/reverse-shot, POV and close-up shots to capture more than just spatial dynamics. Unlike *Kikulacho* and *Njohera*, characters are shown in these types of shots even where they are not the ones speaking. This reveals characters' reactions and emotions. For instance, Philip's contempt for the taxi driver is captured in a reaction shot while a point-of-view shot aptly captures the latter's brutality earlier when he attacks Toto. Toto's own state of wretchedness, suffering and vulnerability is indelibly captured in close-up shots.



A contemptuous Philip in a reaction shot and the brutal taxi driver from Toto's POV



The miserable faces of Toto captured in medium close-up



**Figure 10:** Some types of shots in *Toto Millionaire*

## SOUND

Sound in filmic narration can be analysed at two major levels: diegetic and non-diegetic. Diegetic sounds are those that are deemed to emanate from the story world, such as those that are made by the characters and those that are environmental. Non-diegetic sounds are those that are inserted into the plot and that are obviously not part of the story world, such as voice-overs and mood music. In the three films, both these types of sounds are present. Their nature and design may vary, but their functions remain more or less the same.

In *Njohera*, there is a simple design of the sound track that is characteristic of the film's essentially simple construction. There is only one non-diegetic "theme" song: *Be Magnified* (Don Moen), which announces the central theme right from the opening titles accompanied by introductory diegetic clips of the characters inset against a non-diegetic still background. The words of the song makes it obvious why it is chosen:

I have made you too small in my eyes, oh Lord *forgive me*  
And I have believed in a lie, that you were unable to help me  
But now oh Lord I see my wrong  
You're my heart and show yourself strong  
And in my eyes and with my song

Oh Lord be magnified, oh Lord be magnified

The film's title *Njohera* means "forgive me" in Gikuyu, and is captured in the last words of the song's first line. These are the same words that Wandahuhu utters upon his return home at the last scene of the film. Besides its touching message, the song's instrumental track paints a poignant tone that recurs at every transition as a premonition of the sentiments on which the story concludes. The film ends with the same verse of the song against the same non-diegetic background as if to appeal to something, someone, beyond the diegesis, which reiterates the film's core religious anchorage of the film. Although the overall character of the soundtrack in this aspect is rather static, its illustrational function in the narrative is apt and complete.

The only other instance of non-diegetic sound in this film is of Wandahuhu's voice over reading his letter in scene three. While the idea of it is conventional in the classical film mode of narration, its execution invades the diegesis in a jarring manner. First, it is Gacuma who is asked by his mother to read the letter. Second, Wandahuhu's voice does not flow the way words of a letter would; at some point he repeats words or rephrases a sentence in a live speech manner. Thirdly, and most jarringly, the two characters in the diegesis behave towards the paper the way one would to a person in a live conversation, including waving goodbye at the end. If this is intended as a personification technique, a better manner of executing it would have been to superimpose a clip of Wandahuhu's image on the paper. This is one instance that demonstrates the distancing effect of illustrational storytelling.

Some of Wa Gacuma's and Gacuma's reactions to Wandahuhu's voice-over reading a letter

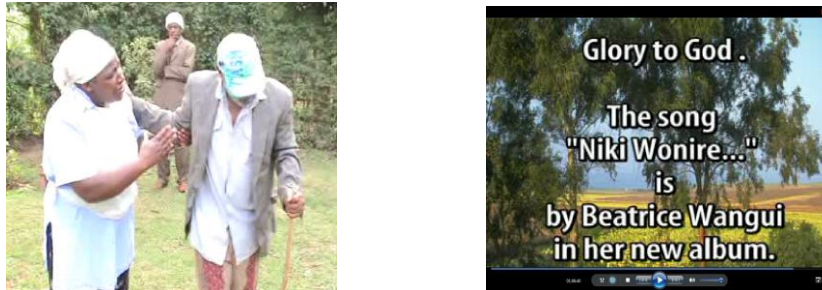


**Figure 11:** Excess in narration of *Njohera*

There are several instances of diegetic singing in the plot of *Njohera*. When Wandahuhu leaves home for work in the city at the end of scene one, Wa Gacuma escorts him singing happily together an Agikuyu song whose words translate as "travel with Jesus, He is the rock". This signifies hope, and contrasts sharply with a song she sings to him in the last scene when he returns home. Its central line translates as "what did you find that caused you to backslide?" It both bemoans and

reprimands his slip in faith. However, it also serves a non-diegetic end; that of publicising Beatrice Wangui (Wa Gacuma in the film) and her album that features the song as captured in the last frame of the film.

Wa Gacuma sings to Wandahuhu a song that is advertised in a title on the last frame of the film



**Figure 12:** Diegetic and non-diegetic use of songs in *Njohera*

Other diegetic sounds are environmental. They include birds chirping, a cock crowing, a cow's moo, a radio and other noises that serve spatial and contextual functions. Some of these sounds also invade the diegesis. An example is where an unintended grating sound causes Wa Gacuma to cringe. Another is the sound of a cup's contact with Wandahuhu's teeth that reveals it to be empty while purportedly at least half-filled with porridge.

Wa Gacuma cringes at unintended diegetic sound and Wandahuhu's empty cup is given away by its sound



**Figure 13:** Diegetic violation of sound in *Njohera*

*Kikulacho's* sound scheme is comparable to that of *Njohera* with the only difference being in scale, as is with the difference in amount of narrative material. Non-diegetically, where *Njohera* utilises only one recorded song with precision, *Kikulacho* uses numerous recordings mostly for mood and filling up the textural spaces of the audio spectrum especially in transitions and where dialogue is muted. Like *Njohera*,

Western music, mainly of hip-hop and Rhythm and Blues character is chosen: Blackstreet, Snoop Doggy Dog, Peabo Bryson, Maria Carey, Michael Learns to Rock, and suchlike. These are used judiciously for an unobtrusive effect. Hip-hop is associated with youthful characters, while R&B goes with romantic scenes with occasional silencing of the diegetic ambience to let the words of a song carry the narrative. Such words as “I’d give anything to fall in love” and “Love me please, just a little bit longer” accompany images of Pastor Edwin’s escapades with several women (scene nine) and Richard’s outing with Mercy (Scene fourteen *b*) respectively. But unlike in *Njohera* where the words of the song reflect the meaning of the story accurately, the words here do not reveal the duplicitous nature of these two affairs. They just set a general tone to illustrate the mood of romance.

However, other instances in *Kikulacho* use instrumental music whose sound punctuates and intensifies the emotional atmosphere and its fluctuation in a scene. For instance, as Richard and Sue are putting together the final details of their trap in the last scene of the film, a foreboding instrumental piece gathers momentum in the background. Its volume is highest as Pastor Edwin enters Room 103 and has sex with his daughter. Then follows an ominous, discordant tune played in the lower registers of bass and piano accompanied by thunderous sounds. It runs relentlessly to the end with a finality that paints an atmosphere of doom as final credits roll up. In the absence of action showing the consequence of this final action, this sound is all we have to work with in speculating what becomes of the characters. Needless to say, it does not bode well.

Diegetic music is also present in *Kikulacho*. The pastor sings during his sermons in the streets, and with his congregation in the church and outdoor services. This happens as a matter of course within the context of worship. Like in *Njohera* other diegetic sounds are environmental: the television, cars honking, the clamour and din of life. There is little violation of the diegesis apart from a few instances where the sound track inexplicably disappears and silence pervades the atmosphere, which can be blamed on post-production glitches more than on narrative intent. The choice of western recorded popular music (sung in English) in the two films whose medium is largely African (Kikuyu and Kiswahili) may be said to be indicative of Kenya’s socio-cultural environment. Nevertheless, it reinforces the “illusions of grandeur” noted under causality, especially given that there exists an inexhaustible body of similar music by Kenyan musicians.

As in camera use, *Toto Millionaire* presents a more deliberate design of the sound track. Little, if any, recorded music is used in preference for simple tunes, rhythms and sound bites that unobtrusively serve the story non-diegetically at four major levels: mood, character/action identification, transition and general commentary. The film starts and ends with plaintive yet playful sounds of an instrumental ensemble that includes African percussive rhythms; the most prominent of which is a xylophonic



rhythm that is mostly associated with Toto's running action.

But the dominant mood of the story is established at the first scene, as Toto talks to his mother. We hear a melancholic tune that recurs throughout in the background of the film's action and dialogue. It is a simple intermittent melody in minor tonality that is accompanied by similarly intermittent arpeggiated piano sound bites and an occasional bass that often carries the melody. Together with the xylophonic rhythm, which fluctuates according to the tempo of action, this melody is the aural narrating agent that sets the static; bleak yet light tone of the film. It also marks most of the transitions where it is sometimes joined by flowing strings for a fuller aural texture. Notably too, it marks Toto's discovery of the prize bottle top with a rise in volume that foreshadows the suffering Toto will go through as a result. Another set of "ostinato" sounds appears twice to imitate Toto's frenetic action of changing clothes in scene eight to communicate his impatience and the urgency of the moment.

But what may be considered the theme tune of the film due to its memorability and prominence in length and volume is a groovy genge-type piece that recurs especially during considerable spells of action without dialogue. It is associated mainly with Toto's two car rides (with the stranger who unknowingly transports him to the city and with the taxi driver who assaults him). Its upbeat character creates a sense of hope and promise that goes well with the journey segments. Its function in this manner is however negated where it accompanies Supa and Barry G's search for Toto's home in the village towards the end of the film. It ends up serving more as a substitute for dialogue.

The playful xylophonic rhythm mainly associated with Toto's running action (repeat marks are used to indicate its length and not the number of times it is repeated)



**Figure 14:** Rhythmic motif in *Toto Millionaire*

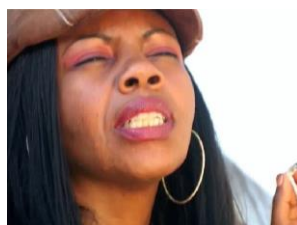


(Above) the dominant melodic motif that recurs in various timbres and fragments throughout the film and (below) the upbeat **genge**-type instrumental groove that recurs with some variation in the film (repeat marks are used to indicate its length and not the number of times it is repeated)



Figure 15: Melodic motifs in *Toto Millionaire*

Other non-diegetic musical sounds include a reggae rhythm that accompanies the prostitute’s action of smoking marijuana. It appeals to our stereotyped social schema that associates reggae music with this drug. But whether by intent or mere coincidence, a soft sustained crash of a cymbal in the sound track is heard at the same time as the prostitute inhales a lungful of bhang smoke with an expression of ecstasy on her face in a fleeting powerful moment that fuses the diegetic with the non-diegetic.



Ecstatic sound and action of this prostitute coincides with the crash of cymbals in the sound track  
Figure 16: Synchronization of non-diegetic and diegetic sound and image in *Toto Millionaire*



Diegetic sound in *Toto Millionaire* also functions at both the literal environmental level as well as symbolic semantic level. Apart from such sounds of cars driving past, constructors hammering or grinding at something, people coughing, the radio and others that give the narrative ambience and spatial depth, some sounds have been deliberately selected to comment on significant aspects of the narrative. An example is the sound of bottle tops, when a barman throws them at Toto, when Toto himself is playing with them or when Barry G is playing draughts with Supa or somebody else. The image and sound of them is a constant pointer to the ultimate part that a bottle top plays in the narrative outcome of the film. They become narratively unifying by creating a motif that raises their stature above the other objects, with the same effect that wistful piano chords draw our attention to the poster announcing the raffle competition in scene two.

Barry G's desire to win is echoed by wistful piano chords and Toto playing in one of the bottle top's motifs



**Figure 17:** Sound and motif in *Toto Millionaire*

An interesting treatment of diegetic sound occurs in scene six where pieces of the preacher's words "The Bible says repent now, the time is near" are repeated over and over with a staccato effect that makes the line ring unreal. Besides being consistent with the preacher's delusional state of mind, it lampoons profit-driven religiosity.

As evident in choices made in these three films, the audio track design of Kenyan film narratives is just perfunctory. This happens to be the case even with the classical film tradition of which Stam (2000, 222), with regard to music, notes that "the leitmotif became a rather mechanical device for allying particular themes to particular characters, themes which were returned to with minimal variation during the course of the film" and "tended to be redundant, subliminal, hackneyed, and comfortably tonal," to imply that not much creativity or freshness generally goes into the design of the soundtrack. But Stam goes further to point out that "since music is closely tied to communitarian culture and 'structure of feeling', it can tell us where a film's emotional heart is". *Toto Millionaire* seems the more conscious of this "soul-locating"

function of music in film narration.

### RHYTHM AND EDITING

Rhythm refers to the flow of events in the plot, especially with regard to tempo and its fluctuation as well as temporal patterns of images and sound. This is mostly determined by editing, which in turn is determined by the length of shots and the kind of action they bear. The three films under study may be said to fall under the melodrama genre in a broad sort of way. The heterosexual romance in *Kikulacho*, the family drama of *Njohera* and the sentimentality of *Toto Millionaire* are all hallmarks of this genre, often marked by a sedate pace. We may therefore characterise the tempo of the three stories as such. On average, *Kikulacho*'s pace may be said to be quicker than *Njohera*'s, with *Toto Millionaire*'s falling somewhere in between, but they all fall within the same range.

The classical continuity style of editing is largely unviolated in the three films. Instances that could be deemed a violation, such as in scene two of *Toto Millionaire* where Toto is seen heading screen-right in one shot then screen-left in the next, can be explained away by the context (city streets can lead you one way then another) or circumstance (Toto is new in the city and trying to find his way about). Most shot-to-shot transitions are ordinary cuts that link complete units of action/dialogue. This means that shot length is determined to a large extent by action or dialogue length. For this reason, the fairly long single take dialogue scenes of *Njohera* gives it a comparatively slow pace that is well suited to its simple narration style. *Kikulacho*'s shots are fairly short, while *Toto Millionaire*'s prying and reflective narration makes the camera linger on a shot for a while. But it is in this last film that more sophisticated editing techniques are used. For instance, the match-on-action cut is utilised to take the viewer from a general view of things to details. An example of this occurs in scene four when Toto discovers the winning bottle-top. We see him pick it up in a medium shot before the camera zeros in on it in his hand and then on his hip region in close-up as he stuffs it away into his pocket. Scene transitions in the three films are also kept simple with fades, cross-fades and simple cuts being the most common. *Njohera* also avoids stylised transitions apart from an instance where a spin is used in a narratively significant way.

Wandahuhu's suffering on one scene (left) spins into Gacuma's grand property plans in the next (right)



**Figure 18:** Stylised editing in *Njohera*

In this poignant transition, Wandahuhu's downturn in life is contrasted with Gacuma's upturn in a way that casts the former's mistakes into sharp perspective. A comparably stylised transition used in *Kikulacho* can hardly be said to serve any such purpose apart from marking temporal and spatial changeover.

A stylised transition indicates passage of time (left) and space (right) in *Kikulacho*



**Figure 19:** Stylised editing in *Kikulacho*

As mentioned earlier, *Kikulacho's* use of transitional objects, cross-cutting, intercuts and montage, also adds to the vitality of its rhythm. So too does the use of sound bridge in several scenes where for instance the voice of a character is heard slightly ahead of his entry into a scene so that the visual is out of synch with the aural in a way that does not compromise the narrational integrity but in fact adds to its elegance. *Toto Millionaire* seems to avoid any such overt transitions in favour of the conventional cut and fade. However, its rhythm is adversely affected by its entry of several scenes too early and exit of them too late. The most jarring of this is the one at the live recording of the award ceremony mentioned earlier. The scene is allowed to run to ridiculous excesses where we see the post recording going on as Philip looks at the diegetic television crew and grinning awkwardly, says:

I...I think I've...I have finished (awkward pause). You have...you have taken enough pictures, now we are good. (faltering) Was it ok – the sound maybe? I don't know what people think. Was I being heard clearly? Eeh? (pause) I...we are now on air, isn't it? (cameraman nods) Yah! (laughs)

Philip addressing the diegetic television crew with Toto seemingly switched off after the live recording



**Figure 20:** Late scene exit in *Toto Millionaire*

If this is intended for comic effect, it not only falls flat, it also succeeds in unnecessarily disrupting the rhythm and pushing many a viewer right out of the story world in the way it stands out more as an editing error. Even the evidence of the diegetic camera mediation is absent as evident in the figure above. The film also abounds with early scene entries, frequently marked by perfunctory phone calls, characters whistling or time-filling dialogue that includes gibberish. For instance, when the taxi driver and later Toto come to Mamba bottlers to claim their prize, we arrive at the office several moments before the significant action, “compelling” Philip and his secretary (Rebecca) to “entertain” us with time-filling pretexts of romance that are not only unconvincing and perfunctory, but of no narrative consequence. They end up being feeble and incomplete illustrations of workplace romance as their words demonstrate in the following exchange that takes place before Toto’s arrival:

Seated at her desk, Rebecca picks up a phone receiver as Philip approaches her from behind.

Philip: Sasa Rebecca

Rebecca: (to the phone, simultaneously) Yes, hallo!

Philip: Rebecca

Rebecca: (still to the phone, simultaneously) Umm...ok (continues talking on phone as Philip leans on the back of her seat) I'll... ok. Hey, just a moment (puts down the phone)

Philip: (straightening up and holding his hip self-consciously) Now, why didn't you hug me this morning?

Rebecca: (self-consciously) Oh, hallo! Hey Philip, you are really looking good in that shirt, eh?

Philip: Do you know I bought it on my trip to Germany.

Rebecca: Are you sure?

Philip: Yeah

designer, (bending to show her the design label on the inside of the shirt collar) Van Basten.

Rebecca: Wewe! Now that's why I say you are my man.

Philip: (overlapping) But why didn't you hug me?

Rebecca: (ill at ease) Ai, but why should I hug you? That's...that's...ai, surely

Philip: I thought it was because of yesterday. Anyway, I am expecting somebody,

Rebecca: Aha

Philip: Tell them I am not around, and... (gesturing towards his office shyly) you know...

Rebecca: (overlapping) Ok, sawa

Philip: ...si you said you are coming over now.

Rebecca: I'll come over.

Philip heads back to his office as Toto enters the frame.



Figure 21: Early scene entry in *Toto Millionaire*

## STYLE

Consequent to the disparities so far observed, style in the three films is as diverse as their narration. While *Njohera* has a documentary quality about it, *Toto Millionaire* exhibits some art film element and *Kikulacho* is essentially melodramatic. *Njohera*'s documentary style comes out in its use of long outdoor shots using natural lighting that renders much of its other narrative elements natural. Little about it comes out as premeditated or stylised. The characters, their physical and psychological appearance, their actions and dialogue, the setting, the soundtrack and editing are kept as basic as possible. This sets a matter-of-fact tone about its whole rendition

which suits its bucolic character in such a way as to tell us that “this is how the Kenyan rural folk look, talk, behave and live”. Although it has several instances of unconvincing actions, its use of a medium that the actors are comfortable with (Gikuyu) somehow frees the actors to embody their character more comfortably and interact with ease.

*Toto Millionaire* on the other hand tends to go out of its way to deliberately design its content. From the scripted dialogue, through the trash-and-cans suburban setting and designed soundtrack to the hues that give its visuals a “burning” effect (symbolic of the severity of the characters’ living conditions), this film speaks of deliberate selection of elements. It sets a sentimental melancholic tone with some light touch here and there to present both the tragedy and folly of static existentialism. Despite, and perhaps because of, its deliberate construction, this film has an artificial aura that makes it deliver less than it promises. Its dialogue is erratic (at some points studio pasted and unsynchronised with the image), its mise-en-scène, while well selected, is poorly staged (the village market is markedly deserted as is the Mamba Bottler’s premise for such a “rich” company), some actions are knee-jerk and it raises a host of issues that are not satisfactorily treated.

*Kikulacho*’s melodramatic style emanate from its content and rendition which is romantic in both senses of the word. The tragedy of frivolous life and vanity is presented with affected sophistication characterised by movement and activity that is essentially cyclic. The succession of ineffectual action and dialogue in exotic-looking settings by a string of loosely related characters all presented in a convoluted narrative strategy is symptomatic of the loss of purpose in today’s Kenyan urban society and its preoccupation with the wishful and mundane as much as it constitutes a narrative approach that is pretentious and carefree.

On the whole, however, these films share elements of the different styles. Being family dramas for instance gives them all a quality of melodrama. Their visual style also contains a lot of documentary qualities. For instance, they are shot on location for the most part using natural light. In addition *Toto Millionaire* incorporates many unstaged events, such as the views of the streets of suburban Nairobi with its characteristic hustle and bustle of people who are part of the scenery but not part of narrative action. Even *Kikulacho* seems to document Edwin’s debauchery using an iterative documentary approach that Bordwell (2001) calls categorical in which “progression from segment to segment depends too much on repetition (‘and here is another example...’)” (Bordwell, 115). Bordwell goes further to state that the simple development of this form “risks boring the spectator” as “our expectations will be easily satisfied”.



## Conclusion

This paper has traversed with a broad stroke the essential elements that are central to classical film narrative, namely, causality, time and space, characterisation, narration (visual and aural) and style. It has clearly demonstrated that in manipulating these elements vis-à-vis classical film narrative conventions, Kenyan film\_makers exhibit skills that range from rudimentary to occasional flashes of brilliance with the common pattern lying somewhere between the two extremes. Unfortunately, the world of cinema favours brilliance and exactitude more than anything else. On the question of balance between visual images and dialogue in narration for instance, it has been noted that the films, especially *Njohera* and *Kikulacho*, rely more on dialogue. Comey (2002) puts it bluntly that “in film, when dialogue explains the story or the situation or feelings, it comes across as fake and boring” (Comey, 15). Comey represents the world viewer\_ship that this study is exhorting Kenyan film\_makers to strive for. If they are to reach it, a lot need to cut down not only on this over-reliance on dialogue, but also on what Comey calls mechanical indication or projection of sentiments rather than genuine emotional expressions that emanate from character interaction with each other and their situation. That said however, there remains the question about the purpose that the films serve within the unique Kenyan socio-cultural situation. It has emerged clearly in this analysis that Kenyan film\_makers, driven perhaps by the socio-cultural demands placed upon them by the society, make their narrative choices based more on illustrational than narrational considerations. A few instances will serve to illustrate this.

Firstly, in cinematography, the camera rarely penetrates individual or private spaces. This is a cultural attitude in many African societies where space is shared and individual space respected. Therefore the camera will almost always circumscribe the collective and where one individual is framed, it is in the context of his environment, a space that implies not only the absence of the others but an extension of the individual. That is why instead of the camera painting for us the very personal states of the characters, the characters express them outwardly by indication and loud acting. That is also why the close-up is such a rare technique in the film analysed here. The camera is here to tell a story illustratively; not to invade private space. For example, when Wandahuhu goes into bed with Nyakirata, the camera does not make it beyond the curtain that conceals that private space. This does not leave the viewer wondering what happened between the two when the narrative resumes in the next scene with a long leap in time.

Secondly, in choice of a soundscape, the Kenyan filmmakers as represented here prefer to go with the social and the familiar whether it be in terms of the selected musical tunes or sound effects. The songs used in *Kikulacho* and *Njohera* are common tunes that many Kenyans can hum along. This familiarity and social identity with the intended audience informs the film maker’s choices for the sound track, including

everyday sounds like cockcrows, the radio, people at work, honking of cars, and the like. Where originality is attempted as in *Toto Millionaire*, the resultant composition has to strike a chord with the audience in terms of style (African percussive music, *genge*, reggae).

Thirdly, editing is kept as close to the natural social rhythm of things as possible. Africa is still a very oral society and much of her social action is dialogue-based. The editing as evident in our analysis here respects the conventions of this culture such as the turn-taking character of African discourse. It presents complete units of dialogue in one shot before moving to another complete unit of dialogue in the next shot. Simplicity rules, and is complemented by presentation of other elements of the *mise-en-scène*: lighting, setting, physical action and such. Even *Toto Millionaire*'s early and late scene entries and exits is in keeping with African social life. Africans take time – before 'attacking' an important matter – by means of circumspect action and are never in a hurry to leave an exciting event. That is a conception of time and its utility that the film maker brings into film narration.

All these factors among others not analysed in this paper give the *Riverwood* film its illustrational character and dictate its preference of a style that is most amenable to such choices. A melodrama that is receptive to theatrical and documentary elements seems to be the genre of choice for this industry. Whether this will lead it to the 'high table' of world cinema is something that remains to be seen, and a question for another paper.

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