

AFRICAN cinema unit

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The African Cinema Unit Yearbook is a publication comprised of peer-reviewed scholarly articles devoted to the study of South African and African screen studies, and reports on activities organised by the African Cinema Unit. All correspondence is to be addressed to ian.rijdsdijk@uct.ac.za

African Cinema Unit Board

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Preface

The year 2014 marks the twentieth anniversary of South Africa's first democratic elections. Amidst the celebrations there will be profound reflections across the political, social and cultural sectors of society. In 1789, Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter to James Madison, "Every constitution, then, and every law, naturally expires at the end of nineteen years." Jefferson's ruminations on the duration of a generation are a product of his time, but there is no doubt that South Africa is in the process of a second transition. Twenty years is, after all, enough time to give birth to, raise and educate a generation of people who will vote for the first time in 2014.

The film industry, and South African cinema in general, has been the focus of several book-length studies¹ and media debates over the past ten years, but the development of screen scholarship in South Africa is a subject that has received comparatively less attention. Has South Africa mended its relationships with the continent, or is it still the awkward cousin no-one in the family wants to talk to at parties? How does South Africa's post-apartheid state relate to Africa as a whole? How should one go about teaching screen studies in South Africa given the ubiquity of mobile technologies, the realities of the 'download generation', and the decline of conventional cinematic distribution?

South Africa's re-entry into the global screen world has coincided with profound changes in film technologies as well as a noticeable shift in film discourses on the African continent. Alexie Tcheuyap boldly claims, "until recently, African film scholarship has been almost systematically dominated by cultural, historical and political considerations that are

- 1 Maingard, Jacqueline. *South African National Cinema*. London, New York: Routledge (2007); Botha, Martin (ed) *Marginal Lives & Painful Pasts: South African Cinema After Apartheid*. Cape Town: Genugtig (2007); Saks, Lucia. *Cinema in a Democratic South Africa: The Race for Representation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (2010); Botha, Martin. *South African Cinema 1896–2010*. Bristol, Chicago: Intellect (2012); Modisane, Litheko. *South Africa's Renegade Reels: The Making and Public Lives of Black-Centred Films*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2013); Van Vuuren, Lauren. *The Great Dance: Myth, History and Identity in Documentary Film Representation of the Bushmen, 1925–2000*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town (unpublished PhD thesis, 2005); Paleker, Gairoonisa. *Creating a 'Black Film Industry': State Intervention and Films for African Audiences in South Africa, 1956–1990*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town (unpublished PhD thesis, 2009); Riley, Eustacia. *From Matieland to Mother City: Landscape, Identity and Place in Feature Films Set in the Cape Province, 1947–1989*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town (unpublished PhD thesis, 2012). Special edition of *Journal of South African Studies* 39:3 (2013). See also Hermanus, Oliver. 'The myths – and maths – of local film,' *City Press* (17 August 2012) <http://www.citypress.co.za/columnists/the-myths-and-maths-of-local-film-20120817/>; Young, Roger. 'A car chase too far: what SA film can't learn from Hollywood,' *Mail & Guardian* (Arts and Culture, 24 May 2013) <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-05-24-00-a-car-chase-too-far-what-sa-film-cant-learn-from-hollywood>

2 Tcheuyap, Alexie. *Postnationalist African Cinemas*. Manchester: Manchester University Press (2011), 1.

3 Harrow, Kenneth. *Postcolonial African Cinema: From Political Engagement to Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (2007), xi.

4 Coetzee, Carli. 'All Tickets Please, or How Cinema Histories of South Africa Can Stop Re-Enacting the Racialised Past,' *Journal of South African Studies* 39:3 (2013), 724.

dated and have become somewhat obsolete”,² while Kenneth Harrow opens his book *Postcolonial African Cinema* with a call for nothing less than a revolution in African film criticism, “a revolution against the old, tired formulas deployed in justification of filmmaking practices that have not substantially changed in forty years. Time for new voices, a new paradigm, a new view – a new Aristotle to invent the poetics we need for today.”³ Several factors are driving these new waves of African film criticism. The explosion of Nollywood has produced notable work around not only the film industry in Nigeria itself, but also its impact on film distribution, diaspora studies, micro-budget production and genre. Developments in filmmaking technologies and distribution platforms have also brought to light a new generation of young filmmakers taking their films out into communities both real and virtual. A third factor that will have increasing influence is archival studies: how are films being stored? How are countries maintaining their archives? Are ‘lost’ or neglected films being restored? At the time of writing, South Africans are about to see the first of possibly hundreds of neglected films from the 1970s and 1980s, many made in indigenous languages (although sometimes by filmmakers more interested in the tax breaks offered to them than the art of film or their films’ black South African audiences).

Carli Coetzee writes that “one way of supplementing and reframing our histories [of South African film], and creating new archives, is through paying more attention to audiences”.⁴ This raises two key points in relation to film scholarship in South Africa. The first concerns audiences, and the second relates to archives, not just in the sense of preservation and development, but also a broader understanding of what ‘the archives’ might entail. As film scholarship moves into new areas (film festival studies; audience mobility and interactivity; transnational studies) the focus in South Africa needs to move beyond histories of production and identity, and shed light on neglected areas such as restoration, audience and language and ‘alternative’ archives.

In one sense, then, South African film scholarship is entering a tremendously exciting era as new areas of research open up and niches are explored. Teaching African film in South Africa is also developing as a new generation of students

enters university, raised on a greater diversity of film cultures than students before them, and able to access film more easily. A new generation of postgraduate students is also emerging, keen to study the films of the past but also enthusiastically exploring the neglected, the obscure and the taboo in African and South African film.

A key aim of the African Cinema Unit (ACU) is to develop emerging scholars and research in African screen studies. The four essays collected here represent not only research into mainstream filmmaking (the Australian adaptation of J.M. Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace*, 2009) but, more particularly, filmmaking at the margins of African and South African cinema. The article on *Disgrace* discusses the film's contested transnational identity (made by Australian filmmakers about a distinctly South African text) through an examination of Coetzee's own engagement with film over the years (including failed attempts to adapt his books to screen), and the deployment of landscape symbolism in Steve Jacobs and Anna Maria Monticelli's adaptation of the novel. Does the director's interest in the novel's "universality" compromise its very specific sense of place and exploration of South African social and political circumstances, and what role does the choice of location and the semiotics of filmic landscapes play in representing the film's South African setting?

Clarien Luttig's review essay of Yaba Badoe's acclaimed documentary *The Witches of Gambaga* (2011) discusses the documentary modes used in the film, which examines the lives of so-called witches sent to a remote camp for 'rehabilitation'. *The Witches of Gambaga* not only examines the prejudices and injustices surrounding the identification and persecution of the 'witches' who are sent to this camp, but also locates the camp within the currents of Ghanaian history and contemporary society. How can such atavism exist in the contemporary world and what do the attitudes toward witchcraft say about modern African society? Badoe strives for more than a simplistic excoriation of those responsible for the pain and suffering experienced by these men and women; she positions the camp within a longer process of accusation, punishment and, in some cases, 'rehabilitation'.

Luttig discusses Badoe's significance as an African woman filmmaker investigating and bringing into view the

persecution of marginalised women. She also explores Badoe's documentary method, which emphasises the complexity of the situation and avoids simple gender and class binaries. "The film's subjects," Luttig argues, "are depicted with empathy and respect, as autonomous people – rather than merely as victims." As a result, "the film exhibits a sense of social responsibility in that it avoids offering only a solitary and isolated glance at a troubling situation".

Turning to films explicitly (in both senses of the word) South African, Jacques de Villiers explores the neglected post-apartheid vampire film *Pure Blood* (2002, Ken Kaplan). Through an analysis of the film's hybrid generic modes and acquisitive approach to arcane South African popular culture, he argues that "*Pure Blood's* engagement with hybrid modes of identity – expressed predominantly through the film's aesthetics and form – is less a conscious choice than the result of genuine uncertainty around what constitutes 'white South African' identities".

Finally, Martha Evans provides the first extensive analysis of the film *Snake Dancer* (1976), Dirk de Villiers' exploitation/biopic of 70s celebrity exotic dancer, Glenda Kemp. Evans relates Kemp's life of notoriety and cult stardom (and her subsequent turn to born-again Christianity) to the chaotic production and distribution of the film. The film's commercial failure leads Evans to this paradox: "South African audiences wanted the international version, and overseas audiences were nonplussed by the amateurish production and relatively tame nude scenes." Kemp's notoriety arose not only because of her risqué nightclub act: Evans argues that Kemp persistently aggravated "the extent to which racial and sexual politics remained intertwined" during apartheid.

The second section of the Yearbook includes reports and interviews relating to the first year of the ACU's activities. Trevor Taylor introduces the 1st alt.Africa Mini Film Festival (held in August 2012) by outlining his desire to provoke audiences into seeing not only the taboo in African cinema, but also the richness at the margins which is often overlooked in academic studies of African film. His article also includes an interview with Nigerian filmmaker Chucks Mordi. Marius van Straaten reports on the screening and reception of *Odd Number* (2012), his documentary film about Cape Flats gangsters, at

the Zanzibar International Film Festival. Liani Maasdorp and Alta du Plooy report on master classes by noted documentarian Jon Blair and young South African filmmaker Oliver Hermanus respectively.

The African Cinema Unit

In 2007 the Centre for Film and Media Studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT) launched a full-semester, senior undergraduate course on African and South African film. Initially the focus was on core African film texts (*Touki Bouki*, 1973, Djibril Diop Mambéty; *Wend Kuuni*, 1983, Gaston Kaboré; and *Battle of Algiers*, 1966, Gillo Pontecorvo) and South African films both well known (*Mapantsula*, 1987, Oliver Schmitz) and marginal (*Proteus*, 2003, John Greyson). The course was greeted with curiosity and some resistance from students willing to engage with the unfamiliarity of world cinemas but not African cinemas. Eight years later, the undergraduate course has matured and the Centre now also offers a two-year taught MA in African Cinema, one of few such courses offered internationally.

Around the time that the new undergraduate course was initiated, the idea of an African Cinema Unit also emerged with the aim of offering researchers a base at the university from which to work with researchers and the materials and archives held by the African Studies Library. The African Cinema Unit launched officially in 2011. This volume is the first in what will hopefully be an annual publication, showcasing original scholarship in African screen cultures.

One of the discussions within the ACU has been its identity as an African research unit located at the southern tip of the continent, based in South Africa but reaching out to the continent (and further to the community of scholars based at universities around the world). However, given the scarcity of postgraduate courses in African film globally and the growing resources in the African Studies Library at UCT, the unit's identity as African while based in South Africa seems less significant than the connections that are being made with scholars and institutions abroad.

In 2012, the ACU organised a number of festivals and master classes (some of which are covered in the second section

of this edition). South African filmmaker Jyoti Mistry was the focus of a series of events in August, beginning with the launch of her book *We Remember Differently: Race, Memory, Imagination* (UNISA Press) and the screening of her short film *We Remember Differently* (2005). The following day Mistry's feature-length experimental film *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* [*The Bull on the Roof*] (2010) was screened. Shot in Vienna, New York, Johannesburg and Helsinki, the film contrasts the exoticised notion of global travel with the everyday banalities, and ways of living in these cities. The three-day programme closed with her innovative spoken word film (in collaboration with Kgafela oa Magogodi), *I Mike What I Like* (2006).

In September, veteran filmmaker Ross Devenish gave a moving, playful and fascinating address entitled 'Memories of a would-be filmmaker'.⁵ Devenish has directed several challenging and important South African films – *Boesman and Lena* (1973), *The Guest* (1977) and *Marigolds in August* (1980) – and has also had a distinguished career in British television. Addressing the difficulties in shooting his adaptation of Fugard's play under the scrutiny of the security police, Devenish said that "it is in the nature of authority to draw very fuzzy lines so that you can never be certain if you are within or outside of the law". In a lighter vein, he regaled the audience with his Pythonesque experiences of working on Jack Cardiff's *The Lion* (1962) in Kenya. In a sobering reflection on his lengthy and productive filmmaking career – from "vanity films for Mr Teasy Weasy" to adapting *Bleak House* (1985) for the BBC – Devenish remarked that "only the very lucky filmmakers go from one project to the next".

In 2013, the ACU hosted a number of scholars and filmmakers and organised several events. Dr Alexie Tcheuyap (University of Toronto), author of *Postnationalist African Cinemas* visited in May and gave several lectures, and Nigerian scholar Dr Innocent Uwah (University of Port Harcourt) spent three months with us in the second half of the year. We were also lucky enough to have three South African filmmakers present their work and give master classes: Akin Omotoso (along with actor Fana Mokoena) discussed his film *Man on Ground* (2012); Sara Blecher presented her film *Otelo Burning* (2011) and gave a postgraduate class around her documentary *Surfing Soweto*

5 For a full version of Ross Devenish's presentation, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4R7VqEPc48>

(2007); and, fresh from the controversy surrounding his film *Of Good Report* (2013) at the Durban International Film Festival, Jahmil X.T. Qubeka talked about censorship, violence and his aesthetic choices in front of a packed first-year film class.

The second alt.Africa Mini Film Festival (curated by Trevor Taylor in August 2013) exposed audiences to the provocations of Christoph Schlingensiefel (*United Trash*, aka *The Slit*, 1996 and *The African Twin Towers*, 2009) and Richard Stanley's Namibian-set cult horror film *Dust Devil* (1992). Audiences also got an insider's perspective on Douglas Hickox's *Zulu Dawn* (1979) – the under-appreciated 'sequel' to Cy Endfield's colonial war film *Zulu* (1964) – through the eyes of South African filmmaker Cedric Sundström, who was 2nd assistant director on the film. He shared his memories of carousing with Peter O'Toole and Burt Lancaster, feeding thousands of Zulu extras, and directing Kubrickian-scale battle sequences. Sundström also screened and discussed his experimental South African psycho-thriller *The Shadowed Mind* (1988), which shared the distinction with several other South African films of the late 1980s of being banned by the apartheid government.

In line with the aims of the ACU to develop emerging scholarship in African screen studies, a postgraduate colloquium took place in August 2013. The fruits of this collaboration between teachers and postgraduates are already being borne as several MA theses have been produced from institutions around South Africa.

Current and future research in the ACU

Exciting research is currently underway in the ACU. The recent re-emergence of hundreds of films made under various apartheid-era subsidy schemes is already generating interest from researchers in film and television studies, and librarianship and archive studies. New areas of audience research and the politics and aesthetics of film restoration are being explored, as are niche areas such as the international co-productions of horror and science-fiction films during the 1970s and 80s.

While the late-apartheid past is being uncovered to a greater degree, research is also deepening our understanding of the early years of South African filmmaking outside of the

canonical films that ‘begin’ many histories of South African film. South Africa’s identity as a setting in early Hollywood is also being explored. The nature and status of South Africa’s film archives is thus a priority for future ACU research programmes.

Ian-Malcolm Rijdsijk

(Dis)placed: Place and Identity in the Film *Disgrace*

IAN-MALCOLM RIJSDIJK

Lucy: This place being what it is.

Lurie: This place being what?

Lucy: This place being South Africa.

South Africa and (trans)nationalism

I first saw *Disgrace* (2008, Steve Jacobs) in the same week that I had the opportunity to watch two other films with South African settings: *District 9* (2009), Neill Blomkamp's Afro-futurist blockbuster, and *Shirley Adams* (2009), Oliver Hermanus's precocious low-budget attempt to bring a new aesthetic and narrative sensibility to South African film. *Disgrace*, perhaps unfortunately, found itself on South African screens at the moment that *District 9* crash-landed on the global box office. While *District 9* lit up discussion boards on the Internet and sparked, at times, heated debate amongst critics all over the world, *Disgrace* met with muted discussion and an international box office equating to only 1% of *District 9*'s.¹ Nevertheless, seeing three new 'South African' films in one week is something of a rarity, and my initial reaction concerned what I perceived to be a new transnationalism in South African film.

Taken together, the three films presented an optimistic view of South Africa's screen potential, ranging from a small, independent art-house film through a star-lead literary adaptation to a full-blown, big-budget sci-fi action film.

¹ *District 9* raked in over \$210 million internationally from a \$30 million budget, while *Disgrace* cost approximately \$10 million and earned back just over \$2 million at the box office. Of interest is that 55% of *District 9*'s take came from the US with 45% from the rest of the world, while *Disgrace* earned 97% of its money from the rest of the world and only 3% from the US. The Australian box office for *Disgrace* was almost the same as that of the US. This speaks to (a) the significance of a good performance in the US, and (b) the promotion of 'local' film in territories outside of the US (in this case Australia). All figures from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com>

South African cinema appeared to have entered a new transnational phase.

South African stories are inextricably bound into a complex of fractured, volatile identity, a conflicted sense of local and global audiences, and uncertainty over how to represent contemporary realities while bearing the country's apartheid and colonial past in mind. As these stories increasingly played out on a global stage after the end of apartheid – from Oprah Winfrey's selection of Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* for her rejuvenated Book Club² to Oscar night recognition for *Yesterday* (2004, Darrell Roodt), *Tsotsi* (2005, Gavin Hood), *District 9* and *Invictus* (2009, Clint Eastwood)³ – transnationalism seemed to be the most useful context within which to address our discarded 'nationalist' past and the outmoded Rainbow Nationhood of the mid-1990s.

None of this prepared me, however, for the comments I discovered when I returned to *Disgrace* and its critical reception. "Despite the South African background and setting," declared Wade Major, "*Disgrace* is an unmistakably Australian film."⁴ Major's qualifying comment that since Coetzee's immigration to Australia he has become "more an Australian icon than a South African one" is the first step in a rickety rope-bridge that joins Coetzee's critical writing and origins as a writer in South Africa to the peculiarly Australian character of the film adaptation's aesthetics and narrative. Major completes the journey thus:

No surprise, then, that his literary voice should meld so seamlessly with the kind of blunt and unsentimental truth-telling that has defined Australia's unique brand of poetic realism since it first emerged during the Australian New Wave of the 70s and 80s. While neither Jacobs nor his wife, screenwriter Anna Maria Monticelli, are necessarily New Wave figures, both came of age during the era and, like fellow Aussie Ray Lawrence, remain firmly entrenched in its stylistic and thematic conceits.

The dizzying conflation of Coetzee the novelist with a perceived mode of Australian cinematic poetic realism (a far remove from Coetzee's style ideologically), and to which the writer and

- 2 See Rita Barnard's excellent essay 'Oprah's Paton, or South Africa and the Globalisation of Suffering,' in *Print, Text and Book Cultures in South Africa*, edited by Andrew van der Vliet. Johannesburg: Wits University Press (2012), 140-163.
- 3 *Yesterday* was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film in 2005, *Tsotsi* won for Best Foreign Language Film in 2006 and in 2010 *District 9* was nominated for four awards (including Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay) while *Invictus* was nominated for two acting awards.
- 4 Major, Wade. *Disgrace* [review], *Box Office*, (18 September 2009) <http://boxoffice.com/reviews/theatrical/2009-09-disgrace>

director might not actually belong, culminates triumphantly in the assertion of “stylistic and thematic conceits” which are never explained.

In more sober terms, David O’Connell notes: “Evoking the contrast, the neglected divide between black and white, Coetzee’s more meaningful political and social metaphors have survived the transition to screen well and this compelling Australian film, co-produced with South African interests, is another strong entry into the list of this year’s local output.”⁵

Both Major and O’Connell are commenting from the perspective of the film trade and in this context *Disgrace* is most certainly Australian. However, for Major to describe the film – set and shot in South Africa⁶ with a specifically South African subject matter – as “unmistakably Australian” seems absurd. I will argue that Major and O’Connell are in fact correct, but in ways that they do not perhaps intend.

Before looking at the film adaptation of *Disgrace* (written by Anna Maria Monticelli and directed by Steve Jacobs), I want to discuss two elements of Coetzee’s writing which impact on the adaptation itself as well as the ways in which one might interpret it. Firstly, I want to consider briefly Coetzee’s own relationship to the film medium, and secondly the more complex relationship between landscape, visualisation and national identity.

J.M. Coetzee on film

Current research into the relationship between Coetzee, his novels, and the medium of film is illuminating what has been a tantalising but scarcely explored critical engagement.⁷ In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee delivers an interesting reply that supplements Attwell’s complex inquiry into the “tension between [Coetzee’s] respect for the linguistic-structural conditions of fiction, and the existential-historical dramas being played out within them”. The more “fundamental influence” on *In the Heart of the Country*, notes Coetzee directly, is “film and/or photography”, whereafter he disparages *Dust* (Marion Hänsel’s 1985 adaptation of the novel) and argues for the value of the voiceover in film.⁸ In their critique of *Dust*, Dovey and Dovey remark that “The physical setting is wrong, although this was not entirely the fault of Hänsel: sanctions against South

5 O’Connell, David. *Disgrace* [review], In *Film* (Australia) (27 June, 2009) <http://www.infilm.com.au/?p=1017>

6 Certain interior scenes in the early sections were shot in Sydney.

7 Dovey, Lindiwe and Teresa Dovey. ‘Coetzee on Film,’ in *J.M. Coetzee’s Austerities*, edited by Graham Bradshaw and Michael Neill. Surrey: Ashgate (2010), 57-78.

8 Coetzee, J.M. ‘Interview,’ in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1992), 59-60.

9 Dovey and Dovey, 'Coetzee on Film,' 61.

10 Coetzee, J.M. 'Arthur Miller, *The Misfits*,' in *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000–2005*. London: Harvill Secker (2007), 222.

11 Coetzee, J.M. 'The Burden of Consciousness in Africa,' in *Doubling the Point*, 115–120.

Africa by European countries led to the film being shot in Spain, and the landscape, architecture and furnishings of the house are unplaceable, but are quite obviously not that of a farm in the Karoo."⁹ As is the case with the film of *Disgrace*, economic and political factors have pronounced effects on the production of films, but what interests me here is the Doveys' notion of '(un)placeability'. In their formulation, unplaceability is acceptable insofar as it carries no connotations of the locations used (the film does not look like it was shot in Spain), but is unacceptable because the narrative requires a strong sense of place, even if that place is subjected to reflexive critique by Coetzee in the novel. Placeability, as I will show, is central to the debate over the film adaptation of *Disgrace* as well.

In his more recent essay 'Arthur Miller, *The Misfits*', Coetzee emphasises the art of the screenplay and its literary nature (Miller "operating at the tail end of a long literary tradition of reflecting on the closing of America's western frontier"¹⁰) and appears more interested in the processes of the film's production (Monroe's psychological implosion, her relationship with Miller, the filming of the mustangs) than he is about film qua film. The result is a curiously isolated piece of criticism with no sense of what brings him to write about *The Misfits* (1961, John Huston) in the first place, and of what film as a medium might mean for him so many years after his earlier musings.

By contrast, the most interesting piece of film criticism by Coetzee is an essay on Ross Devenish's film *The Guest* (1977), which merges Coetzee's deep knowledge and understanding of South Africa's literary culture with his curiosity about film.¹¹ The film examines an episode in the turbulent life of Afrikaans poet Eugene Marais in which he attempted to overcome a drug habit on an isolated highveld farm. Not happy just to 'review' the film, Coetzee makes recourse to the screenplay in its written form in this dense analysis that interlaces the screenplay as literary (and pre-production) text with pro-filmic performance of the actors and the post-production elements of voice-over, editing and writing on the screen.

Marais speaks: "Stop the car." "Why?" "I want to say grace." While Visser watches, Marais walks into the tall grass, struggles up a ridge, and vanishes slowly down the

other side. Africa swallows him up. Over the scene we hear Marais (Athol Fugard) reciting a verse; a subtitle tells us it is Marais's "Lied van Suid-Afrika". Visser looks on. The screenplay says: "His face expresses for us in these final moments our sense of the enigma of Eugène Marais." The poem comes to an end. We see only the empty veld. Text on screen: "Ten years later, on the farm Pelindaba in the Pretoria district of the Transvaal, Eugène Marais, suffering acutely again from withdrawal symptoms, shot himself."¹²

12 *ibid.*, 116.

This double interpretation leads to a conclusion where Coetzee schools both Devenish the director and Fugard the actor/writer: "On its own terms, are there not ways in which *The Guest* could have been made into a better film? Are there ways, for example, of preventing the falling-off of interest and tension in the film as Marais begins to recover?"¹³ Coetzee critiques not just film as the final artistic product but also the *process* of its production. His curiosity about the filmic visualisation of literature is evident in the form of *In the Heart of the Country* – an explicit experiment in visual storytelling that is strongly influenced by avant-garde film – despite his declaration that it "is not a novel on the model of a screenplay".¹⁴

13 *ibid.*, 120.

Coetzee has also written two screen adaptations of his own work: *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, both of which have experienced faltering, unsatisfactory developments from page to screen.¹⁵ Overall (and this includes *Disgrace*) Coetzee's novels have not been successfully adapted to the screen or, at least, adapted in a way that takes his own views on film and writing into account. That said, it is arguable whether his own adaptations would ever have been successful as films because he certainly was not going to direct them himself. In Coetzee's chiding of Devenish and criticism of Hänsel, I see a rather spare understanding of the director's art (or role) in the creative process, and in his writing on film, he does not appear to consider a fully experimental approach to his work: Godard and Chris Marker are about as alternative as he gets.

14 Coetzee, 'Interview,' 59.

15 See Kannemeyer, J.C. *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball (2012), 312-319. *Waiting for the Barbarians* has come close to being filmed on several occasions. In 2014, UCT Press is publishing two screenplays Coetzee adapted from his own novels (edited and with an introductory essay by Hermann Wittenberg) drawn from the extensive Coetzee Collection at the Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas (Austin).

With more archival research being undertaken currently on Coetzee's film collaborations and his thoughts about films, a fuller picture of his understanding of film as well as the influence of film on his writing will emerge. What one can

see is that Coetzee is a writer interested in the medium of film in terms of both the adaptation of literary texts into film, and as an influence on his own writing. However, his novels prove difficult to adapt to the screen, either because his own efforts at collaboration falter, or because the eventual conditions of production marginalise his own involvement to the point where his approval is sought only at the level of script.

Landscape: representation and 'envisioning'

In her essay 'Reponses to Space and Spaces of Response in J.M. Coetzee', Carrol Clarkson discusses "the ways in which language, rather than landscape, draws the limit between notions of 'native' and 'foreign'" in Coetzee's work.¹⁶ It is the way in which land is understood, interpreted and communicated through language and artistic convention that produces landscape, and it is the predominantly colonial (and vexed) construction of South African landscape that not only forms the basis of Coetzee's seminal critical work, *White Writing*, but also informs many of his novels. Even in *Waiting for the Barbarians* – a novel set in an unnamed land – Coetzee's construction of place has South Africa's problematic tradition of landscape in mind:

[W]hat is described in *Barbarians* is a landscape I have never seen ... So the landscape of *Barbarians* represented a challenge to my power of envisioning, while the Karoo threatened only the tedium of reproduction, reproduction of a phraseology in which the Karoo has been done to death in a century of writing and overwriting.¹⁷

While Coetzee is drawn to the dry and 'inhospitable' interior of South Africa in narratives such as *The Life and Times of Michael K*, *In the Heart of the Country* and *Disgrace*, these environments are never simply settings – aesthetic contexts for action. Coetzee's landscapes connote control over the land through naming, representation and narration; they are indissoluble from the characters' histories and emplacement in society. *Disgrace* draws together themes that run through Coetzee's previous novels: the migration between the metropole and rural areas, the violence in, and of, these desert regions,

¹⁶ Clarkson, Carrol. 'Reponses to Space and Spaces of Response in J.M. Coetzee,' *J.M. Coetzee's Austerities*, edited by Graham Bradshaw and Michael Neill. Surrey: Ashgate (2010), 44.

¹⁷ Coetzee, 'Interview,' 142.

the dynamics of race and gender in the contest over land and landscape, territory and place.

In his 1990 essay 'Censorship in Africa', Coetzee investigates the philosophical and psychological elements underpinning the legal language of censorship under apartheid. Through a series of displacements, he argues, the detached censor is able to rationalise offence, thus masking the true paranoia of the state. "Reason cannot explain paranoia to itself," Coetzee concludes. "In paranoia, reason meets its match."¹⁸ Drawing on a Freudian understanding of paranoia as (in part), "a general detachment of libido from the world", Coetzee describes the malaise of white South Africa at the end of apartheid:

The form that this general detachment of libido from the world has taken in the psychohistory of the white South African in the twentieth century has been an inability to imagine a future for himself, a relinquishing of an imaginative grasp of his future; it manifests itself in an end-of-the-world phantasy whose expression in political discourse has been in a phantasy of a 'total onslaught' of hostile powers against the South African state, an onslaught in which no means go unused, even the most unsuspected.¹⁹

In the novel *Disgrace*, published five years after the first democratic elections, one can see in David Lurie such an "inability to imagine a future for himself", at least under the conditions in which he finds himself professionally (as a teacher), creatively (as a writer), psychologically (as a husband and father) and politically (as a white male). In the wake of the attack Lurie has "a taste of what it will be like to be an old man, tired to the bone, without hopes, without desires, indifferent to the future ... [H]e feels his interest in the world draining from him drop by drop. It may take weeks, it may take months before he is bled dry, but he is bleeding."²⁰ Does this enervation, this desiccation into a "fly-casing in a spiderweb ... ready to float away," translate to Coetzee himself, soon to leave for Australia in the wake of criticism from the authorities (the new regime) over his portrayal of South Africa's race relations? Not necessarily, because while *Disgrace* can be (and has been) read as a manifestation of the South African socio-

18 Coetzee, J.M. 'Censorship in South Africa,' *English in Africa* 17:1 (1990), 17.

19 *ibid.*, 13.

20 Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. London: Secker & Warburg (1999), 107.

- 21 Clarkson, Carrol. 'Reponses to Space and Spaces of Response in J.M. Coetzee,' *J.M. Coetzee's Austerities*, edited by Graham Bradshaw and Michael Neill. Surrey: Ashgate (2010), 44.

political zeitgeist it also, as Ian Glenn writes, "sits squarely in a tradition that is pessimistic about the possibility for the white coloniser of finding a true home in the colonised space or of coming to a full integration of settler with colonised through happy hybridity".²¹

It is this fundamental and complex understanding of landscape in Coetzee's writing that troubles the filmed adaptation of *Disgrace*, for what is at stake in the film is not just the translocation of the action – from one part of South Africa to another – in aesthetic terms, but the ways in which this translocation distances the film from the novel's concerns and contributes to an alternative reading of the narrative which considers South Africa physically and culturally from a distinctly non-South African perspective. The problem here is neither parochialism, a 'hands-off' from South African critics to Australian filmmakers, nor the academic snobbery of literary critics registering their dismay (once again) at the liberties taken by filmmakers at the expense of a novel's complexity.

The result of decisions taken over the film's production by the filmmakers is that a tension develops in the film between the universality of the story (its allegorical weight) and the specifics of place, its South African setting (historical, social and spatial). On the surface, attempts made by the filmmakers at authenticity and readings of inauthenticity from viewers signify its problematic (in)authenticity. In films made about South Africa, the most common of these readings of (in)authenticity is the failure of non-South African actors to 'get the accent right'. Nevertheless, a more sustained analysis of this tension in *Disgrace* reveals further deliberate and unwitting (mis)readings, symptoms of an 'outsider' reading of text, character, landscape and national discourse.

Most reviews (particularly those in Australia) read the film in terms of its comment on contemporary South Africa, the plight of its two white protagonists masking the gradual deterioration of the Rainbow Nation and a pronounced failure of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in transforming the psychological and political landscape of the newly democratic country. But what makes *Disgrace* such a difficult literary text to adapt to film is that Coetzee the South African writer and Coetzee the author of *Disgrace* enjoy a complicated

and at times paradoxical relationship with South Africa's post-apartheid discourse.

In the following sections I want to consider three elements of the film's construction of place that create an ideological and narrative tension between the quest for optimism and the quest for authenticity: the locations chosen for the film, the geography of the farm, and the fade to blue that concludes the film.

Location, location, location

From its very beginnings film has had tremendous power in representing physical environments – often in ways that incorporate and transcend other media. Film gave motion to the frozen tableaux of photography, and it gave scale and depth to the dramatic art of landscape painting (a genre that, certainly in mid to late 19th-century America, experienced unprecedented popularity). From subtle to violent climatological phenomena (seen in the fascination with stormy seas in some very early films) to characters' travels through foreign lands or exploration of wildernesses, early film not only had the capacity to induce awe in its spectators visually, but through the use of movement and, later, sound it could produce extraordinary verisimilitude which helped to immerse the viewer in the world of the story.

While the idea that all elements of the filmmaking process are put in service to narrative developed as a component of the classical narrative model familiar to us today, the filming of landscapes (whether urban or rural) has developed its own conventions and iconography. The establishing shot, the cavalry charge, the featureless terror of wide deserts and open seas, the diminishment of human scale – all these are less about the narrative than they are a part of the grammar of setting, and also the grammar of place, by which I mean the attempt by the filmmaker to create a *believably authentic* setting. Edward Buscombe notes, for example, that the cacti favoured by John Ford in the dramatic Monument Valley settings in several of his westerns were not, in fact, indigenous to the area but were either transplanted from their native habitat or prefabricated.²² Thus the 'authentic' movie western iconography associated with Ford is, in one key sense, an invention that has become a convention.

Whether found or constructed, all landscapes in film are a construction by filmmaker, affecting the viewer through the

²² Buscombe, Edward. 'Inventing Monument Valley: Nineteenth-century Landscape Photography and the Western Film,' in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, edited by Patrice Petro. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1995), 106.

- manipulations of colour, angle, scale and duration. And that is before the complementary arts of diegetic or non-diegetic sound or voice-over have been added. Moreover, the ideology of that landscape is never neutral: the landscape is always doing ideological work for the narrative – conventionally in support of the narrative but sometimes in order to destabilise it. In spite of the sharp intake of breath or subconscious expression of amazement the viewer might make when being treated to a dramatic landscape on the screen, these views are never innocent. As Simon Schama writes: “before it can be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind ... The wilderness, after all, does not locate itself, does not name itself.”²³
- In the case of *Disgrace*, the choice of landscape had as much to do with the industrial and commercial nature of the filmmaking process as the ideological shift in the visual setting of the film. The simple truth is that Australians wanted to make the film, put up the money and believed in the project enough to bring it to fruition. Furthermore, though South African locations are central to the story and South African actors are prominent, South African financial support for the project appears to have been lacking.²⁴ As a result, a major reason for the film being shot in the Cederberg instead of the Eastern Cape was the demand for locations within easy driving distance of Cape Town and its film services. Basic economics played a significant role, leaving the nuances of place in Coetzee’s *Disgrace* negated by the centripetal force of Cape Town’s film service industries, and casting the real and the virtual rural off from the concerns of the urban metropole. As Robert Fish notes: “[I]f cinema functions as both product and instrument of geographical experience, then such experience, it would seem, is of a decisively metropolitan cast.”²⁵
- Be that as it may, the filmmakers were disenchanted with the locations of the novel in any case. Though considered “drab and flat and boring” Jacobs also says: “I didn’t even bother going there.”²⁶ Instead, he wanted something “epic ... a beautiful landscape [that] made more sense of her decision to stay there, despite the awful things that happen to her in that place”.²⁷ Jacobs’ language echoes an observation Coetzee makes in *White Writing* about the difficulty Europeans have in seeing the sublime in South Africa’s horizontal plateaus, veld
- 23 Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. London: Harper Collins (1995), 6-7.
- 24 Producer/writer Anna Maria Monticelli says in an interview: “We were hoping to get money from South Africa and we just weren’t able to. Nobody would put a cent into it. There were some people who wanted it and would fund the film, but they would take over and have creative control. And that was something I just couldn’t do.” (in Siemienowicz, Rochell. ‘Adapting *Disgrace*: an interview with screenwriter and producer Anna Maria Monticelli.’ Australian Film Institute. (2009) http://www.afi.org.au/AM/ContentManagerNet/HTMLDisplay.aspx?ContentID=7699&Section=Adapting_Disgrace
- 25 Fish, Robert. ‘What are these cinematic countrysides?’ In *Cinematic Countrysides*, edited by Robert Fish. Manchester University Press (2007), 2.
- 26 Coetzee is spare in his descriptions of the farm’s environs. Though there has been good rain, David thinks: “Poor land, poor soil ... Exhausted. Good only for goats.” (*Disgrace*, 64). It is also very cold, so cold at one point that David cannot tie the bunches of flowers being prepared for the market. (*Disgrace*, 68, 70).
- 27 De Waal, Shaun. ‘Fallen from Grace: Shaun de Waal speaks to Australian director Steve Jacobs about adapting *Disgrace* to film.’ *Weekly Mail and Guardian* (14 August, 2009). <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-08-14-fallen-from-grace>. It should be noted that De Waal’s article is not in a Q&A format, so words attributed to Jacobs are often in paraphrase.

and semi-desert compared to the more traditional sublime subject of mountains whose “verticality – heights and depths – [becomes] the locus of important ... feelings such as despair and ecstasy, and values such as transcendence and unattainability”.²⁸ Subconsciously or not, this quest on the part of the producers for something epic and redemptive in the landscape – evoking timelessness and national belonging as well as the potential for the land to reconcile the strife between those who control it – is reflected in the critical reception of the film. Thomas Caldwell writes: “The cinematography also captures the locations perfectly and the incredible use of natural light in this film creates an amazingly evocative sense of the South African countryside.”²⁹ Cinematographic skill guarantees authenticity of place which then signifies national identity, supplanting the South African iconography of game reserves, deserts and veld.

Theo Tait understands Jacobs’ intentions perfectly and then spectacularly misidentifies the location in the film: “But the switch [at the end of the film] does emphasise the movie’s one undoubted advantage over the book: the shots of farm’s setting, in the bleakly picturesque area of the Eastern Cape – a place that partially justifies Lucy’s powerful love of the land.”³⁰ His comment, along with Jacobs’, nevertheless reveals the real tension in the adaptation: Why does Lucy stay? Especially if, as in the novel, the land is a godforsaken dustbowl outside some backwards rural town. It does make one wonder why Jacobs did not just set the film in the Western Cape, why he stuck with the pretense that the action takes place in the Eastern Cape, a region he didn’t even bother to visit.

Nicolas Rapold correctly acknowledges the actual location in the film – the “majestic ... rugged citrus-growing backcountry northeast of Cape Town” – but, like Tait, feels that this landscape “underscores the pull of the land in a way not possible in the book”.³¹ Sandra Hall, writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, makes a general but no less interesting comment on the film’s representation of landscape: “Jacobs shot much of the film in South Africa and the beauty of its vast expanses reflects a threatening ambivalence. Lurie is fearful of these wide open spaces, seeing the potential dangers they hold for a solitary woman like his daughter.”³² For Hall, the countryside (or ‘backcountry’ for many American critics)

28 Coetzee, J.M. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. Yale University Press (1988), Johannesburg: Pentz Publishers (2007), 54.

29 Caldwell, Thomas. *Disgrace* [review] <http://blog.cinemaautopsy.com/2009/06/18/film-review-disgrace-2008/>

30 Tait, Theo. ‘Is the film of JM Coetzee’s Booker-winner *Disgrace* a success?’ *The Guardian*, (28 November, 2009). <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2009/nov/28/disgrace-coetzee-film-malkovich-review>

31 Rapold, Nicolas. ‘Tough Terrain to Document: South Africa,’ *New York Times* (3 September, 2009). http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/movies/06rapo.html?_r=0 This contest over the ‘right’ setting is seen clearly in the comment by Brigid Olen of South African company of DO Production: “We chose the Cedarberg and Citrusdale[sic] areas, which were really incredibly beautiful locations that really mimicked the Eastern Cape scenery of the novel. It’s a magnificent landscape ... In a way the setting was a character in itself.” (Fink, Sally. *Disgrace; The Callsheet* (August 2009) http://www.thecallsheet.co.za/daily_news/view/957

32 Hall, Sandra. *Disgrace* [review], *Sydney Morning Herald* (20 June, 2009). <http://www.smh.com.au/news/entertainment/film/filmreviews/disgrace/2009/06/19/1244918176572.html?page=2>

33 Fish, 'What are these cinematic countrysides?' 1.

34 Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 60.

35 Mondello, Bob. 'Disgrace exposes a divided country's despair,' *NPR Review* (17 September, 2009). <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112641580>

36 Rainer, Peter. *Disgrace* [review], *Christian Science Monitor*, (9 October, 2009). <http://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Movies/2009/1009/p17s02-almo.html>

37 Dovey and Dovey read this bland endorsement in cryptic terms: approval that masks his "disaffiliation from the role of landscape in the film." 'Coetzee on Film,' 77.

38 Glenn, Ian. 'Betraying and Delivering: Filming *Disgrace*,' *Ihla do Desterro* 61 (2011), 280.

is both the pastoral ideal and violent frontier, in Fish's terms, "affirmative engagements with nature and the non-human, and nightmare encounters with a monstrous and de-natured in-human"³³ The mountains of the Cederberg again come to represent South Africa, but if one reads the racial politics of the violent attack into Hall's understanding of Lurie's fears for his daughter, then the ambiguity of beauty and peril becomes specifically South African. In the novel, Lurie is unambiguous: when he finds out that Lucy is on her own on the farm, his first comment is, "You didn't tell me that. Aren't you nervous by yourself?"³⁴ The danger is not that Lucy might have an accident, get bitten by a snake. The danger is that Lucy might be attacked. Implicitly understanding her father's fear, she replies: "There are the dogs. Dogs still mean something." [To whom? one might ask.] "The more dogs, the more deterrence."

The difference between South African perspectives of the film, and the perspectives of viewers in Australia and the United Kingdom, for example, is that South Africans make the threat of racial violence against whites the point of the book and the film (whether they are being critical or not), whereas critics abroad imply or suggest this threat, as if to avoid undermining the optimism that Jacobs (and Monticelli) work so hard to produce. The "breathtakingly clear skies and a parched landscape",³⁵ the "vast, panoramic countryside",³⁶ are all beauty of a sort, forms of aesthetic relief when the narrative going gets tough. In this light, can we take Coetzee seriously when he says (in a prepared statement in support of the film), "Steve Jacobs has succeeded beautifully in integrating the story into the grand landscape of South Africa"³⁷

Glenn, somewhat mischievously, suggests that "the move of the action from the Eastern Cape in the novel to the far more picturesque Cederberg in the film no doubt betrays the original in terms of the feel of the landscape, but in key ways the physical irreality of the film mirrors that of the novel. Where, one wonders, do the party-goers in the film come from, given the film's insistence on the splendid isolation of the farm?"³⁸ While this forms part of Glenn's greater argument that the film "[does] not betray some ideal version of the novel, but [comes] up against the limitations, social and imaginative, of the novel itself", one wonders whether his observation is not an allusion

to Coetzee's critique of Devenish's *The Guest*: "where do the African farm labourers who materialise out of nowhere for a single fifteen-second sequence live?"³⁹ For Glenn, the failure of both book and film to establish a history of ownership of the land, or to establish the proximity of the neighbours and the guests at Petrus's party, produces abstraction of landscape, a space upon which the characters act rather than a place in which characters live.

In one of the most wide-ranging and negative reviews of the film, Andries du Toit picks up on this "irreality" by recognising that the landscape is much more than just the land. "The Eastern Cape is South Africa's Sertão, its Red River Valley, its remote and distant moral centre," he opines. "All the stories of what happens there are indissolubly entangled with the outlines of its densely populated, desperately beautiful bare eroded hills."⁴⁰ But the real inauthenticity concerns those who live in that place, those consigned to the margins of the story:

As best as I can recall, there is with one exception, not a single mobile phone in the entire movie. For anyone who has hung around in the rural Eastern Cape, where Chinese traders hawk consumer electronics on the pavement of every rural *dorpie*, and where every livelihood depends on something that is happening a thousand kilometres away, this is just baffling ... It's rather as if everyone has been transported bodily into another era, a South Africa untouched by the profane, demotic commercialism of present day consumer culture.⁴¹

What is inauthentic is not the translocation of place (as a visualised space) so much as its dislocation – the removal of that place into a historically and socially parallel sphere. To this critic, it seems, an authentic translocation might have been more palatable than what is perceived as a dislocation, which is by its nature inauthentic.

Ultimately, while cost and the contingencies of film production cannot be ignored, it is also true that very deliberate choices influenced the setting of the film, from the choice of location (there are plenty of flatter, less dramatic areas within driving distance of Cape Town) to the construction of Lucy's

39 Coetzee, 'The Burden of Consciousness in Africa,' 118.

40 Dovey and Dovey make the same point. 'Coetzee on Film,' 77.

41 Du Toit, Andries. 'Lost in Africa: *Disgrace*, whiteness and the fear of desire' (17 September 2009). <http://asubtleknife.wordpress.com/2009/09/17/lost-in-africa-disgrace-whiteness-and-the-fear-of-desire/> Du Toit, it must be said, is as disenchanted with the novel as he is with the film.

farmhouse. The results are not incidental. The decision to render the landscape in epic terms reflects a subtext for Lurie's profound alienation; to Lucy's difference from Lurie, to the trauma that throws them into disarray, and to the reconciliation that Jacobs establishes at the end. However, another, less desirable subtext hitches a ride: in order for Lucy's decision to stay on the farm to make sense, the hope it encourages must overcome the ominous sense that the terrible violence she and Lurie are subjected to is an unchanging South African reality. This is difficult for critics abroad, who want to cheer the film's optimism while not appearing naïve about South Africa's post-apartheid problems, or sounding like reactionary doomsayers. Rapold finds himself in the middle of this conundrum, as does Jacobs, in this passage:

Though the savage violence in *Disgrace* may seem worlds away to some Americans, it remains a fact of life for at least some South Africans, for whom the growing pains of the post-apartheid era run deep. "They're in the situations of decision making that Lucy has in the film," Mr. Jacobs said. "They face that every day, and there's not a logical reason for staying. It's spiritual, and emotional."⁴²

42 Rapold, 'Tough terrain to document'.

Though violent crime affects black South Africans far more than it does white South Africans, given the context of the film there is little doubt that the South Africans to whom Rapold and Jacobs refer are white. Implied in Jacobs' statement is the exodus of mostly white South Africans to Australia and New Zealand since 1994, very few of whom, I expect, were confronted with the prospect of giving birth to their black rapist's child. Again, the language of evasion is clear: who dares challenge the spirit and actions of reconciliation when the alternative is the atrophied interiority and resignation of Lurie and the so-called 'liberal afro-pessimism' that stalks warily behind?

Two houses

Disgrace (the film) presents not just a displaced topography but also a particular filmic register for seeing that topography. Consider Lurie's approach to the farm in the novel:

A stopover in Oudtshoorn, a crack-of-dawn departure: by mid-morning he is nearing his destination, the town of Salem on the Grahamstown-Kenton road in the Eastern Cape.

His daughter's smallholding is at the end of a winding dirt track some miles outside of town: five hectares of land, most of it arable with a wind-pump, stables and outbuildings, and a low sprawling farmhouse painted yellow, with a galvanised-iron roof and a covered stoep.⁴³

43 Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 59.

There is nothing in the film that seems antagonistic to this description, but there is something truly majestic and fully cinematic about the shots that bring Lurie from the solemn and spare interiors of Cape Town to Lucy's farm, shots which exceed Coetzee's succinct prose. A series of extreme long shots reveal whole towns dwarfed by the rugged mountains, the road snaking in sympathy with the contours of the slopes, finally becoming a dirt road that clings to the side of the mountain. Lucy's farmhouse is truly isolated, set against rocky slopes and pine forests. On the downslope, Petrus's house under construction is barely visible. The extreme long-shots that track Lurie's journey to the farm as well as many of the film's establishing shots are taken from a high angle, emphasising not only the farm's isolation but also an extra-diegetic perspective. Like the Torrance family in *The Shining* (1980, Stanley Kubrick), Lurie is on a journey into dramatic and ominous isolation.

The interior of the farmhouse is also portrayed differently in the film to how it is evoked in the novel, albeit in subtle ways. In the novel Lurie describes the house as "large, dark, and even at midday, chilly," and though in the film the interior is somewhat gloomy, the main rooms are exposed to natural light by wide expanses of windows, suggesting that the characters' lives inside are constantly on display to those outside. The house in the film is also interesting in the context of the Doveys' critique of *Dust*: where Hänsel could not shoot in South Africa, the Australian production of *Disgrace* not only had access to South African locations but also chose to build Lucy's seemingly decades-old farmhouse from scratch. Everything about its interior, aspect and situation is a product of imaginative and physical construction.

The particular orientation of Lucy's house in relation to the outbuildings occupied by Petrus and his family sets up a spatial tension with high-angle shots looking down at the outbuildings – mostly from Lurie's point of view – and low-angle shots looking back up at the main house. These reinforce the spatial orientation of colonial power. Towards the end of the film, two shots demonstrate the profound shift in power that has taken place in the film.

As Lurie confronts Lucy about Petrus's marriage proposal, the camera racks focus to the background where Petrus's new house takes shape. Lucy says: "I'll become a tenant on his land", a sharp reversal of an earlier exchange where Petrus introduces his wife to Lucy and Lurie, saying "Lucy is our benefactor". The shot exploits the slope up and down which Lurie has tramped through the film and confirms that the dominance of the house (re-established compositionally several times in the film) is about to be displaced.

If the mountain terrain orientates the dynamic between Lucy and Petrus, it also contextualises the change in Lucy's relationship with her father. After the attack we see Lurie shot from a low angle against the mountainside, but the heroic possibilities of the composition are thoroughly undermined by the bandages around his head and over his eye. The landscape dominates him; he looks lost and pathetic. However, in the closing scenes when Lurie walks down the mountain to the house, we see Lucy framed in a similar shot. She is radiant, triumphant against the same mountain backdrop in a shot that is pure classical Hollywood.

These examples show how Jacobs has consciously used his chosen landscape to underpin the narrative, complementing Lucy's journey from the trauma of the attack to her full reconciliation with her destiny as a mother and a partner, her belonging on, and to, the land. Though the precariousness of her situation does not seem to have changed (what will be the nature of her protection under Petrus's patronage?), the landscape shots encourage us to see her not only as the "forward-looking lady" Petrus describes in the novel but also as the "solid existence" Lurie comes to terms with in the novel's penultimate scene.⁴⁴ Significantly, Jacobs' direction in terms of camera and mise-en-scène pulls the narrative towards a

44 Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 136, 217.

conclusion that, while still sombre, expresses symbolic hope in place of intellectual and emotional resignation.

Fade to blue

The most noted departure from the novel made in the film is the decision to switch around the final two scenes in the book. Where the novel ends with the “giving up” of the dog, in the film Lurie euthanises the dog and then, after stopping his vehicle on the road above Lucy’s farm, walks down for a conciliatory cup of tea. It is clear that, despite a concerted (and largely successful) effort to follow the narrative action of the novel, concluding the film with Lurie giving up the three-legged dog for euthanasia would have drained any redemptive quality to the story and would certainly have killed the film’s chances of being made at all. In an interview with Shaun de Waal, director Steve Jacobs says: “Was it a film about a man and his dog? No. It was about many other things and many other people. It doesn’t change what happens in the novel, but it switches the final moments. In film, you have to acknowledge the journey you’ve been on. So the ending included some kind of reconciliation, some kind of contrition from the David Lurie character.”⁴⁵ Though Coetzee gave his blessing to Monticelli’s script, I wonder what he would say about the novel’s final scene amounting to “a man and his dog”.

⁴⁵ De Waal, ‘Fallen from Grace’.

There is no doubt that the film’s conclusion is neater, more conventional and more hopeful; however, the decision is more complex than merely switching depression for optimism. As is true of many adaptations from novel to screen, film can represent action and visual setting in striking and dynamic ways, but often struggles to convey the interiority of character. Frequently in the novel, the action of a scene is complicated by Lurie’s description of the action. For example, Glenn notes the effect during the attack in the film of losing Lurie’s “sardonic” consideration of the failure of the missionary project in Africa⁴⁶ – “He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Glenn, ‘Betraying and Delivering,’ 281.

⁴⁷ Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 95.

Similarly, the scene in the film where Lurie leaves the truck on the road and walks down to Lucy’s farm loses the introspection

in the novel that helps set up the dispiriting final act. Looking at Lucy, the literary Lurie muses over her development from a “tadpole in her mother’s body” into her “solid existence” which will, in turn, produce “a line of existences in which his share, his gift, will grow inexorably less and less, till it may as well be forgotten”.⁴⁸ In the film, the final scene is not only a tentative reconciliation between father and daughter, one in which she leads and he follows, but, in the closing shots, it is a symbolic reconciliation with the present as a condition of the past.

48 Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 217.

There has been virtually no mention in the reviews and essays I have read of the unusual fade to blue that ends the film, apart from that of Glenn, who suggests that the blue fade might represent “the passage of time”. He adds:

The intention of this scenic finale is presumably to show not only the beauty of the Cederberg, but also a state of co-existence in which Lucy’s house is now complemented by Petrus’s house and in which the tension Lurie felt at seeing the building going up next door is now alleviated, taken into a larger sweep of history, seen *sub specie aeternitatis*.⁴⁹

49 Glenn, ‘Betraying and Delivering,’ 281.

Given Jacobs and Monticelli’s optimistically reconciliatory take on the narrative, such a transcendent interpretation is fair, but it is nevertheless striking to observe that the blue fade seems to take its hue not from the sky or the blue-grey rock of the mountains, but from the roof of Petrus’s house. This will be the new arrangement, we are told. As the series of tracking shots pulls back from the valley in a conventional deployment of landscape as cinematic closure, Lucy’s house becomes less visible against Petrus’s blue roof, suggesting not only its permanence but also a confirmation of the shift in the balance of power on the land.

Conclusion

For director Steve Jacobs, and indeed several commentators, the film’s strength is its universality rather than its representation of a particular place. *Disgrace*, “like all great pieces of literature ... has a universal quality to it”,⁵⁰ Jacobs says, explaining his desire (along with that of Anna Maria Monticelli) to adapt Coetzee’s novel to the screen. However, as the Doveys despair: “The novel

50 Wotzke, Anders. ‘Interview with *Disgrace* director Steve Jacobs,’ (14 June, 2009). <http://movieindex.com/interviews/interview-steve-jacobs-disgrace/>

is about South Africa.”⁵¹ It is about South Africa’s history, places, subjugations, and displacements. Is there a tension here between discarding the categories of ‘national’ cinema in a new world of transnational film production and storytelling, and the insistence on a kind of nationalist authenticity of place? Put another way, is there a tendency in non-South African productions of South African stories to transform their local chewiness into a more palatable experience for a global audience? An audience that registers distaste – a few critics talk of the film leaving them with an unpleasant taste in their mouths – but offers a tonic of optimism and ideological closure to cleanse the palate?

One of the book and the film’s central conversations occurs when Lurie asks Lucy why she won’t report the attack. Lucy says:

‘The reason is that, as far as I’m concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.’

‘This place being what?’

‘This place being South Africa.’⁵²

Lurie rejects her argument, and at the end of the exchange he is left “shaken”: “Never yet have they been so far and so bitterly apart.” If the film starts out with Lurie in control of the narrative perspective, from here on Lucy takes over. In screenwriting terms, it is not only a narrative turning point but also sets the course for the concluding reconciliation between Lurie and Lucy or, more properly, Lurie and Lucy’s decision.

However, when Lucy says “This place being South Africa” in the film, there is an uncomfortable echo of Danny Archer’s world-weary line “T.I.A. – this is Africa” in *Blood Diamond* (2006). Coetzee’s novel predates that film, but given the dispiriting procession of major movies ‘about Africa’ in the past ten years,⁵³ *Disgrace* is in danger of confirming a prevailing pessimism for global audiences while the filmmakers argue for a light in the dark.

And this is where, despite being a book about South Africa, *Disgrace* the film is Australian, at least more so than

51 Dovey and Dovey, ‘Coetzee on Film,’ 77.

52 Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 112.

53 See Evans, Martha and Ian Glenn. ‘TIA – This is Africa: Afropessimism in Twenty-First-Century Narrative Film,’ *Black Camera* 2:1 (2010), 14-35.

54 Wotzke, Anders. 'Interview with *Disgrace* director Steve Jacobs'.

it is South African. The motivation for telling a story with “universal appeal” whose central conflicts are the same as those of “Palestine, Northern Ireland or the Balkans”⁵⁴ and the casting of an internationally renowned Hollywood actor makes clear that from the outset, this was a project aiming to translate South African complexities and particularities in unambiguous and morally comprehensible terms to a global audience. Where the novel terminates in resignation and opaque interiority, the decisions over location and landscape fully complement a vision of *Disgrace* as heroic and transcendent, culminating in a sweeping mountain panorama beneath a clear blue African sky.

Chickens, Witches and Scapegoats: *The Witches of Gambaga*

CLARIEN LUTTIG

“The search for a scapegoat is the easiest of all hunting expeditions.”

Dwight D. Eisenhower

In the North Ghanaian village of Gambaga there is a so-called “witch camp”: a place of refuge for some of the thousands of women in the region who have been accused and found guilty of witchcraft and subsequently cast out from their communities. They live as exiles, removed from their families and forced to work hard under harsh conditions in order to survive – a situation which becomes even more shocking when one notices that the majority of these women are elderly. Their alleged crimes include being blamed for a variety of social ills: from things as serious as death and outbreaks of meningitis to matters as banal as a child’s inability to sleep. The only trial undergone to test a woman’s guilt is a ritual involving the death of a chicken. The position in which it dies – whether its wings face the sky or the ground – determines the fate of the accused.

Gambaga is a provincial town situated about 150km from Tamale, the capital city of the country’s Northern Region. The sanctuary it houses for women who have been accused of witchcraft is the oldest in the North. As the director has noted, the Northern Region – where the local population depends mainly on agriculture for survival¹ – is one of the poorest in

¹ Badoe, Yaba. “What Makes a Woman a Witch?” *Feminist Africa* 5 (2005), 38-39.

Ghana, and is notably underdeveloped compared to the areas to the south. While *The Witches of Gambaga* (2011) focuses on this area, director Yaba Badoe points out that the belief in witchcraft – and the problems that this belief leads to – is not limited to Northern Ghana, explaining in the film that “witchcraft-belief permeates Ghanaian culture. It’s a part of the ether we breathe here.”

Badoe’s documentary is noteworthy for a number of reasons, yet before I attempt any analysis, some context is required. Cinemas in Africa have yielded a number of remarkable works depicting strong female characters (whether fictitious or real), addressing women’s issues and critiquing patriarchal systems – to such a degree that theorist Lindiwe Dovey recognises a “feminist basis to much ‘African Cinema’”.² However, as Dovey proceeds to point out, the overwhelming majority of African films have historically been produced by male directors, with the relatively few films made by female African directors in the 20th century receiving incredibly limited distribution. Recent years have seen a change: Dovey notes an “exciting flourishing of female directors on the continent and in the diaspora”.³ *The Witches of Gambaga* is significant as a product of this movement – particularly so because Badoe investigates in the film a contemporary socio-cultural issue that is so widespread in Ghana, the country of her birth. Bearing in mind the repugnant filmic misrepresentation of African subjects that characterised the colonial period and which still influences some post-colonial depictions, films made by Africans about African issues are crucial in challenging and replacing stereotypes produced by cultural imperialism. This applies to both fictional and documentary films.

American film critic Bill Nichols devised a system that aimed to categorise documentaries into six different modes, which he viewed as sub-genres of the documentary film: the poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive and performative.⁴ In addition to establishing a system with which to classify documentaries, Nichols aimed to chronicle the development of the documentary form by presenting these modes in an order that “corresponds roughly to the chronology of their introduction”⁵. Since the publication of this system, the concept has been validly criticised: Stella Bruzzi, for example,

2 Dovey, Lindiwe. ‘New Looks: The Rise of African Women Filmmakers,’ *Feminist Africa* 16 (2012), 18.

3 *ibid.*, 23. Note: Badoe is based in the UK.

4 Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (2001).

5 *ibid.*, 100.

points out that “... the fundamental problem with Nichols’ ‘family tree’ of documentary modes is that it elides differences between films that are similar in one formal respect whilst simultaneously imposing a false chronology onto documentary history”.⁶ Paul Ward points out that “suggesting that the development of documentary is in any way a tidy, chronological ‘evolution’ is highly problematic”.⁷ However, Ward also draws on the work of Carl Plantinga in arguing that “... thinking in terms of ‘prototypical’ examples, and those that are less typical, is a helpful way forward”.⁸ While Nichols’ work was useful in pioneering critical understandings of the documentary form(s), it is clearly flawed, and few, if any, contemporary documentaries would fit neatly into any of his modes. Despite this, the categories suggested may still prove useful as a kind of shorthand when discussing certain elements of documentary films and identifying different approaches to the production of what Grierson eloquently termed “the creative treatment of actuality”.⁹

Documentary film is perhaps most commonly (or stereotypically) associated with the expository mode, which presents facts and arguments and relies on voice-over to “propose a perspective, advance an argument, or recount history”.¹⁰ Classic examples of this mode include the films of John Grierson, as well as the majority of television news programmes and many nature documentaries, such as those of David Attenborough. *The Witches of Gambaga* includes features of the expository mode, particularly in its use of voice-overs and interviews as well as its tendency to directly address the viewer. As is characteristic of this mode, the film seems intent on making an argument and convincing audiences of its stance, and making use of so-called ‘talking heads’: interviews filmed in close-up with people considered knowledgeable or experienced in the subject matter, sharing their opinions, in support of the argument. The voice-overs in Badoe’s film, however, are not of the omniscient yet anonymous ‘voice-of-God’ narrator that typically characterises this mode; instead, the subjects are allowed to relate their own stories, translated either through subtitles or through a translator, while the director herself describes her investigation and shares details of her experiences.

6 Bruzzi, Stella. *New Documentary* (2nd edition). London: Routledge (2006), 48.

7 Ward, Paul. *Documentary: the Margins of Reality*. London: Wallflower (2005), 27.

8 Ward, *Documentary*, 23.

9 Grierson, John. ‘The Documentary Producer,’ *Cinema Quarterly*, 2:1 (1932), 8.

10 Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 105.

Sequences are included where the director addresses the camera directly, at times reflecting on the process of filming. Badoe discusses how some of the people included as subjects respond to being filmed, reflects on some of the challenges encountered during production and her experience of documenting this phenomenon so close to where she was born. This creates an atmosphere more akin to the participatory mode, where the filmmaker's presence and the effect of the filming process on the subjects are acknowledged. Indeed, this approach has been described as being similar to the anthropological approach that combines participation with observation – a description that seems very appropriate as we watch conversations and interviews between Badoe and the subjects of the film, translated by a third person. Finally, there are a few elements of the poetic mode within the film: beautifully composed landscape shots, and semi-abstract images focusing on the movements and patterns of water being swirled in a bowl, millet being sifted, hands shelling peanuts, and other small actions expressing an inherent beauty. These more meditative visuals are complemented by a soundtrack that includes haunting melodies by Ivorian artist Dobet Gnahoré.

The film's subject matter touches on a range of particularly sensitive topics, including cultural practices, religious and spiritual beliefs, the human tendency to make scapegoats out of vulnerable individuals and – most pertinently – issues of marginalisation, most specifically those based on gender. Such contentious themes are all too often depicted superficially, using simplistic structures to create dichotomies of good and evil. Badoe's film aims instead to examine the complexities of a deeply troubling situation, the impact it has on individuals' lives, and the underlying causes that lead to and exacerbate the problem. The filmmaker does not pretend to be entirely objective regarding the subject of this film – on the contrary, she makes it clear that this issue is significant for her on a personal level, mentioning that she had been writing about the 'witches' for fourteen years when she made the film, and reflecting on her fascination with stories that link "ordinary, middle-aged women like [herself] to witchcraft". Badoe's participatory approach prompts the viewer to reflect not only on the 'documenting' and

bringing to light of a situation of injustice, but also to engage with the way the film is made from Badoe's personal perspective.

While it might have been relatively easy to ridicule these cultural beliefs and practices in the film, especially when they have such dreadful effects on people to whom the director can relate, Badoe avoids this type of cheap sensationalism. The film undoubtedly expresses her outrage at the fact that in the contemporary world, a woman's fate can be determined by the death of a chicken, yet the focus is not upon questioning the beliefs or rituals involved. Instead, the filmmaker investigates the consequences faced by those women found guilty of witchcraft, and invites them to share some of their stories, recounting the accusations they faced and how they came to the camp. These include horrific tales of being threatened, assaulted and left for dead – very often by their extended families.

From these tales it becomes evident that the gender-systems in this culture are highly relevant to the situation. Theirs is a rigidly patriarchal society, where social roles are strictly prescribed and defined according to sex. Polygyny¹¹ is common and women refer to their husbands' other wives as their "rivals". Moreover, the culture is both patrilineal and patrilocal¹² – meaning, respectively, that possessions are inherited along the male bloodline and that when a man and a woman marry, they will live with the man's family. Thus, women in the communities being documented – and throughout Ghana – have very little autonomy, and most of the power they possess is located in the protection they receive from the males in their lives. It is highly unusual for a woman to own a house. In the few instances where this does happen, it is met with disapproval and distrust from the community – as in the case of successful businesswoman Asara Azindow, one of the women interviewed.

While local people generally agree that witchcraft is used by both men and women, there is an assumption so widely held that it is accepted as fact: that while men use magic for 'good' purposes (such as protecting their homes), women's use of magic is malicious. The 'witch camp' in Gambaga houses only females. While Badoe acknowledges that there have been reports of male 'witches' being sent to some of these camps, she points out that the number of men exiled in this way is almost negligible – and the amount of time that they then spend in

11 The system whereby males may have multiple wives, distinguished from polyandry – where females may have multiple husbands – and polygamy, where a person of either sex may have multiple spouses.

12 Badoe, 'What Makes a Woman a Witch?', 49.

13 Badoe, Yaba. 'Representing Witches in contemporary Ghana: Challenges and Reflections on Making *The Witches of Gambaga*', *Feminist Africa* 16 (2012), 88; and Badoe, 'What Makes a Woman a Witch?' 40.

the camp incredibly short – in comparison with women facing similar accusations.¹³ Women in the camp explain that a man, when accused of 'bad' witchcraft, can usually stay in his home because he owns it. Female 'witches' must leave their husbands', brothers' or fathers' homes so as not to bring shame upon the family. However, this reasoning is not applied to the previously mentioned case of Asara, who owned her house: not only was she forced to leave her home, but her children were violently prevented from recovering her possessions, and the house was subsequently pillaged and destroyed by the community.

In the context of this gender disparity, it is perhaps unsurprising to discover that the individuals who are most likely to be accused of witchcraft are those women who do not conform to the roles and behaviours expected of females in the society, and those women who are not favoured with the protection of a man. Targets typically include widows, who are usually relegated to living with a brother and then often ousted by one of their sisters-in-law. Even more at risk of such accusations are the very few women in the society who have defied social norms by achieving financial independence, such as entrepreneurs who own their houses. Although *The Witches of Gambaga* shows that these are the most common victims, there are also comparatively young women – such as a pregnant 35-year-old – who are accused, found guilty and exiled. The implied conclusion is that the problem is rooted in a very old and widespread fear: "a visceral terror of women's procreative power and sexuality".¹⁴ Of this seemingly ubiquitous attitude Badoe writes: "... such is the level of anxiety surrounding women's sexuality that when it operates independently of male control, it becomes synonymous with dangerous, destructive forces".¹⁵ Exacerbating the horror of the experiences the subjects had survived is the manner in which the majority of these women admit to the charges of their being 'witches'. The viewer is given the impression that these confessions have little to do with actually having practised the use of magic, and are rather necessitated by circumstance: some subjects had to choose between confession and death, and no woman is granted refuge in Gambaga unless she admits to being a witch.

In addition to the women in the camp, Badoe also interviews the Gambarrana – the chief of the village, who oversees the

14 Badoe, 'What Makes a Woman a Witch?' 40

15 *ibid.*, 45.

camp. It is believed that he and the gods of Gambaga hold the power to neutralise the accused women's 'witchcraft', ensuring that they refrain from using magic whilst staying in the camp. In addition to having to confess their 'guilt' in order to be allowed into the camp, the 'witches' are required to work the Gambarrana's fields in order to earn their keep. The work is gruelling and occupies most of the day, and the women are not allowed to leave the village without the Gambarrana's consent. In addition, if and when the time arrives that a woman is allowed to move back to her community, she – or more likely, the male under whose protection she falls – is required to 'pay' the Gambarrana. In the early stages of the film, the Gambarrana seems intent on creating an impression of his altruism and generosity, emphasising his kindness in protecting these 'witches' and reminding the director how privileged she is when he allows her to film a certain ritual, because, he claims, many before have requested the right to document the process, and been denied access. As the story progresses, it becomes apparent that the arrangement at the camp is much more to this man's benefit than he would initially have the viewer believe. Badoe discusses the role he plays in keeping the system in place, and the material profits he gains. To her credit, however, she resists depicting him purely as a villain or an opportunist, explaining that in a situation as complex as this one, one cannot think simply in terms of 'good guys and bad guys'.

The film's nuanced view of the situation and those involved is complemented by the sensitive portrayal of its subjects. Although the processes of editing and translation necessarily shape the narrative, each of the 'witches' is encouraged to share her story with the director "in her own words ... I would encourage the subject to tell me whatever she thought was important in her life in any order that she wanted."¹⁶ The subjects are given a certain amount of agency, which is visually complemented by shots where they face the camera directly. Badoe highlights how the women react differently to their situations, both emotionally and practically: amidst feelings of fear, loss, rejection, hope and anger, many women yearn to return to their communities, but one woman decides to remain in the 'witch camp' where she has raised her children in order to continue supporting their education there. Thus, the film's

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 41.

subjects are depicted with empathy and respect, as autonomous people – rather than as victims.

Finally, the film exhibits a sense of social responsibility in that it avoids offering only a solitary and isolated glance at a troubling situation. Besides visits to a number of villages in the area, footage of the capital city Accra is also included, where interviews with locals reveal that the belief in witchcraft (and the probability of women being accused of it as a way of blaming them for various problems) is not exclusive to poverty-stricken provincial areas. Furthermore, four years after the initial footage (which makes up the majority of the film) was recorded, Yaba Badoe and the film crew return to the ‘witch camp’ to observe how the situation has developed in the meantime, and to visit some of the women who have subsequently returned to their communities. As is perhaps inevitable, some things have improved, while others have worsened. In some cases, the effects of the previous filming process had somewhat improved the lives of the subjects: one woman, for example, explains that through being filmed (by Badoe and others), she has become something of a local celebrity. In others, women who have succeeded in returning to their communities have been placed under a variety of severe restrictions by the local chiefs. While not all of the changes that occur between these visits are positive, the film does not offer only a bleak vision of the situation. Some progress is noted – for example, a new chief in the village of Kparigu seems to espouse a far more enlightened approach to the matter than his predecessors did: when a woman in his village is accused of witchcraft, he tells us, he seeks to understand and resolve the underlying social and personal problems that might have led to the accusation, rather than merely sending the woman away if she is ‘proven’ (through ritual) to be a witch. Through attempting to show the situation in such a balanced manner, the film manages not only to criticise and draw attention to a problem, but also to document the potential for positive change – leaving the viewer, and the subjects, with a feeling of what might even tentatively be called hope.

In conclusion, *The Witches of Gambaga* illustrates a complicated situation with sensitivity, a sense of responsibility and a certain amount of empathy for all the individuals involved.

While it would be idealistic and naïve to hope that the world could be saved through documentary films, such balanced portrayals as this could well contribute to raising not only awareness but also understanding in viewers, and encourage other documentary filmmakers to approach their subjects with similar consideration and respect.

***Pure Blood*, Impure Aesthetics: Questions of White Identity in a Post-Apartheid Vampire Film**

JACQUES DE VILLIERS

Near the end of Ken Kaplan's *Pure Blood* (2001), two Afrikaner family members – Eugene and Fanus – give voice to contrasting opinions about the white person's place in a changing South Africa:

Eugene: There's a future out there that I don't know anything about. I don't fit in.

Fanus: I don't know what's going to happen to us. What I do know – I wanna be a part of it.

Emerging in the film's final minutes, these opposing statements represent the thematic culmination of an anxious concern about identity and belonging in post-apartheid South Africa; a concern that has been simmering throughout the film. It is a preoccupation that is signalled in *Pure Blood's* very title, which signifies two quite different, seemingly separate, concerns. The notion of 'pure blood' connotes the discourse of racial purity and eugenics. But as the title of the film it also references a long line of blood-smeared vampire/horror flicks and television series: *Blood and Roses* (1960, Roger Vadim), *Blood Bath* (1966, Jack Hill, Stephanie Rothman), *Taste the Blood of Dracula* (1970, Peter Sasdy), *Blood Ties* (1991, Jim McBride), *Innocent Blood* (1992, John Landis), *True Blood* (2008–2014, HBO) and others.

As one may discern from the title of this essay, Kaplan's film draws on both associations. Purportedly falling within the horror category, *Pure Blood* nevertheless treats the genre with a good degree of satire and irreverence by envisioning vampires in the guise of pasty, right-wing Afrikaners out to reclaim apartheid's 'glory days'. The plot centres on a supposedly deceased apartheid-era general who, unbeknownst to his family, has managed to preserve his undead essence in a vial of blood. Seeking, in his words, to "bring back the days of glory" and "bring shelter and protection to our people", The General passes his essence onto (and into) his son, Fanus. It seems Fanus was born of an 'unspoilt' mother (to the extent that she had not slept with any other man before The General) and so the pure blood of the title – blood that The General needs "to keep the line going" – runs through his veins.

One can already see that certain essentialist and eugenicist notions of identity are being set up for satirical ends. My aim in this essay is to dissect the ways in which *Pure Blood* executes this critique and how such a process articulates a fascinatingly ambivalent and uncertain notion of what constitutes 'white' identities¹ in post-apartheid South Africa. Despite being bedevilled by some undeniably weak writing and lacklustre filmmaking, *Pure Blood* launches a fascinating critique against conservative notions of white identities in the early 21st century by demonstrating the fallacy of an essentialist, 'pure' notion of identity. What makes the film particularly interesting is the fact that, as if in support of its theme, its own sense of identity is decidedly hybrid: a dizzying blur of genres, narrative conventions and aesthetics. *Pure Blood*, it turns out, is anything but pure. In this manner the film highlights two distinct approaches to questions of identity: one rooted in a pre-formed, essentialist notion of identity as fixed, and another that views identities as flexible, subject to outside influence and change, lived from moment to moment and often experienced interstitially – the latter notion synonymous with the work of Homi K. Bhabha. While *Pure Blood* encodes the former in markedly negative terms, its expression of the latter is more ambivalent and falls short of wholesale endorsement. Indeed, while the critique of the essentialist position is consciously worked out by the filmmakers and makes up the film's subject

¹ I use 'identities' in the plural to encompass both English and Afrikaans designations and also to stress how all identities are hybrid, fluctuating and highly complex phenomena that cannot simply be reduced to one fixed designation. When I use 'identity' in the singular it is usually to contemplate a single individual or character's sense of personal identity, identity as a discourse, or to assume the logic of the essentialist discourse about identity in order to critique it.

matter, I will argue that *Pure Blood's* engagement with hybrid modes of identity – expressed predominantly through the film's aesthetics and form – is less a conscious choice than the result of genuine uncertainty around what constitutes 'white South African' identities and, by extension, white South African filmmaking in the contemporary political and cultural moment.

Drawing on this latter concern I examine how *Pure Blood* raises questions of identity that not only reflect one's personal sense of self, but also mirror what I take to be a crisis of identity in the local film industry. *Pure Blood* is a telling product of the difficulty filmmakers experience in knowing what kind of films to make and what kind of audience(s) to make them for, a problem further compounded by the fact that the film industry, like most industries in South Africa, is relatively untransformed and still dominated by a white minority. I therefore bookend my discussion by reading *Pure Blood* as symptomatic of a wider uncertainty within the local industry; a reading that will hopefully spur a more widespread debate and analysis of the place, practice and aesthetics of local South African filmmaking.

The identity question in contemporary South Africa

Before moving to an in-depth exploration of the film itself, I will first examine the more general question of how we understand cultural identities as emerging and finding articulation in a post-apartheid, and more broadly post-colonial, context. In doing so, I want to lay out some basic theoretical guidelines that will help to place and conceptualise *Pure Blood's* politics of identity.

Eugene's claim that he won't "fit in", and Fanus's desire to be "part of" a new South Africa typify opposing ends of the white discourse about identity as it circulates in post-apartheid South Africa. To crudely summarise, we could characterise the conservative stance as pessimistic, alienated and fraught with anxiety over the opening up of barriers to a culturally and racially heterogeneous majority of 'others' – groups and individuals who were kept separate by the apartheid regime, but who now carry a no-holds-barred licence to mingle with the white *volk*.² This position reveals a simultaneous concern over pollution and exclusion: the conservative asks how one is meant

² In Afrikaans, literally 'people', but referring more generally to 'nation'.

to preserve a sense of ‘white’ identity under such ‘contaminating’ circumstances. At the same time, even if whites were somehow able to retain a ‘pure’ identity (whatever that might mean), what significant cultural and political position could such a minority hope to occupy in a post-apartheid environment that recognises the diverse rights of a majority black constituency? This is essentially the view of the old apartheid wolf, now dressed in far less impressive clothing.

The more liberal position recognises this situation – uncertainty over the consequences of racial mixing – but appears more optimistic. It sees the situation as representing a boon of reform and an opportunity to reshape the very notion of ‘white identity’ into something engaged, unfixed and hybridised; a liberating situation precisely because it allows one to become imbricated with other groups and individuals.

Taking a closer look, let us first consider the essentialist notion of identity – that signified by Eugene’s comment – which dominated apartheid-era discourse on race relations. With its anxiety over the ‘non-white other’s’ cultural influence, this view perceives identity as reified and formed in advance: to be, for instance, an ‘Afrikaner’ or ‘white’ implies being ‘pure Afrikaner’, ‘pure white’, or not being ‘Afrikaner’ or ‘white’ at all. Such rhetoric will be familiar to anyone with even a passing acquaintance with the dominant trends in South African political discourse pre-1994. My focus here is on the attendant *anxiety of identity* present in the essentialist discourse. During apartheid, the need to preserve a “pure white race”³ was accompanied by a great fear of intermixing with other racial and cultural designations, with the purported consequence that one’s own identity – which one is innately incapable of sharing with the racialised ‘other’ – will become diluted and lost. To combat this perceived threat, an essentialist discourse around ideas of a ‘pure’ Afrikaner *volk*, its values and beliefs is further entrenched through the material and ideological enforcement of apartheid policies.⁴ Coercive attempts are made to freeze ‘culture’ as something predetermined, rather than being active and open-ended with shifting boundaries of recognition and difference that stress continual change.

By contrast, Fanus’s view sees subject formation – defined as the formation of one’s self-identity – as hybrid and taking place

3 A phrase from the National Party’s 1948 *Report of the Colour-Question Commission*, and a key forerunner text to apartheid’s fully-fledged implementation that same year. Quoted in David Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*. Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers (2009), 21.

4 For a sense of just how firmly a social Darwinian rhetoric was entrenched in the power structures of apartheid-era South Africa, consider a survey conducted by Heribert Adam in 1966-67 amongst the white elite in government and business. Among other findings, Adam’s survey revealed that 74% of the whites questioned considered there to be differences in ‘skull formation and brain structure’ between whites and blacks, while 80% believed there to be a difference in ‘hereditary character predispositions’. Statistics quoted in Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, 86.

in the spaces *between* recognisable categories. Such a theory of identity poses a major threat to the validity of essentialist discourse, which is rooted in binarised terms such as self/other, male/female, white/black, and predicated on the entrenched separation of terms. However, as Homi Bhabha has argued in the introduction to *The Location of Culture*, rather than working within the age-old boundaries and paying respect to coherent, fully realisable definitions of black/white, male/female, coloniser/colonised, indigenous/foreign, etc., what we need instead in the post-colonial and post-apartheid era is a theoretical project that analyses the *blurring* of perceived boundaries of identity and the ontological inbetween-ness (the interstices) experienced in such a blurring – a project that would “think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities”, focusing instead “on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences”.⁵ From this perspective, subject formation escapes the traditional confines of binarised cultural demarcations and is instead negotiated in the space between comfortable – that is, ideologically calcified – identity constructs. Furthermore, identity is subject to change, having to constantly negotiate new and opposing influences, trends and norms. In this sense it becomes something akin to a performance – dynamic, embodied, experienced from moment to moment, rather than something that is predetermined and set in stone. As Jacqueline Maingard asserts, even though identity “is specifically located, positioned, it is also unstable, unfixed, constructed in difference”.⁶

So where does this leave someone who self-identifies as ‘white’ – be it ‘Afrikaner’ and/or ‘English’?⁷ The question brings us back to Kaplan’s *Pure Blood* and the way it displaces fixed notions of identity and the characters’ anxieties over not “fit[ting] in”. In interviews surrounding the film, Kaplan made reference to this sense of displacement and its attendant critique of an outmoded, essentialist discourse about identity:

[With *Pure Blood*] I am talking really about white South Africans, who never thought the sun would ever set on their little corner of sunny Africa. But now things have changed and some are fearful, some are clinging to the past and all of us are trying to figure out where we fit in to this new country and its new democracy.⁸

5 Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge (2004), 2, his emphasis.

6 Maingard, Jacqueline. ‘Framing South African National Cinema and Television,’ in *To Change Reels: Film and Culture in South Africa*, edited by Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela. Detroit: Wayne State University Press (2003), 130.

7 Such neat delineations are necessary simplifications: applying an interstitial approach, the line between where ‘English’ ends and ‘Afrikaner’ begins (and vice versa) is never as clear as these categories would suggest.

8 Kaplan, Ken. ‘Cue Magazine Interview’ (July 2000). <http://www.icon.co.za/~bioskope/pureblood/interview.htm>

For Kaplan, *Pure Blood* was a chance “to make a feature film that reflects the state-of-mind that created apartheid and look at those people today and what they’re going through”.⁹

If the film’s racist right-wing antagonists react to the changing South Africa by clinging ever more firmly to an essentialist notion of identity, *Pure Blood*’s own formal construction reflects a fully-fledged identity crisis. Purportedly a vampire/horror film, *Pure Blood* has frequently been marketed as a typical genre flick, and this would of course be fine ... if *Pure Blood* could stick to a genre. Instead, the film exists ambivalently in the spaces between genres: it just as frequently interpolates screwball comedy, quirky romance and a host of other stylistic asides into its particular brand of gory, over-the-top horror. Similar ambivalence is discernable in its eclectic soundtrack and a narrative structure riddled with subplots and character motivations that frequently slide into bizarre, seemingly inconsequential (and occasionally incoherent) asides. In a film that takes white post-apartheid South Africa as its focus, these eccentricities could easily be taken as a pertinent expression of identity crisis, but they are doubly ironic in a narrative concerned explicitly with eugenic purity. *Pure Blood* therefore represents a combative discursive site, which pits an essentialist, predetermined, eugenicist discourse about identity (reflected in the beliefs of many of the characters) against the film’s own hybrid, performative and joyously eclectic structure and style.

The obscure(d) object of purity

Despite enthusiastic governmental endorsement and financing (in the form of the Interim Film Production Fund),¹⁰ the participation of high-profile South African producer Anant Singh and some moderately promising performances at local and international film festivals,¹¹ *Pure Blood* never received a theatrical release in South Africa. While it holds a markedly niche overseas presence (having been sold to the independent masters of schlock, Troma Entertainment, who released it straight to video in the States) it remains all but forgotten in its country of origin. Because *Pure Blood* has had such a low profile locally, I will try and lay out the plot in some detail, noting however that it is a plot which is labyrinthine in its narrative

9 Kaplan, ‘Cue Magazine Interview.’

10 For a more detailed account of this endorsement, see ‘Videovision Entertainment Draws First Blood at South African Film Market’, <http://www.icon.co.za/~bioskope/pureblood/press.htm>

11 SA Independent Film described it as “the find of the [Cape Town Sithengi 2000] Film Festival” and overseas it won Best First Film Award at the Roma Fanta fest. See ‘Sithengi 2000: An Overview’ <http://www.icon.co.za/~bioskope/pureblood/sithengi.htm> and ‘Lucio Fulci Award – Rome Fanta Fest’ <http://www.icon.co.za/~bioskope/pureblood/press2.htm>

structure, often quite shoddy in conveying its plot points and frequently given to thematic and narrative asides that seem to have little to do with the main story arc. A simple narrative encapsulation can be fraught with interpretive difficulty, and so the following description balances clarity of description with an attempt to stress the incongruousness of much of what transpires.

Set in an unidentified contemporary town against a backdrop of power station cooling towers and huge power pylons, *Pure Blood* centres on a nameless Afrikaner family, comprising protagonist Fanus (a man in his early to mid twenties), Gertrude (Fanus's mother) and their live-in domestic worker, Hope. Fanus dreams of working in the Defence Force like his supposedly long-dead father, The General; instead he ekes out a living as a constable – work which amounts to little more than watering plants when he is not sitting idly at his desk. His drudgery is shattered with the arrival of Eugene – Fanus's much older half-brother, long presumed dead. It's never really made clear how Eugene supposedly died, nor is Fanus all that interested in finding out where his half-brother has been all these years. Fanus seems equally oblivious to the smouldering tension between Eugene and Gertrude, although we soon discover that the two are in love. This situation seems excusable to Eugene (though Gertrude is more hesitant) because Gertrude is not his biological mother and because he is now apparently dying (although the film never specifies why or from what). Meanwhile, The General is in fact still around in undead form, first as a vial of blood and later as a ghost and/or vampire (*Pure Blood* is never quite clear on whether he is one or the other). Eugene is soon summoned by his father, who commands his eldest son to bring Fanus to him – Fanus being of 'pure blood', since The General locked away his (white) virgin wife, Gertrude, until she had conceived and given birth.

At this point the plot loses focus. Fearing The General's imminent return, Gertrude commits suicide, which gives rise to an entirely new plotline. After his mother is declared dead by a doctor, Fanus is left shocked and devastated. Eugene, who has been given some of The General's blood to 'prepare' Fanus, instead injects the blood into Gertrude in the hope that he can bring her back to life. He's in luck! Gertrude's death

is reversed and she promptly rises from her deathbed and continues with her domestic chores. Fanus, apparently prone to extreme suspension of disbelief, takes this development in his stride, assuming a misdiagnosis on the doctor's part. When he simultaneously starts seeing a much younger woman around the house, he assumes disapprovingly that this is a girlfriend Eugene has brought round. What he doesn't realise is that the woman is actually a sultrier, youthful manifestation of Gertrude, formed from her long-suppressed bitterness towards The General. Whereas the older Gertrude is repressed and withdrawn, her younger self is brazen and reckless, not to mention downright evil; soon she begins seducing visitors to the house and stabbing them with a syringe, which turns them into zombie-vampire hybrids (though, much like The General, their ghoulish designations remain unclear).

Gertrude's stabbing scenes ably demonstrate *Pure Blood's* genre inconsistencies. The first is staged in the suspenseful and violent conventions of the traditional horror film, but this contrasts markedly with a later scene, which, set to a rollicking concertina and piano arrangement, seems to obey the conventions of physical slapstick comedy – as we shall see, such changes of mood and tone are endemic to the *Pure Blood* experience. Whilst turning her victims into the walking dead, the younger Gertrude convinces Eugene to undergo the same treatment, which he does in exchange for eternal life and a chance to defeat The General. Soon Eugene, (the young) Gertrude and her victims are all part of the zombie-vampire-undead collective. Hilariously, in another of the film's radical tonal shifts, they use their newfound immortality to blockade themselves inside the house and spend all day boozing. Fed up with this hedonism, the young Gertrude convinces Eugene to inject his corrupting blood into a series of cakes that the older Gertrude baked before her 'death'. The plan is to serve these at a police fair in order to possess the officers and turn the law over to their side. In amongst these developments, The General's original racial-purity plotline attempts to reassert itself but is interrupted (though not entirely wrapped up) when Eugene easily dispatches The General, stabbing his father to death and taking his place.

Pure Blood's final third concludes in relatively straightforward fashion. Fanus finally becomes aware of the

undead goings-on and teams up with Hope, who has thus far fulfilled a token presence in the film by offering discreet ‘superstitious’ words of warning, or else idling in her room, inexplicably passive towards a burgeoning undead threat. Together with his obligatory love interest, Becky, Fanus faces off against the right-wing forces of evil, thwarting Eugene and Gertrude’s plans by destroying the cakes, but not before Hope is shot and left for dead. Becky is hospitalised after unwittingly eating a slice of the cake and survives her ordeal, although she bears some disturbing signs of vampirism. Becky and Fanus are soon forced to flee their former lives after Fanus becomes a key suspect in a little girl’s murder – the girl, of course, fell victim to the vampiric hoard.

Now running a towing service and living in a trailer, Fanus and Becky respond one evening to a car crash that brings about a final confrontation with Fanus’s undead family. Eugene provides one final revelation: he is, in fact, Fanus’s father – he and Gertrude had had an affair right under The General’s nose. Fanus is thus the product of familial incest, an ironic and biting commentary on The General’s ideology of genetic purity. After a physical struggle in which Fanus comes close to being stabbed to death by the young Gertrude, her older self stabs her younger self, killing them both and thus reconciling the two halves, while sparing Fanus a similar fate. Eugene, now alone, voices the aforementioned deep-seated insecurity about his own place in post-apartheid South Africa and hands his gun to Fanus, in the hope that he will shoot him – after a moment’s hesitation Fanus complies. With no family left, Fanus seeks to begin anew with Becky. He places a ring on her finger and, unlike Eugene, expresses cautious optimism about their future: “I don’t know what’s going to happen to us. What I do know: I wanna be a part of it.”

“Not actually a genre movie”

At its conclusion, *Pure Blood* seems to sympathise with Fanus’s optimism over Eugene’s anxieties of identity. Indeed, the ending is a typical example of what Fredric Jameson has labelled a ‘symbolic act’, understood here as an action or activity that invents an “imaginary or formal ‘solution’ to unresolvable social contradictions”.¹² In *Pure Blood*, this is achieved through

¹² Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press (1981), 79.

the eradication of Fanus's entire family, which eases the protagonist's integration into the 'new South Africa' through an effacement of his guilt-stained past as benefactor of the apartheid system. The ring he slips onto Becky's finger is a gesture to begin afresh, to build a new family unburdened by a troubled history. But such a neat and idealistic resolution is at odds with the instability evident throughout the film, both in *Pure Blood's* narrative structure and its aesthetics.

In addition to the twists and turns that make up *Pure Blood's* chaotic narrative structure – not to mention the film's vagueness over what apparition the undead horde are meant to constitute (vampire, zombie or some hybrid of the two) – the film harbours a range of bizarre subplots, which include a tacked-on sentimental recollection of Fanus's dead dog (named Hitler), a frequent but bizarre bridging of scene transitions with repeated close-ups of ants in an ant-farm¹³ and a truly peculiar subplot involving a hotshot cop who electrocutes dead bodies (presumably, in a movie indexed within the horror genre, to make sure that the bodies remain properly dead). *Pure Blood* provides no clear answer on this point. Indeed many of these inclusions feel decidedly heterogeneous and poorly integrated into the main storyline.

A similar lack of focus is evident in the film's frequent shifting of mood and genre, never settling on one particular emotional tone for very long. While it should be noted that Kaplan himself is quite clear in insisting that "*Pure Blood* is not actually a genre movie" (my emphasis),¹⁴ this only means that *Pure Blood* doesn't stick to *one* genre. Whether it is the strange slapstick comedy that frames the doctor's stabbing and possession of his wife or the film's incongruous and eclectic soundtrack – featuring everything from rock hits like The Springbok Nude Girls' "Blue Eyes", 'traditional' accordion compositions, synthesised B-grade horror stingers, upbeat reggae instrumentals and 80s Afrikaans *treffers*¹⁵ such as "Ramaja" by Glenys Lynne – *Pure Blood's* decentering hybridity indexes genres and moods as if Kaplan were ruffling through a flipbook with one hand, while tuning a radio with the other.

However, this hybridity is strangely apt in satirising the antagonistic General's eugenicist beliefs. Just prior to the start of the film's main credit montage, which only begins about ten

13 This could be read as a potential side-glance to the famous opening sequence in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) and that U.S. film's critique of (white) middle class, suburban manners and mores. *Pure Blood* also seems to evoke Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991) in its small town setting and repeated shots of the local power plant – though in typically fragmented fashion neither the images of the ants or the power plant serve any clear thematic or narrative function, coming across as more of a tacked-on afterthought than a central thematic component of the film.

14 See Kaplan, Ken. 'SAFilm.org Interview with Ken Kaplan', <http://www.icon.co.za/~bioskope/pureblood/interview2.htm>

15 Colloquial term for popular radio hit song.

- 16 This misplaced use of a low-budget synthesiser score to evoke the horror genre was probably not deliberate parody. Kaplan ran out of funds prior to the completion of post-production – the stage at which music is usually scored and matched to picture – and his choice of music and arrangement was probably the result of severe monetary restrictions. For more on the film's budgetary difficulties, see Kaplan, 'SAFilm.org Interview'.

minutes into the film, we witness a flashback to The General and Gertrude's wedding day. As cheesy synthesised music attempts to convey a mood of menace and suspense,¹⁶ The General commands Gertrude to strip in front of him. Appraising her body, he says chillingly: "You're just a child. I'll be the first, good. No one else will have you." The film returns to the present as a shaken Gertrude – whose memory triggered the flashback – turns a photo of her former husband face down. We then cut to Eugene, who spits at his father's portrait as it hangs on the wall, before hearing The General's last words in voice-over: "You will bear me a son of the purest blood."

No sooner has he made his pronouncement than the film's soundtrack flips to reggae-infused, trumpet-toting dance music, signalling the start of *Pure Blood's* opening credit sequence – a cutting rejoinder to the store The General places in the idea of 'purity'. Whereas the very beginning of the film starts with brief, sombre-looking upfront credits – dark-red text splashed onto the screen, accompanied by an ominous lurching sound and ever-present bass drone – these same dark-red titles, clearly indicative of the horror genre, at this point bob incongruously up and down in time to the funky music – music more suited to a beach-set summer blockbuster. Although the horror genre will keep trying to assert its identity throughout the film, here its presence is afforded token status via the continued emphasis on blood: the dancing onscreen credits are interspersed with close-ups of blood sachets (marked 'pure blood') as they are carted down hospital corridors. The 'pure blood' label has, at this point, already established itself within the horror genre (as per the title credits), as well as with The General's eugenicist notions of Afrikaner 'purity', but the title montage then radically recodes and parodies these associations by placing the sachets (literally) in the hands of black nurses, who shuttle the blood from room to room. Here, the signifier of racial purity comes into 'contaminating' contact with, and is indeed in the control of, the racialised 'other'. In the same way that the funky music, the rapidly cut montage and the bizarrely animated dancing credits destabilise the horror genre, the connection evoked between 'white' blood and black skin serves as a succinct example of the way *Pure Blood* undermines the eugenicist politics.

Clearly the aesthetics and symbolic juxtapositions that surround The General's desire for "a son of the purest blood" are anything but pure. What we get instead is a disorientating hybridisation of genres and onscreen signifiers. This disorientation finds personification in Fanus, who is the focus of the montage. Forced to undress and change into a hospital robe, shuttled between several black nurses and eventually laid out on a hospital bed in order to get his blood taken, Fanus appears visibly disoriented and uncertain for the duration of the sequence. Playing off the racial trope that privileges white/colonising agency over black/colonised passivity, not to mention active male agency over a passive female one, this sequence reverses the roles: the white male protagonist is defenceless and at the mercy of a public institution that signifies as exclusively black and female.¹⁷

The anxiety of identity

As Fanus's presence in this opening sequence suggests, *Pure Blood's* hybrid aesthetic and narrative characteristics – blurring of genre, disorientating narrative shifts and eclectic soundtrack – should be understood as working in relation and giving expression to the characters' own fractured sense of identity.

This is evident in both the film's younger, more liberal characters (Becky, Fanus), as well as the older, conservative antagonists (Eugene, The General, Gertrude): in *Pure Blood*, *everybody* is undergoing some kind of identity crisis. In a film intrinsically concerned with exploring the crises confronting post-apartheid white identity, it is of course fitting that one of the characters should literally split her personality: Gertrude is divided into her present-day submissive, remorseful self and her younger, lascivious apparition, and embodies (twice over) the unsuccessful disavowal of white complicity with the brutality of apartheid.

But despite the obviousness of this separation, I would suggest that it is Fanus who bares the most fascinatingly *ambivalent* traits of split identification. While he tries to reconcile his troubling heritage of a racist past with his desire to get ahead in the post-apartheid environment, he also doubts what relevance he has to the new political dispensation.

17 One should not discount the way gender shapes Fanus's sense of identity. Even though it is the category of race that *Pure Blood* engages with most emphatically, it is interesting to note the ways in which Fanus's gendered signification fails to meet normative masculine tropes and the manner in which these compound his feelings of inferiority and displacement.

As such, he exhibits an attendant sense of inferiority. The first time we see Fanus on the job he is presented as a constable who never seems to leave the police station, relegated to watering plants in the police chief's office. His black superior treats him as little more than human clutter: "That's enough of that. You can go now, Constable. I've got a police station to run." Fanus's redundancy, uncertain sense of belonging and bristling under the changing order of things is refracted in his seemingly petty gripe about the new naming of ranks: "They got black officers now. They don't call them what they used to. An inspector's the same as a sergeant used to be. A superintendent is like a, like a lieutenant. A commandant is now a *chief* superintendent ... Things are changing. You got to keep up with them or you're lost."

This emphasis on shifting positions of identity and their liminal interplay is ironically pertinent to a narrative whose central character is committed to the defence force and the national cause it represents. As the film reveals, however, national institutions – such as the defence force and the police force – signify different things to different people. The General feels the police should represent a bastion of the old, segregated South Africa. For the new police chief there is now a chance to "build the future", as he tells Fanus; a chance to forget the racist authoritarian history personified by Fanus's father. But what does it signify to Fanus? He is clearly proud of his professional station in life, going so far as to salute his uniformed appearance in the mirror before going to work. Kaplan is at pains to convey the store Fanus places in order and neatness, presenting a series of big close-ups in which Fanus buttons his jacket, straightens his tie and observes the star emblazoned on his police cap. These shots lead up to his self-salutation, a shot which Kaplan holds as Fanus stares at himself in the mirror, averting his eyes briefly as if having a second thought, thus urging us to ponder what exactly Fanus thinks he's saluting. Does he see himself following in the line of his male forbearers – at one point awkwardly boasting to the police chief, "I'm squad material, sir. It runs in my family" – or does he consider himself a man of the new South Africa, divorced from his tainted heritage?

The answer: Not quite one or the other. Fanus's identity is fundamentally interstitial. Although he is not entrenched in

conservative right-wing racism, he is nonetheless influenced by that ideology – as indicated by his disapproving remarks about black officers and the changing order of things. Yet he also actively participates in this new order – unlike his mother, or Eugene and his motley squad of zombie-vampires, who are content to kick back and remain blissfully hidden indoors. While Fanus attempts to incorporate two opposing positions into his own personal sense of identification and belonging, one senses that what he wants most of all is an establishment of order – a system that he can fit into. The attention he gives to his uniform and appearance is a performative attempt to embody his ego ideal.¹⁸ But, typical of the film's non-essentialist tendencies, *Pure Blood* shows how the positions of identity that we choose to align ourselves with are not fixed or stable: neither the uncontaminated, racially superior, exclusivist white subject of apartheid nor the liberal, productive, accommodating 'new South African' white are indefinitely fixed or 'true' outside of certain social, cultural and material forms of validation.

In this regard, it is worth considering the possibility that towards the end of the film, *Pure Blood* manifests, albeit in a visually comical way, the well-worn anxiety that the new political dispensation can only damage white South Africans' economic and social standing; that the new South Africa literally has no place for them. When Fanus and Becky lose their jobs in the police force and private security respectively and have to take up residence in a trailer, *Pure Blood* discards the middle class liberal image to instead stage the myth of the poor white. Both characters undergo a complete visual transformation: from well-dressed custodians of authority they are now comically stereotyped as 'trailer trash' through their clothing and caravan, inhabiting the mise-en-scène of the white subaltern on the peripheries of urban society. With nowhere else to go, whites like Becky and Fanus are reduced to lonely, drifting nomads. While this narrative twist makes clear that there is no solace in the liberal position, *Pure Blood* also reveals the flimsy construction of the conservative, segregationist, essentialist view of white identity. This critique climaxes near the end of the film when Fanus discovers that Eugene, and not The General, is actually his real father. Gertrude, in her caustic younger guise, spells this out by mocking The General's preoccupation with

18 For an argument of how ideologies and identities are enforced through a performative and material reiteration, see Louis Althusser's 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)' in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster. London: NLB (1971) and Saba Mahmood, 'Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject,' in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, edited by Ellen T. Amour and Susan M. St. Ville. New York: Columbia University Press (2006), 177-224.

eugenics: “After all The General did to ensure your blood would be pure. And in the end you’re just a mongrel, created out of our hate and perversion.” Much like the vampire of old, The General’s obsession with purity proves his undoing, tricked and killed by the ‘truth’ of Eugene and Gertrude’s conspiring incest. Purity, and with it the notion of fixed identity, is thus shown up as myth, constructed to serve white power’s ideological and politically motivated ends.

Eugene’s revelation and Gertrude’s assertion together offer an extreme example of the way in which the past is frequently narrativised by disavowing certain events and realities – visually represented in this instance by an until-now repressed flashback to Fanus witnessing his biological parents engaged in an incestuous primal scene. The revelation exposes the very taboo that must be disavowed by eugenicist and essentialist discourse, because it is the logical conclusion of both: incest.

The question of audience(s)

The film’s climax thoroughly unmoors Fanus’s sense of ontological anchorage and casts him adrift in a sea of ideological ambivalence and contradiction. The only way *Pure Blood* can forge a satisfying conclusion at this point is to disavow everything that Fanus has learnt and experienced – revelations about his identity that should shake him to the core. But such a clichéd resolution chafes against the rest of the film’s destabilising eclecticism. As I’ve indicated above, the manner in which *Pure Blood* constantly undercuts genre expectations strongly emphasises the film’s inclination towards hybrid, split and incompletely reconciled notions of identity. To this end I have argued that *Pure Blood*’s use (and sometimes misuse) of every element of film form mirrors the characters’ own crisis of identity.

Furthermore, I would argue that this also reflects the *filmmakers’* own uncertainty over the question of identity. While I can only speculate about how much of *Pure Blood*’s aesthetic and narrative incongruity is a deliberate critique of conservative notions of white identity, I would suggest that Kaplan and his predominantly white collaborators might be articulating an uncertain sense of their *own* identities, both as individuals and filmmakers. Fanus’s final line (“I don’t know

what's going to happen to us ...") reveals a matching uncertainty over questions of identity and belonging that resonates with Kaplan's own statement that: "All of us are trying to figure out where we fit in to this new country and its new democracy." In this sense, while *Pure Blood* critiques apartheid's outmoded, essentialist notion of identity, it also shares a great deal of its targets' anxious ambivalence about what roles white South Africans are expected to play and what positions they should adopt in the new socio-political dispensation. In short, the film critiques one discourse on white identity while also playing out the existential gap left in the wake of that discourse.

Pure Blood therefore profoundly communicates something of the unsettled, transitional character of white identities in post-apartheid South Africa. From a filmmaking point of view, it also tells us a great deal about South Africa's film industry and its relation to the predominantly white practitioners who work in it. While South Africa has witnessed incredible political and cultural change since 1994, socio-economic transformation has sadly lagged behind. Considering the overall political agenda and the relative inefficiency with which government has made good on its promise to right the wrongs of the past, the film industry is but one of many racially and economically untransformed cases in fields as diverse as mining, agriculture and commerce. But where it differs from most other industries is in its *creative* character, the manner in which any single film needs to appeal to a large viewing public in order to make back its considerable cost and, perhaps most central to my argument, its ability to represent and appeal to different identity groups – be they racial, cultural, religious, gendered or any other category. "There is no national cinema in South Africa,"¹⁹ writes Jacqueline Maingard, a statement that could be construed as negative but which should in fact be taken as an affirmation of the plurality of identities that make up the democratic post-apartheid discourse. There is no one cohesive national cinema, but a plethora of different voices that form a quilt-like figure representative of "the contested terrain of nation and identity in South Africa".²⁰ This falls in line with the interstitial notion of subject formation I outlined above, a notion of selfhood that represents a freeing up, diversifying and intermingling of different and often oppositional categories

19 Maingard, 'Framing South African National Cinema and Television,' 115.

20 Maingard, Jacqueline. *South African National Cinema*. London and New York: Routledge (2007), 1.

21 Maingard, 'Framing South African National Cinema and Television,' 130.

of identity. While I think this signals a positive development that is very much in line with a discourse of democratic equality and inclusiveness, it does point to the fact that “there is no fixed way forward, no fixed formula for framing national cinema and television in South Africa, *nor for its making*” (my emphasis).²¹ While Maingard considers the italicised portion of her argument from the point of view of financing and subsidy, I would additionally suggest that the lack of a “fixed way forward” for film production represents a source of considerable anxiety for a creative industry still very much dominated by a white minority.

To bring this back to *Pure Blood*, consider for a moment the degree to which the film's decentring is not simply reflective of a crisis of identity, but also demonstrative of the uncertainty white filmmakers feel around how best to appeal to a culturally and racially diverse film-going audience. Kaplan articulates an unease amongst certain post-apartheid white South Africans when he suggests that “all of us are trying to figure out where we fit in to this new country and its new democracy”. As a filmmaker he could just as well express a similar sentiment: “All of us [working in the film industry] are trying to figure out [how best to make films that appeal] ... to this new country and its new democracy.” Kaplan's awareness of this marketing conundrum is evident when he says, “the film had to be accessible and entertaining and I chose to write a dark comedy that kept far away from the obvious heavy political drama of those anti-apartheid movies from the 1980s”.²² In light of the fact that *Pure Blood* never received theatrical distribution, clearly his push for accessibility failed. Instead, his attempt to appeal to the local market clearly manifests an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink confusion that is reflective of an uncertainty over what an “accessible and entertaining” South African film ought to be.

22 Kaplan, 'Cue Magazine Interview', 4.

I would therefore suggest that in addition to reading *Pure Blood* as an articulation of white identities in flux, we should also understand it as symptomatic of an uncertainty over what kind of *cinematic* identity South Africa should be producing. A fledging and precariously financed and supported industry on the whole, the South African film industry has a long way to go before it can consolidate itself as a significant cultural and public presence, either within South Africa or on the

international screen. Tied to this struggling development is the desire to consolidate *what* will constitute and *who* will construct (a) 'South African' film. Underlying this unanswerable question are broader – but even more crucial – questions of identity and belonging: Who can or cannot partake in shaping national identity? What *is* national identity and can it (or should it) ever be thought of in the singular? Who can lay claim to (and thus represent) their country's historical and contemporary narratives? The multiple answers will be hotly and endlessly debated because, as a film like *Pure Blood* reveals, identities and their articulation are always split, always in flux, always being negotiated and are never conclusively settled.

1 Interview with Dirk de Villiers, *Snake Dancer* (DVD) Special Edition produced by Mondo Macabro, 2006.

“Braaivleis, rugby, sunny skies and ... Glenda Kemp!”: Erotica and the Contradictions of White South African Identity in the Film *Snake Dancer*

MARTHA EVANS

In 1975, when South African erotic dancer Glenda Kemp agreed to collaborate with Dirk de Villiers to make a film about her life, the director thought he had hit the jackpot. The country was abuzz with reports on the naughty artiste’s arrests for displays of public indecency, and the national Afrikaans newspaper, *Rapport*, had just voted the 29-year-old Kemp “newsmaker of the year”.² As De Villiers put it in a later interview: “Glenda had more publicity than the Prime Minister of the country at the time.”³

Things didn’t work out as the director had planned, but in retrospect *Snake Dancer*, as the film was titled, provides a fascinating glimpse into the psyche of white South Africa at the time. As the above slogan suggests, Kemp was intricately tied up with the pleasures (and pleasures denied) associated with life under apartheid, and she had a love-hate relationship with South African citizens.

To persuade Kemp that her life was worthy of a biopic, De Villiers showed the dancer a scrapbook with collected newspaper articles on the various scandals surrounding her career. Journalists had had a field day reporting on her antics. But reading about Kemp and watching her perform were two totally different experiences, and relatively few South Africans

2 Reuters, “Newsmaker strips again”, *The Miami News* (15 July 1975) <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2206&dat=19750715&id=ujo0AAAAIBAJ&sjid=hesFAAAAIBAJ&pg=3975,1625636>

3 Interview with Dirk de Villiers, *Snake Dancer* (DVD) Special Edition produced by Mondo Macabro, 2006.

were able to watch her in the flesh. The ban on striptease had forced her out of clubs and into private performance; in her recently (self) published autobiography, she recalls how she and her manager brother travelled throughout South Africa as a kind of “Bonny and Clyde” team, with the press in tow.⁴ The director sought to capitalise on the nation’s fascination with the lithe blonde dancer; he was so confident of the film’s success that he overextended himself to buy the rights to an international film and was set on starting up a movie company in New York. De Villiers formulated a plan to produce two versions of the film: an uncut production for overseas consumption, and a censored version for local audiences. His rationale – not unreasonable – was that, in South Africa, all those who had been denied the pleasure of watching Kemp’s dancing would now be able to enjoy her on screen, while overseas, the film’s erotic sequences would attract viewers en masse.⁵

Kemp’s reasons for collaborating with De Villiers were different. To the young wannabe actress, this seemed the opportunity of a lifetime. “This was a dream come true for me,” she recalls in her autobiography. “From a very young age I had wanted to be a movie star. Never did I dream I would be the star in my own movie of my own life. I could not wait for the cameras to start rolling.”⁶ The dancer’s performance, as some reviewers have noted, stood out. Though, today, her character is somewhat dated and seems like an American movie star imitation rather than an accurate depiction of a white South African woman living in apartheid South Africa, it is still clear that she could act.

The film begins with a brief view of Kemp’s childhood, recording her separation from her family and her “adoption” by well-meaning, religious foster parents. Glenda is depicted as a barefoot, carefree child who has a fascination with snakes and who takes up ballet, dreaming of dancing. After graduating from teacher’s training college, she eschews teaching for dancing, once she discovers that she can earn a pretty penny in Hillbrow’s go-go bars, to the disapproval of her foster parents and her fiancé, Ken, who eventually leaves her on account of what he sees as her immoral career. An unscrupulous club owner, Brannigan, notices her talent and manages to persuade the reluctant Glenda to not only work in his club but also to strip for special

4 Kemp-Harper, *Glenda Kemp: Snake Dancer*, 63.

5 In 1974 Dirk de Villiers directed *The Virgin Goddess*, an adaptation of the well-known story about a white woman washed ashore in the Eastern Cape in the 18th century. His version starred the Argentinian erotica star Isabel Sarli and her filmmaking partner Victor Bó. He thus had experience making and marketing an ‘exploitation’ film before *Snake Dancer*, another element to his lengthy and colourful directing career.

6 Kemp-Harper, *Glenda Kemp: Snake Dancer*, 78.

performances. Although she initially declares that she will never strip, she gives in when her brother gets into financial trouble, only to discover that she actually enjoys dancing naked. Glenda spices up her routine with the inclusion of a large python, to the horror of some of her fellow dancers. The gimmick is a success, however, and she fast becomes one of the most highly paid – and widely condemned – performers in apartheid South Africa. When the police raid Brannigan’s club, the pair take to the road, performing in private venues around the country. The dance sequences become more and more raunchy throughout the film and Kemp is eventually arrested for public indecency when an undercover policeman attends one of her shows. Although she is acquitted, Brannigan deserts her and her brother takes over as her manager until she is arrested again; and this time the outcome does not go her way. Feeling lonely, disillusioned and out of control, she calls upon Ken, who has remained loyal to her, but when he arrives at her apartment, flowers in hand, he finds that he is too late: in an obvious departure from her biography, Kemp is strangled to death by her pet pythons.

In spite of Kemp’s enthusiastic performance, the film made little impact. In South Africa, the public had limited interest in her acting ability and the film’s pre-publicity was overly cautious, emphasising the fact that “Glenda’s story”, as the film was dubbed, would be “family fare”. By all accounts, local audiences, wanting a raunchier and more authentic experience, lost interest and the film was a box-office flop. De Villiers’s plans for overseas success were similarly disappointed. The heyday of sexploitation films had come and gone, and De Villiers was too late. Hard-core pornography films had already flooded the American market – *Deep Throat*, released in 1972 (Gerard Damiano) led to the rise of what the *New York Times* termed “porno chic” – and, although Kemp’s antics were sometimes reported on overseas, there was not enough international interest in her to carry the film. *Snake Dancer* was thus a movie made in the wrong place at the wrong time. South African audiences wanted the international version, and overseas audiences were nonplussed by the amateurish production and relatively tame nude scenes.

But, to Kemp’s apparent alarm, the film has enjoyed a glowing afterlife. Released in 2006 as a special edition DVD

package by Mondo Macabro – purveyors of “rare world cinema” – it is referred to now as one of South Africa’s few cult classics. The (mostly) true story of Glenda Kemp makes for historically fascinating viewing, even if it does not fully realise the radical nature of Kemp as a cultural phenomenon. *Snake Dancer* serves instead as a bizarre record of white South Africa’s conflicted reaction to one of its more politically provocative figures. In addition, because the star plays herself, the film provides the only filmic archive of her inimitable style of dancing.

Kemp was partially trained in ballet – although not to the extent that the film suggests – and much of the film records her real-life erotic dance sequences, which, with today’s staid pole- and lap-dancing routines, are refreshingly distinctive. She was an Isadora Duncan figure, a free spirit who expressed herself artistically through an unrestrained form of dance. “I was a freedom dancer,” Kemp remembers in an interview with Genevieve Louw. “Don’t tell me, ‘Now you put your foot there, then you do that’; I just want to flow.”⁷ True enough, there is little technique to her dancing, but her movements are still oddly mesmerising. Although her stiff, raised shoulders give the dances a slightly torturous feel, her hip gyrations are hypnotic. The sequences are all the more enthralling because Kemp was so obviously enjoying herself. Even in film – which, as Daniel Nagrin has pointed out, is a medium not suited to recording the immediacy of dance not specifically choreographed for cinema⁸ – it is clear that she entered an ecstatic, trance-like state when she danced. It is this childlike pleasure in physicality that no doubt set her apart from other dancers and accounted for some of her fame.

But Kemp’s dancing was also politically provocative, and it is this characteristic more than any other that led to her notorious reputation. Her routines very often ridiculed South Africa’s moral and racial politics, a trait that the film perhaps doesn’t make enough of, caught as it is between a liberal and *verkrampte*⁹ view of the dancer, as well as fear of the censor. While *Snake Dancer* records the Calvinist outrage at dance routines involving religiously irreverent props – the famous serpent, affectionately known as Oupa, and a devilish hand puppet – Kemp also flouted the authorities in more far-

7 Glenda Kemp interview by Genevieve Louw; for a transcript of this interview, see: <http://artheat.net/project/december2008.html>

8 Nagrin, Daniel. 'Nine Points on Making Your Own Dance Video,' *Dance Theatre Journal* 6:1 (1988), 33.

9 Narrow-minded, hidebound, conservative.

reaching ways. One of her costumes – bloomers, braces and a Voortrekker *kappie*, the iconography of Afrikaner nationalism – was distinctly subversive. Removing these items in a striptease context poked fun at the figure of the Boer *volksvrou*.

Lauren Beukes's tribute to Kemp also recalls how, in 1973, the dancer deliberately painted herself with black body paint, wore an Afro wig and danced to African drumbeats for a much-publicised performance in Volksrust, a conservative Afrikaans *dorpie*¹⁰ that was up in arms over the stripper's impending visit.¹¹ The reaction to Kemp's performance suggested the extent to which racial and sexual politics remained intertwined. "Everybody expected me to sign my own death warrant and strip naked," Kemp recalls in her autobiography. "Nobody expected me to change my identity and dance my way into the apartheid laws."¹² The South African state legislated against a host of what were ironically termed "undesirable" acts. While laws such as the Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963 clamped down on the distribution of pornographic texts and shows, the earlier Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act forbade interracial sexual relations and marriage. Kemp's antics in Volksrust pointed to the absurdity of attempting to police sexual desire in this way. The audience played into her hands and some viewers reportedly raved about the act. A businessman, Pat Shipman, claimed, "Volksrust will never be the same again. New vistas have been opened." And another revelled in the politically incendiary nature of the show, stating: "This is better than contravening the Immorality Act."¹³ Such responses to Kemp, together with the general impatience with the state's paternalistic approach to material deemed "undesirable", suggest the conflicted stance of many white South Africans. While they bitterly lamented the absence of some of the freedoms associated with the democratic Western world (including participation in international sporting events, access to the availability of pornography and the freedom to gamble), it took some time before they voted in favour of real democracy in the 1992 whites-only referendum.

Snake Dancer includes a very general and tame reference to Kemp's famous Volksrust performance, most likely because more accurate recordings of the routine were chancy. According to Kemp, "even filming it in South Africa for the overseas version could have been risky".¹⁴ We do see a drumbeat dance

10 Small, normally rural town.

11 Beukes, Lauren. *Maverick: Extraordinary Women from South Africa's Past*. Cape Town: Oshun (2004).

12 Kemp-Harper, *Glenda Kemp: Snake Dancer*, 69.

13 In Hopkins, Pat. *Cringe, the Beloved Country*. Cape Town. Zebra Press (2003), 48.

14 Author interview with Glenda Kemp, 20 January 2013.

sequence with backing dancers dressed in Afro wigs, but Kemp never appears in black body paint, and the dance appears as a standard routine rather than the more politicised dig at the racial views of the state that post-apartheid writers such as Beukes and Hopkins have focused on.

In another real-life taunt, Kemp threatened to “strip to the bone” in a public venue, and an expectant policeman did not get the joke when she removed everything but a black body stocking with a white skeletal pattern sown onto it. He arrested her even though she had not contravened any law. The following morning the case was thrown out of court, but Kemp remembers the experience of unjust arrest as being politically enlightening. “How my heart bled for the black people of South Africa,” she claims in her autobiography.

Kemp was seen as so subversive that, according to Richard Carver, she provoked one of the few and bizarre instances of direct government interference in the early days of South African television. In the late 1970s there were apparently plans for her to appear on a panel television programme, but an enquiry from the Prime Minister’s office persuaded the South African Broadcasting Corporation to cancel the entire show. As Carver explains, “in right-wing puritan circles the introduction of television had been greeted with: ‘I suppose that before long we’ll be having Glenda Kemp on the box.’”¹⁵

While the film overlooks the real political value of some of Kemp’s acts, it does lament the state’s approach to censorship. This was typical of white South Africa at the time: it tended to complain about the state’s fear of the supposedly corruptive pleasures of the Western world (television, gambling, pornography), but said very little about the oppressive racial politics that subjugated the majority of the population. This was particularly true of the more liberal print media, and Kemp became a convenient means for it to voice its frustration over the state’s paternalistic approach to white citizens, which perhaps accounts for her popular status. “Just look at these disgusting pictures,” a *Scope* magazine caption accompanying a tasteful 1970s Kemp photo shoot decried, in an indirect accusation against the state’s interpretation of nudity as “undesirable”.¹⁶

The tension between the artist and the state forms a kind sub-theme throughout the film’s narrative. As was the case with

15 Richard Carver, ‘South Africa’ in *Who Rules the Airwaves? Broadcasting in Africa*, edited by Richard Carver and Ann Naughton. Article 19, Index of Censorship (1995).

16 *Scope*, ‘The girl who wiggled her way out of a teaching job.’ (1973).

her real-life court cases – in which, famously, the renowned artist Walter Battiss vouched for the aesthetic value of her performances – Kemp pleads for the court to see her acts as artistic rather than indecent. In the film, her character explains: “I don’t spend the forty minutes stripping. I act. I mime. I dance.”

While this mirrored Kemp’s real-life defence of her work, as a biopic *Snake Dancer* is somewhat deficient, mainly because De Villiers was working within the sexploitation genre. Kemp’s recent autobiography fills in some of the gaps in the film. In addition to overlooking Kemp’s subversive role in the country, the film narrative skips over many interesting aspects of her life, including her interesting childhood. We learn that Kemp was adopted at a young age, but there are no depictions of the heartbreaking years spent in an orphanage, where Kemp recalls the sadness of being reduced to “number 16”. In reality, her ‘adoption’ came much later than the film depicts and the section of the film focusing on her childhood serves mainly to draw a distinction between Kemp’s rural upbringing and the potentially corrupting influences of the city. This is typical of the traditional sexploitation story, which as Pennington points out, emphasises “the perils of an innocent country girl lost and debauched in the city”.¹⁷

¹⁷ Pennington, Jody W. *The History of Sex in American Film*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group (2007), 23.

The film thus hurries to emphasise the more titillating aspects of the Kemp figure, constructing her instead as a male fantasy: a demure and naïve young woman who simply enjoyed taking off her clothes. As many writers have noted, part of the fascination with Kemp stems from this improbable-seeming motivation, which the film partially misrepresents. De Villiers concocted the detail of Kemp turning to stripping in order to help her brother out of a gambling debt. The dancer’s repeated “no” to Brannigan’s attempts to persuade her to do “special shows” turns to a “yes” once she finds that her brother is in financial dire straits. Glenda’s spiralling morality provides a second, contradictory sub-theme, and the figure of Ken, her first love (no doubt based on Kyle Koczwara, who became Kemp’s real-life first husband in 1980), serves as a condemnatory voice throughout the film. Through Ken’s disappointed eyes, we watch as Kemp slides further and further away from her resolution that she will never strip. “You’ve got the wrong girl,”

she initially tells Brannigan when he asks her to do “special shows”: “I’m a dancer, not a stripper.” But before long, she blurs the boundary between the two.

In reality, Kemp was not driven by economic need. She maintains that “in real life I just loved dancing”¹⁸ and assumes that De Villiers added this narrative element to spice up a story that was “a bit boring”. True enough, as many feminists have lamented,¹⁹ not only does the pornography industry prey on economically disadvantaged women, but the narrative of a woman who reluctantly provides sexual favours out of financial desperation – a watered-down version of the rape fantasy – is often the scenario for pornographic films. Here, De Villiers was simply catering for established audience expectations, using one of the stock narratives of pornography. But in Kemp’s case, the story returns to her biography, feeding into another male fantasy: she finds, once she’s overcome her inhibitions, that she actually *likes* stripping. This is closer to the truth, although Kemp always saw herself as much more than a stripper.

Interestingly, Kemp, now a devout Christian, remains disappointed with the film’s portrayal of her performances, feeling that it represented her as little more than a stripper, that it did not capture the essence – what she calls the “sacredness”²⁰ – of her art. De Villiers recalled that, after filming, Kemp was quite shocked when she saw some of the edited footage, because of the way the camera had decontextualised her acts and reduced her image to individual body parts.²¹ In her autobiography, Kemp explains: “I had no control, I was left at the mercy of the camera. The shows were the same, but the camera was going where no audience was allowed to go.”²² She apparently did not watch the international version of *Snake Dancer* until it was screened by M-Net some forty years after its first release, and she remains, she claims, “disgusted” by the footage.²³ From a sexual point of view, to modern audiences, the film is not in the least bit shocking and it is hard to believe that it was necessary to produce an even tamer version for South African audiences.

The need to placate morally uptight South African viewers also resulted in the film’s unexpected and dramatic conclusion, which most critics have seen as the film’s greatest weakness. De Villiers explains that he chose to “kill off” Glenda to appease the more *verkrampste* sections of the South African public; in his

18 Louw, 'Interview with Glenda Kemp'.

19 See, for instance, Dworkin, Andrea. *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Dutton: New York (1979).

20 Louw, 'Interview with Glenda Kemp'.

21 Interview with Dirk de Villiers, *Snake Dancer* (DVD) Special Edition produced by Mondo Macabro, 2006.

22 Kemp-Harper, *Glenda Kemp: Snake Dancer*, 79.

23 Louw, 'Interview with Glenda Kemp'.

24 Interview with Dirk de Villiers, *Snake Dancer* (DVD) Special Edition produced by Mondo Macabro, 2006.

25 Wood, Mike. 'Review of *Snake Dancer*,' *Exploitation Retrospect: The Journal of Junk Culture and Fringe Media Since 1986* (no date). http://www.dantenet.com/er/ERchives/reviews/s_reviews/snake_dancer.html

26 Pennington, *The History of Sex*, 100.

words he says they would have been so “disgusted” with her that he felt he needed to condemn her in some way.²⁴ This contradicts the rest of the narrative, which tends to support Kemp over the regime – “You root for her,” as one reviewer noted, “all the more so because her story is true.”²⁵

The conclusion serves as a final, damning comment on her dubious morals. After repenting and realising the supposed sinfulness of her ways and calling upon Ken for help, Kemp is strangled by her pet props. This plays out as a (most likely unconscious) reference to Isadora Duncan, whose fondness for flowing scarves ironically led to her tragic death in 1927, when a silk scarf became entangled in the open spokes of a motor car and broke her neck. The film’s portentous tagline – “Little girls shouldn’t play with snakes” – is meant to serve as a warning against overtly sexualised behaviour, but the film cannot have it both ways, condemning both censorship *and* Kemp’s morals, just as white South Africans could not have it both ways, enjoying the popular pleasures of the Western democratic world while eschewing its political values.

An alternative interpretation of the film’s ending is more symbolic. Kemp claims that she always read the conclusion as representative of the end of her career, even though she danced for a good five years after the events at the film’s conclusion.

Whichever way it is read, today the ending seems heavy handed, but it exemplifies the love-hate relationship Kemp had with the South African public, and some of the contradictions of white desire under apartheid. While the bulk of the narrative revels in Kemp’s artistic spirit, ultimately she is punished for transgressing boundaries. It is also typical of the sexploitation genre, which tended to blend sexual images with a moralising storyline,²⁶ perhaps as a kind of justification for its use of erotic fare. The result is a somewhat conflicted narrative; since *Snake Dancer* so obviously celebrates Kemp and her performances, we never quite believe the film’s supposed disapproval, and the morally upright Ken seems both uptight and pitiful alongside the roguish and likeable villain of the piece, Brannigan. There are apparently plans afoot to produce a new filmic version of Kemp’s fascinating life. Mendy Groner of Memetic Films approached Kemp in 2010 and she reluctantly agreed to collaborate in the process. It will be interesting to compare

the post-apartheid portrayal of Kemp with De Villiers's film. As it stands, *Snake Dancer* serves mainly as a fascinating (albeit, according to Kemp, inadequate) record not only of her dancing, but also of the tensions that she provoked in apartheid South Africa. While it may be deficient as a biopic, it remains a priceless cultural record of a person who *New Scientist* referred to at the time as "one of the few artistic spirits" spawned by the country.²⁷

²⁷ Gould, Donald. "Glenda's Python," *New Scientist* (24 July 1975), 230.

The 1st alt.Africa Mini Film Festival or The Other Side of The Underneath: Looking Between the Frames for the Hidden, the Occult, and the Arcane in African cinema

TREVOR TAYLOR

History is written by the victors, it is often said, much like the history of religion is primarily that of establishment dogma. As such, the history of cinema, especially in academia and the international film-festival circuit, tends to be the history of the ‘respectable’, artistic, non-threatening and only mildly subversive cinema which appeals to a Western middle-class, film-literate elite.

The underbelly of European and American cinema has, over the past twenty years – with the advent of video, DVD, and the Internet – seen a renaissance with a whole new audience of young adherents keen to unearth the films of such filmmakers as Jesús Franco, Gary Graver and Gerard Damiano and to treat them with the same respect and serious analysis as they would Orson Welles or Carol Reed. Nevertheless, the underbelly of African cinema has remained invisible, sidelined by the academic focus on filmmakers such as Sembène Ousmane, Idrissa Ouédraogo, Djibril Diop Mambéty and Gaston Kaboré.

The launch of the African Cinema Unit (ACU) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) seemed like a good opportunity to reveal some of the less salubrious sides of filmmaking in Africa. The 1st alt.Africa Mini Film Festival brought together the bizarre, the profane and the taboo as a reminder that African cinema, in its broader conceptions, is as provocative and experimental as cinema anywhere.

Day 1 (Friday, 27 July): Nigerian cinema's unique amalgam of Christianity, blood-curdling horror and rituals from a pre-Christian ethos

To begin the three-day event and to share the excitement I had felt on my own discovery, some twelve years ago, of Nigeria's cinematic riches, I opened the event with an introduction to the extraordinary hysterical cinema oeuvre of evangelist/film producer and actress Helen Ukpabio, who, in cahoots with her faithful director Tecu Benson, produced a series of blood-spattered, sexually explicit evangelical horror films in the 1990s.

Produced with verve and proselytising intent similar to, but by far outreaching, the Christian fundamentalism of the Baptist films of Billy Graham and those who followed in his footsteps in America, the films were designed to convert watchers and to shepherd them into Ukpabio's network of churches. The oeuvre came to an abrupt end when her and Benson's *Rapture 1* and *2* (2001) went too far and the censors stepped in, putting a stop to the grosser excesses of this most imaginative, if highly questionable, high point of Nigerian cinema.

Deeply rooted in a paradigm of Christians under attack from satanic forces, Helen Ukpabio's vision is an amalgam of the worst excesses of the days of the Spanish Inquisition, with angelic voices and primal male fears such as impotence being attributed to satanic intervention. The films are explicit in areas both sexual and brutal, which would be unthinkable in mainstream cinema. Being for higher religious purposes, however, the Ukpabio/Benson cinematic canon is unique in transcending the boundaries of taste.

I first saw their masterpiece (for want of a less generous description) *End of the Wicked* (1999) in a season of 'way out' African cinema in a lovely decrepit cinema in Brussels called the Nova. In the company of South African director

Richard Stanley, of the masterpiece (here I use the word without blushing) *Dust Devil* (1992), I could want for no better companion. Speechless after the film for a while, Richard then turned to me and said, “My faith in cinema is restored.” A very telling statement at a time when the cinematic horror genre was becoming more and more reliant on special effects and less on content. *End of the Wicked* had a plethora of special effects, for sure, but they were of such a Heath Robinson nature that they created an atmosphere far beyond naturalism or digitalism, and rather an arcane morass of the diabolic and Dionysiac: the story focuses on a witch of such foul decadence that she at one stage grows an enormous phallus with which she proceeds to rape her own daughter.

The intricacies of Nigerian distribution being what they are – recent releases take precedence over older product – acquiring copies of the Ukpabio/Benson films proved difficult in Europe, although with the advent of DVD, the full canon is available by mail order from the website of Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries, the evangelical franchise registered by Ukpabio in 1992. Nevertheless, having been unable to locate a copy of *End of the Wicked* in the available time frame, I screened the equally bizarre, although slightly less explicit, *Highway to the Grave* (2002). It tells the story of a coven of witches whose star pupil wreaks havoc on the good people of Lagos, which involves impotence and the physical shrinking of the male victim into Tom Thumb before he confronts the (presumably) terrifying prospect of the witch’s genitalia lurking in the high alpine region of her miniskirt.

The plot formula is standard across the full spectrum of the Ukpabio/Benson productions, weightily titled “A Helen Ukpabio Expository Series”: witchcraft and consorting with the Dark One leads to suspension of sexual power, financial ruin and loss of status within the community. The victims often seek assistance from traditional doctors – a total anathema to Ukpabio – and this frail deference to the magic of voodoo is punished. Ukpabio generally plays the crusading evangelist who, in the final third of the film, will enter the scenario to cast out demons, punish the wicked and reward the just.

Ukpabio has been blessed with the collaboration of Teco Benson, a sometime actor with an imposing demeanour,

and a director of some imagination. Although working with seemingly unpromising material, Benson's sense of pace and his rococo-tabloid enthusiasm for the grotesque earmarks him as an important stylist and certainly one of Nigeria's auteurs, albeit of a genre in grave disrepute.

Over the years, Ukpabio's detractors have grown and she has been particularly attacked for her ministry's railing against 'child witches', which lead to the killing of many children on suspicion of being the devil's spawn. A Channel 4 documentary titled *Charismania Unrestrained: Africa's Witch Children* (2008) produced by a group called Stepping Stones Nigeria, has done her name no good and although she still has a vast network of churches – not just in Nigeria but across Africa, including South Africa – she has also lost her erstwhile collaborator, Teco Benson. His 2010 production *The Fake Prophet*, although as lurid as anything he has made before, is clearly a critical piece in which he distances himself from her.

The second session of the day was a film called *Bleeding Rose* (2007) from Nigerian independent filmmaker Chucks Mordi, who cut his teeth in the Nigerian industry but, appalled by the working conditions and technical shoddiness of most productions, set himself the task of making a horror film that was well shot and which had sound that was professionally mixed. Combining traditional mythology with a restrained Christian message, the film mixes *The Blair Witch Project* (1999, Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez) with the slasher conventions of a group of young people being serially carved up by an unknown presence. Made with humour and style, the film boasts a wonderful performance from Nigerian thespian Olu Jacobs (who reminds one of Boris Karloff) and provides some fascinating insights into Nigerian student politics as members of the university students' union, fearing for the safety of their classmates, go on the rampage to confront the hidebound university administration. (An interview with Chucks is included at the end of this report.)

Day 2 (Saturday, 28 July): Jo'burg – Bad City

Taking my title for the second day's session from an unpublished book by Peter Morris, a writer from Johannesburg who now lives in Portugal, my purpose was to show how a city, having

a character of its own, is intrinsic in the moral design of films shot within its confines. Although many films are shot in cities doubling as others where shooting costs would be much higher – Cape Town is a perfect example of a bogus location city – films which are rooted in their location are immediately recognisable and have a much greater resonance.

Johannesburg has always had a character of ‘wickedness’, being the crime-filled destination for rural Africans in films such as *African Jim* aka *Jim Comes to Jo’burg* (1949, Donald Swanson), *Come Back, Africa* (1959, Lionel Rogosin) and *Dingaka* (1965, Jamie Uys), or the ruin of innocent Afrikaans girls in films such as *Debbie* (1965, Elmo de Witt) or *Die Goddelose Stad* (1958, Pierre D. Botha).

Morris has a sincere revulsion for Johannesburg which is wonderfully captured in his screenplay for an as yet unrealised project, *Zombie Drive-by Party*, in which a pair of ex-KGB operatives flee the crumbling Soviet Union in 1994 and come to Johannesburg, bringing with them the stolen Soviet treasure: Stalin’s penis floating in a bottle of formaldehyde. Connecting with other émigré Soviets, they enter a network of body-parts entrepreneurs and muti merchants before finding themselves in the very bowels – literally – of the state, floating in the excrement of the New South Africa.

Johannesburg is as much a character in Morris’s script as is Stalin’s disembodied member, and also – as in all three films chosen for the discussion on the festival’s day two – Johannesburg is the leading man. Some cities, such as Paris, are female, but Johannesburg is definitely male – and a chauvinist to boot.

The first of the three unique visions of the dark soul of Johannesburg is the, until recently, extremely rare 1970s Hillbrow-based drug cartel movie *Death of a Snowman* (1978, Christopher Rowley) which, besides the British actor Nigel Davenport playing a South African cop, boasts an almost entirely black cast (with Ken Gampu as a crusading journalist), and includes a rare movie role from singer Margaret Singana. Trevor Rabin, of the South African rock band Rabbitt, prog legends Yes – and now a major composer in Hollywood – did the music.

Clearly designed to cash in on the popularity of the American 'blaxploitation' films of the time, the movie reveals many interesting elements in its depiction of its location. Although set in apartheid South Africa, the intricacies of social relations across the colour barrier are never mentioned. The white cop and the crusading black journalist have a close friendship, and the journalist enjoys a close relationship with the police hierarchy. The gritty filmmaking makes excellent use of Johannesburg locations, although the drug-gang war involving black and Chinese cartels is strangely anachronistic in the context of apartheid's constraints. These reservations aside, *Death of a Snowman* is a satisfyingly visceral experience, and although the filmmakers avoid direct confrontation with the political realities of the time, the strange ambiance of 70s Johannesburg cannot be disguised.

This ambiance is superbly captured by the second film in this section, *Snake Dancer* (aka *Glenda*, 1976), starring the sensational exotic dancer Glenda Kemp. Directed by the prolific Dirk de Villiers (*My Broer se Bril*, 1972; *The Virgin Goddess*, 1974), the film was shot in an explicit version for international release and a totally bowdlerised version for South Africa.

The day's third film, made in post-apartheid years, is *Pure Blood* (2002), a tongue-in-cheek film about right-wing vampires in search of racially untainted blood. Directed with a dark good humour by Ken Kaplan, the film is a wonderful and sadly neglected take on the new South Africa, and a newly dispossessed class holding onto their one certainty – the purity of race. The ugly plains of Midrand and sinister electricity pylons dominate the soulless landscape. Kaplan re-emerged into the feature-film world in 2012 as the producer of one of the darkest of nightmare visions this country has come up with: *Sleeper's Wake*, directed by Barry Berk. (Both *Snake Dancer* and *Pure Blood* are discussed in separate chapters in this publication.)

Other notable films which make great use of Johannesburg's unsettling intensity are Darrell Roodt's *City of Blood* (1983) and *Lullaby* (2008), Andrew Worsdale's classic *Shot Down* (1988), Aryan Kaganof's *Nice to Meet You, Please Don't Rape Me* (1996), Heinrich Dahms's *City Wolf* (1988) and Ralph Ziman's *Jerusalema* (2008).

Day 3 (Sunday, 29 July): The imp of the perverse and the heart of darkness

The purpose of the third and final day was to look at Africa as through a colonial spyglass – with oneself an outsider and Africa forever the Dark Continent. Obviously this has been the history of colonial cinema: mystification where there is no mystery and banality where there is; paternalism where there should be respect and bonhomie where there should be disgust. Gualtiero Jacopetti came closest to an honest view, born of cynical jaundice, when he made his much reviled *Africa Addio*. Burdened with accusations of racism in 1966 when it was made, it took almost forty years before the film could be rediscovered and re-examined, not as a racist diatribe but as an unflinching exposé of African nations being deserted rather than liberated, and regimes of tame dictators being installed instead of administrations which would benefit the people in the long term.

This is also the theme of Steve Kwena Mokwena's horrifying and poetic dialogue with Frantz Fanon, whose landmark statement of negritude, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) was a required text for those involved in the winds of change in Africa. The film *Driving With Fanon* (2010) takes Mokwena, in the company of a local journalist, into the horrifying butchery of post-colonial Africa in Sierra Leone, where he engages with the ghost of Fanon on how the wretched stay wretched, the poor stay poor and European capitalist self-interest continues to thrive.

A side journey into the cinema of Ghana – which preceded Nigeria in the horror/evangelical oeuvre – provides a fascinating examination of how an indigenous industry all but succeeded in booting Hollywood product out of the cinemas. In Ghana this was replaced with an audience hungry for local stories and characters, and a paradigm far more recognisable than *Top Gun* (1986, Tony Scott). William Akouffo's *Diabolo* (1987) is the story of a young man who seduces women in bars before taking them to hotel rooms, drugging them and turning into a snake that rapes them, causing them to vomit money. It was a success of extraordinary dimensions, making Akouffo a millionaire overnight – proof that a local film shot on VHS could potentially have a larger audience than a product from

Hollywood. Akouffo's follow-up, *Diabolo 2* (1988), in which the hapless girls vomit forex, is perhaps one of the most telling indictments of how money (especially if internationally recognised) is at the root of all seduction, rape and animist transformation.

The next session was a screening of the film *Safari Obscura* (2010), described by its director, Anton Kotze, as "the first animist movie". Introducing the film to the students, he explained how, in the process of filming throughout Africa for a commercial company, he had filmed an archive of his own vision, which he had edited into a psychedelic ritualistic journey, animist in intent, searching for the great pervading spirit of the continent. Beginning with a birth, going through many deaths and renewals and entering again into birth, Kotze's meticulous montage of images is never formless, but has a grand design. He discussed this with the students in the context of his journeys through Africa and the process by which he made the film.

Finally, we looked at pornography – negritude as a turn-on for the European viewer – and the filming of what, in 2007, was the first serious attempt at shooting all-black pornography in South Africa, in a production called *Africa Extreme*, directed by Elvira Hoffman (from Uitenhage) and Fritz Grogauer (from Germany).

Having been privileged with total access to film the production process for a proposed documentary – it was to be entitled *Black Fruit*, and was roundly rejected by most funding agencies in South Africa – I screened the students the resulting three-minute promotional film. It was designed not to titillate, but to underline the immense disparity between intent (the eroticising of black sexuality in a form attractive to Northern European audiences) and the bemused consternation of the South African black performers at the things they were being asked to do, and the strange plastic toys they were being asked by the directors to employ for reasons of supposed 'sexiness'.

Chucks Mordi at home in Woolwich Dockyard, Greenwich, UK

In researching the alt.Africa festival I visited the amiable Chucks Mordi in his home down in the far south-east of London's dockland. Chucks has been resident in England for twelve years, during which time he has made the occasional

film, worked hard at mobilising the local Nigerian community into creating an Anglo-Nigerian film scene and, to keep the wolf from the door, driven a taxi.

He sees himself as joined at the hip to the Nigerian film ethos. “I was there when she was born. I see myself like I was the midwife. I was in the crucible of the creation of Nollywood,” he says. In 1992, those who were into film and making their movies on any sub-standard format available were scorned as retrograde children, but from these small beginnings – all the filmmakers were concentrated in one street – the mammoth Nollywood grew.

The film that Chucks views as the first important Nollywood film is *Living in Bondage* (1992), directed by Okechukwa Ogunjiofor who later set up the TAVA awards for film students, but he says the godfather of Nollywood film directors was Zeb Ejiro.

Schooled in Applied Arts, Chucks studied sculpture at university and became the only professional set designer in the fledgling industry. He prided himself on his talent for pyrotechnics (without CGI) and the sometimes frightening use of combustibles – seen most remarkably in the film *Rituals* (1997).

His first directorial film outside of Nigeria was *Forbidden Fruits*, shot in England for a producer known primarily for Yoruba-language films. Although shot in 2001 the film has never been released, a fact that Chucks is fairly laissez-faire about, putting it down to the producer’s discomfort with dealing with English-language product. Films which followed were *Bad to the Bone* (2002) and *Dirty Dogs* (2005) which, although released, have disappeared from view, joining the thousands of Nigerian titles which have been discarded as being past their sell by date. Chucks is clear about the lack of respect accorded Nollywood film, a comestible to be discarded once used, rather than archived as befitting the work of artists.

His next film was *Bleeding Rose* (2007) and, being his own production, he was not going to treat the film as anything other than a work of art. Shooting on HD, a first for Nollywood, and sound mixing in London, the film is technically streets ahead of anything else made by Nollywood up to that point.

Highly praised in Nigeria, the film won the Golden Camel Award for Best Film (2007) and Chucks won a NOPA (Nigerian Personality Award).

Keen to create a unique UK/Nigerian-diaspora film movement, Chucks formed a group with twenty young Nigerians around Peckham Rye in 2001 but intrinsic differences emerged, primarily over the issue of piracy and producers' rights, and the group fell apart. He persevered in his vision, setting up in 2006 the British-based ZAPA award event for Nigerian film, and co-ordinating a conference with the Nigerian High Commission and representatives of the Nigerian film industry, Nigerian censors and Nigerian filmmakers. With the support of London-based terrestrial community channels PASSION and BEN (Bright Entertainment Network) Television he has co-ordinated regular premiere screenings of Nollywood films at cinemas in the south-east London area.

His mission to provide impetus to a UK/Nigerian-diaspora film movement prompts the discussion of how the Nigerian model of production has inspired many young filmmakers in South Africa, where such a diasporic film movement is flourishing. An interesting example is the film *Foreign Demons* (2010), shot both in Nigeria and Johannesburg. It stars popular singer Yvonne Chaka Chaka as a Johannesburg woman bewitched by a Nigerian spell who sets out to Lagos to break the hold it has on her. Originally to be directed by Darrell Roodt and Andrew Worsdale (who also wrote the script), the completed film is directorially credited to the co-producer, Nigerian-South African resident Faith Isiakpere.

Chucks has made two films recently – *Shattered* (2010) and *The Rubicon* (2012) – both shot in England and both yet to be released. His other pet project is a film and book on the Nigerian film industry from its birth to the present by someone who was there and intimately involved.

***Odd Number* at the Zanzibar International Film Festival**

MARIUS VAN STRAATEN

Odd Number, my 2010 documentary film produced by the University of Cape Town (UCT), was selected and accepted by the 2012 Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF), which took place from 7 to 15 July, in Zanzibar on the east coast of Africa. The documentary features Rashaad Adendorf, a redeemed ex-gangster, and Face, the leader of the Hard Livings gang in Bellville South, Cape Town. The film was part of my MA in Media, Theory and Practice at UCT. I also used the visit to do research for the written component of my thesis, which focuses on race and representation. *Odd Number* was one of only a few films by white filmmakers to be accepted by the festival, which has a predominantly black audience; the research aim was to observe how the audience would respond to Rashaad's story being told by a white man, and to discuss race and representation with the audience afterwards.

Odd Number had two screenings followed both times by a question-and-answer session. Forty people attended the first screening and the question-and-answer session lasted for thirty minutes. Most of the questions centred on how I had managed to gain such intimate access, and why Rashaad and Face were willing to talk so openly to me.

During the course of the ZIFF I conducted video interviews with Dr Ikaweba Bunting and Dr William Bissel which focused on representation in general, and representation in *Odd Number* specifically. Dr Bissel is an associate professor of Anthropology

and Sociology at Lafayette University and has attended eight ZIFFs. He had studied the festival over a twelve-month cycle from planning to execution and has a special interest in film, inequality, colonialism and Africa. He asked me to elaborate on the process of gaining such intimate access to my subjects. In response, I highlighted the duration and quality of my friendship with Rashaad, as well as the high level of trust we had developed over the years. I pointed out that Afrikaans was our shared mother tongue, which was a contributing factor in our relationship, and I also recounted how I had come to notice that many coloured people on the Cape Flats assumed a shared political view based on our mother tongue: there was often immediate solidarity in light of the perceived marginalisation by the African National Congress (ANC) government. An environment of trust and confidence had grown out of this.

Dr Bunting is an associate professor and the ZIFFs festival director. He lectures in African studies at California State University. When asked why he had selected *Odd Number* for ZIFF, he replied:

I wanted African films, and not just any kind of film – I wanted films that addressed really critical issues of social justice, identity, race, religion and prison. I saw in *Odd Number* that it took on that whole thing. It is made in Africa and is critical in looking at those issues. [Rashaad's] conversion to Islam is also intriguing to me.¹

1 video interview (2012)

He believed that Rashaad's conversion to Islam and subsequent identity shift had contributed to him escaping death by the gangs after he had refused to join them.

When I asked Bunting if a white man could tell a black man's story and vice versa he replied, "If you were raised in a white community, I don't think they could tell that same story as a black man. It could be compassionate, it could be understanding, but there is a certain point where there is a disconnect".² He then pointed to his own experiences with the Masai in Kenya and Tanzania, and how he knew in certain situations that he was missing something without sometimes knowing what it was.

2 *ibid.*

Bunting's advice to a filmmaker making a film about another culture or race is: "Before you pick up the camera, go live with your subject and try and understand them better, and let the community direct your film and follow their cues." When asked at the end of the interview if he had any last point to make about representation, he said: "As a filmmaker, be aware of your power all the time and be motivated by justice. We cannot be driven by the motivation of profit or personal aggrandisement ... We have to be driven by that idea of a better and just society, because we have to be as close to the truth".³

3 *ibid.*

In another interview, when I asked Bissel the question of whether a white man can tell a black man's story, he responded: "Probably not in the same way that another person of African descent would tell the story, but is it better that that story doesn't get told, or is silence a better value?"⁴

4 *ibid.*

In a follow-up email after the video interview, Bissel raised a deeper issue about my interview question presuming a racial economy of opposition between "white" and "black" that is in itself a product from a colonial past and legacy of slavery:

it takes for granted precisely those categories that deserve to be put in question and risks essentialising [legitimising] these identities. How is whiteness constituted or understood, or blackness? From Tanzania, to South Africa, Brazil or Canada, notions of race shift quite widely, and across the globe.⁵

5 email (2012)

Bissel argues that although we live in a world shaped by the history of race and all the inequality, distinctions, and divisions this implies, we have to acknowledge that race itself is a fiction with no biological or material reality, although we recognise it has had very real effects. Part of the question of whether a white man can tell a black man's story should thus acknowledge that the terms "white man" and "black man" are fluid, contested and up for debate.⁶

6 *ibid.*

According to Bissel, the relationship between the filmmaker and subject is the fundamental building block for good representation.

You cannot do good anthropology or filmmaking without entering in to a relationship with the people you will be working with and if you do not do that you are just appropriating images or ripping them off. The shallowness of that relationship or its injustice will come through in the images and work.⁷

7 video interview (2012)

He believes that an ethical relationship that is consensual, negotiated and ongoing “takes the research relationship and puts it in the continuum with friendship, mutuality and something that is unfolding. That is the way the best work comes out.”⁸

8 ibid.

When asked what he thought of *Odd Number*, he responded that it was a beautiful work and one of the two best films he had seen that far at the ZIFF. He found it fascinating “precisely because I teach courses in things like ethnographic method. It really raised a lot of questions for me about how you were able to establish that kind of rapport and engagement that came through the film.”⁹ Bissel was struck by the sadness of Rashaad “growing up in that milieu with that kind of rage and the fact that the only way he could express that rage was through increasing violence and destructiveness”.¹⁰ He found it touching that Rashaad did experience a profound life transformation, which most people do not experience.

9 ibid.

10 ibid.

The festival was very productive in terms of collecting material for my thesis. It was a great privilege that the African Cinema Unit (ACU) enabled me to present an African film at a large festival like the ZIFF, allowing me to be present as an African filmmaker, speak about my work, and engage with the audience and other African filmmakers. After the trip, I am of the opinion that the ACU needs to focus on African and Pan-African festivals to promote its courses.

Jon Blair: Style and Storytelling in Documentary Film

LIANI MAASDORP

“Encounters” is the leading documentary film festival in South Africa. As part of the 2012 festival, the fourteenth since the first edition in 1994, the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) Centre for Film and Media Studies (CFMS) invited Jon Blair to speak about style and storytelling in his documentary films. Blair is the only documentary filmmaker to have won an Oscar, two Emmys and a British Academy Film Award. Encounters screened three of his films as part of a special focus on his work, while CFMS hosted Blair’s very well attended master class on Saturday, 9 June.

The Encounters reviewers selected 29 international and 22 local films from 487 entries received to compile the 2012 line-up. Some of these films premiered at Encounters, while others were selected because they had won prizes or had been popular at other international festivals. Of the films selected, Jon Blair’s had certainly garnered the most critical acclaim: *Anne Frank Remembered* (1995), winner of the 1996 Academy Award for Best Documentary, along with *Reporters at War* (2003) and *Dancing with the Devil* (2009).

South African-born Blair moved to the United Kingdom at the age of sixteen when he was drafted to the South African Defence Force. A conscientious objector, his early awareness of injustice undoubtedly influenced his filmmaking practice. As a director, producer and writer, his non-fiction film topics have ranged from the South African student uprisings of 1976,

to holocaust stories, to the ongoing strife between drug lords and police in Brazil. Currently based in Devonshire in England, Blair divides his time between running his production company, Jon Blair Film Production Co Ltd, and working as non-fiction commissioning editor for the broadcaster Al Jazeera.

Blair's master class at UCT focused on strategies for matching form to content. He showed extracts from a selection of his films and spoke about how his use of film language had evolved over the years. Attendees were encouraged to bring their own ideas, experiences and questions to the master class as Blair wanted to lead a free-ranging and interactive session.

The first film extract Blair showed during the master class was from his first film, *There Is No Crisis!* (1976). Made by Blair as part of his responsibilities at Thames Television's *TV Eye* show, it was the first programme made for British television about the 1976 Soweto uprising. Eyewitness accounts add impact to the film. Blair shared that he has found there are three kinds of interviewees: people who want to tell a story and have probably told it before and have refined it; people so traumatised by what happened to them that they've never talked about it; and people who are prepared to talk about it, but who don't necessarily do so in the way that you'd like them to for the film. In the latter two cases, "you have to peel away the layers of memory to get to the story".

With regard to conducting interviews, Blair advised against going on a "fishing expedition". Rather "know what you want to get and work gently towards it" so that you can capture the rare but critical moment when the interviewee comes to a realisation or catharsis. According to him, when conducting an interview the filmmaker is "looking for truth, but not necessarily the truth the interviewee sees or wants to reveal". It is the ability to get at that "inner truth" that differentiates a good filmmaker from a mediocre one.

He also cautioned against cutting away from interviews just for the sake of adding visuals to the film. Visuals are, of course, critical to the telling of the story, but if what the interviewee reveals is compelling, then even a "talking head" can be interesting on screen. He shared a practical strategy to "take people back to places where things happened and get them to walk-and-talk you through events". Not only does this help to

unlock interviewees' memories, but there is also no substitute for "the atmosphere of a real place".

He employed this strategy in filming *Anne Frank Remembered*, taking interviewees back to Amsterdam from as far away as Israel and the United States. The film was released in 1995 and marked a significant moment in Blair's career. Although his other films have won a variety of high-profile prizes, this is the film that won all three of the most prestigious international film prizes: an Oscar, an Emmy and a BAFTA. The film tells the story of Anne Frank who is widely known for the two years' worth of diary entries that she wrote as a thirteen to fifteen year old while she hid from the Nazis in a secret annex in an Amsterdam house. *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) has been published in more than sixty languages and dramatised for stage and screen.

Blair's film, which was described as "a masterpiece" by *The Independent*, looks outside the diary to tell the story of the girl who wrote it. The film includes eyewitness accounts, previously unseen documents, photos and letters and some very evocative filming techniques. During the master class, Blair explained that he starts most of his films in a similar way by using an evocative "money shot" sequence to grab audience attention and establish the characters and situation of the film. In *Anne Frank Remembered*, Blair made use of a motion control camera to make figures and furnishings appear in and disappear from the space Anne hid in. Blair was the first filmmaker to be granted permission by the Anne Frank House museum to film in this space and to re-dress it for his camera effect. As motion control equipment is expensive and bulky, and setting up is time consuming, it is mostly used for commercials and feature films. In *Anne Frank Remembered*, the motion control sequences add visual interest and production value, but they go beyond the merely aesthetic. Their true value lies in how they visualise memory and loss, two of the themes explored in the film.

Blair further pointed out that having opposing characters in a film works well to create tension. In his latest film, *Dancing with the Devil*, there was no shortage of character conflict. The film intercuts between the stories of three diverse but equally compelling characters. Spiderman is a young drug lord; Leonardo Torres, an inspector in Rio's drug squad;

and Pastor Dione, an evangelical preacher who stands in the middle, trying to mediate between these two extremes to bring peace to the favelas. Having covered conflicts in the Middle East, Cambodia and Angola over the course of his career as a documentary filmmaker, Blair understands the challenges of filming in dangerous situations. His advice to master class attendees included going on a hazardous environments training course and to always thinking about what *could* happen and what *could* go wrong, not what you'd *like* to have happen. He cautioned young filmmakers working in conflict situations to remember that as a documentarian, "you are there to bear witness – honour that responsibility".

During the three-hour class Blair also addressed issues around research, scripting and planning. He gave attendees input on what to do before going out on a shoot in order to minimise one's risk of not getting the story, while maximising one's ability to tell it. Blair emphasised the importance of good preparation, and said that he never relies on chance: "If chance comes along, that's great, but don't rely on luck or good fortune to make your film. The more experienced you are, the more chances you can take."

Blair sees research as a critical part of a filmmaker's preparation for a shoot. Another essential part of preparation is putting together a good team to make the film. Blair sees selecting appropriate collaborators as a priority, and he emphasised the value of camera people to capture the action and editors to craft the story in post-production. Luckily, he mused, he is good at "mobilising people and getting them to do things". He revealed that in his experience, people like to be approached by filmmakers, but he also emphasised that it is critical to give "credit to those who help you".

Making his documentary films entertaining is a priority for Blair. People sometimes view documentaries as primarily educational or informative, but to become successful it is important to understand how audiences view films. Character is critical to how an audience engages with a film; according to Blair, one should "make it about real people, interesting characters, and make sure it's rooted in real human interest". Blair shared that he always ensures he is interested in a story before taking on a project. He encouraged aspiring filmmakers

at the master class to use the same measure, because “if it isn’t interesting to you, it won’t be to anyone else”. His advice: try to find an unconventional or unexpected angle to the story. Part of this is about being strategic about what you spend money on. Not every aspect of the filmmaking process has to be expensive, but it’s worth spending money where it will make a difference to the entertainment or production value of the film.

In over 35 years as a filmmaker, Jon Blair’s work has included documentary, drama and comedy. He has won most critical acclaim for his non-fiction films and, in addressing complex and contentious issues in a compelling way, he has arguably contributed most through this form. He was recognised in 1994 by Stockton University in the United States for his contributions to human rights awareness through his filmmaking, and no one who attended his master class at UCT could argue that the Honorary Doctorate he received was not well deserved. He is not only a prolific filmmaker, but is one who interrogates his own practice and speaks about it in a compelling way. His master class was of great value to all attendees – filmmakers and academics alike.

Oliver Hermanus: On Watching and Making Films

ALTA DU PLOOY

For its final event of 2012 the African Cinema Unit (ACU) invited alumnus and award-winning Capetonian director Oliver Hermanus to present a master class on Friday, 12 October. The class was primarily organised for the screen production and scriptwriting students, but opened up to welcome other interested parties on and off campus. Hermanus's two feature films, *Shirley Adams* (2009) and *Skoonheid* (2011) were screened during the two preceding weeks, and about fifty guests attended Hermanus's lecture. He was introduced by novelist and ex-screen-production programme convenor, Emma van der Vliet.

Hermanus completed an undergraduate degree at the Centre for Film and Media Studies (CFMS) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2003, punctuated by a semester abroad at the University of Southern California. Some of his classmates have remarked how, even back then, Hermanus was highly driven, often approaching students trying to cast them in his films. In 2006, after briefly working for a production company in Cape Town, and working as a press photographer, he received a private scholarship from Hollywood director Roland Emmerich (*Independence Day*, 1996; *2012*, 2009; *Anonymous*, 2011), and completed an MA at the London Film School.

It was here that Hermanus "felt peer pressured" into watching a vast number of films by filmmakers like Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Jean-Luc Godard and Andrei

Tarkovsky, as well as other pictures by “obscure Mexican directors whose work you were required to know at dinner parties”. The viewing list for the London Film School came to about twelve films per week, not including the students’ own exploration of films in their personal time. Hermanus credits this process for having introduced him to the cinematic ‘voices’ of various directors. By absorbing other directors’ bodies of work and techniques, Hermanus started to uncover what *he* would bring to the screen; what he wanted to ‘say’ on screen, and how he might want to ‘say’ it.

The issue of cinematic ‘voice’ in the master class emanated from a column Hermanus wrote for *City Press*¹ in August 2012, ‘The Myths – and Maths – of Local Film’. After adjudicating the 2012 Durban International Film Festival, he wrote that the problem with our industry does not only consist of audiences and funding, but that “we don’t have great directors ... yet” and that the ones we have are like a “festering wound”. He expressed a widely resonating disappointment with the National Film and Video Foundation for not really having anything to show for what they’ve been mandated with – developing filmmaking talent – for more than a decade.

During the course of the master class Hermanus shared some important personal experiences in his capacity as a South African director. He is passionate about shooting locally and telling stories about home, although his next project about biblical Judas might be shot in different international locations. He is thoroughly unimpressed by South African extras (or ‘cattle’, as he calls them) and he had a detailed discussion with students about collaborations with his director of photography, Jamie Ramsay, for *Skoonheid* specifically. He gave practical advice about vehement differences of opinions on set, and how he managed his own, often last minute, changes of mind about a shot. Sometimes he would be influenced very directly by a film he had seen – Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) in one instance for the stunning opening sequence of *Skoonheid*.

Hermanus talked seriously about finding actors. He still regularly goes to see student drama productions to scout new talent. He encouraged the students to cast as many different types of actors in their different productions. He emphasised how this would help them to get to know people but, primarily,

1 Hermanus, Oliver. ‘The myths – and maths – of local film,’ *City Press* (17 August 2012) <http://www.citypress.co.za/columnists/the-myths-and-maths-of-local-film-20120817/>

to learn how to *talk* to actors. He recalled how acclaimed British director Stephen Frears (*My Beautiful Laundrette*, 1985; *Dangerous Liaisons*, 1988; *The Queen*, 2006) presented a master class at the London Film School when he was studying there. Frears advised the prospective directors in the audience to never use the word ‘like’ when explaining to an actor how a scene should be approached. The idea is not to prescribe responses, but rather to elicit these ideas from the actors, and help them mine their emotional/physical acting capacities and range.

Another big problem that Hermanus identified in his column is the ‘maths’ of local film. In South Africa each film is burdened to be a blockbuster. This, for obvious reasons, is massively restricting and the surest way to destroy any type of creativity or distinct directorial voice. He reiterated the main concepts of basic budgets and suggested ways to make a film successful financially.

But of course the issue of money relates closely to the one of audiences and the development of audiences. This is something that Hermanus systematically unpacked during his class. He talked about film audiences in France, compared to local ones. Approximately 10 000 people would have seen *Skoonheid* during its entire run in South Africa. In France, around 10 000 cinemagoers would have seen it in a single week. Hermanus described South African audiences as going to the movies only to relax and/or ‘escape’. They want to see stories they’ve seen many times before, but with different actors and jokes. And sometimes they want even *those* elements to stay the same à la Leon Schuster or Willie Esterhuizen.

At the time of the master class, *The Amazing Spiderman* (2012, Marc Webb) was the highest grossing film in South Africa for the year. Notably, Michael Haneke’s *Amour* (2012), which won the Palme d’Or in Cannes, was not bought by Ster Kinekor and won’t be on circuit here at all. This does not bode well for the cultivation of local film audiences. Hermanus described films on circuit at Ster Kinekor’s Cinema Nouveau movie houses as “artsy in South Africa, but still very mainstream from an international perspective”.

South Africa has had a very productive year in terms of the number of new releases. Hermanus states in his column that “the industry has made 66 feature films, our highest annual

output ever". A number of these films target the currently strong Afrikaans market. In many of these films – *Platteland* (2011, Sean Else), *Pretville* (2012, Linda Korsten) and most notably, *Semi-Soet* (2012, Joshua Rous), which was a smash hit at the box office – nostalgia is clumsily made up in Hollywood wrapping. Hermanus is sceptical about what he calls "Afrikaans New Wave" for "Tannie and Oom Almal". While I do not agree that these specific films make up "Afrikaans New Wave" – I'd suggest rather *Roepman* (2011, Paul Eilers), *Die Wonderwerker* (2012, Katinka Heyns) and *Skoonheid* – one has to concede that generally speaking, the Afrikaans market likes ideologically conservative and regressive, and often really dumb, films.

Directors should not have to feel that they can only make films if they are bound to succeed at the box office, which is what Afrikaans musicals (*Liefeling*, 2010, Brian Webber; *Jakhalsdans*, 2010, Darrell Roodt; and *Platteland*) are tapping into. While efforts should be made to open up films to larger audiences, it is worth saying that free artistic license and safe creative environments usually generate this organically.

The tension between directors, audiences and money raises many important questions. What does the "Afrikaans market" really look like, and might an international audience be ready to consume South African-language films? (There are isolated examples, like Darrell Roodt's *Yesterday*, 2004, a Zulu-language film.) When and how will South Africa implement proper systems to give films widespread international distribution? How does one cultivate film audiences? Or, more specifically, how do *filmmakers* cultivate audiences? And should they have to? How important is a well-developed local audience? Or should our films be taken overseas where viewers are actually interested? Hermanus considers this the only way, for now as he stressed the importance of taking one's films to large, international film festivals.

However tricky and complex these issues might be, Hermanus's trajectory is clearly focused on finding his own 'voice', and during the master class he encouraged student filmmakers to do the same. For him, this process has a lot to do with *watching* films as well as making them: "[but] to be able to write films, and then make them, you have to have *ideas* first."

