

INTERVIEW TWO

Behailu Wassie Interviewed by Michael W. Thomas*

Addis Ababa, March 8, 2016

MT: Thank you for speaking with me today Behailu. Can you please introduced yourself and tell me about how you joined the film industry?

BW: I never thought I would be a filmmaker. When I was in university I studied agriculture (crop science) because I was forced to do it, even though I was one of the top students. After I graduated I rented some land and started a farming business but I didn't enjoy my studies or work in agriculture. I wasn't passionate about the field and because it is a seasonal business, in the down season I managed to find time, and that's when I started writing. This was when I found my true passion. Farming gave me the time to contemplate myself more and I started to read more as a habit. Then, in 2009, my friend offered me a post as a writer in a sport newspaper. So I started to write articles and it helped me to develop my writing and gave me space to express my thoughts about my country, but as it was a sport paper, I didn't have the freedom to write about these things in detail. Then I started to take short term film training courses and I loved it so much because I was able to express myself and my thoughts in a clear way and that is how I became a filmmaker.

MT: And what was your first film?

BW: *S A E/Ya Lij* 2010/11. It was a very challenging process but I found it easy to express myself through film. It was a big learning curve for me because I wrote and directed it, and learnt many things in the process of making it. It was such a big part in my career and made me who I am. Through the experience of making this film I realized how Ethiopian

technology is very backwards compared to the rest of the world. The film also highlighted how people who are obsessed with technology can become isolated in Ethiopian society as there can be a clash with our traditional way of living. It is particularly these sort of ideas, which emerge from the ambivalences of our contemporary society and culture that I like to express and share through film. I really like that I can use film to express myself or raise these issues, but it is up to the audience to judge and challenge their preconceived ideas, to look at things in different ways through film. My aim is to use film to open up discussions on these issues, it is not to make right or wrong judgements. I was lucky with this first film as it went down well with audiences and critics which gave me a good platform to build my career. After that, I made my second film *በልደተ ቂን* Belideté Ken which was released in 2012, then came *አንድ 30/Sené 30*, *አይራክ/Ayrak* and *አ-የት፡የ/Utopia*. These three films became very successful in Ethiopia and helped me grow even more in this industry. Whenever I make films I gain economically but they also contribute to who I am, I learn a lot and I grow as a person through making films. When I want to raise an issue I always take my time. Making a film is very expensive and challenging in this country as none of us have professional training but we are achieving a lot and doing well, it has become a great love of mine.

MT: Can you tell me more about your different financial and technical experiences with making films?

BW: I try to use the latest technology for each of my films. Because technology is improving so quickly, this means that we are also pushed to grow and learn quickly in terms of production, just to be able to keep up. But what is really important for me is not the technology or production quality but the idea at the heart of the story. Personally, I don't like fantasy films or films that don't relate to real life. What really matters to me are stories that engage with the issues of our society. For me, the thing that makes me happy is when people talk about the issues in my films and when my films strike a chord with society and people's

conscience. I am not so concerned with camera angles and technical issues as long as my themes are communicated successfully. For the production of a film, many people come together, and in order to get them all working together it is most important they all understand the story of the film and work together to achieve the aims of the story. I am most satisfied when my films are discussed in terms of the issues they raise instead of just for the technical or stylistic qualities. My philosophy is to make sure we look after our soul and in this era of globalisation where we listen to so many ideologies from different parts of the world, I think it is important that we stay connected to our society and our issues, in this regard fantasy and escapism is not a concern of mine either.

When you make a film you don't have to copy from other cultures and countries. Other people make their own film depending on their culture so you can't just mimic them but you can adapt the good things to your own situation and culture. For me I really like reading books on Ethiopian history and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and so I've always been aware of our rich history and culture, these are our strong roots. Because we have strong roots in Ethiopia I am able to appreciate both our culture, and foreign culture. This enables me to mix them together to satisfy both body and soul. Our films reach between 250,000 to 300,000 people in the cinemas and then over one million when the film is released on VCD, and even more online, and despite comedies selling well, it is important for me to use my films to relate to Ethiopian society, customs, history, and ideology in order to have a deeper, more meaningful and tangible value for how people act and think in relation to Ethiopia.

Art, and culture in general, is like the farming process: you take what is best for you, you have to work hard to cultivate it, and this is what the film process is like for me. You start with the seed which is the idea and the story. Then, like the tractor or the plough we use the camera and other technology to develop the seed into the fruit. But we cannot just be satisfied with a beautiful fruit, the fruit has to taste good. I believe that we all have our separate tastes

depending on the cuisine of our culture and as I have Ethiopian culture in common with my audiences, my films and the ideas they communicate share the flavours and tastes of our cuisine.

MT: That is an interesting philosophy and can we see this in your film *Ayrak* as it is a romantic comedy film, correct? Can you explain to me how the genre has become localised for you as, despite obviously relating to Hollywood styles, it speaks specifically to Ethiopian audiences?

BW: Yes, *Ayrak* tries to address the differences in people's ideologies. We have two characters, one loves tradition, is confident in himself, rooted in Ethiopian culture, and loves his country; the other attempts to be a modern woman but she does not belong in America, where she was educated, and struggles to fit back in Ethiopia. Instead of being grounded like him, she floats in-between two cultures. I think it is about how, as coming from different societies and cultures, we understand and value our respective cultures and those foreign to us. As an Ethiopian I value things differently than someone from a different culture and we also have different ways of expressing and understanding these values. Personally, I don't want to live in an isolated and nostalgic idea of Ethiopian exceptionalism but I also don't want to abandon my Ethiopian identity for the sake of adopting Western customs. What we need to look for is a balance and continual negotiation of our identity as a culture and society, and this is what the film attempts to do by bringing together the modern, outward looking, and rich female character with the male who lives in the countryside and is rooted in Ethiopian culture.

This film stayed in the cinemas for five months which was a big success and made a really big influence on how this issue was discussed in Ethiopia at the time. In fact even in Addis you can see this dislocation, for example if you go to Bole it is very different from the rest of the city as people try and speak English and think Amharic or other Ethiopian languages are

ugly, but it is these people who are cutting off their roots and become floaters who will soon forget about their culture and their society and so they will lose their way. Just as in the film, the male character does not care about his appearance but speaks from his heart and soul whilst the female changes her mind easily and is overly concerned with her appearance. A romantic comedy is like this in Ethiopia as we adapt it to speak to the soul of our culture and society, but we also use the comedy elements to feed the hunger for entertainment in the belly of our audiences, and in order to make a financial living for ourselves as filmmakers. Here we call romantic comedy, *assekiñ yefikir film* and because of the commercial pressures to recoup the cost of making a film, many filmmakers are able to take advantage of the popularity of certain genres. Equally, however, there are people who become constrained by the idea of genres. As well as *assekiñ yefikir film* being the most popular films in cinemas they are also the largest in number which fail to be screened. This is also because many unqualified people attempt to make a film and think they can get easy financial rewards but this is not the case as is evidenced by the statistics given by the Bureau of Culture and Tourism and the number of films that fail to get an exhibition licence.

MT: And then you also wrote *Sené 30* which is quite different, and also has a powerful message?

BW: Yes, it is completely different. In this film I was exploring the issue of humanity through naming the old blind male protagonist Sewenet (“humanity”). All other animals are defined by their nature and instincts but humans have the capacity to change from day-to-day. For example, we are having an important conversation now and after this meeting we are bound to be influenced by each other, thus changing as humans. In the film, Sewenet becomes who he is through his experiences, we learn he has sacrificed his love and his vision, and through his sacrifices he has gained much wisdom. So, through his long life and hard experiences, the wisdom of Sewenet is authentic and he is the right person to guide the young

male character who is just beginning on his journey through life. This film was also successful with audiences and since the industry is becoming more competitive with more releases it stayed in the cinemas for three months after its release in 2015. For *Ayrak* and *Sené 30* I sold the scripts to Fikeryesus Dinberu who directed both films. For *Ayrak* I was on set most of the time to help him with everything but for *Sené 30* I had less input on set. I feel very lucky to have this talent and to be able to express myself in this way. Imagine, if I want to discuss these ideas to people directly I cannot find fifty people, but through film I can reach thousands and even millions of people. The only thing I pray is that people take positive messages and ideas from my films and do not misinterpret them.

MT: So when you have a blank page in front of you how do you start a script? Do you think about the social themes that concern you or do you see what themes are current in other films? Do you think about the components that would make a successful film or are you only concerned with communicating important ideas?

BW: I always listen to my heart; I am always honest to myself. I do not pay attention to others but I understand the social, political and religious/spiritual situation, and so ideas come from observations and I just try and develop them in a way that feels honest to myself. Always before I start, I develop the idea and the structure, sometimes I even start at the end and work my way back to the beginning; but once I have the idea I feel like the script is already half complete. After you get the core idea then you can have fun with it, you can be serious or use comedy and other genres. The structure of my films are simple so that the message is clear for my audience. This is definitely influenced by the folk stories (*teret*) my father used to tell me. They introduce the characters and establish the story, then they create action and build suspense, and then we reach the resolution which always carries a moral teaching, and this is definitely how most successful films are structured here in Ethiopia. When I watch Hollywood films I am not surprised by their ideas but what amazes me is that

they make the film into a puzzle with many complex narrative strands. It shows how far they are going and some youngsters aspire to make films like Scorsese or Tarantino and I respect this, but mine are simple in structure and aim to communicate a clear message.

MT: So what do you think of the influence of Hollywood or other foreign films on Ethiopian film?

BW: We can pick lots of films that are influenced by foreign films such as *Wesané*, which was a remake of a Bollywood film. But now people are becoming more patriotic and nationalistic. So more recently people are looking at Ethiopian society and looking at their audience here and creating these more simplistic narratives. As our industry is also still very young, I believe that as we grow and develop, people will experiment and create more complex narratives and aesthetically accomplished films that our audiences will also come to appreciate. But at the moment people want a film that they can relate to, so films reflect our way of living in Ethiopia and the aspirations and anxieties we have. But equally I believe that having a simple narrative allows the film to be understood by everyone, young and old.

MT: And what about Nigerian films? They are very popular all over Africa and in the diaspora but they don't seem to have an audience here. Is this true and if so why do you think this is the case?

BW: There are two main reasons here. The first is because most Ethiopians do not speak English. I am expressing my ideas to you in Amharic because my language is the best way I can express myself. And secondly, people who speak Amharic can grasp the cultural and social messages of our films in more depth. Now, as our film industry is growing, people only want to watch Amharic films as the quality is similar to Nigeria but it speaks directly to them. A sign of the rise in talent and quality of our films can be seen in the recent offices DSTV and other pan-African distribution companies are setting up here in order to start to show Ethiopian films to audiences outside of Ethiopia.

MT: Speaking to audiences here in Addis, it seems that a major reason for going to the cinema and watching films is to learn about life and love. But others also talk about needing the entertainment of comedy. Can you help us understand this more?

BW: Many filmmakers do not have the time or effort to try and make another genre apart from *assekiñ yefikir film* as it is easy to make people laugh and to create empathy with characters who have to overcome obstacles to achieve their love. Entertainment is always necessary but you can entertain people and connect with people by making tragedies too, this is why *Wesané* was such a popular film in 2007 because there was not a dry eye in the cinema after the film finished. Today in Ethiopia we see that the audience numbers have plateaued, or some even say they are falling, but there is a huge potential market just here in Addis of people who are just waiting for a particular genre to come out as they are bored and tired of only watching *assekiñ yefikir films*. Yes, entertainment is important as we need to nourish our body just as we need to give our soul satisfaction. That is what I believe. Comedy is very easy to tell, tragedy is different. I believe there are people out there looking and waiting to be addressed by different kinds of genres.

MT: If you look at a film like *Rebunni* by Kidist Yilma, it seems that although being successful in cinemas it became really famous after it was released on VCD and this is similar with the first *assekiñ yefikir film*, Henok Ayele's *Yewendoch Guddyay*? Why is this?

BW: Lots of people don't believe in the potential of filmmakers here so many people don't want to lose their time and instead wait until the film is released on VCD. *Rebunni* is a really good film but I am sure most of the audience saw it at home. Because cinema owners have a lot of power over what films they show, they often want films that make the audience laugh in the first minutes, and so fail to open their doors to new genres and ideas. It is the case that we make most of our money from theatrical releases in cinemas but our films reach more audiences after they are released, and this is when people contact me to tell me how

much they appreciate the film. Even if you look at Ethiopia, we have a population of over one hundred million but there are only a few cinemas in other towns and cities outside Addis Ababa, so when films are released on VCD, although there are issues with pirating, that is when the films become well known. The other problem is that the cinema owners are only concerned with making their money now, they have no concern for making the industry grow in terms of art and diversity in the future. There is a gap in trust and communication between filmmakers and producers, cinema owners, and audiences because of this. This is why it seems that after films become very well-known and popular through VCD more of that genre will begin to be screened in cinemas because there is less risk for the cinema owners.

It is also true that there is more competition and big rivalries between private cinemas which can lead to pettiness. This is also a reason why the government cinemas that play films on second run and for a cheaper price are consistently able to draw big audiences, because their films have already been successful in the private cinemas on their first run. I think this is where the government can help the situation more by supporting the filmmakers and helping to create a more legitimate and transparent operational structures for the film industry. They need to help protect the rights of us filmmakers and create space for a wider variation of film genres and themes to be explored. On top of this, as there is no proper structure to the industry, it can take more than two years for you to get the money you earned through cinema box office receipts as cinema owners take their time and there is no distributor to take on this work.

The film industry is like a marathon, many athletes start the race at the beginning but only a few extra talented make it to the finish line. The filmmakers who make a living out of cinema here are few and many actually offset the difficulties of the film industry through making TV commercials, documentaries for NGOs and other such products. There needs to be a coherent policy from the government to sort out the structural issues in our industry.

People have to understand that fiction films are more than just entertainment, they create powerful narratives that touch your soul and influence peoples' behaviour, and because of this simple fact I am optimistic for the future.

MT: It is interesting to hear how influential cinema owners are here, and what about film producers?

BW: They monopolize everything because they have money and they have no concern for the quality of the film or for making spaces to improve the quality of film production. Again they are just people with money who have little or no experience in film, their main aim is to make money. We need people who are passionate about the production process of filmmaking not just people who are interested in making money.

MT: Do you see changes coming soon, and if so, in what ways?

BW: Yes definitely, I see more films being valued by our society such as with *Rebunni* and *Etege*. Both are unique and audiences like them and I see more young filmmakers being inspired to make films about their experiences and about Ethiopian culture. You cannot only concern yourself with the satisfaction of your body. Just like my view of my country is not just the land or river, it is coming from your soul, your relationship with culture, society, and humanity. Film is like this, it has to have a soul for it to have deep value, but also it has to nourish the body through entertainment and often, here this is done through comedy. In Ethiopia there is a lot of poverty, but I am not ashamed of our poverty. In Amharic *dehenet* (“poverty”) has multiple meanings: one is poor, the other (*denet*) is salvation. So when you don't have money your soul is getting stronger. That is how I understand my country, our films and our love, we struggle with material wealth but we have strong immaterial wealth in our culture and society. Another example is the word *temhert* which means “education” but *mhert* means “mercy” and so these words are also inextricably linked to each other just as above. Love is linked with all of this and it is all about listening to your soul. As love is the

major narrative in our films, so too our films are like smoke, and cannot be achieved without a fire. So I always try to balance my films to address love, identity and feeling, and be entertaining too.

MT: And finally, when you describe these double meanings it reminds me of the Amharic technique of wax and gold - concealing a deeper meaning through these *double entendres*. Is this exclusively used when speaking and writing or can this exist in cinema too?

BW: Yes, it can be used in cinema. If you have wax and gold in your film then the audience will get a simple message immediately but more complex meanings will only be uncovered by those who contemplate the message further. The best films have the soul hidden in the entertainment, in that sense of course it is just as the wax hides the gold. The richness of Amharic also gives us lots of flexibility when making films as we can also use dialogue for hiding ideas and challenge the audience to try and find deeper meanings and value by themselves. Despite this I am also influenced by Chinese and Indian films and what really matters is to reach as many souls as we can and I believe films are the best method of achieving this. I hope we use films to tell our own narratives. If I watch a Hollywood film I can see that it is technically and cinematographically beautiful but it does not speak to me. I want our films to speak to our people, to speak to their soul, which reflects our religion and our traditions. I think this is why our films are successful and will be successful in the future too as the country grows. And hopefully, like the Chinese and Indian films, our films and culture will also be able to speak to people from different parts of the world.

* This interview was conducted in Amharic and the interviewer would like to thank Lideya Tsegaye Teshome for helping to translate the more complex notions presented.