

“Every artist is in dialogue with his or her society”

A conversation with Chuko Esiri, writer and co-director of *This Is My Desire (Eyimofe)*, a remarkable Nigerian film

David Walsh
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With *This Is My Desire (Eyimofe)*, twin brothers Chuko and Arie Esiri, Nigerian filmmakers, have produced a vivid and convincing picture of life in Lagos, Nigeria’s capital city. The film was presented at the San Francisco International Film Festival in April. The film opened in movie theaters in the US and Canada in July and August.

This Is My Desire takes place in two chapters, “Spain” and “Italy,” named for the destinations to which the film’s two central protagonists, Mofe (Jude Akuwudike) and Rosa (Temi Ami-Williams), would desperately like to emigrate.

Each has a difficult time. Mofe is a skilled electrician working for a corrupt, vicious boss in a printing plant. A family tragedy hits him hard, but that is not the end of his difficulties. Rosa works in a bar and a hair salon trying unsuccessfully to make ends meet. She is also in charge of her teenage sister, several months pregnant.

The Esiri brothers describe Lagos as “a third character” in the script. The Lagos metropolitan area, estimated at 21 million, makes it the second largest in Africa, after Cairo. As we noted in our review, “The city is one of the fastest-growing on the planet. It has specific characteristics, but it also has characteristics in common with São Paulo, Mexico City, Mumbai, Dhaka, Chongqing and, for that matter, New York and Los Angeles.”

“Even leaving aside the deadly pandemic,” we wrote, “what is the essential, most general reality for vast numbers of human beings at present, especially those living in teeming urban centers such as Lagos? A precarious existence, characterized by economic insecurity and relentless pressure of various kinds. To get through a single day unscathed, while remaining housed and fed, is a triumph for tens or perhaps hundreds of millions.”

We were fortunate recently to be able to conduct a video interview with Chuko Esiri.

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David Walsh: I want to congratulate you and your brother on this extraordinary film, *This Is My Desire (Eyimofe)*, which I think is one of the best films of the year. One that combines social truths and artistry, which is an issue I would like to return to.

The other issue is the social situation in Nigeria, particularly under the conditions of pandemic. Nigeria is not considered to be the worst hit, with “only” 180,000 cases and “only” 2,200 deaths, at least officially. But there are reports of the devastating impact of the pandemic on poor people in Lagos. There is also the World Bank study indicating that COVID-19 crisis will drive another 11 million Nigerians into dire poverty. What is your understanding of the situation?

Chuko Esiri: I do not know if the pandemic has actually exacerbated things to that degree. The issue we have and the reason why people are

constantly falling below the poverty line is due to bad policy and economic insecurity, both of which have nothing to do with COVID-19. So obviously the pandemic only worsens, deepens a terrible situation.

As for the relatively low COVID number, the majority of our 200 million people live in rural areas. Even Lagos is not like London or New York, where people are moving around constantly. You go to work, you come back, that is all.

It has been a taxing few years in Nigeria, pandemic or not. People have been falling below the poverty line, quite consistently. It is government policy and the inability of our current administration to right the ship. I would be very reluctant to lay a great emphasis on the pandemic. Because that is what the government has been doing. They say, ‘oh well, you know, we had these ambitious targets for removing people from poverty, but now with the pandemic ...’

DW: I see what you mean. I am certainly not trying to make excuses for the people who run the country.

CE: No, no, I know. It is always like that with these reports. It is just being able to dissect the numbers and get to the truth of it. Everything they say about falling into poverty and about the dire situation is true. But ...

DW: ... it was not exactly a Garden of Eden before.

CE: Yes, exactly. It has been true for a long time.

DW: How would you describe the situation of social inequality in Nigeria, before or during the pandemic?

CE: Unfortunately, bad, bad. We did not want to make a doctrinaire film. We tried to express life in the day-to-day. But you are constantly running up against the society’s failings. It almost does not matter what social class you belong to. You are left to your own devices. You have to generate your own power, pump your own water. The structures that are supposed to help you just ... frankly, they do not exist. They are all ruined.

There are some people who are very, very, very, very rich. There is extreme wealth at one end. We have the highest paid politicians in the world. They make millions. You have a lot of individuals who are like athletes drafted into the NBA or the NFL, basically they have five to 10 years to make all of their money.

DW: Grab as much as possible as quickly as possible.

CE: Yes, that is how they approach it.

DW: There is the issue of why people emigrate. And the people who try and, in this case, fail to emigrate. Presumably, that is a major question.

CE: It is very difficult to live the best possible life. Look at the currency rate. Six or seven years ago, the rate was 159 naira to the US dollar. Today, it is about 425 to the dollar. It just continues to go up and up and up.

So, the result is inflation, rising food prices. We are a country that

imports a great deal. You undertake importation in dollars, and you have to pass that expense on to your customers.

If someone can leave, and go do a menial job, cleaning bathrooms or whatever it is, in Spain or Italy, for the minimum wage, they do that and send the money back to take care of their families. Because the alternative is sit on your hands and hope. So the country pushes you out, it absolutely pushes you out.

And not just the most vulnerable members of society, it also pushes out people of relative privilege as well. I have a friend who went to law school, who wanted to come back and work and, you know, she has no interest in being an entrepreneur and starting a firm or any of those things. She just wants to be a professional, to work and just live her life. And you cannot do that in this country. You will spend literally your whole life trying to pay off student loans and your debt.

We have some of the poorest people leaving and then you have got a lot of the brightest and sharpest leaving as well, because they do not have an opportunity either. One of the doctors who helped develop the COVID vaccine studied medicine at the University of Calabar and then moved to the United States. We need people, we need educators, we need health care workers. We need them at least to try and make the best of the terrible situation, but the country pushes them out. It really does.

DW: The two central characters in *This Is My Desire* are working class characters, but not, I suppose you could say, the worst of the worst in terms of economics. They are both spontaneous creations, living and real human beings. They are not mere types, but in some way, you hoped that they would be representative of bigger layers as well?

CE: Yes, I think that is the average Nigerian. Poverty is a very big category, which has many definitions. These people know where their next meal is coming from, they are working, they are trying to make the best of things. And like anywhere else in the world, once you belong to that set-up, to that class society, you are living by a thread. It is not fundamentally different in the States, you are one hospital bill away from being ruined.

So, yes, these are average Nigerians. It was important to us to undermine stereotypes. Nigeria has a reputation for producing criminals. Either email scammers or Boko Haram terrorists, and it is all very, very negative. We wanted to try to show that actually that is a very, very small proportion of the population. We have 200 million people. Most of them are out there working two, in some cases, three jobs. They are often religious. Trying to make the best of a bad situation.

DW: I think that comes across. They are both very moving and sympathetic, sensitive characters. Since you mentioned it, because it was something I also referred to in my review—obviously, there is a difference between Lagos and New York or Detroit—but there also is something recognizable. You do have on a world scale a certain leveling out of conditions. Whether it is Mexico City or New York or Shanghai, there is a certain universalization.

CE: I agree. The social process is pushing out the poor and replacing them. The wealth disparity that currently exists is not a Nigerian phenomenon. It is a global issue. I am here in London, some of my friends are talking about how difficult it is to own a home, compared to their parents' generation. I remember reading an article in the *New York Times* about the average age of roommates going up. It is now normal to have people in their early 30s, in some cases, mid-30s, living with other people. It is not the American Dream, it is the universal global dream of having your own house, your place to go home to, it is getting harder and harder all over the world.

DW: I was interested by the fact that you referred to James Joyce and *Dubliners*, and to Charles Dickens and *Bleak House*, and also to certain Taiwanese filmmakers in your interviews, or your comments. In each of these cases, there is the effort to get to social truth with artistic elegance, which is a rare combination in filmmaking at present. I am wondering

how you see the issue, the relation between artistic truth and social truth.

CE: In one form or another, every artist is in dialogue with his or her society. Even Marvel films, at their inception, were really a reflection or reaction to the world or the environment that those original creators were living in. So I think that is something you are always doing.

The authors or artists I most admire strike a balance, they create a heightened realism that gives you an impression of things. There is still the deep emotional connection you have with the characters, that humanity that is shared throughout the world.

Everybody knows what it is to love, to hate, to want something and not get it, to want something and get it, everybody knows these things.

So you have that human element always working prominently, rather than inserted into the world as an after-thought. That serves to give you an impression of that time in that place.

For me, Joyce's *Dubliners* was a revelation. *Dubliners* opened up everything to me when I read it. It is one of these books I read every year at some point. Joyce was a man who was doing his very best to portray a city that he was so intimate with. And when you read the 15 stories, you are looking at it from that angle, you get a sense of what that society is like. And for myself and my brother, that is really what we want to do.

Our whole journey began with discovering Italian neo-realist cinema. My brother tells the story about watching *Bicycle Thieves* [1948, Vittorio De Sica] for the first time. And he thought to himself, if I can be connected to this man from 1940s Italy, to his situation, to his desperate need for the bicycle for his work ... If I can be so deeply involved and connected to this person, or these people, then I could do the same thing in my country.

We were young, but Nigeria's problems have been around for a long time. You want to watch cartoons, but there is no power. We had these massive generators, they take diesel. The generators came on, once a day or something, and then you can sleep with the fans on. We were lucky enough to go to school in England, and things are very different. You suddenly realize that what you took for granted is not normal, is not right. It sort of seeps into you and becomes a part of you. I think every artist wants to say something about their environment, one way or another. How can I give you, a stranger, even a foreigner, an impression of this place?

DW: Absolutely. And you have done it. This is probably not a question for you to answer, or it would encourage some immodesty. But why is it so rare these days, the kind of work with seriousness about both art and society?

CE: I really do not know. I will say in my part of the world, there is an immense access problem. I have lots of filmmaker friends coming up. There is a whole load of us coming up the moment. Technology has democratized filmmaking to a degree, but there is in Africa a terrible access problem. We do not have the same funding opportunities as in Europe, or the States.

When it comes to grants, tax rebates and all these things, we do not have the same infrastructural advantages. There is also a skills gap.

There are also the "gatekeepers." You know, I will not name names, but at some of the festivals we applied to, we had individuals write back and give us feedback about how the film wasn't "African enough." The people who decide who gets to see the film have their impression of what certain parts of the world should be like. You are kind of debarred at that last place.

In Europe and the States, there is a shift away from this sort of social realist, neo-realist work into more genre stuff ... I do not use the word commercial. It is just a different art form. I find myself more often than not watching work from the past.

DW: Obviously, Nigeria is famous for its commercial film industry, "Nollywood," the third largest in the world based on its worth and revenues generated. Is there anything interesting going on there?

CE: Not to me, no. Nollywood is actually a genre, as opposed to an

industry. It is so huge, and it is so dominating, that it has become synonymous with the Nigerian film industry.

Oh, there may be some more interesting stuff. You have younger filmmakers trying new things, trying to break out of the Nollywood formula. Usually they are romantic comedies, family dramas, somewhere this side of *telenovelas*, with religious themes, God, voodoo and that sort of thing.

But I think recently we have seen individuals that identify as filmmakers, trying new things, making horror films or more philosophically informed Nollywood features. We will see where that goes, but, unfortunately, those individuals have had a problem at the box office because it is hard when people have had high fructose corn syrup, have been eating candy their whole lives, even to give them dark chocolate is difficult.

So, it is a grind, but you will slowly see more individuals try things out.

DW: Do you have any contact with any of those filmmakers?

CE: Yes, and that is a positive thing. I think there is more of a cooperative spirit. Lagos is actually quite a small city in itself. It is a small big village. Especially for artists, because everyone is encouraged to become a doctor or lawyer or something.

And, again, with the younger people, the generation below me, and the generation around us as well, there is definitely a greater willingness to cooperate and share contact information, local distributors and offer assistance.

DW: Do you have a plan for another film?

CE: I am currently writing an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* [1925]. But we are moving it from London in the 1920s to Lagos.

DW: What themes in *Mrs. Dalloway* would interest you in 2021?

CE: Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary that she hoped to skewer English society, in 1920, coming out of the war, the upper class in particular. You have soldiers coming back suffering from shell shock, and no one knew what it was. And they were being told to buck up and deal with it. But it was really a period of massive changes.

For me, in Nigeria, you have this upper class sitting on top of things. Woolf was very conscious of the fact that she was standing on the shoulders of many other people.

Discussing the consequences of the war is something that is very taboo in our country, especially among soldiers, and we are a country that is currently engaged in what they call an insurgency, but I think it is a civil war.

There has been an insurgency for about 12 years now, in the northeast. You have a lot of men, mainly those on the front line, returning into society, and they do not have the support they need in order to have a chance of surviving well. And that just carries down. Because there are soldiers suffering from PTSD beating their children, and then that child beats his child, and so on and so forth.

And really many of these problems actually stem from the first civil war that we had, in 1967. A million people died. But you do not hear about it that way. You had a lot of people who fell back to life, from the different sides. And they went back out into the world as though nothing happened. So we're seeing the ramifications now. I have friends whose parents fought in that civil war. And they are only just beginning to uncover the trauma that the society carries. So it is that sort of thing.

While I was reading Woolf's book, I was thinking to myself, there are many things that remind me of Nigeria today, the social inequality, the mental health issues. So we are interested in taking a very English novel and making it Nigerian. I wanted that challenge.



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