



Oil on water

A film by Newton I Aduka

WRITER-DIRECTOR'S NOTE AND IMAGE BOOK

Before publication of his acclaimed third novel, *Oil on Water*, Helon Habila, sent me a draft manuscript of the book. He said, “You will get it”.

Helon and I are of the same generation: that generation born in the mid-sixties at the onset of the Nigerian-Biafran war in which upwards of two million people lost their lives; the end of the illusion of the so-called Nigerian independence.

We were the generation that lived through not just the war, but also the half a dozen coups d’État and equal numbers of military dictatorships that followed.

The same ones that saw the change from empirical measurements to metric, that generation that experienced the chaos of the change from driving on the left side of the road to the right, and the change from the British pound sterling to the Naira monetary system... We were a generation caught in the turmoil of Change. He said if I ever considered adapting *Oil on Water* for cinema, it was mine.

I read the manuscript and it resonated for me all of the above, all before and all after. It told my story and I wanted to make the movie.



The first oil well in the delta...

Oil on Water takes us into the proverbial “*Heart of Darkness*”. What or who brought the darkness?

A major criticism of Joseph Conrad’s “*Heart of Darkness*” is its description of the “Natives”. They are rendered as a single threatening dark mass devoid of agency, devoid of voice. But then, here is a story where we get to hear it from the inside, from Conrad’s voiceless dark mass. This time, the story is rendered in all its nuances and complexities, engaging at every turn.

When did the “Darkness” begin? Questions, questions and more questions. Questions that draw us into the story...

There is a mythological and dreamlike nature to *Oil on Water*: Two men, an old washed-out alcoholic journalist and his young protégé, in a canoe paddled along by an old man and a boy, in a search of a white woman. The three men and the boy in the canoe appear as if from thin air on the foggy dilapidating landscape. They glide along the labyrinthine tributaries of the delta. The image is dreamlike. On the surface of the water, a layer of petroleum refracts and reflects glints of light, but the dark opaque surface hides much mystery beneath. In the horizon behind burned out trees, gas flares from abandoned oil well illuminate the night sky in a warm orange glow. This landscape is somewhat post-apocalyptic. But this is not a film set some-time in the future. This is the Niger delta; this is now. Who is the Woman they seek? Or perhaps better still, who are these men and the boy? What are the two journalists really looking for? Suddenly, a surreal space in the middle of so much devastation: a pristine island a shrine occupying the entire waterfront. A sculpture garden – giant sculptures, some facing east with smiles others facing west with sad faces. Members of a sect: men, women and children milling around in white robes; protectors of the island. Their leader a gentle figure of a man...



why has he brought his supplicants here? Then the militants, masters of the waterways - they know every turning, every shallow, every rapid.

The plot is intriguing. But the old man and the boy will guide the two journalists and us through these mysterious spaces towards the revelation behind these imageries and how they are related to this landscape and the landscape to them. And of course, who is the white woman, how did she get here?

With *Oil on Water*, I want to explore, cinematically, the ecological disaster sweeping through our time, across the globe. This is the singular most important problem staring humanity in the face today. One that we must all come to terms with in order to re enforce our search for a way to continue to exist on this planet.



Who will take the blame? Does it matter now? But there are things we must understand.

*What does this all mean?
“The story... The Story... The Story.”
Who’s story? Your story? My story?
Your side of the story.
My side of the story.
“But the story is not what we seek.
What we seek is the meaning
of the story”*

ZAQ tells young Rufus.



As filmmakers, we set out to engage an audience in a story, something conjured up from imagination. We tell our stories, but how much of the meaning of the story do we communicate? Is there one meaning to a story, or does an audience devise its own meaning? To resolve this enigma, I have offered one story told through multiple characters; Rufus’s story, Zaq’s story, Isabel’s

story, Solomon’s story... each, a piece of a jigsaw puzzle that resonates to form the whole. The structure organically evolves in the process of writing the screenplay one that reconciles all the stories. This structure is predicated on the idea that the past echoes the present, which reflects the future and that all stories are one: Humankind’s search for meaning.

On the surface the story is a straight story, a linear narrative (two local journalists set out on a journey along the river, into the heart of the Niger delta in search of a Woman).

But to tell that story a certain deconstruction and reconstruction of the elements, visual metaphors and symbolisms are necessary. To understand the meaning of the story, we have to embark on a journey, the river. And at the end of the river?





Oil on Water is intended as a cinematic drama that sometimes borders on the hallucinatory; characters traverse a sick Landscape that reflects their inner and outer journey. Sometimes out of the ordinary, things are glimpsed: fleeting images, the play of lanterns, myriad colours of the sky, flares bellowing out of pipes illuminating shapes and figures at night in a play of light and shadow, reflections, odd forms pitched in silhouette against the sky, the overbearing darkness of the forest, the hazy sun...

And at rare moments, beauty: our characters perceive and understand Nature's signs.