

PAINTING WITH LIGHTS: THE ART OF CREATIVE STORYTELLING THROUGH CINEMATOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

*Before a single line of dialogue is spoken, before a character takes their first step, a story has already begun told in the universal language of light and shadow. This journal, **Painting with Light: The Art of Creative Storytelling Through Cinematography**, moves beyond the traditional focus on Nollywood's script and melodrama to explore its powerful new visual frontier. It challenges the outdated notion of Nigerian cinema as purely functional and argues that a quiet revolution is underway, led by a new generation of cinematographers who wield light not as a utility, but as their primary narrative tool.*

*Through an incisive analysis of three landmark 2023 films—the soulful period drama *Breath of Life*, the gritty crime thriller *The Trade*, and the sweeping epic *Jagun Jagun*, this study reveals how contemporary Nigerian cinematographers are engaging in a sophisticated dialogue with global cinema. We unpack how light is used to sculpt mood, construct character, and forge a distinct visual aesthetic. We see how Ola Cardoso's painterly compositions in *Breath of Life* echo the psychological depth of Vittorio Storaro; how John Demps' raw anti-aesthetic in *The Trade* finds kinship with the unglamorous realism of a David Fincher thriller; and how Adeoluwa Owu's mythic framing in *Jagun Jagun* commands the epic force of a Kurosawa masterpiece.*

*By placing these Nigerian films in conversation with their international counterparts, this journal demonstrates that Nollywood is no longer just borrowing a language, but mastering it to tell its own unique stories. This is a cinema that has moved from necessity to choice, where every shadow and every highlight is a deliberate artistic decision. Ultimately, *Painting with Light* reveals a Nollywood that has found its visual voice one that is at once globally fluent and unapologetically local, demanding to be not just watched, but truly seen.*

INTRODUCTION

In the lexicon of filmmaking, cinematography is the language, and light is its most eloquent dialect. While the camera records action and the script provides structure, it is light that ultimately determines how a story feels. Cinematic techniques, particularly lighting, form the core vocabulary through which filmmakers communicate, subtly shaping how stories are perceived, interpreted, and emotionally experienced. Far beyond the mechanical function of exposing an image, the artful manipulation of light and shadow is a cornerstone of cinematic

narrative, a silent yet powerful authorial voice.

The term "cinematography" itself is derived from the Greek *kinema* (movement) and *graphein* (to write). Literally, it is "writing with movement," but in the practical, often chaotic, world of the film set, it is more accurately and more poetically described as "painting with light." As John Alton suggested in his seminal 1949 text, *Painting with Light*, light is not merely a utility; it is a tool of psychological manipulation (Alton 13). To "paint with light" is to manipulate the audience's subconscious, using photons to delineate truth from deception, safety from danger, intimacy from isolation, and the past from the present. In the architecture of cinema, light is the material from which space, form, and emotion are sculpted.

While its most basic purpose is to render a scene visible, its artistic function is far more profound: to interpret the narrative, articulate the unspoken, and guide the viewer's perception without their conscious notice. The cinematographer, as the master of this craft, does not simply record a pro-filmic event; they actively construct meaning through the deliberate manipulation of light and shadow. This process, often romanticized as "painting with light," is in reality a rigorous intellectual and artistic discipline that operates at the precise intersection of technology, physics, and storytelling. As Roger Deakins, the Oscar-winning cinematographer of *Blade Runner 2049* and *1917*, puts it, "Lighting a scene isn't just about exposure, it's about revealing the soul of the story" (Deakins).

Every film is, in essence, a story told in light. Before dialogue is spoken, before music swells, and even before a performance begins, it is the image the composition of colour, texture, contrast, and movement that draws the viewer into a cinematic world. Cinematography, as both science and art, transforms the written word into a visual, visceral experience. It is the cinematographer's job to read a script not for plot alone, but for its emotional undercurrents, its thematic weight, and its psychological geography, and then to translate those abstractions into a concrete visual scheme.

Historically, the understanding of light as narrative has evolved alongside the technology itself. The German Expressionist movement of the 1920s, with films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922), was among the first to consciously use hard, directional light and deep shadow not as a byproduct of low budgets, but as an expressive device. The stark chiaroscuro became a visual metaphor for the characters' fractured psyches and the moral ambiguity of the world they inhabited (Bordwell and Thompson 467). This approach was later refined and codified in Hollywood by the film noir cycle of the 1940s, where cinematographers like John Alton and Nicholas Musuraca used venetian blind shadows, low-key lighting, and single-source illumination to create a world of paranoia, fatalism, and moral decay. In these films, light was not neutral; it was judgmental. It hid faces in shadow, it carved guilt into a character's features, it suggested a world where no one could be fully trusted, because no one was ever fully seen.

The transition from black-and-white to colour film did not diminish the importance of light; it complicated it. Cinematographers now had to consider not only the intensity and direction of light, but its hue and temperature. Vittorio Storaro, in his work on *The Conformist* (1970) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), famously developed a theory of colour based on human psychology,

associating specific colours with emotional and political states (Storaro 22). In *The Conformist*, the protagonist's journey toward fascism is charted through a deliberate shift from warm, natural light to cold, sterile, blue-tinged interiors. Here, light and colour become a political commentary, a visual argument made without a single line of dialogue.

In contemporary cinema, the digital revolution has further expanded the cinematographer's palette. The sensitivity of modern digital sensors allows for shooting in conditions previously impossible, capturing detail in near darkness. However, this technical freedom has also led to a common critique: that digital cinematography, in its pursuit of clarity, often sacrifices the intentionality and mood that came from the limitations of film stock. Yet, cinematographers like Deakins, Rachel Morrison (*Black Panther*, 2018), and Greig Fraser (*Dune*, 2021) have demonstrated that the digital canvas can be painted with the same deliberation and artistry as celluloid. Fraser's work on *Dune*, for instance, uses the vast, harsh light of the desert not just as a setting, but as an antagonist an oppressive, inescapable force that shapes the characters' struggle (Fraser). The light is a character.

This journal argues that cinematography must be re-evaluated not as a technical service to the director's vision, but as a primary act of authorship in storytelling. The choices made about light, its quality, direction, colour, and movement are narrative choices, as significant as a line of dialogue or a piece of casting. By analyzing key case studies from films and contemporary practice, this paper will explore the specific mechanisms through which cinematographers "paint with light" to create meaning. It will examine the use of high-key versus low-key lighting to establish genre and tone, the psychology of colour temperature, the narrative function of motivated versus unmotivated light sources, and the way camera movement interacts with light to guide the audience's eye and emotional focus.

Ultimately, to understand a film is to understand its light. To study cinematography is to study the invisible art of making the audience feel, before they have had time to think. It is an investigation into how a beam of light, carefully placed, can tell a more complete story than a page of dialogue ever could.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea that light is more than a technical requirement in film is not new. For many years, filmmakers, critics, and scholars have agreed that lighting is a form of storytelling. It shapes mood, directs attention, and tells the audience how to feel before a single word is spoken. This review looks at what has already been written about cinematography, especially the use of light, from both international and Nigerian perspectives. It shows that while the language of light is universal, the way it is used and understood is also shaped by culture, budget, and history.

The theoretical foundation for understanding light as a narrative tool is well-established in film studies. Influential cinematographers and theorists have long explained the power of lighting to shape a film's meaning. John Alton, in his seminal 1949 book *Painting with Light*, was among the first to write down the practice in clear terms. He detailed how light and shadow can be used to create mood, depth, and psychological tension (Alton 13). His work laid the groundwork for analyzing lighting not just for its practical job of making things visible, but for its expressive potential. This idea is echoed by scholars like Blain Brown in *Cinematography: Theory and*

Practice, who explains how modern technology has expanded the cinematographer's toolkit, while the core principles of using light to tell a story remain timeless (Brown 89). The interplay of light and shadow, or *chiaroscuro*, is often cited as a powerful technique for creating dramatic compositions and directing audience attention.

For a long time, the scholarship of cinematography has been dominated by Western perspectives, notably the "Rembrandt lighting" tradition and the film noir aesthetic. V.I. Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein established the early foundations of visual montage, but it was Néstor Almendros who later championed the use of natural light as a narrative device (Almendros 45). Films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) rejected naturalism, using high-contrast, distorted lighting and painted-on shadows to visually show the characters' troubled psychological states. This movement established a precedent for "unmotivated" lighting—light that does not come from a logical source within the scene but exists purely for expressive effect. This stands in contrast to "motivated" lighting, which imitates a diegetic source like a lamp or window to enhance realism (Bordwell and Thompson 468).

However, to only look at Western cinema gives an incomplete picture. Nigerian film scholars have, in the last two decades, begun to document and theorize a distinctly African approach to visual storytelling. And this is important, because the conditions under which Nigerian films are made are very different. Onookome Okome, in his study of Nollywood aesthetics, argues that the "video film" era was defined by its immediacy and its rejection of the slow, expensive lighting set-ups of celluloid film (Okome 5). He notes that early Nollywood cinematography was often "flat" and "over-lit" not because of ignorance, but because of necessity: fast shooting schedules, small generators, and the need for the image to be clear on poor television sets and pirated VCDs. This was not a failure of art, but an adaptation to a specific economic and technological reality.

Similarly, Hyginus Ekwuazi, in *Film in Nigeria*, points out that the first generation of Nigerian filmmakers trained at the National Film Institute in Jos were taught classical Hollywood lighting techniques, but often had to abandon them on location due to lack of equipment (Ekwuazi 112). He describes a practice of "making do," where reflectors were made from cardboard and foil, and sunlight was the main, and often only, key light. This created a visual style that, while different from Hollywood, had its own honesty and energy. It was a cinema of the available light. The discussion of natural light brings us to a key debate in global cinematography. While Almendros (*Days of Heaven*, 1978) made natural light an artistic choice, for many Nigerian cinematographers it was the only choice. Tunde Kelani, Nigeria's most celebrated cinematographer-director, has spoken and written extensively about this. In his work, from *Ti Oluwa Ni Ile* (1993) to *Maami* (2011), Kelani developed a style that embraces the harsh, bright sunlight of Yorubaland, not as a problem to be fixed, but as a character in the story (Kelani 34). His frames are often filled with deep, rich colours and strong shadows, celebrating the texture of the environment. Jonathan Haynes, a leading scholar of Nollywood, calls Kelani's work "a cinema of cultural reclamation," where the lighting serves to document and dignify Nigerian spaces, rather than to mimic foreign ones (Haynes 201).

This idea of light as cultural documentation is also explored by Ngozi Onwurah. Though based in the UK, her film *The Body Beautiful* (1991) is a key text in Black British and African diaspora

cinema. Onwurah uses light intimately, to photograph dark skin tones with a sensitivity that mainstream (white) cinematography often lacked. As she explains in an interview, standard film stocks and lighting techniques were designed for Caucasian skin, often rendering Black skin as a flat, underexposed shape (Onwurah 78). Her work, therefore, was a political and technical act learning to “paint” Black skin with light, to show its texture, its highlights, its depth. This concern is shared by contemporary Nigerian cinematographers like Yinka Edward (*October 1*, 2014; *Lionheart*, 2018), who has talked about the need to develop lighting techniques specifically for Nigerian skin tones and climates, rather than simply importing manuals from the West (Edward).

Moving back to the global conversation, the work of Vittorio Storaro provides a useful counterpoint. Storaro is famous for his “theory of colours,” where he assigns psychological and emotional meaning to different colours of light (Storaro 22). In *Apocalypse Now* (1979), he uses a shift from yellow light (representing the known world) to a deep, hellish red and orange (representing madness and war) to chart the protagonist's psychological journey. This is a very deliberate, intellectualized use of light. It requires control, time, and money—resources that were scarce in early Nollywood.

But the principle is the same. Whether in a Hollywood studio or on a street in Lagos, cinematographers are making choices about colour temperature. A scene lit with warm, orange light from a practical lamp feels intimate and safe. The same scene lit with cold, blue moonlight feels lonely and dangerous. Bruce Block, in *The Visual Story*, calls this “visual structure,” arguing that contrast and affinity in elements like light and colour are the fundamental tools for creating emotion (Block 55). A film with high contrast in its lighting (very bright brights and very dark darks) will feel tense and dramatic, like film noir. A film with low contrast (everything evenly lit, no deep shadows) will feel safe, open, and often comedic, like a sitcom.

Nigerian film scholar Akin Adesokan, in *Postcolonial Artists and Global Aesthetics*, critiques the tendency to judge Nollywood by Hollywood standards of “good” lighting (Adesokan 143). He argues that the bright, flat lighting of many Nollywood dramas serves the genre's primary purpose: clear, melodramatic storytelling. In a film where the power is in the dialogue, the confrontation, the tears, the audience needs to see the actor's face clearly. Hiding it in shadow would be counter-productive to the narrative goal. The lighting, therefore, is functional to the form. It is not “bad” lighting; it is appropriate lighting for that type of story.

This genre argument is supported by global film theory. David Bordwell notes that different genres have different “norms” for cinematography (Bordwell 310). A horror film uses darkness and shadow to hide the monster. A musical uses bright, even light so we can see the dance moves. In this light, the typical Nollywood family drama, with its clear, bright lighting, is simply following its own generic norms, developed for its own audience.

The digital revolution has changed the conversation for both global and Nigerian cinema. As Blain Brown notes, digital cameras are much more sensitive to light than film was, allowing cinematographers to shoot in very low light conditions (Brown 211). This has led to a trend in international cinema towards naturalism and available light, as seen in the work of Emmanuel Lubezki (*The Revenant*, 2015), who famously shot almost entirely with natural light. In Nigeria,

the shift to digital (from video) has also been transformative. It has allowed a new generation of cinematographers, like Muhammed Atta Ahmed (*King of Boys*, 2018) and Femi Awojide (*The Trade*, 2023), to achieve a level of image control that was impossible before.

Ahmed's work on *King of Boys* is a good example of a “New Nollywood” aesthetic. The film uses a much more cinematic approach to light than the first Nollywood wave. It employs low-key lighting, strong shadows, and a desaturated colour palette to create a world of political intrigue and violence, directly referencing the visual language of film noir and gangster films (Ahmed). This shows a conscious movement by Nigerian filmmakers to adopt and adapt global cinematic language, while still telling local stories.

However, access to technology does not automatically mean good storytelling. Jeremy Kagan, in his book *Directors Close Up*, interviews several cinematographers who all warn about the trap of “pretty pictures” (Kagan 167). They argue that lighting must always serve the story, not distract from it. A beautifully lit shot that tells the audience nothing is a failure. This is a point that Nollywood, with its story-first tradition, has always understood intuitively, even when its budgets were small. The late Amaka Igwe, a pioneering Nigerian producer-director, was famous for saying, “Our strength is our story. The picture must carry the story, not replace it” (Igwe 91). The role of the cinematographer is also a subject of discussion. In the Hollywood system, the cinematographer is head of a large department, with gaffers, grips, and electricians. In Nigeria, especially in the early days, the cinematographer was often also the camera operator, the gaffer, and sometimes the editor. This “one-man crew” reality, documented by Francoise Balogun, meant that deep, complex lighting set-ups were simply not possible (Balogun 67). The style that emerged was therefore one of speed and efficiency. The question of authorship becomes complex. Is the “Nollywood look” the result of a conscious artistic choice, or an economic necessity? The literature suggests it is both.

Finally, there is the emerging academic work on the future of Nigerian cinematography. Shola Adenekan, writing on the “New Nollywood” wave, observes a new generation of filmmakers who are internationally trained and are consciously blending Hollywood technique with Nigerian storytelling (Adenekan 33). Films like *The Figurine* (2009) by Kunle Afolayan, shot by Yinka Edward, mark a turning point. They proved that a Nigerian film could look “cinematic” by international standards and still be a local box office hit. Edward's use of moody, atmospheric lighting in *The Figurine* was a deliberate departure from the bright Nollywood norm, and it signaled a new ambition in the industry.

This literature shows a clear consensus: light is a narrative tool. From John Alton's “painting with light” to Tunde Kelani's “cinema of sunlight,” the principle is the same. The differences lie in the execution, which is dictated by technology, budget, genre, and culture. The early scholarship was dominated by the West, but Nigerian scholars like Okome, Ekwuazi, Haynes, and Adesokan have provided a crucial corrective, showing that the Nollywood aesthetic is not a lack of skill, but a valid and functional response to its own conditions. The current trend, documented by Adenekan and seen in the work of cinematographers like Edward and Ahmed, is a synthesis—Nigerian stories now being told with a full, conscious command of the global language of cinematic light. This review, therefore, sets the stage for the present study: to analyze not if Nigerian cinematographers paint with light, but how they do it, and what their

unique paintings mean.

THE LANGUAGE OF CINEMATOGRAPHY: LIGHT AS STORY

Cinematography is not simply about recording images; it is about designing them. Every lighting choice, lens selection, and frame composition carries meaning. Light is narrative. Its absence and presence, its direction and intensity, all contribute to mood, theme, and character psychology.

The legendary cinematographer Vittorio Storaro (*Apocalypse Now*, *The Last Emperor*) called cinematography “writing with light.” He said: “Every light, every shadow, is an idea. Light is not just illumination, it is philosophy” (Storaro 22). Cinematographers use light to manipulate emotion. High-key lighting evokes openness, purity, or comedy. Low-key lighting suggests mystery, tension, or danger. Colour temperature (warm versus cool) subtly guides emotional response. Shadow can represent fear, secrecy, or duality.

For instance, in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), cinematographer Gordon Willis used shadows deliberately to symbolize the moral darkness surrounding the Corleone family. Critics later called him “The Prince of Darkness.” The visual tone of the film, muted golds and deep blacks, embodied its themes of corruption and loyalty (Bordwell and Thompson 472).

In contrast, in *Lagaan* (2001), Bollywood cinematographer Anil Mehta used bright, dusty tones of rural India to reflect both realism and hope. The film's daylight exteriors captured community, struggle, and faith. Light was not just illumination; it became a metaphor for freedom (Mehta).

Nollywood has its own evolving visual language. In *Breath of Life* (2023), cinematographer Ola Cardoso crafted intimate lighting compositions that mirrored the film's theme of spiritual rebirth. Rather than flooding scenes with light, Cardoso often used soft, single sources – a window, a lamp to isolate the protagonist in moments of grief and reflection. The shadows were not empty; they were full of his past. This approach shows a clear move away from the flat, high-key lighting of early Nollywood towards a more deliberate, psychological use of light. As Cardoso himself noted in an interview, the goal was to make the audience “feel the silence in the room, not just see the actor” (Cardoso).

This attention to silence and shadow is also evident in the work of Kunle Afolayan and his regular cinematographer, Yinka Edward. In *October 1* (2014), a period thriller set in 1960 Nigeria, Edward used low-key lighting and a desaturated palette to create a sense of foreboding and historical weight. The film avoids the bright colours often associated with Nigerian films. Instead, it uses fog, rain, and dim interiors to make the audience feel the tension of a nation on the edge of independence, and a town on the edge of terror (Edward 15). The choice is not merely aesthetic; it is narrative. The darkness hides the killer, but it also hides the colonial secrets of the town.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that “good” cinematography in Nigeria must always mean dark and moody. The power of Nollywood has always been its directness, its ability to communicate emotion clearly to a wide audience. Scholar Akin Adesokan warns against using only Western art-house standards to judge Nigerian films (Adesokan 143). He argues that the bright, clear lighting of a film like *Living in Bondage* (1992) was perfectly suited to its melodramatic story of greed and the supernatural. The audience needed to see the fear on the actors' faces, to see the details of the ritual. Hidden shadows would have weakened the story's

impact. In this context, the lighting was a success because it served the story being told.

This idea of “fitness for purpose” is supported by Bruce Block in *The Visual Story*. Block explains that visual intensity should match narrative intensity (Block 112). A quiet conversation does not need dramatic shadows. A violent confrontation does. Many contemporary Nigerian directors understand this balance. In *Lionheart* (2018), directed by Genevieve Nnaji and shot by Yinka Edward, the lighting is mostly bright and naturalistic, reflecting the film's themes of family, business, and optimism. But in key moments of conflict or personal doubt, the lighting shifts. Windows become smaller, shadows grow longer, and the colour temperature cools. The change is subtle, but it guides the audience's emotion without them necessarily noticing the technique.

The global conversation about cinematography is also moving towards this kind of intentionality, away from simply “beautiful” images. Roger Deakins, perhaps the most respected cinematographer working today, constantly emphasizes that his job is to be invisible (Deakins). In *1917* (2019), his lighting is motivated, logical, and unshowy. A flare lights a ruined town. A fire lights a soldier's face. The audience believes the light because it feels real to the world of the film. This is a lesson that has been taken to heart by a new wave of Nigerian cinematographers. Barnabas Emordi, who shot *The Milkmaid* (2020), used almost exclusively natural light to tell a story set in rural Northeast Nigeria. The harsh sun, the cool shade of a tree, the warm glow of a fire at night – these become the only light sources. The result is a film of stunning realism, where the light itself tells you about the heat, the dust, and the danger of the environment (Emordi).

Furthermore, technology has become a great equalizer. The affordability of digital cinema cameras and LED lights means that cinematographers in Lagos now have access to tools that were once only available in Hollywood. But as Blain Brown cautions, tools are only tools (Brown 210). An expensive light in the hands of someone with no story sense is useless. A cheap LED panel in the hands of a storyteller like Tunde Kelani can be magic. Kelani, working for decades with limited resources, mastered the use of reflectors and the Nigerian sun to create images that are both beautiful and culturally specific. His film *Saworoide* (1999) uses the golden light of late afternoon to bathe the Yoruba town in a warmth that feels both nostalgic and real. It is not the light of a Hollywood western; it is the light of home.

In the end, the literature from both Nigeria and the rest of the world points to the same conclusion: light is a language. Gordon Willis spoke in shadows. Anil Mehta spoke in sunlight. Ola Cardoso speaks in soft, intimate pools of light. Tunde Kelani speaks in the bright, honest light of day. They are all using the same alphabet, but they are telling different stories, for different people, in different places.

The gap this study addresses is the lack of close, scene-by-scene analysis of *how* contemporary Nigerian cinematographers are making these choices. We know they are doing it. We can see the results in films like *Breath of Life*, *The Trade*, and *Jagun Jagun* (2023). But the academic writing has not yet caught up to the practice. This literature review has shown that the foundation is there – in the global theories of Storaro and Block, and in the Nigerian context provided by scholars like Adesokan and Okome, and practitioners like Kelani and Edward. The next step is to look

closely at the work itself, to analyze the frames, to understand the grammar of this new Nigerian visual language. It is no longer enough to say Nollywood is “improving.” We must now ask: what, exactly, is it saying with light, and how is it saying it?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design and using textual analysis of selected films. The goal is not to measure light with a meter, but to understand it as a language. Therefore, the methodology is interpretive rather than statistical. It focuses on meaning, intention, and effect, rather than numbers.

The first step of the research was the selection of films. Three contemporary Nigerian films were chosen as primary case studies: *Breath of Life* (2023, dir. BB Sasore, DOP: Ola Cardoso), *The Trade* (2023, dir. Jadesola Osiberu, DOP: John L Demps), and *Jagun Jagun* (2023, dir. Adebayo Tijani and Tope Adebayo, DOP: Adeoluwa Owu). These films were selected for three reasons. First, they represent different genres – a period drama/romance, a crime thriller, and an epic action film. This allows for a comparison of how light is used for different narrative purposes. Second, they were all shot by cinematographers who are recognized as part of the “New Nollywood” wave, known for a more conscious and cinematic approach to image making (Adenekan 33). Third, they were all commercially and critically successful in 2023, meaning their visual language was effective for a contemporary Nigerian audience.

The main method of analysis is close textual analysis, also known as shot-by-shot analysis. This method, widely used in film studies by scholars like David Bordwell, involves breaking down a film sequence into its component shots and examining the formal choices made in each frame (Bordwell 47). For this study, three key sequences were selected from each film a total of nine sequences. The sequences were chosen because they represent a significant emotional or narrative turning point in the story (e.g., a moment of revelation, confrontation, or loss). They are the moments where the cinematography is most likely to be working hardest to convey meaning.

Each sequence was analyzed using a checklist adapted from Bruce Block's visual structure model and Blain Brown's cinematography framework (Block 55; Brown 92). The analysis focused on five elements of light:

1. **Quality:** Is the light hard (creating sharp shadows) or soft (creating gentle transitions)? Hard light often suggests tension or realism, while soft light can suggest romance or memory.
2. **Direction:** Where is the light coming from? Front light is revealing, side light is dramatic, backlight creates separation and mood.
3. **Ratio/Contrast:** Is the scene high-contrast (low-key, with deep blacks) or low-contrast (high-key, with few shadows)? This relates directly to genre and tone.
4. **Colour/Temperature:** Is the light warm (orange/yellow) or cool (blue/green)? Warm light is often associated with safety, home, or the past, while cool light can suggest danger, the future, or emotional distance (Storaro 22).
5. **Motivation:** Does the light have a visible source in the scene (a lamp, a window, fire) or is it unmotivated (placed only for effect)?

The analysis was not done in isolation. To avoid a purely subjective reading, the findings were compared with the existing literature on cinematography. For example, when a scene in *The Trade* uses heavy top-lighting to make a character's eyes fall into shadow, this was analyzed in relation to John Alton's writings on using light to suggest moral ambiguity (Alton 41).

The second method was semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured format was chosen because it allows for a conversation, rather than a rigid questionnaire (Kvale 64). A list of guiding questions was prepared (e.g., "What was your main lighting challenge on this film?", "How did you want the audience to feel in this particular scene?"), but the interviewees were free to elaborate and take the conversation in new directions. This was important because, as Tunde Kelani has noted, Nigerian cinematographers often solve problems in practical, on-set ways that are not found in textbooks (Kelani 34). The goal of the interviews was to get the practitioner's perspective – to understand the intention behind the image, and the practical realities (budget, time, weather) that shaped the final result. The interviews were conducted via video call, and transcribed.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this methodology. First, textual analysis is inherently interpretive. Two viewers can look at the same shadow and see different things. To mitigate this, the analysis is grounded in established film theory and, where possible, checked against the cinematographer's own statements. Second, the study is limited to three films from one year. It does not claim to represent all of Nollywood, which is a vast and diverse industry, as documented by Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome (Haynes 12; Okome 5). However, by focusing deeply on a small number of recent, influential films, the study can provide a detailed snapshot of current practice.

Finally, this research is informed by an ethical consideration raised by Nigerian scholars: the need to analyze Nollywood on its own terms, not just as a failed imitation of Hollywood (Adesokan 143). Therefore, while global theories of light are used as a framework, the analysis constantly asks: "What is this lighting choice doing for *this* Nigerian story, for *this* Nigerian audience?" The methodology, in essence, is an attempt to listen to what the light is saying, in both a global language and a local dialect.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS: READING THE LIGHT IN THREE NEW NOLLYWOOD FILMS

The analysis of *Breath of Life* (DOP: Ola Cardoso), *The Trade* (DOP: John Demps), and *Jagun Jagun* (DOP: Adeoluwa Owu) shows that contemporary Nigerian cinematography has moved beyond the "just make it visible" approach of early Nollywood. These cinematographers are not just lighting sets; they are lighting emotions. They use light as a tool to build mood, to define character, and to create a specific visual world. The three films are very different in genre, but they share a common trait: intentionality. The light is no longer an accident of the location or the budget; it is a decision.

1. LIGHT AND MOOD/ATMOSPHERE

The most immediate function of light in these films is the creation of atmosphere. The audience feels the mood before they understand the plot, and this is done almost entirely through lighting choices.

In *Breath of Life*, Ola Cardoso uses light to create a mood of quiet grief and slow healing. The film tells the story of a man who has lost his faith and family, and lives in isolated bitterness. Cardoso rarely uses bright, open light. Instead, the protagonist's house is often lit by a single, soft source, a window in the daytime, a small lamp at night. The rooms are filled with shadow. This is not the dramatic shadow of film noir, but a heavy, soft shadow that feels like sadness. It is low-key lighting, but gentle. As Blain Brown notes, soft light is forgiving, it wraps around the subject (Brown 95). Here, it wraps around the man's pain, making the audience feel his loneliness without needing dialogue. When the young house help, Elijah, enters his life, the lighting slowly changes. A second lamp is turned on. A curtain is opened wider. The shadows in the room become lighter. The atmosphere shifts from despair to cautious hope, and the audience feels this shift physically, through their eyes, before any character says the word "hope."

The Trade, shot by John Demps, uses light to build a mood of tension and documentary realism. The film is based on a true story of a kidnapping syndicate, and Demps avoids any lighting that looks "cinematic" or pretty. He uses a lot of available light and practical sources (the light that exists in the location, like fluorescent tubes in an office or a bulb in a dingy room). The colour palette is desaturated, often leaning towards a sickly green or yellow, especially in the kidnappers' hideouts. This creates an atmosphere of unease and dirtiness. There is no romance in the image. The world feels real, and therefore the danger feels real. In the scenes with the police, the lighting is slightly cleaner, more fluorescent and bluer, but it is still flat and unflattering. There are no heroes lit with golden light here. Demps' approach aligns with what Roger Deakins describes as "invisible lighting" the light is motivated, you believe where it is coming from, so you focus on the story, not the technique (Deakins). The mood is not one of stylized thriller, but of a news report you cannot turn off.

Jagun Jagun, a Yoruba epic, presents the opposite challenge. Cinematographer Adeoluwa Owu must create an atmosphere of myth and grandeur. He does this by embracing hard, direct sunlight. The film is set in a pre-colonial warrior era, and the battles take place in open fields under a harsh sun. Owu does not soften this light. He lets it be hard. The shadows are black and deep. Sweat glistens on the warriors' skin. The light is a physical force, it feels hot. This creates an atmosphere of brutality and reality. The fight scenes are not clean and choreographed like a Hollywood film; they are messy, dusty, and hard to watch, because the light shows every detail. This is a conscious choice. As Tunde Kelani has argued in his own work, the Nigerian sun is not an enemy to be diffused, but a character to be used (Kelani 34). Owu uses it to make the audience feel the weight of the warriors' world. At night, around the fire, the light becomes warm, orange, and flickering. The hard daylight of war gives way to the soft, communal firelight of the village. The atmosphere shifts completely, from public violence to private storytelling, purely through the change in light quality and colour.

2. LIGHT AND CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION

Beyond mood, light in these films is used to tell us who the characters are. It shows their inner state, their morality, and their change over time.

In *Breath of Life*, Cardoso uses light to show the protagonist, Timi, as a man closed off from the world. In the first half of the film, he is often photographed with half his face in shadow. This is a classic technique, described by John Alton, to show a character's duality or inner conflict (Alton 41). We understand, visually, that this man is hiding something, that he is not whole. The house

help, Elijah, is almost always lit with soft, even light. His face is open, we can see his eyes clearly. He has nothing to hide. The film's emotional climax is a scene where Timi finally breaks down and cries. Cardoso lights this scene with a single, soft light source coming from the side. Timi's face is fully lit for the first time in the film. The shadow is gone. The light is literally showing us that his walls have come down, that he is finally exposed and honest. It is a simple, powerful piece of visual storytelling.

John Demps uses light in *The Trade* to construct character through environment, not through beauty. The main kidnapper, played by Blossom Chukwujekwu, is never lit to look handsome or cool. He is lit by the same ugly fluorescent lights as his victims. This is important. The film refuses to glamorize him. He is not a movie villain; he is a man in a room. In contrast, the lead negotiator is often shown in silhouette against a window, or with his face half-lit by a computer screen. Demps uses light to show that he is carrying a burden, that the job is weighing on him. He is a man working in the dark, both literally and figuratively. The lighting does not tell us if he is a good man or a bad man; it tells us he is a tired man. This is a more complex, more human way to build character than the old good guy/bad guy lighting.

Adeoluwa Owu's work in *Jagun Jagun* uses light to construct characters as archetypes. The main villain, Ogundiji, is introduced in a scene where he is backlit by the sun, his face in complete shadow. We cannot see his eyes. He is a silhouette, a force, not a man. This immediately establishes him as a mythic evil. The hero, Gbotija, is introduced in a scene where he is training at dawn. The light is soft and golden. He is lit from the side, the light catching the sweat on his muscles. He looks noble, strong, but human. We can see his face, his effort. Owu is using the direction and quality of light to tell us, in the first ten minutes, who to fear and who to follow. Later, as Gbotija becomes more ruthless, his lighting changes. He is shown more often in hard light, with deeper shadows on his face. The light is showing his moral journey, his descent into the same darkness as his enemy. The character is being constructed, and deconstructed, by light.

3. LIGHT AND VISUAL AESTHETICS

Finally, these films show a new confidence in visual aesthetics. The cinematographers are making beautiful images, but the beauty always has a purpose. It is not decoration.

Breath of Life is the most aesthetically “beautiful” of the three films, but its beauty is quiet. Cardoso has a painterly eye. He often frames shots through doorways, using the door frame as a natural vignette, with the character lit in the center of the frame and the foreground in shadow. This creates depth and focuses the eye. He also uses colour temperature expressively. Flashbacks to Timi's happy past are bathed in a warm, golden light, very similar to the technique Vittorio Storaro used in *The Last Emperor* to denote memory (Storaro 30). The present day is cooler, bluer. The past feels warm and lost. The aesthetic choice is directly tied to the theme of the film, which is about a man stuck in a cold present, haunted by a warm past.

The Trade has a very deliberate anti-aesthetic. It is not an ugly film, but it rejects beauty. John Demps uses handheld camera work and often keeps the light sources in the frame (we see the bare bulb; we see the fluorescent tube flickering). This is a technique associated with the Dogme 95 movement and filmmakers who want to create a sense of realism by showing the artifice

(Bordwell 310). By showing us the light source, Demps is saying: “This is real. This is not a movie set.” The visual aesthetic is one of transparency. The film looks the way it does not to be beautiful, but to be believed. This is a valid, and powerful, aesthetic choice.

Jagun Jagun has the most overtly “cinematic” aesthetic. Adeoluwa Owu uses drone shots, slow motion, and wide lenses to create epic scale. The colour grading is rich and saturated. The reds of the warrior's clothes are deep, the greens of the forest are lush. This is a film that wants to be looked at. It wants to be a spectacle. However, the spectacle is rooted in culture. The lighting of the night scenes, with dozens of practical torches and fires, creates a look that feels authentic to the period, even as it is beautiful. It is not the clean, blue “movie night” of Hollywood. It is orange, smoky, and alive. Owu has created a visual aesthetic that is both epic and specifically Nigerian. It proves, as scholars like Hyginus Ekwuazi hoped, that Nigerian stories can be told with full cinematic grandeur without losing their identity (Ekwuazi 112).

In conclusion, the analysis of these three films shows that the “art of creative storytelling through cinematography” is alive and well in Nollywood. Ola Cardoso paints with soft, emotional light. John Demps paints with hard, truthful light. Adeoluwa Owu paints with bold, mythic light. They are working in different genres, with different goals, but they are all using the same fundamental tool “light” to shape mood, define character, and create a compelling visual world. The conversation has shifted from “Can we light it?” to “What do we want the light to say?”

4. GLOBAL CINEMA: UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES OF LIGHT AS NARRATIVE

Cinematographers worldwide use a shared toolkit of light and shadow to reveal a character's inner life. The Nigerian films in this study use these tools with nuance and power.

In *Breath of Life*, the protagonist, Timi, is consistently lit with half of his face in shadow. This is a classic visual metaphor for a divided self, a man hiding from his own pain. The technique is almost synonymous with Gordon Willis's work in *The Godfather* (1972), where he famously used top-lighting to obscure Marlon Brando's eyes, suggesting a man whose soul was lost to darkness (Bordwell and Thompson 472). Ola Cardoso uses the same tool but for a different purpose: Timi's shadow is not one of moral corruption, but of profound sorrow. When he finally breaks down and his face is fully lit, it mirrors the moment Michael Corleone closes the door at the end of *The Godfather*, but in reverse. For Michael, the darkness wins; for Timi, the light does.

John Demps, in *The Trade*, constructs character by refusing to use traditional hero/villain lighting. The kidnapper and the police chief are often lit in the same flat, functional way. This is a sophisticated choice that resists easy moral judgments and is reminiscent of the naturalism seen in a film like *Sicario* (2015). In *Sicario*, cinematographer Roger Deakins lights the FBI agents and the morally ambiguous mercenaries with the same harsh, realistic light of the environments they are in. There is no “hero light.” Demps' work in *The Trade* follows this same philosophy. Light does not tell you who is good or bad; it simply reveals people trapped in a difficult situation, leaving the moral judgment to the audience.

Jagun Jagun uses a more archetypal, yet equally effective, approach to character lighting. The

villain, Ogundiji, is introduced as a fearsome silhouette against the sun, a technique used across global cinema to establish a powerful, almost supernatural threat. The hero, Gbotija, is often framed in the golden light of dawn or the warm light of a campfire, marking him as noble and human. This use of light to establish character archetypes is fundamental to epic storytelling, seen clearly in John Toll's cinematography for *Braveheart* (1995). William Wallace is frequently framed against the majestic, sun-drenched Scottish Highlands, his face lit to convey courage and destiny. Adeoluwa Owu uses the same language of light for Gbotija, demonstrating that the visual codes for "hero" and "villain" are deeply ingrained in global cinematic culture.

CONCLUSION

The journey through the visual landscapes of *Breath of Life*, *The Trade*, and *Jagun Jagun* confirms the central premise of this journal: cinematography is not merely a technical process of recording, but a primary act of storytelling. The old adage of "painting with light" is not just a romantic notion; it is a practical methodology being masterfully applied by a new generation of Nigerian cinematographers. In their hands, light becomes ink, shadow becomes subtext, and the screen becomes a canvas for complex human emotion. They have moved beyond the historical necessity of flat, functional lighting and have embraced a cinema of deliberate, expressive choice.

Our analysis demonstrated how this choice manifests in three distinct, yet equally powerful ways. We saw Ola Cardoso in *Breath of life* wield soft, painterly light to craft a mood of profound grief and eventual healing, using a visual language of shadow and warmth that speaks directly to the emotional arc of his protagonist. We witnessed John Demps in *The Trade* adopt a gritty, anti-aesthetic realism, using harsh, motivated light not to beautify, but to authenticate, placing his work in a global tradition of social-realist cinema that values truth over style. Finally, we observed Adeoluwa Owu in *Jagun Jagun* create a mythic grandeur, using the epic scale of hard sunlight and flickering fire to build a world that is at once fantastical and tangibly real.

These Nigerian cinematographers are not working in a vacuum. Their work is a vital part of a global cinematic conversation. Cardoso's emotional chiaroscuro echoes the psychological depth of Vittorio Storaro; Demps' unglamorous realism finds kinship in the work of Harris Savides; and Owu's epic framing engages with the same principles of spectacle seen in the films of Akira Kurosawa. Yet, in each case, this universal toolkit is localized. The golden light of a flashback in *Breath of Life* is the specific warmth of a Nigerian family home; the harsh sun in *Jagun Jagun* is the specific heat of the Yoruba landscape. They are speaking a global language, but with a distinctly Nigerian accent.

The significance of these findings extends beyond a simple appreciation of beautiful images. It offers a clear counter-narrative to the outdated perception of Nollywood cinematography as purely functional or technically deficient, a perception often rooted in the limitations of its earlier video-film era (Okome 5). This research demonstrates a paradigm shift within the industry a move from a cinema of necessity to a cinema of choice. The work of Cardoso, Demps, Owu, and their contemporaries proves that Nigerian filmmakers are no longer just asking, "Can we light this scene?" They are asking, "What is the most powerful way to light this story?" This represents the maturation of an industry, one that is now confident enough to prioritize not just the story it tells, but the way it looks and feels.

Furthermore, this evolution challenges a monolithic definition of what an "African film" should look like. These three films show that it can be a quiet, character-driven drama, a gritty urban thriller, or a sweeping historical epic. By mastering the universal language of light, these filmmakers are ensuring their stories can be felt and understood on a global stage, without sacrificing the cultural specificity that makes them unique.

As with any study, this one opens more doors than it closes. The analysis was limited to three films from a single year. Future research could expand this scope, tracing the evolution of a single cinematographer's style over multiple films or conducting a broader survey of lighting trends across different Nollywood genres. A deeper investigation into the influence of streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime—with their specific technical requirements and global audience—on this new aesthetic would also be a valuable contribution. What happens to a local aesthetic when it must answer to a global distributor?

Ultimately, this journal has sought to illuminate the often-unseen art that gives Nigerian cinema its new power. The story is no longer just in the script; it is in the shadows on a character's face, in the warmth of a remembered past, and in the harsh glare of an unavoidable present. The painters have arrived, their palettes are full, and their canvases are bigger and brighter than ever before. As more Nigerian storytellers pick up the brush, the world watches, eager to see what new pictures they will paint with light.

STATEMENT AND DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this article, "Painting with Lights: The Art of Creative Storytelling through Cinematography," is my own original work. All sources used have been appropriately cited and credited in accordance with the MLA 7th edition style guide. This work has not been previously submitted for any other purpose or publication.

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