

Tragedy and memory: No lessons learnt

documentary review/ WITH BERTHA KANG'ONG'OI

"We look for answers in order to open new questions,"

Portbou, French-Spanish border, September 1940: Walter Benjamin, a German Jewish philosopher attempts to cross the border, while running away from the Nazis. He never makes it. He spends only one night at the border town. It is widely believed that out of desperation, he takes an overdose of morphine and dies. But a few other people think the Nazis killed Benjamin.

David Mauas, a Spanish Film maker makes a documentary out of the mysterious circumstances and conflicting accounts of Benjamin's death. It is a film about memory, about examining history.

This film was screened for the first time in Africa at the Alliance Francaise in Nairobi a fortnight ago.

"Initially, I felt the film did not have much relevance to the Kenyan society, because of its European theme," said Mauas during an interview after the screening. "But my experiences around the world show that each country connects with the film in a unique way — depending on their collective experience."

It was not any different in Kenya.

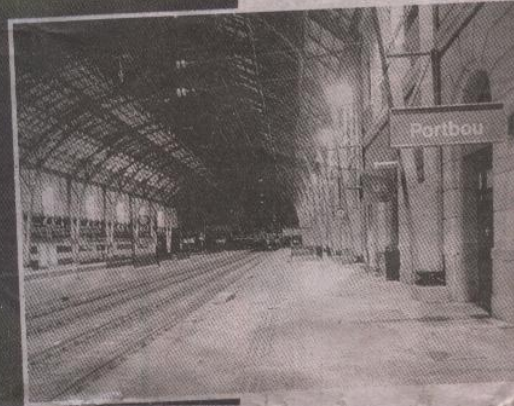
SELF EVALUATION

When the floor opened for discussions, nearly everyone present saw a connection between the film and the need for self-evaluation regarding what had happened before, during and after the post election violence, and learning from the mistakes of the past.

One speaker said: "Those who don't learn from their mistakes are bound to repeat them. We should never forget what happened in



David Mauas, a Spanish Film maker. [INSET] Portbou, French - Spanish border



the country at the beginning of the year so that it never happens again, because memory serves to bring closure and healing..."

But David has a different view. "We never learn anything from catastrophes," he says. "Catastrophes are just that: Catastrophes. We go looking for answers in order to ask or open new questions — not necessarily to learn anything. History has shown that one catastrophe never stopped another from happening."

In the ensuing discussion, while some argued that the Rwanda genocide served as a reminder of where Kenyans could go if we kept up with the violence, others rightly pointed out that it nevertheless has not stopped or helped to serve as a reminder in the Dar-

fur crisis, the Congo war or hindered the advance of the Lord's Resistance Army.

SALVATION ANY MOMENT

But one of the most poignant statements made during the film was a quote attributed to Walter Benjamin in which he expressed hope in the Messiah that salvation could come through at any second of any day. But as writer Tony Mochama would point out later, just as much as salvation or healing is possible at any moment, so is damnation.

As we come close to marking the first anniversary of a really dark time in Kenya's conscious, Mauas points out that we lack the advantage of time and distance to stand back and examine what

happened from memory.

"You are still living within the period that this catastrophe happened. You lack distance but that is not to say that you do not have the power not to repeat the same mistake again. It will, however, take another generation or two who have the advantage of living outside this time frame, to fully examine what happened."

As Mauas says, there is no lesson learnt from our self-hatred and self-annihilation, but we can use and take advantage of every second as a possible time for salvation.

So who killed Walter Benjamin?

Good question!

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