

Mimesis and the Paronomasia of (In)Fidelity in Kunle Afolayan's *Anikulapo* (2022)

Olagoke Olorunleke Ifatimehin Ph.D.

Abstract

The human creative skill and imagination is often a consequence of social life. Whether it comes as film, music, painting, dance or literature, art is a byproduct of life and society. It is a representation of that which already exists, a precursor text, in order to create beauty and excitement through a new manifestation. And it is in this manifestation that the mimetic is invoked. The imitation/appropriation of a pre-existent text, like history, myth, literature and folktales is often examined from the binary problematic of exactitude and platitude (fidelity) or of creativity and adventure (infidelity). This paper concerns itself with Kunle Afolayan's *Anikulapo* as a mimetic representation of culture and myth/history and interrogates notions of fidelity and paronomasiac infidelity. It applies filmic documentary observation as a method and formalism as a theory to argue that art may require the history and myth of a people as source material to express itself, but it is not confined to the limits of the material's originality. It argues that mimesis is not the faithful reproduction of a matter as it is but an unfaithful reconsideration of a text as it could be. It also argues that however its dependence on a pre-existent text, an adapted text should be adjudged based on the internal workings of its own meaning-making propensities. The paper concludes that a precursory source is merely a resource, for the filmmaker, as for the artist in general; a material to be imitated as art, and art only works for the service of its own purposes and not for a slavish fidelity to accuracy and the creation of an exact equivalence.

Keywords: Fidelity, Infidelity, Mimesis, Paronomasia, Resource,
Anikulapo

Introduction

The most fundamental quality of the mimetic is its open declaration of a reliance on a source for its very existence, a copying. Mimesis is the imitation, reflection, appropriation, representation, and copying of an original. Originality here does not exclusively predicate a contestation of authenticity but an inference on an origin. Krings cites that the mimetic “do not deny their origins but seek to establish or maintain contact with their respective originals” (16). For a text to be mimetic therefore, it has to have depended on a precursor, and acknowledge same. It is in the act of copying the precursor by conscious admittance and/or by a silent evocation of elements of the old in the body of the new (intertextuality) that mimesis gains its distinction.

As the art of copying or imitation, mimesis undulates between the fissures of fidelity and infidelity. These fissures have been described as “the central critical category of adaptation studies” (Giddings and Sheen 2), “the most frequent and most tiresome discussion of adaptation” (Andrew, 100) and Starr (73) concludes that “fidelity in screen adaptations will always be a criterion resistant to anything like scientific quantification”. Fidelity concerns the faithful transmission of the mirror image of a source text within the context of its pristine meaning and presentation. It attempts, with great dedication to precision and detailed fealty, to match as closely as possible the overarching dispositions of the original text.

The effort at recreating an exact equivalent of the source text is the taxonomy of fidelity criticism in adaptation studies. And this is not without its problems. Mcfarlane submits:

Fidelity criticism depends on a notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a

single, correct 'meaning' which the filmmaker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with. There will often be a distinction between being faithful to the 'letter', an approach which the more sophisticated writer may suggest is no way to ensure a 'successful' adaptation, and to the 'spirit' or 'essence' of the work... since any given film version is able only to aim at reproducing the filmmaker's reading of the original and to hope that it will coincide with that of many other readers/viewers (8-9).

Some of the common sources of adaptation include literature, history, myth and film. These sources have consequent cult-like following of scholars and members of the spheres of influence of the precursory which have taken upon themselves to protect the texts from 'wanton' copying and copyists. The clamour for fidelity begins with them. While the notion holds valid that relying on a source to create a film automatically suggests a recognition of value, either in form or content (or in both), in the source which ought to draw some level of semblance in representation, loyalty to its every trait is not a mandatory act of creativity or filmmaking. History, for instance, is a record of past events which to a large account is sacrosanct. This sacrosanctity is not the responsibility of the filmmaker, who is first and foremost an artist, to protect. Yet the filmmaker understands the essence of staying true to history, but s/he is not confined to it. Dusi avers:

Studying *texts*, therefore, does not mean forgetting the *contexts* in which they produce meanings that are socially shared. There is no contradiction; it is a question of thinking, for example, of a film or a TV show drawn from literature not as a separate object, but as a point of arrival in a process. On the one hand, this process has

strong connections with the sources, that is, with the texts from which the cinematographic (or television) product draws themes, images, structures, and methods of storytelling. On the other hand, what is set in motion is a negotiation and a comparison with the target culture, which is often radically different from the source text it receives and decodes. It is thus important to examine not only how the source text was adapted, but also the choices determined by the means utilized, as well as the choices linked to the logistics of production and audience captivation, which directly depend on the producers and the receivers in the target cultural system (82-83).

Most often than not, the mimetic, however, its attempt at fidelity, is an unfaithful activity because it betrays one element or the other hitherto inherent in the source text. This element could be as basic as the transition from one form, say myth, to another, in our case, film. Stam in his words had even registered a cautionary doubt that “it is questionable whether strict fidelity is even possible. A counterview would insist that an adaptation is automatically different and original due to the change of medium” (55).

Ultimately, fidelity alternates between its viability as a “choice for the filmmaker and a criterion for the critic” (McFarlane, 9). To find a meeting point, if there ever could be any, is to refocus the source for what it really is to the creative filmmaker, a resource. This way, the precursor is no longer a material which the adapter must faithfully transmit but a source of reference upon which s/he manifests her/his creative truth along the lines of historicity (artistic truth rather than historical truth). Hence, as long as the adapter does not refer to a source in his new material, that source may as well never have existed, except externally projected upon

it by the critic/reader. Also, when a source is acknowledged, this new material is rendered, and should be interpreted, upon the internal basis of its (re)presentation within the context of the new material and not on the external structures and strictures of the old. In other words, while a text admits to an influence outside of itself, its fidelity is adjudged on the parameters of its own understanding, interpretation, renegotiation and representation of the source of influence. This indeed, is how art ought to be read, from the principles of formalism.

According to Dobie formalism provides,

...a way to understand and enjoy a work for its own inherent value as a piece of literary art. Emphasizing close reading of the work itself, formalism puts the focus on the text as literature. It does not treat the text as an expression of social, religious, or political ideas; neither does it reduce the text to being a promotional effort for some cause or belief (33).

Klages also reiterates that:

Formalism is a mode of literary analysis that focuses primarily on the literary text itself, without regard to the context of its creation or consumption. Formalism emerged in the 1920s as a way to separate literary studies from other disciplines such as history, sociology, and psychology; formalism was designed to define literary studies as its own form of knowledge, with its own unique object and methods of study (30 – 31).

The text, therefore, exists according to the proclivities of its own narrative devices. Whatever contents are represented, however, their similitude with precursory texts, are mere subjective impressions of the artist. Film is art before it is anything else. It is a medium of storytelling, of re-creation. This is not in any way to

suggest that film is art for art's sake. But that before it can stand for anything else it first must be art. We may have film for the sake of history (placed at the service of history) but film is not history, in the image that it was but in the frame that it could be through artistry.

It is this freedom to evoke infidelity, to be disloyal to all but itself that makes art characteristically artful. Consequently, film may reflect certain normative worldviews and cultures, but it is not an objective authority for reference on the matter. It is at best a subjective derivative of what may exist out there yet counter-distinctively operating oblivious of it, only guided by its own internal systems and schematics. Analogies could be drawn by fidelity critics with pre-existent sources the new text acknowledges or shares equivalences by, but the new text is art which should be appreciated on that basis of distinction. It is on this conceptual frame that Kunle Afolayan's film *Anikulapo* (2022) is examined, bearing in mind that the mimetic is a zeugma for the indeterminacy of fidelity and infidelity.

Kunle Afolayan's *Anikulapo* (2022) and its Mimetic Resources

Inspired by a story acknowledged to Ifayemi Elebuibon (this is known only because the film gives that much credit in its peritext) who cites a verse of the Ifa's oracle divination called "Idin'osun", *Anikulapo* tells of a traveler from Gbogan, Saro a weaver of Aso-ofi, who goes from one town to the next in search of new markets for his business. He chances upon Oyo-Ile where a rich merchant and member of the royal court, Awarun, becomes his benefactor. His impressive weaving leads him to the palace of the Oba where he finds love in the youngest wife of the king, Queen Arolake, who sneaks out of the palace to visit him in his hut

at night. His benefactor, who also sleeps with him, discovers the sacrilegious relationship between Saro and Arolake, and cautions him of this. Saro denies his sexual misdemeanour with the queen. He continues to see Arolake until the young Princess, who is also in love with Saro, finds them out and reports them to the palace. The lovers are caught and Saro is beaten to death. The great Akala bird uses its resurrection power to bring Saro back to life. Arolake snatches the power of the mysterious bird, and they make their way to a faraway town to begin their lives anew. There, the son of the hunter they first meet dies and Arolake seizes the opportunity to present the power of resurrection to Saro who brings the boy back to life. Soon, Saro's fame grew, and he becomes an important man because of his ability to resurrect the dead, earning the nickname Anikulapo (he who carries death in his pouch). He marries more wives to compliment his growing ego and arrogance and snatches the opportunity to seek for the hand of the princess in marriage as the price to resurrect the prince who has recently died. Arolake, who now feels neglected and 'useless' empties the gourd of resurrection thus rendering Anikulapo powerless, and leaves. The king agrees to his request to give the princess to him as wife, but Anikulapo is unable to resurrect the prince because the gourd has now lost its potency. His failure leads to his death, but the great Akala bird returns and resurrects him yet again.

One of the fundamental mimetic resources of Kunle Afolayan's *Anikulapo* is the narrational mode of the film. As mentioned earlier, the film narrative derives its emplotment from a story inspired by a story told (history/myth). The film acknowledges its reliance on a story told by Ifayemi Elebuibon and deploys a narrative voice in reeling out the plot of the film. This voice functions at the same time as that of a narrator who is not

affected by the incidents in the film as well as that of the director who superimposes his interpretation of the story above the one that first inspired him through the filmic technicalities of voice-over and motion pictures. Hence, while the story comes across as a mimetic elicitation, subjective as it must be, the narration takes on an ambiance of originality to the point that it evokes in the viewer, an authentic believability. Or as Mcfarlane (16) puts it, “Those words spoken in voice-over accompany images which necessarily take on an objective life of their own. One no longer has the sense of everything’s being filtered through the consciousness” of the storyteller. But as storytelling goes, the creative inventiveness of the narrator/director entertains a level of “subjective impressions”. This is important to note especially because film is storytelling, and a film which relies on a text for its own existence would characteristically identify as an imaginative response, however the sacredness of its (re)source.

The voice-over/narrative establishes the background for the film. It situates the film within the ambivalence of the Yoruba cosmology and tradition. It introduces the Akala bird as a mystical bird which possesses the power of resurrection.

The Ifa oracle says that the Akala bird has power of resurrection. When people die in an untimely way, with its divine ability, the mystical Akala bird resurrects them. But if the person’s time is due, the mystical bird allows them passage to the great beyond (Afolayan 2022, 01:36-01:58).

This bird and its resurrection power become the *leit motif*, the springboard for all the actions in the film. The occasional intermittence of the voice-over goes on to provide continuity for the film and holds the viewer in the penumbra of the mimetic,

shaded between dramatic action and the fictional reminder of a storytelling, albeit filmic, session.

The superintendence of the Yoruba culture and legend as locale for the story provides yet another resource for *Anikulapo*. The filmic *mise en scene* is designed and shot in a manner that provides an ambience of Yoruba-ness to the viewer. The Yoruba people and their culture are well known beyond the lens of representation. And because they actually exist, the filmmaker who wishes to weave his/her story around their proclivities would be expected to demonstrate fealty in his/her adaptation. This is essentially expected of epic films, a genre to which the film under study belongs. According to Onu:

The Nollywood epic/adventure/cultural film is a type of film which involves stories in traditional locales, ethnic situations and expressing cultural experiences. They also feature local costumes, make up, props, setting and so on. The adventure films are packaged to present energetic and action filled experiences for the film spectators. Adventure films deal with love, conquests, travels and are often spiced with magic and fantasy. A good number of the adventure/epic films produced deal with popular legends, myths, folklores and common tradition (258).

Anikulapo characterizes the epic film, hence it would be expected that the film would strive as much as possible to avoid anachronism by demonstrating fidelity to the culture which informs the narrative. Ekweariri and Ejelonu have noted that the epic film must attempt a mirror image effect through,

The desire to add local contents to it thereby bringing it closer to the people and their culture. Such culture as reflective and portrayed in the film must be identifiable

through the myriad of materials sourced within. However, it has to be noted that in sourcing for these materials, authenticity and outright fidelity to the cultures and thematic contents of the film should be maintained to a reasonable extent otherwise its meaning may be misinterpreted.... (177 – 178).

While this may hold as accurate, the filmmaker has the God mode to create an entire universe of Yoruba tropes and icons. Film, as art, projects worlds beyond the familiar and in the intersections of fidelity and infidelity, there is hardly a falsity of culture and/or myth and history in filmic representation. This is especially so because art is an imaginative invention, however its claims at verisimilitude. The Yoruba in Afolayan's *Anikulapo* therefore, does not have to be tethered on the leash of faithful simulation. Every other world and context fades into the liminal and the universe of the film becomes the only one we are to know.

An essential component of the overarching depiction of Yoruba culture can be seen in Afolayan's use of the Yoruba language. The very title of the film is in Yoruba. The original language of the film is also in Yoruba. Names of places (Oyo, Gbogan), characters (Awarun, Arolake, Saro), are also in Yoruba. The soundtrack and music are rendered in the Yoruba language. All these combine to create a cultural setting (in all its myths and traditions) for the film, Yoruba land. While the voice-over had mentioned that Yoruba land is the setting of the film, the motion pictures, in what could be referred to as the establishment tableau, present an array of traits that could be regarded as constituting Yoruba-ness. There is music and drumming as the camera treats us to a montage of masquerades, costumes adorned by men and women, identifying royalty and commoners,

the Oba (king) riding on a horse while his chiefs and attendants walk on foot in a procession, dances and dance patterns, musical instruments, culinary identities, palace guards, sculptures, festival, arts and crafts and free movement (Afolayan 2022, 03:14-04-39). This tableau introduces Oyo-Ile where the king practices polygamy, women are freely allowed to work and trade, markets are functional, the king sits in council with his chiefs, elders are accorded respect and life is generally tolerant and accommodating. But when Saro, who visits Oyo from Gbogan, takes advantage of the positive reception of the town and its people by sleeping with the king's wife, Arolake, custom demands that he be put to death. It is at his death that the Yoruba myth of the Akala bird unfolds. The bird raises him from death only to realise that he is not worthy of life but before it could put him back to death, Arolake jumps in and snatches the power of resurrection from the bird (Afolayan 2022, 1:15:28-1:15:40).

In a distant land, Ojumo village, far away from Oyo-Ile, Saro, now equipped with the power of resurrections, builds a reputation for himself as Anikulapo, the one who carries death in his pouch, and grows arrogant and greedy due to his fame and prosperity. Unlike in Oyo-Ile where the king addresses his people by himself, the king of Ojumo does not speak in public. His mouthpiece speaks in his stead.

Arolake: Listen. What does the king look like? They say he is dumb.

Saro: (Chuckles). Come on. Arolake. He is not dumb.

Arolake: I heard he only speaks through a mouthpiece.

Saro: Yes. What I heard is that, it is an abomination for him to speak in public. At least he speaks to his queen and children. He also speaks to the chief priest during rites and propitiation.

Arolake: Ah! Then why doesn't he speak publicly? Or was it a heavenly judgment?

Saro: Hmm. Let's not be deceived. I don't understand it. Some people say that he swore an oath a few years ago, exchanging his tongue for power in order to conquer his enemies.

Arolake: Hmmm.

Saro: Some people also say the last time he spoke was when he saw his father being slaughtered like an animal during the war.

Arolake: Awwww. Ah. What a pity.

Saro: Ah.

Arolake: That's so bad.

Saro: But only God knows that which is true or false.

Arolake: Who knows?

Saro: Ah. (Afolayan 2022, 1:37:23-1:38:37)

Should there be culture enthusiasts who might want to fault the depiction of a Yoruba king who only speaks through a mouthpiece, this conversation above conveniently justifies the act and shrouds it in an ambivalence of uncertainty thus alluding to the slippery and provisional character of truth and falsity. What is of greater import at this point is the plausibility it gains from the viewer. Values and tradition exist and it is only expected that these values should be upheld. But infidelity plays itself out to reinvent self and redefine meaning.

Anikulapo and Mimetic Paronomasia

Afolayan's *Anikulapo* thrives on the creative impulse and thematic/plot structure of infidelity. The film, beyond the narratology of myth, revolves around unfaithfulness. Queen Arolake, while bound by the fidelity of marriage to the king, falls

in love with Saro, when he visits the palace to trade his wares. Theirs was love at first sight. She trails Saro on his way back home and makes love to him in the open of the forest. It is this act of infidelity that spurs the conflictual mimesis of the film. This infidelity, in its paronomasia, arouses a sense of disappointment and betrayal, a departure from the norm, in a sense, from the source. When the lovers are found out, the palace guards arrest Saro and lead him to the king with the chants “Saro, betrayer” trailing them all the way (Afolayan 2022, 1:10:31-1:10:48). Saro is brought down to his knees before the king:

King: Saro, what a pity. People of Oyo.

People of Oyo: Your Royal Highness.

King: Oyo Chiefs.

Oyo Chiefs: Your Royal Highness.

King: (Pointing at Saro). This is a betrayer. Oyo receives everyone from far and wide.

Chiefs: Yes.

King: We did welcome you. And you had the guts to pierce the eye of Oyo with a sharp stick you are holding. Not even a king dares try this with me. But you, a stranger, had the guts to.

Chiefs: Oh yes.

King: Who sired you? The king does not suggest.

Chiefs: Yes.

King: The king decrees. You guards.

Guards: Your highness.

King: Take this criminal, and treat him exactly the way he deserves.

Crowd: Long live the king.

Chants of “Saro the betrayer continues” (Afolayan 2022, 1:10:53-1:11:51).

This notion of betrayal is also a critical paradigm in adaptation studies. The reliance of a text on another and its consequent (re)production hardly hold the same mirror image in representation. This reveals the problematic of fidelity and infidelity, just as it does in the scenario above. The source is often left in a betrayed state because the adaptation does not reproduce it in its exactitude. Stam aptly submits thus:

When we say an adaptation has been “unfaithful” to the original, the term gives expression to the disappointment we feel when a film adaptation fails to capture what we see as the fundamental narrative, thematic, and aesthetic features of its literary source. The notion of fidelity gains its persuasive force from our sense that some adaptations are indeed better than others and that some adaptations fail to “realize” or substantiate that which we most appreciated in the source novels. Words such as *infidelity* and *betrayal* in this sense translate our feeling.... (54).

But this feeling of disappointment and betrayal emanating from the infidelity that all of Oyo have against the lovers is hardly the feeling the viewer has. This is especially because the viewers ‘understand’ the factors which lead the lovers to be unfaithful. And one of the factors is the creative knack to be different and free from the taxonomy of tradition, an essential factor in mimetic predilection. Arolake was married off to the King at the age of 15 to repay the favour the king extended to her father (Afolayan 2022, 1:02:19-1:02:55). Saro was only 6 years old when he was forced to go and work on a farm in order to pay off his parent’s debt. (Afolayan 2022, 1:04:24-1:04:35). Both have resolved that they would disentangle themselves from the chains of their parents’ misgivings in a manner that commends an adaptation’s

creative inventiveness to be different from its source's traditional modes. Infidelity becomes freedom from the shackles of a precursor's prededication.

It is Saro's infidelity that also leads to his downfall. While in Ojumo, he grows wealthy and important and impregnates his house help, Omowon, on the excuse that Arolake could not produce children for him. He goes ahead to marry yet another wife, Bimpe, and is eyeing to add yet another, the princess of Ojumo, Ajoke, who he has made the price for resurrecting the dead prince. Arolake, feeling betrayed and neglected, empties the gourd of resurrection and leaves. These acts of hers render Saro powerless as he is now unable to resurrect the dead (Afolayan 2022, 2:09:04-2:09:46).

Conclusion

As critical as fidelity and infidelity are to adaptation studies, a reliance on a precursor must never be a taxonomic venture. Verisimilitude and accuracy of facts may be culturally suitable for adaptation, but adaptation does not draw its value from fidelity as much as it does from infidelity. Those who lay claim to the position that once a film deems it fit to cinematize history, it is thereby bound to be truthful to history, would realize, once they pick up the camera, that film pans more towards the artistic than the historical. If such proponents of fealty are to be given cameras to create film from history individually, they are not likely to return with an exactitude of content even though the same historical material was appropriated.

Whether the story is a faithful transmission of the original or an artistic flirtation with infidelity, the art of film draws a suspension of disbelief in the viewer. The viewer is only obliged to

connect to the universe of the film and not to a projection of preconceived expectations drawn especially, from outside of the adaptation. Film, may be inspired by a monolithic preponderance, but its appeal is to a universal schema. Either way, film is fiction, and its most important characteristic constituent is that it is art and thereby, a product of imagination, first. The pun is intended.

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