

Storytelling the environment through films: A reassessment of the representation of ecological degradation in Curtis Graham's *Olobiri*

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Abstract

Ecological degradation remains a critical developmental challenge in Nigeria, particularly within the Niger Delta, where decades of oil exploration have devastated the environment. Human activities, including deforestation, oil spills, and pipeline vandalism, have compounded the collapse of ecosystems. Since the discovery of crude oil in 1956, the Niger Delta has become a focal point of national and international environmental concerns. Despite global awareness, the crisis persists, leaving host communities to contend with pollution that threatens their livelihoods and health. Nigerian filmmakers have increasingly employed the medium of film to address these issues, offering social commentary and advocating for environmental reform. Curtis Graham's *Olobiri*, produced by Roger Ofime, exemplifies this trend by depicting the socio-ecological devastation caused by oil exploration. The film poignantly captures the struggles of the Olobiri community as they navigate the loss of their ecological space and its catastrophic impact on their lives. This paper reassesses the narrative techniques used in *Olobiri* to highlight environmental violations and the broader implications of ecological degradation. By exploring the film's characters, themes, and visual storytelling, it examines how cinema can be a persuasive tool for fostering environmental awareness and inspiring change. The analysis underscores the power of narrative persuasion in addressing human behaviour towards the environment, advocating for a shift towards sustainable practices. Through its depiction of the Niger Delta's realities, *Olobiri* not only portrays the plight of affected communities but also illustrates the potential of storytelling as a medium for social impact, environmental preservation, and ecosystem restoration.

Keywords: Environmental Degradation, Narrative Persuasion, Niger Delta Crisis, Social Impact Films

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly influenced various industries and their operations around the world. One such sector profoundly affected by this digital revolution is the film industry. Digital platforms have made films accessible for global consumption, transforming how audiences engage with cinematic content. Moreover, films inherently possess the power to shape social behaviours and influence societal patterns. Eder (2023:102) explains that “every day, citizens of late modern societies watch hours of moving images, which contribute in many ways to their political thoughts and actions.” Films can be used as visual storytelling to convey messages about the environment to a broader audience. This function of film is important in Nigeria. This is because human activities largely cause Nigeria's environmental degradation. Yahaya et al. (2017) identify that the increased human activities in Nigeria have continued to aggravate environmental degradation, which poses a significant threat to sustainable livelihood and causes major environmental hazards that can make life and survival unbearable.

One of the significant environmental abuses that have persisted in Nigeria for many decades is oil exploration in Nigeria. The Niger Delta area where oil is found has experienced environmental pollution ranging from oil spillage on their waters and farms, killing the aquatic animal and destroying their farms, to air pollution due to rampant illegal oil refinery operations in this region. Nwilo and Badejo (2005:567) think that “the main sources of oil spill on the Niger Delta are: vandalisation of the oil pipelines by the local inhabitants; ageing of the pipelines; oil blowouts from the flow stations; cleaning of oil tankers on the high sea and disposal of used oil into the drains by the roadside mechanics.” This indicates that humans are at the forefront of environmental degradation, and social impact films can be used to address human behaviour towards the environment. To actualise this, environmental films often create a workable model that drives narratives that can show environmental outcomes that are connected to human activities with the sole aim of making a social impact via such narratives. For McCormack et al (2021), the impacts of environmental films on environmental behaviours and connection with nature are linked to insights from the narrative persuasion field with those of conservation psychology. They identify three promising pathways through which environmental films might influence their audiences: (a) reduced resistance to environmental messages, (b) interactions with audience identity and (c) meaningful media experiences. Like many other parts of the world, Nigeria has experienced massive estrangement from nature, resulting from human attitudes and behaviours, leading to the current global environmental crisis experienced in Nigeria and elsewhere (Pyle, 2003). Environmental films seek to make social impacts through visual storytelling that can bring about the social behaviour of people and the way they interact with the environment.

In the film *Olobiri*, the Nigerian Niger Delta region is represented through visual storytelling in such a way that the audience can feel the pains of the natives who, out of years of frustration, have taken to anarchy as a way of reclaiming back their ecological space. The agitations for a green environment seem to have lost their purpose, and the people of this region now join hands with oil explorers to degrade their environment further through pipeline vandalism and other related hazardous activities. The reassessment of significant characters and themes in the film *Olobiri* is aimed at showing how storytelling about the environment through motion pictures can help convey environmental messages, impact human behaviour towards the environment, and thus preserve and safeguard the environment.

Synopsis of the film *Olobiri*

The film *Olobiri* produced by Roger Ofime, tells the story of Oil discovery in the Olobiri community of the Niger Delta area of Nigeria in 1956 and the subsequent degradation of the ecosystem of the community due to oil spillage caused by exploration activities of the oil companies operating the community. The story is told from the prism of

Timpire, a character played by Olu Jacobs. Timpire regrets his inability as an educated young man to encourage his people to demand a significant stake in oil exploration and ecology preservation. The people of Olobiri were satisfied with the minute and insignificant positions offered to them and the little monetary offers made to the community during the discovery of oil. Years have passed, and their lives are in shambles due to the oil company's activities. There is no river to fish, water to drink, or farmlands to cultivate, and the air they breathe is contaminated with oil fumes.

The complete collapse of the Olobiri community's ecosystem has led to anarchy and agitations. Boma, aka Gunpowder, played by Richard Mofe-Damijo, a geology graduate and former employee of LESH oil company, is the character through which the film drives the thematic concern of environmental degradation and its consequences in society. The film opens with Gunpowder conducting a public execution of his former partner, Dogo, whom he accuses of greed and sabotaging the struggle for the emancipation of the Olobiri ecology. Gunpowder was triggered to anger the more with the news that there has been approval for Foreshaw to extract oil from Otuagbagi, a nearby community- a deal worth \$300 million in revenue each year. In his resolution to protect his people and the environment, Gunpowder takes laws into his hands. He successfully infiltrated Forshaw Oil Company by planting a spy who worked as a personal assistant to the founder and director of the organisation, Mr. Powell. The spy's job is to dissuade Foreshaw from continuing the oil exploration plan. First, he sends pictures of malnourished Nigerian children and those affected by crude oil poisoning inside the envelope to Powell and other concerned persons. Still, the company's representative in Nigeria, Cyril Beke, encouraged the company to ignore it and go ahead with the oil exploration plan. This is when Powell decides to visit Nigeria to see things for himself.

Upon Powell's arrival in Nigeria, his convoy, including Cyril and a group of soldiers, was attacked by Gunpowder and his men. Powell escapes with the help of a soldier and is found by the community doctor Timpire's grandson's love interest. The doctor hides Powell to Timpire's house. Meanwhile, Azu and Dobra, who are Gunpowder's accomplices, have kidnapped Powell's family in the US. The story's twist comes when Gunpowder captures Timpire, his grandson, the doctor and Powell. The series of events paved the way for the cancellation of the oil exploration. Still, Gunpowder refuses to honour his agreement with Azu and Dobra to release Powell when it is cancelled, insisting that Powell and Cyril Beke must pay with their blood. Infuriated by Gunpowder's betrayal and blood lust, Azu reports himself to the police and reveals Gunpowder's hideout.

Impacts of Environmental Abuse

The film *Olobiri* through motion picture presentation, vividly depicts the complete environmental degradation in the Olobiri community of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. The film can be classified as storytelling about the environment because the unfolding action inherent in the film revolves around environmental abuse due to human activities on Olobiri land. The film shows that this abuse has been ongoing and persistent since the discovery of oil in Olobiri in 1956. Ekpo and David (2018) observe that since the discovery of the first commercially viable oil wells in Olobiri, in the Niger Delta, Nigeria, in 1956 to the present day, the issue of oil production and its effect on the environment has been the source of constant menace to the lives of people living in the community and also a significant source of friction between oil companies and their host communities. Through the cinematic presentation of the social realities inherent in the Olobiri, the film shows one of the lead characters, Timpire, rebuking a boy for drinking water from the river. Gunpowder also tells his mother that he has resulted in anarchy, mayhem, murder, maiming, and homicidal enterprise because that is the only way he can fight for the emancipation of his people and the restoration of the collapsed ecology of Olobiri. He reminds his mother that the blood which she

coughs out often is an insignia of the struggle and also a result of inhaling fumes from oil exploration and drinking from the river, which is already contaminated with petroleum jelly. Gunpowder rebukes his mother for suggesting he take a job offer with the same oil companies that have ruined their lives.

The film also depicts how oil companies' operations in Olobiri have been a significant source of environmental abuse and degradation. Like Ekpo and David (2018) rightly observe, the films show that oil exploration and activities have affected fishing activities in the host communities, which is a significant economic preoccupation among the indigenes of Olobiri. The primary sources of the oil spill in Olobiri are vandalism of the oil pipelines by the local inhabitants due to neglect by the oil companies, ageing of the pipelines, oil blowouts from the flow stations, cleaning of oil tankers on the high sea, disposal of used oil into the drains by the roadside mechanics, tanker accidents, ballast water discharge, etc. Oil kills plants and animals in the estuarine zone. Oil settles on beaches and kills organisms that live there; it also settles on the ocean floor and kills benthic (bottom-dwelling) organisms such as crabs. Oil poisons algae disrupt significant food chains and decrease the yield of edible crustaceans. Initially, the people of Olobiri were farmers who lived by the trade of their fishing nets and the dignity of labour of farming on their rich vegetation. No wonder Nwaozuzu et al. (2021:2) state that in the film *Olobiri (Blood and Oil)*,

The apt portrayal of Niger Delta oil communities' extensively degraded and polluted environment validates the reality of anguish and victimhood because of the massively diminished fishing and farming prospects. Lastly, the implication of this scenario is increased unemployment, psychological distress, diseases, and violent restiveness, which have enormously reduced the well-being of Niger Delta inhabitants.

Curtis Graham, in this film, *Olobiri*, shows through his directorial approach and concept the cauldron of contradiction that characterises the fight for the emancipation of Olobiri. In the opening scene of the film, the director shows through motion pictures the gruesome murder and execution of Dogo, who has been accused of greed and betraying the course they pursue. Also, the Oil Company's representative in Nigeria, Cyril, is presented in such a way that his character does not care about the environmental abuse and the consequent effect on the lives of his people. Then Gunpowder, the anarchist, resorts to violence and the breakdown of law and order. The situations presented in the film appear to be typical of the social reality in Olobiri and the entire Niger Delta at large. (Agbiboa and Maiangwa 2012). The poor living conditions of the Niger Delta people as a result of corruption on the part of political leaders and many factors have prevented the cleaning of Olobiri land, this environmental degradation has displaced many people from their source of livelihood, and this is the course Gunpowder is fighting for in this film.

Tool for Environmental Change

Over the years, the world globally has experienced a pattern of unfriendliness from nature; even though this estrangement from nature, it is evident that attitudes and behaviours of human activities are implicated in the current environmental crisis (Pyle, 2003). This means that there is a need for humans to rethink and change their attitude towards nature. Recently, researchers have begun to share the notion that films have the potential to disseminate widely through motion picture narratives, stories and information that can impact human interaction with the environment (McCormack, 2021; Jones et al., 2019; Silk et al., 2018). Films with solid environmental themes are adjudged to have the ability to influence social behaviour regarding human interactions with the environment.

Olobiri has strong environmental themes and, hence, a social impact film that aspires to influence ecological change through cinematic narrative persuasion. First, the film shows the unjust indignation that thousands of people living on the riverine coast of

Olobiri daily endure due to human activities on the environment. By connecting to the suffering from the inception when oil was discovered in the Olobiri community in 1956, the film shows a long-standing battle of a complete collapse of the Olobiri ecosystem occasioned by oil exploration. The film is a social reality of the indigenes' day-to-day lives. Their livelihood is solely dependent on the ecosystem for survival, thus increasing the level of poverty and displaced persons. These people, who were originally farmers, could not harvest from the gullets of their rivers, which nature had reserved for them. They cannot access drinking water or cultivate their farmland due to oil pollution that has now contaminated their streams and rivers, causing forest destruction and biodiversity loss. In general, the area is an ecological wasteland. In the film, we see the people of Olobiri living in abject poverty, with no water to drink and no sound health system to treat them for the illnesses they bear due to environmental degradation. The scriptwriter Samantha Iwowo, in an interview with Nduka Otiono, states that:

I was keen to write a story with a theme bearing an immediacy of resonance within the Niger Delta society. Based on this, I developed the characters; I wanted each to be an archetype of the sort of victims oil exploitations in the Delta continue to create. In Olobiri town, even now, every inhabitant in some form continues to suffer the devastating effects consequent upon decades of mindless drilling of its land for oil. From the child to the aged, the youth and the middle-aged, hopelessness can be gleaned from conversations I had with them during my field research for the film. They exist – no aspirations! The town is a ghostly remnant of those who have not had the opportunity to leave. Only one rundown school exists there. A few youths engage in the bike-transportation business. Besides this, nothing! Farming is impossible. Access to pipe-borne water is impossible...

From the preceding, it is evident that the film depicts the ugly realities inherent in Olobiri land. Besides cinematic rounds, the film is widely distributed on SVOD online streaming platforms like Netflix and YouTube. This means that it reaches an audience across the globe. One of the ways social impact films, especially those on the environment, can effect changes is by triggering empathy (O'Bryhim & Parsons, 2015) by showing the inhuman treatment and suffering the people of Olobiri received. Empathy often generates global conversation and thus can deter those abusing the environment. In the film, the oil company suspended their planned exploration, which was estimated to accrue an interest of 300 million dollars. Visual storytelling has the potential to create dramatic experiences that are so vivid in such way that the experience can lead to catharsis. Catharsis can influence the audience's behaviour in their connection and interaction with nature. Here, *Olobiri* is conceived as an environmental film because it is set in the natural world among their primary subjects or themes, concerning plants, animals, landscapes or other natural phenomena like climate (McCormack, 2021). The film *Olobiri* is a non-fiction story that involves human and non-human protagonists.

As an environmental film aimed at making a social impact, the film *Olobiri*, in its storytelling format, has explored a certain degree of narrativity, having nature and human intersection with nature in view. Through narrative persuasions, the story depicts characters in contradictory conditions caused by human activities that have wholly degraded the environment. The causally linked sequence of events that present the crisis, conflict, and resolution shows the harmful impact of environmental violations on humans. Gunpowder and his men completely break down the law and order, taking the laws into their own hands. The collapsed ecology of Olobiri leaves the community, as presented in the film, in abject poverty and a varied array of developmental issues.

Conclusion

Through visual narratology, the film *Olobiri* shows a veritable persuasion pathway by identifying a degraded environment and how human activities play a significant role in

violating the ecosystem. *Olobiri*, as an environmental film, beyond its social impact function, shows its potential to influence viewers' identification of environmental violations from the purview and knowledge about the level of ecological abuse continually going on in the Niger Delta region area of Nigeria. For example, depictions of the environment as a character in the film and the violation of the environment by other characters, such as the oil companies' work may allow viewers to draw social comparisons between themselves and those presented in the film through the purgation of emotions of pity and fear. This can reinforce a paradigm shift in behaviour on how the oil workers and the indigenes of Olobiri connect and interact with the environment. Environmental change can be achieved by storytelling the environment through narrative persuasion. The film *Olobiri* is a good example.

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