

FILM CRITICISM

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Just *93 Days*, and the Sacrifice, Courage, and Hope that filled those Days

Allen H. Redmon

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Steve Gukas' film, *93 Days* (2016), tells the remarkable story of how Nigeria and supporting global agencies stopped the spread of Ebola in their country and, by extension, the rest of the world with extraordinary efficiency. A threat that various projections predicted could have resulted in the rapid infection of millions of people across the world officially ended in "just" 93 days. As the graphics at the end of the film share, only eight people died as a result of the 2014 outbreak, only twenty people were even infected, and the World Health Organization (WHO) "praised [Nigeria] for its swift, diligent, and successful handling of the crisis." All of this stands in stark contrast with what could have been.



Figure 1: CDC predictions as represented in film.

In the current COVID-19 context, Gukas' film, which won an "Audience Choice Award for Images of Africa" at the 2017 Minneapolis/St. Paul International Film Festival, becomes a film with images for any world deciding how to respond to the next viral threat. The film advocates for the very practices the world is presently attempting, social distancing, self-quarantine, and the rigorous tracking of those who

may have come into contact with the disease. More than that, Gukas' film provides a clear picture of the promise such efforts can deliver, and a subtle reminder that runs throughout the film that no virus lasts forever.

Gukas and screenwriter, Paul S. Powlston, create a plot that credits the persistence of one doctor, Dr. Ameyo Adadevoh (Bimbo Akintola), for initiating the efforts that stopped Ebola before it had a chance to spread. Patrick Sawyer (Keppy Ekpenyong-Bassey) arrives at First Consultant Medical Centre Obalende, Lagos, with unusual symptoms. He rejects the idea that he has been in contact with anyone who had Ebola, but Adadevoh refuses to accept this claim as a justification for dismissing a man who is very clearly symptomatic of something.



Figure 2: Sawyer getting tested.

In a pivotal early scene, and without Sawyer's consent to be tested, Adadevoh argues to keep what becomes the index patient for the disease in Nigeria against his wishes even though doing so could violate his individual rights. The scene could fall into a thin argument for the public good over individual rights, but, in Gukas' hands, it functions more properly as an indication of the instances of courage one needs to stop an outbreak. Such efforts require doctors who are willing to follow their expert opinion even when doing so might overwhelm other legitimate values.

Such efforts also require a team of respondents. No individual effort can combat a pandemic. *93 Days* showcases this point in two significant ways. The first way focuses on the support individual efforts require if they are going to have the effect they might. For instance, Adadevoh's willingness to act would have been inconsequential had her director, Dr. Benjamin Ohiaeri (Danny Glover), not supported her. Gukas carefully registers this point by including a scene where the Ambassador from Liberia (Sola Oyeade) confronts Ohiaeri to demand Sawyer be released. The audience is set to see the absurdity of this request knowing that Sawyer will return a positive test for Ebola. In the fuller context of the film, the real significance of the moment exists in Ohiaeri's willingness to defy governmental pressures he might not always be willing to resist.

Something similar happens in a scene that occurs after Sawyer dies. Ohiaeri reports that Liberia demands proof that Sawyer was Ebola-positive *before* Sawyer's body is cremated per local protocol. Nigeria's Commissioner of Health, Lagos State, Dr. Jide Idris (actor uncredited), refuses to wait: "The protocols are clear on this. We can't wait [...] *on my authority.*" Ohiaeri simply responds, "exactly." The

progression of the plot demonstrates the ways that individual efforts to respond to a pandemic must be supported by offices with increasing authority. No individual can outperform the collected action of an entire country. Every individual action requires, at some point, the administrative support of offices with the practical means and the official authority to support those actions. The willingness to act courageously becomes nearly inconsequential without some official support behind it.

Gukas juxtaposes two scenes toward the end of the film that show with tremendous precision the way the collective must support the individual if a pandemic is to be stopped. The first scene occurs as Adadevoh talks with Dr. David Brett-Major after she contracts Ebola. Brett-Major tries to assure Adadevoh that she can still beat the virus with the words, "it hasn't beaten you yet." Adadevoh responds, "no, not yet." More meaningfully, she declares what becomes *the* truth after the WHO declares Nigeria Ebola-free: "we stopped it, didn't we? We stopped it here." Brett-Major agrees, saying, "Yep, I think you did." The shift in person is the kind of thing you would expect to occur when one person is talking to another person on their deathbed. Brett-Major obviously wants Adadevoh to know the significance of her actions.



Figure 3: Adadevoh realizes the significance of what they have done.

Gukas follows this emotional scene with a special, News 10 report, though, that establishes just how many other people can be credited with stopping Ebola in Nigeria. The Deputy Incidence Manager of the Ebola Crisis Emergency Center in Lagos, Dr. Olukayode Oguntimehin (actor uncredited), describes the "894 contacts identified and monitored, [the estimated] 18,500 face-to-face visits [...] to assess Ebola symptom development, [...and the ...] massive social mobilization campaign" to contain and treat Ebola patients. Obviously, these efforts could not be conducted by one person. They require a total national if not international effort. The juxtaposition of the above two scenes captures each of these points.

Gukas creates another pair of images during his denouement that work in wonderful unison with one another. The first is an extreme longshot of the makeshift hospital in Yaba Brett-Major and his team coordinate.



Figure 4: Dr. Igonoh comforts Dr. Adadevoh as she lays dying.

Dr. Ada Igonoh (Somkele Idhalama), another doctor at First Consultant Medical Centre to contract the virus, but one of the ones to beat it, sits at the foot of the bed of her mentor and boss, Adadevoh, who has slipped into a coma. Igonoh encourages Adadevoh to keep fighting. Gukas pulls his camera back from the moment so that the importance of the image overwhelms anything that is being said. The point of emphasis becomes the number of empty beds in the Yaba facility. The image serves as a visual reminder of what Adadevoh's actions allowed. Without her courage and sacrifice, each of the beds in the image, and who knows how many more, would have been filled. The resulting picture reinforces the idea that Ebola in Nigeria stops with Adadevoh.

Gukas reemphasizes this point a few scenes later at the funeral of Adadevoh and the other three members of the Medical Centre to die. In a slow, high, long pan left, the camera passes across a sea of faces who are infection-free. They are infection free because of what those in the caskets, and those who supported them, did.



Figure 5: A slow pan of the surviving faces.

The situation could have so easily been inverted. The faces in the dramatic pan shot could have

represented the infected. The number of survivors might have been significantly lower. The individual and collective actions in Nigeria prevented that inversion from occurring. The number of living surpasses the number of dead, but only because of the responsibility taken by the individuals being remembered at the funeral and by the national and international agencies that supported their efforts.

The slow panning shot accumulates another point of significance, one also included in the title, that probably most matters for those watching Gukas' at the beginning of a pandemic. In much the same way Hebrew scriptures intend forty-days-and-forty nights to denote a long span of time that will eventually come to an end, Gukas' title does more than just indicate the number days that passed during the ordeal in Nigeria. It also provides some comfort for those entering a time of challenge and uncertainty that such times do end. Pandemics do end and they do so faster under the right conditions. Society as a whole just has to commit to those conditions as quickly as they can and they must keep to them until the ordeal passes. And pass it will.

Author Biography

Allen H. Redmon is Professor of English and Film Studies in the Department of Humanities at Texas A & M University Central Texas, where he teaches classes in film studies and adaptation. He is the author of *Constructing the Coens: From Blood Simple to Inside Llewyn Davis* (2015).
