

**“THE PAST AS REVENANT”: CYNICISM, MEMORY AND TRAUMA IN  
FANTA RÉGINA NACRO’S *THE NIGHT OF TRUTH***

It should be recognized that in a perfect society victims are entitled to full justice, namely trial of the perpetrator and, if found guilty, adequate punishment. That ideal is not possible in the aftermath of massive violence. There are simply too many victims and too many perpetrators. ... It is for this reason that such societies have to find other solutions. Some countries simply forget the past and attempt to induce a national amnesia in its people. Of course that is bound to fail – the victims do not, indeed cannot, forget. (Martha Minow)

Set in an unnamed African country, *The Night of Truth* is a fictional story of two ethnic groups, the Bonandé and the Nayak emerging from a vicious civil war over power. Led by Colonel Théo Bogwanda, the Bonandés took arms against the majority ruling Nayaks to end decades of political and economic marginalization. After ten years of fighting each other in a brutal armed conflict, the leaders of the two sides have decided to make peace, convinced that only “restorative justice”<sup>1</sup> can heal the wounds of war and help piece together the social fabric. In this courageous journey, both parties have to deal with the cynics among them.

Cynicism should be understood in this essay as the ill-disposition of all those opposed to the peace and reconciliation initiative embodied by Colonel Théo and The President. And neither side, Bonandé or Nayak, lacks such individuals who wish to derail

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<sup>1</sup> According to Martha Minow, “Restorative justice emphasizes the humanity of both offenders and victims. It seeks repair of social connections and peace rather than retribution against the offenders.” p.92 . Having been successfully implemented in post-Apartheid South Africa, the guiding principle and the wisdom of this philosophy were recently reaffirmed in Côte d’Ivoire by the creation of a “Commission Dialogue, Vérité et Réconciliation” (Commission for Dialogue, Truth and Reconciliation). The task of this commission is to heal the country and consolidate the fragile peace after months of post-electoral violence exacerbated by ethnic divisions.

the entire process either for some perceived mistrust in the other side or for some obscure motives. Drawing from philosophical and literary ideas, the intertextual perspective used in this article shows how cynicism is to Nacro's film even though a greater emphasis is on survivors' traumatic experience.

A great deal of the film is based on scenes of painful memories and flashbacks. The movie starts when the warring parties have already agreed on a cease fire. Through flashback the viewer is taken back to the dark hours of the civil war. This cinematic construction exposes the human tragedy and the psychological toll of the conflict on survivors. Trauma theories will be used as an analytical framework for this study. We would like to emphasize that the use of flashbacks in *The Night of Truth* is a unique cinematic tool to reveal the survivors' suffering as they are dealing with both the physical and invisible wounds inflicted by the war. Coined by the motion picture industry, the term flashback was used for the first time in 1960 to describe the conditions of victims of torture, collective violence and survivors of genocide. According to Richard McNally (2003:113-114), flashback designates in this case: "sudden, unbidden, emotionally intense sensory experiences (such as visual images or smells) that seemingly reinstate the sensory impressions that occurred during the trauma. The vividness of the imagery produces a disturbing sense of reliving the experience." In *The Night of Truth* Edna and Colonel Théo are two main characters who exhibit severe forms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Edna is the first lady. She is married to The President. In a context dominated by authoritarian rule, being the President's wife also makes Edna a very powerful figure. The character becomes even more complex later in the film when the viewer learns that The President is not Michel's biological father. As it turned out, the child was fathered by Youba, The President's closest military adviser. With this revelation, another facet of Edna's personality emerges: that of a manipulative woman, ready to undermine her husband's power and political standing. Youba is the one who will assist Edna to carry out her sinister plan of revenge against Théo, her son's killer.

Mourning is a necessary and healthy process for the living in order to move forward after the loss of a loved one. Each society or religious group has its own ritual for mourning. Being in the presence of the deceased persons and in many cultures burying the corpse is part of the process of coming to term with their loss.

Edna's grief and psychological trauma are brought to light very early on in the film. Her visit to her son Michel's grave turns out to be a very painful and disturbing experience. When Edna lays the bouquet of flowers on the grave and as she sits facing the little boy's picture on the headstone, she is overwhelmed by the visions of her son. Edna's husband, The President tries to convince her to leave so they can focus on preparing for the Reconciliation Ceremony scheduled for later that evening at Théo's compound; but Edna snarls: "I can see him. He's still suffering." Later, during the reconciliation party the sight of Théo's son Honoré triggers in Edna the agonizing sense of reliving the loss of her son. She has to take a moment to compose herself before telling Soumari, Colonel Théo's wife, how little Michel was brutally murdered and savagely mutilated. As the viewers later learn, Théo was responsible for this heinous act committed on an innocent child. As Théo confesses to Edna and begs for her forgiveness in the spirit of true reconciliation, he tries to explain the unfathomable:

The devil put him before me. He was there in front of me showing no fear. That air of innocence, no reproachful. I pulled out my knife; I stabbed him in the stomach. He cried out and that excited me, then I grabbed his testicles and cut them off. I crammed them in his mouth. I didn't understand what happened. Oh, my God ... since then I haven't slept. I'm asking for your help. I'm not myself anymore. I can't live without your pardon.

Théo's confession sounds genuine and his suffering real as his sleep is haunted by the terrible images of the brutal ethnic conflict. On one occasion while napping in a hammock, Théo has a nightmare about dismembered bodies floating in a river. The vividness of the imagery and the intensity of the emotion were so overwhelming that he jumps up from his sleep sweating profusely. Silence is another manifestation of trauma in

*The Night of Truth*. “The lady with the dreadlocks”<sup>2</sup> represents this form of suffering. She finds refuge in painting which becomes a therapeutic tool for her tormented soul. One of her drawings, the “many-headed woman” and her children speaks to the extraordinary resilience of human spirit in the face of genocidal violence<sup>3</sup>. The drawings on the city walls remind the viewer of *Guernica*; Picasso’s famous painting denouncing the horrors of the Spanish civil war. This survivor’s drawings, like Picasso’s painting show the anguish of war on human faces. Many of the victims are depicted with their faces distorted by pain and their mouth open. Some of the paintings represent children being slaughtered or having survived the war with severely maimed limbs. Minata and Souli are two of those children who survived the war with one leg amputated. The lady with the dreadlocks’ stoic silence embodies Anne Whitehead’s description of traumatic experience: “The past of revenant” (2004:12). This survivor’s silence is very telling about the underlying paradox that lies at the heart of a traumatic experience: a situation in which as Delage (2003: 27) put it, survivors “can neither forget, nor talk about their experience” (ne pouvoir ni oublier, ni en parler). In *The Night of Truth*, “the lady with the dreadlocks” is not the only survivor who expresses her traumatic experience in painting. All the civilian survivors participate in a cathartic act of painting. They end up turning the city’s walls into a giant fresco that bears witness to their trauma. Through this communal act of remembering and healing they share their memories of tragic historical events with a wider audience. This interconnection between tragedies, history and memory entails “that history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth 1996:24).

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<sup>2</sup> Since this female character is unnamed throughout the film we are using this expression to describe the character.

<sup>3</sup> Even though Fanta Régina Nacro claims that the film was in part inspired by the brutal fate of her uncle who was accused of plotting a coup, Manthia Diawara (295), the similarities with Rwandan tragedy of 1994 are overwhelming and cannot be overlooked.

Koudbi, a war-weary private in Théo's army, is another survivor who suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He sees dead people everywhere. During the party he refuses to eat as a way of honoring the victims of the conflict: "The dead. All those who gave their blood they're here, all around [us]. You don't see them, but I do. They're saying: 'There was no point in dying.'" In a previous scene in *The Night of Truth* while he is helping Major N'Gové to perform maintenance on the rebels' arsenal, Private Koudbi experiences a similar vision. He refers to a bunch of stacked rifles as dead people: "Major, you know what all these weapons stacked up make me think of? Of dead...An army of corpses." The fact that there is a greater number of people living with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) testifies to the brutality of the ethnic conflict between the Bonandés and the Nayaks. To emphasize the viciousness of their atrocities, each camp refers to the other as "wild dogs." In this next segment of the essay, I will discuss the literary and the philosophical relevance of the use of the imagery of the dog in *The Night of Truth*.

#### **"I DON'T WANT TO WAKE SLEEPING DOGS [UP]": SAYING "NO" TO CYNICISM**

The first part of our subtitle is borrowed from the film, *The Night of Truth*. Soumari, Colonel Théo's wife uses these words to confront Adama, the leader of the band in charge of entertaining the guests at the reconciliation party. Soumari is suspicious about Adama's intentions to derail the reconciliation ceremony. The latter admits that he wants to beat the war drum to "energize" the participants at the peace signing the party. Soumari gives Adama a dire warning against the use of the war drums. At the height of the ethnic conflict, the Banandés had used the war drum to summon the courage and ethnic loyalty of the rebels during the battle of Govinda. Years later the entire population is dealing with the trauma and consequences of the horrendous atrocities committed in Govinda: "That's not a drum, is it? I don't want that tonight. The music must be soothing.

No incitement to war ... I don't want to wake sleeping dogs." Soumari's choice of words is both pertinent and rich in connotation as well as intertextual references.

Some films<sup>4</sup> dealing with civil war, genocide and mass violence in Africa present the continent's current socio-political reality with a great deal of cynicism. Throughout human history the use of the canine figure in the civic and political discourse is quite common:

[...] the image of dog is closely associated to the keeper of the just city. Therefore Plato's image of dog as a protector does not have any poetic or aesthetic dimension. First of all, it conveys an ethical and political dimension" (Cassin et al. 1997: 429 . My translation).  
 [...] l'image du chien permet à Platon d'envisager le gardien en tant que gardien de la cité juste. Ainsi l'image du chien de garde selon Platon ne possède aucune dimension poétique ou pittoresque. Elle comporte d'abord une dimension éthico-politique. (Cassin et al. 1997: 429).

Inspired by recent socio-political violence and ethnic conflict in contemporary Africa, these films use a reversal of this positive image of dogs<sup>5</sup>. This reversal of imagery is meant to denounce the civic and political disarray that goes along with genocidal violence. This depiction of the socio-political realities of the continent by means of hybrid aesthetics is indicative of a new trend in African cinema. And commenting on this new artistic endeavor, Diawara (2010:95) argues that "the gaze and the voice belong to the Africans" In Raoul Peck's film, *Sometimes in April* (2005) when Augustin Muganza returns to the charred ruins of her daughter's school, the only living creature that he encounters in the rubbles of the court yard is a stray dog feeding on human remains.

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<sup>4</sup> Jean-Stephane Sauvaire's *Johnny Mad Dog* (2008) and Michael Caton-Jones' *Shooting Dogs*, (2006).

<sup>5</sup> In early Caribbean and American societies where slavery was practiced, dogs were used to chase slaves who escaped. See : Patrick Chamoiseau, *L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse* (1997). In Césaire's *Et les chiens se taisaient* (1956) the canine figure is associated to death : "le chien maigre de la mort" (15). Also in many present day democracies, police dogs are used to control large crowds. In the film *Shooting Dogs*, the United Nations Blue Helmets had to battle dogs attracted to hacked-up corpses lying outside the school's gates.

Earlier as Augustin was trying to find his way to the school, he asked an old man for directions. The old man was dismissive about Augustin's willingness to go on a search for answers, his desire to want to know what happened to his daughter Anne-Marie and all the school children. From a resigned voice imbued with cynicism the old man shouted at him: "Forget about the school. Forget about everything. Some things are better left alone." The reference to canine figure has been used since Antiquity as the embodiment of cynicism.

According to the Cynics' agenda, dogs do not represent a civilized state. Instead they symbolize the savage nature of a beast. Here the image of the dog, of the Cynic is conflated with Plato's image of a wild wolf. [...] And Dion Chrysostomus used to call Diogenes the mad dog of Laconia" (Cassin et al. 1997: 431) [My translation]

Dans le programme des Cyniques, le chien ne représente pas l'état domestique. Mais il est le symbole de l'animalité sauvage. Ici l'image du chien, du Cynique rejoint l'image platonicienne du loup sauvage. [...] Et Dion Chrysostome traitait Diogène de chien enragé de Laconie (431).

In *The Night of Truth* some characters' cynical language can be analyzed from the same intertextual perspective. When Soumari learns that Major Ngové had told her son that his father, Colonel Théo is a traitor for wanting to make peace with the Nayak President, she confronts Ngové about the conversation. During the verbal altercation Ngové reveals his cynical view about the peace process initiated by his brother and The President: "You know Soumari, war is useful. What your father never got through peaceful protest, we won it through armed struggle." Tomoto, the village's fool and a Nayak hater is another cynical character in the film. He goes around spreading the most heinous stories about the Nayaks; like "Those wild dogs" to refer to the Nayaks' ruthlessness, or "Nayaks are not men like us. If you catch one, you'll see. He'll have scales on his skin. Like a snake." Tomoto uses this particular language of hatred while preparations are underway at Colonel Théo's compound for the evening reconciliation ceremony and women are busy cooking food. An interesting shift in the camera's

perspective takes place as Tomoto speaks. The camera focuses on Fatou, the young lady accused of being a Nayak because she was born from a Nayak father. Fatou is seen standing at a table in the kitchen, holding a knife, about to slice a huge python which happens to be a culinary delicacy for the Nayak people. This image is very powerful from both a symbolic and anthropological point of view. Both the symbolism and the social dimension of sharing food are reaffirmed at a time of deep crisis and mutual mistrust among people; rejecting the Lacanian view according to which the “symbol has to be annihilated” so that the human reality can live on. Despite Tomoto’s message of hatred, the common humanity of both the Bonandé and the Nayak is recognized in that confined space and through a juxtaposition of divergent symbolisms. As two courageous leaders are on the verge of planting the seed of a new nation, the viewer is reminded that a state that aspires to becoming a true republic must first pass the test of tolerance and pluralism. From another perspective Théo’s tragic death and The President’s subsequent decision to put an end to Edna’s vengeful madness articulates one key message: the birth of a new nation-state always requires painful sacrifices as competing agendas and interests need to be reconciled or accommodated. Achieving and maintaining peace under such volatile circumstances become a delicate balancing act given the complexities of the challenges:

Many civil wars in the continent of Africa have been triggered by forces that are essentially politico-economic in nature. Yet, a good if not an overwhelming proportion of these violent conflicts came to assume an “ethnocultural” articulation that exacerbated their viciousness and delayed their resolution. In the process, the ethnocultural sometimes came to be “imagined” as a cause in its own right. As a result while peace efforts in such a war situation must certainly address the root politico-economic causes, ethnocultural consideration often need to be an integral part of the package if gains of conflict conciliation are to endure (Alidou 2006:53).

In *The Night of Truth* Major N’Gové, Colonel Théo’s brother, boasts about the political success achieved by the Bonandés through military means. In response to Soumari who accuses him to be a warmonger, he stresses the necessity of war as a means to obtain political concession and social justice for the Bonandés. The argument between



Major N'Gové and Soumari reveals a female perspective on war and peace at a very critical time in the film. In this next part of the essay we will discuss three female characters of different backgrounds and experiences.

### **EDNA, FATOU AND SOUMARI: THE FEMALE GAZE AS A SOCIO-POLITICAL CRITIQUE?**

In many civil conflicts in Africa women tend to be disproportionately affected than the other segment of society. Very often in addition to losing a spouse, they have to suffer the loss of a child who is either killed or forcibly enrolled as a child-soldier. Sometimes women are victims of abuse committed by the warring factions. In *The Night of Truth* Fatou epitomizes such brutal abuses. Fatou's agony and torments can be summarized by this unique perspective on trauma: "What we call trauma takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security becomes our tormentors: when the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no longer a source of refuge but a site of danger" (Edkins 2003:4). She has parents are from both ethnic groups, Bonandé and Nayak. During the civil war her parents were slaughtered by Colonel Théo's Bonandé rebel army. They had her watch as her parents are tortured and executed. The soldiers then tried to rape her but she was saved by Théo, the Commander of the rebels. Since she had survived these vicious atrocities, Fatou is haunted by the painful memories. She describes her ordeal in these terms: "Deep down, I'm dead. I'm distraught." She also speaks of experiencing nightmares in which she sees "a black hyena swallowing the sun." Beyond Fatou's individual suffering, the nightmare stands as a powerful metaphor for the dark side of humanity which is revealed every time genocide is perpetrated. The hyena represents the savage nature of violence poised to take over Reason, the governing principle of the State. Fatou's nightmare seems to predict the danger of failing to achieve

a viable peace agreement. Théo and The President's courageous decision to make peace can be interpreted as a victory of good citizenry.

Earlier in the film Fatou is driven back to town as the preparations are underway to celebrate peace between the Bonandés and the Nayaks after ten years of fighting. On their way to Colonel Théo's compound the driver stops to pick up Tomoto. Fatou is the focus of Tomoto's hate for the Nayaks. Tomoto despises her mixed background: she is from a Nayak father and a Bonandé mother. Later, as Tomoto tries to assault Fatou he yells out: "She doesn't belong here. She is half-breed. She is taboo." In *The Night of Truth* Edna's grief helps shed light on African children as victims of wars. In the past decade, several studies and reports commissioned by NGOs have contributed to raise awareness about this issue:

According to UNICEF's statistics, children are particularly affected by armed conflicts, as they are both victims and killers. For Nick Danziger, two million children have been wounded or maimed during the last ten years and there are currently, at least three hundred thousand children engaged in fighting in a total of thirteen different wars. The impact of these situations is twofold: physical and psychological abuse. (Mekoulou 2006:185) [My translation]

Even though there is no child-soldier in *The Night of Truth*, the brutal killing of little Michel focuses attention on the fate of children in conflict zones. One of the women gathered at Théo's compound tells how she lost her son during the conflict: "My son Amado was the same age as a Nayak neighbor's daughter. You'd have thought they were brother and sister. But during the fighting, my neighbor tied me up. He made me watch as he chopped up my son. He screamed, he was terrified I wonder how I survived that. Those people are pitiless." Edna's desire for revenge can be paralleled with the act of vengeance of a teenage girl in *Johnny Mad Dog* (2008), a film inspired by the use of child-soldiers in the civil war in Sierra-Leone. Johnny, the ruthless child-soldier is killed in the end by a teenage girl whose seven years old brother was abducted and by Johnny's unit during a raid on their neighborhood. Fofu later died.

Victimhood is not the only narrative and pictorial framework through which women are seen in *The Night of Truth*. And this displacement of the gaze offers a more nuanced view of key female figures in the film. Women are both complex and strong characters who can be agents of peace and social change. Soumari is not only the daughter of a former prominent politician; she is also Colonel Théo's wife. She exhibits a very strong character. She does not hesitate to confront her husband about some of his political moves. First, she is very reluctant about Théo's decision to let The President in the compound with armed men. Similarly she was quick to confront Major N'Gové – who is Theo's brother – once she learns that N'Gové had called Théo a traitor for accepting a peace agreement with The President. Unlike Edna, Soumari seems to understand that a negotiated peace is the only viable solution between the Nayak and the Bonandés. Furthermore she is not manipulative like Edna. Through Edna, Fatou and Soumari different socio-political perspectives are offered. Their respective position with regard to the peace process is undeniably the most important because the nation's future depends on the success of that agreement.

In the end we want to make the argument that the female voice and gaze in *The Night of Truth* function as a socio-political critique of the African post-conflict State. This is very relevant at a time when there is an emerging discourse among political scientists advocating that there good governance and peace would prevail in many of the world troubled places if women were in charge of key leadership positions like Head of State<sup>6</sup>. Steven Pinker makes a compelling argument in favor of promoting more women to top leadership positions as a way to enhance world peace:

A third force promoting the [ human] species's retreat from violence has been *feminization* - that is , a growing respect among cultures for the interests and values of women. Since violence is largely a male pastime,

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<sup>6</sup>The case of Liberia is often quoted as an example. But also more recently the case of Malawi where Mrs. Joyce Banda took over as President.

societies that empower women tend to move away from the glorification of violence and are less likely to breed dangerous subcultures of rootless young men (Pinker 2012: 36).

In many ways Nacro's work fulfills one of the initial missions that Francophone African nations wanted state-sponsored-cinema to achieve; to speak to the citizens in ways that the other media outlets cannot do. Theater along with cinema has proven to be efficient vehicles in that regard.

Gender inequalities as well as violence against women and children are all very critical topics about which Nacro's film engages the viewer. On another level, by bearing witness to mass atrocities *The Night of Truth* attempts to answer a fundamental question raised by Director Nacro: "What can we do in front of horror?" (Diawara 2010: 295). Through her film Nacro chooses to bear witness to atrocity, refusing to be a silent by-stander:

This film is written in memory of a man. Accused of having fomented a coup d'état, he has been tortured and sent to jail. One night, some people prepared a charcoal fire, attached him over it and made him slowly roast until the morning. This man was my uncle. From this tragic event I wanted to make a film...to relate it to the world (Diawara 2010: 295).

The question that arises in the aftermath of great human calamities is how the survivors should, individually and collectively deal with the trauma associated with painful events they experienced. Nacro's film is a compelling example that remembering, despite being painful is preferable to amnesia.

## CONCLUSION

The staging, the use of flashbacks to emphasize traumatic memories and the portrayal of cynical characters in *The Night of Truth* to articulate and depict Africa's contemporary socio-political turmoil and civil wars can be interpreted as "a new form of aesthetics" in contemporary African cinema. This new form of cinema gives "voice, image and a language to African cinema through a naturalistic and documentary approach to creating fiction out of reality" (Diawara 2010: 95). At times, this quest of new pictorial

and political discourse requires the use of hybrid aesthetics like the one at work in *The Night of Truth*. After all, Fanta Régina Nacro is prompt to claim that her film borrows from the Shakespearian concept of drama (Sotinel 2005). We would like to argue that Nacro's film also reflects Césaire's approach to theater. From that perspective the film functions as a critique of both structural violence and its dehumanizing effects. The President refers to Théo's welcome address as poetry. Theater, after all, is considered to be a higher form of poetry. This is certainly true of Césaire's vision as a playwright. Also later in his speech, Théo uses a metaphor to liken the devastating effects of war to the destructive force of hurricanes; active natural phenomena on the Caribbean Islands. This reference permeates *The Night of Truth* with a Cesairian inspiration as captured in this speech given by the Theo:

President, have you ever seen a hurricane? I saw one once, in the Islands. First of all, there is a cool wind that gladdens your heart. You think the world will be reborn. That's the beginning of Revolution. The awakening of the poor, the oppressed, of those humiliated, as we were, we the Bonandés. And the wind brings the rain. It's good, warm, [and] sweet, like the first blood in the fight for a just cause. And then afterwards... afterwards the wind becomes stronger and stronger. It rips roofs off, it wrecks everything. That's war. We forget why we are fighting. Daily, we trample our ideal. We strangle it with our own hands. It's horror, Mr. President, it's madness. So it has to be stopped, by any possible means. You understand? So that never again the hurricane passes where we live.

In *The Night of Truth* the intrusive camera reveals not only the character's inner thoughts and emotions but also their intimate space. It is in the privacy of their room as both are getting dressed that Théo confides in his wife about his deepest anxiety and asks for her support: "I'm scared." I really need you." Also another episode of Edna's madness takes place in their bedroom. She is seen acting hysterical as The President helps her take her medication and tries to convince her to get some rest.

The absence of any external third party in the film is very much in line with recent African Union's philosophy for conflict resolution. The institution advocates "non

intervention”, calling nonetheless, for local solutions to end the continent’s political crises. South Africa, the continent’s superpower and a vocal advocate of this principle would like to see implemented the “African Union’s preferences for how to prevent and resolve conflicts in Africa” (Mckaiser 2012). The peace initiative in *The Night of Truth* is achieved without any foreign intervention. That success is a reaffirmation of this policy of “non intervention.” Despite being controversial, this principle has the merit of presenting some degree of moral and ethical clarity: African leaders must take responsibility for the continent’s socio and political turmoil. Subsequently, they should be fully invested in the quest for solutions that reflect the populations’ true aspirations peace and economic development.

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