

DIALOGUES IN SILENCE

IBRAHIM SHADDAD THROUGH THE FRAME

By Leena Habiballa

Ibrahim Hamid Shaddad is a distinctive presence amongst cultural workers in Sudan. As a prolific filmmaker, theatre director, and arts educator, he embodies a spirit of critical yet playful inquiry into the living legacies of colonialism and imperialism, racial subjugation, and loss. Turning away from the moral surrogacies of cinematic emblems, Shaddad's work carries the psychic imagination instead, and in so doing invites a unique and vivid cinematic practice.

In his experimental films, the moving image addresses us directly, often without dialogue and accompanied only by sparse and deliberate use of sound. Shaddad seems interested in the ways the moving picture articulates itself, how it stretches and composes meaning when liberated from the burden of the sonic, as well as what such an aesthetic encounter evokes in the viewer. The clarifying power of the visual becomes a language and method unto itself, encapsulating Shaddad's filmic orientation towards the world, one which is concerned with how interiority can realise itself outside of the bounds of the programmatic and teleological. This orientation finds its most compelling expression in the films *Insan*, *Al Habil*, *Jamal*, and *Jagdpartie*.



Still from *Insan* (1994), courtesy of Ibrahim Shaddad

In *Insan* (Human Being, 1994), his most celebrated work, we inhabit the spinning mind of a dairy farmer who journeys from his village in the desert to Khartoum city, leaving behind his wife and livestock in search of a sustainable living. He quickly discovers that the scarcity and poverty he hoped to elude are not just a function of his geographic location but of the very class relation he occupies with respect to the state; the reality of which is heavily policed and criminalised in this new world of manufactured

deprivation. His various attempts at exercising this relation in order to make something else of it generate new and different forms of precarity, illustrating the structural unthinkability of an otherwise or elsewhere for those operating within the social imaginary of an austerity, security state.

The farmer's daily encounters with this alien and alienating world are not without humour. *Insan* finds the comic in the tragic — the farmer's wonder and then disgust at the newfound delicacy of ice cream, his recreation of Westerns with his only cow, etc. — a satirical nod to the absurdities of lives lived in migration. Part of this absurdity exists in the atomisation of the farmer in the city; the expectation that he play the role of the propertied individual, the ideal state subject, which he cannot seem to realise. And in the adoption of the numbing, temporary pleasures of the city that do nothing to satiate his desires for self-activity. The power of the silent visual here is evident. The large absence of sound destabilises our habitual affective vernaculars and compels us to trace emotional meaning differently so that we come to savour the film's dense polysemic notes.

Confronted with a soaring desperation, the dairy farmer's mind meets the impossibility of a physical escape from conditions of dispossession with a psychic one. Shaddad dramatises this oneiric state through a visceral and dizzying montage, interleaving flashes of the farmer's past life or visions of an alternate present, blurring the lines between the real and imagined. This illegibility captures the dismantling of a claim to subjecthood/subjectivity by the farmer, shifting us further into his dislocation, psychic uprootedness, and eventual forced surrender and adjustment to the cadence and logic of a class society.

In one sequence, we are transported back to the farmer's harrowing trip across the desert, the loss of his wife and livestock across its expanse clearer to us now as a depraved tax incurred to enable this journey. In another sequence, the vibrant music and rhythms of his village bring his body into dance, allowing him motion where stagnancy and stalled development prevail. And in yet another, the oppressive grind and groan of hydraulic machines surround him. Against the flat, unhurried landscape of the desert, these animated structures appear alien and monstrous. Shaddad exploits this aesthetic contrast to make another contradiction visible: that which exists between the state's projects of rapid resource extraction from peripheral regions and the scarcity that abounds in them.



Still from *Insan* (1994), courtesy of Ibrahim Shaddad

In stunning, meditative shots, the camera paints the machines as both a hurdle to and horizon of development, encapsulating the conflict between the reality of capitalist exploitation and the romantic rhetoric of opportunity employed by the nation state to extend control over its citizens. Our dairy farmer gazes headlong into one of these elaborate structures in the desert, his thirst — an allegory for dreams of prosperity — growing more and more intense. Gushing streams permeate his reveries and an audio snippet of a family jubilantly crying *al masoora jat! moya moya!* (the tap is running! water, water!) repeatedly erupts into the frame.

As the drought in his body reaches breaking point, we see him launch towards a pipe at one of the drilling sites. His tongue, extended expectantly, is charred by a flood of petrol. This is Shaddad's damning commentary on two of the Sudanese military dictatorship's foundational projects at the time: the [Gezira Irrigation Scheme](#) and the burgeoning [oil industry](#). The state's narratives of economic progress facilitated by these projects — and which were used to manufacture consent for the regime amongst its citizens — eventually cannibalised themselves, leading to civil war and destitution for those most ensnared in their promises. A mouth full of petrol leads to a piercing, resounding cry; a cry that collapses all the elegiac echoes across multiple historical junctures into a single, turbulent pneumatic transmission.

A series of associative breaks flash on the screen marking the end of the farmer's trance. His psychic deterioration is complete. There is no salvation from the neurosis of expropriation, no path to exceed its grasp even through the mind. His imagination, once the site and stage of an upstream battle against the current of so many hopeless circles, is culled. A morbid resignation sets into his bones with every laboured breath as he floats in the water of the Nile — a final, cruel irony with which Shaddad leaves us.



Still from *Insan* (1994), courtesy of Ibrahim Shaddad

The themes of economic progress and labour are a constant in Shaddad's work. In *Jamal* (A Camel, 1981), an experimental short sold as a folkloric documentary on the traditional production of sesame oil to the Sudanese Department of Culture, Shaddad explores these themes through a camel's working day. The oppressive wail returns, this time sharper and more severe because its source cannot be located: is it the camel or the beams in the mill groaning? Truncated, rotating shots of the ceiling, the cracked dried mud of the walls, the camel's humps and fur, the sesame grains compressed against the beam disperse

the scene further until enough detail reveals that the camel is condemned to turn in endless circles inside the mill. Bound and blindfolded, its sense of time is distorted, the choreography of its misery lengthened as a result.

The camel's periods of rest bring no respite and are not the rejuvenating antithesis to labour, but an integral part of the continuum of exploitation. A weary, almost human-like expression settles on its face. Undercutting these stylised black and white scenes are rapid montages of another life with its herd, along with visions of cranes and circling industrial excavators confining a worker to the camel's fate. The future and past intersect in this uncertain moment: have we moved backwards or forwards in time? Is the worker living the camel's revenge fantasy? Or has the spectre of automation made the work of the rural human obsolete, entrenching them further in the cracks and valleys of uneven development?

No sooner do we begin to contemplate these questions does the camel find itself bound and yoked once again, protesting the recurrent episode of toil. More than the accumulation of signs and symbols, *Jamal* dissolves the demarcations between human and animal uniting them through a single, shared relation to labour. Both find themselves betrayed by this relation, unable to taste its fruit in the context of failed modernisation. The camel's protestations cannot stop the cycle of exploitation; a blindfold approaches the lens and its vision is overpowered by darkness.



Still from *Jamal* (1981), courtesy of Ibrahim Shaddad

The Sudanese imperial context is visited in the film *Al Habil* (The Rope, 1984). Here, Shaddad explores the generational wound of imperialist genocide perpetrated by the [Turco-Egyptian conquest of Sudan](#) (1820-1824). The opening scenes depict the Turkish Punishment Expedition (1822) — a series of military operations instigated by the Ottoman viceroy [Muhammad Ali Pasha](#) to avenge the killing of his son Ismail Pasha by a rebellion in Shendi — which claimed 50,000 lives. We follow two blind survivors of this slaughter. Connected by a rope assembled between them and their donkey, they each take turns to drag the others away from the site of the massacre.

The sense of loss is total as they proceed aimlessly, feeling their way across the unforgiving landscape of the desert. The constant drone of harsh gusts of grainy winds adds to the men's permanent disorientation and heightens its unbearable ache. The rope that connects them is subjectivised into the necessary bond of collaborative survival that nonetheless arrests them in the conditions of its making.

Indeed, enduring a long, treacherous journey, filled with many fatal near misses, they find themselves back at their initial starting point. The men's traversal occurs under the watchful eye of a sinister, decadent Ottoman figure — presumably representing the chief of the expeditionary forces *Daftardār* or the Turco-Egyptian order — whose menacing presence appears adamant on the annihilation of every last Sudanese. Despite the film's subject, it maintains the playful, dreamlike quality of the folktale. This endows it with a fantastic, farcical twist that tricks the senses into fully imbibing the story with its harrowing elements intact.



Still from *Al Habil* (1984), courtesy of Ibrahim Shaddad

These elements implicitly pose many questions within the film about the nature of lives lived in the wake of genocide, loss, and trauma: what does it mean to witness carnage the scale of which you cannot fully conceptualise? How to live with the knowledge that the same imperialist violence may be visited upon you at any moment and that this time you may not escape it? How to map and negotiate the spatial realm of loss and whom to trust to transport you through this unknown? Where to go when your only bond is also your great unbinding? Where to go when you are seemingly trapped in a cycle of loss that recreates itself? Who does one become as a product of all this powerlessness and grief? And on and on. These enquiries dilate within the spaces left by the film's unsaturated soundscapes, their urgency accelerating and their swelling configuring into their own inaudible score: *a lamenting filmsong*.

Despite the setting of the film, Shaddad's interrogation of the afterlives of genocide go beyond the specific Turco-Egyptian context and can be read as a parallel allegory of the Sudanese central government's genocidal civil war in modern day South Sudan (1983-2005) which had erupted for the second time a year before the release of the film. Navigating a hostile cultural terrain of state bureaucracy and censorship, Shaddad constantly found imaginative ways to deliver visceral experiences to Sudanese audiences that draw and personalise connections between the country's imperial and colonial legacies and unravel the regime's logic right under its nose.

In *Jagdpartie* (Hunting Party, 1964), Shaddad's graduation film from the German Academy of Film Art (now the Konrad Wolf Film University of Babelsberg), we witness the genesis of his talents for deconstructing the integuments of social reality. Shot in the forests of Brandenburg, the film is an exposition on racism and the trappings of white supremacy. Shaddad employs the Western genre to depict Joe's plight, a black worker who is on the run from a mob of white men. The film opens with Joe

emerging from hiding inside a tree trunk — almost as if emerging from a womb — his lips parched, indicating that he has been eluding the mob for quite some time. From the beginning, we understand that Joe has been born into a world and life of violence.



Still from *Jagdpartie* (1964), courtesy of Ibrahim Shaddad

The camera plays with light and shadow to create a homogeneity between Joe and his surroundings, interpreting him as an extension of his environment. This acts to elucidate racial logics that connect/counterpose blackness with animality as a measure of the value of black life. Equally, it establishes the story's timelessness by casting the woods as the eternal witness to Joe's flight.

Exhausted and emaciated, Joe finally comes upon a white couple living in the valley. His grating hunger and thirst compel him to approach them, carefully at first, but more insistently upon discovering their tolerance of him. Joe seems adamant on the prospect of an intimacy across the colour line, expressed through shared labour. Glenn and his wife, on the other hand, are reluctant — at least initially — and resistant to the implications of this endeavour. Toying with camera positions, Shaddad captures their interactions from varying proximities and unlikely angles, subjectivising the sense of total racial surveillance from which the couple's vigilance emerges. Despite a rhythm of conviviality eventually finding sway between all three of them, there remains a lingering tension distilled in the threat that the violence of whiteness may re-erupt in Joe's face at any moment. Put another way, Glenn's commitment to an 'epidermal schema' (see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*) of racialised signification and grids of power threatens to overwhelm and foreclose their shared horizon of a working-class solidarity.

This threat is realised when Glenn discovers from his boss that Joe is being chased for allegedly sleeping with his employer's daughter. The sully of white womanhood proves too great a crime for Glenn, a line that Joe cannot uncross. His wife's suggestion, "Maybe they love each other," is met with indignation. Glenn is expected to join the hunting party, but first warns Joe to flee. This act is less a safeguarding of Joe and more a preservation of Glenn's conscience: if Joe escapes before the rest of his drinking buddies arrive, Glenn can absolve himself of the responsibility for Joe's life. For Joe, whether delayed by another chase across the thicket or not, the knowledge of his own death is all too certain. He refuses to keep running. Perhaps naively insistent on his humanity in Glenn's eyes, he chooses instead to believe that their bond could outlive the annals of race and follows him back to the hut.



Still from *Jagdpartie* (1964), courtesy of Ibrahim Shaddad

The mob spot Glenn and Joe, and hurtle towards them, forcing Glenn to break with his moral conflict and pull the trigger. Here, the open space of the forest can be read as a white public space that erases intimacies created in private and overdetermines the relations it contains. Three rapid breaks, three breaks in the world, each closer to the site where the bullets enter Joe's flesh, mark the end of Joe's life. The film concludes with a close-up of Glenn's desolate face transfixed on the life he has just taken. Joe's killing resolves the intensifying ideological clash between Glenn and Joe. This quandary has Glenn's claim to whiteness as its stake, something he cannot tolerate despite his liberal attitudes. Shoring up his whiteness through violence restores his place in the racial order of things, forever unmaking the life of the otherwise he had shared with Joe moments before.



Still from *Jagdpartie* (1964), courtesy of Ibrahim Shaddad

Jagdpartie remarkably endures in its timelessness. Shaddad's foregrounding of human relations and his capacity to capture the essence of the psychological, experiential, ideological, and spatial recomposition of blackness by the white world lends it this quality. Shaddad's suspicion of the spoken word is apparent even in this early work. Uncharacteristic of his remaining films, *Jagdpartie* contains dialogue, albeit scant, and yet what is unspoken and silenced is of more gravity to the narrative drive. Tracing the evolution of Shaddad's cinematic voice is a lesson in the slow practice of embodiment and a re-evaluation of the terms of language and the auditory. Shaddad asserts a complete life for the naked moving image,

believing in its inherent potency and wholeness undiluted by the other senses (and yet somehow still heightening them).

His films do not shy from the real. Their through line insists on abandoning teleology for curiosity and patience and the wild unravelling of natural consequences. Shaddad films with careful and faithful attention to the lives of his characters, allowing for them to depart from the confines of the plot if necessary. His cinematic interventions petition the mind for the lifting of the veil in order to turn it violently towards the present as it is. To view Shaddad's films is to *experience* one's whole body stirring and awakening into so many states: revulsion, jouissance, dejection, fascination, laughter, and despair. It is this irresistible swirl of affectivity that speaks to the spirit and makes his work unforgettable. His impressive cinematic oeuvre reconsiders the boundary of the art form, playfully toying with its limits and reservations. There is a tender and determined generosity to Shaddad's eye and thinking that liberates one from the rigid, joyless indulgence of self-awareness into the full and wild surmise of the imagination. His gift to us is that of the passionate rediscovery of the world's and our own newness. A priceless debt he asks of us to pay forward.

Leena Habiballa is a PhD student studying the cellular and molecular biology of ageing at the Mayo Clinic and Newcastle University. Her essays have previously appeared in [Tropics of Meta](#), [Media Diversified](#), and [The Third Rail](#).