

# FILM REVIEW

**Samuel Bazawule, director.** *The Burial of Kojo*. 2018. 80 minutes. Twi and English. Ghana. ARRAY Releasing and Netflix. No price reported.

In Samuel “Blitz” Bazawule’s film *The Burial of Kojo*, mythical expressions come from unexpected places. Cinematographer Michael Fernandez’s use of slow-motion, images deeply saturated in blues and shadow, glowing pink skies, and sparkling light flowing from the night sky conjure an enchanted world accompanied by Bazawule’s original score. But flickering in the background of narrator older Esi’s (Ama K. Abebrese) reflections and realizations, the television disrupts the escapist pleasure of these dreamy images and grounds the film in today’s African media culture. The telenovela *Puebla mi amor*, which is embedded in the film, conveys profound truths.

*The Burial of Kojo* features significant shifts in settings, beginning in isolated and idyllic Nzulezo, a village where the houses are set on stilts near the banks of Lake Tandane, some two hundred miles away from the capital city of Accra. This setting is the magical location where Kojo (Joseph Otsiman) parents Esi through storytelling; it appears uncomplicated by the noise and demands of the city or, of a woman’s understanding of her father’s failings.

Throughout much of the film, we hear the narrator, young Esi (Cynthia Dankwa), recounting the stories her father told her in a lilting, steady child’s voice. However, the true nature of her father and uncle’s relationship—a bitter rivalry over a woman they both loved that only deepened when her father, driving while intoxicated and distraught, struck the newlyweds on their wedding night, killing the bride—is revealed to her through the Spanish-language soap opera she watches with her grandmother in the late afternoons. When she sees one brother strike the other on the tv screen, she asks “Is that what happened between my father and uncle?” Knowing the answer is in the question, she runs out of the room on a quest to reconcile her father’s absence.

Bazawule created *Puebla mi amor* specifically for the film and shot it in Ghana along with the rest of the film. In an interview, he explained: “*Puebla mi Amor* is a completely fictitious telenovela I created just out of knowing how much telenovela culture really has played an impact on Ghanaian ideology—ideas of love, ideas of family” (Patrick D’Arcy, “Behind-the-scenes of *The Burial of Kojo* — a dazzling new film shot in Ghana” [*TED Fellows*, October

25, 2017]). The ambitious director had initially planned to cast and film the soap opera in Miami, Florida, where its story is set and where a majority of telenovelas are filmed, but with his budget based largely on funds raised from his successful Kickstarter campaign, he decided to locate the shoot in Accra and recruited expats to play the characters. Commenting on the extra work of creating a television show within his film, Bazawule explained, “It was really exciting to create that world right here, and show that it’s all fluid—that we live in a polycultural society and nothing is an island and everything’s borrowed from the next” (D’Arcy, “Behind-the-scenes”). Telenovelas have been broadcast widely in Africa since the 1970s, and with the televisualization of African media—i.e., fewer theatrical venues and rare opportunities for original film production and distribution—the increased competition among international corporations for screen time has been waged on screens in Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and elsewhere on the continent. Changes in technology, taste, and economics have made the telenovela form more accessible in Ghana.

The telenovela within *The Burial of Kojo* offers both realism and surrealism in that it bends time; it is a popular form of media culture, shot specifically for *The Burial of Kojo*, and it is a universe running parallel to the main film. Its plot mirrors and reflects the darker realities of her life that the young girl Esi could not fully recognize but that become apparent to her as the adult and author of the story we are hearing and seeing.

*Puebla mi amor* condenses the film’s conflict, boiling it down to this emotional essence and stripping it of any intellectual pretention or high-mindedness. When we first see the brothers together, the tension is apparent but beneath the surface; everyone is well-behaved and careful not to conduct themselves in an undignified manner. However, through the lens of the telenovela, raw passions of guilt, envy, and a desire for revenge are made plain. It is in this way that the telenovela is truly surreal; it scoops up buried memories and truths. It is also a sous-realism—a realism that, unexpectedly, looks beneath the surface.

In the calm shade and comfort of her grandmother’s bedroom, the women’s space of the film’s reflections, resting perhaps after a morning of cooking and errands in the city, Esi reflects on the world and her own life through the telenovela. Where her father’s stories create mysteries and mystifications that enchanted but obscured reality, the telenovela grounds Esi in the real world and offers answers to the riddles her father entertained her with. Through the telenovela, Esi truly becomes initiated into the real world. Where her father is enigmatic throughout much of the film—close, yet in many ways playing a minor role in the film’s action (since it happens *to* him rather than *by* him) the television characters are presented for analysis, gossip, and thorough anthropological gazing. They may have secrets, but as viewer, Esi knows them all. As shared women’s space, although it’s grandmother and a child, the bedroom appears to be a place nonetheless that allows Esi the freedom of inquiry as she asks questions that might otherwise be scary or even forbidden.

*Puebla mi amor*, as a soap opera set in Miami, is aspirational television in that it pictures a prosperous shiny world abroad—made all the more absurd since Bazawule shot it in Ghana rather than the United States. It lends some authenticity, however ironic, to the desire for a life of comfort and access to material goods, beyond the village, and so it is part of the reason for Kojo's decision to allow his brother Kwabena to deceptively persuade him to become one of the *galamseyers* working in a dangerous, likely illegal, though now abandoned, gold mine run by a Chinese company. A *galamsey*, derived from the phrase “gather them and sell,” is a local term which means informal, unregulated, and often illegal small-scale gold mining in Ghana. Such workers are known as *galamseyers*, or *orpailleurs* in neighboring Francophone nations (Marisa Schwartz Taylor and Kevin Taylor, “Illegal Gold Mining Boom Threatens Cocoa Farmers [And Your Chocolate]” [*National Geographic*, March 6, 2018]).

Even this reference to the real world outside the film, its realism, is shaped by Esi's limited perspective as a child. Esi is the griot of *The Burial of Kojo* in the sense that she is the storyteller, and spectators to the film view the world through her eyes. For instance, when her mother haggles with the police for attention to her missing father, she can barely see over the top of the counter to fully observe that: (1) missing miners are routine and (2) missing husbands and fathers are routine. In this scene, she is trying, as both a grieving daughter and a grieving but mature woman, to explain her father's absence to herself. She blends the telenovela with her own memories—perhaps sees herself as a character in a thriller playing the detective.

In the film's conclusion, we realize that it is Esi rather than her father (or maybe both of them) who has been caught between two worlds: alienation and authenticity, the village and the city, longing and reunion, and it all hinges on cliffhangers about her father's absence. Was it a suicide? Was it a murder? Did he leave with no explanation? Esi goes searching for him—running—calling on the full range of myth and detective work to solve this mystery. She even commands a search party, despite the reality that Kojo's death or absence or abandonment was really not so remarkable in a world that presented him with few options other than to disappear.

Lauded in the press as a “dazzling modern fable” and for its “magical realism” *Burial of Kojo* won the Luxor African Film Festival's 2019 Grand Nile Prize for Best Narrative Feature and Best Narrative Feature (World Cinema) in the 2018 Urbanworld Film Festival (Glenn Kenny “‘The Burial of Kojo’ Review: A Dazzling Modern Fable.” [*New York Times*, March 28, 2018] and Ethel-Ruth Tawe, “Magical realism in Accra.” [*Africa Is a Country*, February 20, 2019]). The film has deep literary and visual antecedents in Afrosurrealism, categorized by critic and poet Amiri Baraka as having “the very broken quality, almost to abstraction.” (Amiri Bakara, “Henri Dumas: Afro-Surreal Expressionist.” [*Black American Literature Forum* 22 (2): 164–66]). In its double point of view of the child storyteller and the woman author and its

visual and narrative exploration of Esi's creative subconscious and her gaps in memory as well as ideologies of love and family through the telenovela, *Burial of Kojo* offers a rich example of contemporary surrealist African filmmaking.

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Terri Francis   
Indiana University  
Bloomington, Indiana  
[francist@indiana.edu](mailto:francist@indiana.edu)