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# At the End of the Rainbow: *Jerusalema* and the South African Gangster Film

Lesley Marx

Between Oliver Schmitz's *Mapantsula*, released in 1988, and Ralph Ziman's *Jerusalema*, released twenty years later, lies the history of a country torn apart by systematic racist oppression for half a century. Reborn under the sign of truth and reconciliation, the brave new world carries not only the scars of the old, but has given birth to mutations of poverty, disease, crime and rampant violence. Since the glory days of classic Hollywood, when Cagney, Raft, Robinson and Bogart scowled their way across the screen, the gangster film has been the genre *par excellence* to engage with these themes of economic inequity and class stratification, and to explore the possibilities of violence both to transform and to destroy.<sup>1</sup> The genre emerged as a powerful expression of economic frustration during the Depression, a period that challenged the founding ideals of America as well as the preferred image of American heroic masculinity forged on the frontier. The gangster as self-made man, in search of the pot of gold, has been inscribed into different plots: on the one hand, he (invariably "he") plays the system in order to control it and have the freedom to become legitimate (*The Godfather* films [1972–1990] are an example). Or he plays the system too recklessly and brings about his own destruction: one thinks of Tony Montana, collapsing into paranoia, snorting a pile of cocaine as bullets rain through his mansion in De Palma's baroque *Scarface* (1983). Alternatively, he plays the game too conspicuously, like Frank Lucas in Ridley Scott's *American Gangster* (2007): Lucas breaks his rule not to attract attention by his dress, and becomes, literally, a marked man.

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<sup>1</sup>What follows about the genre is a recasting of observations I made in an earlier article (Marx, "Underworld RSA").

Robert Warshow's still compelling essay on "the gangster as tragic hero" describes the genre as one that confounds American optimism. Writing as McCarthyism loomed, Warshow observes that "America, as a social and political organization, is committed to a cheerful view of life . . . Modern equalitarian societies. . . whether democratic or authoritarian in their political forms, always base themselves on the claim that they are making life happier . . ." <sup>2</sup> The gangster and the films he dominates contest this preferred narrative by offering, instead, "a consistent and astonishingly complete presentation of the modern sense of tragedy." <sup>3</sup> In the classic form of the genre, the gangster is "the man of the city, with the city's language and knowledge, with its queer and dishonest skills and its terrible daring, carrying his life in his hands like a placard, like a club," <sup>4</sup> an image that captures the ruthless self-assertion with which the gangster must "make his life and impose it on others." <sup>5</sup> Drawing attention to himself, to his individualism, becoming a success, are acts of aggression and outlawry that must, finally, be punished by the crowd who hate such success—the gangster, from Little Caesar to Tony Montana, must be forced back into anonymity. "The gangster's whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual," writes Warshow, "to draw himself out of the crowd, and he always dies *because* he is an individual; the final bullet thrusts him back, after all, a failure." <sup>6</sup>

In the old South Africa, with its dichotomous ideologies of apartheid and the struggle for liberation, and where race and poverty were intimately bound, the genre found its most effective form in telling the story of black masculine assertion, with the American film gangster playing a charismatic role. Former gangster, Don Mattera, reminisces about the 1950s in Sophiatown: "We loved corrupt and crooked lawmen like the one Dana Andrews played in *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. We hated the straight ones and we chewed gum like Richard Widmark's 'Styles' character in *Street With No Name*. Our gangs were named after some of the killers in the movies." <sup>7</sup> Where the glow of nostalgia might color—however ambiguously—the lost moment of Sophiatown, the brute reality of contemporary gang violence across South African cities is altogether more disturbing. Taking a cue from Warshow's analysis, one might argue that, in the new South Africa, rainbow-nation politics requires us to be cheerful, the emphasis on Black Economic Empowerment espouses the possibility of material success for those previously disinherited and popular culture should mirror this post-1994 optimism. Individualism, aggression, the imposition of one's own world on the rest of the world—these become the signs of progressivism. The ethos of the gangster becomes the ethos of the "Rainbow Nation." In the light of the increasing class divide in the country and the concomitant increase

<sup>2</sup>Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," 127.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 129.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 131.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 131.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 133.

<sup>7</sup>Mattera, "Jerusalem: South Africa's New Oscar Hope?" NFFV Movie Blog, 4 December 2008: [http://www.nfvf.co.za/new\\_website/blog/index.php?/archives/5-Jerusalem-South-Africas-New-Oscar-Hope.html](http://www.nfvf.co.za/new_website/blog/index.php?/archives/5-Jerusalem-South-Africas-New-Oscar-Hope.html)

in violence, however, the rainbow politician might protest (to misappropriate Prufrock) that this is not what he meant at all.

The possibilities for tragedy are reduced in this context—relegated, indeed, to the apartheid past. And it is in the gangster films of this past that tragedy may be found: on the one hand, the gangster was indeed a man of the city striving to assert his individuality; but under apartheid, his aggression was a revolt against the facelessness of the pass book, as well as against economic and political emasculation. Rather than ironizing a grand narrative of happiness, in South African gangster films before 1994 the dead body of the gangster bore a direct, mimetic relationship to the obscene spectacle of social misery. After apartheid, the gangster's signifying terrain has become increasingly fluid. Films such as *Boy Called Twist* (2004), *Dollars and White Pipes* (2005) and *Tsotsi* (2005) all propose the possibilities of moral redemption and social rehabilitation for the gangster, in narratives that endorse a capitalist economy, eliding the irony of “redemption” so defined. In contrast to these films with their liberal narrative arcs, are those that propose success for the gangster, certainly, but within a world view that is deeply cynical. *Hijack Stories* (2000) is a kind of poor cousin to the more glamorous and controversial *Jeruselema* (2008), towards which the trajectory of this essay leads as central object of attention. Both these later films eschew sentimentality in favor of a satirical celebration of the protagonist who plays the acquisitive game with ruthlessness—and panache. The gangster is no longer a tragic hero, but, especially as played by Rapulana Seiphemo, merely the most appealing and energetic exponent of the values espoused by gravy-train politics.

An exploration of this shift in the role of the gangster as mirror to South Africa's continuing transition might start with a reminder of three gangsters whose stories represented what Dawid de Villiers refers to as the eschatological moment of revolution<sup>8</sup> before 1994: Mapantsula, BT, and Stander. Although it was made in 2003, Bronwen Hughes's *Stander*, based on the life of André Stander, policeman turned notorious bank robber, refers back to the 1980s and provides a narrative pattern for her protagonist that warrants comparison with the earlier films. The film takes as its premise a statement Stander made at his trial that he was shocked into rebellion by his experiences during the 1976 riots. An impressively choreographed ten-minute sequence of the riots, showing Stander shooting a young black man, dramatizes this interpretation. Once Stander has broken out of prison, however, he and his gang indulge in a bank-robbing spree apparently for the sheer adrenalin rush—and the money. The film is a glamorized, conventionalized genre treatment of the story, with Stander going down at the end in a hail of bullets. That Stander dies is not only necessary in terms of the biopic status of the film, but egregiously writes the film into the pattern of apartheid gangster stories, where the moral imperative dictated that the protagonist gone wrong should pay for his wrongdoing, even if, as Hughes proposes of Stander, he evinced a political sensibility.

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<sup>8</sup>De Villiers's excellent essay, “After the Revolution: *Jeruselema* and the Entrepreneurial Present,” is forthcoming in 2010 in the *South African Theatre Journal*.

While Oliver Schmitz's *Mapantsula* was immeasurably more powerful and deeply engaged with the seriousness of its subject-matter, it was unable to see beyond the death of the gangster, Panic. His growth of conscience and his moral and political redemption allow him an apotheosis at the film's climax, but the cost of his conversion to political and communal responsibility is, in this pre-liberation film, his life. The framing of the final scene, where he refuses submission to the system, radically reduces his options: Panic is in prison, and the likelihood that he will be murdered for his refusal to inform on his comrades is foreshadowed both by the scene where he is threatened with being thrown from a window several storeys up in the prison building, and by the audience's knowledge of such violations perpetrated against activists. The gangster is redeemed to become a tragic hero. Under apartheid, the protagonist is both punished for straying into self-serving individualism and rewarded with martyrdom when he joins the community in its struggle. The same pattern is seen in Michael Hammon's *Wheels and Deals*, where BT, the cocky hero, starts off on the side of the good activists, becomes frustrated, turns to a life of crime stealing cars, but returns to the unionist fold. He, like Panic, is politically and morally rehabilitated; he too must suffer punishment and is gunned down in the streets by the crooks.

Gangster protagonists don't die after 1994 (although their sidekicks might). They go straight and find the pot at the end of the rainbow, or they stay crooked and find an even bigger pot. Or they are adopted, as is Twist, and find that fairytales do come true. *Boy Called Twist* and *Dollars and White Pipes*, both informed by hopeful endings, are set in Cape Town, a city whose natural splendour cannot cloak the blight of shantytowns lining the main arteries into the city or the bleak nakedness of the Cape Flats, that sandy stretch of land originally buried beneath the sea and now home to thousands of coloureds forcibly relocated during apartheid.<sup>9</sup> *Dollars and White Pipes*, directed by Donovan Marsh, opens on the Flats and offers the possibility of renewal based on real events, taking its cue from the life of Bernard Baatjies. The opening tragicomic montage introduces us to a series of images illustrating Bernie's voice-over account of the shrunken world in which he grew up, shaped by relentless repetition, generic predictability:

Ja, Hanover Park—as far as the Cape Flats went, you couldn't get flatter. If you lived here, your whole life was *sommer* [simply] mapped out. You got born, you grew up, never left the area, never saw white people except on TV [we hear the soundtrack of *Dallas* in the background and see Bernie and his family glued to the TV screen]. However, you had a choice of two schools—the one round the corner, or the one round the other corner. After you dropped out you got a *kak* [shit] job. If that didn't excite you, you could always join a gang. In my area there was a choice of three: the Mongrels, the Americans, or the *Ma se Kinders* [Mommy's Boys]. Didn't matter who you hooked up with. Sooner or later some *ou*

<sup>9</sup>Very loosely defined, "coloured" was the racial nomenclature given by apartheid to the mixed-race population in South Africa.

[guy] from one gang would stab some *ou* from another gang who would then join a third gang and stab all the *ous* from the first gang. Then, of course, they all had to stab each other—just in case. So what should a *ou* do in a place like this—*die enigste duidelike ding* [the only obvious thing—he makes a mandrax pipe with the neck of a broken bottle].

As Bernie introduces us to Hanover Park, we see Table Mountain in the distance—an irony of Cape Town’s topography is that the dwellers on the Flats have one of the loveliest views of the Mountain, like a mirage of Paradise. Worth noting, too, is the name, “Hanover Park,” with its aristocratic and pastoral connotations—one of the many misnamed townships on the Flats. Others include Grassy Park, Lavender Hill, Silver Town, Heideveld (heath field) and Bonteheuvel (parti-colored hill).

Bernie watches *Dallas* obsessively and takes JR Ewing as his role model, an overt comment on the power of American cultural and ideological ascendancy in the new South Africa. For a while his star shines and, deploying a mix of smarm, chutzpah, and a disturbing ability to exploit Cecil, a trusting *idiot-savant* whom he meets on the train into Cape Town, he finds himself running a very successful club, although never quite making it into the big time. The protection racket, run by the gangster, Mr Kuyser, whom Bernie dubs the “coloured JR,” finally forces him out of the Cape Town nightclub business. He does, however, recover his sense of moral priorities, saves Cecil at the risk of his own life and, we are told in the final title, makes his way to Johannesburg where he runs a restaurant. Egoli, the “city of gold,” lives up to its name for Bernie.

The film shares its upbeat ending with that of Tim Greene’s imaginative adaptation of *Oliver Twist*. In adapting Dickens, Greene allows himself a story with a happy ending for his protagonist, but he also takes the risks of the novel, in that the happy ending depends on the machinery of plot, rather than providing models by which to address the systemic problems of a post-apartheid capitalist society. Oliver, renamed Twist, escapes enforced farm labor and makes his way to Cape Town, where he is taken up by a gang of street kids and their mentor, the dreadlocked Fagin. Nancy is a coloured prostitute and Bill Sikes a hardened white criminal who speaks with a strong Afrikaans-inflected accent. (This demographic mix is one of the strong points of the film, especially pertinent to the racial fusions of the Western Cape and to the shifting demographic construction of poverty and crime in the country). The events follow the novel quite closely except for a key change: Twist discovers that he is the grandson of a fine old Muslim gentleman called Ebrahim Bassedien. Monks is Bassedien’s brother, and, by implication, the seducer of Shamila, Twist’s mother. He is, thus, Twist’s father, suggesting a quasi-incestuous seduction in the past and pointing obliquely to the nightmarish accounts of family dysfunction in South Africa. This paternity also taints Twist in ways that subvert the novel’s care to give Oliver an unexceptional pedigree.

Twist’s foray into theft (filmed with the comic zest of Carol Reed’s *Oliver!*) leads to his imprisonment in Caledon Square, notorious in local history for the incarceration of political activists. This history is elided, however, in Twist’s rescue

from the jail and translation to the Bo-Kaap<sup>10</sup> home of his Muslim benefactor. The city metamorphoses into the magical world of family, love, mothering and the recovery of childhood. Twist feasts his eyes on the gorgeous vista of Table Mountain and the wide expanses of the suburbs beyond to the sea (of course, these suburbs include the Cape Flats, where Bernie Baatjies and his fellows are having a rather different experience—long shots can be very forgiving). Twist shouts with joy: “I can see the whole world.” The film will circle back to this scene, as the finally rescued child smiles against the fairytale backdrop of the mountain.

Notwithstanding the erasures of brute reality effected by this closure, Greene does provide several moments of insight into the complex experiences of his characters. Giving Twist a Muslim identity, for example, not only allows the child to find his home in one of the brightest, most enchanting (and cinematically affective) spaces of Cape Town, but also instates a powerfully positive reading of the Muslim community. Even as the Brownlow–Maylie families are at the furthestmost reach, socially, morally and economically, from Fagin’s gang in the novel, so the close-knit Muslim community is the antithesis of the gangs of Cape Town. Notably, too, the young boy partakes effectively in the lives of the street children, suggesting not that he is innately good, like a fairytale orphan, but that he is a dispossessed child subject to real temptations and that he finds solace amongst these children. There is, for example, a scene under a bridge where the children are improvising a song as they pass a bag around in a glue-sniffing ritual. Twist refuses, then succumbs and has his first experience of being “stoned.” The film doesn’t judge him or the children, but reveals the temptation and pleasure of this escape from the pain of reality. Nuanced performances by Kim Engelbrecht and Bart Fouché as Nancy and Bill also stress the psychic damage perpetrated on characters caught up in cycles of destitution and violence. Neither is wholly criminal in the film. Even Bill, unlike his novelistic counterpart, reveals grief for Nancy’s prostitution. Moreover, in the moral patterning of both the novel and the film, housebreaking and other kinds of petty theft never lead to economic security. The point is implicit that, in a capitalist economy, only those who have the ruthless single-mindedness to break into corporate, large-scale theft will gain from their actions.

In Gavin Hood’s *Tsotsi*, Fela, the slick dealer in stolen cars, is this big-time gangster without a conscience. For Hood, however, the film is about Tsotsi’s moral redemption. The film starts off securely within the gangster formula but mutates into a mythic rite of passage for the protagonist, its fabulistic features and moral view suggesting a closer kinship with *Twist* than with films like *Hijack Stories* and *Jerusalema*. *Tsotsi* was given a gala screening on the opening night of the Sithengi Film Festival in Cape Town in 2005—one of those red-carpet events that produces a motley audience. There were those who had come to look at the film; there were those who had come to look at each other. The ironic connections between a film about poverty, abuse and dispossession screened to the mix of film buffs, political

<sup>10</sup>The Bo-Kaap is a Muslim-dominated area of Cape Town, climbing the slopes of Table Mountain, and characterized by brightly painted homes.

glitterati and society wannabes serve to point up some of the tensions and paradoxes at the heart of Gavin Hood's film—at once an exquisitely crafted Oscar winner, a crowd-pleasing, placatory, universalist narrative about the redemption of the hero, and a story about the gruesome realities of AIDS orphans, violence and South Africa's increasing class divide.

Hood, as is now well known, updates Fugard's novel from 1950s apartheid South Africa and the razing of Sophiatown to engage with the moral, political and economic ambiguities of South Africa after 1994. Instead of being presented, mysteriously, with a baby in a shoebox by a young woman who flees into the rainy night, the film's Tsotsi hijacks the car of a wealthy middle-class black woman, only to find her baby in the back seat. The odyssey of Tsotsi and the baby climaxes in his recovery of his past and his given name, David, as well as in the birth of a sense of moral and social responsibility. He goes back to the baby's home in order to return the child to the overwrought parents. *Tsotsi* resists *Mapantsula's* tragic vision.<sup>11</sup> Although both films suspend closure in that we don't actually see what happens to their protagonists, in *Tsotsi* we are not sure whether the young gangster, having demonstrated his redemption through his return of the baby, will be served a prison sentence that may be worse than death, or whether he will be treated with clemency. Relocating the story to the present, Hood tries to find a way to engage with the dream of possibility born of post-apartheid South Africa, while acknowledging the tentativeness of that prefix—how long will the legacy of apartheid last? Three endings were shot: in one Tsotsi is killed, in one he is wounded but escapes into the night. The ending that was settled on suspends him in an attitude of Christlike surrender, a freeze-frame on his bright white shirt that leaves the audience to wonder. Where some audience members want him to go to jail, others want to adopt him, says Hood.<sup>12</sup> Rita Barnard proposes a way of reading the ending that draws on theories of the narrative and ideological patterns of the *bildungsroman*, where closure is achieved through the submission of the “anarchic predispositions of the individual” to “the conformist demands of the state,”<sup>13</sup> a reading that resonates with Warshow's analysis of the (compulsory) death of the gangster. The final scene gives us a young man whose anarchy is tamed, who accepts “his identity as criminal,”<sup>14</sup> yet whose dispossession by the hopeless inadequacies of the state to protect him from poverty have been pointed up by the very act of handing the baby back to its affluent parents, parents whose wealth gives them the authority to insist on the prompt exercise of the law. Tsotsi is frozen, then, not only by Hood's

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<sup>11</sup>It resists Fugard's tragic ending, too: in the novel, both Tsotsi and the baby are crushed to death by a demolition squad.

<sup>12</sup>Gavin Hood, Interview, *The Movie Chicks*, 27 February 2006: [www.themoviechicks.com/early2006/mcttsotsi.html](http://www.themoviechicks.com/early2006/mcttsotsi.html). Lindiwe Dovey sees the suspended ending as an effective resistance against simplistic closure, allowing the audience to enter into debate regarding the issues raised by the film. See Dovey, “Redeeming Features.”

<sup>13</sup>Barnard, “Tsotsis,” 545.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 560.

post-production strategy, but in the full glare of the police spotlights that illuminate the last scene, a figurative death.

Barnard reads astutely against the grain of Hood's avowed intentions. His comments on the making of the film reflect his desire to evoke both Tsotsi's material reality and the mythic dimensions of his story (visually captured in that final Christ-like tableau). The realist impulse is seen most obviously through Hood's key invention: the introduction of the middle-class black family who live in a fortified home in the suburbs, no longer the privileged domain of spoilt whites as in *Mapantsula*. Moreover, he shot on location in the shantytowns surrounding Johannesburg and in Soweto; the search for the cast took place in community halls, and the use of Tsotsi-taal got the nod from his backers. Hood's own experience of writing educational dramas about HIV and AIDS in the shantytowns gave him some familiarity with that world.<sup>15</sup> The choice of South African music star Zola's kwaito is also crucial to locating the film's place—culturally, geographically, historically.<sup>16</sup> Hood comments: "I love the universal themes, and yet I love the specificity of the story—that it's set in Johannesburg, which is my home city. It's energized and crazy and frightening, yet at the same time very stimulating..."<sup>17</sup> Of course, to celebrate the spaces of the city, especially those of poverty and crime, inevitably runs the risk of irresponsible glamorization of the gangster's story, and sentimental aestheticizing of its material context. The film's beautifully photographed *mise-en-scène* and the emotive use of music all contribute to the film's unquestionably seductive cinematic rhetoric. Its ameliorative qualities nevertheless run the risk of diminishing the seriousness of its task—to offer a persuasively redemptive vision not only of and for the gangster, but of and for the city in which he undergoes his journey.

This journey is one that Hood explicitly sees in terms of "classic mythology" where the hero encounters "threshold guardians, that just happen in this case to be a 3-month old baby, a man in a wheelchair, a young woman, a father figure and a drunk friend."<sup>18</sup> A key factor in this journey derives from a structural change to the novel: the deployment of the magical "three" of fairytale, described by Christopher Booker in terms of "growth and transformation."<sup>19</sup> In the film, Tsotsi visits both Miriam's shack and the Dube family home three times, each visit marking a shift in his emotional and moral responsiveness both to his surroundings and to the inhabitants of these places. The film's fabulistic *mise-en-scène* is especially striking in the treatment of Miriam and her home. In Hood's view, this *mise-en-scène* rejects miserabilism in favor of a more nuanced and realistic treatment of the shantytown

<sup>15</sup>Gavin Hood, interview with Adrian Hennigan, 15 March 2006: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2006/0/15/gavin\\_hood\\_tsotsi\\_2006\\_interview.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2006/0/15/gavin_hood_tsotsi_2006_interview.shtml)

<sup>16</sup>Kwaito is defined by one website as "an urban soup of South African jazz and township pop mixed with Western house and rap. It's the music that defines the generation who came of age after apartheid." <http://www.insideout.org/documentaries/kwaito/documentary.asp>

<sup>17</sup>Gavin Hood interview, *The Movie Chicks*.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots*, 231. I am grateful to Ian Rijdsdijk for pointing out this pattern of threes.

setting and, by implication, the imaginations of its community.<sup>20</sup> However sentimental this *mise-en-scène* may seem, within the symbolic logic of fable that the film offers, the chimes and mobiles that hang from Miriam's ceiling serve as a sign both of her imagination and of Tsotsi's potential for change. At first, his response is curious, then ironic. He can see only "broken glass" but, as the camera rests on his face lit by the mobile, she tells him that she sees "Color. Light. On you." Miriam's room becomes, thus, a spatial counterpart to the baby and offers magical transformation. Her room is echoed visually when Tsotsi breaks into the Dube's home and finds himself in the baby's bedroom, filled with color and light. Given that, at this point, Tsotsi has had a full flashback to his separation from his mother, the scene in the baby's bedroom inscribes his identification with the baby. The spaces of Miriam's room and the baby's bedroom become compensatory fantasies that help Tsotsi to reconnect with his deepest, most humane self. At the same time, they are offered by the film as real spaces that suggest both the economic differences of the inhabitants and the ways in which the human imagination turns space into place. Where the Dube's home signals luxurious consumerism, Miriam's home is transformed through her own productive ingenuity and creative recycling.

A key sequence in the film's insistence on redemption begins when Tsotsi emerges from Park Station (dressed in his startling white shirt) and walks, first, to the top of a hill from which he has a view over the city—its signature skyline backlit, its sepia tones echoing those of the shantytown, as Vusi Mahlasela's voice is heard on the soundtrack. Tsotsi is shot from below as he holds the baby, outlined against the sky on this dusty, scrubby spot of earth, African worshipers dancing under a tree below. If this is Tsotsi's Gethsemane moment, then it is also a moment where the city is represented as a perfectly harmonious backdrop to his moral rebirth, figured in the surrender of the child and his discovery of a capacity for compassion which Hood sees as central to his regeneration.<sup>21</sup>

It is, however, the figure of Fela in Hood's film, the gangster who is not merely a survivor in the city, but triumphant over it, who becomes the focus of two films, *Hijack Stories* and *Jerusalema*, that mercilessly contest the low-key moral and economic redemption of Bernie, the fairytale redemption of Twist or the more mythically inflected redemption of Tsotsi. Twelve years after *Mapantsula*, Oliver Schmitz tackled the subject of twenty-first-century South African crime in *Hijack Stories*, an ambitious reflexive attempt to explore the performance of black male identity, the growing class divide in the black population, and to deliver a more conventional action-driven gangster story about car hijacks. Unlike the tragic redemption of *Mapantsula*'s ending, that of *Hijack Stories* is utterly cynical: a role reversal sees the "good guy," Sox, almost killed and the real gangster, Bra Zama, taking his place in a movie about gangsters, thus going legit and, seemingly, ensured

<sup>20</sup>Hood, "Proudly South African Filmmaking: *Tsotsi*" (n.d.), [www.writingstudio.co.za/page914.html](http://www.writingstudio.co.za/page914.html)

<sup>21</sup>Hood, *The Writing Studio*. Interestingly, this location was also used by Les Blair in *Jump the Gun*—it is the favourite spot of the prostitute and brings the film to a climax as she and Gugu, the black singer, discover sisterhood, while the white male protagonist heads out of the city.

of a new life as a result of his streetwise manipulation of circumstance. A dualism is set up between the grit of the black township and the glitz of (heretofore white) Rosebank, with the protagonist steering an increasingly uneasy course between the two.

As in *Dollars and White Pipes*, American popular culture is formative, here in the shape of American gangster films and their impact on the South African gangster imagination.<sup>22</sup> In the case of Bra Sox, the wannabe gangster, the role model is Wesley Snipes in *New Jack City*. Snipes's flashy acquisitiveness is central to his gangster persona, suggesting parallels with the bling world of the so-called "black diamond," product of the new South Africa. The other intertext is South African Television, whose power to mediate identity is most obvious in the monicker adopted by Sox's old schoolmate-turned-gangster: "Bra Zama."<sup>23</sup> The Zama Zama show was a TV lottery show that featured a multilingual white woman and black man. As intertext, it heightens the film's satirical exposure of the consumerist obsessions of the country, where the gangster ethos is simply a more extreme form of widespread greed. Bra Zama's gang treat the TV1 rainbow-nation slogan, "Simunye—We are One," with derision and Bra Zama repeatedly taunts Sox by calling him Mr Rainbow Nation. Adopting an ironic stance towards new South African rhetoric is seen, too, in sidekick Joe's insistence that they need to steal four cars, because there are four members of the hijacking squad—otherwise there would be a failure of democracy.

Possibly of a piece with its generally non-realist, Brechtian structure<sup>24</sup> is the film's cavalier attitude towards the hijacks. Would the white suburbanite (played by Marcel van Heerden, then the bad cop in *Mapantsula*, now the helpless victim) really come running unarmed out of his walled property to see why his car siren has gone off? The scene is shot for laughs as he goes scampering comically away at the first opportunity. The main heist of ten cars, orchestrated by Zama, is slickly filmed, but the reckless bravado with which he chooses the Brixton Police Station as a holding place suggests that he is quite mad, especially given his lecture to Sox that one can either play one's life as a Zama Zama game or have a plan.<sup>25</sup> A nostalgic nod in the direction of the old clear struggle, as Zama recites Ingoapele Madingoane's "Africa My Beginning" over Joe's grave, is also present in the casting of Dolly Rathebe as Zama's mother—she who was Panic's feisty landlady in *Mapantsula*. These moments seem anachronistic in the current film, belonging to a different

<sup>22</sup>Schmitz includes the intertext of a South African gangster film, the quirky, inchoate *Sexy Girls*, whose climactic shoot-out inspires one of Bra Zama's gang members to fire at the cinema screen.

<sup>23</sup>Bra Zama's American role model is, curiously, Sylvester Stallone, causing Sox to accuse him of a failure to subscribe to "nigga psychology."

<sup>24</sup>Todd McCarthy makes the Brechtian connection in his review of the film, "Hijack Stories," in *Variety*, 16 October 2000: <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117788379.html?categoryid=31&cs=1&p=0>

<sup>25</sup>Bra Zama's insistence on Brixton may be rash, but is also a way of thumbing his nose at the old apartheid centre of control that was the Brixton Murder and Robbery Squad, a legendary unit that warranted a radio program based on their successes.

world, where the South African gangster film still subscribed to an overarching moral vision.

Ralph Ziman's film, *Jerusalema*, has no such pretensions. Resolutely of its moment, it once more stars Rapulana Seiphemo, whose cinematic incarnations reveal something of the evolution of the film gangster in twenty-first-century South Africa: he was the black diamond and fatherly mediator of Tsotsi's climactic restoration to society in Hood's film; he was Bra Zama in Schmitz's film and effectively reprises that role in Ziman's *Jerusalema*.<sup>26</sup> Here he plays Lucky Kunene, a young man accepted into the university's School of Business Studies, presumably on academic grounds, but denied funding. Economic frustration is the initiating, if rather briskly handled, motivation that leads him and his friend Zakes to raiding an Indian shopkeeper's store and then to hijacking cars under the patronage of Mkhonto We Sizwe veteran, Nazareth. When an elaborate grand heist goes wrong with blood spilt, Lucky leaves Soweto for Hillbrow, where he plies a legitimate taxi business until he is, in turn, hijacked.

Circumstance is thus seen to push him, willy-nilly, in the direction of crime and he sets up an ingenious system for hijacking buildings, drawing the rents even while posing as a concerned property developer and friend to the poor and oppressed. He becomes rich, dumps his black girlfriend and takes up with a middle-class Jewish woman, Leah, whose brother haunts the notorious Chelsea Hotel in search of drugs. Persuaded by an increasingly drug-addicted Nazareth to work with the Nigerian drug lord, Tony Ngu (played by a South African who looks and sounds like a South African), things start falling apart, especially when policeman, Blakkie (sic) Swart undertakes a determined mission to apprehend the "hoodlum of Hillbrow." Finally imprisoned, Lucky makes a cunning escape and we see him, in the last shot, on the beach in Durban, speculating on how many buildings he can take in his new stamping ground and whether he can persuade a disenchanting Leah to join him. The fates of Nazareth and Ngu are less rosy—they are both killed by Lucky (although the editing of Nazareth's death is ambiguous).

There was considerable hue and cry when *Jerusalema* was released, largely concerning the response of audiences who laughed at the hijacks.<sup>27</sup> The hijacking

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<sup>26</sup>More recently, Seiphemo co-scripted and starred in Jann Turner's light-hearted romantic comedy/road movie, *White Wedding* (2009). He plays the sexy, free-spirited friend of the groom who falls in love with a hitch-hiking English woman in this innocuous, well-meaning paean to rainbow nationhood.

<sup>27</sup>For one example of reporting such audience dismay and the voluble response generated by the report, see Gerald Schneider's "Audience at *Jerusalema* Lapped up the Hijackings," *The Citizen*, 9 January 2008: <http://www.citizen.co.za/index/article.aspx?pDesc=76604%2c1%2c22>. The epidemic of blog entries on the film is notable, with responses to the film ranging from ecstatic to enraged. The abusive, often racist, vitriol of the authors gives a sobering insight into the passions that underlie the country's preferred image of reconciliation. "Tlanch Tau" writes, in response to Schneider, "Oh! Please man. Shut up already! If it was a scene, gruesome crime scenes from a Hollywood movies you would be reacting exactly the same way and laughing your white behind off and now because it's a brilliant South African movie you just have to spoil everyone's fun by being like that? That's the problem with you people, you never appreciate anything good from this country, or is it because you couldn't relate to it?" A particularly violent riposte comes from "Ginger": "T.I.A.—This is Africa [a quotable quote from Leonardo di Caprio's character in *Blood Diamonds*]. Here the savage reigns. Don't expect civil standards and law to be the order of the day. It's a jungle out there."

scenes have surely, however, been shot for their comic effect. We are meant to cheer the underdog. This is so especially in the first hijack performed by the young Lucky and Zakes. Their attempt is ham-fisted to say the least, as neither of them can drive. The victim of their assault has to sit between them and teach them. More than that, sympathy for the victim is partially allayed by making him the butt of satire—he pleads with Lucky and Zakes not to hurt him as he has a wife, three children . . . and a girlfriend. The doyen of South African film reviewers, Barry Ronge, feels no need to excuse *Jerusalem*'s take on violence. On the contrary, he has repeatedly applauded it. His *Sunday Times* review puts the case that

Ziman is not just making a crime thriller but touching on a culture of lawless acquisitiveness rooted deeply in South Africa's colonial and apartheid history and culture. How does Lucky Kunene in Hillbrow in 2008, differ from the rapacious, racist old "randlords" of Johannesburg? That's a question that no South African film has yet posed.<sup>28</sup>

Reading the film as a historical/ political allegory is acute, but may not be the first response to the film, whose most immediate strength lies in its consummate command of a specifically cinematic vocabulary, calculated to thrill and seduce the viewer. The filming of Hillbrow is exquisite, even as it treads a fine line between realism and glamour. Ziman has spoken of his desire for authenticity, through scripting in several languages with the help of Mtutu Matshoba; through joining police on their raids into Hillbrow and also talking to criminals; and through location shooting, security risks notwithstanding (his crew suffered armed robbery and attempted hijacking).<sup>29</sup> He also praises his photographer, Nicolaas Hofmeyr, who has a documentary background—and an instinct for visual poetry. Ziman notes that Hofmeyr "loves Joburg and he knows . . . that if you climb up this mine dump at this time of day you'll get the sun coming up behind the towers."<sup>30</sup> Even the close-ups on the desperate dinginess of the high-rises with their rows of washing hanging from countless windows takes on an abstract poetic quality, while the visual refrain of the time-lapse shots over the Hillbrow skyline is the product of such lyrical instincts. Completely unnaturalistic, they give the film its epic (and apocalyptic) resonance.

The tension between realist and non-realist aesthetic impulses is thus seen in both Hood's and Ziman's films, and has repercussions for the way in which their representation of the gangster world frames the world beyond the film. Ziman's desire for intimacy with the real world of the narrative echoes that of Hood, but

<sup>28</sup>The *Sunday Times* review is reprinted on the Crime Beat site, "Jerusalem – breaking new ground in South African Cinema," <http://crimebeat.book.co.za/blog/2008/09/03/cine-crime-barry-ronge-reviews-the-ground-breaking-jerusalem/>

<sup>29</sup>Information drawn respectively from: Ralph Ziman, "Conversations: Writer-Director Ralph Ziman Talks about *Jerusalem*" with Daniel Derckson, <http://www.writingstudio.co.za/page2239.html>; Heather Formby, "Profile: Ralph Ziman, Focus on Hillbrow," *Financial Mail*, 21 July 2006, <http://free.financialmail.co.za/06/0721/people/peoplerreal.htm>; and Renée Bonorchis, "Jo'burg's dark underbelly as never seen before," *Business Day*, 2 March, 2007, <http://www.businessday.co.za/PrintFriendly.aspx?ID=BD4A212061>

<sup>30</sup>Ziman, *The Writing Studio*.

where *Tsotsi's* soft-filtered look, framing, *mise-en-scène* and narrative arc mythicize its protagonist, *Jerusalema* mediates its realist imagery through jump cuts and the MTV editing that reflect Ziman's earlier career. The editing is central to the film's energy and resists sentimentalizing the world of the film, even as it risks glamorizing it (in much the way that Meirelles' *City of God* may be seen as both hard-hitting and, merely, gangster chic). This tension between realism and glamour at an aesthetic level feeds into the tension between the film's critique of the betrayals of the dream of a new South Africa, on the one hand, and its affective affirmation of its protagonist, on the other.

*Jerusalema's* critique is also hampered by moments of awkward plotting and characterization. The film starts with rapid cuts from long shots of the city to close-ups on its overwhelming congestion and poverty. The action sequence as the police close in on a bloodied body lying on a bed is counterpointed by a suave voice-over offering us the protagonist's world view, based on those of Al Capone ("If you're going to steal, steal big, and hope to hell you get away with it") and Karl Marx ("Property is theft"). "I think," says the voice, "that they'd be proud of me"—a thought ironized by the high-angle shot on what we assume to be the wounded body of the speaker. His story plays out as flashback, using the contrivance of a journalist, who, as the film progresses, interviews the Portuguese South African property owner whose buildings are hijacked, the pursuing policeman, Swart, and the unctuous mob lawyer, Sithole. The interviews enable various points of view to be articulated, illustrating Ziman's comment that his job is not to seek solutions, but to ask questions and to give space to different stories: "I wanted to understand some of the justifications because you meet people and, whether they rob banks or whatever, people always have their story, and their own story always puts them in the right and explains what they are doing."<sup>31</sup> Such moral relativism might suggest a complex play with point of view, but the film's weaknesses of plotting and characterization repeatedly countermand this potential. The interviews conducted by the journalist, for example, are set pieces. These characters' lives are not dramatized. They are cardboard cut-outs, even Blakkie Swart, whose name is laughable (and misspelt). That it echoes the pet name of the Republic of South Africa's first—Afrikaans—State President, who used to act in cowboy movies, may or may not be intentional. However implicit the satire, Swart remains hopelessly two-dimensional and prone to unseemly and implausible recklessness, especially when he assaults Lucky in front of witnesses at the police station—although his rage may be understandable, given the unbelievable ease with which Lucky penetrates Swart's office and swaps his own file for another. Swart lacks altogether the kind of context provided for other lawmen-antagonists such as Eliot Ness in *The Untouchables* (1987), or, indeed, Richie Roberts in *American Gangster*.

The same two-dimensionality applies to the Afrikaans woman banker who seems prompted to buck the system on the basis of a flirtatious exchange of glances with Lucky (and who brings him a basket of goodies when he is prone in hospital).

<sup>31</sup>Ziman, *The Writing Studio*.

The possibilities of an interesting romance springing up between them is left aside in favor of his meeting with Leah. Bizarrely, she is found driving the streets of Hillbrow on her own at night, seeking her drug-addicted brother. That she appears terrified is the only credible aspect of this creaking device to bring her and Lucky together in order to play out the theme of interracial love in the new South Africa (the class bar having been crossed through Lucky's nefarious activities). Shelly Meskin can do little with her role—her lines go from bad to worse, with the most cringe-worthy moment being that where she tells Lucky: "I guess when you're rich, poverty seems glamorous. It's got a certain charm." The vacuousness of this line is matched by the character's smug revelation to Lucky, as they sit in what seems to be an upmarket restaurant (replete with picturesque singing African Zionists swaying past), that she runs a nutrition clinic in Alex (Alexandria township) twice a week and persuades supermarkets to donate out-of-date food. Of course, we never see her work in Alex, so her information must rest at the level of assertion and takes its place with Lucky's description of his work: he "buys and sells property" and "runs a non-profit housing trust."

The female characters are generally not well served by the script. Lucky's mother is stereotyped—devout, caring, anxious and wounded, she has appeared before in much feistier form in De Palma's *Scarface* and again in *American Gangster*. In *Jerusalema* she is inflected, too, by the intertexts of the suffering African mother of apartheid-era films such as *Mapantsula* and *Sarafina* (1992). If Lucky's mother is stereotyped, he nevertheless remains uncompromisingly true to his chosen path, and the film refuses the conversion moment so beloved of the classic gangster film (most memorable in *Angels With Dirty Faces* [1938], when Cagney performs the coward on his way to the electric chair, so that the Dead End Kids won't want to emulate him). When Lucky's mother asks him to read Psalm 137, he does so but, although he may read in a sober voice and may look faintly moved, he embarks on his escape and flight to Durban with élan. The other female character to be treated with callous disregard, by both the script and Lucky, is Nomsa, who gives up her education to pursue a life of petty crime. When she is caught, Lucky, hypocritically, tells her, "I warned you not to do this . . . It's over between us." Cut to a disco and the gyrations of his new female interest, Leah. Nomsa is summarily excised from the plot.

Vagaries of plotting and the two-dimensionality of the secondary characters cannot quite overwhelm the incontestable potency of the political satire conveyed by Lucky's voice-over. The film derives much of its effectiveness from its astute and unnervingly funny attack on South African Newspeak—taking the glimpse we have of this attack in *Hijack Stories* to new heights. Seiphemo's voice-over, uttering many of these gems, is appropriately wry, smooth, charming: he tells us of the origins of his career in crime, tied to the rhetoric of 1994: "freedom, the new South Africa, a new dawn, a new day, a fresh start, a clean page, a new beginning." The litany is rehearsed, with masterful irony, after we have already seen his bloodied body and heard him called the hoodlum of Hillbrow, after we have seen the slum that is Hillbrow. His control of the current rhetoric reaches its zenith when he sets up his spectacular scam. Gazing across the city skyline to the strains of "Jerusalema," he explains:

During community outreach, tenants were incentivized to exercise their democratic rights—to give us their money . . . In cases where a landlord would defy the will of the people, a chief of conflict resolution was promptly appointed. Studies of the nature of the dispute were made and terms that would appeal to the landlord’s sensibilities were proposed. We were taking back the streets, one building after another after another. I looked around and what I saw was an empire waiting to happen.

Such a comic concentration of New South African terminology points to the disturbing facility with which the signifier may be severed from the (original) signified, to erase its reformist urgency and then to deploy the empty signifier as rhetoric in the further abuse of the still-dispossessed. Lucky’s ruthless evacuation of prostitutes, pimps and drug pushers replays the forced removals perpetrated by the old white regime, just as his cynical use of language reprises the apartheid abuse of, for example, Biblical language to justify racial oppression.<sup>32</sup>

The parodic command of euphemistic jargon is not Lucky’s alone. When quizzed by the young Lucky, Nazareth admits to being in “the procurement industry,” with a specialty in “affirmative repossession.” The phrases make their political point with stylish precision. But Nazareth plays a more complex role in the unfolding of Lucky’s story. His name, most obviously, is one of the notes orchestrated into the religious theme of the film. The ubiquitous hymn “Jerusalema” is sung both on the soundtrack and in diegetic moments by passengers in Lucky’s taxi, by African Zionist church members and by the school choir, whose concert Lucky attends. It signals, of course, the hopes for the country (for which the city is a metonymy) and points, again with irony, to the collapse—or, at least, destabilizing—of those hopes. Nazareth, the village where Christ was raised, is the name given to an MK veteran, suggesting the passionate idealism of the “spear of the nation” and the armed struggle. That the flip side revealed human rights abuses is part of the ongoing struggle of the country to come to terms with a past in which good and bad are moral categories that have become tortuously interwoven. The moral ambiguity—even vacuum—of Ziman’s film speaks disconcertingly to a past that so unremittingly shadows the present. The religious theme is also present in the time lapses and the recurrent shots of Johannesburg’s skyline. Ziman describes how “sometimes in some of those images in the film you see Hillbrow and you’ve got Ponte and you’ve got the tower in Yeoville and it does look like these spires reaching up.” What we see, he says, is “a city on a hill.”<sup>33</sup> These comments recall the rhetoric of America’s Founding Fathers and suggest, once more, the kinship between gangster movies across the Atlantic, in their capacity to uncover the dark underside of the national—and religiously-inflected—dream.

Beyond the symbolism of his name, however, Nazareth is a war veteran. Having been trained in Moscow, having served the cause, Nazareth returns to the new South Africa only to find that there is no place for him. Sasha Gear has discussed the

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<sup>32</sup>See, for example, Herman Gilioomee’s analysis of the role of the Bible and biblical history in the construction of Afrikaner identity in *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (2003).

<sup>33</sup>Ziman, *The Writing Studio*.

country's failure fully to demobilize veterans and enable them to reintegrate themselves into society.<sup>34</sup> Instead, they find themselves marginalized and unappreciated, even held up to mockery, as the film shows, by a younger generation who have little understanding of the lives of the ex-soldiers. When we first meet Nazareth, Lucky rags him with a cheeky grin: "So tell me, when did you get out of the bush, gorilla?" Grimly, Nazareth replies, "It's not gorilla, it's guerilla, *verstaan* [understand]? And I trained in Moscow, not in the bush." Undeterred, Lucky persists, "So how was Moscow?" "Cold as hell, *bra* [dude]," replies the vet. "Do you speak Russian?" asks Lucky. "No man, the only Russian I embraced was an AK47," says Nazareth. His sidekick laughs: "Aah, *kak* [shit], the only Russian he embraced was vodka." Nazareth, significantly, joins in the laughter: "You said it," he concedes, suggesting his proneness to drug addiction later. The popular association of returned MK vets with crime is also played out by the film: we never see Nazareth except in his criminal capacity.<sup>35</sup> A later exchange between him and Zakes highlights the hostility between those who suffered apartheid in the country and those who went into exile, fighting beyond the borders, and merely becoming pawns in the Cold War. Nazareth is inspired by Michael Mann's *Heat* to attack armoured cars and, in Lucky's words, learns strategy from both "Mother Russia" and "Uncle Sam." So much for that war between "super powers" and the imbrication of marginal countries like South Africa. The harvest is, the film seems to propose, merely pervasive criminal violence. When a later heist goes wrong, Nazareth goes to jail and emerges years later in Hillbrow. The scars on his face are not explained, but suggest traces of a brutal prison experience.

Of course, this is Lucky's story, told largely through his eyes, yet Jeffrey Zekele makes such effective use of the screen time given him that the possibilities for tragedy are powerfully evoked. From the charm, energy and coiled anger of our first encounter with him, through his pathological outbreaks of murderous rage and increasingly helpless need for cocaine, to the shootout when Ngu uses him as a shield against Lucky and his gunmen, he is the one character who summons fear and pity, in the Aristotelian formulation. Nazareth's story is the uncanny fissure in the present of Lucky Kunene's triumphant progress. That he is not chosen to be at the centre of the story speaks its own poignant message: the very choice of filmic protagonist ensures that those whose ideals led them to lay their lives on the line continue to be marginalized while the prize of representation is awarded to "Lucky"—canny, cunning, playing the new South African game of self-interest and finding a largely warm welcome.

Don Mattera describes how the audience at his viewing of the film "shouted triumphantly when their hero, avenger, Lucky . . . is seen strolling on a Durban beach without a care in the world ready to start his criminal activities all over again; the cruel and cold stereotypical Afrikaner cop and his face-slapping lackey—and the

<sup>34</sup>Gear, "The Road Back."

<sup>35</sup>Gear acknowledges the links between violence, "militarised identities, unresolved trauma, and personal transition," but criticizes "the simplistic linkage regularly made between ex-combatants and violence" (256–7).

entire South African police force, beaten yet again. Hooray . . .”<sup>36</sup> Having written, in the review, of his own past as a gangster and of the ways in which Hollywood gangster movies encouraged him to identify with the bad guys, Mattera nevertheless laments *Jerusalema*’s “sad and colossal glorification of crime, criminality and bloodshed,” its lack of a “moral and compassionate antithetical portrait to the sordid human carnage and social decay displayed in the film—other than the weeping of a church-going mother.”<sup>37</sup> The power of the film to evoke such reactions is clearly an index of the overriding schisms that beset the country. In search of new heroes to speak to a populace still waiting for the new day to dawn equally across the land, the film gives us a smooth-operating entrepreneurial gangster who takes back the streets, redefining apartheid geography, a smooth-talking crook who redefines nation-building rhetoric and so instates a moral reversal where the hoodlum is the hero.

As a gangster film, *Jerusalema* is a mixed bag. Strong on action and aesthetics, weaker on character and plot, its satire on South Africa after the rainbow has started pixelating is frequently unsparing. Indeed, the fractured generic identity of the film—too cynical for an old-fashioned morality tale or a Warshovian tragedy, and too conscious of itself as political commentary to be completely at ease with the menippean extremes of satire—produces a tale well fitted to the fractured moment of South Africa’s transition, even if its gangster ethos runs counter to the country’s preferred national narrative. That narrative is, of course, centered on the African philosophy of *ubuntu* and has been espoused eloquently by iconic figures like Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and the rhetoric of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.<sup>38</sup> *Ubuntu* depends as much on faith in humankind’s fundamental goodness and generosity as it does on the assumption that intolerable social inequities can be addressed by a sense of shared humanity. Transcending individual self-interest, *ubuntu* contests the gangster’s ethos and proposes a philosophy that engages the life of the spirit. At one extreme of the films I have considered above, Greene’s *Twist* presents a world still invested by a benign, if arbitrary, moral order that sees the child safely home. Nancy and Bill are not so lucky. *Dollars and White Pipes* sees Bernie risk his life for the simple-minded but loyal Cecil. Hood’s *Tsotsi* gives us the possibility for personal, if de-politicized, transcendence. *Hijack Stories* and *Jerusalema* are relentlessly materialist, however, the title of the latter and its religious imagery merely underscoring the marginalization of the spirit. Given that South Africa’s transition appears to have become an existential state of being, it is no surprise that the country’s gangster films, those indices of whether the rainbow dream of a new South Africa is being realized or not, should present such widely differing accounts of the dream realized, the dream deferred or the dream simply abandoned.

<sup>36</sup>Mattera, “*Jerusalema*.” Paradoxically, though, he expresses the wish that the film should “bag an Oscar,” indicating his own, albeit reluctant, seduction by the film.

<sup>37</sup>Mattera, “*Jerusalema*.”

<sup>38</sup>Desmond Tutu, “Ubuntu,” <http://www.tutufoundationuk.org/ubuntu.html>

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