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The Aesthetics of Power: Cinematographic Construction of the Big Man

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Abstract
This study examines the aesthetics of power through an analysis of cinematographic techniques used to construct the figure of the Big Man in *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*. Grounded in formalist film theory, the study foregrounds cinematography as a central site through which authority, dominance, and political power are visually produced and sustained in film. Adopting a qualitative descriptive research design, the study employs purposive sampling to select the film as a representative text in which the Big Man is prominently foregrounded. Data was collected through repeated observation and visual analysis of the film, complemented by document analysis of relevant scholarly literature. Using interpretive textual analysis, the study systematically examined cinematographic elements such as shot size, camera angles, lighting, and mise-en-scène, focusing on how these techniques shape audience perception of the Big Man. The findings reveal that cinematography functions not merely as a technical device but as an aesthetic strategy that magnifies authority, naturalizes hierarchy, and centres the Big Man as a visually commanding presence. The study contributes to film and cultural studies by demonstrating that power in cinema is actively constructed through visual form. By foregrounding cinematography as a performative and aesthetic mechanism of power, the study offers insights into the visual politics of leadership and authority in African cinema.

Keywords: Cinematographic, *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin,* Nigeria

Introduction

Film aesthetics has long been central to understanding how cinema generates meaning beyond narrative content. Early foundational work by Sparshott (1971) [9] situates film aesthetics in the organisation of visual form, arguing that meaning in cinema emerges through deliberate arrangements of image, rhythm, and perception rather than mere storytelling. This position is extended by Barber (2015) [2], who emphasises film form, particularly cinematography, as a primary site through which ideological and cultural meanings are encoded and communicated to audiences.

Contemporary scholarship further refines this focus by examining the cinematographic image as an aesthetic construction. Cowan (2019) [4] underscores the role of framing, lighting, colour, and camera movement in shaping visual emphasis and directing audience interpretation, while Ehrat (2005) [5], drawing on Peircean semiotics, demonstrates that cinematic images function as signs whose aesthetic organization mediates power, representation, and narration. These insights establish cinematography as a semiotic and aesthetic system rather than a neutral recording device.

In non-Western and postcolonial contexts, aesthetics becomes inseparable from questions of culture and power. Papaioannou (2009) [6] traces African cinema's shift from orality to visuality, highlighting how visual aesthetics negotiate authority, tradition, and modernity. Similarly, Bisschoff (2009) [3] and Pugsley (2016) [7] reveal how aesthetic choices in African and Asian cinemas articulate cultural hierarchies, gendered power, and political identities. Recent comparative work by Sonni *et al*. (2025) [8] further demonstrates how visual aesthetics mediate cultural power dynamics in contemporary cinema.

In the Kenyan context, Ba (2016) provides an important precedent by analysing cinematographic techniques in *The Making of a Nation*, illustrating how camera work contributes to ideological meaning. However, focused analysis of how cinematography constructs the figure of the Big Man as an aesthetic embodiment of power remains limited. This study therefore, builds on film aesthetic theory and African cinema scholarship to examine how cinematographic techniques visually construct power, authority, and dominance through the Big Man figure.

Statement of the Problem

The figure of the Big Man is a recurring symbol of authority and power in many cinematic texts, often interpreted through political, ideological, or narrative frameworks. However, existing scholarship has given limited attention to the *cinematographic techniques* through which this power is visually constructed. As a result, the role of the camera in shaping audience perceptions of dominance, hierarchy, and legitimacy remains under-examined. Power in cinema is not communicated solely through dialogue or storyline but is embedded in visual form. Elements such as framing, lighting, camera angles, movement, and composition function to aestheticise authority and position the Big Man as visually commanding. When these techniques are overlooked, analyses risk reducing power to thematic representation rather than recognising it as a crafted visual experience. This study therefore addresses the gap in scholarship by examining how cinematographic techniques construct the aesthetics of power in the portrayal of the Big Man, demonstrating that authority in film is actively produced through visual form and cinematic design.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in formalist film theory, which provides an appropriate framework for analysing cinematography as a system of meaning in its own right. Associated with scholars such as Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, and I. A. Richards, formalism prioritizes the internal organisation of a text and the techniques through which meaning is produced, rather than external factors such as historical context, authorial intention, or audience reception. As articulated by Eichenbaum (1926), formalism seeks to establish an objective and systematic analysis of art by focusing on form, arguing that what a work communicates cannot be separated from how it communicates it. Consequently, form is understood as integral to, rather than subordinate to, content. In this context, meaning in film is generated through formal properties such as shot composition, camera angles, lighting, mise-en-scène, and editing. Formalist film theory therefore, treats cinema not as a transparent reflection of reality but as a carefully constructed aesthetic system in which visual techniques shape perception and interpretation (Sen, 2018) [10]. By foregrounding unity and coherence among these elements, formalism demonstrates how cinematic form organizes power, emphasis, and hierarchy within the image.This study adopts formalism to examine how cinematographic techniques construct the figure of the Big Man in *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*. Focusing specifically on mise-en-scène, shot size, camera angle, and lighting, the analysis demonstrates how visual form is used to aestheticise authority, foreground dominance, and produce the Big Man as a commanding presence on screen. The film is thus approached as an artistic construction whose meaning emerges primarily through its cinematographic design.

Literature Review

The reviewed scholarship demonstrates sustained interest in cinematographic techniques within Kenyan film and television, particularly in relation to visual style, national history, and sociocultural representation. BA, F. M. I. (2016) and Irungu (n.d.) provide detailed analyses of Hilary Ngweno's *The Making of a Nation*, foregrounding camera work, framing, and editing as tools for narrating Kenyan nationalism. These studies are valuable for establishing early traditions of politically engaged Kenyan cinema and for showing how cinematography supports historical narration. However, their focus remains largely descriptive and celebratory, with limited critical interrogation of how visual form produces ideological meaning or ethical tension. Diang'a (2015) [27] and Nyutho (2015) [30] broaden the discussion by situating cinematographic techniques within the historical development of the Kenyan film industry. While these works map stylistic evolution and institutional challenges, they privilege industry history and technical progression over close textual analysis. As a result, the affective and symbolic implications of cinematic form receive limited attention.

More recent studies, such as Oiye *et al*. (2025) [31] and Gichuki (2025) [28], shift toward detailed examinations of camera eye, mise-en-scène, and visual narration in contemporary Kenyan films and animation. These works demonstrate how visual strategies construct social meaning and identity, particularly for younger audiences. Similarly, Ndede (2021) [29] explores aesthetics and pain in Kenyan crime films, linking visual form to emotional and ethical paradoxes. Nonetheless, these studies focus primarily on Kenyan contexts and contemporary genres, leaving earlier African political films underexplored.

The major gap across this body of work lies in the limited application of cinematographic analysis to non-Kenyan African political cinema and to representations of authoritarian power. This study addresses that gap by applying close visual analysis, photography, lighting, shot variation, and mise-en-scène, to *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*. In doing so, it extends Kenyan-centred cinematic frameworks to a broader African context and demonstrates how film form functions as a critical language for interrogating dictatorship, violence, and postcolonial power.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine how cinematographic techniques are used to construct the figure of the Big Man in *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to generate in-depth interpretations of visual and audio-visual elements rather than quantifiable measurements. The descriptive design enabled the researcher to closely examine dialogue, nonverbal communication, character interaction, and stylistic features of the film in order to tease out meanings embedded in its cinematographic form.

The study focused on a single film selected through non-probability purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was suitable because it allows the researcher to deliberately select a text that best represents the phenomenon under investigation. *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin* was chosen from a broader pool of films and visual texts that include *A Day in the Life of a Dictator*, *Mobutu*, and *The Last King of Scotland*. The excluded texts were deemed unsuitable for various reasons: some were documentaries, others were multilingual, and some prioritised fictional characters over the historical figure of Idi Amin. In contrast, *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin* prominently foregrounds Amin as the central character, employs English, and presents a factional narrative that allows for sustained analysis of the Big Man figure. The choice of a single film is consistent with

qualitative research principles that value depth over breadth, enabling detailed and fine-grained analysis of the text.

Data collection involved observation, visual analysis, and document analysis. Observation was conducted through repeated viewings of the film to capture actions, interactions, dialogue, and nonverbal communication among characters. An observation guide and checklist were used to ensure systematic recording of relevant features. Particular attention was paid to cinematographic elements such as shot size, camera angles, lighting, mise-en-scène, and camera movement, as well as how these elements function to foreground power and authority. Notes were recorded in a field notebook, and selected images representing different shot types were captured in digital form. These constituted the primary data for the study. Document analysis was used to complement the visual data. This involved reviewing scholarly books, journal articles, film reviews, and previous studies on cinematography, film aesthetics, and representations of power in cinema. Document analysis provided theoretical grounding and contextual support for interpreting the visual strategies identified in the film. The combination of observation and document analysis enhanced the credibility of the findings by allowing triangulation between the film text and existing scholarship.

Data analysis was carried out using interpretive textual analysis. This method was appropriate because it enables researchers to describe and interpret how meaning is constructed in recorded and visual texts. The film's audio-visual content was carefully transcribed, and instances of cinematographic techniques were coded and categorised. The analysis focused on identifying patterns in shot composition, lighting, camera angles, and mise-en-scène, and examining how these formal elements contribute to the visual construction of the Big Man. Data were organised into thematic categories related to cinematographic techniques, stylistic figuration, and representations of power, allowing for coherent interpretation and discussion.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Ethical approval was obtained from Kisii University following the approval of the research proposal by supervisors and the faculty. A research permit was also acquired from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) before the commencement of data collection and analysis. These procedures ensured that the study adhered to established ethical standards in academic research.

Results and Discussions

This section analyses the cinematographic techniques through which *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin* constructs and foregrounds the figure of the "Big Man." It examines the use of mise-en-scène, shot composition, camera angles, lighting, montage, and sound as central devices for shaping narrative meaning and visualising authoritarian power. Cinematography is approached as a creative and interpretive process rather than a neutral recording of events (Mauler, 2012). Following Kellner (1987), the analysis attends to filmic form as a key site where political and social ideologies are articulated. By examining these techniques, the section demonstrates how cinematic form communicates the film's critique of power and leadership under Amin's regime.

Variations in Lighting

Lighting is a central expressive element in film, functioning not merely to illuminate scenes but to shape meaning, atmosphere, and emotional response. Through variations in intensity, contrast, and distribution, lighting contributes to characterisation, narrative emphasis, and mood construction. As Cattle (2008) observes, "the underlying aim of lighting design is to control the luminous environment in order to influence the perceived environment" (p. 4). Similarly, Melo and Paiva (2005) argue that well-illuminated scenes are commonly associated with happiness and openness, whereas dimly lit scenes tend to evoke mystery, sadness, or menace. Lighting is therefore instrumental in guiding audience perception and emotional engagement.

The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin deploys lighting contrastively, relying on high-key lighting to signal moments of celebration, pleasure, or emotional ease, and low-key lighting to underscore tension, suffering, injustice, and impending violence. These visual strategies reinforce the film's thematic opposition between public spectacle and private brutality, as well as between Amin's indulgent lifestyle and the nation's suffering.

High-key lighting

High-key lighting is prominently used in scenes that depict moments of national optimism, personal indulgence, or emotional release. A notable example occurs during Amin's reception and inaugural address, which is shot in natural, high-key lighting. The brightness of the scene, coupled with the jubilant crowd, visually communicates a moment of collective hope and celebration. The lighting aligns the audience momentarily with the public enthusiasm that accompanied Amin's rise to power.

Similarly, the scene in which Amin celebrates with dancers after taking over from Obote is brightly lit, reinforcing the mood of triumph and festivity. High-key lighting is also employed in Amin's private spaces, particularly in his bedroom scenes. These scenes are suffused with soft, bright lighting that creates a romantic and sensual atmosphere, foregrounding Amin's hedonistic tendencies. The visual warmth of these moments contrasts sharply with the violence unfolding elsewhere, thereby emphasising his moral detachment.

Following the acquittal of the British journalist, the interview conducted outside the courtroom is also well illuminated. The brightness of the setting mirrors the journalist's relief and the celebratory mood of his supporters. Likewise, the statehouse lounge scenes, where Amin socialises with women and aides, are naturally and brightly lit, conveying serenity and leisure. This visual calm is deeply ironic, as it coincides with widespread killings of Obote's supporters. Through this contrast, the film highlights Amin's insensitivity and detachment from the nation's suffering.

A brightly lit romantic scene of Amin's bedroom

Low-Key Lighting

Low-key lighting is used extensively to mark moments of fear, injustice, and impending tragedy. The film's prologue and voice-over narration are presented in dim lighting, immediately foreshadowing a sombre and tragic narrative. This mood is reinforced in the introductory hospital scene, where a critically wounded patient undergoes emergency surgery. The subdued lighting, combined with the struggle of Dr. Oroya and his team to resuscitate the patient, conveys urgency, uncertainty, and fragility of life.

The courtroom scene in which the British journalist awaits trial is also poorly lit, visually registering his vulnerability and the injustice of the false accusations levelled against him. The low-key lighting reflects the oppressive nature of Amin's regime. This sense of foreboding intensifies when Justice Benedict Okiwanuka, who acquits the journalist, is later frog-marched by Amin's men and murdered. The subdued lighting in his office during this sequence anticipates the danger that ultimately consumes him.

The detention cells at the State Research Bureau (SRB), where suspected rebels and perceived supporters of Obote are held, are darkly lit. The oppressive lighting accentuates the inhuman conditions of confinement and foreshadows the executions that take place within these spaces. Darkness here becomes a visual metaphor for both moral decay and the erasure of human dignity.

A low-key lighting of a section of the scene during the Entebbe raid

Low-key lighting is also employed in scenes of personal tragedy. After Amin abducts a young woman from a dance hall and attempts to rape her, an act that leads to her suicide, the subsequent killing of her fiancé occurs in near darkness outside the hall. The poor lighting not only situates the event at night but also deepens the somber emotional impact of the senseless violence.

The Entebbe raid, following the hijacking of foreigners, is staged in poorly illuminated nighttime scenes. The darkness heightens the sense of danger and horror associated with the operation. The scene is rendered particularly ironic by its juxtaposition with Amin's indulgent intimacy with his lovers, highlighting his obliviousness to the looming catastrophe. Through this contrast, the film reinforces its critique of Amin's moral recklessness and political irresponsibility.

The Use of Photography

Photography, whether realised through still images or moving pictures, is fundamental to meaning-making in film. It constitutes the visual foundation upon which narrative, emotion, and ideology are constructed. Through photographic composition, framing, and shot selection, film communicates both denotative and connotative meanings. Denotative meaning refers to the literal, descriptive content of the image, what is directly visible, while connotative meaning emerges from cultural associations, symbolic systems, and ideological frameworks that extend beyond the image itself. As Zelizer (2010) [22] aptly notes, "connotation here suggests that images provide more than what is physically caught by the camera; where, associated with symbolism, generalizability and universality, the image draws from broad symbolic systems in lending meaning to what is depicted" (p. 3).

In *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*, photography operates as a critical semiotic resource through which power, violence, excess, and moral contradiction are visualised. The film's photographic choices do not merely record events but actively shape how characters and actions are interpreted. Through variations in shot types and framing, the filmmaker constructs particular outlooks on leadership, authority, and suffering, while simultaneously guiding audience perception and emotional response. This section examines how photography, especially through the variation of shots, contributes to the articulation of the film's central themes and ideological positions.

Variation in Shots

Shot variation plays a decisive role in cinematic storytelling. Different shot scales determine what the viewer sees, how much contextual information is provided, and the degree of emotional intimacy established between the audience and the characters. In the film under study, a deliberate combination of long shots, medium-long shots, medium shots, and close-ups is employed to balance spectacle with intimacy, and public performance with private consequence. These photographic strategies structure the viewer's engagement with Amin's rise, consolidation of power, and eventual downfall.

Long Shots

Long shots are extensively used to situate action within broader spatial and social contexts. They establish setting, scale, and collective mood, allowing viewers to apprehend both individual actions and their wider implications. Following the overthrow of Obote and the subsequent seizure of power by Amin, long shots depict multitudes celebrating on the streets of Kampala. These images visually communicate mass excitement and national euphoria, immersing the viewer in the atmosphere of political transition. However, embedded within these celebratory scenes are disturbing counter-images: Amin's soldiers capturing and terrorising perceived Obote sympathisers even

as Amin acknowledges jubilant crowds. The long shot thus accommodates contradictory meanings, hope and violence, within the same frame, foreshadowing the regime's duplicity.

A long shot of celebrations on the Kampala streets

Similarly, the State House is introduced through a long shot accompanied by the inscription "THE STATE HOUSE, KAMPALA, UGANDA." The presence of armed guards immediately signals heightened security and authority. Inside the State House lounge, long shots capture multiple simultaneous activities: Amin swimming, being massaged, soldiers on guard, waiters serving drinks, and scantily clad bodies basking in the sun. This photographic choice foregrounds Amin's indulgent lifestyle and obsession with pleasure. The visual excess of leisure and luxury is sharply contrasted with hospital scenes elsewhere in the film, where victims of gun violence struggle for survival. Through this juxtaposition, long shots reinforce the thematic opposition between power and suffering.

The barracks scene is likewise introduced through a long shot that reveals the Ugandan flag, armed soldiers, and military infrastructure. Amin's arrival, visibly shaken yet heavily guarded, is framed within this expansive composition. The long shot establishes the barracks as a space of discipline and coercion. When the alleged coup plotters are presented kneeling before Amin, the spatial arrangement underscores his dominance and the vulnerability of those under his control. His instruction that the suspects receive "VIP treatment," a euphemism for execution, gains chilling significance precisely because it is delivered within this seemingly orderly military setting.

Medium-Long Shots

Medium-long shots serve as transitional frames that balance contextual awareness with character focus. They allow viewers to observe action and interaction while still attending to dialogue and gesture. One notable instance occurs as Amin flees the country following his ouster. The aircraft is shown in the sky in a long shot before transitioning into a medium-long shot as Amin boards it. His remarks about regrouping in Jinja convey defiance and an unyielding sense of self-importance, reinforcing the image of the "Big Man" who refuses to accept defeat.

Medium-long shots are also employed in scenes that reveal Amin's cruelty through casual conversation. As Amin, Bob Astles, and Mariamungu identify a snake for Amin's meal, the shot allows the audience to follow their banter while overhearing Amin's chilling directive to eliminate soldiers from the Acholi and Langi communities. This casual issuance of death sentences within an almost playful context foreshadows the subsequent executions and underscores the normalisation of violence under Amin's rule.

The scene in which Amin eats the snake is similarly framed in a medium-long shot. As he encourages Mariamungu to eat, proclaiming that "snake will make you strong," Amin is portrayed as transgressive and extraordinary, someone who defies conventional norms. This photographic framing reinforces his cultivated image as a fearless, almost mythical figure, while simultaneously unsettling the viewer.

Extravagance is further highlighted through medium-long shots of Amin's elaborate motorcade shortly before an attempted bombing. The scale of the procession exposes his misuse of state resources and indulgence in excess. This is echoed in scenes where confiscated Asian properties are distributed to Amin's loyalists. Alternating medium-long and medium shots ensure that both the items and recipients are clearly visible, reinforcing themes of patronage and corruption.

The abduction of a young woman during a celebratory entertainment is captured initially in a medium shot, while the subsequent killing of her fiancé outside the hall unfolds in a medium-long shot. The photographic distance allows viewers to witness the brutality while situating it within the broader spectacle of praise and celebration occurring simultaneously inside. This contrast exposes the moral hypocrisy at the heart of Amin's regime.

A mid-long of Amin, Bob and Mariamungu being served snake for their food

Close-Ups

Close-ups eliminate surrounding visual information to concentrate attention on facial expression, gesture, and emotional intensity. They create intimacy and foster identification, enabling viewers to feel the psychological weight of events. In this film, close-ups are strategically used to humanise victims and expose the emotional consequences of tyranny.

In the opening hospital scenes, close-ups of Dr. Oroya's soiled hands and perspiring face emphasise urgency, exhaustion, and professional dedication. The unconscious patient is similarly framed in close-up, while shots of the medical team working in unison heighten tension and establish a sombre tone. These images visually articulate the human cost of political upheaval.

Close-ups also introduce major characters. Amin's first appearance, celebrating aboard a pick-up truck, captures his initial elation. However, as the narrative progresses, similar close-ups reveal paranoia and aggression. Mariamungu and

Bob Astles are introduced in close-ups that establish their proximity to power. Bob's presence as a white confidant raises postcolonial questions about dependency and internalised colonial hierarchies, while Mariamungu's emergence foreshadows his later role as head of the State Research Bureau.Justice Benedict Okiwanuka is introduced through a close-up at the reception, dressed formally and visibly pleased by public approval. Amin's praise of him, delivered in a medium close-up handshake, cements his symbolic role as a figure of integrity. This photographic intimacy deepens audience sympathy when he is later murdered for resisting Amin's interference in judicial matters.

Close-ups intensify scenes of violence and moral confrontation. The murder of Dr. Ebine in the lift, the discovery of severed heads, and Dr. Oroya's horrified reaction are all captured in close or extreme close-ups, rendering shock and disbelief palpable. Amin's calm demeanour in corresponding close-ups starkly contrasts with Oroya's anguish, visually articulating the regime's moral bankruptcy.

Telephone conversations between Amin and Justice Okiwanuka are presented in medium close-ups that register tension and resistance. Okiwanuka's reluctance and Amin's authoritarian insistence are etched onto their faces, reinforcing the tragic consequences of moral courage under dictatorship.

A close - up of Amin's commanding face

The Use of Mise-en-scène

Mise-en-scène, understood as everything placed within the film frame, including performers, setting, costume, props, and décor, is central to filmic style and interpretation. Westwell and Kuhn (2012) describe mise-en-scène as the total visual content of the shot, while Buckland (2012) emphasises that analysing mise-en-scène involves identifying the symbolic clues embedded in filmic space, set design, props, colour, lighting, and spatial arrangement, through which filmmakers communicate meaning. In *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*, mise-en-scène works alongside dialogue to deepen narrative comprehension, offering visual evidence of character, ideology, and historical tension.

A key function of mise-en-scène in the film is the use of setting to produce contrast and expose the moral contradictions of Amin's regime. The opening sequence establishes this method through rapid alternation between spaces of care, celebration, and violence. In the hospital theatre, Dr. Oroya and a team of medical staff struggle to save a gunshot victim, a setting that conveys urgency, professionalism, and human vulnerability. This space is immediately contrasted with scenes outside the hospital where staff flee as soldiers shoot and hurl stones, and with Amin's jubilant street celebrations following the coup. Even without explicit inscriptions of date and location, the visual composition, crowds, military presence, and public festivity signals a national rupture. The juxtaposition positions Amin as indifferent to suffering: while others confront injury and fear, he is absorbed by spectacle and self-affirmation.

Amin enjoys himself in a swimming pool with women at statehouse

Setting also functions to differentiate characters. Dr. Oroya's repeated placement in medical spaces reinforces his ethical commitment; his refusal to abandon a patient during news of Amin's takeover establishes him as a stable moral counterpoint to the regime. By contrast, Amin is frequently located within spaces of leisure and privilege, receptions, lounges, and State House interiors, where décor and arrangement highlight excess and insulation. The State House is introduced as a guarded, elite space, marked by soldiers and controlled access. Inside, Amin is depicted swimming, being massaged, and socialising with women, while disappearances and killings intensify elsewhere. The opulence of the bedroom, portraits, expensive furniture, and orderliness, further underscores the disjunction between state comfort and public terror. Through these settings, the film stages a visual critique of authoritarian power as both indulgent and detached.

Several settings foreground the regime's destructive logic through symbolic staging. The scene featuring severed human heads in a refrigerator at State House is particularly stark: the domestic familiarity of a fridge becomes a grotesque container of political violence, collapsing the boundary between private space and state terror. Similarly, the "persecution ground"- a large open expanse where victims are tied to poles and executed before distant onlookers, visualises public punishment as spectacle. The open landscape and the crowd positioned at a remove create a theatre of fear, reinforced by announcements such as "This is what happens to Obote's men." Here, mise-en-scène reveals how violence is not hidden but staged to discipline the populace.

Other settings intensify meaning through metaphor and foreshadowing. At the animal orphanage, a snake chasing a hen becomes a visual symbol of predation and cannibalistic power. This symbolism is later reinforced when Amin eats the snake, linking appetite to domination and normalising excess as political character. The River Nile setting, shown with crocodiles and other aquatic creatures before bodies are introduced, prepares the viewer to anticipate consumption, turning nature itself into a silent accomplice in the regime's disposal practices. The countryside location where journalists are murdered and vehicles burned uses emptiness, dusty roads and scattered shrubs, to convey isolation and impunity, implying that violence thrives where there are no witnesses or institutions.

The film also uses religious and diplomatic spaces to dramatise ideological instability and opportunism. A church service held to pray for the new president is visually framed as solemn and orderly, pulpit, congregation, ritual calm, yet it occurs alongside ongoing killings. Dr. Oroya's discomfort within the congregation suggests a society compelled into public reverence while privately fearful. In another church sequence, Amin attempts to reassign a Catholic church into a mosque, an act that symbolises shifting alliances and instrumental religion. The later return to the same church in panic after the car bombing introduces irony: the space he devalues becomes a refuge when power is threatened, revealing self-interest rather than conviction.

Bodies of slain Ugandans in a mass grave

Props further sharpen these meanings by anchoring abstract themes in tangible objects. The handheld horn speaker used to announce executions amplifies both sound and terror, functioning as a tool of intimidation and a marker of the announcer's cruelty. Amin's motorcades, cars and motorcycles, serve as mobile props of state extravagance, visually contrasting the president's hyper-protection with citizens' insecurity. The rungu, repeatedly carried and theatrically flung during official moments, operates as a culturally resonant emblem of authority and coercion. Inside Amin's office, items such as the air conditioner and official flags signify affluence, "modernity," and bureaucratic power, while nearby scenes of half-naked children scrambling for donated clothing expose the material deprivation that authoritarian spectacle conceals.

Mise-en-scène supports the film's postcolonial commentary through the symbolic image of Europeans carrying Amin on a chair. The chair becomes a prop of status and validation; Amin interprets this act as proof of recognition by whites, revealing a lingering colonial imaginary in which legitimacy is confirmed through European admiration. The sequence culminates in celebratory entertainment that coincides with Amin's sexual predation and murder, sustaining the film's larger pattern: public praise and private brutality occur within the same aesthetic system.*The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin* employs mise-en-scène to produce layered meaning through contrast, symbolism, and spatial irony. Settings and props do not merely locate action; they visualise power, expose hypocrisy, and render violence legible as a structured practice of rule.

Conclusion

This study analysed *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin* through its use of photography, shot variation, lighting, and mise-en-scène to demonstrate how cinematic form constructs political meaning. The findings show that the film's visual strategies function as critical tools for exposing the nature of authoritarian power rather than simply illustrating historical events. Photography and shot variation reveal a tension between spectacle and intimacy. Long and medium-long shots frame Amin within public celebrations, military spaces, and displays of authority, visually constructing his dominance while simultaneously accommodating acts of repression. Close-ups shift attention to the emotional and ethical consequences of power, particularly through characters such as Dr. Oroya and Justice Benedict Okiwanuka, encouraging audience empathy with victims and resisters.

Lighting further sharpens this critique. High-key lighting accompanies moments of pleasure and public performance, while low-key lighting dominates scenes of fear, injustice, and death. This contrast produces visual irony, revealing the moral emptiness underlying political spectacle. Mise-en-scène reinforces these meanings through deliberate contrasts in setting and symbolic use of props. Spaces of care are opposed to spaces of indulgence and violence, while objects such as the rungu and motorcades signify coercion and excess. Overall, the film employs visual contrast and irony to portray authoritarianism as performative, brutal, and ethically hollow.

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