

Twitches of a dead monster

Sandile Dikeni volunteers to try and answer John Pilger's question of nearly 10 years ago: is apartheid dead?

Nearly 10 years ago, when we began the elegy to apartheid – our eyes were still wet and our souls heavy at the prospect of an uncertain future under the blinding flags of a promised democracy – John Pilger, the Australian journalist, in a documentary he made on South Africa, asked the question: “Is apartheid dead?”

Those who at the time were placed to answer on our behalf (an impressive panel that included Khehla Shubane, Kgalema Motlanthe and some other dignitaries) never really answered him. Partly because he had answered the question for himself in his documentary with the same name, but also because those, who were supposed to answer him, were too eager to claim the scalp of the apartheid monster and hold it up high, instead of bearing witness to the birth of a baby called democracy. In this context their words became angry wind and the quality of their retorts became justification of the uncertainties that South Africans felt about their future.

Ten years down the line, I volunteer to answer John Pilger and all those who still want to ask the question.

Mr Pilger, your visit to my country came at a strange time. It was both the time of a death and the time of a birth. You found us with our eyes moist for the birth and the death. You found us with tears of sadness and tears of joy. We were at the mortuary and maternity wards of the same hospital. A graphic representation of that moment – you would certainly appreciate as a filmmaker – would probably be the last scene in a horror movie where the hero or the heroine stands above the corpse of the monster, weeping, and blinded by the tears and the moment does not see the subtle twitch of the hand or eye of the beast, that suggests to us as viewers – from a distance – the sequel.

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Ruth Seopedi Motlau

As a keen observer of the apartheid drama in South Africa, you might have observed a sequel in the making, when you pronounced that apartheid was not dead. I also believe that your observation might not necessarily have been, as many here at home said, “a wish that apartheid was alive so that the film be born”. I rather think it was an eyewitness account speaking of the passion of a progressive democrat willing to observe the death of an epoch of horror. In other words, a search for the reassurance that, “this thing” would not wake up.

As a co-observer, I must testify that there were moments in your testimony, when I was with you. But as a participant inside the moment, I knew that the best way of certifying death was by putting the

stethoscope against the chest of the beast and listening to its secret pulse. I have been listening for the last 10 years. And I now can tell you: apartheid is dead! It took some time to die, but it is now finally dead. There were the twitches that you observed; there still are some twitches; they are signs of a nervous system in collapse.

However, of what use is this pronouncement of death if it does not help us announce the other birth? Ten years after the announcement of the epoch of democracy, the most interesting question is certainly: “Has the baby been born?”

During this decade I have learnt that to midwife the birth of democracy is nearly as difficult as killing apartheid, and to kill a democracy is easier than to



kill apartheid.

I believe that the apartheid state has been transformed into a democracy. The new question is now whether this democracy, in its 10 years of existence, has delivered or is delivering the desired fruit to its citizens.

An easy way to answer this question might be provided by a quick reference to a government document titled *Towards a Ten Year Review*. You will be surprised by a flowing narrative that clinically tabulates the achievements of this new democracy. But even in this clinical narrative we are able to discern the hesitations due to the brutal realities of living within an inherited organisation called the nation state. In a somewhat dry manner the authors make this point early in the introduction: "The findings of the *Ten Year Review* need to be examined in terms of state power and its limitations. This will help determine whether certain objectives were in fact realisable if only the state was more efficient and whether there are some objectives that are beyond the scope of direct state intervention."

The above quote, which sounds and reads like an excerpt from a Trotskyite contribution to the politburo, forgets to mention the African context of the South African state.

Within the context of an African nation state (as undesirable as it might be for some of us), the South African democracy has done well in many respects. One aspect has been the maintenance of the state itself. The silent prediction was that African political power (read "black" and sometimes "neo-liberal" in our context) couldn't sustain state power. And so, governance outside the apartheid state paradigm, and in the hands of black political power, would fail. The new South African state is living evidence that "blacks actually can run a country!" But so what?

President Thabo Mbeki, in his 2004 State of the Nation address, lauded writer Rian Malan for his acknowledgement, in a piece reflecting on 10 years of democracy, that the South African state and system actually work!

Good for the president. Good for Rian Malan.

But for some of us, apart from the unreal fears of Malan and the white minority, the real question would be whether "state limitations" have allowed us in the last 10 years to provide for the poor of South Africa. Have the black poor finally found a path to walk out of crippling poverty towards a future where they can share in the wealth of a rich country they have built with their "dark, black granite hard hands" through tremor and toil?

Trying to find clear and final answers to these questions from the *Ten Year Review* is an arduous task. After a thorough read of the document, one feels guilty about the motives for reading it. It is as if the motives of the writers were planned in order to provide us with an alibi or some strange absolving mea culpa, when the poor confront us after 10 years of democracy.

And this is where I actually run away from the book and look somewhere else for what these 10 years have meant for me and for my country.

For a great part of these 10 years, I have woken up in sweat after a nightmare that persistently dominated my sleep. The mutilated face of my late grandmother framed the nightmare that tormented me as it dramatised my past of hurt, torture, humiliation and a desperate passion to fight and escape the apartheid dragon. The nightmare had become my personal symbol of what the face of apartheid really looked like: a face with multiple second-degree burns. Her charred lips revealed burnt and broken teeth where a stone had crushed her. There is a deep gash on the forehead where the stone pierced her burnt flesh and a mixture of blood and puss is gushing from it. The remains of her left eye, hanging on a sensitive thread of nerves and veins is contrasted by the right eye bleeding tears and black sticky liquid from her cornea. Her head revealing the light brown patches of the skull, where the fire licked both dermis and epidermis in attempts at devouring the innards of her brains. And then the stench of rotten flesh, mixed with the odour of bodily excretion, coloured by the distinctive pungent smell of naked fear. I hear the voice of the doctor asking her:

"Where does it hurt?" And she, with the last remaining broken eye and the painful movement of the muscle above her bleeding brow, indicating downwards towards her womanhood, where they tried to push a splintered, burning lance up her body. Or sometimes in a softer variable of the nightmare, her eyes again indicating downwards, because when they burnt her, the fabric of her underwear stuck to the skin of the softer parts of her underbody, and as she tried to remove it, tore the cooked flesh... And then I scream.

I started screaming in confinement at Victor Verster Maximum Security Prison. The screams became louder in solitary confinement at Macassar police station near Cape Town. And every time I wished the nightmare was a mere figment of my imagination, and that one day, I would wake up and realise that my poetic experimentations in dream form were merely the sad poetics of living in a horror land called apartheid. But it was not. My nightmare was a recall of a real incident.

My grandmother, Emily Manong, 78, was brutally murdered in a desperate micro-context of betrayal, poverty, envy, love and hate, in a small and extremely poor township in Victoria West in the Karoo. It was a black context the authoritative voice in the commercial media dubbed "black on black violence". The actual gory narration of the plot in this murder belongs to a novel or some other artistic expression. The real cold brutal fact is that her murderers were never convicted. In one ironic fashion, this trial was a witness to the warped soul of apartheid's judicial system. In another, it was a sobering moment about how much expectation we had heaped on the system. The apartheid court could not get a conviction because the real murderer was apartheid itself. The macro context of this murder was apartheid.

It was only after the introduction of a new state that we could bear witness to the scars in our souls: when the TRC allowed us to testify to our future. And even then, we could only offer fragments of the real horror picture. I do not think there is a final narrative that will be able to capture the horror of our time.

But then there is a future, slippery and unpredictable, that the new architects of our society are attempting to build with dreams and a few concretes.

The task so well attacked, even prematurely, by the early autopsy of John Pilger, has been about how we mirror the national contours and even the hidden faces of this South African discourse in the new media which is available to us. The challenge had to do with the fact that Pilger, an outsider, provided us with some mirror reflecting aspects of ourselves and probably led us to a controversial discourse we were not ready for.

The challenge for us as narrators of our own history and discourse is how we present it to media like the SABC, in a space and time allowed by our own readiness, and that of the publisher, without hurting ourselves because of our proximity both in time and narrative to the story to be told.

Ten years down the line I have found only some of the words and images representing my own reflections. This is an indication that apartheid is dead. But the real death will be when these images (not only mine, but many of ours) populate our screens and pages to the point where we recognise ourselves on a daily basis in the chase of a normality and a return to some humanity, better than what our history represented and still represents.

For now, I am happy to say that my eyes are dry, and in a way, I am ready to see and read in a clear manner. My nightmares are also ebbing away.



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