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Post-Script, Still Longer Shadows: Guillaume Lachenal on "In the Shadow of Ebola"

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By Guillaume Lachenal

This commentary on Gregg Mitman and Sarita Siegel's [In the Shadow of Ebola](#) is intended as a post-script to the [forum on the film](#) which appeared earlier this year. Lachenal prepared this text, written in Paris, for a special session of the African Studies Association meetings in San Diego on 20 November 2015.

The first time I saw the film, I was initially struck by the visual conversation about movements and circulations, and how they were canalized by doors and fences: roadblocks; gunfire to make people move away; that boy who couldn't move, his leg demolished; the not-so-closed, not-so-policed treatment centers and their heavy metal doors; the visas issues; the drives along the US highways; the CCTV across the Chicago airport gates; and the world-famous US wire fence along a Wisconsin walkway. It was the film's light touch at these choreographies that touched me first, and the way they gave tempo to the film. The strength of the film is there. I wish I had the energy to think and write more about the limpid narrative arc, the brutality of stories of a state-humanitarian power that "saves and shoots at" his people, and the delicate visual rhythm that threads pieces together.

In the present situation here in Saint Denis, other images and ideas come to mind as I rewatch the film, which suddenly looks different: the declaration of the "state of emergency"; the classic psychology lesson—part of any NGO package about Ebola (and post-terror attacks)—about the "denial phase"; the radio asking you to "stay home" until "it" subsides; the experience of being locked home by the army; the reassuring domesticity and continued play of children; the empty market street (*my* empty market street of Saint Denis, occupied by army and police and TV crews); the experts wearing white "PPE" (*there* against the virus, *here* to protect evidence about the assault and kamikazes in this little street of my little town where 5000 bullets were shot last night); the President's voice, that reassures and terrorizes.

"I authorize the fumigation of all public domains." This is the sentence in President Johnson Sirleaf's declaration that I would like to comment on. This is a strange sentence, which condenses perhaps the most important

running thread of the film, beautifully presented in a network of correspondences between the images and the commentary: the discussion about past and memory; the story of a country which wants to “put the past behind,” but which inherits its ruined infrastructure, pathogenic in its very state of being only half destroyed; the traces of past conflicts and of previous global health interventions (“Cholera Centre” written on the door); and the final meditation on the “memory that will remain”, the “memory [that] is going to continue”.

“Fumigation”: this is a strange occurrence here. To my knowledge, fumigation has never been recommended for Ebola, nor used. After a brief search on PubMed, formaldehyde fumigation may have been used in certain treatment units in the West, but there is no evidence of its efficacy or usefulness at all. What is crucial in the Ebola response is the washing of everything not destroyable (bodies, soils, houses) with chlorine, “sprayed” with classic gardening sprayers but without pressure (we call it *aspersion* in French), which is very different from a fumigation (no smoke here, but rather large particles of chlorine solutions, wetting the surface where they are sprayed). Nowhere the WHO, MSF or CDC speak of “fumigation”.

So where does this come from? Who wrote that sentence, as part of the state of emergency declaration? Is this a response to rumors and protests against spraying interpreted as aggression (and named as “fumigation”, or in some French-speaking areas “*pulvérisation*”?) in many Ebola-stricken communities in Liberia and Guinea? Is this an echo of the past, of the distant time of the malaria eradication scheme, involving DDT large scale (and intra-domestic) spraying, which began as early as 1945 in Liberia?^[i]

“I authorize the fumigation of all public domains” (which also means: “I authorize the intrusion into all private domains”). I wonder what is the “fumigation” in our present situation here in France? What kind of useless ritual is our Algerian-war 1955 “State of Emergency” now authorizing, coming straight from a past that we want to leave behind? And why is it that I am ambivalently, inarticulately, longing for such a fumigation (but fearing it at the same time), an operation that is, we all know it, built-for-failure, that would violate public space and simulate protection?

And in the end, the last image of the kid arriving in Chicago chewing on a chocolate bar... It’s just what I want to do here in Saint Denis: to get high on sugar.

Note

[i] James L. A. Webb, Jr., "The First Large-Scale Use of Synthetic Insecticide for Malaria Control in Tropical Africa: Lessons from Liberia, 1945–1962," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, Volume 66, Number 3, July 2011, pp. 347-376 .

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