# Historicizing the Action Film Genre in Nollywood: A Critical Reading of Teco Benson's *Mission to Nowhere.*

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*Abstract*
*The action film is one of the most substantial film genres that has revolutionized the cinema in most film cultures of the world. In the cause of fighting against unimaginable odds action films often presents its hero in a thin line between life and death. Thus action film which usually revolves around violence, close combats, pursuit and escape among others, typically ends victoriously for the hero. In this study, the researchers undertake the historical inquiry of the development of the action film genre in Nollywood with the view of establishing a chronological background that propelled the emergent of the genre in Nigeria. The study shall adopt a purposive sampling of Teco Benson's Mission to Nowhere, one of the films that firmly established the action film genre in Nollywood and through a qualitative methodology embark on its filmic analyses. The study discovers that among other factors, vengeance is key to the sustainability of the action film genre in Nigeria and therefore*

*recommends that due attention be paid to the historical study of film in Nigeria.*

**Introduction.**

Action film, as implied by the name describes a genre of film that is propelled by action. As suggested by Iloma (2018, p.29) " it presents a moral interplay between the good and ill-motivated characters in such a way that physical combats, frantic chases, violence, inconceivable odds and other life threatening situations are encountered but end victoriously for the good character". Tasker (2004, p.18) suggests that elements of rare overpowering of obstacles with slim escapes and the subduing of villains are decisive features in determining the action film genre. Supportively, Ayakoroma (2014, p. 95) avows that "high energy, physical stunts, chases, battles, fights, escapes and spectacles that take the audiences' breath away" are also inherent to the action film genre. The features identified above provide more explicit interpretation to the canons of the action film genre. Given that action as a physical movement is an inherent characteristic of the visual medium called film, it might be tempting to think that every film can equally be seen to be action film owing to the presence of action in them. It should however be noted that action film as a genre of film in film theory and criticism is measured by certain benchmarks. Apart from the ones identified above which emphasize the thematic and aesthetic angles to the genre, Jennifer Bean (2004, p.24) attempts to examine the concept from a technical perspective as she avers:

> The most notable characteristic of the action cinema is its dynamic tempo: rapid editing at once articulates and accelerates the breath- taking pace of the stunting human body. It is also true that the body takes primacy over voice in the genre, that the action film 'speaks' through visual spectacle, that spectacle, in fact, takes precedence over narrative meaning.

The precedence of tempo, fast cuts and visual spectacles over narrative meaning in Bean above accentuates the invaluable contributions of camera movements and editing techniques to the unprecedented fascinations of the action film genre. It suggests that the magnetic and captivating elements of the action film are not necessarily dependent on the chronological sequence of events in the narrative but could be achieved through an avalanche of stupendous film techniques. It is therefore against this background that Dancygar makes a copious input on what can be adjudged as the most suitable canons of the action film genre with reference to film techniques. Dancygar (2007, p.208) posits that in view of the fact that the action film genre presents characters whose combats fall within the circle of life and death, viewers' sensitivities must be aroused to understand the dramatic motif of each character to enable them identify with the character(s) whom he or she must intuitively take sides with. The act of identification with the dramatic goal of a character as foregrounded above is very crucial to the genre as failure would lead to the gross loss of meaning in the entire action sequence.

Dancygar further posits that the (action) filmmaker must ensure that his viewers go beyond the understanding of the goal of the character to be emotionally involved in the activities of the character, (such as chase, pursuit, combat etc.) noting that the achievement of this emotional involvement gives the action sequence, enough strength, engenders excitements and deep involvement in the narrative. Again, given the fact that the moment of survival of a character is key to the action film genre, Dancygar (2007, p.268) notes that actions such as fights to death, car chases, critical conditions of life and death are intrinsic to the action sequence. It is against this background that he postulates the theories of identification, excitation, conflict and intensification.

Dancygar therefore emphasizes the usefulness of encouraging specific kinds of shots. He identifies these to include: "close-ups and point of view shots" noting that a character is depicted as a victim at the point when the camera looks down on him. In other words, a character is depicted "as

possessing dominant or ominous presence" when the camera looks at him from a low angle position. He therefore opines that the close-ups and point of view shots are very useful in encouraging emotional engrossment and identification the same way the subjective camera placement does. Furthermore, Dancygar emphasizes that such techniques as shot variations, camera movements like zoom, tilt and pan helps to achieve excitation in an action film. He further asserts that moving shots are more exciting when they are captured from the subjective point of view. Hence, when such camera movements such as "trucking, tracking, dolling and handheld shots follow the motion" (qtd in Iloma 2018, p. 31)) excitations are engendered. Again, Dancygar adds that another way of engendering excitation in a sequence is to edit with pace and shorten the length of shots.

Again, Dancygar identifies the usefulness of crosscutting to the development of conflict in an action sequence. He notes that when two characters are involved in a scene, each character tries to realize a goal, as he attempts to make this effort, conflict is achieved through the crosscutting of the efforts of the characters. Hence, the importance of crosscutting in building conflicts in the action film is reiterated. In addition, Dancygar posits that intensification becomes most important when the scene comes towards the end at that point when a character achieves his or her motif to the detriments of the other. He posits that varying the length of the shot is a necessary means to achieving intensification in the action sequence. "Hence, switching between a series of shorter shots produces intensification". (cited in Iloma. 2018, p.31). Dancygar therefore concludes that the use of close ups and subjective shots are key to the realization of the most captivating impact of the action sequence.

In view of its inexhaustible enthralments, the action film has undoubtedly become one of the most powerful and spellbinding film genres that have revolutionized the cinema. Dancygar 's (2007, p.270) observation that the genre has exploded significantly in the United States which corroborates Tasker's (2004, p.1) assertion that it "has established itself as one of the leading genres in contemporary Hollywood cinema"

foregrounds the inalienable success of the genre. In addition, the unparalleled cadre of globally reputable artistes that have been developed around the world from the background of the action film lend credence to the incontrovertible success of the genre. Iloma (2018,p10) rightly exemplifies some of these artistes to include: Sylvester Stallion, Stephen Spielberg, Chuck Norris and James Bond and directors such as James Cameroon, David Cronsberg and Bruce Willis, to mention but a few".

Suffice to say that major studies on popular film genres in America have affirmed these artistes as the "most successful in Hollywood and the most sought after around the world" (Dancygar, 2007, p271). The success of the action film genre in Asia has equally brought to the fore, artistes such as Clint Eastwood and Bruce Lee amongst others. In Nigeria, African largest film Industry, actors such as Sam Dede, Hank Onukwu and Gentle Jack alongside such directors of the likes of Teco Benson, Izu Ojukwu, Tallila Thompson and Lancelot Imasuen among others have also ascended to global repute due to their track record achievements in the action film genre. Looking at the laudable impacts of the action film in major film cultures of the world including Nollywood and consequent upon the dearth of adequate scholarly inquiries on this subject matter in Nigeria, this study considers it dutiful to contribute to existing literatures on the subject matter. Even though, references may be occasionally made to other film cultures of the world especially Hollywood in a build up to our discourse, this study focuses primarily on historicizing the genre in Nigeria. Since film is a product of societal reflections, this study shall pay attention to the prevalent social backgrounds that heralded the action film genre in Nigeria and how they are reflected in the films.

**Historical Trends of Action Film.**

In a study entitled: "Action Film Genre in Nigeria: A Critical Analysis of Selected Films". Iloma (2018, pp9-10) analyses the action film as revolving around some major historical antecedents in America where the genre assumes an overriding influence in the world. He notes that these historical

antecedents which are recognized in various subgenres of the action film genre reflected in different epochs of the American development. Citing Luka Wheeler, Iloma (2018, p.9) notes that although the action film may have started in America with the experimental works of Edwin S. porter and W.D Griffith, efforts at documenting the action film genre in Hollywood began with adventures subgenre in the 1920s and 30s. He posits that the combatant experience of the early American frontier provided the historical background for the thriving of the adventures subgenre. In his quest for acquiring new place of settlement or colonial territory, the American frontier encountered severe resistance, his persistent pursuit of his goal therefore led to serious fights. Given the period of civilization which the adventure stories reflect, sword was a major instrument of warfare, No wonder the adventure films dwell mainly on sword warfare.

Iloma further states that in the 1940s and 50s, the dominant subgenres of the action film were the war and cowboys. He argues that the war film mirrored another level of the American civilization where scientists had started making gains in the development of more sophisticated technologies. The war film therefore showcases serious fighting which revolve around the use of guns and other heavy explosive devices. It is dominantly preoccupied with the themes of territorial annexation, jailbreak, resistance and imprisonment amongst others. It also showcases the preponderance of naval and air assaults.

The cowboy film a subgenre of action film which also came to the fore at the same historical period with the war film was a reflection of the cattle rearing life of the American man, which thrived significantly in the 19th century. According to Onu (2012, p.18) "the Cowboy was the first mythical hero created by stories woven around contemporary American life". Onu (p.18) further notes that the cowboys had huge impact on the American economy and consequently, they were very influential on the society. Onu, (cited in Iloma 2018, p.9) posits that the Cowboys "were the heroes of the western part of America and the big boys of the time". In the same source, He further notes that the

> cowboy made the American life both easy and difficult noting that while their economic activities helped in ensuring prosperity and better the life of the Americans, they sometimes reared their wildlife in manners that were in variance with the existing laws. (Onu, cited in Iloma 2018,p.9)

It is therefore against this background that Iloma (p.9) conjectures that

> the cowboy's film is motivated by the need to protect the cows from being attacked by perceived enemies. The cowboy in this context could be likened to the biblical *good shepherd* who gives his life for the sheep. Like the herdsman in a typical African setting, the cowboy who is motivated by the dramatic motif of ensuring the total safety of his cows fights to finish.

Suffice to state that it is this quest of protecting the cows from rustlers and other aggressors that propels the fights in the cowboys' film. Onu (2014, p.20) further cites Bordwell and Thompson to state that the cowboy's costumes mainly consist "jeans and well brimmed felt hats and crowns".

The 1960s witnessed the thriving of the spy-adventure films which according to Iloma (p.9) ostensibly sprang from the works of Alfred Hitchcock. The spy-adventure films usually feature a one-man army with abundant strength and always overcomes his enemies. He notes that "James Bond's films were the commanding examples of the spy-adventure genre of the 1960s". he further explains that

> the Bond films feature a super-active character that is larger than life. This character who is engaged in a life threatening battle against the villainous

> character always ends triumphantly in his favour

The Bond films are therefore propelled by some techniques such as ''quick cutting, car chases, fist fights, a variety of weapons and gadgets'' (Georgewyse, cited in Iloma 2018,p.10).

Another spectacular subgenre of the action film that dominated the cinema was the martial arts which came to the fore around the 1970s. Although, the martial arts film took roots in Asia, the globally reputed centre for acrobatic culture, it was imported to America where it flourished significantly. The martial arts films are notably exemplified by *Enter the Dragon* (1973) and *Return of the Dragon* (1972)

During the 1990s, hybrids of many subgenres of the action film flourished. Lukswheeler (cited in Iloma 2018, p.9) notes that the "parody of sub-genres like the Western, the spy and urban action films amongst others was characteristic of the 1990s". Again this period 1990s witnessed early period of the digital technology which revolutionized the cinema. Such technologies like the Computer Generated Imagery CGI and Three Dimension Effects 3DFX provided abundant seamless effects and animations which added great aesthetic values to the action film genre.

**Action Film Genre in Nigeria: Historical Evaluations.**

The emergence and subsequent development of the action film genre in Nigeria may not have occurred if not for some prevalent social antecedents that where given filmic attention to. This rightly justifies Iloma's (2018, p31) assertion that "films do not appear in a vacuum but are products of the filmmakers' critical responsibilities of mirroring social realities in their societies". Affirmatively, Shaka, Uwah and Uchendu (2014, p213) posit that the "social commentator would definitely flow with the current wherever it may lead". In view of the foregoing, our analysis on the issue of discourse in this paper shall be emphatic on the social trends that illuminated the action film genre in Nigeria.

Like the rituals and prostitution genres in Nigeria which developed following the dire need of man to survive at a time when the unfavourable economic conditions of Nigeria had caused mass pauperization, absurdity and hopelessness for the common man. Shaka (cited in Iloma, 2018, p.32) rightly supports this idea when he declares that the rise of armed robbery and hoodlumism in Nigeria came to the fore following the "Youth unemployment and mass poverty" experienced in Nigeria as a result of the unfavourable economic conditions in the land. He goes on to establish that on the 12th of June 1993 when the presidential election that was to bring MKO Abiola to power was annulled with impunity by the Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida led administration, unbelievable rise in civil unrest that divided the country along ethnic marginalization and religious blocks consequently ensued. The polity was dominated with the feelings of ethnic neglect, exclusiveness and marginalization. This led to the formation and revitalization of various apex socio-cultural groups to protect the interest of the concerned ethnic nationalities that floated them. Example of these groups include: The Arewa Youths, Odua People's Congress OPC, Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra MASSOB. Ijaw National Congress IYC, Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People MOSOP, Ugbako Ikwerre, Uzugbani Ekpeye amongst others. Shaka (2011, p.247) further asserts that in the midst of this political instability, "Corruption and lack of political leadership resulted in economic depression in the country". This consequently led to the abrupt closure and liquidation of many factories, especially the ones employing large population of Nigerians such as the textile Industry. Unemployment, poverty sufferings and frustrations arguably ascended to crescendo as far as the Nigerian history is concerned just as the masses lived in acute impoverishment, loss of faith and absolute disarray with governance. The impacts of this disillusionment on mankind was the central preoccupation of Albert Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* and Eugene Ionesco's *Essay on Kafka* alongside the works of other absurdist writers like Samuel Becket, Jean Genet, Arthur Adomov, Alfred Jarry and

the likes. In one of the most heart-touching seminars of our time titled *The Myth of Sisyphus,* the French born Algerian dramatist, essayist and Noble Laureate Albert Camus (1913-1960) laments the debasement of man in his society as he declares:

> A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty is a familiar world but in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusion and light. Man feels a stranger, he is an irremediable exile because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promise land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and the setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity (Cited in Martin Esslin 1993, P23).

Corroboratively, in his *Essay on Kafka*, the Romanian born French playwright, Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994) reiterates how human life had become devoid of purpose and meaning. He notes that when man is "cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots" all his actions are prone to becoming senseless, meaningless, absurd and useless. (cited in Esslin, 1993.p.23). Suffice to say that the bad leadership which consequently led to the dehumanizing conditions of common citizens in Nigeria as reviewed above provided a veritable background for the thriving of criminality in the country. Shaka (2011, p.247) reaffirms that "youth unemployment and mass poverty boosted armed robbery in Nigeria". In response to his social responsibilities, the Nigerian filmmaker flooded the market with films bearing narratives of armed robbery, violence and other forms hooliganism. Most prominent of these films include: Chiko Ejiro's *Escape from Congo* (2000), Teco Benson's *Executive Crime* (2000), *State of Emergency* (2000), *Broad Day Light* (2000), *Highway Grave* (1999) *Accidental Discharge* (2003) and *Executive Crime* (2004), Ogoro's *Across The Niger (2004*) and Tarila Thompson's *State of Emergency 2* (2005) amongst others. (cited in Iloma, p.32). Iloma further affirms that these films are widely considered as

what makes up the action film due to the inherence of physical combat, crime, chase, escape, exchange of firearms alongside others. He further adds that "major studies on the action film genre in Nigeria primarily dwell on crime and other related activities", no wonder Adenugba (2008, p.7) posits that this cadre of film revolves around "gangs of armed bandits, squad of human traffickers and drug organisations amongst others". He further notes that the commonly told stories in this genre primarily deal with a trail of gang members, more especially, the leader by security operatives. Conclusively, Adenugba submits that "the need for survival, struggle for power and fame, love, justice and the law of Karma" constitute the dominant themes in the Nigerian action film. Our analysis of the action film in Nigeria is therefore guided by this established background.

**Analyses of Teco Benson's *Mission to Nowhere***

Teco Benson's *Mission to Nowhere* (2007) which revolves around the theme of crime suitably exemplifies the action film genre in Nigeria. In this film, Naomi Adams, an influential novelist and mother of Pamela Adams is murdered in cold blood at her residence by unknown assailant(s). Men of the Homicide department of the state CID swiftly swing into action to unmask the culprit(s) for possible prosecution. All efforts to uncover the real suspect(s) proved abortive as culprit(s) appear to be conversant with all strategies marshalled out to get them by the police. The leader of the security operatives, detective Roger Williams (Sam Dede) strongly suspects in his heart that a close associate is involved in the information divulgence to the bandits. Tina, Rogers' house help who had previously worked for the slain Mrs Naomi Adams in the same capacity is arrested. Upon severe torturous interrogations, she confesses to the crime of murdering Mrs Adams by herself as vengeance for hitting her husband to death with her car the night after her wedding. She also confesses to be the one responsible in leaking sensitive police information to her accomplices.

It is important to note that the crime in this film is not primarily enthused by economic impulse and desperation for survival, it signals

development in the society by pointing to the fact that violence and combats in human society are not limited to economic factors alone. This film explores the theme of vengeance as it shows the extent to which an aggrieved Tina can go to revenge the cause of justice for her crushed husband. The action in the film is sustained by varieties of techniques. The story which revolves around crime, armed bandits and consequent trail by the police suitably provides a popular description of the action film genre in Nigeria as established above. Again, Dancygar's theories of identification, excitation, conflict and intensification as discussed above are exuberantly demonstrated in the film. Identification is brought to the fore at the expository stage of the film when the dramatic goals of the actors are established. The filmmaker's ability to intuitively compel viewers to identify with Roger Williams and his associates from the Homicide Department of the state CID is quite commendable. The murder of Naomi Adams is a crime against humanity, hence Roger Williams' dramatic goal of providing justice for her horrific murder by unknown killer(s) could be adjudged a rescue mission to the human race. To such a good motivated character, attracting identification from the viewers is only a spontaneous phenomenon. He is therefore seen as the messiah that would bring justice for the slain humanity in the film.

Conversely, the actions in the film are sustained by series of excitations. The copious use of camera movements and pace in the film justify this. At the laboratory scene when forensic analyses are to be undertaken to establish who the culprit is, different forms of camera movements are utilized to achieve excitation. Another source of excitation that is conspicuous in the film is the pace. The film is paced from beginning to the end with fast and quick actions intertwining with fast cuts. The shots do not take the usual traditional lengths in most African films instead, they are accelerated in fast cuts. From the scene where Mrs Adams is murdered to the scene where the police arrive and all through the preliminary investigations of the police, the notion of fast pace could be visibly seen in the swift cuts between the characters involved.

Again, the film demonstrates action through the use of techniques. One of the most commonly used technique to realize conflict in the film is cross-cutting. Crosscutting involves establishing actions from two or more different scenes. In *Mission to Nowhere,* Benson achieves this by frequently cross-cutting between the hero and the suspected villain. In the scene where Naomi Adams is to be buried, the movement of the tough-looking suspected murderer of Mrs Adams who is dressed in trench coat and bowler hat is intercut or cross-cut with that of Detective Roger Williams to build tension in the film. Even more enthralling about the film are the ways in which camera and editing techniques are utilized in the narrative to establish intensification. The regular use of shot variations and switching between successions of shorter shots in the film go a long way in achieving the intensification effect on viewers.

**Conclusion**

This paper has been able to trace the emergence of the action film genre in Nigeria to the poor leadership that characterized the country around the 1990s. It has also been able to note that the consequent effect of the poor leadership was a destruction of the nation's economy in such a way that poverty and unemployment became high as citizens remained impoverished and sought for easy way out. Hence, the rise of armed robbery and other acts of hooliganism prevailed in the society, thereby making major reflections in the themes of Nollywood films.

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**Filmography.**

**Film Title: Mission to Nowhere**

**Director Teco Benson**

**Production Company: TFP**GlbalNetwowk

**Staring:** Sam Dede, Larry Williams Stephenie Okerekem, Barbra Soki etc

Format: Video Compact Disc. Duration: Two Hours.

**Note on authurs**

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