Looking Through Ẹlẹ́ṣin's Hourglass

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November 23, 2022



Or How to Render Metaphysics in Film

There is now the quartet, in film, of Ernst Ingmar Bergman (*The Seventh Seal*), Michael Cimino (*The Deer Hunter*), Cary Joji Fukunaga (James Bond, *No Time to Die*) and Biyi Bándélé, (*Ẹlẹ́ṣin Ọba*), who in my opinion, have brought something special to the understanding of the human condition, through film, where death as sacrifice or ritual suicide is concerned. Taking radically different paths, these directors have explored the metaphysical outlines of what it means to die and how death and dying intersect with sacrifice. The quartet all arrived at the liminality that skirts the very province of the grim reaper decades, even centuries apart.

The opening montage of Ẹlẹ́ṣin Oba features an epigraph by Wọlé Ṣóyínká, a quote which is striking specifically for its aural, not visual, reference. The montage is succeeded by a drum sequence where the drum says, in Yorùbá:

"Death has claimed the sartorial

Death has claimed the cute…"

There is significant history and a fardel of stories behind these floating lines of music. In days gone by, the transition of kings was usually announced with drums and symbols. No one in Ọyọ́ ever says the king has died, not even in jest and certainly not in earnest. There were reasons for these, all collected in various anecdotes and analects.

Anyway, drum-talk is then taken up in a short chant sequence, not so much in explication of the drum-message as it is in extension of the same, valorizing both death and, in this case, the soon to be deceased. So far, so good, and NOT in the *buga* sense. Thereafter, and as soon as the first major spectacle in the film is introduced, there is a lapse in the tension of the film for which there is no redress until more than fifty minutes has effluxed and Olúnde (Déyẹmí Ọ̀kánlàwọ́n) comes to confront his father with paternal failure. Olúǹde's intervention also redeems, if such a word is ever adequate to the weight of the moment, patrimonial honour.

The directorial choices from this moment of Olúǹde's encounter with his father build on each other in subtle and not so subtle ways until Ẹlẹ́ṣin's eventual end – camera obscura, linguistic jousts, even the mild dozens. The confrontations succeed each other until the climactic moment in which the ghastly consequence of taking an existential detour stares Ẹlẹ́ṣin in the face.

Film is unforgiving of visual flaws, but immaculate perfection in the medium does not exist, either. The question, from a viewer's standpoint, is whether a director of the experience and sensibilities of Biyi Bándélé could have failed to notice the lack of synchrony between gesture, dance and music in Ẹlẹ́ṣin's first scene of excess so early in the production. The effect is decisive enough to set the senses off kilter and not even the brilliant lighting and colour, not even the enchanting play upon play of words in the film could set things right. Curiously, the film's harmony of tone and vision is restored by the time Ẹlẹ́ṣin enacts his final, sybaritic swansong. Think of a Noh sequence but with living humans (as Ẹlẹ́ṣin himself wonders aloud at least once).

All courts are ethically charged spaces and the court at Ọyọ́ is not an exception. The events captured in this film, which have since become part of the life and literature of the world began radiating from the Ọyọ́ court, perhaps one of the few such instances that has made it into world literature and film. Biyi Bándélé's treatment of court dynamics is not simple, putting the matriarchal and the patriarchal order on display in a tango of which death is the invisible, triangulating, third. Bergman does this, too, in the denouement to *Det Sjunde Inseglet***.** Again, there are critical differences in the ways in which Bergman and Bándélé approach the subject. For example, Bergman presents his audience with a coldly calculated confrontation on the chess board between death and the knight. It is interesting that the point is not whether the pawn has moved to bishop 4 but why the knight plays a game he knows he will lose. Bándélé regales us with sheer rhythm, picking up and slacking off in turns until the denouement. The variations in music translate into millions of possibilities, as obtains in a game of chess but again, the caesura is the (same) main thing.

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There is an expression in Ọ̀yọ́ for the interloper. In Yorùbá it goes thus:

"Má fi lọ̀ mí n dá síi

Abi ojúgun lẹ́gbẹ́ etí."

It is still a popular expression among children, and most probably was coined by children. It literally portrays the interloper as a grotesquery, specifically one with ears about the shin, or vice versa. The genius of Biyi Bándélé is revealed, in part, by how successfully he demonstrated that order and the grotesque are not mutually exclusive. The polished Pilkings pair (Jenny Stead and Mark Elderkin), ostensibly there for order, manage to incarnate chaos without once losing the façade of imperium. The chemistry of the two actors is so natural that they seem totally oblivious of cameras and lights. I hope they come back on the set of more Nigerian productions.

The cast generally did manage the method acting with considerable success. Whether seasoned

actors or making cameo appearances, the cast (and the casting) in *Ẹlẹ́ṣìn* undergo something of alchemical transformation before us. Táiwò Ajai-Lycett, of course, delivers handsomely, as does Jídé Kòsọ́kọ́ in his role as the conflicted representative of the constabulary. But Ọdúnladé Adékọ́lá is no Christopher Walken, he is not wooden but he is a tad too amused for a man contemplating his transition. Also, his beard lends a somewhat comic look. Still, as an actor, he has now come so far on his journey that he should embrace new challenges, new roles and further blossom. I am inclined to think that no one knew the enormity of presenting the essence of *Ẹlẹ́ṣìn* on film more than Bándélé himself, given the opening montage. Film had a whole era of silence, a whole era of monochrome, before sound and Technicolor. Knowing Biyi Bándélé though, who is to say that he didn't say with his peculiar humour: 'Here we go, Palazzo…'?

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It is said that the last of the five senses to take leave of a man or woman is the sense of hearing. Cutting-edge cognitive science appears to support this proposition somewhat. The Yorùbá, not waiting for scientific validation, do not paint pictures for the dying and do not call upon the perfumer or the masseuse for the dead. The Yorùbá know that the culinary hour is past in the mo(ve)ment (Ìbà to Oyin Ogunbà) of transition. They know that the hour of the chanteuse is always now. Is it happenstance that, in the imagination of scientists, everything began with the big bang? Is it chance that sound is absent in a vacuum? Growing up in a village where death and dying were not sequestrated aspects of reality, one of the repeated acts I personally witnessed at the dying moments of one of us was the spontaneous rendition of the oríkì of the newly departed. And once, in the 90s, visiting a doctor in training at the University College Hospital, Ìbàdàn, the heart-wrenching eulogy and lament of a mother for a dying child so broke my heart that I could not find it in me to go back to that sprawling hospital for a while.

To transform narrated text into film takes inventiveness. Where the author is Wole Ṣóyínká working concomitantly as poet and dramaturge, it takes considerable resource of mind, spatial acumen, aural acuity and pure imagination. Where Ṣóyínká combines those specific elements of poetry and drama with history as he does in ***Death and the King's Horseman***, what is required to make the work into film approaches the transcendental but if there was anyone capable of this, Biyi Bándélé was.

A dramatist himself, Biyi Bándélé understood the differences between the page, the stage and the screen. Anyone with education in these subjects understood these as well. One of the things that stood Bándélé's acuity apart in this instance, perhaps, was his understanding of the demography of his audience(s). His last works in film (and photography) indicate what his understanding of his task as curator and director was: To vividly present life and human choices against a backdrop of consequences.

There is surfeit of sound and light and colour in Ẹlẹ́ṣìn but I'll argue that these are what transform the hourglass into spectacle. No one directs the camera at the merely factual, and Ẹlẹ́ṣìn Oba was more than mere fact. It was a moment of transition in an entire culture which Bándélé's lens captured in that surplus haul of death which that culture itself (not the interloper) deemed sufficient to halt the practice of ritual suicide permanently (suicide is taboo in Yorùbá culture).

A word on the seamless communication (without the aid of interpreters) between Ẹlẹ́ṣìn and Pilkings in their final encounter: the choice of the director here is valid, in my opinion, and Bándélé is not the first director to go this route. This was one of those moments in history in which both the intent and the meaning of the opposing parties were so clear as to transcend words. Indeed, words there were the gloss, Bándélé could have thrown us back into the era of the silent film and we would still have gotten the message.

To reduce the spectacle to mere sound and colour is to do disservice to the cinematography and the artistic vision of the filmmaker. Much was done by way of restoration (the colonial residence), premonition (Amúsà at the residence), adjuration, abjuration and reiteration – quietly. The hermeneutics of Yorùbá world view bleed into the director's choice of sequences but perhaps none were as successfully executed in the film as the succession of those climactic confrontations – first between Ẹlẹ́ṣin and his son, Olúǹde, then between Ẹlẹ́ṣin and Pilkings and finally between Iyaloja and Ẹlẹ́ṣin (which, with considerable cinematic tact, Biyi Bándélé makes to happen outside the mixed and moderating presence of Europeans). The confrontation of Ẹlẹ́ṣin and Iyaloja is not so much an encounter betwixt personages but a confluence of both private and public histories, a melding of tragic metaphysics and a convergence of home truths. Bándélé scored big there.

Iyálọ́jà (Shaffy Bello) transcended typecast boundaries and realized the role of an excoriating witness with stunning aplomb. She's weakly matched by the chastened and self-flagellating Ẹlẹ́ṣin in the final confrontation between them. We may not expect the non-native speaker of the Yorùbá language to understand the meaning, or shades of meaning in that final encounter. When, for example, the Iyáloja said, addressing a disgraced Ẹlẹ́ṣin "ajá ọdẹ lèmi, imí ọdẹ lounjẹ mi" we sympathize with the translator who did capture the scatological import of that annunciation but not its teleology.

The accordion of language in this film expands and is contracted in various attempts to capture the poetics of the moment. The screenplay was translated by Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún into Yorùbá from Bándélé's English screenplay, and then subtitled back from the film's performance. Thus there is considerable shuttling from language to language, register to register.

How does one show on the silver screen and in five seconds, that Iyalọ́ja's seven choice words were the summation of a whole philosophical outlook which decried both excess and waste? How does the director show that this was the circular ecology of the Yorùbá, something the world is now coming round to see, in one pithy saying? The translation of Death and the King's Horseman into Yorùbá by Akinwumi Ìṣọ̀lá (*Iku Olokun Ẹṣin*) reclaims these admirably from Ṣóyínká's English into the original grooves of Yorùbá ratiocination. It could not have been easy, even for Ìṣọ̀lá writing in Yorùbá. But, if it was not easy for Ìṣọ̀lá, how much more difficult would it have been for Bándélé? But this is where the exceeding brilliance of Biyi Bándélé and his cast of actors shines brightest. 'There will be an answer', he seemed to say with his choices here, with the Beatles, 'let it be, let it be.' Ultimately, the vision on the screen tells of the utter contempt the Ọ̀yọ́ have for whatsoever shirks purpose or the necessary. And there is always a shade of difference between abrading executed with female energy as juxtaposed with the male. We will continue to see her Sultry Eminence on the screen but we will no longer see just Marilyn Monroe. Henceforth, we will see the self-correcting impulse at work wherever excess, or shirking, rears its head. This is cinematic transfiguration for Shaffy Bello and it is gladdening to see it in one's lifetime.

Between Olóhùn Iyọ̀ on the one hand and Iyalọ́ja on the other, there is considerable latitude in exploration of the possibilities. To understand the linguistic forest trails which intersect throughout the film, it is helpful to consider Wole Ṣóyínká's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the primary material used for the film, written in a highly poetic register. Akinwumi Ìṣọ̀lá's Yorùbá *retrieval* of Ṣóyínká's effort, *Ikú Olókùn Ẹṣin,* is also dense and high Yorùbá. The screenplay's register and diction is a compromise between that high register and the quotidian, marketplace, Yorùbá and is somewhat more accessible than the original by both Ṣóyínká and Isola. The precise moment that the film gets its vim back, when Olúndè addressed his father as 'alátẹnujẹ' is an example of how the screenplay navigates this. Ṣóyínká had the original as 'eater of leftovers' while Ìṣọ̀lá rendered it as 'ajàjẹkù'. It can be argued that most Yorùbá people born in the 21st century will struggle with the connotative and denotative meanings of *alátẹnujẹ* (and they are in the majority by far) but I will say that the word choice is irreducible. It is never easy to adapt a poetic play into film without pulverizing the language. We nevertheless continue to read and watch Shakespeare in the original.

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Oncologists say that when cells refuse to die, when they replicate without restraint, there results a crisis, a disease, that we call cancer. This is the story of Henrietta Lacks, from whom tissue was obtained more than seven decades ago, tissue which still replicate today and which help medical scientists, and humanity at large, understand cancer. What these specialists describe at the cellular level is akin to what the elders of Ọyọ́ concluded regarding society. Some deaths are necessary. If they do not occur, if they are not executed, the energy of society is depleted, corrupted, debased. The dilemma, of course, is how to deodorize a natural enemy. Could music and poetry do it? Film? The answer, dear friends, is blowing in the wind.

Ọyọ́ linked ritual suicide with two animals (the camel is perhaps the only animal known to actually be capable of this). The parrot and the horse. The king himself, if he became unreasonably tyrannical, was shown the parrot's egg in a calabash. It would take too long and is a digression to this review – to explain why the parrot was pressed to service in this way. Suffice it to say that this was civic shorthand to the monarchy – that the people needed their own voice back, which they were no longer willing to use to mimic any regal schoolmaster. They also possessed their own truth, which the king was not going to like, and which needed urgent expression.

The case of the horse is a little more involved, less figurative but relevant nevertheless to this review. The horse was not native to the forest regions or even the parklands of Ọyọ́. Horses were purchased from the Hausa kingdoms to the North of the river Niger in exchange for kola nuts, palm produce and enslaved people from the South. Horses were expensive, too expensive perhaps, as tsetse flies did not allow them to breed in Yorùbá land. They were a powerful symbol of prestige, of (phallic) prowess and military might. Today, they would be the Rolls Royce, the Bentley, the Tank – none of which are yet produced locally and all of which are still procured at prohibitive costs at the expense of the people. Today, the King's horsemen would be the Generals in charge of procurements – much as we still have it today – men who possess stratospheric wealth and the ears of the ruler to boot. The horsemen embodied something beyond affluence. They embodied license, excess, intolerable impunity and vestigial elements of the sin-eater. They were men of power, not men of justice, and society back then decided at some point that they were not a sustainable feature.

The death of the King's horsemen was deemed necessary therefore. There were no assembly lines for horses, or for virgins (there was a huge appetite for these by both kings and horsemen) and there was bound to be a point of crisis in supply. This was, in summary, the backdrop as far as Ọyọ́ was concerned. The challenge, for the people, was how to tell themselves, while telling the Ẹlẹ́ṣin, vital home truths. They had a mechanism for telling the King to quit the scene which they seldom utilized but they were not going to spare the King's horseman on any account. As far as Ọyọ́ was concerned, it was settled – if you chose to live as Ẹlẹ́ṣin then you should be prepared to die as one. All but the stranger knew and understood this.

Pilkings was a stranger who came on the scene with his own history, his own conceits, his own psychic baggage. It was convenient for him to resort to the codified manifestations of English jurisprudence, now enforced throughout the Ọyọ́ realm at the invitation of the Alaafin. It is material, and the reader should not forget, that there was such chronological proximity between the horrendous human cost of World War II and the inexorable survivor's guilt that a man in Pilking's shoes must feel, however faintly. He was here, safe in Africa save for mosquitoes (for which he had gin and tonic spiked with quinine) and doing real good to real people, elevating the mood and doing his best to replenish depleted human stock (Biyi Bándélé captures this with remarkable elegance and panache), even arranging for the bright spark called Olúnde to study medicine, no less, in England.

The Aláàfin dies. It is time for the Ẹlẹ́ṣin to die. The Ẹlẹ́ṣin wants to travel light, indeed, empty. (There

was a Chinese prince in legend who achieved this feat in just seven days with a grand attainment of nine states of the ultimate bliss on the final night.) The Ẹlẹ́ṣin tarried at it, stopping to take toppings in the form of a new wife on the appointed day of his departure. Word reached the constabulary who felt it necessary to put a stop to the *barbaric* act of 'committing death' an expression which Amúsà uses and which puzzled the Pilkings pair, quite fittingly. It is from this point in the film that the genius of Biyi Bándélé as director, and of the cast in entirety, shifts into screaming gear and really blazes forth.

The dilemma of Ọyọ́, of Pilkings, of today, is the very dilemma of life itself. It is what Wọlé Ṣóyínká, Biyi Bándélé and Bergman captured, in a measure, with their art. There is no universe in which that dilemma is completely transformed as by alchemy into beauty. If such transformation were at all possible, humanity would have finally arrived at the formula for creating genuine monstrosities. The people of Ọyọ́ made their choice, Pilkings with Amúsà et al made their choice and the audience today has a choice to make – either flawed gems, such as we have them, or the very azimuth of existence which, mathematicians tell us, is zero. The emptied hourglass. We live between these poles. We are never fully replete for long, nor are we entirely emptied for long. There will be earth with us in it, us with a little Ẹlẹ́ṣin Oba in us on earth, and there will be time, laid out before us. There will be interpreters to help us – Gaston Bachelard, Wọlé Ṣóyínká, Dúró Ládiípọ̀, Bergman, Bándélé. There will be the silence that was there before the big bang, also, whispering, urging us to shun excess and to do the right thing at the right time.

Tádé Ìpàdéọlá, a Nigerian poet and lawyer. He has three published volumes of poetry – *A Time of Signs* (2000), *The Rain Fardel* (2005) and *The Sahara Testaments* (2013) to his credit. He also has other works such as translations of W.H Auden into Yorùbá and Daniel Fágúnwà into English. His collection of poems *Cold Brew*, is due for publication in September 2022. He is also a past president of PEN (Nigeria Centre). Ìpàdéọlá lives in Ibadan, Nigeria, where he writes and practices law.