

## The mediation of cultural identities: texts and contexts in Ghanaian video-films

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the texts and contexts that inform the mediatory processes that Ghanaian video-films have engaged in towards the creation of new cultural identities, often ambivalent, but sometimes extreme and contestable. The narratives and subtexts of video-films, particularly those of the Pentecostal and occult genres, have often posited new cultural identities and worldviews. The historical and cultural contexts within which these videos are produced and consumed often demonstrate their potential to create new perceptions about Ghanaians in general, and to effectively engage in the mediations and negotiations for new forms of socialization. This paper discusses those processes that inform contemporary public perceptions of Ghanaian identity (or identities) and what role video-films play in such processes, particularly within a Ghanaian context. Using theories of identity, representation and mediation, the paper attempts a textual reading of a sample of video-films in order to frame their narrative contexts and ideological subtexts in relation to their role in identity formation.*

**Keywords:** Video-films, Mediation, Representation, Identity, Ghana, Text, Context.

## **Introduction**

“Video-film” has emerged as the most popular expression, among several, to describe the practice of producing full length fictional motion pictures using video technology, and which are distributed on the same format or on various other digital formats. This practice, which emerged in both Ghana and Nigeria in the mid-1980s, and has become very popular across Africa, did not metamorphose out of the blue and grow in a vacuum. Rather certain cultural and economic contexts influenced their birth and growth. In the process of growing into considerably large industries, various cultural and economic factors came into play to mediate between the producers, the video-film texts and the audiences, thus producing a cornucopia of social meanings and new forms of identity formation.

In Ghana, whilst early video-films of the late 1980s were mainly concerned with the ongoing transformation of the national society at that time, following years of natural, political and social upheavals, video-films of the 1990s took on a wider variety of concerns, the most popular being the focus on the dualism between Christianity on one hand and witches, occultists and all others on the other hand. By 2005 video-film audiences had begun to witness a shift from these themes to more family dramas, postmodern themes and concerns over issues of royalty, albeit fictionalized and far from reality.

In these fictionalized representations of the nation, its people and culture, there have often been attempts to mediate new perspectives of various cultural identities. The socio-economic contexts within which the video texts are produced, marketed and consumed have often served as fertile grounds from which various ideas sprouted, including the good ones, the bad, the extreme, the purely nonsensical and the very ugly. What is of interest within the scope of this paper is how the producers of video-films have sought to create and popularize various forms of identities or to reinforce existing ones by employing the mediatory potentials of video texts to engage in dialogue with spectators, whether they do this consciously or not.

This dialogism, to borrow from Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), is that communicative process which results in new social allegiances and therefore the evolution of new identities. Dialogism is a school of literary criticism which emphasizes the relationship between an author and his/her literary work, the relationship between the work and its readers, and finally the relationship of all three to the social and historical forces that surround them.

Often these new forms of identity are expressed through the choice of social interactions, language styles, clothes, and tastes. For example, when one pays attention to local radio presenters in Ghana, one will notice many of them making great efforts to sound foreign, especially American. In the 1990s, following the introduction of tele-novelas from North and Latin America on Ghanaian television channels there was a noticeable increase in a preference for red dresses among women which were not funeral or Valentine-day related. Among some cultures in Ghana, the red colour is associated with funerals. I do not have empirical data to support this observation, but the sharp rise in trendy red dresses following the popularity of these TV soap operas was remarkable. I have also observed how lovers of the Charismatic-Pentecostal genre of video-films often engaged actively with the video texts, and by doing so, reinforced their beliefs in the physical presence of the supernatural, by identifying with the visualization and apparent physical manifestation of spirits,

which are portrayed in the video-films. Meyer (2004) has made similar observations about members of these non-orthodox Churches.

Video-films that depict family dramas (or families in crises) tend to be pontifical in their textual mediations and often audiences will take sides with the good characters and thus enjoy momentary feelings of moral superiority, if even for just one and half hours (or many hours, in cases where the video-film is produced in multiple parts). Both Sutherland-Addy (2000) and Meyer (2001) have also observed this type of engagement by many Ghanaian video-film audiences with the texts.

In the last ten years, there has been a shift to what may be referred to as postmodern themes, for want of a better expression. The tendency in Ghanaian video-films has been to depict a society that is being consumed by its own consumerism. The characters are depicted to be happy with their consumerist indulgence. For example, many video-films, such as *Princess Tyra* (2007) and *The King is Mine* (2009) portray Kings, Queens, Princes and Princesses living in environments that are far removed from contemporary royalty, and where ordinary citizens are shown to live in opulence but describe themselves as paupers. We see families, businessmen and women, and career oriented individuals who are all portrayed as successful in a certain ideal and utopian world, and yet who are not satisfied with their current statuses and want more. It is often a world that is portrayed to be devoid of economic challenges or cultural transformations. The conflicts are often centred on the individualistic and egoistic search for greater social power and unlimited wealth. This tendency reflects the producers' fascination with, and an aspiration for ostentation, and by extension, feeds the fantasies of many audiences.

Before examining some of these videos, I wish to spend some time to propose some conceptual and theoretical frameworks within which this discussion of textual mediation will take place. For a start, I propose that our understanding of the key concepts of culture, identity and mediation be informed by their theoretical conceptions in both Media and Cultural Studies.

## **A Framework For The Study**

### **The Concept of Culture**

As a point departure, I will attempt a working concept of culture for my particular purpose in this paper. To try to define culture is to walk knowingly into a deadly mine-field. Many have tried and accepted the futility of such an exercise. The common definition that we mostly use for convenience is the amorphous and ambiguous definition that *culture is the total way of life of a people*.

As a human process, culture encompasses many things including media, mediation, identity and representation. These are themselves very fluid concepts because culture can be described as an arena for interactions, for negotiations, for interpretations and for the sharing of knowledge and experiences, which themselves are continuously in transformation.

Chris Barker (1999) has observed the futility in trying to define culture. Culture is noted as one of two or three most difficult words in the English Language. According to Barker, "culture is not 'out there' waiting to be correctly described by the theorists who keep getting it wrong. Rather,

the concept of culture is a tool which is of more or less usefulness to us in understanding human beings as a life form. Consequently, its usage, and therefore meanings, continue to change” (Barker, 1999, p. 11). Hence the aphorism that “Culture is dynamic” which implies that culture is not a given, a static existence, but a continuously changing phenomenon.

Stuart Hall, one of the most prominent scholars of contemporary cultural studies, himself has struggled with trying to grasp a holistic understanding of culture, which has led him into constructing several theories of it. Hall (1996) writes that “[by] culture, here, I mean the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society. I also mean the contradictory forms of common sense which have taken root in and helped to shape popular life” (Hall, 1996, p. 439). Notice that even this definition is quite vague and amorphous. The continuous dynamism of culture, for example, makes the concept of ‘grounded’ practices quite untenable. By grounded practices, I mean norms, ideas and rituals that have developed over time and may be considered the foundations of culture. Time tested practices still form important components of culture but they have ceased to be the most important even in traditional societies.

John Tomlinson (1999) observes the difficulty in defining culture and therefore attempts to avoid the minefield of such an enterprise. He however offers a scope that he uses for his own analysis, which I believe is quite appropriate for my purpose here.

According to Tomlinson, “culture can be understood as the order of life in which human beings construct meaning through practices of symbolic representation” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 18).

I choose this very context-bound definition because of the focus on two aspects of culture contained in it – the construction of meaning and symbolic representation. These two are important for this discussion because the processes of cultural and identity formation part-take in the complexities of media construction and representation. Meanings do not exist a priori, in some form of pristine natural truth, or in a state of reality that is devoid of context, influence and manipulation. Instead, we make meanings out of what we are told, how we are told, what we see and how we see, and therefore our conceptions of reality, of ourselves and our answers to the questions “what is real?” and “who am I?” are dependent on our prior knowledge and experience of the world. This brings me to the question of identity, because the understanding of the self is often defined by the contemporary cultural context within which one finds one self.

### **The Concept of Identity**

Identity is rooted in culture and is just as difficult to define because of its transient and slippery variables. Identity is not simply who you are, but also who you are not, and more importantly, it is who you have been and who you are becoming. As Kathryn Woodward (1997) has argued, identity is marked by difference, and this is experienced through symbols of representation. It is a process that is never ending.

There are many ways in which we form pictures of our societies and environment. The types of training that we may receive at home, the influences from our peers, what we learn in school, the indoctrination we receive in churches, mosques or other religious communities, all play roles in

forming our attitudes and approaches to life. But the most important influences in contemporary times, arguably, are the mass media.

In fact, it has been suggested that the present generation of young people are children of the media. That is because they grow up on a steady diet of media products. They spend more time watching TV, playing video games, watching movies on hand-held devices, listening to music and surfing the internet, than anything else. It also partly explains why the culture of reading has become quite unpopular. The knowledge that most young people acquire is contained in the mass media, and they tend to express their worldviews and define themselves through a process that is referred to as mediation.

### **The Theory of Mediation**

To have a working knowledge of mediation, we can draw on Denis McQuail's (1983, revised 2005) theory, which posits that mediation is a process of "relaying second-hand (or third party) versions of events and conditions which we cannot directly observe for ourselves" (McQuail, 2005, p. 82). More importantly for this discussion, mediation refers to "the efforts of other actors and institutions in society to contact us for their own purposes (or our own supposed good). This applies to politicians and governments, advertisers, educators, experts and authorities of all kinds" (McQuail, 2005, p. 82).

Mediation also involves relationships between the media, technology and society. The advancement in technology, such as the internet, satellite television and local radio stations, has reinforced the pervasiveness of media in society, thus offering us mediated perspectives of our broader national, cultural and political environments. This process of mediation is not only technological, but also epistemological, axiological and rhetorical.

Media texts are mediated because, as McQuail has pointed out, culture, of which media are part, is dependent on the economic and power structures of society, as Marxists have argued. "It is assumed that whoever owns or controls the media can choose, or set limits to, what they do" (McQuail, 2005, 79). Thus media shape our perception of experience by being selective. In fact selectivity is fundamental to the process of mediation because this allows a reduction of the complexity of society and culture to more comprehensible levels.

Media, such as films, have the potential of opening up the world to audiences in unlimited ways, but may also limit or control our perception of the world through context-bound selective processes. For example, the image of indigenous Afghan women wearing Burqas conjures various meanings to various people. For radical Muslims, it is a sign of obedience to the laws of the Qur'an, dignity for womanhood and respect for her husband and family. For the moderate Muslim, it might be a sign that Islam is failing to grow with the times and to be in tune with the rest of the modern world. For human rights advocates and feminists, that image might symbolize oppression, a violation of fundamental human rights, the abuse of the privileges of women, social seclusion, and the denial of basic human freedoms.

Therefore, our understanding of the image is dependent on the contextual frameworks within which the image is presented, in addition to our own previous knowledge and conceptions of

Islam. These together, offer specific meanings of the image. The one image of Afghan women will therefore present us with multiple realities. We can say, then, that the existence of prior knowledge in relation to the contextual framing of images (cultural representation) presupposes the existence of some reality, which is, in fact, constructed reality.

Media may be neutral in their presentation of reality, or of the world, but may also be actively participant in shaping the way in which the world is presented and therefore how the public perceives it. The consequence of the pervasiveness of media in our lives is that our experiences are mediated, shaped, and reformed through media texts, such as television, radio, newspapers and films (Giddens, 1991).

According to McQuail (2005), mass media and society continue to influence each other in mutual ways. As cultural industries, media, including films and video-films, respond to the demands of society to produce information and entertainment and at the same time employ their textual power to influence changes in the socio-cultural climates, which in turn create new demands for new media content. McQuail argues that “the media to a large extent serve to constitute our perceptions and definitions of social reality and normality for the purposes of a public, shared social life, and are a key source of standards, models and norms” (McQuail, 2005, p. 81).

McQuail argues that the notion of media intervening between audiences and reality is only metaphoric, but may actually connect particular audiences to other experiences. Media can achieve this through various forms of mediation “ranging from neutrally informing, through negotiation, to attempts at manipulation and control. The variations can be captured by a number of communication images, which express different ways in which the media may connect us with reality” (McQuail, 2005, p. 83).

This connection is often achieved in various ways, depending on the technology that is used, or in other words, the medium that is employed in conveying the message. Marshall McLuhan’s famous aphorism that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967) could be interpreted to mean that “embedded in every tool is an ideological bias, a predisposition to construct the world as one thing rather than another, to value one thing over another, to amplify one sense or skill or attitude more loudly than another” (Postman, 1993, p. 13).

Here again the question of selectivity has a primary consideration in understanding the motives that guide the operations of mass media. For example, why does a video-filmmaker choose to produce a movie about a fictional kingdom where the practices have no connection to real Ghanaian royal gallantry, and yet present the images as if they were a mirror on reality? What is it that informs the choices of subjects by video-film producers, such as city living as against rural living? It is possible to discern these choices by doing what is referred to in Film Studies as textual analysis.

### **A Methodology for Textual Analysis**

Textual analysis is often associated with the qualitative method of social scientific research, referred to, in other words, as “*qualitative content analysis*”. This phrase has been linked to the

German sociologist and cultural critic, Siegfried Kracauer who in the 1940s and 1950s became an important film theorist (Larsen, 1991, p. 121).

According to Larsen, it was Kracauer's "manifesto of qualitative content analysis... 'The Challenge of qualitative content analysis' which dealt a severe blow to the type of quantitative content analysis practiced by many contemporary mass communication researchers." According to Larsen, Kracauer opted rather for "qualitative, hermeneutic, or humanistic procedures" (Larsen, 1991, p. 121).

Kracauer's argument was that "the proposed quantitative strategies for determining the content or meaning of media messages are, if not useless, then certainly not as objective and reliable as suggested by Barelson and others" (Larsen, 1991, p. 121). The reason for this, according to Kracauer is that the breakdown of textual meanings into quantifiable units destroys the very object of study "since the atomistic character of the resulting data precludes a relevant examination of the relations within each text as a meaningful whole" (Larsen, 1991, p. 122).

Consequent to this argument, the text "should not be regarded not as closed, segmented object with determinate, composite meanings, but rather as an indeterminate field of meaning in which intentions and possible effects intersect." Furthermore, "while media texts are thought of as complex and indeterminate, they are also said to be historically determined to the extent that they express the general ideological trends (zeitgeist) of a given period, which minimizes the danger of 'subjective misinterpretations'" (Larsen, 1991, p. 122-3).

Following the trend set by Kracauer, other researchers (Lowenthal, 1961; Jay, 1973; Negt, 1980) sought to develop systematic methodologies or approaches to, and tools for the study of media texts, such as film, beyond the traditional literary approaches. Such tools included, for example, semiology or semiotics, intertextuality, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis and reflexivity. In recent times developments in gender and feminists studies have contributed tremendously to qualitative studies of media content and how media produce and disseminate knowledge and information.

There are four basic assumptions involved in media's production and dissemination of knowledge and information. These are, the ontological which relates to the discourses of reality, the epistemological which deals with the relationship between the producers of media and the material that they are dealing with, the axiological which is concerned with the association of social values to the production of media content, and the rhetorical which has to do with the use of language.

There is a tremendous amount of literature on each of these tools, and it would take an enormous amount of space to attempt to discuss each of them separately. However, in the proceeding sections of this paper, I will endeavor to incorporate their theoretical and methodological assumptions in relating the texts to their contexts in order to bring out their manifest and latent meanings. A brief historical background to video-films will be a useful point of departure.

### Textual construction and mediation

As I noticed earlier, video-films in Ghana during the late 1980s, when they had only just emerged, were mostly concerned with the radical social transformations at the time. Ghana had gone through various forms of social, economic and political rupture that left the citizens with few civil society organizations that possessed nationalist ideological orientations.

As Ninsin (1998) has argued, the PNDC government, which had come to power in a military coup d'état, had virtually put itself beyond reproach as Ghana's "fledgling democratic institutions, laws and procedural rules were either set aside en masse; or ... were brutally subverted" (

It is not surprising that video-films of that period, generally avoided political themes, even in satirical forms. As Sutherland-Addy has noted, video-films were "rather less profoundly analytical of the evolution of the broad historical and political contexts of Ghanaian society" (Sutherland-Addy, 2000, 267). It is fair to say then that video-films of this period failed to offer a realistic picture of the contemporary social, cultural and economic circumstances of the nation. They mediated away from the pressing political and social upheavals that were of concern to almost every Ghanaian citizen. Instead, they sought to create and present a different kind of reality that was devoid of political implications and that which placed the responsibility of the nation's problems at the feet of individual errant citizens.

However, whilst the culture of silence kept political descent on the quiet, the social ramifications of economic crises provided historical and thematic substance to video-filmmakers. The major issues that were dealt with in the video-films of the 1980s, focused on the "fickleness of human nature, domestic crises, and the stresses involved in the modernization process" (Sutherland-Addy, 2000, p. 267). As stated earlier, video-films of this period avoided political confrontations and dealt mainly with social issues. As Sutherland-Addy has argued, video-films of this period represented "the nature and effect of certain forms of behavior or particular practices, especially as they relate to the domestic context and to the workplace" (Sutherland-Addy, 2000, p. 267).

One of the most popular themes among video-film producers was the *family in crisis*. This was a theme that resonated well among audiences as most patrons could relate to the economic and cultural transformations that offered fertile grounds for corruption, unfaithfulness, deceit and even murder, within families. It was common to hear audiences discuss a video-film they had just seen, and suggest that they knew certain families that had gone, or were going through similar experiences as portrayed in the movie.

### Images of Families in Crises

The context was often the economic difficulties that made most females vulnerable to the exploitation of men, as often portrayed in the video-films. Many video-films offered a representation of families that ran into crises because one member of the family was usually unfaithful. Whilst it cannot be said that such representation was false, it certainly generalized the experiences of a few families to create the impression of a nation filled with crises-ridden families. For example, Kofi Yirenkyi's *A Heart of Gold* (1993), portrays a family that is torn apart through deceit, but which is able to reunite. In the video, Julie frames her best friend with accusations of



infidelity, in order to have her thrown out of her matrimonial home, so that she Julie then moves in. She begins to maltreat the whole family, including the man who has taken her in. She attempts to use evil powers to consolidate her position, but she is exposed, driven out and the family reunites.

In fact, apart from video-films, a survey of popular cultural products in Ghana, such as hip-life, Gospel music, and tabloid newspapers, will almost certainly reveal the many ways in which, what we know as the reality of our social culture, has been perceived and constructed by the producers of popular cultural products, and the ways in which various perceptive polarities have influenced the shape of these cultural artifacts.

Researchers of media have agreed that patrons of cultural products are not mere passive receivers of texts but that they are usually actively involved in creating the meanings generated in those texts. Therefore, we can infer that these texts are close approximations of the cultural characteristics of the producers and consumers.

In this dialogic sense, popular culture functions as a way of seeing the wider society and as a means through which people make sense of themselves, their societies and environment. This does not mean that popular culture reflects the reality of what obtains in actual societies in an empirical sense. This is because the production of cultural products involves a series of mediations informed by social and economic forces, by varying ideologies, cultural nuances, individual convictions and aesthetic considerations. For example, Africa's most renowned filmmaker, the late Ousmane Sembène, once said about himself that, "I control the entire film process and I feel completely responsible for it" (Pfaff, 1984, p. 78). This presupposes the extent to which the content of his films may be manipulated to suit his ideological convictions.

We can agree with Schulz (2004) who argues that "by definition (and apparent from the etymology of the term), communication succeeds only if some kind of commonness arises between sender and recipient. Commonness is the result of transferring meaning through signs" (Schulz, 2004, p. 90). So, whilst the producers of stories of families in crises portrayed images of unfaithful men against their descent wives, or vice versa, in order to engage audiences in making life-style choices, those of the Charismatic-Pentecostal genre of video-films had a different agenda.

### **Charismatic-Pentecostal Texts**

By the beginning of the 1990s, the emergence of so-called Charismatic-Pentecostal Churches saw the evolution of new identities, often radical, which then informed the types of narratives of video-films that came to be known as the Charismatic-Pentecostal genre. Not only were these video-films inspired by this emerging religious tendency, but the narratives and images were actually shaped by what obtained in the theology and practices of these new religious movements. The texts of the Charismatic-Pentecostal genre in turn became the source of inspiration for followers and prospective followers of Charismatic Pentecostalism. Evidence of this is the religious nature of their spectatorship during the screening of such video-films. People could often be seen praying along with a character and stamping their feet in order to crush some evil being, or a host of actions that are intended to support the protagonist who is up against evil spirits.

These new identities that people often adopted, particularly the religious ones, were often then cinematically reconstructed, in exaggerated fictions, in order to portray familiar aspirations, characteristics and circumstances that the audiences might easily relate with. Charismatic-Pentecostal video-films often represented a society that was under attack by evil spirits, and it would only take the intervention of a powerful Charismatic-Pentecostal clergyman to fight such evil, and to bless the good people with wealth. Often such representations are false, but when they are informed by the behavior of the behavior of real Pastors, audiences tend to believe everything they see on screen.

As Okwori (2003) has argued, “[the] dominant refrain in these films (was) the utilization of the rituals and grotesque characters to generate contexts in which wealth and riches transport the characters from a normal reality to a world of fantasy” (Okwori, 2003, p. 8). Apart from the characters in the films, the audiences also experience the same transportation.

But can we claim a strong association of these fictional texts to reality? To borrow from Haynes and Okome (1997) most video-films “give us something like an image of the (*Ghanaian*) nation – not necessarily in the sense of delivering a full, accurate, and analytical description of social reality, but in the sense of reflecting the productive forces of the nation, both economic and cultural” (Haynes and Okome 1997, p. 21).

Okwori (2003) has described the inability of video-film producers to representative the truth about society and yet make the audiences believe they were watching true representations of the society.

“The economic and cultural productive forces is (sic) guided by beliefs – and ‘superstition’ – which thrive on the elaborate and intricate spinning of ‘fabu’. ‘Fabu’ is short for ‘fabrication’ – i.e. something which has been ‘made up’, ‘put together’. It is used in this instance to describe a genre of stories that are partly rumour and which have no definite source or origin, but which could be true, probably are not and yet are believed as if true” (Okwori, 2003, p. 9).

Drawing on Mbiti (1969) Okwori, argues that “the belief in the efficacy of rituals and an accompanying ‘superstition’ has always been part of the indigenous people’s attempt to come to terms with incomprehensible phenomena” (Okwori, 2003, 9). He points out the ambivalent nature of certain life choices that pitch Christianity against representations of traditional African belief systems.

“[Even] in the age of Christianity, Islam and modernity the belief in efficacious ‘charms’ and rituals has not abated. Quite the contrary has taken place and more and more people are actually turning to rituals for protection from violence or, more pro-actively, for social or professional betterment such as promotion at work or success in business. It is this phenomenon which drives the popularity of the home-video movie among individuals and turns its production and distribution into an industry” (Okwori, 2003, p. 9).

## The Dualism between Christianity and Traditional Africa

Even though these video-films represent various forms of rituals, particularly the money-making ones, they often also deny the efficacy of such rituals and tend to portray them as devilish, anti-social, destructive and powerless. At the same time, the depiction of ostentation and vast wealth, ostensibly achieved through money-making rituals, is an attempt to mediate the ambivalence felt by audiences of wanting to use similar ritualistic means of ending their poverty (or increasing their wealth as the case may be) and yet denouncing the evil nature of such rituals. Interestingly, most of such textual representations allude to good spirit in Christian, often foreign, images, whilst the evil ones are represented in black or African motifs.

In Ghana, there have been popular local paintings of a victorious white and handsome Jesus standing over a defeated black and ugly Devil. The associations are obvious. To draw on Frantz Fanon (1961), “[colonialism] is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (Fanon, 1961, p. 210). This predicament is further aggravated by the complicity of the local artist through a self-imposed contempt and condescension, the subversion of one’s ovarian historical roots and therefore the denial of one’s cultural identity.

From this perspective, many video films have served as conduits for the denunciation of indigenous cultures in order to promote others, mainly Euro-Christianity. These video films, such as *Namisha* (1999), *Expectations* (1998/1999), and *Time* (2000) provide evidence of the confrontational relationship between traditional African beliefs, which are rapidly being retrenched, and mainly Charismatic-Pentecostal spirituality which provides new mediatory processes for identity formation.

Sutherland-Addy, has discussed the treatment of religious conflict in Ghanaian video films in which she identifies an uneasy co-existence of Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion, the latter, often cast in a negative light.

“In this framework, **unexamined popular beliefs** provide a convenient arena for the battle of good against evil. Villains are easily identified with indulgence in a negative spirituality which is, in the vast majority of cases, **depicted as the practice of traditional African spirituality**” (Sutherland-Addy, 2000, p. 271. Emphasis added).

Even though identity is not a fixed historical fact which the cinematic discourses may seek to represent, but rather a continuous process of production that is always constituted within representation (Hall, 2000, p. 704), it is quite problematic when indigenous forms of identity are portrayed not as part of the process but as the unwanted ‘other’ which must be discarded. Usually this attitude stems from the lack of adequate knowledge about the ‘other’, and the preference for forms of beliefs that, although apparently popular, have not been adequately examined. For example, there is no evidence that traditional forms of worship have been the source of evil in any society in Ghana, or indeed the whole of Africa. This is not to say that indigenous African societies

are devoid of evil-doers. However, the blanket generalization of all traditional forms of worship as heathen or evil by the video films of the occult genre is an ignorant proposition.

Debates over the cultural context of the videos represent what Hall (1997) describes as the tensions around the struggles for cultural identity and cultural diversity. These tensions have often resulted in cultural amnesia and the dislocation of people from their cultural roots. Drawing on Hall's (1997) concept of the *roots* and *routes* of cultural identity it seems the 'routes' of identity formation appear to have replaced the 'roots' within both the individual and the collective consciousness of people. This ambivalence is very much evident in many video-films.

In the video-film *Expectations* (1999), for example, the complications over the successor to a traditional village throne is not solved through the cultural traditions of the people but by the intervention of a Pastor who has just returned from overseas, charismatic prayers, and a God, who by inference, is unknown to the village people. Apparently, from the point of view of the producers of this video, the traditional processes of finding a chief for the village, processes rooted in time-tested traditional wisdom and protocols, are not relevant. The video-film suggests that only a Charismatic Christian route is suitable for solving even the most traditionally African problem.

In *Namisha* (1999), an occult goddess, Obadzen, is located within a post-modern African setting. Even though she is portrayed as a good and generous spirit, she is still represented as inferior to a Euro-centric perception of God. For example, in one scene the Obadzen tells Ansah "you can't fight the power of light", thus alluding to her own 'dark or evil powers'. She also declares her inferiority to "Jehovah-God". The use of the signifier 'Jehovah' is an obvious allusion to Charismatic-Pentecostal beliefs (where it is used more frequently) and presumes the hegemony of their concept of God over any other. The self-denunciation of the Obadzen is typical of the postcolonial inferiority complex of the native African who has been positioned by the colonizer to accept the hegemonic superiority of Western concepts and beliefs.

In this video, Ansah, an Obadzen disciple who has converted to Christianity, tells Slobo, a new Obadzen faithful, that "I have been redeemed from the hands of Satan" and "I pray that God opens your eyes for you to see the light." These declarations clearly demonstrate the contempt that Charismatic-Pentecostal believers feel for traditional spiritualists, no matter how genuine and positive the latter's work may be (see Cyprian Fisiy and Peter Geschiere, in Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger eds., 1996, p. 193).

### Postmodern Texts

The modest improvements in the economy of Ghana and the apparent demise of the initial euphoria that greeted Charismatic Pentecostal movements have shifted the focus of many to purely consumerist interests. From the early 2000s, video-films have changed their approach of the representation of contemporary society to one that is economically stable, where local traditions and postmodern attitudes intersect to feed the material and consumerist fantasies of both video-film producers and audiences.

In contemporary video-films, the directors, who are an integral part of society, often claim to understand the community's need for escapism, however temporary, from the harsh realities of

their lives, and therefore pander to those ostensible needs by portraying certain idealized and often mythical situations. The community repays the filmmaker handsomely by patronizing his escapist products and the material wealth that he/she gains tends to distance him/her from sharing the more immediate and real concerns of the people.

Youngberg (2006) argues that because film is a medium that involves, evolves, and engenders its own conventions for representation, any cultural content for which it is the chosen medium for transmission will inevitably undergo a series of very complex processes of mediation which is endemic to the film production process.

Video-films tell stories by appropriating the various cultural motifs and beliefs, both past and present, as sources, but through a process of ideological mediation, the producers of video-films transform these motifs and beliefs into fictional creations, which nonetheless exhibit a social reflectionist quality from a reflexive point of view. The video-films of Shirley Frimpong-Manso are good examples of the representation of middle to upper class societies in which people strive to achieve their deepest desires or live out their fantasies. These may be economic, emotional or sexual. For example, in *Scorned* (2008), a woman pours out her frustrations on an almost helpless man just so that she can prove her feminine powers. In *The Perfect Picture* (2009) we see a group of ladies living out their (mostly sexual) fantasies at the expense of the men who are portrayed as hapless and unreliable. Audiences react to these videos differently. Whilst some feminists believe that Frimpong-Manso has found her voice and also offered a voice for women, some assume that she is merely representing her own aspirations and fantasies in reflexive narratology.

## Conclusion

I will draw on Kilborn (1998) to conclude that the technological revolution that has made recording of social phenomena very accessible, has equally very challenging implications. As Kilborn has observed, “[in] recent years, there have been claims that we have been experiencing a video or camcorder revolution” (Kilborn, 1998, p. 201). Citing other writers, (Corner, 1994; Murdock, 1993), Kilborn argues that “the introduction of new recording and editing equipment has enabled quite radical changes to be made in the processes by which broadcast material is produced. All this has, in turn, given rise to much debate and speculation concerning the political and ideological implications of these developments” (Kilborn, 1998, 202).

Today, Kilborn will certainly need to revise his arguments since the revolution is now not merely a video or camcorder revolution, but that mobile technologies and the access to internet sharing of material, have completely and radically transformed the ways in which we gather, create and disseminate information across the globe. This has implications also for the way people now engage with media texts, such as video-films.

The question that Kilborn asks, which is absolutely crucial, has to do with the dialogism that I described at the beginning of this paper. “Do they pave the way for new forms of democratic involvement or do they point inevitably in the direction of ever greater viewer commodification and the triumph of market forces?” (Kilborn, 1998, p. 202). It is necessary to begin to think of new methods of understanding how relations between the producer, the text and the audience can be

constructed in a world that is now open to almost anyone who holds a mobile devise and can create content, and has access to the internet and can share the content worldwide.

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