

**Colour Adjustment:  
Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid  
South African Documentary**

by

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# ABSTRACT

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The goal of this dissertation is to examine the process of racial transformation within South Africa's documentary film industry and to assess how the nation's shifting identity is both influenced by and reflected in documentary film. Drawing examples from a diverse collection of local and international films, I have examined changes in *who* is making documentaries in South Africa and *how*, as well as the representations of race that result. In particular, I have focused on how the balance of insider vs. outsider storytelling may be shifting and to what effect. At the same time, I have qualitatively examined the representations produced by black/insider filmmakers as compared to those of white/outsider filmmakers in order to assess the impact of the filmmaker's racial status on outcomes. Finally, I have investigated ways in which the tradition of white-on-black storytelling must change in order to satisfy the political shift that has taken place in South Africa and the cultural sensitivities that have resulted.

This study draws multiple conclusions:

- 1) Thanks largely to the legacies of apartheid, the already high barriers to entry into the documentary field are considerably higher for people of color in South Africa. For this and other reasons, black South Africans remain more often the subjects of documentaries than their makers. Overcoming this barrier must be a long-term priority, as it is the only means by which an equitable plurality of voices may reach South African audiences.
- 2) This persistence of racial inequity has fueled tensions throughout the industry. In particular, white filmmakers who seek to document black subjects face mounting criticism, regardless of the purity of their intentions or methods. These tensions are ultimately a burden on the industry as a whole, and the inability to look past race has inhibited progress.
- 3) While racial parity must remain the industry's ultimate goal, the intent, integrity, and approach of the filmmaker is ultimately a more significant determinant of representational accuracy than the color of his or her skin. In particular, the

following three factors are critical to accurate and ethical representation, regardless of the socioeconomic status of the filmmaker vis-à-vis subject:

- a. First-person and/or reflexive approaches to documentary story-telling which help frame documentary narratives as subjective – i.e. representations of one filmmaker’s viewpoint as opposed to objective representations of pure, unadulterated fact.
- b. The cultivation of meaningful relationships between filmmaker and subjects that endure beyond the scope of the project – the presence of which elevates the filmmaker’s level of understanding and empathy toward his or her subjects, and also helps ensure a sense of responsibility for their long-term wellbeing.
- c. Collaboration between filmmakers and subjects such that subjects have greater agency in determining the construction of their images. This strategy helps to mitigate both concerns regarding power imbalance, and inaccuracies that may arise through the practice of outsider storytelling.

### **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Cape Town. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

Kristin Pichaske

15 October, 2008.

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# CHAPTER 1

## BACKGROUND, RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

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### 1.1 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DOCUMENTARY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Documentary films have the potential to address some of South Africa's greatest post-apartheid challenges, from fostering mutual understanding among diverse communities, to educating a largely illiterate population and building a more cohesive, democratic society. In a 2003 critique of the SABC, Pieter Fourie summarized the critical role of the media (and documentaries) as follows:

Since 1994, South Africa has been going through a rigorous process of political and social transformation that affects the life of each citizen and the organization and culture of each South African institution. There are many uncertainties and even anxiety...To tell these people's stories, to bring them together through programming that has as its objective to create understanding of one another's cultures, histories and ideals, and to contextualize the country's problems, achievements and possibilities are of the utmost importance (2003: 161).

Fourie's words echo the sentiments of many who believe that generating diverse local content for the South African television is critical to the country's wellbeing. The racial divide in South Africa remains such that for many, representations of a particular race, tribe, or community that appear on television are the only exposure one is likely to have to that race, tribe, or community. Documentaries are particularly salient in this regard, given their unique ability to represent the real. As South African producer Neil Brandt argues:

For a lot of people a documentary [about the people of Bonteheuwel] on the SABC is probably the only impression they will have of Bonteheuwel.

It's not likely that they will ever go there or have friends from that community or any other community like it. So it is critical that that documentary presents a fair and accurate picture (2006).

Despite all that is at stake, there is a growing sense that media-makers, government, broadcasters, and other stakeholders are not doing enough to ensure that national television and film programming is diverse, accurate and culturally sensitive. Rather, the film industry in general and the documentary industry in particular remain troubled by a dark past and ongoing racial tension.

### 1.1.2 AN INDUSTRY DIVIDED

Evidence of racial divisions can be found in all corners of the South African documentary industry. At several panel discussions at the Encounters Film Festival in recent years, discussions of race and representation have boiled over into heated argument.<sup>1</sup> In online chat rooms, filmmakers continuously trade sharp remarks about who has the right to tell stories about whom.<sup>2</sup> Media headlines have repeatedly accused the SABC and its documentary commissioning editors of everything from racial essentialism to censorship and pandering to government interests.<sup>3</sup>

Much of this conflict is rooted in the contentious history of the media in South Africa and throughout the African continent. As Thelma Gutsche, Manthia Diawara, Teshome Gabriel and countless other African film scholars have argued for decades, the majority of documentary filmmakers in South Africa (as elsewhere) have historically been white,

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<sup>1</sup> One noteworthy example took place at a debate on "Cultural In/Sensitivity" at the Johannesburg Encounters festival in July 2007. The discussion soured after a commissioning editor from the SABC stated publicly that SABC Factual believed that it was time to put an end to documentaries made by white filmmakers about black subjects (Encounters, verbatim notes, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> For several months in 2006, filmmakers on the popular chat group known as Moviezone engaged in a heated debate about race. (See <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/moviezone/>) Racial insults have since continued to bubble to the surface of Moviezone dialogue, prompting some members to publicly denounce the group, which was once widely viewed as an extremely useful tool for sharing important industry information and discussion.

<sup>3</sup> C.f. Mabuza, Ernest. "Blacklist Fear at SABC – Cosatu." *Business Day*, January 31, 2007; SAPA. "Why was Mbeki Documentary Withdrawn?" *Mail and Guardian*, May 27, 2006; SAPA. "Moving Towards Censorship." *Mail and Guardian*, November 15, 2006.

Western and male, and therefore the balance of films produced have presented “reality” as filtered through a white, Western, male bias – a phenomenon that has served to keep people of color and other marginalized groups on the fringes.<sup>4</sup> This concern is further exacerbated by the dual legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Given that the cinema of apartheid was controlled almost exclusively by whites and typically used for the purposes of spreading white propaganda, most black<sup>5</sup> South Africans were denied the opportunity to see themselves and their cultures accurately reflected in the media until very recently. An added consequence is that decades of South African history were lost in the sense of never having been told from an objective, non-white perspective.<sup>6</sup> Hence, many black South Africans understandably have strong feelings about the need to memorialize the past, reclaim their history, and tell their own stories in their own voices.<sup>7</sup>

Few filmmakers would question the notion that documentary films should represent the full spectrum of cultures and experiences of South Africans in all of their diversity. There is also agreement that, after decades of cultural repression, previously disadvantaged South Africans have a right and a need to tell their own stories. Unfortunately however, the fact remains that a critical mass of black documentary filmmakers has yet to emerge, the means of film production remain largely in white hands and blacks remain more often the subjects of documentary film in South Africa than the makers.<sup>8</sup> Questions of how to

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<sup>4</sup> c.f. Diawara (1992), Gutsche (1972), Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1989).

<sup>5</sup> The term “black” is used throughout this dissertation to refer to people of African and Indian descent, as well as so-called “coloured” people – a practice which, while contested (as with most racial labels), is not uncommon in South Africa. The term “coloured,” though also troublesome, is used here without qualification in the interest of expediency.

<sup>6</sup> The historical racial bias of South African film is well documented in literature on the cinema of apartheid. C.f. Bignaut and Botha (1992), Davis (1996), Gutsche (1972), and Tomaselli (1996). Chapter five of this study provides a more in-depth analysis of this and other historical factors that have shaped racial discourse within the industry today.

<sup>7</sup> The overarching concern around history and memory provides the basis for Annie Combes’s book *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Duke University Press, 2003). Francois Verster articulates the implications for personal narratives in the field of documentary in “Redefining the Political: A Short Overview and Some Thoughts on Personal Documentary Films from the New South Africa” in Martin Botha’s anthology *Marginal Lives and Painful Pasts: South African Cinema After Apartheid* (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Chapter five of this dissertation substantiates the existence of racial inequity in the industry and examines its causes.

achieve parity and what to do in the interim therefore continue to fuel heated debate. Division around these issues threatens filmmakers' efforts to organize, share scarce resources, lobby for effective policy-making and otherwise band together for the greater benefit of the industry (Desai 2007). Many of the industry professionals interviewed for this study voiced their opinion that an objective study of these emotionally charged issues could greatly benefit the industry.

### **1.1.3 THE SOUTH AFRICAN DOCUMENTARY MAKER'S DILEMMA**

For those who would make documentaries in South Africa, the overarching political issues noted above are exacerbated by a host of ground-level practical and ethical concerns. These are problems I have experienced firsthand, and in fact much of the initial inspiration for this study came from personal experience.

After working for eight years as a documentary director/producer, I first came to South Africa in 2002 to shoot a documentary titled *Guguletu Ballet*, which chronicled the lives of several ballet dancers from the Cape Flats. Immediately, it became apparent to me that South Africa presented a unique set of challenges for documentary work. Never before had I encountered such a pronounced gap between my own experience, socioeconomic status and world view, and that of my subjects. In the years since, I have continued to do documentary work in South Africa, and as a white, female, American director working almost exclusively in disadvantaged communities, I have encountered a variety of troubling responses to my work.

For the most part, the South Africans whose lives I have documented have been exceptionally open – so much so that I found myself confronted with a host of new ethical issues. In communities that have been under-represented for decades, the desire to have a voice and to “be heard” is powerful indeed – so much so that it can potentially open the door to exploitation. In this environment where the average citizen is not as media-savvy as the average Westerner – and might not even have access to television – a great deal of education must take place before one can obtain consent that could be considered truly informed. As my subjects were not demanding of this information or aware of their own rights, the responsibility fell entirely on me to fulfill this obligation and to determine how much due diligence was enough.

On the other end of the spectrum, I have encountered those who argue that I have no right to document stories and communities of which I am not a part. In one instance, while shooting a documentary about forced removals under apartheid, I met a victim who argued that no one who was not a part of his community should be able to make a film about it. When I inquired as to his rationale, he replied quite simply, “because you are not angry enough to tell the story properly.” While I don’t agree that anger should be considered a prerequisite for documentary filmmaking, I can certainly understand that individual’s frustration – much of which stemmed from the fact that dozens of international film crews had traipsed through his former neighborhood over the years searching for stories about the forced removals that took place there. Most came and went in a matter of weeks, never returning to provide any assistance to the victims or even offering their subjects a copy of the finished work. In the end, a community that had been marginalized for decades was left feeling that it still did not truly have a voice.

As a cinematographer, I’ve also had the opportunity to work with other “outsider” filmmakers as they attempt to navigate these challenges. Each of the filmmakers I’ve worked with has had good intentions and made an effort to do right by his or her subjects. Still, many made missteps. This should come as no surprise given that the finer points of ethics and etiquette in this unique filming environment remain murky and the demands of time and budget place significant limitations on the filmmaker.

These concerns are not unique to the international filmmaker. They are felt by all documentary makers who are outsiders vis-à-vis their subjects – which is to say nearly all filmmakers in South Africa. In a country where the first and third worlds live side-by-side and where huge educational and economic gaps persist, most filmmakers are far removed from the communities and circumstances of their subjects. South Africa therefore presents a unique – and in many ways, ideal – environment for examining the outsider-documenting-Other phenomenon in a contemporary context. It is an environment that presents a clear and observable set of challenges and a wealth of relevant case studies for examining approaches to documenting the Other. Moreover, it is a place where filmmakers *must* grapple with these challenges if the industry is to repair its racial fissures and move productively forward. Yet little academic study has been devoted to this task and it is clear that key questions remain unanswered, leaving

many frustrated.

#### 1.1.4 A SCARCITY OF EXISTING LITERATURE

In 1996, Keyan Tomaselli wrote that “the study of South African cinema remains confined to a handful of scholars” (1996: 10). While some new authors have dedicated attention to the tremendous growth and change within the South African film industry in the past decade, the focus has typically been on feature films. Yet as Fourie’s argument suggests, documentaries bear a particular significance for societies in transition – in terms of reclaiming history, redefining identities, and giving previously marginalized people a voice. In addition, documentary work is generally more accessible to disadvantaged groups and therefore a key point of entry into the film industry. Indeed, as I shall argue later, many of the most successful black South African narrative filmmakers started out as documentary filmmakers.

Nonetheless, a review of literature on this topic reveals little of substance. Several books and articles have been written on related topics – e.g. (narrative) cinema in South Africa,<sup>9</sup> race and representation in the media in general,<sup>10</sup> and race in African cinema.<sup>11</sup> However, literature that delves into the particulars of documentary films in post-apartheid South Africa is scarce. Until very recently, Jacqueline Maingard was the only academic whose writings focused specifically on this topic, and these are almost entirely limited to her doctoral thesis and a series of derivative articles. For the most part, her analyses extend only up until 1995 and therefore her work does not delve into the radical transformation that has occurred in the South African documentary industry since then.<sup>12</sup> Curiously, her recent book, *South African National Cinema* (2008) devotes almost no attention to the subject.

In late 2007, as this dissertation was being written, Martin Botha published an anthology on post-apartheid cinema entitled *Marginal Lives, Painful Pasts: South African Cinema After Apartheid*, which includes a remarkable five chapters on new South African documentary. One of these chapters – “Black Stories, White Voices: The Challenge of

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<sup>9</sup> C.f. Balseiro and Masilela (2003), Blignaut and Botha (1992), Davis (1996).

<sup>10</sup> C.f. Dyer (1997), Ferguson (1998).

<sup>11</sup> C.f. Diawara (1992), Bakari and Cham (1996), and Harrow (1999).

<sup>12</sup> A complete list of Maingard’s body of work on South African documentary can be found in the bibliography.

Transforming South Africa's Documentary Film Industry" – is a condensed version of this dissertation. Two additional chapters provide significant contributions to discourse on post-apartheid South African documentary. Keyan Tomaselli's "Communication for Development in New South African Documentary" (pp. 159-184) provides a useful framework for analyzing contemporary South African documentary films, particularly those with distinct social/political agendas. Some key concepts emerge from this discussion which I have incorporated into my theoretical framework. Another significant contribution in this volume is Francois Verster's "Redefining the Political: A Short Overview and Some Thoughts on Personal Documentary Films from the New South Africa" (pp. 107-128), which provides a lucid meditation on the rise of personal documentaries in the New South Africa. Verster's conclusions often overlap with and substantiate the arguments of this study and I have therefore incorporated some of his insights throughout.<sup>13</sup> Beyond these offerings, little of substance has been written about the documentary industry since 1994.

## **1.2 OBJECTIVES AND KEY QUESTIONS**

### **1.2.1 EXAMINING HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY BARRIERS TO TRANSFORMATION**

This study aims to contribute to the existing body of literature about the history of South African documentary filmmaking on two levels. First, it adds an analysis of how that history which has already been documented has contributed to the contemporary barriers, both economic and psychological, to achieving racial transformation. Second, it adds significant research and analysis specific to South African documentary film during the past ten years – an area which remains underexplored.

While this study does not aim to provide a prescription for achieving racial equality within the industry (a matter which in itself could be the subject of several doctoral theses), it does attempt to lay some groundwork in the form of evaluating the current state of the industry and identifying the key factors that must be addressed and their root causes.

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<sup>13</sup> The two remaining chapters on documentary each focus on one individual film and therefore have limited overall bearing on this study. They are: Lauren Van Vuuren's "An Act of Preservation and a Requiem': The Great Dance: A Hunter's Story and Technological Testimony in Post-Apartheid South Africa" (185-206); and Adam Haupt's "Forged are my Fingerprints: Music, Social Change and Authorship in John Fredericks' *Mr. Devious the First: My Life*" (207-218).

This groundwork, while important in its own right, also provides a context for evaluating the work of contemporary South African filmmakers.

### **1.2.2 EXPLORING FUNDAMENTAL THEORETICAL QUESTIONS OF RACE AND REPRESENTATION**

The logistical and theoretical underpinnings of the “race and representation” debate are not new or unique to South Africa. For decades, anthropologists and documentary theorists around the world have contested the (white, Western, male) practice of documenting the “exotic other” on both ethical and representational grounds.<sup>14</sup> The recommendations emerging from this debate have ranged from efforts to promote indigenous filmmaking, to more reflexive modes of documentary, to a greater attention to the power dynamics between filmmaker and subject.<sup>15</sup> This global debate is a richer one – one that values placing more diverse voices in the director’s chair, but also understands that diversifying the views and experiences reflected in documentary film is not solely the charge of the director. Rather it can be, and increasingly is, driven by the subject.

This study seeks to enrich the South African debate by applying some of this broader global perspective to some fundamental questions that lie at the heart of racial tension within the documentary film industry: *In the post-colonial era, is it acceptable for white South Africans to make nonfiction films about South Africans of color? What are the ethical and aesthetic implications of this practice? Does a filmmaker’s status as an “insider” (i.e. one who is documenting his own story or her own culture) guarantee a higher standard of representation? Should white filmmakers be held to a higher standard in South Africa and if so, how might that standard be defined?*

My thesis argues that while cultivating a more diverse generation of filmmakers in South Africa is critical, it is not in itself an adequate solution at this stage in South Africa’s long march toward racial equality. In the near term, the work of white filmmakers remains necessary and viable, with the caveat that those filmmakers must proceed with great

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<sup>14</sup> Sources on this topic are too many to enumerate here, but are cited throughout this work. Examples of note include the writings of Manthia Diawara, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Jean Rouch, and Jay Ruby.

<sup>15</sup> C.f. Ruby (1991).

caution and work to identify more collaborative approaches to filmmaking that empower subjects to have greater control over the construction of their own images.

### **1.2.3 BRIDGING THEORY AND PRAXIS**

As Michael Rabiger has noted, “it is a curious fact that most film theorists come from history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, or philosophy – everywhere, it would seem, except actual filmmaking. Their work is thus not aimed at making better or different films but at identifying patterns and meaning in those already made” (2004: 107). To the contrary, this dissertation aims to apply some of my experience as a documentary maker, as well as insights gleaned from many other South African filmmakers, to develop links between theory and praxis.

The study first endeavors to identify the complex formal and ethical questions one must grapple with when making documentaries in the South African context: *How can filmmakers work to level the inherent socioeconomic gaps and power imbalances that so often exist between themselves and their subjects in South Africa? How might the industry work toward granting previously marginalized South Africans greater control over the construction of their own images? What formal and procedural approaches can help ensure the highest possible standards of honesty in representation?* By examining working examples of how theories of race and representation can be applied to address these questions, I hope to provide insights as to how documentary filmmakers of all kinds might create more diverse, more accurate, and more ethical representations of South African people and culture.

# CHAPTER 2

## APPROACH AND OUTLINE

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### 2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical considerations that inform this study fall into three general categories. The first relates to defining the documentary form and its complex relationship to truth. The second concerns the ethics of representation, in particular as related to the practice of documenting the Other in a postmodern<sup>16</sup> context. The third, deals with historical and political concerns associated with the practice of cinema in Africa, including questions of colonialism and neocolonialism, and related concerns about racial iconography and other persistent negative stereotypes.

#### 2.1.1 DOCUMENTARY “TRUTH”

**Chapter three** endeavors first to define the term “documentary” for the purposes of this study, drawing attention to longstanding theoretical debates around the relationship between documentaries and “truth.” This chapter then outlines a set of criteria for evaluating the relative truth or authenticity of a given documentary. The framework for this discussion is derived primarily from Bill Nichols’s “modes of documentary,” a typology that breaks down the documentary genre into six distinct subgenres and examines the relative merits of each with regard to authenticity. The typology establishes a basic vocabulary and a set of parameters by which the films discussed in this study can be evaluated in terms of how they use form to achieve some representation of “the truth.”

Naturally, other documentary theorists have proposed several alternative approaches to documentary typology. Noteworthy examples include Erik Barnouw, who breaks the practice of documentary down according to the intended role of the maker – e.g.

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<sup>16</sup> The term “postmodern” is used here to refer to both a period in time (i.e. roughly since the 1950s) and a set of philosophical concepts, including the notion of reality as a construct and the rejection of artificially imposed (read: Western) definitions of order and truth.

“Prophet, Explorer, Reporter...”<sup>17</sup> and Michael Renov, who categorizes according to four basic functions: “to record, reveal or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyze or interrogate; and to express” (1993:12-36). I have employed Nichols’s typology for two reasons. Firstly, his writings in general and his typology in particular are arguably the most familiar and widely used in film analysis.<sup>18</sup> Second and most importantly, while other frameworks center on a film’s intent or aesthetic value (factors which are not a primary concern of this study), Nichols’s typology focuses on specific formal strategies and how these help or hinder a film’s ability to represent reality. It therefore lends itself well to the purposes of this study, which strives to measure the accuracy and authenticity with which South African filmmakers represent their subjects.

Presented in a roughly chronological manner, Nichols’s typology also serves as a documentary historiography that enlightens the ways in which filmmakers have grappled with formal, ethical and representational issues over the past century. The typology thus provides an effective overview of the ways in which documentary practice has evolved over the past century in order to keep pace with postcolonial and postmodern sensibilities, which demand a more democratic, less didactic approach to representing others – particularly those from nonwestern cultures and/or backgrounds.

Finally, Nichols’s typology also helps serve to make a key point about the history of South African documentary, which will emerge in chapter four: most of his modes were not widely used in South Africa until after the advent of democracy – a factor that has greatly limited the development of the local industry and its audience. Thus, for the purposes of this dissertation, Nichols’s typology provides not only an effective heuristic model for evaluating the representational strengths and weaknesses of any given film(maker), but also a useful perspective for analyzing the ways in which the South African documentary industry as a whole has developed in recent years.

### **2.1.2 THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION**

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<sup>17</sup> These subcategories form the chapter headings of Barnouw’s *Documentary: A History of Non Fiction Film* (see Barnouw,1993).

<sup>18</sup> In his documentary handbook, *Directing the Documentary* – itself one of the most widely used sources in the field – Michael Rabiger writes that Nichols is “widely considered the guru of documentary theory,” and that “his *Representing Reality* [which includes the typology under discussion] is considered the theorist’s bible” (2003:109).

**Chapter four** examines the *ethical* challenges inherent to documentary practice. Whereas the theoretical principals of chapter three focus on the basics of the documentary form, this chapter emphasizes process and the relationship between image-maker and imaged. The concepts presented draw on several different disciplines, including ethnographic film, anthropology, theories of representation and postmodernism.

Here again, I have attempted to focus on theoretical models that have practical implications for filmmakers. I have therefore given special emphasis to Jay Ruby's writings on ethnographic film as these provide an explicit and concrete set of criteria for analysis, as well as models for more ethical documentary filmmaking. While Ruby's theories are oriented toward ethnographic filmmaking, he argues – and I concur – that they can and should be applied to all manner of nonfiction cinema.

### **2.1.3 HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL FRAMEWORK**

Having established a theoretical framework for analyzing the practice of documentary film that is not subject- or geography-specific, I turn my attention in **Chapter five** to perspectives on “African” cinema. Much of this discussion centers around the early and ongoing influence of cultural imperialism and the West, bearing in mind the argument that, “Western, and later specifically U.S., economic and cultural dominance both in the wider relationship between nations and in the area of cinema itself forms a crucial framework for any understanding of film production in the Third World” (Armes 1987: 53).

In an effort to establish this framework, I first provide an overview of the ways in which colonial powers deliberately and successfully sought to control the development of cinema throughout Africa and have continued to do so to the disadvantage of Africans and the global image of Africa ever since. Included in this discussion are related theoretical concepts such as colonialism, postcolonialism, neocolonialism, and the gaze. The legacy of colonial cinema is an important consideration for South African filmmakers who, I would argue, have a special obligation to work toward correcting the countless Eurocentric misrepresentations of Africa created during an era of brutal Western conquest and perpetuated in the present. This fundamental premise cannot be forgotten

when examining the work of contemporary filmmakers and indeed it is this premise that fuels arguments in favor of putting an end to white-on-black filmmaking altogether.

Of course there is an inherent fallacy in the notion that a single “African cinema” exists. To begin with, African national identities are defined by a variety of factors not shared by the entire continent (e.g. Arab nationalism vs. Islam). In addition, the national cinemas of Africa are not all the same nor have they evolved as part of a single development. Hence, Balseiro and Masilela astutely question whether there is any more value in discussing “*an* African cinema” than in debating “*a* European cinema?” (2003: 7). “African cinema” is thus a contested concept, which has been defined by various scholars in terms of geography, political affiliations and/or race, to name a few.<sup>19</sup> This chapter defines the term broadly, emphasizing certain specific commonalities among the cinemas of Africa, including the shared experiences of colonization (and its social and economic impacts), historical and contemporary depictions of black Africans as a race, and those aspects of Pan-African identity which are tied to the process of the struggle for independence.

South Africa has historically received scant attention in literature devoted to this subject, having been colonized and decolonized on a different timeline and in a different manner from the rest of the continent. Tomaselli notes, for example, that, “South Africa, which has produced more films than the rest of the continent put together, was, during the apartheid years, generally excluded from the category of an African state by film scholars” (1996: 165). However, he argues that South Africa deserves a place in this broader discussion, noting that many of the patterns of cinematic development under apartheid mimicked those imposed through colonialism elsewhere on the continent. Hence, many of the same theoretical models apply.

The latter part of this chapter examines theoretical responses to the common concerns of African cinema. The first of these, which I touch on only briefly, is Third Cinema – a movement intended to promote a radical political restructuring of cinema in the Third

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<sup>19</sup> In “‘African’ Cinema: Theoretical Perspectives on Some Unresolved Questions,” Tomaselli provides a helpful analysis of competing notions of “African” cinema that takes into account careful consideration of the unique space occupied by South Africa.

World<sup>20</sup> that would oppose the film forms of the West. Initially conceived in Latin America, the concept of Third Cinema has also been adopted by several African film theorists. However, it is not often applied in South Africa and I argue that it does not function as a practical set of standards by which to measure contemporary South African documentaries. Though a few scholars have related this concept to South African films,<sup>21</sup> the concept has received scant attention since the transition to democracy. Moreover, Third cinema *practice* never took root in South Africa, as evidenced by the fact that none of the documentary filmmakers interviewed for this study cited Third Cinema as an influence on his or her work.

Nonetheless, Third Cinema as a concept cannot be fully ignored, firstly because it has been highly popularized as a response to neocolonial influences on Third World cinema and secondly, because its framework and the history that led to its development provide insights about the fundamental issues underlying debates about race and representation in South African cinema today. Thus, for the purposes of this study, discussion of Third Cinema is brief and selective, functioning more as informative context than analytical rubric.

I conclude this chapter with an overview of Keyan Tomaselli's "development communication" theory – a framework which he has begun to develop in recent years through a series of screenings, discussions and debates among southern African filmmakers at the annual Southern African Communication for Development (SACOD) forum. Whereas Third Cinema has been critiqued for its devotion to "pure theory,"

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<sup>20</sup> The First World vs. Third World paradigm has also been problematized by many scholars but remains necessarily embedded in this discussion. This position is supported by Bhabha, who argues that "in the language of political economy, it is legitimate to represent the relations of exploitation and domination in the discursive division between First and Third Worlds." Pointing to the enduring relationship between Western capital and cheap, Third World labor, as well as the "sharp growth in a new Anglo-American nationalism" (a factor which has only expanded in recent years), he contends that there can be little doubt that "such economic and political domination has a profound hegemonic influence on the information order of the Western world, its popular media and its specialized institutions and academies" (1990: 112). The question of whether South Africa can be considered a Third World nation is likewise complex and problematic and this issue is addressed within chapter five.

<sup>21</sup> C.f. Davis (1996), Maingard (1995), Prinsloo (1996), and Tomaselli and Prinsloo (1992).

development communication offers an extremely pragmatic and results-oriented framework (a natural result of having been developed in cooperation with filmmakers). The result is an analytical framework which takes into account much of the theory presented in chapters three and four of this study and interweaves the historical and contextual factors presented at the outset of chapter five. Thus, development communication can be seen as a means of binding together all of the relevant theories presented by this study into a single analytical framework. Within this framework are several of the most important building blocks for my film analysis: the concept of “participatory/observational process,” use-value, ethical process, crew/subject relationships, and participant and community outcomes.

## **2.2 METHODOLOGY**

The research and analysis conducted for this dissertation falls into two broad categories. The first is a historical overview of documentary practice in South Africa and an assessment of the current state of transformation. The second is an analysis of key films. I have employed different methodologies for achieving these two tasks, and a summary of each follows.

### **2.2.1 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND INDUSTRY ASSESSMENT**

**Chapter six** provides an overview of the South African documentary industry from its inception until 2007. This section investigates historical and political factors which, in effect, stunted the creative and ethical development of documentary film in South Africa in such a way that black filmmakers could not emerge and white filmmakers were ill-equipped to represent black subjects accurately. Like the colonial cinema that permeated the whole of Africa during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this has important implications for documentary practice today and has played a role in shaping the racial discourse within the industry. Because the history of nonfiction film in South Africa up until 1995 is well documented, this portion of my research comes primarily from secondary sources, although I have supplemented much of that research through discussions with various individuals who were a part of the industry during that time.

Tracing this historical legacy to the present, I then examine the state of racial transformation in 2007, barriers to entry for previously disadvantaged South Africans,

attempts to overcome these barriers and their impacts. Because this area has not been well documented, my findings here are derived from a variety of primary sources, including personal experience.

As a documentary filmmaker who has worked exclusively in South Africa for several years, I brought to this study some fundamental knowledge as gained through work in the field, discussion with colleagues, attendance at festivals, markets, workshops and panel discussions and the like. I have, however, endeavored to substantiate any conclusions drawn from my own experience through empirical research, including a series of interviews with filmmakers, academics, and industry players. A broad socioeconomic range of sources were consulted. In most cases, interviews were conducted in person, tape-recorded and transcribed. On those rare instances where in-person interviews were not possible, I sought written feedback in the form of e-mail correspondence. I began this process with a series of key questions, which I then customized according to the areas of expertise of the interviewee. As is so often the case with interviews, my initial list of questions tended to expand in many different directions depending on the answers I received.

In order to substantiate and/or quantify my findings, I also consulted a range of published resources, which include but are not limited to industry publications (e.g. film and anthropology journals), government and NGO reports (e.g. SACOD newsletters and Forum reports, NFVF annual reports and other government reports related to the film industry and economic empowerment), and online resources (e.g. online chat groups and key websites such as that of SADOX and the Film Resource Unit). As a result, the primary conclusions put forth in this chapter are all corroborated by multiple sources.

## 2.2.2 SELECTION OF FILMS FOR ANALYSIS

**Chapters seven through nine** link the theoretical framework and the historical and political context to the practice of filmmaking by analyzing a series of case studies. I have selected three recent (i.e. released after 2000) films for analysis. Each of these films meets a high standard of critical and commercial success, all having been screened both locally and internationally on television and garnered multiple awards. While all have been reviewed and referenced in scholarly writings, none has been analyzed in detail prior to this study. The filmmakers are racially mixed so as to allow for comparison between insider and outsider storytelling strategies and outcomes. Most importantly, each film provides an archetypal example of one or more of the key theoretical concepts outlined in the preceding chapters.

***Ochre and Water* (chapter seven)**, Craig Matthew and Joelle Chesselet's 2001 documentary about the Himba of southern Namibia, has been praised as a textbook model for documenting the "exotic Other." Its ethnographic tendencies make it a natural fit for applying much of the theory presented in chapter four. A collaborator of ethnographic filmmaker John Marshall and a self-professed student of ethnographic film theory, Matthew has consistently applied said theory to the making of *Ochre and Water* with exceptional skill. The film also provides an excellent working example of how formal strategies outlined in both Chapters three and four, such as subjective first-person narration and reflexivity can be applied to mitigate the problems associated with outsider filmmaking.

***WaN'Wina/Sincerely Yours* (chapter eight)** is arguably the most powerful example of insider storytelling to emerge in the new South Africa. Part of the *Steps for the Future* Series, which was specifically aimed at producing films by southern Africans, for southern Africans about HIV/AIDS, it chronicles director Dumisani Phakathi's return to his childhood neighborhood to talk with former friends and neighbors about their attitudes regarding HIV and sex. Like *Ochre and Water*, it is produced in a reflexive style that includes first-person narration by the filmmaker. However, whereas Matthew is an extreme outsider vis-à-vis the Himba, Phakathi is very much a part of the community he is documenting. The exceptionally candid and revealing commentary that he is able to acquire as a result is clearly what gives the film its power. *Wa N'Wina* therefore

serves as a useful lens for examining arguments in favor of empowering previously disadvantaged South Africans to tell their own stories.

***The Mother's House* (chapter nine)** is one of the most controversial films produced in South Africa in recent years, and yet also one of the most successful. Produced by Francois Verster – a “privileged” white, male filmmaker – it is an intimate and sometimes harrowing documentary about three generations of poor, black women. From the project's inception, Verster's outsider status brought cries of racism from the documentary establishment. In addition, his choice of observational style (as opposed to the reflexive form of the preceding two films) has been criticized for being overly voyeuristic and leaving aspects of contextual analysis up to the viewer. Nonetheless, I argue that by applying several of the theories about ethics and representation outlined in Chapters four and five of this study, Verster has managed to produce a documentary that stands up to intense ethical scrutiny. It is therefore an excellent example of how process – as opposed to form or insider status – can provide the keys to authentic and ethical representation.

### **2.2.3 APPROACH TO FILM ANALYSIS**

Bearing in mind Rabiger's commentary about the detached nature of much film criticism, this study attempts to approach the task of film analysis using multiple methodologies. Each film is examined through a careful application of the established theoretical framework – in terms of form (as per the analysis in chapter three), in terms of process/ethics (as per chapters four and five), and in terms of historical/political context (as per chapter 5).

In order to avoid the conjecture that so often accompanies theoretical analyses of film, I conducted lengthy interviews with the director of each film to establish his own motives, vision, process and perceived outcomes for the films. Outside sources (academics, anthropologists and other filmmakers) were also consulted for direct input. Finally, in the case of *the Mother's House*, where the role of the subjects was of paramount importance, I interviewed the main characters represented in the film in order to assess their experience of the filmmaking process, the final product and its impact on their lives.

## **2.3 CONCLUSIONS**

**Chapter Ten** provides a summary of conclusions resulting from this study and recommendations for future research. Here I compare the examples presented by each of the three films analyzed in the preceding questions and consider implications for the broader industry.

# CHAPTER 3

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: *TRUTH, DOCUMENTARY AND NICHOLS'S MODES*

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### 3.1 DEFINING DOCUMENTARY

Defining the documentary is difficult, whether documentary is understood in terms of its formal features, its assumptions about the construction of knowledge, its approach to narration, its assertions of authority, the expectations it evokes in the audience – or all of the above (Bernstein 1998: 398).

Of all the genres of film, none has been subject to more semantic and conceptual confusion than the nonfiction film. We cannot agree on the differences, if any, between fiction and nonfiction. When scholars use the terms 'nonfiction' or 'documentary,' it is often unclear what body of films they refer to (Plantinga 1994: 389).

There is no such thing as documentary (Trinh T. Minh-ha 1993: 90).

What is a documentary? What is documentary's relationship to "reality" or "truth"? To evaluate the formal, technical, and ethical issues associated with documentary film is a difficult task, in part because the genre itself is difficult to define. This difficulty stems in part from the fact that there is no clear dividing line between fiction and nonfiction films. In addition, the field of documentary encompasses several sub-genres, each with its own unique representational strategies and concerns.

Scholars and filmmakers alike often credit John Grierson as the first filmmaker to define documentary as we now know it. His definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" is a popular one among filmmakers and academics alike (Ellis and McLane 2005: ix; Rabiger 2004: 4). No doubt this is due in part to the simplicity and generous inclusivity this definition offers. However, in the contemporary context and for the purposes of this study, such a broad definition is not particularly helpful as it could

easily be argued to include a number of fiction films that are “based on” or “inspired by” real characters and events. Thus, Grierson’s concept of documentary works as a starting point, but requires further illumination. Carl Plantinga makes a useful distinction in this regard, arguing that documentaries “[make] *direct* assertions and implications about the actual world, whereas fiction, in creating an imaginary world, makes assertions about the actual world only *indirectly*, via metaphor or analogy” (1991: 390).

Documentary can also be defined in terms of the expectations it arouses in the audience. Nichols posits that viewers engage with the documentary form in a way that also takes the relative nature of truth into account.

In documentary... We settle into a distinct mode of engagement in which the fictional game calling for the suspension of disbelief (“I know this is fiction, but I will believe it all the same”)... transforms into the activation of belief (“this is how the world is but still it could be otherwise”). Our oscillation now swings between a recognition of historical reality and the recognition of an argument about it (1991: 28).<sup>22</sup>

In recent years, the line between fiction and documentary has become increasingly blurred, a factor which makes defining the genre even more difficult. Films like *Story of the Weeping Camel* (Falorni and Davaa, 2003) and *Touching the Void* (Kevin Macdonald, 2003) have pushed the boundaries of documentary by including staged images, contrived narrative, and recreations that are both elaborate and pervasive. Nonetheless, such films have consistently been deemed documentaries by industry “experts.” Both *Story of the Weeping Camel* and *Touching the Void* were on the shortlist of potential Oscar nominees in the Best Documentary category. According to The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, these two films can be classified as documentaries because the *balance* of material in each film is nonfictional in nature.

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<sup>22</sup> While this may be true in some contexts, how true is it for audiences that are not as media-saturated, media-savvy, or media-critical as those in the world Nichols inhabits? No conclusive research on the subject has been done, but certainly it would be presumptuous to assume that the average South African viewer (and perhaps even the average Western viewer) approaches documentary with the kind of critical postmodern eye Nichols has described.

The films discussed in this study fulfill all of the various requirements and definitions laid out above. All deal with direct representations of actuality. All can be said to arouse in the viewer an “activation of belief.” While some may include small recreations and other minor elements of fiction, this study generally does not deal with genre-bending documentaries that represent a significant blend of documentary and fiction, except to point out that this growing trend exists within the broader industry. Although I will consistently use the term “film,” this should be interpreted colloquially to include documentaries shot on both film and video and broadcast in theatres and/or on television. I have not included short-form news or magazine journalism programs in this study, as I see these as separate genres with their own particular issues and conventions.

### **3.2 DEFINING TRUTH**

Okay, so what is truth? It’s a moveable feast. There is my truth and your truth. The Irish have this expression, ‘it be truth, to him’. We all understand that. There are multiple truths (Dennis O’Rourke, quoted in Spring 2005: 129).

Since its inception, the documentary form has inspired endless debates about the relationship between truth and the filmic image. Initially, documentary seemed to hold great promise as a medium that could directly represent reality, as opposed to merely describing it. Thus, viewers had great faith in the authenticity of early documentaries. However, in truth, most early documentarians were not engaged in the practice of documenting “reality” in any unmitigated form. In fact, limitations of technology at the time made it nearly impossible for them to do so. More importantly, filmmakers like Dziga Vertov and John Grierson believed that it was their responsibility to not only record but also *interpret* the world as they saw it.

For Grierson and Vertov, the documentarian does not merely record the world; he or she creates one consonant with what the filmmaker regards as actuality. Grierson argued that ‘you photograph the natural life but you also, by your juxtaposition of detail, create an interpretation of it’...

Vertov argued that filmmakers should produce a *kino pravda*, or 'cine truth,' that was unique to the vision of the world offered by the camera... Vertov's and Grierson's notion that the documentary film was an interpretation of the realistic scenes the camera captured makes their ideas parallel to those of film realists like Bazin. All three thought that cinema was a product of *the creative abilities of the maker* (Ruby 2000: 271-72, emphasis mine).

Over the years, the relationship between documentary, truth, and objectivity has become progressively more complicated. While advances in technology have made it increasingly possible to capture "reality" with minimal intervention, the rise of postmodernism has rendered the very notion of objective reality or truth quite murky.

Nichols takes what has been described as a "critical realist" approach to this issue. Rather than denying the existence of an actual historical world or denying that documentaries have the potential to capture that world, he argues that the historical world is "separate from discourse but [gains] meaning only *through* discourse" (Plantinga 1998: 390; Nichols 1991: 121). He describes documentary then as a means by which "pleasure and power, ideologies and utopias, subjects and subjectivities receive tangible representation." Thus Nichols lends historical weight and credence to the documentary form. He qualifies this point, however, noting that documentaries cannot fully capture the full "magnitude" of the historical world and arguing that filmmakers have an obligation to acknowledge their own inability to do so (Nichols 1991: 230-231).

Others, including Jay Ruby, argue that documentaries should not attempt to capture a sort of objective truth, but rather filmmakers should return to the aims of their Griersonian forebears and seek to produce documentaries that are intentionally and openly subjective in nature.

Documentary filmmakers have a social obligation to NOT be objective. The concept was inappropriately borrowed from the natural sciences – an idea which has little support from the social sciences. Both social scientists and documentary filmmakers are interpreters of the world. As Sue Ellen Jacobs has put it, 'Perhaps the best thing we can learn from

anthropological writings' (and I would add films and photographs) 'is how people who call themselves 'anthropologists' see the world of others.' To present ourselves and our products as anything else is to foster a dangerous false consciousness on the part of our audiences (1977: 10).

### **3.3 ON THE MAKING OF “TRUTHFUL” DOCUMENTARIES: NICHOLS’S MODES**

How are documentary representations created? What makes one more “true” or “fair” than another? If we accept that no documentary can perfectly capture reality in an objective way, what creative and procedural strategies are available to filmmakers that can help ensure that their documentaries are as accurate and respectful as possible? This section looks at various approaches to documentary filmmaking, examining inherent problems and potential solutions for mediating the thorny relationship between documentaries and reality.

In a series of writings, Bill Nichols has devised a typology of documentary “modes” which provide a helpful basis for examining this evolution and evaluating the inherent strengths and weaknesses associated with different approaches to documentary. Recognizing that documentaries cannot be neatly divided up into rigid categories (and perhaps also seeing this sort of categorization as ultimately unhelpful), Nichols instead sought to provide a framework for analyzing the different forms and functions of documentary in ways that are not mutually exclusive. Each of Nichols’s modes – *expository*, *observational*, *participatory*, *reflexive*, *poetic* and *performative* – represents a set of features and conventions developed (at least in part) in pursuit of ways to more accurately and ethically represent the real. In Nichols’s words:

We might say that reflexive documentaries call into question assumptions common to all... of the other modes; that interactive documentaries break out of the present tense limitations of an observational mode; that observational documentaries reject the argumentative pitch of the expository mode; and that expository documentaries seek to challenge the invitation to escape from the social world implicit in much fiction (1991: 23).

Importantly, the modes are not mutually exclusive. In fact most contemporary films contain elements of more than one mode. Hence Nichols's typology offers a language and a set of strategies that are fluid and can be applied across a wide range of films. A summary of each documentary mode follows.

### **3.3.1 EXPOSITORY MODE**

The expository mode of documentary aims to present factual information about the historical world, typically assembling that information into a coherent argument or historical account. It is often characterized by "Voice-of-God" narration and/or other forms of text, which articulate the argument, while images provide supporting evidence.

The expository form can be traced back to documentary's earliest days and arose in part from a dissatisfaction with the escapism associated with fiction filmmaking. Pioneers like Robert Flaherty and John Grierson believed that film had a higher purpose than to entertain and should be used to educate, inform, and bring about social change. In the Griersonian tradition in particular, expository documentary finds its roots squarely in social activism (Nichols 1991: 32-35; Barnouw 1993: 85-100).

In keeping with journalistic standards, expository films generally aim to be professional, impartial and authoritative in tone. The director assumes the role of researcher, journalist and expert/authority. Input from subjects is subjugated to the larger voice of the filmmaker.

Exposition can accommodate elements of interviews but these tend to be subordinated to an argument offered by the film itself, often via an unseen "voice of God" or an on-camera voice of authority who speaks on behalf of the text... The voice of authority resides with the text itself rather than with those recruited to it... witnesses give their testimony within a frame they cannot control and may not understand...The tone and perspectives are not theirs to determine (Nichols 1991: 37).

This approach would eventually come to be seen as overly didactic and naive in that it assumes that the filmmaker is able to know absolute truths about the "real" world. In the

postmodern era, a growing sense of relativism and the constructed nature of reality significantly problematized the field of documentary in general and the expository mode in particular. Contemporary critics would argue that no filmmaker has access to or can accurately represent “the truth.” Hence, the omnipotent, authoritative style that characterizes expository filmmaking has fallen out of favor to some degree.

An added concern related to this mode is the “tradition of the victim,” which grew out of the socially focused Griersonian tradition. Many of the early films made by Grierson and his National Film Board of Canada (and others like them) were aimed at “giving voice to the voiceless.” In a new age where self-empowerment is valued and paternalism is frowned upon, this tradition of turning the camera on society’s hapless victims is often regarded as tasteless and/or unhelpful (Pryluck 1976: 22; Winston 1988: 269-287).

As a consequence of apartheid (for reasons which I will explain in detail later), the expository mode is the predominant mode of documentary production in South Africa. While this has begun to change in recent years, there remains a fair amount of negative sentiment toward the notion of the “all-knowing (white) filmmaker” of the past who, in the expository tradition, created authoritative (mis)representations of black communities and issues of which he was not a part.<sup>23</sup> Like their Griersonian forebears, South African filmmakers have been accused of taking a paternalistic approach that perpetuates negative stereotypes of black South Africans (Davis 1996: 66-73). This remains a source of conflict.

### **3.3.2 OBSERVATIONAL MODE**

The observational mode, often referred to as “direct cinema,”<sup>24</sup> aims to spontaneously record real events without intervention on the part of the filmmaker. In its purest form,

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<sup>23</sup> This concern became a focus of the 2007 Encounters debate on “Cultural In/Sensitivity in Johannesburg” referenced previously.

<sup>24</sup> The term *cinéma vérité* is also frequently used to describe the observational mode of filmmaking that emerged during this historical period. Many scholars use the terms direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* interchangeably or distinguish between the two only in that the direct cinema movement arose in North America while the *cinéma vérité* movement developed in Europe. There are however, critical differences between the subgenres. Nichols aligns the term direct cinema more closely with the observational mode as it “stresses the nonintervention of the filmmaker.” He aligns the Jean Rouch form of *cinéma vérité* with the participatory mode. Nichols quotes Erik Barnouw’s

observational documentary disavows voice-over commentary, nondiegetic sound or music, intertitles, reenactments, or interviews. The observational editing style tends to be minimalist, approximating the experience of being a fly-on-the-wall, observing life as it is lived (Nichols 1991: 38-39).

Observational filmmaking emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s with the development of new lightweight, portable video equipment and synchronous sound recording devices. Once forced to stage action and add soundtracks in post, filmmakers were freed by these innovations to record “life unawares.” This technological breakthrough dovetailed nicely with the changing social and political climate. As the more conformist 1950s came to a close, and the more free-spirited 1960s began to take shape, filmmakers and viewers alike became dissatisfied with “the moralizing quality of expository documentary” and observational film provided a welcome alternative (Nichols 1991: 33).

Early observational films like *Primary* (Drew Associates, 1960), *Don't Look Back* (D.A. Pennebaker, 1967) and *High School* (Frederick Wiseman, 1968), offered seemingly unregulated access to people, events and institutions previously inaccessible to the average viewer. Moreover, they did so in a nonjudgmental format that allowed the viewer to draw his or her own conclusions – a refreshing contrast to the didactic, authoritarian style of the 1950s expository mode.

The observational mode has proven particularly useful in the field of ethnographic film, where expository methods have the potential to taint images with the bias of the researcher. As Nichols explains:

Observational filmmaking and the social science approaches of ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism have a number of principles in common. All three stress an empathetic, nonjudgmental, participatory mode of observation that attenuates the authoritative posture

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“helpful” distinction between the two terms as follows: “The direct cinema documentarist took his camera to a situation of tension and waited hopefully for a crisis; the Rouch version of cinema vérité tried to precipitate one. The direct cinema artist aspired to invisibility; the Rouch cinema vérité artist was often an avowed participant. The direct cinema artist played the role of uninvolved bystander; the cinema vérité artist espoused that of provocateur” (Barnouw 1993: 254-255).

of traditional exposition. Observational cinema affords the viewer an opportunity to look in on and overhear something of the lived experiences of others, to gain some sense of the distinct rhythms of everyday life, to see the colors, shapes, and spatial relationships among people and their possessions, to hear the intonation, inflection, and accents that give a spoken language its “grain” and that distinguish one native speaker from another. If there is something to be gained from an affective form of learning, observational cinema provides a vital forum for such experience. Though still problematic in other ways, there are qualities here that no other mode of representation duplicates (1991: 41-42).

Hailed by many of its proponents as a veritable documentary second-coming, the observational mode is, of course, not without its flaws. First and foremost, the notion that a filmmaker might capture “reality” without any sort of intervention has come to be understood as a falsehood. The very presence of a camera tends to inevitably influence behavior. Moreover, every film is ultimately the result of a series of decisions on the part of the filmmaker which shape the ways in which it reflects reality. It is, after all, the director who decides whom to film, where and when; the process of filming itself involves decisions of framing, angle, and other factors which shape reality in many ways, both subtle and overt; and most importantly perhaps, documentaries often take shape in the edit room, where the director decides what material is used (and in what order), and what is left on the cutting room floor.

Indeed, some observational filmmakers are overtly political in their approach. Frederick Wiseman, one of direct cinema’s most noted practitioners, concedes that each of his films has an agenda and a distinct point of view, arguing, “I think the objective-subjective stuff is a lot of bullshit. I don’t see how a film can be anything but subjective” (quoted in Nelmes 2003: 202). In some cases, this is revealed in his cinematography – as seen in an extreme (and extremely unflattering) close-up of a teacher’s thick glasses in *High School* (1968). In other cases, Wiseman’s opinions are expressed through editing. A frequently cited example can be found in *Titicut Follies* (1969), wherein Wiseman intercuts footage of a naked mental patient being force-fed with footage of the same patient being prepared for burial at a later time. The juxtaposition makes a sharp

statement about the poor treatment of the patient and its ultimate result (Nichols 1991: 41).

The aforementioned scene raises an additional problem associated with the observational mode: its tendency toward personal intrusion and voyeurism. Observational filmmaking by nature tends to involve recording intimate moments, interpersonal conflicts, and hidden – and sometimes unflattering – personal characteristics.

In addition, the observational mode can be problematic in that it does not provide the means for the filmmaker to provide critical comment and context. Limited only to presenting the here and now, observational filmmakers often risk creating an incomplete picture of people and events – showing, for example, compromising behavior without sufficiently analyzing its root causes or motivations. This has particularly worrisome implications for ethnographic films or any documentary about a marginalized or “exotic” culture.

Before many ethnographic filmmakers had even embraced observational style, [Tim] Asch realized that the problem with narrationless observational films about cultural behavior exotic to Western audiences was that viewers simply lacked the knowledge necessary to understand what they were seeing and, without some assistance, were more likely to employ racist stereotypes (Ruby 2000: 119).

Observational filmmaking therefore tends to be the most ethically challenging of modes, raising a range of issues from intrusion, to misrepresentation, to informed consent and more. As chapter four argues in greater detail, these issues remain extremely contentious in the South African context, in large part because of the very wide gap in socioeconomic status between the average filmmaker and his or her subjects – a gap which exacerbates the already troublesome power dynamic between filmmaker and filmed.

Thus white filmmakers who wish to continue the practice of documenting poor black subjects – particularly in the observational mode – open themselves to a multitude of

criticisms regarding exploitation, misrepresentation, and benefiting from other people's pain and suffering. Francois Verster is a noteworthy example. One of South Africa's most successful filmmakers and also arguably one of its most berated, Verster has made a career of observing the lives of impoverished, marginalized, and often troubled black characters. His many fans appreciate his sensitive and intimate portraits and the messages they reveal about humanity. However, his critics find his relatively privileged "outsider" status vis-à-vis his subjects and his often painful portrayals of their darkest moments troubling. In particular, critics note that his choice of observational-style filmmaking omits any suggestion of his role or potential bias in creating the product that appears on screen.<sup>25</sup>

### **3.3.3 PARTICIPATORY MODE<sup>26</sup>**

Participatory films are those in which the filmmaker goes beyond merely observing and/or commenting on the subjects at hand to actively engage – asking questions, investigating, and provoking action and dialogue before the camera. Like the observational mode, participatory filmmaking emerged in the 1960s with the advent of synchronous sound recording, which made it possible to capture dialogue and other forms of verbal interaction on film for the first time.

The most common form of interaction in the participatory mode was and still remains the on-camera interview. By allowing people to speak for themselves directly to the viewer, this innovation has enabled subjects to play a larger role in shaping a film's text. Subject commentary tends to carry more weight and become more central to the film's argument in the participatory mode than in its expository predecessor. The editing of participatory films generally centers around weaving input from various sources into one coherent argument, as in the expository mode, but typically without the didactic overarching

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<sup>25</sup> Verster, in conversation and through other forms of personal communication, has described various instances in which he has been criticized for his work in this vein. These claims were substantiated by his longtime producer, Neil Brandt as well as his subjects and are discussed in detail in chapter eight. Further Evidence can be found in Tomaselli's SACOD Forum Reports and other writings. (See Tomaselli 2003, 2007, 2008.)

<sup>26</sup> Nichols initially termed this the "interactive" mode. This was replaced with the term "participatory" in the final (2001) iteration of his typology, which I have included here.

commentary. Hence, one could argue that the participatory mode represents a more democratic or collaborative form of filmmaking.

However, this too is debatable. While participatory films do offer subjects greater autonomy in the form of being able to speak for themselves, the weaving together of these perspectives into a cohesive filmic argument often amounts to individual perspectives being subsumed by the larger perspective of the filmmaker. As Ruby argues:

Being able to hear people tell their stories and observe their lives instead of being told what they think and the meaning of their behavior clearly offers subjects greater say in the construction of their image. It represents a major shift in attitude about where one looks for authority and authenticity. However, editorial control still remains in the hands of the filmmaker. The empowerment of the subject is therefore more illusory than actual. Although new voices are heard, traditional forms of authorship have not been significantly altered (2000: 204).

As Nichols also points out, the interview itself is a flawed interaction. While interviews may appear to flow as natural dialogue, there is an inherent power imbalance that stems from the fact that the interviewer has chosen whom to interview, what questions to ask, which responses to include and which to discard. The result is “a form of hierarchical discourse... as in the confessional and the interrogation” (Nichols 1991: 47).

In his article *The Interview as Unnatural Act*, Brian Winston points out that this concern is compounded when the presence of the interviewer and the questions he or she has asked are omitted from the finished documentary – creating the appearance of a “pseudomonologue.”

The final result on the screen of this most mediated of devices is, paradoxically, a talking head seemingly addressing the audience without intervention. This is true even if the subject is looking off camera, and is certainly the case if the lens is directly addressed. Secondly, in the interview footage there is seldom any acknowledgement of the essential maldistribution

of power between the interviewee and the (often unseen and, these days, rarely heard) interviewer. These factors apply to almost all the various interviewing techniques now used. They combine to make interviews at least as suspect as reconstructional devices (Winston 1983: 12).

In South Africa, a country with twelve official languages, the interview also raises significant issues with regard to language. Not surprisingly, it is commonplace for white filmmakers to conduct interviews with black subjects in English, rather than in the subject's first language. Filmmakers and broadcasters alike have argued that English is the preferred language because it allows subjects to speak directly to the broadest possible audience without subtitles, which distract the viewer and may leave room for interpretation. However, the practice of conducting interviews in English further tips the balance of power in favor of the interviewer (not to mention the white/Western viewer) and often detracts from the authenticity, accuracy, and richness of the black interviewee's response.

My personal experience as a filmmaker confirms the latter argument. Without question, subjects I've interviewed have been significantly more comfortable in front of the camera and better able to express themselves when given the option of conversing in their first language. Of course, it is not always easy for English-speaking filmmakers to provide for this option. For some, this constitutes one argument against the practice of outsider/white-on-black storytelling in South Africa.

Beyond the interview lie a variety of other interactive approaches that can take participatory filmmaking to another level. Many of these were pioneered by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in their seminal film *Chronique D'un Été/Chronicle of a Summer* (1960). In the film, audiences see Morin and Rouch discussing their intentions at the outset, engaging with their subjects (inevitably altering their behavior), and even screening and discussing edited footage they've shot with their subjects. Rouch and Morin called this form of documentary *cinéma vérité*, a term derived from Dziga Vertov's *kino pravda*, or "film truth" – the truth of what happened before the camera (not to be confused with what would have happened if the camera weren't there). More recent iterations of this mode include personal essays like Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1986), Lourdes

Portillo's *The Devil Never Sleeps* (1996) and, of course, the entire oeuvre of Michael Moore.

The unique brand of truth that such films offer lies in their transparency. While the filmmakers have surely altered reality with their presence and further shaped that reality in the edit room (Moore in particular is known for this), we are able to see – at least to some extent – how the process of making the film unfolds and thus become privilege to the motives and power dynamics involved. As Nichols argues, “we can make our own assessment of their conduct, the procedures governing their inquiry, and the balance between information gained and personal price...” (1991: 46).

Participatory films have gained increasing prominence in South Africa during the past five years. Verster argues that this can be attributed in part to a general shift away from the didactic, authoritative films associated with the apartheid era and an increasing demand for personal narratives, individual perspectives, and representations that allow for multiple interpretations – i.e. films that better represent the ethos of the New South Africa (2008: 108-127). Thus, rather than striving to be the voice of authority, more and more filmmakers are opting to frame their narratives as personal journeys – including themselves and the filmmaking process in the narrative and acknowledging that the end result is but one person's experience of a given event, community, or culture. As I will argue later, this approach has done much to open up new and more politically correct avenues for both insider and outsider documentary making.

Craig Matthew and Joëlle Chesselet's *Ochre and Water* (2001) provides a successful early example of how the participatory mode can enable a filmmaker to capture and represent the lives of a community outside of his own experience without falling into some of the pitfalls associated with expository filmmaking. (It is for this reason that I have chosen the film to be the focus of chapter six.) In 2004, *Project Ten*, a series of thirteen films commissioned to celebrate the tenth anniversary of democracy, helped popularize participatory filmmaking by encouraging a group of emerging filmmakers to find their own voices and create a high-profile body of work within this emerging subgenre. Today, the interactive mode has become the mode of choice for several of South Africa's most successful filmmakers, including Rehad Desai and Dumisani Phakathi.

### 3.3.4 REFLEXIVE MODE

The reflexive mode attempts to subvert many of the problematic conventions associated with other modes by exposing their flaws and encouraging viewers to “see documentary for what it is: *a constructed representation*” (Nichols 1991: 57). Reflexive documentaries do not just tell stories or make arguments about the real or historical world. They make arguments *about how the real world is represented* in traditional documentary forms. Films like *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), *Ressemblage* (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1983), and *No Lies* (Mitchell Block, 1970) confront the problematic aspects of documentary head-on by drawing the viewer’s attention to the production process, the inherent biases involved in that process, the constructed nature of filmic images themselves and even the ethical concerns associated with representing others on film. Reflexive filmmakers often appear on camera in order to reveal their own roles in the process of constructing representations of reality.

Reflexive films can also serve to heighten trust in the viewer. Tomaselli cites the example of *Addicted to Solitude* (Jon Bang Carlsen, 1999). Within the film’s text, the director sets out to document life on an Afrikaans-owned farm in post-apartheid South Africa, but becomes enthralled with two characters he meets while conducting research and ends up making a very different film.

Carlsen takes us as viewers inside his film, and inside his methods, and therefore, inside the lives of his subjects. He humanizes all his informants, no matter their ideology. We know how the film was made. We do not feel distanced, remote or alienated. Like Carlsen, we the audience are somewhat bewildered, trying with him to make sense of the situations and people. No one in the audience distrusted the film or the director (Tomaselli 2008: 179).

Nichols further breaks down the concept of reflexivity into two categories: *political reflexivity*, which draws attention to “the relations of power and hierarchy between the text and the world,” and *formal reflexivity*, which draws attention to concerns with the cinematic form. Both politically and formally reflexive documentaries are particularly well suited to undermining hegemonic structures because of their unique ability to

challenge conventional assumptions of truth, order, and authority. The fact that they began to gain popularity in the 1970s and 1980s could be attributed in part to “Twentieth century tendencies toward radical doubt, uncertainty, skepticism, irony, and existential relativism” (Nichols 1991: 69).

While the reflexive mode does have a unique capacity to subvert many of the problems associated with the documentary form, it is important to note that the effectiveness of reflexive films depends entirely on the viewer’s ability to interpret self-conscious or ironic messages as intended. Therefore, reflexive filmmaking can be a risky venture if either the filmmaker fails to make his intentions clear or viewers lack the media savvy to translate his or her message. This is a lesson hard-learned by Verster, whose first film *Pavement Aristocrats* (1998) sought to undermine “expert” testimony that marginalized homeless people by juxtaposing authoritatively styled interviews with raw footage of homeless people’s lives on the street. While some critics praised the film as brilliant commentary, many took its content at face value and criticized the filmmaker for giving voice to a cadre of racist academics while exploiting his subjects.<sup>27</sup>

Another reason that filmmakers have historically shied away from reflexivity is that it disrupts the “suspension of belief” considered by many to be critical to the documentary viewing experience.

To remind the audience of the constructive and interpretive nature of images is regarded by some as counterproductive, if not actually destructive, to the nature of the film experience – that is, to the creation of an illusion of reality. Moreover, some people regard such revelation as self-indulgent, in that it turns the audience’s attention away from the film and toward the filmmaker. For many... being reminded that the images have an author disrupts the fantasy (Ruby 2000: 145).

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<sup>27</sup> At the 2003 Southern African Communications for Development (SACOD) forum a group of socially conscious documentary filmmakers discussed *Pavement Aristocrats* and mixed impressions were expressed. Some described the film as “discomforting,” while other raised the issue of respect for the subjects, whose alcohol-induced antics are displayed in full force (Tomaselli 2008:174). This discussion will be revisited and expounded upon in chapter six.

Indeed, this is one of the reasons Verster has cited in defense of the observational style of most of his films, adding that “the film is not about me, it is about the subjects and one doesn’t want to distract from that” (Verster 2006).

In his essay, “Blurry Boundaries, Troubling Typologies, and the Unruly Fiction Film,” Carl Plantinga points out yet another potential flaw with the reflexive mode – noting, as Nichols fails to do, the likelihood that this mode will fall out of favor one day, just as all of its predecessors have.

The moral design of [Nichols’s typology] implicitly devalues the past (as naïve) and favors the forms of the present (as sophisticated). There is a danger here. It remains to be seen how historians of the future will see reflexive and expository nonfiction films. If expository films are patronizing in their “teaching” from a position of authority, can’t we say the same of reflexive films, with their assumptions of a homogeneous audience that is ignorant and unreflective? ...could it be that those who favor reflexive films are underestimating the intelligence of audiences in assuming that audiences need to be continually reminded that they are watching a constructed representation? (Plantinga 1998: 394)

This keen observation notwithstanding, reflexive films still hold much potential in the South African context – in part because of the need to subvert entrenched power dynamics, but also because South African audiences, as a result of their limited exposure to nonfiction films, would do well to be reminded of the constructed nature of the medium. Due to both cultural boycotts and media censorship during the apartheid era, South African audiences were deprived access to documentaries for most of the country’s history. Even today, documentary programming on television remains limited and theatres are geographically and financially beyond the reach of most South Africans. As a result, many viewers have little experience with documentary films, much less documentary theory. Hence the reflexive format could be extremely useful in cultivating a more critical viewership. Unfortunately, however, this mode is not common as yet. While several recent films have included moments of reflexivity (*Ochre and Water*, *Wan ‘N Wina*), Verster’s *Pavement Aristocrats* is one of the few examples of a film that is truly reflexive by nature.

### 3.3.5 POETIC MODE<sup>28</sup>

Contrary to the expository mode, the poetic mode does not aim primarily to convey factual information or make an argument. Instead, this mode emphasizes “mood, tone, and affect much more than displays of knowledge or acts of persuasion.” Conventions like continuity editing (whether that be continuity of action or argument), plot, and character development are often disregarded in favor of exploring aesthetic, temporal, and spatial relationships. Nichols links the poetic mode to modernism, arguing that it developed “as a way of representing reality in terms of a series of fragments, subjective impressions, incoherent acts and loose associations.” To the extent that poetic documentaries are documentaries at all, this is largely in that their source material consists of images taken from the real/historical world. Poetic films like Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (1982) skirt a fine line between representing reality and representing “a world of the artist’s imagining” (2001: 102).

Some would use the term experimental almost interchangeably with Nichols’s poetic mode. He instead argues that poetic films “combine experimental and documentary elements” (2001: 104). Given that all of the modes in Nichols’s typology include documentary elements, this begs the question, why not simply refer to this mode as the “experimental mode of documentary”? This semantic peculiarity notwithstanding, the poetic mode gets less attention in Nichols’s writings, just as it is less frequently put into use by practitioners of documentary film.

The poetic mode is an extreme rarity in South African documentaries, and therefore receives minimal attention in this study. This can be attributed to three significant industry factors, on which I will elaborate later. The first of these is the historical use of documentary almost exclusively as a social/political tool. Although some poetic

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<sup>28</sup> The Poetic mode was not included in early iterations of Nichols’s typology. In later versions, he begins his typology with the poetic mode, a curious choice, since he describes the modes as having evolved loosely chronologically – each arising “in part through a growing sense of dissatisfaction among filmmakers with the previous mode” (1991: 33) – and yet the poetic mode does not seem a good fit as the launching point for all other documentary subgenres. Though Nichols traces its roots back to the modernist avant garde and cites examples dating back to the 1920s, I would argue that this mode did not reach a point of critical mass until much later. Thus, for reasons of chronology, as well as evolutionary argument, I have chosen to place the poetic mode later in the chronology.

documentaries like Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* trilogy and the work of Ellen Bruno carry a social message, the format is clearly not as well suited to making a political argument as other modes more closely tied to fact, history, and coherent argumentation. The second limiting factor is the creative isolation that existed in South Africa during the cultural boycotts of the apartheid years – a phenomenon that deprived most filmmakers and audiences of access to creative forms of documentary being produced elsewhere in the world. This historical deprivation has limited the scope of creative expression found in the industry today. A third factor is that this mode of documentary tends to be the most difficult to fund and distribute. Thus, in a country that is severely limited in resources, the poetic mode may be viewed as an unaffordable luxury.

### **3.3.6 PERFORMATIVE MODE<sup>29</sup>**

Like the poetic mode, the performative mode is less focused on presenting facts or arguments. Instead, this mode emphasizes understanding and empathy and sometimes includes a combination of actual reality and imagined reality. Performative films seek to create an affinity in the viewer, often inviting audiences to walk in their subjects' shoes. Using "evocative" and "expressive" tones that tend toward the experimental, they attempt to "remind us that the world is more than the sum of the visible evidence we derive from it" (Nichols 2001: 130-131).

The experiential, empathy-engendering qualities of the performative mode make it uniquely suited to document the experiences of underrepresented, misrepresented, or otherwise marginalized people such as gays, minorities and women. Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1982) provides a classic example. In his effort to give voice to a previously voiceless double minority – the gay, African-American male – Riggs interweaves poetry readings, personal recollections, filmic recreations, and group performances to conjure up for the viewer a sense of what it is like to be black and homosexual in America during the 1980s. Audiences are thus exposed to the feelings of shame, frustration and voicelessness that were part and parcel of Riggs' own experience. This is the type of experience that is better demonstrated (as in the performative mode) rather than described (as in the expository mode).

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<sup>29</sup> As with the poetic mode, the performative mode was not included in Nichols's initial typology but was added in later versions.

Performative documentaries also commonly emphasize memory and the act of remembering, as in *Night and Fog* (Allan Resnais, 1955), which deals more with the act of remembering the holocaust than the event itself.

One would expect that performative documentaries might be a popular genre in post-apartheid South Africa, where the act of sharing memories and experiences has taken on distinct national significance in the wake of apartheid. Yet it remains virtually nonexistent. A rare example is Riaan Hendricks's *A Fishermans' Tale* (2004), a short (26-minute) personal narrative about the filmmaker's attempt to understand his fisherman father's relationship with the sea. Though noted by some critics for its uniquely "poetic" qualities, the film was not widely distributed and therefore does not appear to have had a significant impact on the larger documentary landscape. (Botha 2006)

### **3.4 MODES AND AUDIENCE EXPECTATIONS**

The modes outlined above have implications not only for filmmakers but also for audiences. When a viewer watches a documentary, his or her reading of the film is shaped by a set of assumptions formed by previous experience. Most viewers are also able to recognize specific modes of documentary, if only on a subconscious level. As Bernstein argues, that recognition brings with it some understanding of the mode's traditions and conventions and these further shape the viewer's understanding of the film.

Having pegged a documentary in terms of a certain mode's traditions, viewers maintain certain expectations of the film. Viewers of an expository film, recognizing the tradition's textual conventions and its epistemological assumptions, expect 'a commonsensical world will unfold in terms of the establishment of a logical, cause and effect linkage of sequences and events' (Nichols, *Reality* 37). Viewers of observational films are encouraged to expect a virtual fiction film (Nichols, *Reality* 42-44). Interactive film spectators are challenged to infer the film's argument from the juxtaposition of admittedly limited perspectives. They are also

more highly aware of the construction of the film and its argument (Nichols, *Reality* 48, 56). Reflexive films cue the spectator to 'expect the unexpected, functioning not with a surreal intent to shock and surprise so much as to return the film systematically to questions of its own status and that of documentary in general' (Nichols, *Reality* 62) (Bernstein 1998: 401).

Given that a particular mode will generate a particular set of expectations in the audience, it is critical that filmmakers take into account the ways in which their films may affirm or violate those expectations. One of the reasons Michael Moore's films generate such criticism is that they often masquerade as participatory films – suggesting that Moore is genuinely exploring a given topic for his own edification as well as that of the audience, when in reality, Moore's work is carefully constructed in the expository tradition to support his own predetermined argument.<sup>30</sup> As Bernstein argues:

"In *Roger & Me*, Michael Moore works with and plays on these modes and the expectations they invite. *Roger & Me* establishes itself in its opening moments... as an interactive documentary, one which relies heavily on subject interviews and the filmmaker's... limited understanding... In other words, the opening (as well as its title) cues the spectator to expect that the film... will be tentative, exploratory, and diffuse in organizing its materials... But... Moore has a thesis about why General Motors closed its manufacturing plants in and around Flint, Michigan, and he has a clear argument about its effects on the town. The film is rhetorically organized to support his thesis... Moore's commentary permits no ambiguity in terms of the audience's interpretation of the people, places, and events they see... The spontaneity of his encounters, which is rendered often in the observational aesthetic of "uncontrolled" reality in front of the camera, is undercut by our recognition that in fact Moore has orchestrated all but the fine details of this profilmic event (Bernstein 1998: 401-402).

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<sup>30</sup> Each of Moore's feature documentaries – *Roger and Me* (1989), *The Big One* (1997), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2005), and *Sicko* (2007) – employ this problematic "mixing of modes."

### 3.5 CONCLUSIONS

As with so many aspects of documentary, there is no single correct definition of the genre, no single ideal mode, no perfect approach. To be certain, the evolution of the documentary form from its simplistic, didactic, expository origins is a positive step. The development of new modes has created a genre that is generally more diverse, democratic, and open to interpretation... one in which a greater plurality of voices can be heard.

Given all of the advantages of newer modes of documentary, there has been a tendency to disavow older forms like the expository and observational modes. I would argue that these modes are not wholly outdated. Rather they have a rightful and important place within the larger mix of documentary in South Africa, as elsewhere. Expository films like *Why We Fight* (Eugene Jarecki, 2005) and *The Corporation* (Achbar, Abbott and Bakan, 2004) provide a level of detailed analysis and powerful argument that simply could not be achieved through any other mode. Observational Films like *Spellbound* (Jeffrey Blitz, 2002) and *Startup.com* (Hegedus and Noujaim, 2001) derive much of their power from realism, uninterrupted by reflexive moments that break the spell. To be sure, a world in which expository and observational filmmaking were the only modes of documentary would be problematic. However, the new, more diverse world of documentary has opened up viewer interpretations in such a way that audiences are increasingly able to understand the limitations of these modes and account for them.

A word of caution is warranted, however, in that not all modes of documentary are suitable for any given subject. Films that aim to empower marginalized people are not well served by expository approaches which render their subjects' voices subservient to that of the filmmaker. Similarly, subjects that demand a great deal of context and/or analysis are not well served by an observational approach. Thus, filmmakers must choose with care.

*Control Room*, Jehane Noujaim's 2004 portrait of Al Jazeera's coverage of the War in Iraq Director, provides a useful case study. Noujaim claims that her observational approach was motivated by the movie's underlying theme of media bias in the Western

world and her desire to offer an appropriately open-ended perspective. However, this approach proves to be flawed in that the subject matter is too information-heavy and complex for the observational mode. Hence, the film lacks a degree of context and analysis that would enable the viewer to better understand the workings of Al Jazeera, the US press corps, and the various events on which they are reporting. Consequently, the viewer is left to guess who is telling the truth and who is spindoctoring. One might argue that if Noujaim really wanted to open up dialog about so-called objectivity in the media, a more participatory and/or reflexive approach which revealed her own context, goals, and approach to the subject matter would have been more appropriate, while also allowing her to incorporate a level of thoughtful analysis.

In addition to choosing an appropriate mode vis-à-vis their subject matter, filmmakers must take care to ensure that their methods remain true to the spirit and intent of that mode. Moore's problematic mixing of modes provides just one example of many in which filmmakers are drawn toward the participatory and reflexive modes by a sense that these modes justify spewing biased opinions without shame. While this may be true in some cases, it becomes problematic when the filmmaker's methods do not remain true to the intent of the mode.

For example, South African filmmaker Rehad Desai made a successful career of producing participatory and/or reflexive films in which he is a regular character. This approach is motivated and feels authentic in personal essay films like *Born Into Struggle* (2004), which is about the filmmaker's own experience of being born in exile, and *Heart of Whiteness* (2006), a personal journey throughout South Africa to explore white culture. However, this approach becomes somewhat problematic in his recent film, *Bushman's Secret*, a documentary about how Western pharmaceutical companies have exploited the San Bushmen of southern Africa in their quest to market the natural appetite suppressant known as Hoodia. What separates *Bushman's Secret* from Desai's other films is that he is an outsider vis-à-vis the subject matter in this case, and yet he still uses the same personal essay approach. In order to justify this approach, Desai recruits an insider – a Bushman named Jan – to join him in his profilmic quest to investigate the wrongdoing of the pharmaceutical giants. It is unclear whether Jan's participation was contrived expressly for the purpose of gaining the viewer's trust and validating the approach of the (outsider) filmmaker, or for the purposes of making the

story more appealing and dramatic. His participation does indeed feel contrived, however. Whether taking an insider along for the ride makes Desai's journey more authentic is debatable. What is more certain is that it makes the story more politically correct. In this case, the participatory and reflexive elements of the film appear more as dramatic surface flourishes, rather than a radical departure from more traditional modes of documentary. More importantly, Jan's contrived role renders slightly suspect an otherwise well made and politically righteous film.

# CHAPTER 4

## ETHICAL FRAMEWORK: *THE CHALLENGES OF DOCUMENTING THE OTHER*

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The time when an image maker could take photographs of strangers, usually poor or in some other way removed from the mainstream of America, and justify the action as the inherent right of the artist or the documentarian or the ethnographer is, I believe, ending (Ruby 2000: 139).

### 4.1 DOCUMENTARY AND THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION

Ethical concerns about the practice of “documenting the other” are central to public debate about documentary films. As Jay Ruby, Calvin Pryluck, Bill Nichols, Brian Winston and many others have argued, the filmmaker-to-subject relationship is one in which the filmmaker generally holds the greater balance of power simply by controlling the means of production and having a better grasp of all that the filmmaking process entails. This fundamental power imbalance is further problematized by a long list of theoretical, aesthetic, and political considerations which I will examine shortly.

At the heart of this debate lies the basic concept of representation – i.e. the questions of who has the right to represent whom and in what fashion. As Nichols explains:

[Documentaries] stand for or represent the views of individuals, groups, and institutions. They also make representations, mount arguments, or formulate persuasive strategies of their own, setting out to persuade us to accept their views as appropriate... The idea of representation itself is central to documentary... [it] is what compels us to ask the question, ‘What are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?’ ...For fiction films, the answer is simple... ‘People’ are treated as actors... For non-fiction, or documentary, the answer is not quite so simple. ‘People’ are treated as *social actors*... Most of us think of the invitation to act in a film as a desirable, even enviable, opportunity. But what if the invitation is not

to act in a film but to *be* in a film, to be yourself in a film? What will others think of you; how will they judge you? What aspects of your life may stand revealed that you had not anticipated? What pressures, subtly implied or bluntly asserted come into play to modify your conduct, and with what consequences? (Nichols 2001: 5-6).

Issues of representation present a formidable set of ethical challenges for documentary filmmakers. And yet no clear set of ethical guidelines exists. In fact, surprisingly little consensus has been achieved on this subject. As Pryluck points out, “expressions of concern appear occasionally in film reviews and published interviews; rarely are remarks extended beyond the topic immediately at hand – a particular film or a particular filmmaker. Only occasionally is it pointed out that the apparent ethical lapses are recurrent, not isolated” (Pryluck 1976: 25). Aufderheide concurs:

As a disadvantaged, underfunded sector in film, where many productions were labors of love, documentary depended on the commitment of makers for its longstanding reputation of integrity... Their popularity and the vastly expanded opportunities to make and distribute them are now raising anew questions of standards and ethics. The growing importance and the proliferation of documentaries will surely generate more heated (and unevenly funded) controversy, and may eventually result in a call from within the field for the establishment of professional standards and ethics statements (Aufderheide 2005: 28).

One likely reason that critical theorists have failed to more clearly delineate documentary ethics is that the practice of making documentary films so often waivers between the fields of art, journalism, and social science – each of which brings to bear an entirely different set of ethical constraints. As Ruby points out, artists are typically afforded greater latitude when it comes to using people and their images as the building blocks of their own highly interpretive aesthetic creations. Journalists, meanwhile, are typically held to high standards of truth and objectivity but are seldom expected to take the consequences of their reporting into account. The practice of investigative journalism has set a precedent that justifies the practice of producing damaging reports about an

individual without consent and without regard to any negative impacts that report might have on his or her life – all in the name of justice (2000: 143-144).

## 4.2 LESSONS FROM ETHNOGRAPHY

As compared to artists and journalists, social scientists are expected to adhere to far more precise scientific methodology and ethical standards. In the past few decades, the fields of anthropology and ethnography in particular have become extremely self-conscious when it comes to questions of accuracy and how their work impacts the lives and cultures of those they study. It is therefore not surprising that the field of ethnographic film seems to have done a better job of examining the fundamental ethical issues of its practice and reaching some decisive conclusions, as compared to the larger field of documentary as a whole (Ruby 2000: 140).

As Ruby (himself an ethnographic filmmaker) argues, the critical examinations conducted in ethnography and anthropology can – and should -- be applied by all filmmakers who make a practice of representing others (that is to say nearly all documentarians, period).<sup>31</sup>

Not only are ethnography and documentary films similar in their origins and subject matter, but they have similar goals and methods. Robert Flaherty, the U.S founder of the documentary, and Bronislaw Malinowski, the father of modern anthropological field methods, started using participant observation in their fieldwork at the same time and with no apparent knowledge of each other's work.... [both] saw early on the critical importance of developing a relationship to one's subjects in order

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<sup>31</sup> In his discussion about the boundaries between ethnographic film and documentary, Ruby quotes the following passage from Karl Heider's book *Ethnographic Film* (1976), 'It is probably best not to try to define ethnographic films. In the broadest sense, most films are ethnographic, that is if we take 'ethnographic' to mean 'about people'. And even those that are about, say, clouds or lizards or gravity are made by people and therefore say something about the culture of the individuals who made them (and use them) (Heider 1974:1, Ruby 2000: 26-27). Though Ruby disagrees with this assessment, I would argue that it speaks accurately, if broadly, to the applicability of critical studies in ethnographic film to the practice of documentary.

to capture them accurately (by first coming to understand them on a deeper, human level) (Ruby 2000: 168).

Indeed, much can be learned by examining the parallel development of anthropology, ethnographic filmmaking, and documentary filmmaking. The lessons that can be derived from this exercise are of particular relevance in the South African context, where documentary filmmaking so often adheres to classic ethnographic paradigm of the Westerner exploring the exotic and/or marginalized Other. Thus, in the examination of the documentary ethics that follows, I have drawn extensively on the writings of anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers and scholars. My goal in charting the key ethical concerns these practices share in common is ultimately to arrive at a framework for measuring the ethical standards of documentary practice as it exists in South Africa today and as it should strive to exist in the future.

### **4.3 DOCUMENTING THE EXOTIC OTHER: HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

#### **4.3.1 THE ORIGINS OF (ETHNOGRAPHIC) FILM**

The documentary film was founded on the Western middle-class need to explore, document, explain, understand and hence symbolically control the world. It has been what “We” do to “Them.” The “Them” in this case are usually the poor, the powerless, the disadvantaged, and the politically suppressed and oppressed (Ruby 1977: 8).

The practice of ethnography was founded on the assumption that an outsider could objectively describe and explain a culture “from the native’s point of view” using empirical data and precise scientific methodology. Ethnographers were supposed to convey meaning without any unnecessary commentary, adhering strictly to the facts. Film seemed like an ideal way to supplement written ethnography because it offered a means to record and transmit information in a direct way – one that was less biased or “culture-bound” than written language (Ruby 1995: 77).

Of course the idea that film could capture a totally objective image proved to be elusive. Once an ethnographer began editing shots together into a single cinematic text, he was faced with the dilemma of choice, and therefore forced to enter into the realm of

interpretation. Making matters worse, the technological limitations of the time necessitated that much early ethnographic film events be staged for the camera. In addition, the power dynamics between observer and observed – which were not discussed at the time – were particularly problematic. The subjects of early ethnographic films typically had no exposure to film and therefore little understanding of the process or its intended results, much less their rights as subjects or the potential long-term impacts on their lives.

Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* provides an excellent example. While the film was hailed as a masterpiece of its time by ethnographers and filmmakers alike, much of the footage was staged, falsified, and/or dramatized in order to appeal to a Western audience. Due to the lack of synchronous sound technology at the time, the film's subjects could not speak for themselves and were thus forced to submit to the filmmaker as voice of authority. While Flaherty professed to have a profound respect for his subjects and there is ample evidence of this, there also can be little doubt that he harbored many colonial sensibilities which color the film's perspective. All of these factors contributed to the making of a film that clearly upholds Western stereotypes about the inferiority of indigenous people.<sup>32</sup> Of course this served the needs of colonial society, which demanded a belief in the superiority of white Western culture as justification for imposing that culture on developing countries and exploiting their resources (Macbean 1994: 59; Barnouw 1993: 36-46).

In Flaherty's time, the power imbalance inherent to ethnographic filmmaking was easily justified. Common wisdom held that the technical skills required to make a good film were beyond the means of most people, indigenous or otherwise. Therefore, it was assumed that filmmaking was better left to the professionals. Given this assumption, who could be more qualified to make a film like *Nanook* than Robert Flaherty, an explorer who had spent years traveling and working with the Inuit?

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<sup>32</sup> Examples include a scene early in the film in which a white fur trader demonstrates his gramophone to a seemingly bewildered Nanook. The scene becomes particularly problematic when Nanook looks at one of the records curiously and then attempts to take a bite out of it – thereby displaying a total incomprehension of this technological wonder of the West. Given the regular interaction Nanook and his people would have had with westerners trading in this part of the world, it is highly unlikely that he would be so naïve in regards to the workings of a phonograph. Rather, it is likely that he was performing for the camera.

So began a long history of Westerners documenting indigenous cultures as “Other” – depicting them as exotic, different, and strange, and failing to examine or understand indigenous people on their own terms. This remains a critical issue in post-colonial Africa and one to which I devote special attention in chapter five.

#### **4.3.2 POSTMODERNISM AND THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION**

In the 1950s and ‘60s, the arguments that justified a Flahertian approach to documentary became seriously eroded, thanks to a series of intellectual, artistic, political and ethical changes falling under the common banner of “postmodernism.”

Firstly, as the colonial era drew to a close, the white, Western, male construction of reality increasingly came into question. Second, the “naïve empiricism” that dominated the social sciences in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century began to give way to a newfound sense that no fixed or objective reality existed that could be studied in an objective, scientific manner. Social scientists were thus forced to come to terms with fact that knowledge about a culture is not absolute or fixed. It followed that no academic pedigree could ever truly render anyone -- much less a Westerner – an expert in any indigenous culture. Hence, the question of “who can represent someone else, with what intention, in what ‘language,’ and in what environment [has become] a conundrum that characterizes the postmodern era” (Ruby 2000: 196).

The emergence of postmodernism had direct implications for documentary film. In short, the very notion that documentary was synonymous with fact was undermined completely. Moreover, the right of the filmmaker to document the lives and cultures of others became questionable.

More and more people understand the technologically produced image as a construction – as the interpretive act of someone who has a culture, an ideology, who comes from a particular socioeconomic class, is identified with a gender, and often has a conscious point of view, all of which causes the image to convey a certain kind of knowledge in a particular way. Image makers display their view of the world whether they mean to or not (Ruby 2000: 140).

In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several key factors within the field of ethnography would further what Nash and Weintraub refer to as a newfound “self-consciousness” in the field. These they define as follows:

(1) an increasing personal involvement of ethnographers with their subjects; (2) the ‘democratization of anthropology (that is a polite way of saying that some lower-middle-class students who got Ph.D’s in the 1960s didn’t share some of the class assumptions of the older anthropologists); (3) multiple field studies of the same culture; and (4) assertions of independence by native peoples (1972: 529).

These factors catapulted the profession into a period known as “the crisis of representation,” during which ethnographers and anthropologists began more critically examining their assumptions and attempting to architect a more democratic stance toward the “exotic Other” – one that would be “less authoritarian, more collaborative, and reflexive about its methods, content and forms of representation” (Ruby 2000: 4).

Naturally, these are the very same characteristics that can – and have – paved the way for more self-conscious documentary filmmaking. With the democratization of education and the availability of increasingly affordable gear, the practice of documentary has opened up to a much broader socio-economic range of directors who bring more diverse perspectives to the field. The increasing pervasiveness of media dictates that no documentary is likely to stand as the sole depiction of its subject for any great length of time; thus filmmakers have a heightened sense that inaccurate or overly dramatized portrayals will ultimately be exposed. Last but not least, the general population has become increasingly media-savvy – so much so that even the most “exotic” peoples are far more likely to have a basic understanding of their rights as subjects (Ruby 2000: 201). These developments coincided with several other social and technological advances that would change the practice of documentary film forever. With these changes, a new set of ethical questions has arisen.

#### **4.4 NEW ETHICAL QUESTIONS FOR DOCUMENTARY**

The number of ethical questions posed by documentary filmmaking in the contemporary context are nearly as limitless as the range of potential subject matter that exists in the world and could be the subject of a book in themselves. In the pages that follow, I focus on four key ethical questions that are central to this study:

1. How does one balance the often conflicting goals of good filmmaking and good ethics?
2. How does one balance the public's right to know with the individuals' right for privacy?
3. (How) can informed consent be obtained?
4. In what ways can exploitation be perpetrated by the subject and how can filmmakers deal with attempts to do so?

I do not attempt to outline clear and immutable answers to these questions because of course, there are no easy answers. Rather, I define the key concerns associated with each question. Then, in the final sections of this chapter, I outline several potential strategies for addressing these concerns.

##### **4.4.1 ETHICS VS. AESTHETICS**

It is no secret that many of the most powerful and effective elements of documentary filmmaking – drama, conflict, emotion, etc. – can require exposing subjects at vulnerable and/or unflattering moments. Moreover, even in an age when participatory filmmaking is the norm, subjects' ability to speak for themselves are often subsumed by the larger agenda of the filmmaker, which may be at odds with the subject's best interests. This can lead to clear-cut exploitation as in the case of Michael Moore, who is known for deliberately placing unwitting subjects in compromising situations in order to make them look bad. On the other hand, it can be as subtle as adding or subtracting elements of a story in order to make it flow properly for the viewer.

Ruby goes so far as to argue that entertainment value and ethnographic value are entirely at odds, suggesting that the “commercial film paradigm ethnographic filmmakers borrowed from the documentary-film world inhibits the development of anthropological cinema” (Ruby 2000: 18). While ethnographic filmmakers may be held to higher standards with regard to accuracy and “telling the whole story,” the tension between ethics and aesthetics is even more strongly felt by mainstream documentary filmmakers, who face the added pressures of the commercial marketplace.

Put simply, in order to remain viable, documentary makers need funding. Since Flaherty’s time, the challenge of raising the huge amount of money required to complete a film has been a formidable one. In order to make *Nanook*, Flaherty had to cobble together funds from various sources, including a Hollywood studio, the US government, a furrier business, and an oil company (Worth 1966: 330). Even in the digital age, documentary-making is an expensive enterprise and acquiring the necessary funding remains a constant struggle for the most successful filmmaker. Since relatively few non-profit funders have the capacity to fund an entire feature documentary, most filmmakers are forced to rely on commercial broadcast and distribution channels to fund their work. In order to succeed at this, a documentary must appeal to the largest audience possible. Moreover, without an audience, there can be no social impact; even noncommercial documentarians need audiences.

Study after study shows that audiences generally watch films primarily for the purpose of being entertained, rather than being educated. Thus, the tenets of nonfiction filmmaking focus a great deal on the practice of making documentaries entertaining. Pick up any textbook on the subject and you will learn that a “good” documentary film should have 1) a plot with a simple three-act structure, 2) engaging and colorful characters who relate to basic archetypes, 3) conflict and resolution, and above all 4) simplicity. Audiences, we are told, should not be weighed down with too many facts, figures or detailed bits of back-story. What audiences desire and respond to is reality simplified, dramatized, and distilled into a package that is easy to grasp and lasts no more than two hours (and sometimes two minutes).

“There is a basic conflict between the conventions of successful television documentary realism and an interpretive, reflexive, postcolonial, and

critical anthropology that has more to do with epistemological and economic differences than anything else. The former deals with packaging information in coherent units, whereas the latter sees knowledge as fragmentary, always incomplete, and at times, contradictory (Ruby 2000: 36).

This conflict is felt by anthropological and documentary filmmakers alike. An illuminating example can be found in the case of *First Contact* (1983), Bob Connolly's Academy Award-nominated account of the discovery of a previously unknown native population in New Guinea by gold prospectors in 1930. In a 1994 interview, Connolly explains how he had to simplify the film's narrative in order to make it work, rather than including detailed explanations for everyone's behavior in order to satisfy the political sensibilities of "white liberals" or "neo-nazis" (see Macbean 1994).

In South Africa, this tension between ethics and audience appeal, simplicity and contextualization, is furthered by the extremely limited domestic market for documentaries. It is difficult if not impossible for the average South African documentary to raise or recuperate its production costs without international funding and distribution. Thus, local directors must cater to the very different demands of domestic and international audiences. This often necessitates at least one of two compromises: 1) simplifying a story so that it makes sense to viewers who have little knowledge of South African culture and history (and thus oversimplifying it for the majority of the domestic audience); and 2) catering to the desires of Western audience, who, according to Ruby, "want to be amused by watching exotics doing strange things" (Ruby 2000: 34).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Many other theorists have come to this conclusion, including James Roy MacBean who writes the following about the film *First Contact*: "Surely there is something emblematic about ...documents of indigenous people reacting with amazement to the technology of the white man. A whole set of relations is here represented, especially the way Western civilizations like to dazzle non-Western peoples with demonstrations of its technological superiority. In this kind of encounter, an eminently colonial one, the white man is represented as the active agent making the demonstration happen, while the Other is represented as the passive spectator, if not the 'butt,' so to speak of the joke over how this 'primitive' would respond" (MacBean, 1994). While there is surely some truth in this notion, I do not entirely agree. Given that viewers of PBS, National Geographic and other documentary-heavy channels tend to be urban and highly educated. It follows that many are likely to have a genuine interest in gaining a true

It is certainly the case that documentaries which succeed on an international level tend to be those which simplify, dramatize, and exoticize culture and history. The Foster brothers' *The Great Dance* (2001) is a good example. One of the most internationally successful South African documentaries of all time, the film presents a heavily dramatized account of the hunting practices of the San Bushman. While the depiction is reverent (as opposed to belittling) it nonetheless adheres the simplistic "noble savage" stereotype that has long been typical to films (fiction and nonfiction alike) about indigenous peoples.<sup>34</sup>

Many of the most successful documentaries about the Struggle were made by international filmmakers and likewise conform to standards that feel overly simplified or romanticized to South African audiences, a point which has been argued by Keyan and Ruth Tomaselli.

Watching the American media trying to make sense of the momentous events during February when the South African government unbanned the African National Congress (ANC) and 60 other organisations and released Nelson Mandela, underlines the pitfalls of reporting on processes in other countries: the reports are event- rather than process-oriented; issues are simplified almost out of recognition, and personalities, rather than broader political and social movements, are credited with engineering change. Rhetorical maneuvers are reported as facts. Along the way, subtlety is flattened out: it's rather like observing a two dimensional organism trying to understand a three dimensional space in a four dimensional world (Tomaselli and Tomaselli 1990: 1).

The predilection of international audiences toward simple narratives and archetypal characters is further substantiated by Francois Verster, who bemoans the fact that his film *A Lion's Tale* is his least favorite of all the documentaries he has directed and yet also the most widely distributed documentary in South African history. Verster attributes

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understanding and respect for "exotic" cultures. Again, my own personal experience as both a filmmaker and a viewer bears this out.

<sup>34</sup> For an in-depth analysis of Craig and Damen Foster's portrayal of the San Bushmen in *The Great Dance*, see Van Vuuren (2005).

this largely to the fact that the film involves a catchy song (*The Lion Sleeps Tonight*) and a basic archetypal plot (the struggle of the artist against corporate greed) with which audiences the world over are familiar. Meanwhile, he feels that many of his other films suffer on the international market from their subtlety, complexity, and greater attention to detail (Verster 2006).

Complicating matters of funding and distribution further in South Africa, the marginalized and oppressed are not a mere minority of the viewing audience; they are the majority.<sup>35</sup> Thus, creating films that read well on an international scale and also resonate with the “average” South African viewer is extremely difficult.

#### **4.4.2 INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS VS. THE PUBLIC GOOD**

It is not... so easy to condemn the work of men like Leacock, the Maysles Brothers, and Wiseman. They have shown us aspects of our world that in other times would have been obscured from view; in this, there is gain. In the gain there is perhaps a loss... inevitably, in filming actuality, moments are recorded that the people being photographed might not wish to make widely public: adult citizens riding in a public bus are provoked into making hostile responses to high school students; a long unemployed worker gets rowdy drunk and has an altercation with the local police; a teacher who happens to wear thick corrective lenses is shown in an extreme close-up that emphasizes her heavy eyeglasses (Pryluck 1976: 21).

John Grierson, one of the undisputed fathers of documentary, founded both his own career and the National Film Board of Canada on the notion that documentary film could be an effective tool in the pursuit of social change. Grierson envisioned a world in which the power of film could be harnessed to create a better society – one in which citizens were not only more informed but also moved to take action against social injustices (Barnouw 1993: 85-100).

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<sup>35</sup> According to the 2001 South African census, the country’s racial make-up was as follows: 79 percent black African, 9.6 percent white, 8.9 percent coloured, 2.5 percent Indian/Asian. Therefore 90.4 percent of South Africans can claim “previously disadvantaged” status.

This notion of documentary as a tool for social change remains the primary motivation for many documentary filmmakers today, particularly in countries like South Africa, which are rife with social causes. Grierson's logic also provides the justification for the common practice of making films about "the private acts of the pathological, the socially, disadvantaged, the politically disenfranchised, the economically oppressed, and the exotic Others who are about to 'disappear' under the avalanche of Western influence." Western society has historically condoned this practice, as did the victims themselves, who hoped that drawing attention to their problems might help bring about solutions (Ruby 1991: 4).

However, there is a growing sense that this "tradition of the victim" is both exploitive and unproductive. As Pryluck and Ruby both point out, the outcomes Grierson envisioned for documentary are seldom realized. Few of the documentaries produced by Grierson and his cohorts at the National Film Board can be shown to have had any appreciable impact on the social problems in question and some even had negative consequences for their subjects. Both *The Things I cannot Change* (NFB, 1967) and *September 5 at Saint-Henri* (NFB, 1962) were intended to be sympathetic portrayals of "what it is like to be poor" but had unintended negative consequences for their subjects, who were scorned by their neighbors after the films were released (Pryluck 1976: 22).

The failure of political documentaries to generate social change is often attributed to the fact that social films tend to be viewed by audiences who already have an affinity for a film's subject and thus amount to little more than preaching to the choir (Winston 1988: 275). Ruby is particularly harsh in his indictment of social documentary makers, arguing that "there is little empirical evidence to suggest that [political films] are a significant means of influencing people... The funds spent on [such] productions were wasted, except perhaps to advance the careers of their makers" (Ruby, 2000: 199). This conclusion appears to be shared by a growing number of foundations which explicitly state that they will not grant funds for the production of media – presumably because they assume that the significant expense associated in producing a single documentary could be better spent to provide direct support to social causes and their victims.

Is this assumption correct? In 2000, when Ruby last published his argument, it might have seemed so. However, the cost-benefit equation for documentary media has changed considerably in the past decade. Several different factors have contributed to this: 1) the cost of production has dropped dramatically; 2) free online distribution channels like YouTube now provide a vast array free distribution channels with instantaneous global reach (in this era, the mere threat of appearing on YouTube may suffice to convince some perpetrators of social injustice to amend their ways); 3) social networking tools like Facebook and Twitter are creating powerful new ways to connect documentary content with interested audiences – and more importantly, coalesce concerned citizens around an issue to take collective action; and 4) media makers have become far more savvy about how to use documentaries effectively as tools for social change – viewing them not as an end unto themselves, but rather one part of a carefully orchestrated, multifaceted campaign.<sup>36</sup>

Even at PBS, the United States' most traditional broadcast medium, a political documentary rarely goes to air without an accompanying website where viewers can find out more about the topic at hand, make a donation, get directly involved, or link to a host of resources and opportunities related to that documentary's subject matter. Meanwhile, films like *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004) and *Outfoxed* (Robert Greenwald, 2004) have subverted the usual corporate distribution channels altogether and achieved wide exposure by harnessing the power of social networking on the internet to drive DVD sales and private screenings.

The Internet creates a new marketing engine that works spectacularly when it can tap into 'viral markets,' or the networks of friends, family, and people linked by community or commitment to care about the same issues... The 'house party' phenomenon has led some to hope that political docs can become organizing tools. Certainly the increased accessibility means that aware activists have many more resources to draw on for

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<sup>36</sup> Each of these phenomena have been explored and documented, with much compelling research being done at American University's Center for Social Media in Washington, D.C. C.f. Hirsh 2007 (re: new models for making political documentaries with real social impact), Aufderheid and Clark 2009 (re: the use of social media with documentaries to create dynamic, engaged "publics."), and Clark and Keim 2009 (re: use of Twitter to document the 2009 U.S. elections)

organizing events, discussions, and teach-ins (Aufderheide, 2005: 26).

Moreover, as we shall see, South Africa's *Steps for the Future* series had a significant impact on communities affected by HIV/AIDS throughout southern Africa without the use of the internet as a networking tool – and without even the use of cinemas.

For these and other reasons, I must ultimately disagree with Ruby and Winston's assessment of documentary as a tool for social change. While their contentions are historically accurate and may still often be true on the macro level (few films have significantly altered the course of history), I believe that they are increasingly false on the micro level. In my personal experience, nearly every documentary I have worked on that strove to highlight the plight of a particular person or group of people brought about some tangible benefit to those who participated in the project, even without the use of savvy viral marketing techniques. This has typically taken the form of assistance from individual viewers who saw the film and were motivated to make a donation, lend their support or get others involved. The same can be said about many (though sadly not all) of the contemporary South African films discussed in this study. That is not to say that these productions had sweeping impacts on policy. Rather, each had a discernible positive impact on the participants themselves that came in the form of individual viewers taking action. There is ample evidence that this can work and that the results can justify the costs of production.<sup>37</sup>

That said, the "tradition of the victim" does raise particular issues in the South African context. The pervasive and desperate poverty that exists in South Africa has created an environment where, for many, any interaction with an educated (white) person is thought to be a harbinger of good things to come. As a result, the poor and the marginalized may jump at the chance to work with a filmmaker despite having little idea what the process entails or what benefit, if any, it might bring. Some naively assume that working with a filmmaker or having one's face on television will magically bring some sort of

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<sup>37</sup> Several resources have recently been published which provide guidance for documentarians who strive to be agents of social change and document success stories. C.f. Harding, 2001; and Avni et al, 2005, which documents the impacts of several documentarians working with the activist organization Witness. In addition, the *Steps for the Future* series, discussed in Chapter Six of this study, has been a well documented success in terms of creating positive change in the fight against HIV, as well as positive outcomes for many of the films' subjects.

tangible social or economic benefit. In addition, many South Africans are not self-conscious about being reduced to aesthetic devices that represent poverty and suffering simply because they cannot afford to be. If there is a chance that participating in a film may lead to a job offer, a roof over one's head, or food for one's children, that possibility can overshadow any other concerns.

Needless to say, this creates an environment ripe for exploitation. Oftentimes, the expectations subjects have for the outcome of a documentary are unrealistic. And often, those expectations – whether articulated by the filmmaker or assumed by the subject – go unfulfilled. My personal experiences and the experiences of the filmmakers interviewed in this study notwithstanding, the number of films that have positive impacts on their subjects is surely outnumbered by those that don't.

An additional concern is that these interactions have resulted in the production of an enormous body of films made in Africa which focus on the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed. For better or for worse, most adult Americans continue to associate Africa with the images broadcast by countless famine relief programs in the 1980s. Well-intentioned though they might have been, these images have forever branded Africa as a continent racked by poverty, illness and suffering, and desperately in need of help from the Western world (Nichols 1994: 135). This stereotype is reinforced by many of the films made in South Africa today.

Conversely, a scant number of documentaries exist which present a positive picture of the continent or show Africans as empowered and self-sufficient. According to filmmaker Dumisan Phakathi, when uplifting films about Africans are produced, they face an uphill battle for distribution.

I did a [positive] film about my family and I watched broadcasters not knowing how to deal with African humanity. They are used to seeing only Africans in pain. You get used to watching people in a particular way, and I realized that it's gonna take time for the world, even Africans to accept that even after all the shit they've gone through and even put themselves through that they still have some kind of humanity. So I've watched the film world not know what to do with the film, where to

program it. There was a time when it was that film and *The Mother's House* [making the rounds] and they chose *The Mother's House* and... I came to the conclusion that it was hard for them to accept the humanity in my film. It was so foreign to see Africans just being emotional with the simplest and smallest things. I might be wrong, but that's what my intuition tells me – that they are used to consuming images of Africans in very dire, sad situations (Phakathi 2006).

Not surprisingly, an increasing number of Africans are finding this notion distasteful. The “tradition of the victim” that is so deeply entrenched in the South African documentary industry has implications that reach beyond the representation of one person or community to the representation of an entire continent. This too is a subject to which I will return in chapter five.

#### **4.4.3 THE PROBLEM WITH INFORMED CONSENT**

For many filmmakers who are confronted with questions related to exploitation, misrepresentation, or any sort of negative outcome for their subjects, the response is simple: “they knew I was filming and they gave their consent.” According to broadcast law, “informed consent,” which usually takes the form of a signed contract, is indeed the only requirement a director need fulfill in order to rightfully use filmed images of a subject in his or her work. That is to say, informed consent is legally sufficient – but is it *morally* sufficient? Some argue that it is, often citing the argument that there is public good in exposing the intimate realities of humanity – warts and all. But increasingly, filmmakers, critics, and viewers alike are recognizing that “consent and privacy are too complex to be dismissed in a dozen words” (Pryluck 1976: 22). As Rabiger notes, “Some participants are not attentive or sophisticated enough to absorb all the implications, and although the signature on the release form discharges legal obligations, it doesn't meet those that are moral (Rabiger 2004: 243).

Much of the problem stems from the fact that the chips are stacked in the filmmaker's favor. It is, of course, the filmmaker who decides how much to reveal to the subject about his or her intentions and many withhold certain details that might hinder their access. This sort of clear-cut exploitation aside, there are a variety of situations in which

even honest, up-front approaches to garnering consent can be problematic. In those cases where consent is sought (spontaneously) at the moment of filming, the mere presence of the camera crew carries with it a sort of momentum that often intimidates subjects into acquiescence. Pryluck cites, for example, the case of the Maysles brothers, who regularly sought the permission of strangers to be filmed for *Salesman* (1969) on the spot.

For *Salesman*, the Maysles brothers followed salesmen on their rounds. All three of the visitors – the salesman carrying his sample case, Albert Maysles with his camera gear, David Maysles with microphone and recorder – would approach a door. A brief explanation would be offered. ‘That took maybe thirty seconds,’ Albert said. ‘Most people at that point would then say they understood even though perhaps they didn’t... Then when the filming was over... they would say “tell me once more what this is all about,” and then we would explain and give them a release form which they would sign.’ In exchange, the subject would be given a dollar, ‘to make it legal’ (Pryluck 1976: 21).

In situations like these, participants’ judgment is often clouded by an element of naïveté combined with a desire to be helpful and/or not make a fuss. Even in those situations where permission is sought and granted in advance through lengthy discussions, people are often overly eager to give consent, thanks to what filmmaker Marcel Ophuls describes as the “great urge to communicate because of loneliness, because of insecurity, because of bottled up complexes” (Pryluck 1976: 23). To be certain, the notion of being the subject of a film is flattering. This is particularly true in cases where the subject is poor, uneducated and/or entirely outside of the public eye, as is the case with most of the South African films discussed in this study. Add to this the common global desire for one’s fifteen minutes of fame and it is easy to understand why most filmmakers don’t have trouble securing consent.

Regardless of whether consent is requested and given, and regardless of the motives of both filmmaker and filmed, questions may remain as to whether both sides truly understand what they are getting themselves into. Indeed, the filmmaker often cannot know the outcomes a project may have, as films like *The Things I Cannot Change*

demonstrate. The lesson such examples teach us is that filmmakers rarely have the ability – if the desire – to fully inform would-be subjects of the potential impact of having their lives filmed. As Rabiger puts it, “When you confirm that you want someone to participate in a project, you seldom have more than the sketchiest idea of who or what will be used in the film, what it will say, or how this individual, whom you don’t know very well, will finally appear to the world” (2004: 241). Pryluck ultimately concludes that even “the filmmaker’s best guess on the potential effects of the film” is not enough to constitute truly informed consent.

What is enough? Ultimately, Pryluck invokes the basic principle that “those least able to protect themselves require the greatest protection” (1976: 28). Many documentary filmmakers bristle at the thought of being held to such high standards. To be sure, some of the great documentaries of the past century might not have been made if these standards had been applied. And yet there is a potential benefit for the filmmaker who is willing to provide such protection – because with it comes trust, and with trust comes unfettered access and a level of intimacy not easily attained otherwise. Indeed, as I will later argue, some of the most powerful documentaries made in South Africa in the past century have been born out of a willingness on the part of the filmmaker to grant exceptional protections to his or her subjects.

#### **4.4.4 MAINTAINING CONSENT: THE PITFALL OF REVERSE EXPLOITATION**

Although anthropologists seldom talk about it publicly, all field-workers know that ‘in the field the researcher becomes trapped in the role of power broker, economic agent, status symbol, healer, voyeur, advocate of special interests, manipulator, critic, secret agent, friend or foe’ (Konrad 1977: 920, cited in Ruby 1996: 162).

The above commentary highlights yet another parallel between anthropologists and documentary filmmakers: both require the cooperation of their subjects in order to do their jobs. And just as the desperate needs of underprivileged subject can open the door to exploitation by filmmakers, it is not uncommon for underprivileged subjects to make exploitive demands in an effort to improve their difficult circumstances. This may range

from occasional requests for food, money, transport, dispute resolution and other assistance, to continually making new demands as a condition for participation.

Up-front demands are troublesome for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, journalistic standards generally dictate that one should not directly compensate subjects for interviews.<sup>38</sup> The popular argument behind this is that there is a fine line between paying people for their time and paying them to provide exactly the answers and/or behavior the filmmaker seeks. In addition, one must consider how any sort of intervention on the part of the filmmaker might alter the reality taking place before the camera. If one is trying to make a film about crime and violence in an impoverished township, one must allow crime and violence to occur. In this instance, providing economic assistance to the subject has the potential to change his or her circumstances, thereby compromising the integrity and impact of the film. Finally, if this sort of practice became pervasive, we would find ourselves in a world where access went to the highest bidder. The connection between money and access to “the truth” has worrisome implications indeed.

And yet, how does a filmmaker justify *not* providing some sort of financial assistance to a subject in need, particularly when that filmmaker is clearly in a financial position to do so? This is a dilemma that often arises in a country where the majority of the population lives in poverty and the majority of filmmakers do not. The question of who should benefit financially from stories about real people is a particularly sensitive one in the context of the Struggle, thanks to what Tomaselli describes as South Africa’s “left-wing concept of accountability and the relationship of filmmakers to the Struggle in general” (1992: 363). He argues that “filmmakers should consider whether they have a responsibility that goes beyond conveying the horrors of apartheid to the world’s cinema screens, but also to route some returns to the movements and families that provided these [stories] for the producers, or to the development of progressive film culture” (1992: 364). He cites the high-profile example of Richard Attenborough, who agreed to

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<sup>38</sup> Exceptions to this rule do exist, including fees for celebrity interviews and honoraria often paid to scholars who bring their considerable years of research and expertise to bear in such a way that they are contributing significantly and directly to the content of a film. In these cases, the nature of the testimony is typically expository, as opposed to editorial, and thus unlikely to be affected by bringing money into the equation.

donate all profits earned in South Africa by his 1987 film *Cry Freedom* to a UNESCO fund for child victims of apartheid.

Also cause for concern are those situations in which the subject makes demands *after* consent has been granted. Given that many documentaries today entail a process of filming someone's life over a period of months, if not years, the right to access often is not a one-time negotiation, but an ongoing process. In this regard, it is the subject who has the upperhand. Once a filmmaker has invested significant time and resources in filming, he or she is utterly dependant on the subject to complete the project. While consent forms may have been negotiated and signed long ago, this becomes meaningless if the subject changes his or her mind and begins refusing to cooperate unless new terms are met.

Several of the filmmakers I interviewed for this study – particularly those who worked in poor and/or indigenous communities – spoke of the difficulties they had encountered with subjects who agreed to be filmed only to change the terms of that agreement continually over the course of the project. Says Verster, "When people see an opening, they take it. And you really can't blame them. It's driven by difficult circumstances and an environment where people have to take advantage of any opportunity to survive" (2006).

Filmmakers typically don't like to talk about this sort of thing openly. Most tend to be uncomfortable with the idea of brokering deals with subjects in order to keep their projects going. And yet, as some of the films in this study demonstrate, this process can be ethically negotiated without negative consequences for the finished product.

#### **4.5 NEW APPROACHES TO ETHNOGRAPHIC AND DOCUMENTARY FILM**

The significant concerns outlined here demand equally significant attention to the way documentary makers approach their craft. The remainder of this chapter outlines several strategies for overcoming the ethical issues outlined above. Further analysis follows in the form of individual case studies found in later chapters.

#### 4.5.1 COMING TO TERMS WITH SUBJECTIVITY

“There has been a reassessment of the moral and intellectual implications of documentary authorship. The documentary, particularly its journalistic manifestations, stopped hiding behind the idea that images are merely recordings” (Ruby 1991: 53).

One method of overcoming the inherent subjectivity of documentary is to simply embrace it. For decades, documentarians struggled to uphold the standards of journalism and capture “objective truth.” And yet one mode of documentary after another fell short of that goal. Faced with the impossibility of achieving true objectivity, more and more filmmakers are opting to acknowledge the subjectivity of their work by crafting films in the form of opinions, personal journeys and individual narratives. This development has dovetailed nicely with the viewing public’s increasing cynicism – a phenomenon that has created a demand for *authenticity*, as opposed to objectivity from the media.

A hunger for authenticity can be seen inchoately in many places in America – in the appetite for angry ranters on radio, expressing their ever-so-unvarnished opinions... and in cynicism about 'the media' (meaning mostly news services) as being corporate, soulless, and sold out... A hunger for the real, for something that transcends corporate manufacture, drives marketplace demands. A new cycle begins...

The [documentary] format's reputation perhaps benefits particularly from the cachet given to independent media in general, in a time of great cynicism toward corporate media. When Morgan Spurlock told a festival audience, "We live in a world where documentary film, independent documentary film, has truly become the last bastion of free speech," he won a round of applause and cheers from a packed house (Aufderheide, 2005: 27).

In an era when the field of journalism has suffered a tarnished reputation, independent personal films like those of Michael Moore and Robert Greenwald, (*Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election*, *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*) are striking

a chord with the public. Beyond these obvious examples lie a cadre of more subtly subjective documentaries – films which are not so overtly biased in their presentation but which strive to foreground the voice of the filmmaker. Indeed, “finding one’s own voice” seems to be the new mantra of documentary and this mantra is spreading to some surprisingly mainstream media outlets. For example, the Discovery Channel – which is largely known for formulaic, low-budget programming – has recently devoted two programming slots to documentaries with “distinctive voices and aspirations to theatrical appeal”: *Discovery Times* and *Discovery Docs* (Aufderheide, 2005: 25).

For the many directors who are driven to make films out of a desire to be heard, this brings the freedom to develop a unique artistic and/or political voice, rather than simply recording facts or documenting “unfiltered reality.”

Ironically, the traditional form of journalistic documentary denied a voice not only to subjects but to the filmmakers as well. ‘Objective’ documentaries have no authors, only reporters who present the ‘who, what, when, where, and whys of the ‘truth.’ So the move toward a multivocal documentary form has also involved a renewed and increased role for the filmmaker – an overt acceptance of authorial responsibility” (Ruby 2000: 203).

This coincides with the argument made by maverick filmmakers for years that the further documentaries move away from the tenets of journalistic objectivity, the closer they may move toward uncovering greater truths. As director Dennis O’Rourke argues, “My films are far away from journalism – the codes of journalism are almost constructed so as to avoid having to confront the real truths that are messy and uncomfortable – it’s what I call ‘official storytelling’” (quoted in Spring 2005: 129).

From an ethical standpoint, the most important advantage of coming to terms with subjectivity is that it is allowing documentary filmmakers to present their unavoidably filtered, biased, interpretive versions of reality as just that – their own *opinions*. While subjective filmmaking may be driven largely by the public’s cynicism about objectivity, it has the greatest benefit for viewers who are not yet cynical in this regard. Essay films and other forms of documentary “editorialism” are critical for these audiences because

they acknowledge their own origins and biases so the viewer is not permitted to naively interpret documentary as synonymous with fact.

In this regard, openly subjective documentaries are particularly well suited to the South African context, where viewers appear to trend toward either extreme end of the spectrum. On the one hand, the apartheid government's manipulation of the media for decades served as a potent lesson that the "facts" reported by the media cannot always be trusted. Therefore, many South Africans have a sense of profound cynicism toward documentaries and any other form of media. On the other hand, the majority of South Africans are un(der)educated, nonliterate, and have little direct experience with documentaries, film analysis and so on. Therefore, there is a fair amount of naïveté among South African audiences as well. For these sectors of the population, self-conscious forms of documentary are not even close to being rendered irrelevant or pandering, as Plantinga has predicted. On the contrary, they will remain relevant for quite some time. As we shall see, this form of filmmaking has taken off in South Africa over the past few years and continues to grow.

#### **4.5.2 RELATIONSHIP BUILDING**

It seems to me that the paramount issue is not what was or was not done during the filmmaking process but what relationships existed between the filmmaker and the subject. If it was one which sought or even managed to equalize the power between the two parties, the actual techniques deployed are of little importance (Winston 1983: 12).

It is when you build a relationship with your subjects that they become human and not 'Other' (Ruby 2000: 168).

The old traditions of journalism hold that any personal relationship between filmmaker and subject compromises objectivity. But as documentary sheds its ties to journalistic sensibilities, it is becoming common – perhaps even expected – that documentary filmmakers should have close personal ties to their subjects. Those ties not only result in a greater depth of understanding of the subject, but also a stronger sense of ethical responsibility toward him or her as a human being. This too is an argument easily

substantiated by evolving standards of ethnography.

In recent years, most ethnographers have had to justify their work to the people they wish to study and attempt to compensate both individuals and the community. The need to justify is more commonly experienced by ethnographers than documentary filmmakers because ethnographers tend to stay in the field for prolonged periods and often wish to return for a restudy. They become temporary members of a community and, as such, assume certain obligations. Ethnographers have become increasingly aware that the people they study will read or see the finished product. This knowledge has to have a profound effect on how ethnographers characterize others. Most documentarians cannot afford to stay in the field very long, infrequently get to know the people they film very well, and almost never return to a site to make another film (Ruby 2000: 33).

While Ruby's description of the changing relationship between ethnographers and their subjects is likely correct, his characterization of documentarians as fundamentally different in this regard is presumptuous at best. The documentary tradition includes many examples of filmmakers who have developed meaningful and prolonged relationships with their subjects, including Robert Flaherty himself, who cites his relationship with the Inuit as his primary motivation for making *Nanook* (Flaherty 1950: 16). I have also encountered such relationships making documentaries in rural Africa – an environment where, like Flaherty in the north, I was ill-adept to survive without local support. Indeed, I have frequently enlisted my subjects help with not only my own survival but also many aspects of production that are better left to the local experts than attempted by an outsider like myself. Others who would make documentaries in townships where crime is high are also likely to enlist the help of their subjects with regard to security. Moreover, any filmmaker who seeks to make an intimate observational portrait – regardless of the existence of environmental perils – depends on his or her subjects for content, if nothing else. Thus, relationships are bound to develop.

Further, it is certainly not unheard of in this age for filmmakers to immerse themselves in the culture they are documenting for long periods of time. Digital technology and the

lower production costs it creates make it possible to spend extremely long periods of time in production. As a result, it is no longer uncommon for filmmakers to shoot hundreds of hours of footage for a single project. This point is underscored by the work of Jennifer Fox, whose *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman* (2008) involved shooting more than 1700 hours of footage over a period of several years (Meek 2008: 1).

Finally, the increasing ubiquity of television, even in rural and indigenous communities, dictates that documentaries are all the more likely to be seen and interpreted by the people who are their subjects than a written ethnographic study. Thus, the practice of building long-term relationships between author and subject is not only possible in documentary, it is increasingly the norm.

In fact, both my own experience as a filmmaker and the findings of this study support the conclusion that ***the existence of a meaningful, long-term relationship between filmmaker and filmed is the single most reliable determinant of ethical documentary practice*** and has positive aesthetic implications as well. This is substantiated by the SACOD framework for development communications which I will explicate in chapter five, as well as the films examined in chapters seven and nine, each of which involved a production period of more than five years. Relationship-building has further implications for filmmaker/subject collaboration, a practice which I will now examine.

### **4.5.3 FILMMAKER-SUBJECT COLLABORATION**

The right to represent is assumed to be the right to control one's cultural identity in the world arena. Some people, traditionally film subjects, are demanding that filmmakers share authority and, in some cases, relinquish it altogether. These demands call for profound changes in the way in which images are produced as well as the means by which knowledge is presented to the public. The subjects' demand for some control over how they are represented can be heard almost everywhere in the world (Ruby 2000: 198).

The concept of subject-filmmaker collaboration is not new to documentary. Here again, Robert Flaherty can be cited as an early example in that he had planned to incorporate the active participation of the Inuit in the making of *Nanook* from the inception of the project. In fact, his contract with funder Revillon Freres included a \$3000 line item for “renumeration of natives” (Barnouw 1974: 36). Using a portable projector, Flaherty screened footage he had shot for the Inuit so that, as he put it, “they would understand what I was doing and work together with me as partners” (Flaherty 1950: 13-14).

The approach worked. The Inuit eventually began suggesting scenes to Flaherty. It was they who suggested the infamous hunting scene with the walrus. Flaherty also trained some of the Inuit to be technicians (Barnouw 1974: 36). Countless filmmakers since have been inspired by Flaherty’s example and continued to employ his collaborative techniques. This includes many of the foreign journalists covering the South African unrest in the 1980s who hired and trained black production assistants.

One might argue that this is as it should be – a compromise between the notion that “the filmmaker knows best” when it comes to filmmaking and the subject knows best when it comes to his or her life and issues. Thus collaboration between filmmaker and filmed is an often proposed solution to many of the ethical and representational problems I have outlined.

Collaboration can take many forms. Some early apartheid filmmakers saw collaboration with the African National Congress as a means of validating their work. Roeland Kerbosch, (*Letter to Vorster*, 1976, and *South African Diaries*, 1977), Peter Davis (*White Laager*, 1977 and *Nuclear File*, 1979), and Anthony Thomas (*The Search for Sandra Laing*, 1977, *Six Days in Soweto*, 1977, *Working for Britain*, 1977) were all white filmmakers seeking to contribute to the Struggle and all worked in consultation with the ANC to varying degrees. The strategy not only embedded some accountability to the cause into their project, but also, no doubt, helped open doors in terms of access (Unwin and Belton 1992: 286). Yet such organizational collaboration is typically limited to the macro level – i.e. reaching an understanding of a project’s motives and the basic message that should be conveyed. It is also easily betrayed, as evidence by the fact that Anthony Thomas also sought the blessings of the apartheid establishment – thereby gaining access only to later undermine said establishment. Truer collaboration happens

on the micro level, where individuals have a say in the details of how they are represented on screen and their involvement extends all the way to the finished edit.

Many directors dislike the notion of relinquishing power to their subjects to such a degree. The popular argument against this practice is that it opens the door to exploitation. If, for example, a subject is offered the right to veto any given shot or scene in the editing process, what is to prevent him or her from insisting that an important scene be omitted simply because she was having a bad hair day? And yet many filmmakers have successfully negotiated the process of sharing editorial control with their subjects. Directors Jeff Vaughn and John Schott, who made the 1978 film *Deal* about the television the popular game show *Let's Make a Deal*, offer a compelling success story. Vaughn and Schott gave their subjects the right to review all of their footage and veto any scenes they found problematic (a condition required by the production company that created the original television program). Thanks to this agreement, the filmmakers contend that their subjects were more comfortable participating and less guarded in front of the camera because they knew they would have the option of making cuts on the back end. In the end, the directors claimed that they didn't lose any footage they considered essential to the film (Rubenstein 1978: 36; Ruby 1991: 54).

Here again, success may be very much tied to the presence of a meaningful and enduring personal relationship between filmmaker and subject. Just as relationship-building can safeguard the subject from exploitation, so too can it safeguard the director from subjects who would exploit their editorial powers. Sharing power facilitates the development of this relationship, and the relationship facilitates power-sharing.

In addition, collaboration solves many ethical concerns related to the notion of informed consent. If a subject has collaborated in the making of his own image, then consent can be fairly assumed and the arrangement "fulfills the basic requirements for control of one's own personality" (Pryluck 1976: 28). A caveat must be noted here, however. People seldom see their own flaws as clearly as others do. It is not uncommon for a subject to suffer from delusions which audiences are not likely to share. Such is the case with many of Errol Morris's films, most notably *Mr. Death* (1999), a profile of Holocaust denier Fred Lechter, Jr. Morris claims that his subjects, including Lechter, have always

had full knowledge of how they were being portrayed and even approved of the final cuts of his films (Morris 2002). Yet many of his subjects are highly eccentric. Surely some end up surprised by the backlash that results when their (sometimes offensive) opinions are broadcast to the rest of the world. Morris's test may very well indicate that he has represented his subjects *accurately* and in their own image, but he knows full well that the public is not going to side with some of his subjects and that there will be consequences. His subjects may not.

Thus, if we agree with Pryluck and Ruby, not all forms of collaboration are sufficient. Ruby specifically argues that even with cooperatively produced films, the burden of authorship lies with the filmmaker and that collaboration does not absolve the filmmaker from responsibility for outcomes (Ruby 1995: 80-81).

In addition to questions of self-image, collaboration raises questions of competence. For a film to be truly collaborative, there must be parity among the people involved and this is difficult if not impossible to achieve. Without training in the art of filmmaking, subjects are unable to participate fully in the production process. They are unlikely to sense the implications of certain creative choices like lighting and camera angle. And surely they are less likely to be able to assess how a documentary will read to the average viewer. Thus there generally remains some form of power imbalance unless subjects become trained in filmmaking, in which case the outsider filmmaker is no longer necessary.

No discussion of collaborative filmmaking would be complete without reference to Jean Rouch, who pioneered several strategies designed to empower his subjects to collaborate as fully as possible in the construction of their own images. While the limitations of this study do not permit going into great detail here, there is one aspect of his approach that stands out, particularly in the context of making films in the developing world and/or with marginalized subjects: Rouch made a regular practice of training his colleagues and subjects in Africa to record sound and do other technical work associated with the filmmaking process. Some of those people went on to make films of their own and become pioneers in African cinema. Hence the impact of Rouch on his subjects could be broadened to include the benefits of creating the potential for Africans to begin representing themselves – a significant contribution to the diversification of voices in African cinema that extends beyond Rouch's own filmmaking efforts.

#### 4.5.4 FILMS BY THE OTHER

Ethnic minorities, women, gays, third- and fourth-world peoples, the very rich, and the very poor are telling the middle class, middle-aged straight white males who dominate the industry that the mass-mediated pictures of the Other are false. Many wish to produce their own representations of themselves (Ruby 2000: 139).

In the 1960s, a movement to diversify the demographic mix of power within the global film industry began to take shape. This has since taken many forms and served many purposes. For some marginalized groups, subject-generated films are a means of reclaiming control over their own identities and correcting the false stereotypes of the past. For others, they provide a source of income and a means of balancing hegemonic structures within the media industry.

In recent decades, several indigenous media groups have emerged around the world, including programs by the Inuit in Canada, Aboriginal TV in Australia, the Video in the Villages project in South America and Terry Turner's various Kayapo projects (Aufderheide 1995: 83-92; Ruby 1991: 58). One of the first and most noteworthy of such programs was Challenge for Change, an initiative created by the National Film Board of Canada. The program was launched in the late 1960s, when filmmaker Colin Low traveled to Fogo Island to work collaboratively with the locals. Members of the community selected topics and locations for a series of productions. They were given the opportunity to screen and edit footage. Finished productions were shown in a series of community screenings with discussions following. None of the finished work would be shown outside the island without the prior approval of the community. The collective results of this process helped strengthen the islanders' sense of identity and society. The project was deemed a success and later expanded its efforts to train indigenous people to make their own films (Ruby 1991: 55).

The Challenge for Change program eventually died as a result of government funding cuts, but it became a model for other subject-generated works and some argue that it laid the foundation for the development of community access television throughout North America. Critics of the program argue that although it helped diversify the base of

power, it was essentially teaching white, middle-class values of what a documentary should look like and how it should be used. In the end, there was no fundamental difference in the films that resulted. This is a common problem experienced by indigenous and community media projects the world over and an issue that I will return to later (Ruby 2000: 210).

The development of indigenous and community media projects has been limited in scope. Most programs have, like Challenge for Change, been short-lived and relatively little effort has been devoted to studying their impacts. Perhaps more important than these developments is the rise of individual documentary filmmakers from marginalized groups. This has occurred in part as a natural result of the economic and political empowerment of these groups in general. It has been assisted by concerted efforts to diversify media voices in the Western world.

In the United States, for example, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) has taken the lead in cultivating a more diverse range of voices in documentary. This has included a variety of training programs aimed at directors of color, as well as initiatives designed to support films about minorities. In addition, a collection of government-funded “minority media consortia” have taken shape whose sole purpose is to cultivate and distribute media by, for and about American minorities.<sup>39</sup> These groups have been particularly effective in nurturing emerging talent, providing financial support and distribution, founding film festivals and other events that raise the profile of minorities in the American media.

Finally, technological advances are making the tools of the trade and channels of distribution increasingly available to all and this too is helping diversify documentary voices around the world. In 2004, Current TV began democratizing the global media landscape by pioneering the concept of viewer-created television content. Initially conceived as an all-documentary network, Current made it possible for any filmmaker, anywhere in the world, to create and upload a documentary to the network’s website. Since then, the network – which is broadcast both online and on millions of tv sets in the

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<sup>39</sup> These are the National Black Programming Consortium, Native American Public Telecommunications, Pacific Islanders in Communications, the Center for Asian American Media, and Latino Public Broadcasting.

U.S. and the UK – has purchased and aired thousands of hours of viewer-created documentaries. The success of this model has prompted other new media networks to follow suit and the channels of distribution are broadening at a rapid pace (Sladden 2008).<sup>40</sup>

Naturally, the goals of independent filmmakers from marginalized communities are as diverse as the filmmakers themselves. Some aim to become “successful” in the sense of breaking away from marginalized status and appealing to mainstream audiences. While this does much to shift the balance of power in the media, it raises the specter of assimilation. If a filmmaker from a marginalized group becomes a successful part of the power structure, will he or she remain interested in and/or qualified to represent his or her roots? There are also those filmmakers who strive to remain independent. To the extent that these filmmakers seek power and success, it is so that they might have the power to do things differently (Ruby 1991: 58).

If nothing else, the emergence of filmmakers of color has two undeniably positive effects: 1) a greater plurality of voices, and 2) closer ties to their communities, which should at the very least necessitate a more sensitive approach to representing those communities. (Spike Lee has to know that the choices he makes in terms of how he represents African Americans will result in a distinct reaction from his community and that he is likely to be held to a higher standard as a rare – and therefore very important – voice for African Americans in the film world.) Thus, there is general agreement that the diversification of power to include more marginalized people is a positive step for global society.

It must be noted, however, that documentaries produced by indigenous or marginalized people are not inherently true any more than those produced by those who represent the mainstream.

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<sup>40</sup> Taken to the extreme, this trend can also be understood to include use of cell phone video and free social networking tools like Twitter, which are increasingly enabling virtually anyone to document their world and transmit their message to a worldwide audience. While not closely aligned with the form of documentary practice that is the subject of this study, this practice should be noted as a powerful development with regard to giving citizens of all kinds a voice, as was so clearly illustrated by public documentation of corruption within the 2009 Iranian elections (Sladden 2009).

Although it is clear that the balance needs redressing and that the victims of Western oppression should represent themselves, it should not be assumed that any one group has privileged insight into its own history. People seldom understand their own motivation. No one person can represent his or her gender, class, or culture as a whole. No particular group of people has the corner on being self-serving or adjusting the past to fit the needs of the present (Ruby 2000: 205).

Trinh T. Minh-ha makes a similar argument against binary notions of insider vs. outsider, arguing that while one might be an insider vis-a-vis any given culture, one still becomes an outsider once one begins to engage in the process of documenting that culture as a whole through the lives of its individuals. Moreover, she argues that the very notion that an insider might possess some unique and genuine form of authority is overly essentialist and rooted in the outdated concepts of realism and objective “truth” (Trinh T. Minh-ha 1989: 147).

This last point is particularly salient to the South African debate. As noted earlier, few contest the need for a greater plurality of voices in the documentary arena. And yet the assumption that black South Africans alone can see clearly their own motivations and customs, is a dangerous assumption indeed.

#### **4.6 CONCLUSION**

No one way has an inside track on the truth. All suffer the limitations of being from a particular point of view (Ruby 2000: 32).

One of the few certain conclusions one can draw with regard to documentary ethics is that there is no single perfect approach. However, there does appear to be some consensus that audiences are better served when filmmakers strive for authenticity, as opposed to the ever-elusive objectivity. That means a move toward more openly subjective forms of documentary – forms in which the filmmaker takes responsibility for the opinions he or she is presenting, identifies them as his or her own, and presents them in his or her own unique voice – can bring a greater sense of authenticity and integrity to the genre. Taking this one step further, the use of reflexive techniques can

serve the purpose of making audiences ever more aware of the constructed nature of documentary images.

Just as there is no single perfect approach, there will never be a single perfect filmmaker – someone ultimately qualified to make a film about any given subject. It follows then that a *plurality of voices* should be the ultimate goal. Collaborative approaches to filmmaking serve this goal, as does increasing the number of films being made by “women/natives/Others” (Trinh T. Minh-ha 1989). While this will not in itself provide an inside track on the truth, the rise of a more diverse population of documentary filmmakers will surely generate a more diverse set of perspectives and that can only be a good thing. Ruby describes a world in which “a mixture of theories, methods, techniques, and ideologies all compete with one another – none seeming to offer a definite answer to the question of how to open up these films about culture to provide subjects with some say in the construction of their image” (Ruby 2000: 208-9).

## CHAPTER 5

### **HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL FRAMEWORK: *RACE, COLONIALISM AND AFRICAN CINEMA***

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How many films does the average African see that really talk to him? Is there a single one which evokes the least resonance, the least reflection of his people, life and history – past present and future? Is there a single image of the experience of his forefathers, heroes of African and Arab history? Is there a single film inscribed in the new reality of co-operation, communication, support and solidarity of Africans and Arabs? (Hendo 1996: 39)

The preceding chapters have outlined a theoretical framework that deals with fundamental principals of the documentary form and the ethics of representation – all of which could be applied to both Western and nonwestern films. However, when analyzing films in the African context, one must also take into account a number of factors – social, historical, cultural and economic – that are unique to the practice of cinema in Africa and/or the developing world. Many of these stem from the enduring legacy of colonialism, as Peter Davis argues:

For Africa as a whole, cinema has always been a powerful weapon deployed by the colonial nations to maintain their respective spheres of political and economic influence. History is distorted and a Western view of Africa continues to be transmitted back to the colonized. Apart from the obvious monetary returns for the production companies themselves, the values Western cinema imparts and the ideologies it legitimates are beneficial for WESTERN cultural, financial and political hegemony (Davis 1996: 53).

A number of film historians and theorists have dedicated themselves to the study of this issue. Some have explored the ways in which film once served as a means of spreading colonial propaganda and remains both symptom and agent of Western hegemony. Others have explored the means by which film can emerge as a tool of resistance. This

chapter provides a selective review of relevant work in both areas. Beginning with an historical overview, I trace the development of documentary and narrative cinema across the continent of Africa, exploring ways in which the “colonial gaze” and other forms of imperial control have both hindered the development of African cinema and inscribed in it a pervasive Western bias with inherent racial stereotypes. I then examine some theoretical responses to these concerns and their implications for contemporary filmmakers who work in an African context. While much of the latter theory is problematic, as I shall argue later, there can be found within some important insights that should be considered when analyzing the practice of documentary filmmaking in South Africa.

## **5.1 CINEMA’S ORIGINS IN AFRICA**

### **5.1.1 ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM AND THE GAZE**

The fact that film was invented at the end of the nineteenth century – the height of Western imperialist expansion – is not insignificant. The Lumière Brother’s famous film screening at the Grand Café in Paris in 1895 came on the heels of the “Scramble for Africa,” a period in which European nations met in Berlin and systematically laid claim to every corner of Africa that remained as yet uncolonized. The concurrent development of colonialism and cinema resulted in various unsavory ties between the two practices (Shohat and Stam 1994: 100; Armes 1987: 9).

Firstly, while the benefits of imperialist expansion were obvious to European rulers, members of the working class required some persuasion. Cinema proved useful in this regard by offering the average person an opportunity to see colonies firsthand within a framework that would support various imperialist notions. The first films depicting the colonies were obligingly dark and exotic – portraying Africa as a harsh environment in desperate need of Western intervention – a place where heroic (white) explorers took great risks to bring development and spiritual salvation to primitive (black) people (Sherzer 1996: 4).

These films built on a larger tradition practiced in other contexts – museums, world fairs, written ethnography and the like – of placing the non-white body on display as an object

of spectacle and/or study by the white, Western world. Within the framework of this “colonial gaze,” the “native” was reduced to a racial type without a voice, cultural context or psychological complexity. Meanwhile, the spectator was placed in a clear position of superiority in this West/Other encounter, which affirmed Western civilization as the standard against which other “exotic” cultures might be measured.

Ethnographic films reinforced this relationship through a variety of tactics, both subtle and overt, including depictions of “natives” as being backward, overly simplistic or savage. *Nanook of the North* provides a classic, albeit North American, example in that so many of the traditions represented in the film were no longer practiced by the Inuit, who had modernized by the 1920s (e.g. the practice of hunting with spears as opposed to guns).

Narrative films produced in Africa during this period often took this oppositional relationship one step further, focusing on European heroes who came to the aid of their weaker African counterparts (Armes 1987: 42). These films used familiar European stars and Eurocentric stories to induce empathy in the Western viewer, while capitalizing on the exotic nature of the colonial environment and its people. Always, the story was told from the perspective of the colonizer – thereby highlighting the virtues of colonial officials and settlers, while relegating the colonized to the periphery as “scenery props, picturesque crowds with spears or bizarre unintelligent menials” (Ssali 1996: 88).

The same racialized iconography continues to find its way into both narrative and documentary films today. Even well-intentioned documentary films depicting African struggles against AIDS, famine, and other epic disasters continue to portray the continent as harsh, exotic and forever in need of Western intervention. Meanwhile, films like *Blood Diamond* and *Last King of Scotland* also follow what remains a typical Hollywood pattern in which the entire narrative is told from the perspective of an unlikely European hero and the colonial self/other dynamic is firmly maintained.

### **5.1.2 FILMS FOR THE COLONIZED**

In addition to pacifying Western audiences, cinema proved an effective tool for establishing political and cultural influence over the colonized. Cinema was initially

brought to the colonies under the premise that it was the West's moral duty to "civilize" Africans and that educational films could surely further this goal. Commercial films produced for European audiences were deemed inappropriate for this task, being overly sophisticated for African audiences as well as potentially damaging due to their occasional negative depictions of Europeans (Diawara 1993: 12). Hence, new cinema would have to be produced with African audiences in mind.

The British pioneered this practice with the creation of the Bantu Film Educational Cinema Experiment in 1935. According to its founders, the program "sought through film to educate adult Africans to understand and adapt to new conditions, to reinforce ordinary classroom methods, to conserve the best of African traditions, and to provide recreation and entertainment" (Notcutt and Latham 1937: 27-28). In actual fact, the films produced by this program and its counterparts in other colonies consisted mainly of propaganda films designed to encourage Africans to adopt European customs, use Western products, and/or convert to Christianity.<sup>41</sup> Racism and paternalist attitudes pervaded these films, which often demonstrated a fundamental lack of respect for or understanding of African culture (Diawara 1993: 13-15). This practice was quite successful in imposing capitalism and other Western values on African audiences (Ssali 1996: 89). Armes argues that the projection of negative images of Africans to colonial audiences amounted to a form of ideological domination that was critical to the overall colonial mission.

The 'mythical and degrading portrait' created and spread by the colonizer ends up being accepted and lived with by the colonized. It thus acquires a certain amount of reality and contributes to the true portrait of the colonized. This imposition is the ultimate aim of the colonizer, whose 'legitimacy' is secured only when the colonized accepts not only

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<sup>41</sup> There can be little doubt that the aims of colonial film units were ultimately political, as evidenced by the lengths to which the colonial powers went to ensure total control over the content of any films shot and/or screened in Africa. The French government, for example, deliberately sought to ensure that no subversive or anti-colonial films were made through the Laval Decree, which required that anyone wanting to make cinematographic images or sound recordings send a written request to colonial authorities and include a copy of the script (Diawara 1993: 22-23).

economic dominance but also the image of the world the colonizer presents to him (1987: 11).

From a formal standpoint, colonial filmmakers operated under the assumption that African audiences were “too primitive to follow the sophisticated narrative techniques of mainstream cinema.” Therefore simplified, watered-down films were produced, which were clearly sub-par in comparison to their European counterparts (Diawara 1993: 4). As one such filmmaker put it:

For this audience we call primitive, we must make films for Africans. The scenario will be simple and will deal with few characters. The characters will be easily distinguishable from one another, and they will each have well defined habits... The technique for such films will generally be analogous to the one used when filming for children. The content will, however, be different. The projection time, as for children’s films, must not be long. Fifteen minutes to half-hour screening may be followed by an intermission which will be used to explain what has been shown and what will follow. The scenes will follow each other in a chronological manner; no flashbacks or flashforwards. Dream sequences will be banished. The ideal is a film in which the action takes place in one day (Haffner, quoted in Diawara 1993: 17).

Thus, African cinema was conceived and developed as an inferior cinema from its inception. Arguably this has contributed to an enduring sense among Africans and Westerners alike that African cinema is a lesser cousin to its Western counterpart.

### **5.1.3 FILMS BY THE COLONIZED?**

In 1949, John Grierson was sent to the colonies to write up a report on film activities there and concluded that African audiences could not identify with the films being made there. He would later write, “I believe that we’ll resolve the problem of cinema in the colonies not by projecting films from the West, but by colonial people’s making films inside the colonies for themselves” (Diawara 1993: 3). Grierson’s vision of a cinema by Africans, for Africans would not soon be realized, thanks to enduring imperial control over all aspects of cinema.

Pursuant to Grierson's report, Great Britain did eventually set up a school to train Africans to work in film and other colonies followed. However, this training was limited to basic skills that would enable locals to assist directors sent from Europe. Diawara describes film trainees in Congo as being "treated as assembly line workers." Even in the most culturally advanced colonies, Africans were not involved as directors or producers. Thus, he ruefully concludes that "at independence, these so-called assistants had not learned to appreciate cinema as a powerful tool that they could use for an indefinite number of purposes" (1993: 16-18). Meanwhile, there remained neither funding nor the infrastructure required for would-be African directors to produce a film in their own country.

In the 1950s, Jean Rouch began making some inroads in this regard while producing his own films in northern Africa. By introducing the use of more accessible portable 16mm equipment and hiring and training local assistants, he helped open doors for two of the pioneers of African cinema: Oumarou Ganda and Moustapha Alassane (Diawara 1993: 24). While Rouch's efforts earned him the title "father of African cinema" (a dubious one in that he himself was not African), African cinema would not develop in the fullest sense for many decades.

## **5.2 POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN CINEMA**

By 1960, the colonial era was coming to an end and many African countries had gained political independence. And yet no true African cinema existed – that is to say none "produced, directed, photographed, and edited by Africans and starring Africans who spoke African languages" (Diawara 1992: vii). This followed a general pattern of neocolonialism in which the political control once exerted by colonialism was replaced with more subtle economic forms of control. Cham sums up the current concern as follows:

What one finds in many African countries today is the continued hegemony of structures, institutions, beliefs, practices and preferences which have their origins in non-African cultures, and which were put in place primarily to promote the interests of non-Africans. The

undemocratic and even brutal methods that were formerly employed to establish, maintain and control such hegemonic structures before political independence are the same methods that have been fine-tuned, updated and deployed by the post-colonial state to maintain and control these same structures. Thus, in the eyes of many Africans who feel disempowered, political independence has meant a further decline in the quality of their life, further alienation from the state political power and a sense of betrayal and disillusionment (1996: 6).

Apart from this overarching barrier to overall economic and cultural independence, Africa's failure to develop a film industry of its own can be attributed to several factors, including: 1) a lack of infrastructure (i.e. film-processing labs, editing facilities, and the like); 2) monopolistic strategies employed by American and European distribution companies which make it virtually impossible for films produced in Africa to appear in African cinemas; and 3) a lack of government subsidies for film production and distribution throughout the continent.

### **5.2.1 SKILLS TRANSFER AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

While the former colonial powers did launch several initiatives to support and promote African filmmaking after independence, these fell short to varying degrees and in some cases have even been accused of merely perpetuating dependence. The most laudable example was that of the French, who began to make funding and facilities available to African directors in the 1960s. French aid, though superior to that offered elsewhere, was emblematic of the neocolonialist approach to African cinema: while it empowered the development of filmmakers in the former colonies to some extent, the French ultimately retained control of content, production and distribution. A select few filmmakers were given privileges and were generally assimilated into an existing framework. Production facilities were based in Paris. Africans were not trained to work as cinematographers and editors so that African directors remained dependent on the French for these skills. Rights to the films in question were purchased by the French who then retained control over their distribution. Ultimately, African directors could not work independently in Africa under this system, nor were they encouraged to develop the means to do so (Diawara 1993: 25-33). This created an enduring pattern in which

African filmmakers were ostensibly encouraged to produce their own work, but with the caveat that they conform to the demands of the West.

Co-production with the West is often tainted with paternalism, and it is an economic dependency which, as such, gives the West the right to view Africa in a way that I cannot bear. Sometimes, one is also coerced into consenting to commercial concessions. In a word, Europeans often have a conception of Africa that is not ours (Ousmane Sembene, quoted in James 1970: 41).

In addition to holding the purse strings, Western interests controlled the production infrastructure. As recently as 1993, Diawara would write that Africa lacks film-processing laboratories, sound-dubbing and synchronizing studios, and editing facilities, a fact which significantly limits an African director's ability to complete a film on his own terms, in his own country and within a reasonable span of time (1993: vii). While this is not universally true at this point (the facilities he describes now being available in South Africa and also rendered somewhat obsolete by the development of high-definition video), it is certainly true that most of Africa suffers from a dearth of film infrastructure and that this creates yet another form of dependence on the West.

## **5.2.2 DISTRIBUTION**

The problems of film production in Africa are increased significantly by concerns of distribution. Put simply, the West (and to a lesser extent India) has exerted a near monopoly over film distribution in Africa since its inception.<sup>42</sup> Thanks to the common practice of "block-booking" by large foreign distributors, it is nearly impossible for African filmmakers to break into the system and have their work shown in their own country. As a result, African culture and people are subjected a constant barrage of cinema from the

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<sup>42</sup> Armes cites one particularly noteworthy example: just two French companies – COMACICO and SECMA – owned or controlled over 60 percent of local theatres in francophone West Africa in the 1980s and were the sole suppliers of films for all other theatres in the region. By agreeing to adhere to the same policies of refusing to compete on price and purchasing only the cheapest films available in Europe, they were able to fix artificially low prices and thereby "preclude the African audience from ever experiencing any other form of cinema" (Armes 1987: 45).

West that goes unchallenged by locally produced alternatives. While this problem may have been pioneered by the former colonial powers, the United States is now cited as the primary culprit. Armes likens the current American dominance of worldwide film distribution in particular to “imperialism without colonies” (Armes 1987: 46).

Hollywood films enjoy a virtual monopoly of African theatres. This continued hegemony has many implications. They include the perpetuation and/or the revision and refinement of traditional stereotypes and distortions of Africa and Africans, and the invention of new, more insidious ones. The dominance of the foreign film in Africa also means that the development of vibrant indigenous film industries in Africa is retarded, because when African films are not widely distributed and shown on their own turf, not only are the prospects of recuperating their production costs bleak (this is vital if other films are to be produced), but also their effectiveness in combating the negative film image of Africa and the Africans inscribed on the foreign film and their aim to be an integral part of the development process in Africa become severely compromised (Cham 1996: 3).

This state of affairs extends to African television, where a seemingly limitless supply of cheap B-grade Western programming has been available for decades. Therefore audiences have grown accustomed to such programming as the norm and networks are thus disincentivized to acquire local product both financially and in terms of viewer demand (Stoneman 1996: 176).

### **5.2.3 FORM AND CONTENT**

The forces of neocolonialism have had a variety of unfortunate consequences for the development of African cinema. In terms of form, Diawara argues that African films are still produced in simplified manner – i.e. edited with almost no ellipses “in order to not confuse African audiences.” Cham laments the fact that so many films produced in Africa simply adopt the conventional escapist Hollywood formats of adventure, action and romance and “transpose” them to Africa (1996: 2-3). For those filmmakers who would eschew the traditional form and content of Western cinema, the forces of

neocolonialism provide many barriers. Senegalese filmmaker Mahama Johnson Traoré describes a common dilemma in which, in order to access Western funds (a precondition for producing most African films), a director often must acquire a producer who is based in Europe or the United States. Once this relationship is secured, “the endless discussions commence”:

**Producer:** Your subject isn’t international enough. You have to rewrite it with that in mind.

**Director:** If I do that, the African audience will feel lost.

**Producer:** You have to be aware of which audience you are making the film for. There is no African audience here in Europe. So Africa is...

**Director:** Be that as it may, if I cannot work as I see it, I lose my soul.

**Producer:** Listen, the money-lenders are European, so your work has to meet their requirements, otherwise it won’t work.

Traoré contends that such a director doesn’t merely lose his creative freedom, he also “will have to subscribe, willy nilly, to the image of Africa which Europe wants to impose. But, as he absolutely wants to make the film come what may, he will accept all the producer’s suggestions.” This, he argues, is precisely why so many “colourless and odourless, aseptic African films” have been produced of late (1996: 68).<sup>43</sup>

### 5.3 BROADER IMPLICATIONS: RACISM AND “PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPERIALISM”

Having now established the problematic origins of cinema in Africa and their enduring impacts on films produced by, for, and about Africans, let us take a moment to consider the broader implications of these matters, which are significant and fundamental to the global human condition. Firstly it must be noted that the hegemonic structures and racial iconography which I have just discussed vis-à-vis film are not limited to that medium, or even to the production of culture at large, but in fact pervade all aspects of global discourse. Dyer has argued convincingly of this fact, citing research which demonstrates that in Western representations of all kinds (books, films, software,

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<sup>43</sup> This claim was substantiated by many of the South African filmmakers interviewed for this study, who described similar experienced and expressed concerns about the ways in which the need for Western funding leads to a relinquishing of creative control, thereby perpetuating the Westernization of South African films.

games...) whites are “overwhelmingly and disproportionately prominent, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard” (2003: 303). He further points out the immense psychological implications of this, as evidenced by the way “non-whites” are typically distinguished in terms of their race while whites are regarded as “just people.” Here he describes an all too familiar scenario in which white people note the blackness of a friend or colleague while never bothering to note the race of the white people with whom they come in contact (2003: 301). Indeed, these factors are but symptomatic of a larger global condition, which Dyer sums up eloquently:

Racial imagery is central to the organization of the modern world. At what cost regions and countries export their goods, whose voices are listened to at international gatherings, who bombs and who is bombed, who gets what jobs, housing, access to health care and education, what cultural activities are subsidized and sold, in what terms they are validated – these are all largely inextricable from racial imagery. The myriad minute decisions that constitute the practices of the world are at every point informed by judgments about people’s capacities and worth, judgments based on what they look like, where they come from, how they speak, even what they eat, that is, racial judgments (1997: 1).<sup>44</sup>

This speaks to an important point with regard to the discourses of race in the South African documentary industry. Many white liberal filmmakers argue that in a “nonracial”

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<sup>44</sup> Here I feel compelled to share an example from personal experience, which illuminated the pervasiveness of racialized imagery in a way that no amount of textbook theory ever could. In 2004, I shot a documentary about an American teacher who spent a year at an impoverished high school in rural Kwa-Zulu Natal. Over the course of this project, I interviewed a bright student named Lucky who had become quite close to this teacher, despite the fact that he was not in any of his classes. When I enquired as to how this relationship came about, Lucky replied quite matter-of-factly that he felt it was in his best interests to get to know the teacher because he was white. Further inquiry yielded this statement: *Whites have the power to do a lot of things and I think that if you follow someone who is good like that, you can become good too... When I saw a film about Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ was a white man in the film and the devil was a black man. I don't know if that's real or not, but the first person to go into space was a white. And the person who designed the aircraft was white... So I understand that whites have power and [are intelligent]. They do everything perfectly.* Can there be any doubt that the imperialist “mythical and degrading portrait of the colonized” as described by Armes is at the root of this perception?

society, it is inappropriate to make judgments about whether white filmmakers have the right to make films about black subjects. On its face, this argument appears quite logical and indeed many theorists (including some in South Africa) have begun in recent years to argue for nonracial, “internationalist” or “hybrid” forms of discourse.<sup>45</sup> And yet the very notion of a nonracial society is premature. This is true in an international sense, where, as Dyer argues bluntly, “we have not reached a situation in which white people and white cultural agendas are no longer in the ascendant” (2003: 304). It is also true in a South African sense, where the balance of capital still favors the white minority. Most importantly, it is true in the psychic sense, wherein the persistence and pervasiveness of racialized discourse continues to have devastating effects. Surely filmmakers have an obligation to work toward undoing these ill effects, which have clear ties to cinema’s dishonorable past.

#### **5.4 RESPONSES**

The encroachment of colonial and neocolonial powers on the development of African cinema has prompted a variety of responses. Most of these fall into two basic spheres: 1) from an infrastructural standpoint, efforts to put control of film production and distribution back in the hands of Africans; and 2) from a political and aesthetic standpoint, movement away from Western notions of capitalist cinema toward a cinema that better represents and serves the African people.<sup>46</sup>

A variety of infrastructural solutions have been proposed and some of them implemented. These range from the organization of festivals and markets to promote African films, development African film schools, raising taxes on imported films, efforts to nationalize film distribution, and intra-African film distribution cooperatives. I shall not dwell on these efforts, as I will devote specific attention to their South African

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<sup>45</sup> C.f. Bhabha (1990), Maingard (1995), Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989).

<sup>46</sup> At the first Third World Film-Makers’ Meeting in Algiers in 1973, a manifesto was adopted, which provides a particularly lucid and succinct analysis of the causes and cultural repercussions of economic underdevelopment in Africa, the appropriate role of cinema with respect to combating these ills, and a basic prescription for improving conditions for filmmaking throughout the continent. (See Bakari and Cham, eds. 1996: 17-24.)

counterparts in the next chapter. Let it suffice to say that progress is being made but there is still much work to be done in this regard.

The remainder of this chapter concerns itself with the latter category of efforts to decolonize African cinema – i.e. perspectives on what a new African cinema can and should look like and what aims it should serve. These are useful in providing some theoretical framework that can be applied, albeit selectively, in a South African context.

### **5.4.1 THIRD CINEMA: RADICAL RESISTENCE**

In the politically charged 1960s, a concept known as Third Cinema began to emerge as the popular response to the Western hegemonic grip on Third World film. Conceived by radical filmmakers, Third Cinema and its proponents aimed to create a new mode of filmmaking that could support popular struggles against imperialism, effect social change, and promote cultural self-determination. Originally developed in Latin America, the concept spread throughout the world and has been widely discussed and debated in Africa, with a few scholars specifically examining Third Cinema theory as it relates to South African film.<sup>47</sup> Though the concept is problematic on several grounds, including but not limited to its applicability in South Africa, there are embedded in Third Cinema discourse some theories that are useful for analyzing South African documentary practice, which I will examine shortly.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> C.f. Davis (1996), Maingard (1995), Prinsloo (1996), and Tomaselli and Prinsloo (1992).

<sup>48</sup> It should be noted that the ideas associated with Third Cinema share much in common with those presented by various African filmmakers and theorists under different nomenclature. For example, Cham uses the term “radical” to label African filmmakers who engage in “constructing and promoting an alternative popular cinema... that is more in harmony with the realities, the experiences, and the priorities and desires of the societies which it addresses” (1996: 20). Tomaselli refers to “Radical Cinema,” which he defines as that which opposes not only the mainstream, capitalist production methods but also its stylistic and conventions (1992). Unwin and Belton (1992) use the term “Cinema of Resistance,” which they define in the South African context as referring to films which were “either directly opposed to racism and apartheid, or which have provided non-racist visions, but which have not necessarily redefined style or production methods” (1992: 280). I focus on the concept of Third Cinema here as it is a broadly used and widely debated framework. As such, it provides a point of departure for discussing several important points, including but not limited to the arguments of scholars such as those noted above.

The term "Third Cinema" was developed in a manifesto written by Argentinian filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino and initially published in 1969.<sup>49</sup> Solanas and Getino's manifesto is founded on the premise that Third World filmmakers must create a cinema that rejects the two predominant models of cinema operating in the world: "First Cinema," the capitalist Hollywood form of cinema, which is designed for profit and promotes escapism and bourgeois values; and "Second Cinema," the European art film or "auteur" model of cinema which is designed to serve individualistic needs. Third Cinema, they argued, rejects the view of cinema as a means of mere entertainment or personal expression, seeking instead to serve the masses by presenting the realities of their lived experience and issuing a call to action.

Solanas and Getino called for the total decolonization of cinema – i.e. a doing away with old conceptualizations of film associated with colonialism, neocolonialism and the West, and creating new forms. Concurrently, their concept of Third Cinema entails an inherent distrust of Western formal perfection which, they argue, will only lead to a sense of alienation for Third World filmmakers and audiences.

The model of the perfect work of art, the fully rounded film structured according to the metrics imposed by bourgeois culture, its theoreticians and critics, has served to inhibit the filmmaker in the dependent countries, especially when he has attempted to erect similar models in reality which *offered neither the culture, the techniques, nor the most primary elements for success* (Solanas and Getino 1976: 56).

Thus, Third Cinema rejects the tendency of Third World filmmakers to engage in what Cham terms "mimesis" (i.e. works that imitate Hollywood), demanding that filmmakers instead "oppose the cinema of characters, individuals and authors with a cinema of themes, the masses, and collective work and... replace misinformation, escape, and passivity with information, truth, and action" (Armes 1987: 100).

Solanas and Getino saw documentaries as "perhaps the main basis of revolutionary

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<sup>49</sup> The original manifesto, titled "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World," was reprinted in 1976 and it is this version that I cite throughout this chapter.

filmmaking” and thus central to Third Cinema. They argue that “every image that documents, bears witness to, refutes or deepens the truth of a situation is something more than a film image or a purely artistic fact; it becomes something which the system finds indigestible.” They further demand that documentaries go beyond generating awareness of a situation to actively promote action and change (1976: 55).

On a surface level, Third Cinema appears plainly relevant to the practice of documentary filmmaking in South Africa – a country that has suffered many of the same colonial and postcolonial indignities outlined previously in his chapter. And yet further examination reveals several problematic aspects to both the theory and its relevance to South Africa. Indeed, Tomaselli and Prinsloo have noted that while the theory of Third Cinema obtained broad acceptance and proved useful in various contexts in the 1980s, it “did not attain currency among South African filmmakers” (1992: 338). They provide several explanations as to why this occurred, which I will now examine.

One primary concern is the fact that South Africa does not fit neatly into the Third World paradigm. From a development standpoint, it is an odd mixture of “modernity and post-modernity, and even pre-modernity,” and from a political standpoint, it was not colonized and decolonized in precisely the same way and to the same effect as other colonies in Africa, much less in Latin America (Tomaselli and Prinsloo 1992: 341). Several scholars would argue that this distinction is irrelevant and indeed many of the debates around Third Cinema in the 1980s centered on the idea that Third Cinema practice need not be limited to a Third World context, but can be employed to address concerns of race, class, and gender anywhere.<sup>50</sup> While Maingard concludes that these debates succeeded in refining the concept and opening it up to practice in a South African context (1995: 62), there are in fact several concerns she neglects to take into account.

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<sup>50</sup> Teshome Gabriel pioneered the notion that Third Cinema could be practiced in First and Second World contexts with his book *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (1982). This notion gained broad support and became a focus of a conference on Third Cinema held at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 1986. Several papers presented at the conference were later published in the book *Questions of Third Cinema* (1989), some of which I cite hereafter. (C.f. Willemsen 1990: 8,14). It should be noted, however, that some scholars contested the notion of Third Cinema being practiced outside of the Third World, likening this to the term being “kidnapped” out of its proper context. (C.f. Taylor 1987: 148).

One key issue which Tomaselli and Prinsloo point out is that the influence of imperialism on South Africa is distinct from that of other African nations in that the “colonized” in this case were not encouraged to assimilate into European culture. To the contrary, the apartheid government stressed *difference*, employing a “divide and conquer” strategy that involved (re)constructing all manner of allegedly pre-existing “tribal groupings, languages and cultures and territories” (1992: 358). Therefore, whereas other colonized nations sought to distinguish their own culture from that of the colonizer in the postcolonial era, there existed in South Africa a desire to create a single unifying national culture that would overcome the divisive strategies that had previously been used by the State to maintain control. In the post-Struggle context, the South African national project continues to be one that emphasizes coalescence and cooperation between Europeans and Africans, as opposed to the construction of a single homogeneous South African identity that stands in direct opposition to the West.

An additional factor which inhibited the practice of Third Cinema among South African filmmakers was a general sense of anti-intellectualism, which pervaded many aspects of the Struggle.

During the early eighties... a certain anti-intellectualism distracted middle class cultural workers. Film theory, they dismissively argued, could come later, when socialism had been established and the pressing brutalities of apartheid swept aside. They viewed with skepticism, even alarm, attempts by filmmakers/theorists to conceptualise around insurgent sign systems (Tomaselli and Prinsloo 1992: 339).

This inherent resistance to the theorization of film was compounded by the cultural and political isolation of the 1980s. While under the rule of apartheid, South African filmmakers and academics were prohibited from attending African film festivals and debates and therefore did not take part in the discussions that were occurring around Third Cinema, inter-African distribution and so on. As a result, very few studies were published on the subject of alternative cinema in South Africa prior to the 1980s (Tomaselli and Prinsloo 1992: 347).

Tomaselli and Prinsloo are critical of the anti-intellectual approach taken by many South

African filmmakers at that time, arguing, among other things, that as a result of this inattention to theory, South African documentaries lack “an emancipatory aesthetic” and were vulnerable to cooption by the apartheid state (1992: 357-358). This argument is somewhat suspect; there can be little doubt that documentary film was highly successful in supporting the Struggle and the authors fail to cite specific examples to the contrary. Moreover, conventional Western aesthetics were appropriate at the time given that Western audiences were the primary target for most anti-apartheid films (the goal being to generate international support for the cause as state censorship limited the potential for distribution to domestic audiences).<sup>51</sup>

Contrary to Tomaselli and Prinsloo’s stance, other theorists have argued credibly that Third Cinema is problematic in its insistence on applying elitist intellectual theories in a socialist, working-class context. Bhabha recalls, for example, a “self-defeating assumption circulating at the [1986] Edinburgh ‘Third Cinema’ conference – and in many influential places beyond it – that theory is necessarily the elite language of the socially and culturally privileged” (1990: 111).<sup>52</sup> Willemen interestingly describes Third Cinema (albeit without disparaging intent) as “neither of nor for ‘the people’ ...[but] a cinema made by intellectuals” (1990: 27). Indeed, the arguably elitist theorization of film called for by Third Cinema does appear to contradict its own socialist aims on a certain level. Specifically, the notion of applying Third Cinema theories to the practice of documentary filmmaking in South Africa presupposes a level of education and cultural indoctrination that can’t be assumed – particularly if a primary goal is to open up the practice of filmmaking to the marginalized masses who have been, for the most part, denied access to any sort of education in film studies. In this regard, Third Cinema may serve as a

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<sup>51</sup> In 1990, Gavshon stated that “most South African filmmakers still primarily make films for foreign audiences,” citing intense state censorship as the cause. She notes for example that while the print media could write about the actions of security forces, it was “almost impossible to get away with filming it” and that films and videos were subject to pre-censureship, meaning that no film or video could be screened without prior state approval – a factor which made it extremely difficult to transmit filmic images to local audiences (1990: 332-333). Indeed, Tomaselli himself stated in 1987, “While professional crews and student producers may still find the gaps opened by political contradictions to make films/videos, it has virtually become impossible to screen the productions at cultural festivals where the working class is the main audience” (1987: See

[http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=407&Itemid=45](http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=407&Itemid=45)).

<sup>52</sup> Bhabha devotes an entire chapter in *Questions of Third Cinema* to countering this assumption. (See Bhabha 1990.)

laudable ideal to which some filmmakers might aspire, but not a practical set of standards to which all South African documentaries should be expected to conform.<sup>53</sup>

Another site of concern is Third Cinema's "revolutionary mandate" (Zacks 1999: 9) – i.e. the insistence that films focus exclusively on the struggles of the people. This raises broader concerns discussed earlier in regards to perpetuating stereotypes of Africa as a place of constant strife. As Diawara argues, African cinema in general has evolved such that "African films are no longer produced on tiny budgets and only depicting the misery of African life" (1993: 140). Surely films like *Cosmic Africa* (Craig and Damen Foster, 2004), which turn away from a revolutionary stance and instead promote positive images of South African people should not be discounted for this reason, and in fact have special merit in terms of reconstructing images of South Africa at home and abroad.

Diawara's commentary touches on another concern of Third Cinema, which is its affiliation with the concept of "poor" cinema. In light of the increasing availability of high-end, low-cost digital equipment (particularly in South Africa), Solanas and Getino's assertion that aspirations toward polished First Cinema aesthetics would only lead to a sense of alienation for Third World filmmakers is a dated one. Films like the Foster Brothers' *Cosmic Africa* and *The Great Dance* demonstrate that South African directors do indeed have access to adequate skills, funding, and facilities to produce documentaries of the highest aesthetic and technical standards. While Solanas and Getino would argue that such films are not properly "indigestible" by the system, it is precisely because these films are digestible by First World audiences that they have the power to transform the image of Africans and African cinema in the West.

In this vein, Zacks notes that many films defy classification in Third Cinema terms. For example, *A Dry White Season* (1988), though made by Hollywood and stylistically

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<sup>53</sup> A related concern that has been raised is that Third Cinema theory – and indeed critical theory in general – is largely and inappropriately a product of the West. This much is evidenced by the fact that the major debates on the subject have been located in the UK and published in such Western publications as *Screen* and *Frameline*, and many of the "Third World" contributors to the concept are exiles who live in and are therefore greatly influenced by the West (Bhabha 1990: 113). My concern here is not so much with questions of First vs. Third World origins of the theory, but rather with questions of elitist vs socialist values and the practicality of applying the theory in a Third World context.

displaying all the polish of First Cinema, is politically committed to the tenets of Third Cinema (specifically, to speaking out against apartheid) and is thus problematic for Third Cinema analysis. He eventually arrives at the conclusion that “as many examples of films standing between the boundaries can be found as ones standing within them, leading us to wonder what purpose the categories [of Third Cinema] serve” (1999: 7-8).

This point leads to related concerns about audience reception, which as Gabriel argues, is a critical issue for Third Cinema. Gabriel’s point is that if a progressive film is only viewed at festivals by progressive Europeans, then it is of little use in terms of Third Cinema’s goals. Tomaselli and Prinsloo, however, astutely turn this notion in another direction, pointing out that the potential for Third Cinema to be popular among black South African audiences is questionable at best. They note that a progressive film culture has yet to be developed among township audiences, who instead have historically favored action films “of the *Rambo* and *Kung-fu* variety” (1992: 360). This should come as no surprise, given that First Cinema has long dominated cinema screens in South Africa as in the rest of the continent. Another important factor which must be taken into account is the common-sense notion that most movie-goers – South African and otherwise – enjoy cinema precisely for the purpose of escaping the stress and strain of their day-to-day lives. Few people want to spend hard-earned money to see a film that reminds them of their troubled existence. This point begs an important question: if a substantial audience for Third Cinema does not exist in South Africa, how can it hope to achieve its aims there?

One final note on the limitations of Third Cinema in South Africa must be made: of the filmmakers interviewed for this study, not one cited Third Cinema as an influence on his or her films. When queried on the subject, most replied that they were unfamiliar with the concept. Others who were highly educated in the area of film theory and well aware of Third Cinema as a concept simply felt that it had no particular relevance to their work. This could be attributed to a number of factors, including those outlined above, but on its

face, surely suggests that any dogmatic approach to applying Third Cinema theory in the South African context should be seen as highly problematic.<sup>54</sup>

Nonetheless, debates around Third Cinema have brought to light some thoughts which are clearly relevant to this study. First and foremost, the general notion of decolonizing cinema is an important one. While South Africa may be unique in terms of the particulars of how colonialism manifested itself there, it does suffer from most of the ills of imperialism noted in the earlier segments of this chapter: Western economic and cultural hegemony, a prevalence of damaging racialized iconography, an ongoing and pervasive onslaught of inaccurate and damaging images of Africans created by Westerners, and the historical use of cinema to pacify and control, rather than to educate, among others. Much of the divisiveness around issues of race in the South African film industry today stems from this fundamental set of conditions. That Third Cinema calls attention to these global phenomena and calls on contemporary filmmakers to work to counter them is of great value.<sup>55</sup>

A second, more specific site of relevance for Third Cinema theory in South Africa is the use of film to reclaim history. Just as the colonial powers promulgated revisionist histories of the colonies which denied indigenous people their pre-colonial heritage, so

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<sup>54</sup> In any case, as Willems points out, “a cinema that invites belief and adherence rather than promoting a critical understanding of social dynamics is regarded as worse than useless” (1990: 6).

<sup>55</sup> I stop short here of arguing specifically for the creation of an “authentic” (South) African cinema/aesthetic, free of the influences of Western thought because this goal, though laudible, is likely to remain elusive. Though Armes and others make claims to the beginnings of a new African cinema aesthetic, as marked by a smattering of characteristics that distinguish it from Western cinema (“orality” as opposed to narrative, an emphasis on time as opposed to space, use of long takes as opposed to tight edits, an emphasis on groups as opposed to individual characters...), these claims remain somewhat speculative, particularly in the context of South Africa, a country which defies homogeneous classifications of all kinds. Zacks further critiques such attempts at categorization, taking particular issue with the practice of defining African cinema in terms of its opposition to Western Cinema. He accuses other scholars (particularly Gabriel, Armes and Diawara) of utilizing “prevailing assumptions without evaluating their relations to dominant systems of interpretation” (1999: 15). Filmmaker Sembene Ousmane aptly sums up his perspective on this issue as follows: “We are not trying to define ourselves in relationship to any specific cinema. We want to borrow from each one whatever we can and transform it to make up our own cinema. We know that there is a difference between America and Africa, but we don’t want to spend our time trying to define ourselves in relationship to America” (Gabriel 1982: 116).

too did the apartheid state broadcast to South Africans and the rest of the world a highly fictionalized account of that nation's history. Thus, the re-telling of history is very much a part of the post-apartheid national zeitgeist, as embodied by the Truth And Reconciliation Commission process. Gabriel speaks to this in "Third Cinema as Guardian of Popular Memory: Towards a Third Aesthetics." Here he identifies Third Cinema specifically as a means of challenging official versions of history and attempts to identify several elements of a "third aesthetics" which serve this purpose – the open-ended narrative, use of collective testimony from collective subjects, expressions of multiple points of view, etc. As I will argue in chapter six, many of these strategies found their way into the anti-apartheid documentaries of the 1980s. The same can be said of Gabriel's concept of participative viewing, which is central to the *Steps for the Future* documentary series on HIV/AIDS and other documentaries to be discussed later within this chapter.

Finally, the idea that cinema should function in service to the people is a crucial precept of Third Cinema, particularly given the important role of the media in building a cohesive, democratic society in South Africa, as outlined in the opening pages of this study. The magnitude of this nation-building task demands that the media in general and documentaries in particular be used wisely and not only to serve the aims of profit and escape. This point, however, demands qualification in that the concept of social service has been tied to documentary nearly since its inception and therefore one must question whether Third Cinema is a necessary development for arrival at this conclusion.<sup>56</sup>

The work of many anti-apartheid filmmakers bears this out. The anti-apartheid films associated with the VNS collective, which I will discuss in chapter six, are the most often cited example of Third Cinema practice in South Africa. While those films did indeed demonstrate socialist underpinnings, a (selective) rejection of certain European aesthetic norms, and a sense of urgent political aims, their makers insist that they were not trained filmmakers at the time, much less trained theorists. Rather, they were driven by a sense of political urgency and a desire to serve the aims of the Struggle through any means possible (Edkins 2006, Dworkin 2006).<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Director Nana Mahomo (*Last Grave*

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<sup>56</sup> Willemsen specifically notes that Third Cinema "drew on the ideals of such far from revolutionary currents as... Grierson's notion of the social documentary" (1991: 4).

<sup>57</sup> That the filmmakers in question describe their own early efforts as "naïve" while others rush to classify them as Third Cinema is ironic to say the least and suggests that Third

at *Dimbaza*, 1973) without referencing Third Cinema, has articulated several of its core values:

I think filmmakers in the Third World need to present films with an awareness of their social responsibility, of their commitment to enlightening the audience, of focusing on a particular social problem, so that it isn't just entertainment... primarily, I want to be an instrument for change" (quoted in Unwin and Belton 1992: 285).

Perhaps what is needed here is not so much a "commitment to theory" (Bhabha 1990), but rather a mindfulness of South African cinema's dishonorable past and a recommitment to the use of documentary as a tool for positive social change. It is with these basic aims in mind that I offer the theories of "development communication" which follow.

#### **5.4.2 DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION THEORY**

Whereas Third Cinema ultimately falls short as a framework for evaluating South African documentary, Tomaselli has put forth the beginnings of an interesting and more relevant framework called "development communication" (DC). He describes development communication as a relatively new area of film studies which examines the use of films (typically documentaries) to promote democratization and social change in the developing world.<sup>58</sup> These theories have been developed through dialogue with Southern African Communications for Development (SACOD), a network of filmmakers, related organizations, and "praxis-oriented educators" whose purpose is to advocate for the use of cinema to promote development in southern Africa. Each year, SACOD producers gather at the organization's annual forum to screen and discuss work produced throughout the region and develop a shared sense of best practices. This process has proven both unique and effective, as Tomaselli articulates in his 2007 Forum Report:

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Cinema's rejection of the polished Hollywood aesthetic may lead to confusion between Third Cinema and cinema that is simply poorly made.

<sup>58</sup> While this definition may appear somewhat limiting, development communication is applicable to nearly any documentary produced in a developing world context – a point to which I will return later.

When I first studied film at Wits University in the 1970s I was taught by my mentor, Professor John Van Zyl, that makers of films needed to also watch and study films. Intensively. Engaging in the one without the other was insufficient he argued. Critics watch and write about other people's work; theorists sometimes construct theory without even watching films; producers often only read contracts, and know little or nothing about content, history or theory; but directors - the competent ones' at least - cross all of these activities. The best directors are also the best theorists, the best historians, the best critics. They also understand that audiences respond in all kinds of unpredictable ways.

SACOD Fora interface all these roles - sometimes uncompromisingly so. Released for a few days from the stresses of income-generation, SACOD producers, directors and technicians put themselves in the position of audiences, of critics, of theorists and of historians. They debate style, form, content, ideology, representation, aesthetics, and technique. They debate each other, they challenge each other, and they constantly remind each other of the social potential and social consequences of their films. The discussion is not for the faint-hearted: SACOD Fora have become micro-public spheres where pressing issues of social and cultural responsibility are wrestled over. This occurs in ways quite unlike those found in other forums and festivals (2004: 16).

Not surprisingly, the theoretical framework which Tomaselli has developed through this process is refreshingly well grounded in the practice and experiences of Southern

African documentary filmmakers, and therefore serves this study’s aim of “bridging theory and praxis” well.<sup>59</sup>

**Table 1: Summary of Development Theory**

Paradigm	Modernization	Dependency	Development Support	Another Development/ Multiplicity/ Participatory
Origins	US foreign aid policies of 1950s and 1960s.	Critique of Modernization by mainly South and Central American social movements. Strongly influenced by Vatican II missions.	US and EU after 1979, attempt to provide a “middle way” between modernization and dependency trajectories.	Dag Hammarskjold Foundation. Uses local knowledge approach. Indigenised DSC. Participatory video.
Communication Style	Stimulus-response theory, with message intended to elicit response in the form of “informed” behaviour replacing customary “ignorant” behaviour.	Fostering resistance to imposed structures and systems brought in through modernization policies. Prescriptive.	Semi-participatory using local message formation to encourage donor-defined projects.	Development supposedly defined and driven by beneficiary communities.
Documentary Style	Linear narrative, voice-of-God ‘how-to’ instruction film. Heavy reliance on foreign or native expert voices.	Rhetorical, solidaristic, often mobilizing communities to resist outside agencies. Radical.	More diverse voices, local images, and native experts. Makes use of subject-voices, but still aimed at outside agencies’ agendas.	Subject-generated films supposedly using participatory and action-research based production and writing. Aimed at making beneficiaries’ needs known.
Effectiveness	Almost uniformly a failure in Africa. Perpetuates	Has had effect in the hands of union, NGO and community-based organizations in contexts of	Tends to obscure the agendas of donors, but has been effective in bringing innovations to beneficiary	Very good at making specific communities’ needs known. Tends to create information overload

<sup>59</sup> This framework has been developed largely through Tomaselli’s work documenting the annual SACOD Foras, a task he has undertaken since 2000. As he recalls, “I don’t recall getting a brief from Chris Kabwato on what to write about at the Namibian Forum, so I set about creating my own framework within which to document the 2000 and subsequent Foras, films and discussions. Since SACOD is involved in ‘development communication’ I drew my initial conceptual framework from this discipline” (2008: 5). The framework was refined with each successive Forum Report and finally published as “Development Communications for New South African Documentary” in 2007. (See Botha, ed., 2007). The reflections in this study are drawn from several different iterations as some of the earlier versions include details and examples left out of the most recent published version.

	dependency.	resistance. Very effective during anti-apartheid struggle. Overlooks micro conditions. Internal urban-rural dependencies.	communities.	for donors, and fragmentation of funding to micro-projects at the expense of infrastructural development.
Examples of films at Forum 2000 and Forum 2001		Critique T-Shirt Travels Negotiation Hard Earth Joy	Key for the Future Mishoni, Nkwezi's Story, Silence of the Wombs, Thula Mntwana, Tu, Wild on Wheels, Whose Next? Yellow Card, Yizo Yizo, Journey to a Dream, Ilumba	Hard Earth Joy Resources e Vida, Clouds of Hope

(Source: Tomaselli 2007: 3)

Tomaselli first sets out to define development communication theory in terms of its historical evolution, laying out four development communication paradigms that have passed in and out of favor during the past 50 years. These are: *Modernization*, *Dependency Theory*, *Development Support*, and *'Another Development'/Multiplicity/Participatory*.<sup>60</sup> (See Table 1.)

The *Modernization* paradigm refers to American theories developed in the 1950s and '60s, which assumed a top-down stance to both development and related communication. Under this paradigm, Western entities (typically NGOs and government organizations) assumed the role of "educators," disseminating traditional mass-media communications strategies aimed at modernizing (read: Westernizing) Southern Africans. "Expert" testimony, voice-of-God narration, and other didactic strategies associated with Nichols's expository mode were the norm. Tomaselli argues that Modernization was "almost uniformly a failure in Africa" because the documentaries it produced lacked an understanding of and respect for traditional African culture, communications and development needs, and therefore wrongly attempted to impose detrimental Western "solutions" to presupposed African "problems" (2007: 162). Though well-intended, Modernization films did not stray all that far from the colonial cinema of the past.

*Dependency Theory* arose in the 1960s and '70s as a form of revolt against Modernization, arguing that the latter only inhibited the development of the Third World by fostering dependency on the West. Dependency Theory films encourage people to critically examine Western notions of development and take control over their own lives and communities. Licinio Azevedo's *Joy* (2001) can be considered a successful example of a Dependency Theory film in that it documents one community's efforts to rise up against exploitive deforestation practices carried out by coal mining interests in Mozambique (Tomaselli 2007: 6). The shortcoming of such films is that they stop at urging the masses to resist modernization, failing to offer up an alternative path to development.

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<sup>60</sup> Tomaselli's analysis of these paradigms is often quite sketchy, with his narrative descriptions of various paradigms at times appearing to contradict information presented in table format. I have endeavored here to extract a single coherent description from among several versions. In Tomaselli's 2007 iteration, a fifth paradigm named "Development, Diversity, Dialogue," is also named. This paradigm is not substantially elaborated upon and is omitted from the published 2008 version of the rubric and I have therefore omitted it from this discussion as well.

*Development Support Communication* (DSC) arose in the late 1970s in an attempt to find a form of compromise between Modernization and Dependency Theory. Like Modernization documentaries, DSC films and videos are often commissioned by foreign agencies, but they attempt to improve on earlier iterations by being more participatory in form (e.g. using more diverse voices and “native experts.”) While this marks some measure of progress, DSC documentaries are often mired in traditional Western aesthetic conventions and fail to involve local communities in terms of constructing messages and distribution strategy. Thus, “videos of this type are often imported from other contexts without any real efforts to understand how recipients are to use, make sense of, or benefit from them, with the consequence of communities misinterpreting or rejecting the message, regardless of its viability” (Tomaselli 2007: 165).

Of particular concern are the “hit and run” production tactics common to DSC videos, which are often produced and distributed by foreign NGOs. The need to turn such films around quickly and inexpensively often necessitates minimal research and a selection of subjects/experts/character as dictated by the NGO, rather than by on-the-ground research, relationship-building, and collaboration.

The most recent paradigm of development communication is *Another Development/Multiplicity/Participation* (ADMP).<sup>61</sup> “Another Development” refers to a basic precept proposed by the Dag Hammarskjold Foundation,<sup>62</sup> which argues simply that “different societies have different visions of what human betterment and national betterment is, and how to work towards it” (Tomaselli 2007: 166). Collaboration is central to this concept, and Tomaselli therefore links Another Development to the

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<sup>61</sup> This paradigm is outlined somewhat confusingly in the 2008 iteration of Tomaselli’s framework in that “Another Development” and Participatory Communication are not explicitly linked, whereas they are grouped together as one paradigm in other contexts. Given that Tomaselli has not explicitly differentiated between the two in any of his writings and for the sake of streamlining, I have incorporated the two concepts as per his 2007 SACOD report and ascribed to them the single acronym ADMP.

<sup>62</sup> The Dag Hammarskjold Foundation is a Swedish NGO whose mission is “to examine mainstream understandings of development and bring to the debate perspectives of often otherwise unheard voices, especially those from the Global South.” In 1975, the organization undertook an extensive study which resulted in the report “What Now: Another Development.” The report argued for new approaches to development that stress participation of developing communities in determining their own issues, needs, and paths to development. (See [www.dhf.uu.se](http://www.dhf.uu.se))

practice of “Participatory Communication,” which stresses that local communities must be directly involved in determining the development communication strategies that best suit their needs and culture.<sup>63</sup> Tomaselli classifies ADMP as the “current preferred” paradigm for development communication and associates the work of SACOD producers with this category (2007: 167). This bottom-up approach to development communication has the benefit of inscribing local knowledge, opinions and frames of reference into both development ideas and the way they are communicated. Several key characteristics are attributed to ADMP filmmaking which I will now examine.

### ***Use Value***

One defining characteristic of SACOD/ADMP films is their emphasis on “use-value.” In other words, such films are designed to promote development such that, “the use and social facilitation provided by video, rather than the product itself is the aim” (Tomaselli 2008: 167). While the idea that ADMP films must be designed to achieve development ends may seem limiting, in practice, SACOD has applied this principal to discussion of all manner of films, including the likes of *Cosmic Africa*, which, though not commissioned by a development agency or ostensibly designed to achieve development goals, can be seen as serving the larger goal of re-imaging Africa. “Development” in this case might mean encouraging audiences to see African traditions not as backward, but as linked and on an even par with Western science. This emphasis on use-value can be seen as a more open-ended approach to Solanas and Getino’s notion of cinema in service to the people. While not necessarily oppositional in nature, ADMP films do seek specifically to operate as agents of positive social change.

### ***Ordinary People as Experts***

SACOD producers are generally critical of the use of “experts,” pushing instead for the testimony of ordinary people as a means of strengthening legitimacy and effective

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<sup>63</sup> Tomaselli’s use of the term “participatory” is not to be confused with Nichols’s participatory mode of documentary. While the latter speaks to *formal* conventions in which the filmmaker interacts with the subject on camera and in the finished product, the former emphasizes engaging subjects in the *process* of planning, producing and distributing media.

communication. Tomaselli notes that the agencies that contract SACOD producers often “inappropriately” insist on “talking heads, interviews with their ‘experts’ and the sources they have identified.... often wanting PR films which promote their own instead of the beneficiaries’ interests” (2007: 172). The movement of SACOD producers away from use of outside experts adheres to Nichols’s theories, which favor the participatory mode of documentary over the more didactic, authoritarian expository mode. More importantly, the positioning of Africans as experts serves to counter existing racial imbalances put forth by Dyer.

### ***Immersion***

Participatory filmmakers immerse themselves in the communities they seek to document for extended periods of time and, where possible, members of that community are involved in scripting and planning. Casting of subjects arises organically through this process, as opposed to being prescribed “from on high” by funders or other outside interests. This concept dovetails with Ruby’s argument about spending a significant amount of time in the field as a precondition for ethnographic filmmaking, and also coincides with the concept of filmmaker/subject collaboration as outlined in chapter four.

Tomaselli cites as an example *Red Ribbon Around My House* (Rankwane 2003), observing that “Rankwane slipped into the role of member of the family in [the main character] Pinky’s household. Barriers came down, sensitivity to strangers in the house dissolved and the result is the film’s gritty texture of the real” (2007: 170). While the same could be said of the makers of *An American Family*, here the strategy is not applied with the goal of producing a profitable commodity at the subjects’ expense (First Cinema). Rather, it functions in service to the subjects and their community (Third Cinema). Specifically, the production was emancipatory for Pinky, who became an HIV counselor, and her daughter, who overcame reservations about her mother going public about her HIV status, as well as community members, who were encouraged to engage in productive dialog about HIV.

### ***Consciousness-Raising***

As the impacts of *Red Ribbon* suggest, this kind of immersive, participatory filmmaking offers the potential for the production process itself to empower subjects and raise

consciousness about social issues. The process of being observed and interviewed continually over long periods of time often has therapeutic effects for subjects. Tomaselli cites the additional example of *Very Fast Guys* (Catherine Muller, 2002), in which the film's gangster subjects were encouraged to reflect on their life choices and provided with opportunities for rehabilitation. Within the film, the National Institute for Crime Prevention and Re-integration of Offenders (NICRO) works with the gangsters on the task of finding them employment alternatives, a prospect which would benefit both the subjects and the community at large. In addition to this use-value, the film had the broader benefit of raising consciousness among audiences both inside and outside of the community by humanizing gangsterism in a way that helps explain how outside forces can conspire to limit choices and lead individuals into lives of crime. *Very Fast Guys* accomplishes this through what Tomaselli describes as a "participant/observatory" style, which links together aspects of Nichols's observational mode with the participatory paradigm of development communications to create a sense of what it is like to be in the subject's shoes (2007: 170-171).

### **Contextualization**

An added characteristic that is critical to the consciousness-raising capacities of ADMP films is proper use of context. In the case of *Red Ribbon* and *Very Fast Guys*, context is used to humanize gangsters and people living with HIV by illuminating the circumstances which led to their condition.<sup>64</sup> Referencing to the controversy that surrounded *Pavement Aristocrats* at the 2001 SACOD forum, Tomaselli notes that Verster might have done better to focus on what social forces conspired to turn his subjects into alcoholics, rather than focusing on the act of alcohol abuse itself so that audiences might gain more insight and empathy for them (2007: 178).

This sensitivity toward contextualization stands in opposition to the tendency of more commercially oriented filmmakers to oversimplify for the sake of narrative clarity and

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<sup>64</sup> Tomaselli notes elsewhere that context is critical for oppositional films of any kind: "Commonsense historical assumptions should never be taken for granted by oppositional filmmakers, whether or not the film's content coincides with the ideology of the intended viewers. The contextualization of historical process is one crucial semiotic defense mechanism against co-option, or at least reduces its likelihood. Furthermore, and more fundamentally in terms of the process of signification, it prevents the substitution of one realism for another." (See Tomaselli, 1987: [http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=407&Itemid=45](http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=407&Itemid=45))

entertainment value. Whereas early ethnographic studies and depictions of Africa specifically denied Africans context, social complexity, and humanity, ADMP documentaries foreground such qualities so that subjects are elevated beyond status as mere objects of study or racial types. Ultimately, Tomaselli argues, “how to ethically engage real people, real conditions and real emotions with dignity was the key question. Everyone, the streetkids and gangsters and people living with AIDS, were revealed to have personalities, identities and humanity” (2007: 168).

### ***Attention to Outcomes/Audience Response***

“Let us always be aware that every production has unanticipated consequences” (Gordon, quoted in Tomaselli 2001: 19).

Audience reception is a subject that receives scant attention in documentary theory and criticism, no doubt because it is so difficult to measure. Development communication theory takes tentative steps in this direction. Though the framework does not include specific guidelines in terms of audience responses, it does at least demand that this be taken into account and many SACOD projects demonstrate an uncommon commitment to this. The *Steps for the Future* series in particular must be credited as a model in terms of audience reception planning. Not only were the 38 films in the *Steps* series produced with the idea of cinema “of, by and for the people,” but the project directors heavily prioritized distribution and audience outcomes within the overall mission of the project. The tangible rewards of this strategy will be examined further in chapter six.

The very practice of testing films on one another can be seen as a step forward in terms of being mindful of audience. One can see, for example, a tremendous development in Francois Verster from the advent of his first (not altogether well-received) SACOD screening of *Pavement Aristocrats*, until his most recent *The Mother’s House*, a film which takes great pains to ensure appropriate audience response. Tomaselli’s testimony suggests that this has been a common benefit for participants.

This brings me to a final point about SACOD, which is that the Forum discussions in themselves present an important model for the refinement of both documentary filmmaking and critical theory. As Tomaselli notes, “collaboration between the SACOD rank and file and these praxis-oriented educators has been mutually productive: we have learned as much from our participation in SACOD Fora as I hope the delegates have learned from us” (2007: 9).

#### **5.4 CONCLUSIONS**

So long as the dominant culture’s image of the world continues to be sold to others as *the* image of the world, image-makers are being unethical (Ruby 2000: 40).

The primary aim of this chapter has been to bring to light some of the unseen historical and political forces that shape racial discourse among South African filmmakers today. I have firstly attempted to establish some critical historical context – examining the ways in which imperial forces conspired to inhibit the development of African films and filmmakers. Even today, the global media bear the scars of this past – scars which go unnoticed by most Western audiences (and this indeed is part of their insidiousness), but which have created for conscious black filmmakers and audiences alike the grounds for arguments against white-on-black storytelling. Such arguments, often discounted by progressives who would argue for “nonracial” approaches to documentary, must be understood in terms of their historical context.

In terms of responses to these concerns, I have attempted to work backward from radical, oppositional theories of Third Cinema, into the more pragmatic, open-ended theories associated with development communication. The sum total of these arguments (as well as those presented in the preceding two chapters) serves, I hope, to demonstrate the ultimate value of development communication. By evaluating films not merely in terms of form and aesthetics, but in terms of use-value, immersion, subject/crew relationships, and audience impact, development communication has the potential to take documentary away from its historical position as a tool of imperialism at worst and an ineffectual medium practiced in the Griersonian “tradition of the victim” at best, into a future where nonfiction cinema is a powerful tool for subject and community empowerment.

# CHAPTER 6

## HISTORICAL BARRIERS AND TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN DOCUMENTARY

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### 6.1 DOCUMENTARIES AND APARTHEID

#### 6.1.1 A CINEMA FOR WHITES ONLY

The opportunity to experience cinema in general and documentaries in particular has been denied black South Africans for most of the country's history. Though cinema was introduced to South Africa in 1896, films were not screened in black townships or rural areas for decades. In fact, forty years later, there remained only four black cinemas in the whole of South Africa. There did exist a small number of community film programs, which were organized by missionaries and philanthropists in cooperation with the mining industry for the purposes of "moralizing the leisure time of Africans" (Balseiro 2003: 20; Peterson 2003: 31). Not surprisingly, however, the films screened therein were heavily censored and produced entirely by whites. In a maneuver that will now sound eerily familiar, the American Mission Board pushed for censure of many American films on the grounds that "Africans lacked the sophistication to interpret appropriately what they saw on the screen" (Balseiro 2003: 20). Balseiro argues, however, that the true motivation behind this move was to promote white hegemony by ensuring that European culture would be presented in an idealized manner. As evidence, she cites the following passage from an article published in *Llanga lase Natal* in 1926:

A new menace to European prestige has been discovered in the indiscriminate exhibition of films to Natives. *The natal witness* [a "white" Durban newspaper] is rousing public opinion to seriously consider the question whether a certain class of film called the social Drama should not be banned where the Native may attend. It is shown the witnessing of certain scenes depicting the seamy side in the life of the Europeans must have, and is already having an indescribably (sic) effect upon the Native mind... A few are beginning to be aware that the white man is liable to err

like the rest of humanity and their skins do not make them angelic (2003: 21).

Thus, any subject of film that might stir political controversy was carefully avoided. Black characters, when they did appear, were generally reduced to stereotypical, one-dimensional characters (Davis 1996: 8-9; Peterson 2003: 41). Documentaries were rarely screened for black audiences. Certainly films documenting the harsh realities of black life would have been antithetical to the goal of pacifism and were therefore excluded.

These transgressions went largely unprotested, in part because the black intelligentsia of the time were generally consumed by larger political activities and lacked the sort of leisure time and resources required to pursue cinematic ambitions (Balseiro and Masilela 2003: 11). Film being an expensive medium and one that requires a fair amount of technical training, it simply was not a practical pursuit for an oppressed working class. Moreover, any theoretical exploration of film was rendered nearly impossible, as black South Africans generally were not permitted to view films of artistic merit. Thus both the production and theorization of any form of black cinema was not permitted to emerge.<sup>65</sup>

In the 1970s, attempts were made to cultivate a cinema dealing with black themes and geared toward black audiences, but with dismal results. The motivation driving this development was a new government subsidy system, which enabled white filmmakers with little or no experience to produce low-budget films in ethnic languages with government support. The makers of these films demonstrated little knowledge of black culture. Many did not even speak the ethnic languages in which their films were shot and had to rely on actors to translate their own dialogue. Corruption under this system was rife, the quality of films abysmal, and documentaries generally nonexistent (Van Zyl 1985: 12; Murray 1992: 255-272, Botha 2003: 184).

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<sup>65</sup> Balseiro notes that columnist and intellectual Bloke Modisane was deeply interested in cinema from a theoretical perspective but was, for the most part, thwarted in his efforts to engage in any kind of meaningful relationship with cinema until his invitation to take part in scripting *Come Back Africa* with Lionel Rogosin in the 1950s. Rogosin would later remark that Modisane was “constantly irked” by the barriers the apartheid state placed between him and cinema (2003: 25-26).

Consequently, the majority of today's South Africans grew up without any exposure to quality documentary films that represented their experiences and interests. Needless to say, this has had serious implications for developing a documentary viewing culture and attracting aspiring filmmakers to the profession.

### **6.1.2 THE LEGACY OF STATE PROPAGANDA**

Much of the difficulty in transforming South Africa's documentary industry can be traced back to a long history of propagandistic filmmaking which neither served the interests of black subjects nor represented them fairly and accurately. Throughout South Africa's history, the vast majority of locally made documentary films were created or subsidized by the State. Typically produced through the Department of Information and later through the National Film Board, these films generally served government propaganda needs, including the promotion of Afrikaner values (Tomaselli 1982: 191).

The propagandistic nature of such films necessitated a particular approach that would come to typify South African documentaries for decades. Most were made in the traditional BBC expository style characterized by didactic, voice-of-god narration and simple, binary representations (subjects typically being reduced to basic types: the criminal, the victim, the loyal servant, the "simple country native"). The choices the filmmaker made were not democratic in nature – they simply served to support his own political stance. Subjects in these films had little agency over the film's overall message. Audiences were told what to think rather than encouraged to draw their own conclusions.

Anthony Thomas's *Anatomy of Apartheid* provides a classic example of this mode of documentary. Produced by the National Film Board in 1964, its goal was to paint a benevolent picture of apartheid by illustrating all the ways in which the state provided assistance to blacks with housing and social services. The film includes many images of black South Africans receiving such assistance, yet none of these subjects has a voice in the film. Rather, a white omniscient voiceover speaks for them. Another problematic characteristic illustrated by this film is the almost non-existent relationship between filmmaker and subject. Thomas, a young filmmaker at the time, would later concede that

he knew little of the realities of black South Africans when he made the film.<sup>66</sup> Such was often the case when white filmmakers documented black subjects in apartheid South Africa. The total disconnect between black and white existence virtually ensured that no white filmmaker would be qualified to accurately represent black subjects. And the didactic, propagandistic approaches that dominated the medium helped ensure that subjects would not have the opportunity to speak for themselves.<sup>67</sup>

One rare and groundbreaking exception to this trend is *Come Back Africa*, produced and directed by American filmmaker Lionel Rogosin in 1959. Though not strictly a documentary (the film blends a fictional narrative with improvised documentary footage), it is often cited as one of the first resistance documentaries to be produced in South Africa. Wanting to create an authentic, inside look at Black South African existence, rather than a “shallow Hollywood film,” Rogosin spent a year in South Africa prior to filming and hired two black South African journalists, Lewis Nkosi and Bloke Modisane, to write the script and act in the film (Balseiro and Masilelo 2003: 25-26; Balseiro 2003: 88-108; Tomaselli 1989: 55-57).

This collaboration, along with use of unprofessional actors, improvised dialogue, and documentary footage, helped create one of the first films ever to provide an authentic look at black South African life under apartheid. This is exemplified in the well known “shebeen scene” in which a group of black intellectuals freely discuss their views on white South Africans and their denial of black intelligence. The language and acting in the scene bear a unique mark of authenticity – in part because the actors themselves are members of the black intellectual set and the heavily improvised dialogue is based on their own thoughts and experiences. Rogosin’s effort demonstrated that by democratizing the production process and collaborating with insiders, even an outsider like himself could make a groundbreakingly authentic and important South African film.

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<sup>66</sup> Thomas acknowledges this in an interview that appears as an introduction to his 1977 Film *The Search for Sandra Laing*.

<sup>67</sup> Ironically, as a result of this first encounter with black South Africa, Thomas would later change his political views entirely. He eventually became an outspoken critic of apartheid, left South Africa to live in the UK, and made some of the most widely distributed anti-apartheid films of the 1970s.

*Come Back Africa* might have provided a useful model for future South African documentary filmmakers to follow had it not been virtually impossible for them to do so. For whites and blacks to collaborate in creating anti-government films would have been not only dangerous, but extremely difficult to fund because state subsidies were the only readily available sources of funding. South Africa lacked the mechanisms for supporting independent filmmakers that would have been found in other countries in the form of grant-making organizations, broadcaster support, or formal training (Dworkin 2006). Thus, documentary filmmakers and their products remained bound by the restrictions of the State, and the opportunity for white directors to benefit from black input and collaboration remained limited.

### **6.1.3 ANTI-APARTHEID FILMMAKING: PROPAGANDA FOR THE RESISTANCE**

It wasn't until the 1970s that several key events came together to create the conditions for an independent documentary film industry to develop. The introduction of television in 1976 necessitated a lifting of the ban on video technology, thereby making more affordable small format video cameras available to local filmmakers and broadening the national skills base. While news programming on SABC1 was tightly controlled, producers of drama series' and other programs were afforded a surprising bit of leeway with regard to making social statements that challenged the state. In 1982, the introduction of SABC2 and SABC3, two new networks aimed at black audiences, further opened the door. In some cases the national broadcaster even unwittingly provided tools and training that would be used to produce anti-apartheid films.

Around the same time, a few South African universities began teaching film and video studies, which facilitated the emergence of a new generation of critical viewers and liberal filmmakers. Less restricted than their professional counterparts, South African university students began to explore documentary topics that were critical of the state and/or exposed some of the hardships endured by black South Africans at the time (Tomaselli 1982: 192, 1992: 333-334; Steenveld 1992: 304-309).

Thanks to these and other developments, independent filmmakers like Lindy Wilson and Kevin Harris and collectives like Video News Service (VNS) and the Free Filmmakers began making documentaries that were not only produced independently of state

subsidies and control, but which spoke out against apartheid. Not surprisingly, most of the filmmakers who dared to engage in this sort of filmmaking were strongly motivated – and funded – by political interests. VNS, for example, received considerable ongoing support from the International Defense and Aid Fund (IDAF), which charged the filmmakers with supplying “irrefutable proof” of what was happening on the ground in South Africa (Dworkin 2006). Thus, the nature of documentary filmmaking remained unabashedly propagandistic – its purpose being almost exclusively to make arguments about the ill effects of apartheid (Gavshon 1990: 336).

As a result, little changed with regard to format, at least in the early years. While black subjects began to have their concerns aired, their voices still took a back seat to the voice of the (white) filmmaker. Films like *Crossroads* (Lindy Wilson, 1978), *Isitwalandwe* (Barry Feinburg, 1980) and *Witness to Apartheid* (Kevin Harris, 1987) stuck to the conventional expository style, utilizing a combination of b-roll footage, interview commentary and voiceover narration. Individual perspectives were all subjugated in order to present the message of a united front and/or objective truth.

Exceptions to the rule did emerge. Lindy Wilson’s *Last Supper at Horstley Street* (1985), which documents the departure of the last family to be forcibly removed from District Six, using eschews narration and exposition in favor of the more intimate observational mode. Chris Austin’s *A Brother with Perfect Timing* (1987) presents an empowered portrait of jazz musician Abdullah Ibrahim. Here the mode is more participatory, creating a narrative that is both personal and subjective and only subtly political. Yet such examples were few and far between.

Some have argued that the videos produced by VNS in the 1980s represented a radical departure from conventional form, but these arguments should be viewed with a certain amount of skepticism. Often prepared under duress, many of the VNS documentaries took the form of “video pamphlets” – i.e. short documentaries designed to document conflict on the ground quickly and with political (as opposed to aesthetic) goals in mind. This has led some to classify their work as an example of Third Cinema in South Africa. This claim is rooted in the notion that the work serves revolutionary socialist aims (i.e. cinema for the people), adheres to the aesthetics of “poor cinema,” and dovetails with Solanas and Getino’s call for the use of “pamphlet films, didactic films, report films,

essay films, witness-bearing films - any militant form of expression" in service to the social change (1976: 55-56).

There are, however, several concerns associated with the classification of VNS's work as Third Cinema. To begin with, the fact that the films were made not by the communities being documented, but by white, middleclass filmmakers should be seen as problematic in this context. Second, it should be noted that international audiences were the primary target for these films and indeed much of VNS's funding came from Europe – a common phenomenon in the 1980s as censorship at home became tighter and funding more scarce (Unwin and Belton 1992: 288). While this strategy made sense at the time and was effective in generating international support for the Struggle, it surely runs counter to the prescriptions of Third Cinema. Finally, while it is true that the VNS collective prioritized practical concerns (i.e. producing evidence) over technical polish – an approach that could be linked to Third Cinema's call for "poor" cinema – it must be noted that the makers of these films were not deliberately attempting to adhere to any sort of theoretical model of filmmaking. To the contrary, they attribute their aesthetic choices to practical concerns as well as a *lack of* knowledge about documentary conventions and styles.

We didn't want conventional British type documentary format and we weren't for example going to use voice-over. We were experimenting, but not in any formalized sense of having a good background in the different styles, or of being well acquainted with documentary traditions (Lawrence Dworkin, quoted in Unwin and Belton 1992: 292).

According to Dworkin, much of the early work produced by the collective was "naïve" and suffered from a lack of experience with the documentary form and technology. Certainly the collective did not have ambitions of creating an altogether new form of Cinema (2006). This raises important questions about Third Cinema as a concept and the tendency for "poor cinema" to be confused with that which is simply poorly made. Indeed, as we shall see, as the VNS collective gained the advantages of more experience, higher budgets and more favorable production conditions, their work began to look more and more like mainstream expository documentary.

Here Steenveld takes a more tenable position when she posits that in terms of style, these documentaries were no different from those being produced by the state and broadcast on SABC, but were distinguished by the practice of enabling ordinary members of the black working class to speak for themselves as opposed to relying on “officials” and disembodied voiceover narrators to act as the voices of authority (1992: 303). Thus the work of VNS and other anti-apartheid filmmakers can be seen as a first tentative step away from pure expository mode into more observational and participatory forms of documentary. A classic example can be found in *Fruits of Defiance* (Brian Tilley and Oliver Schmitz, 1990), which documents the Defiance Campaign as seen by residents of Cape Town’s Mannenburg township. While not revolutionary in form, the film presents a richer, more nuanced, more authentic portrait of a black community than previously seen in South Africa by incorporating local dialect, music, and a series of effective “insider” POV shots to capture the essence of the Mannenburg community and their own experiences (Maingard 1997: 194).<sup>68</sup>

While such films took small steps forward for South African documentary filmmaking, sweeping changes were taking place elsewhere in the world. The “crisis of representation,” which originated in the field of anthropology, brought heightened sensitivities to the centuries-old practice of documenting exotic cultures through the subjective lens of the Western white male. A new set of rules governing the power dynamic between privileged filmmakers and marginalized subjects was coming into play – one that emphasized informed consent, power sharing, and the cultivation of more meaningful relationships between filmmaker and subject.

At the same time, the documentary film world was moving away from the omnipotent “factual” representations of the past and toward more subjective and personal forms of story telling. This was motivated in part by notions that a cinematic approach to documentary (one driven by characters and plot) was more engaging than the old expository approach. But it was also motivated by the increasingly held postmodern viewpoint that no documentary can claim to represent objective “truth” or reality – that

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<sup>68</sup> Maingard argues that the documentaries of VNS were fundamentally different in their use of “speaking subjects” and working class POV shots. In actuality, this marks more of a difference in perspective (i.e. representing the side of the working class as opposed to that of the state), than in formal conventions or aesthetic sensibilities.

the filmmaking process is, by its very nature, subjective. Faced with the impossibility of achieving true objectivity, many filmmakers were opting to acknowledge the subjectivity of their work by crafting films in the form of opinions, personal journeys and individual narratives.

South Africa was isolated from these events by the cultural boycott and censorship laws that prevented most international documentaries from reaching local cinema and television screens. Moreover, subjective opinions and personal journeys would not serve the agendas of the State or the opposition as effectively as “irrefutable proof.” And as for the rising standards of filmmaker-to-subject relationships, these would be hard to achieve given the restrictions of apartheid. A huge gulf still existed between races and any attempts to bridge that divide were hindered by severe government crackdowns on the media. Documentary filmmaking under these circumstances was characterized by haste and anonymity, rather than openness and relationship building, as Lawrence Dworkin of VNS attests:

For the most part, our strongest relationship was with the organizations. With ordinary regular folk on the ground, it was a little more difficult to sustain. Certainly if we were filming for a day and in and out and then moving on, there was no opportunity to form a relationship. We also didn't escape some kind of expectation of working with people and having them hope that something might come out of it for them even in terms of some kind of material support for them, which we really couldn't offer. So we faced the dilemma of working with a subject and then us moving on and leaving them to their lives (Dworkin 2006).

Under different circumstances, the subjects themselves might have demanded better, but the filmmaker-to-subject relationship was vastly oversimplified by the common cause of the Struggle. As long as a director was known to be aligned with the ANC, most black subjects would willingly offer up their support and agree to be filmed (Dworkin 2006, Fish 2006). Thus, the process of gaining access via a relationship built on trust, reciprocity and informed consent was not only difficult to achieve but easily circumvented. While this served the need to produce critical films under duress, it had problematic effects. Often, the subjects of anti-apartheid documentaries put themselves at great risk by

testifying on camera while the filmmakers themselves remained anonymous. Some were harassed, detained, tortured and even murdered after the films in question were broadcast.<sup>69</sup> This practice was generally accepted at the time, as most subjects were willing to put themselves at risk in order to serve a higher purpose (Gavshon 1991: 337).

Gavshon argues that these conditions were often exacerbated in situations where foreign crews were involved. Here she points out a frustrating fact: while the methods of foreign crews tended to be more suspect, their (perceived) ability to help the cause was also that much greater.

It is a situation which cuts two ways: on the one hand, foreign 'adventurers' often shamelessly exploit South Africa's pain, lay their subjects open to harassment, and get away with less than sound research. On the other, they can often go much further than most South African filmmakers in exposing such things as the brutality of apartheid and security force excesses and hence keep one of the last routes of information open (1990: 336).

Gavshon further laments the ways in which foreign crews had a tendency to oversimplify the apartheid conflict in order to make it more digestible for international audiences. Here Auderfelde and Ruby's concerns about ethics versus entertainment value come into play.

The way that political conflict has been covered by the foreign media obviously determines foreign 'reading' of that conflict. Although it is very important politically that the transgression of basic human rights be constantly focused upon, such coverage leads to the impression that South Africa is merely facing a civil rights conflict similar to that which the United States faced in the sixties, and that the 'abolition' of apartheid is all

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<sup>69</sup> Gavshon cites two specific examples. Dr. Fabian Ribiero and his wife were murdered shortly after their appearance in *Witness to Apartheid* (Sharon Sopher, 1986). Sicelo Dhlomo was murdered two months after his appearance in *Children of Apartheid* (CBS, 1987). The latter example is particularly troubling given that the victim was only seventeen years old and therefore less likely to be aware of the consequences of his participation (Gavshon 1990: 343).

that is needed to resolve the conflict. Moreover, the documentary tradition has constantly reinforced the idea of the subject as victim, not able to control his or her own life or future, merely waiting for liberation by foreigners, and, certainly in the light of that, not entitled to demand release forms, the right to 'read-back,' or any privacy (1990: 336-337).

The portrayal of black South Africans as apartheid's helpless victims is of particular concern, given the ways in which it reinforced popular and damaging stereotypes of Africans dating back to the earliest days of cinema. Anthony Thomas's *The Search for Sandra Laing* (1977) provides a salient example. While the film is undoubtedly a well-intended attempt to speak out against the evils of Apartheid, its representation of black South Africans is extremely problematic. Here Thomas, a white South African then living in the UK and producing documentaries for British television, has unwittingly replicated the colonial gaze in many respects. This becomes apparent within the first moments in the film, during which Thomas spends several minutes lingering on the image of a nameless, voiceless black woman whose only relevance to the story is that she lives in a village formerly inhabited by his main character. In a series of uncomfortably long shots, the woman stares helplessly into the camera's lens while Thomas's voiceover speaks to the ways in which black South Africans have been victimized by apartheid. Such images, though admittedly more palatable in Thomas's time, place the viewer in the troublesome position of voyeur – gazing upon a victimized exotic Other who is not only put on display, but denied a voice, a name, the opportunity to speak for herself... and indeed any form of complexity that might render her fully human.

This is exemplary of the rest of the film, in which black characters remain uniformly one-dimensional. Thomas's subjects rarely speak for themselves and when they do, their commentary is subservient to his own didactic, ever-present voiceover. Thus the colonial West/Other dynamic is maintained: Africa is portrayed as a place of suffering and its people as helpless victims, while Thomas, the voice of white, Western male authority, speaks for his subjects and appeals for Western intervention on their behalf.

#### **6.1.4 THE SEEDS OF A DIVERSIFICATION**

In the wake of the 1976 Soweto uprising and heightening violence, South Africa found itself the focus of increasing international attention. Foreign broadcasters began stationing full-time crews in the townships to cover the state of unrest and these crews would eventually provide the first opportunity for several locals to enter the industry. Many foreign crews hired township residents to improve access to key locations. As time went on, some were trained as sound recordists and worked their way up to camera positions. A few of these trainees, including Nyana Molete and Eddie Mbalo, would go on to produce their own films. Organizations like VNS followed suit, starting a training and internship program that would also introduce some important future players to the industry (Dworkin 2006). This practice of informal, individualized mentoring would continue to play a role in cultivating emerging talent up until the present.

Also, starting in 1977, a small group at the University of Cape Town, including Mark Kaplan and Liz Fish, founded a community video training program called Community Video Education Trust (CVET). Influenced by the NFB's Challenge for Change program, CVET sought to train community organizations in the townships and empower them to document their own work and experiences (Gavshon 1990: 338). Training was minimal and generally aimed not at facilitating broadcast-quality work, but rather on empowering people to document and publicize important issues within their own communities (Fish 2006). Nonetheless, here too the seeds of a more film-literate population were being sewn. As a result, there emerged a small number of individuals and collectives operating in a similar manner to VNS which were founded by black independents, including RM Productions, headed by Rapitsi Montsho, and Afroscope, by Eddie Mbalo (Sekhukhuni 2005: 76).

While Tomaselli and Prinsloo describe the period up until 1982 as being marked by "serious deficiencies related to the need for theory, collective production practices, refinement of definitions, and issues of distribution and dissemination," this too began to improve (1992: 342). In 1987, the first Independent Filmmakers Conference was held in Johannesburg and a year later, the Culture in Another South Africa Conference took place (CASA) in Amsterdam. Out of CASA came manifestos that laid the groundwork for the Film and Allied Workers Organisation (FAWO) and the National Organisation of Video and Allied Workers (NOVAW), both of which were established soon after. These two organizations marked a turning point in that progressive filmmakers were finally

uniting to produce films and create a “critical film culture” (Tomaselli and Prinsloo 1992: 344).

At the same time, the move from film to videotape created new possibilities for screening documentaries in alternative venues. Whereas film and broadcast media were tightly controlled by the state, videos could be more easily screened in community centers, churches and private homes. In 1986, a small video library and underground distribution network called Film Resource Unit (FRU) was founded. FRU acquired local films that could not be broadcast and weren't being seen by the public and began screening them in townships with community groups. The screenings not only got people talking about important issues, but also trained audiences to become critical viewers of mass media. This practice would be expanded in later years and become an important strategy in working to create a local audience for South African content. Film Resource Unit would later become one of the world's largest distributors of African film.

#### **6.1.5 THE TRANSITION: 1992 – 1996**

There was a transitional period between 1992 and 1995 where everyone was trying to figure out how to position themselves – even the broadcaster. You still had the old guard running the show, but they were under pressure to start allowing alternative voices on the stations... and then post-1994 there were new people coming in with no one quite sure what the role of a broadcaster should be and people jockeying for positions... it was very chaotic. (Dworkin 2006)

By the early '90s, the winds of change were blowing across South Africa. Political parties were being unbanned, restrictions on the media were being lifted, and freedom of expression began to improve. But the process of building up a diverse, skilled film industry and a national documentary culture faced many hurdles. Like all of South African society, the documentary industry would be thrown into upheaval for several years.

For established filmmakers who worked for the State and the national broadcaster, the safety net was disintegrating. After decades of being “on the payroll,” they found

themselves for the first time without a base of support. Anti-apartheid filmmakers were in a similar bind. Their reason for existence was coming to an end – and with it, much of their funding. Many had little or no experience with the business of filmmaking as it operates in a democratic environment. Tasks like writing proposals, raising funds and seeking out broadcast partnerships were completely foreign (Botha 2006, Dworkin 2006).

Meanwhile, the SABC was in a state of flux on all fronts – from staff to policies, programming and organizational structure. Questions of what could and could not be broadcast remained unanswered for years. The broadcaster had no clear framework for dealing with independent filmmakers, as its initial policy was to do as much production work in-house as possible. Thus, there continued to be a struggle in terms of fighting for the space of independent documentary filmmaking (Dworkin 2006).

At the same time, the need for massive transformation on all levels strained the capacity of a small pool of black filmmakers. Those with training and experience were quickly snapped up to fill management roles. Some, like Nyana Molete, went to work for the SABC. Others, like Eddie Mballo, were tapped to fill government/policy-making posts. Of the few black filmmakers who remained in production, many were lured into the realm of fiction films, TV sitcoms and soapies.<sup>70</sup> Not surprisingly, the promise of better job security, bigger paychecks, and the glamour of fiction tended to win out over the uncertainty and low pay of documentary filmmaking. Thus it seemed that an entirely new generation of black filmmakers would have to emerge to fill the void. Given the lack of funding and supports for independent documentary filmmaking, one had to wonder, could a previously disadvantaged individual afford to be a documentary filmmaker in the New South Africa?

#### **6.1.6 OLD HABITS, NEW APPROACHES**

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<sup>70</sup> The term “soapie” is commonly used in South Africa to refer to soap operas.

Not surprisingly, the documentaries produced during this period reflected the transitional nature of both politics and the media: the results were mixed.

For the VNS collective, the transition brought a commission from the ANC to create a five-part series on the history of the organization. Produced just after the un-banning of political parties, *Ulibamba Lingashoni/Hold Up the Sun* was the filmmakers' first opportunity to work under more stable conditions and dedicate more than two years on production. Unfortunately, the results were disappointing. While the series is certainly a more thoughtful and detailed account than the hastily produced anti-apartheid films of the '80s, it failed to take steps forward in terms of format and style, clinging instead to the outdated modes of expository filmmaking designed to educate the masses. By filmmaker Lawrence Dworkin's own account, "the series was pretty mediocre in retrospect."

Our inexperience showed there. We weren't used to the standards of documentary filmmaking that other North American and European countries might have been... we were struggle activists so we never had the opportunity to fully develop the craft in a much more controlled way or thought-out way. In terms of the craft of filmmaking we were very much playing catch-up at that stage (Dworkin 2006).

The *Ulibamba Lingashoni* series would highlight transitional problems at the SABC as well. Still very much under the control of the old guard, the network nonetheless agreed to broadcast the series. However, the decision stirred a huge controversy because other political parties saw the program as propaganda and wanted it removed from the line-up. This was but one of many examples of the uncertainties of operating at a time when the new rules of engagement remained unwritten (Dworkin 2006).

With the lifting of censorship laws and greater exposure to international trends, some local filmmakers began to move away from traditional expository filmmaking toward a more creative, narrative approach to documentary story telling. In so doing, they would begin to take the first steps toward diversifying the culture and subject matter of South African documentary film. As filmmaker Dumisani Phakathi notes:

Documentary in South America was there first to highlight the plight of the working class or of an ethnic group or an issue that was not being looked at. Always there was the sole idea of uplifting people. It's only recently that it's starting to become complex, you can express things, you can do docs about good ideas. At the height it was not about good ideas. It was about saying, 'this guy wants to kill himself so I'm gonna film him for eight days before he kills himself' (2007).

One of the first programs to embrace a new documentary aesthetic was a series called ***Ordinary People***, commissioned by the SABC and Weekly Mail Television, and produced by Clifford Bestall and Harriett Gavshon in 1993. *Ordinary People* was the first current affairs program ever to be commissioned to an independent company. The goal of the program was to document the transition into democracy as average citizens experienced it. Each episode would document a place or event – political, or personal – from the perspectives of 3 or 4 different “ordinary people.” Each individual would be followed by a handheld camera crew who would capture his or her perspective on events, often literally filming from the subject's POV in order to create a sense of insider perspective (Maingard 2003: 224-226).

The *Ordinary People* series was shot in a vérité style and was entirely character- and plot-driven – creative choices that were entirely new for the SABC. By examining events from a variety of perspectives, the series actively challenged the very notion of fixed truths, encouraging the viewer to understand and respect multiple perspectives on the same issue (Maingard 2003: 229). This was a perfect message for a newly democratic South Africa and a positive sign of the new SABC fulfilling its social service mandate. For the field of documentary, it represented a critical first step away from the old conventions of presenting fixed, unified (pro- or anti-apartheid) arguments and binary (black/white, good/evil) representations, in favor of open-ended narratives, multiple viewpoints and hybrid identities.

The artistic merit of these programs was limited by tight production schedules and small budgets. Their short format (26 minutes per episode) did not allow for detailed or artistic character development and gives the programs a magazine-like feel. *Ordinary People* was not yet observational cinema in the truly cinematic sense. Nonetheless, it was a

break from old conventions and a definite step forward in terms of diversifying the style, content and voice of South African documentary film.

One of the first long-form documentary films to adopt this form of personal, observational narrative was *The Long Journey of Clement Zulu*. Produced by Liz Fish in 1992, the film follows three former political prisoners during their release from Robben Island and subsequent attempts to rebuild their lives as free men. Like the *Ordinary People* series, the film is plot-driven and foregrounds its characters' individual perspectives. But it also succeeds where *Ordinary People* fell short: in providing a truly intimate portrayal of the characters over the course of nearly a year. The extended length of the narrative and the intimacy of content enable the audience to gain a true affinity for each character, empathy for his views, and a desire to know what will happen in his life. The means by which Liz Fish – an outsider with regard to race, class, and personal experience – was able to create such an intimate and personal portrait are worthy of further examination.

Of the utmost importance, Fish's racial outsider status was tempered by her status as a political insider. A long-time struggle activist and director of CVET, she had close ties to black communities and had done considerable work with other Robben Island prisoners. She knew the cultures of her characters and she knew their issues. In addition, Fish developed a personal relationship with her subjects that far exceeded the standards of apartheid-era filmmaking. As she contends:

I wasn't coming from a political perspective; I was coming from a personal perspective. They were separated from their families. They were kind of re-entering the world and I went on that journey with them. I literally got on the bus and went home with them and provided a kind of support network for them during that transition" (2006).

This personal relationship served not only to deepen understanding between filmmaker and subject, but also paved the way toward a more collaborative approach to filmmaking. "Community work influenced me in the sense of the process of working very closely with people to tell *their* story, that they own the story," says Fish. "I didn't come in with a preconceived notion" (2006). True to this ideal, *The Long Journey of Clement Zulu* lets its subjects speak for themselves. Each of the three characters interrogates

The Struggle on his own terms and through his own experience of being released back into a democratic South Africa only to wonder what has been gained. The message is subtle, the answers open-ended, and the views subjective and varied.

*The Long Journey of Clement Zulu* was made at a pivotal point in history: a time when Fish's political credentials were still sufficient to afford her access. Years later, she would find it very difficult to make this type of film. "The times were very different then. People were very politically committed and dedicated," says Fish. "If you were a white comrade, people trusted you and worked closely with you. I think the racial tension has in fact gotten far worse in this country today."

### **6.1.7 RECLAIMING HISTORY**

The first decade after apartheid was an intense period of revelation and introspection for most South Africans. After the media censorship and repression of the 1980s, the hard truths of apartheid were finally being aired and both blacks and whites had a lot of processing to do. The idea of reclaiming history and telling stories that could not be told previously became a significant part of the national ethos, which emphasized airing apartheid's dirty laundry.

While the local film industry struggled to find its feet, a wave of international filmmakers began taking an interest in documenting the epic apartheid story. This was perfect documentary material – a tale of good vs. evil filled with archetypal heroes and villains, colorful characters, inspiring music, and a happy ending. Films like *Amandla* (Lee Hirsch, 2002), *Countdown to Freedom*, (Danny Schechter, 1994) and *The Long Walk of Nelson Mandela* (Brent Huffman and Katerina Monemvassitis, 1995) would bring significant worldwide attention to South Africa and air many of the atrocities of apartheid for the first time, for international audiences and South Africans alike.

The practice of recovering popular memory rose to the level of national obsession in 1996, when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) began hearing its first cases. The proceedings were broadcast regularly on the SABC and national radio – the first time an international truth commission would be broadcast to the public. The TRC inspired several international documentaries of note including the Oscar-nominated *Long*

*Night's Journey Into Day* (Francis Reid and Deborah Hoffman, 2001). Local filmmakers also adopted the theme, using their newfound journalistic freedom to craft more detailed accounts of apartheid than could be made previously. Films like *Gugulethu Seven* (Lindy Wilson, 1999) and *Between Joyce and Remembrance* (Mark Kaplan, 2003) elevated the complexity and production value of South African documentary film. Combining some of the documentary traditions of the past (didactic stance, “expert” testimony, a single “objective” argument) with more creative, narrative techniques (*Gugulethu Seven* taking on the formal qualities of a detective mystery while *Between Joyce and Remembrance* introduces an element of personal essay).

## 6.2 BUILDING AN INDUSTRY

While the nation was collectively looking back on its difficult past, policy-makers and industry leaders were beset with the task of creating a new infrastructure for the film industry. The formidable nature of this task cannot be understated and much of the difficulty of achieving transformation stems from this fact. In the broadest sense, transformation would require opening up telecommunications access to underserved homelands and rural areas while creating new policies to regulate service providers and broadcasters (Ali 2003: 114). In 1993, a newly created Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) introduced guidelines requiring all broadcasters to present a broader range of television broadcasting. By 1996, The SABC would have to meet local content quotas of 80 percent for documentary and informal knowledge and 50 percent for educational programming (IBA Act 1993). This move signaled a desire on the part of government regulators to decolonize television programming and increase production of local documentary content.<sup>71</sup>

It wasn't until 1996 that the South African government took its first steps towards creating a national film policy with the release of the *White Paper on South African Cinema*. Recognizing that film was important in cultural terms but also had the potential to create jobs, attract tourism dollars and sell South African products overseas, the *White Paper* made a series of recommendations for cultivating an economically and socially productive film industry. It also specifically addressed the issue of

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<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, this development had minimal immediate impact on the quality of documentary filmmaking, as local television programming was characterized by Afrikaans soapies and other light entertainment television.

transformation and provided guidelines for diversifying the industry (Saks 2003: 133-134; Botha 2006).

One of the document's key recommendations was the formation of a National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) which would support all aspects of the South African film industry and "effect redress across communities by providing funding for entry-level producers and first-time directors, bursaries for film study, and short, specialized film and video productions" (DACST 1996: 13; Saks 2003: 133; Botha 2003: 182). The NFVF was voted into existence with the passing of the National Film and Video Act in 1997 and became reality in 1999. Its work falls into four focus areas: education and training, development, production, and marketing and distribution. A brief analysis of issues within each of these areas and their impacts on transformation follows.

### **6.2.1 EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

At the time the *White Paper* was written, there remained a general lack of formal training institutions for film in South Africa, and the document therefore included as part of NFVF's mandate the creation of a national film school. To date, this mandate remains unfulfilled, although the organization received a grant of R1 million from the Department of Arts and Culture in 2006 to conduct a feasibility study on the subject (Botha 2006).

In the meantime, several film programs have cropped up throughout the country. The University of Cape Town and The University of Witzwatersrand, among others, now have established film studies programs which have evolved to include production training. The focus here is on the intellectual pursuit of film, more so than the technical rigors of production. Conversely, private film schools like AFDA and City Varsity tend to focus on the technical side and have been criticized for a lack of emphasis on theory and the African cinema tradition. Nonetheless, these schools are dramatically improving the local skills base and will have an even greater impact as their graduates come of age.

Despite these developments, training in the area of *documentary* filmmaking remains extremely scarce. In 2003, filmmaker Francois Verster created a documentary training program at City Varsity but this was eliminated in 2005 in a wave of cutbacks. Verster continues to coordinate courses in documentary at City Varsity on an ad hoc basis but

the future there is uncertain. The University of Cape Town has offered an increasing number of documentary courses in recent years, but here too it remains to be seen whether a full-fledged and enduring documentary program will develop.

To some degree, this trend is driven by the demands of students, who typically prefer fiction film training to documentary. Verster credits this largely to a lack of exposure. “Students think of documentary as journalism,” he argues. “They think *Special Assignment*.<sup>72</sup> So young people aren’t interested” (2006). As a fellow documentary educator, I too have found that few students bring a passion for documentaries to their first course, but most acquire a newfound enthusiasm once they have been properly exposed to the genre in all its forms.

The lack of international exposure and scholarly tradition in documentary film likewise limits the availability of qualified teachers for South African students. As the emerging class of filmmakers is still developing, there are relatively few practitioners who are sufficiently film-literate in a global and/or academic sense.

The NFVF supports film training in a variety of ways, including individual bursaries to students attending universities and film schools at home and abroad. In 2006, 75 bursaries were awarded, 55 of them to previously disadvantaged individuals (NFVF 2006). While this has certainly improved the availability of training, full-time study remains beyond the reach of many South Africans. This concern is being addressed in part through a variety of short-term training initiatives, which are too many to include in this summary. Noteworthy examples include CVET, which has not only outlived apartheid but also expanded its work to include formal 3-month and yearlong training programs designed to prepare students from disadvantaged communities to enter the industry (Otto-Sallies 2006). Government supported Mapp-SEETA grants provide funding for a combination of work experience and classroom-based learning. Vast arrays of small, community-based training initiatives are being undertaken by individuals and NGOs throughout the country (Son 2006). Unfortunately, many of these programs

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<sup>72</sup> *Special Assignment* is a news magazine program broadcast on SABC, which adheres to formulaic conventions of television news programming (voiceover, b-roll, current affairs content...) as opposed to what Verster terms “creative documentaries,” which tend to be more character- and plot-driven and employ the full spectrum of Nichols’s modes.

are undocumented and uncoordinated – a factor that exacerbates the already difficult task of connecting students with viable training options.

Alongside all the challenges of providing access to quality training, the process of transformation is limited by a perceived lack of aspiring filmmakers from previously disadvantaged communities, particularly at universities. As Martin Botha, of the University of Cape Town's Centre for Film and Media Studies, explains:

Black students who do go to university don't gravitate toward film. They don't see job opportunities like they would in science and commerce. If you went to the average township high school, you've never studied film. You couldn't go to cinemas. You don't think of film as a job. You don't know anyone who does this for a living. You are not encouraged by your teachers... Even when people saw struggle films, they didn't see the art, they saw the message (Botha 2006).

Without a doubt, financial issues are also at play. Many first generation university students in South Africa bear the burden of expectation that they will support families of 20 or more once they graduate. This too draws most students toward more lucrative fields while documentary film remains an impractical – even unaffordable – choice.

The implications of this are significant on many levels. Not only does lack of access to training limit the number of qualified black filmmakers working in South Africa today, it also impacts the nature of films being produced by those who manage to break into the industry. The fact that many black South African filmmakers are not university-educated, but rather trained on the job or through community initiatives makes it unlikely that their work is heavily influenced by the theory presented in this study.

## **6.2.2 DEVELOPMENT, PRODUCTION AND FUNDING**

Needless to say, the ability to make films is largely tied to the ability to *fund* films, and in South Africa, funding remains scarce. This problem of course has the greatest impact on previously disadvantaged individuals and newcomers to the industry who lack connections to key sources of support.

It wasn't until 1999, when the NFVF came into being, that independent documentary filmmakers had an established national organization to which they could apply for development and production funds.<sup>73</sup> From 2001 to 2006, the NFVF funded 114 documentaries in production – helping to get many projects and careers off the ground (Son 2006). The organization prioritizes black economic empowerment and is exceptionally open to funding projects from first-time and emerging filmmakers, especially when compared to similar organizations overseas. Yet the amount of funding NFVF is able to provide is extremely limited. Since its inception, NFVF's total budget has varied from R10 million at the onset to R35 million at its peak – a tiny fraction of the budgets of its international counterparts.<sup>74</sup>

Funding for the NFVF was established at the founding phase and has not grown as it should since then. The NFVF is now responsible for considerably more and broader initiatives, and its funding should be increased accordingly... It was supposed to have 300 million per year in 2006 to fulfill its mandate of supporting the industry (Botha 2006).

The question of funding is an extremely difficult one for a government that is under immense pressure to address the material concerns of the country before investing heavily in the development of culture. Private investors and NGOs are likewise strained, leaving South Africa with a lack of funding sources for documentary film. As the NFVF's Karen Son explains:

All our money comes unfortunately from National Treasury. Very often, in order to motivate the National Treasury, you need to show that you meet with their objectives – how many jobs, how much economic impact... I

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<sup>73</sup> In 1995, the old film subsidy system came to an end and in 1996, an interim film fund of R10 million was established to bridge the funding gap until the NFVF could take over this function in 1999. However, the interim fund was criticized on a variety of levels including its lack of formal application procedures, feedback mechanisms and mentoring for funded projects – all of which left inexperienced filmmakers feeling particularly disadvantaged (Saks 2003: 134).

<sup>74</sup> According to the NFVF's 2007 annual report, the funding ratio international benchmark is 19 percent, whereas in South Africa it is less than one percent. (In other words, for every rand in production expenses, South Africa contributes less than one cent, as opposed to the benchmark of 19 cents.)

think the Department of Arts and Culture understands the importance of cultural expression and how that can affect the soul of the nation. But how do you translate that to the people who need to give you money? Can you explain to them that making a documentary is just as important as putting a roof over someone's head? (Son 2006).

This lack of public and private funding leaves many producers looking to the SABC for support. Like the NFVF, the SABC has a diversity mandate and is exceptionally open to commissioning work by first-time and emerging filmmakers. But also like the NFVF, its budgets are insufficient by international standards. Marc Schwinges, of Cape Town's highly successful Underdog Entertainment, contends that the company has produced six documentaries on SABC commissions and none has been profitable, thanks to the SABC's tight budgets and strict ownership policies.

The SABC is really the only avenue for commissioned documentaries and since more documentaries are made on commission for the local market than by way of co-production, I feel on the whole documentaries in SA do not make money for independents. Due to the standard commission rates on which these projects were made, we in fact lost money on most of them, and barely broken even on others (Swinges, quoted in Vermeulen 2007: 3).

More importantly, perhaps, the local documentary community has expressed great frustration with the SABC of late. An avalanche of complaints have been leveled at the broadcaster including late or nonpayment, manipulation by political interests, inexperienced, overburdened commissioning editors who lack the capacity to shepherd projects to successful completion, and endless bureaucratic hassles.<sup>75</sup> Related controversies came to a head in 2006, when a formal inquiry substantiated claims of blacklisting and again in 2007, when a controversial biography of Thabo Mbeki was

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<sup>75</sup> Horror stories about the SABC are frequently traded on Moviezone and discussed at industry gatherings, but most filmmakers are reluctant to publish their concerns for fear of retribution. The situation recently prompted industry newspaper *The Callsheet* to conduct an anonymous online survey for the purposes of gathering evidence against the broadcaster (Kriedman 2008).

inexplicably pulled from the network's lineup.<sup>76</sup> The "crisis within the SABC" has reached such proportions that the South African Screen Federation (SASFED) issued a public statement in May 2008 contending that political interference had "undermined the original public service mandate of the SABC" and accusing the network of "long-standing operational dysfunctionality" (SASFED 2008).

In short, the local climate provides only limited and often troublesome opportunities for emerging filmmakers who know how to access the channels of funding and are content to make low-budget films. More established filmmakers and those who wish to produce documentaries of a high standard have little choice but to find additional funding overseas. This raises an entirely new source of contention as many worry that a truly independent South African film industry with its own aesthetic cannot develop as long as the industry remains tied to foreign interests.

### **6.2.3 MARKETING, DISTRIBUTION AND AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT**

The marketing and distribution of locally produced documentary films poses great challenges for South Africa, in large part because the domestic market for films is tiny and highly fragmented. Cinemas remain concentrated in inaccessible, white, urban areas and the price of admission is prohibitive for most South Africans. Organizations like the NFVF, Film Resource Unit and many others have attempted to combat this problem by developing mobile cinema units that can bring film to greater portions of the population. Alternative venues like schools and community centers are also increasingly being used to screen films, and of course television is reaching an expanding audience.

This distribution landscape may change considerably in the coming years with the rise of internet and mobile media. Already, in countries with plentiful bandwidth, consumers are increasingly watching highly personalized content on cellphones, laptops and other mobile devices and sharing it with like-minded peers.<sup>77</sup> The move toward portable,

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<sup>76</sup> A report on the formal investigation into blacklisting at the SABC was published in the *Mail and Guardian* in 2006. (See SABC 2006). This and other concerns have been widely reported in the media. C.F. Gedye (2006), Mabuza (2007), and SAPA (2006).

<sup>77</sup> After recently relocating from Cape Town to Chicago, I was surprised by the now common sight of people watching video content on iphones and other mobile devices on

sharable, digital video could make content available to millions of South Africans who currently lack access to cinemas or television. By streamlining delivery costs and enabling viral marketing, digital distribution also makes it easier to earn a profit through niche-oriented and/or hyper-local content.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, digital convergence could one day make local programming far more plentiful for South African audiences.

However, these possibilities have not yet been realized as a consequence of limited wealth and infrastructure. As Tomaselli and Dockney point out, “In South Africa, the single biggest impediment to this new distribution model is the very high cost and very limited provision of bandwidth... the developmental work of provincial film commissions, amongst other sectors, is ruinously impeded by unnecessary state-imposed regulation on the telecoms sector” (2008: 19). As long as this state of affairs persists, South Africa will lag behind other industrialized nations in the mobile media arena and may not enjoy its benefits for some time.

Nonetheless, digital distribution holds great promise for expanding the global marketplace for South African documentary. Already, sites like Youtube and Rever enable any filmmaker with sufficient bandwidth to broadcast content to international viewers anytime, anywhere, without buy-in from international broadcasters. At the same time, the proliferation of social networking tools and online communities makes it possible to market that content at little or no cost (Aufderheide 2008: 1-2). The

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their morning train commute. My American students, who’ve grown up with such digital devices, now watch much of their “television” on computer screens and actively share content they like with their peers through social networking devices like Facebook. The curriculum in the television department in which I now teach offers an “internet and mobile media” concentration that includes courses in webisode production and viral video marketing – classes that could not have existed a few years ago but today promise potentially lucrative and sought-after job skills.

<sup>78</sup> The trend toward niche-oriented content is examined in depth by Chris Anderson in his book *The Long Tail: How endless Choice is Creating Unlimited Demand* (Anderson 2006). In it, he explains how distribution concepts like Netflix and early video-on-demand offerings helped create markets for cinema that were no longer geographically bound and therefore broad enough to find a critical mass of consumers for niche films. This trend is expounded upon and updated in *the Online Community Cookbook*, a report compiled by the Digital Media Federation, which examines the rise of hyperlocal online news sites in the U.S. (Gordon 2008).

possibilities are highly encouraging and could ultimately help loosen the West's hegemonic grip on the film industry and level the distribution playing field.<sup>79</sup>

However, the question of how to monetize these distribution channels remains largely unanswered. While various models are being experimented with overseas, few content makers are earning a living through online distribution as yet. Moreover, as long as South Africa remains a country with "limited connectivity, a small middle class, and a very large poverty problem," it will particularly difficult for local filmmakers to generate enough online viewers to earn a profit (Tomaselli and Dockney 2008: 24). Until digital distribution channels become profitable, they will have little use for filmmakers looking to fund their work.

Thus, for the time being, filmmakers once again find themselves looking overseas for support from traditional funders and broadcasters. The prospects are mixed. Opinions about the level of international demand for South African content are mixed, but most agree that the potential is there – thanks to both the exposure South Africa received around the end of apartheid and the increasing quality and quantity of local films being made. This is evidenced by the increasing number of festivals that have chosen to curate special segments on South African film. Events like the tenth anniversary of democracy in 2004 helped spur this phenomenon, and the spillover effect has generated ongoing interest (Son 2006).

The NFVF has attempted to nurture this interest through a variety of marketing efforts targeting international film festivals. Some argue that the organization has spent too much of its limited budget on festival PR, and without question, the emphasis of these efforts is on feature films, not documentaries. While the NFVF has sent a delegation to most of the high-profile international film festivals in recent years, top documentary festivals including IDFA, Hot Docs and Silverdocs, remain conspicuously absent from its list (Verster 2006).

#### **6.2.4 FILM FESTIVALS AND MARKETS**

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<sup>79</sup> My own students at the University of Cape Town, as part of a 2006 documentary production course, created some short documentaries that were uploaded and broadcast to audiences worldwide on Current TV – a possibility that would have been nearly impossible to achieve just three years earlier.

The marketing of South African films received a significant boost in 1995 with the creation of the Sithengi Film and Television Market. Hosted during the annual Cape Town World Cinema Festival, the market serves many functions. It is a gathering of industry leaders where important policies are developed, a meeting place where products are screened and sold, a “talent campus” where training is provided to aspiring filmmakers, and a crucial networking event for all manner of industry professionals. Most importantly for documentary filmmakers, the market includes a documentary co-production forum where international broadcasters gather to hear pitches from local filmmakers. The list of attendees has grown to comprise an impressive cast of commissioning editors. While not as large as the top international markets, the intimate nature of the forum affords attendees an uncommonly high level of broadcaster access.<sup>80</sup>

Another important development for the documentary film industry came with the Encounters Documentary Film Festival. Founded in 1994 with the goal of promoting documentary filmmaking and viewing in South Africa, Encounters has evolved into a world-class program of screenings comprising the best of African and international documentaries, and an important venue for local filmmakers to gain exposure for their work.

In 1999, the organizers created the Encounters Documentary Laboratory, which commissions six to eight films each year and provides extensive training and support to the filmmakers. Founder Steven Markowitz says the motivation was manifold:

The idea is to get filmmakers to think a lot deeper about their subjects before they start shooting to improve their character and plot development, and to create a community of peers who will support

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<sup>80</sup> After eleven successful years, Sithengi came under threat of dissolution in 2007 when the board disclosed that the organization was bankrupt as a result of failure on the part of the National Lotteries Distribution Trust Fund (NLDTF) and the SABC to make promised payments totalling R2,750,000. The crisis led to cancellation of the 2007 event. However, a new board was formed in November 2007, plans for a 2008 event are in place and the future of the festival appears secure, at least for the short term. Nonetheless, the crisis speaks to the vulnerability of the industry and the difficulties associated with securing funding for film-related activities of any kind. (Monthly updates on the Sithengi crisis were reported in *Screen Africa* magazine throughout 2007. See <http://www.screenafrica.com>.)

each other beyond the lab... We make a concerted effort to support applications from previously disadvantaged individuals and women. And there was a selfish motive too: We had started this festival and we wanted to improve the quality of our content (2006).

As the number and skill level of documentary filmmakers in South Africa has increased, the Encounters Lab has added more advanced workshops and master classes to its repertoire. This workshop-based model for documentary training has been widely replicated, and has proven to be a particularly effective tool in boosting the quality and quantity of locally made films.

### **6.2.5 INDUSTRY NETWORKING AND EVENTS**

In addition to the higher profile festivals and markets, the South African documentary industry now finds support and training opportunities through a variety of professional networks and workshop events. One of the most long-standing of these is South African Communications for Development (SACOD), which was created in 1987 and includes members from 12 southern African countries. The SACOD Forum, discussed earlier in this study, provides a rare opportunity for professionals to engage in critical study and debate – from viewing groundbreaking new films from the region, to discussing latest developments regarding ethics, aesthetics, and distribution, and getting critical feedback on their own work.

More recent developments include the establishment of the South African Documentary Filmmakers Association (DFA), which was launched at the 2007 Encounters Festival with the goal of creating a body to nurture and represent the interests of the industry. Already the DFA has attracted a wide membership, established important links to industry partners including Encounters, and lobbied on behalf of its members on important industry issues such as government funding and SABC policies (Desai 2007).

Also in 2007, South Africa hosted the first PEOPLE to PEOPLE International Documentary Conference. Jointly initiated by Encounters, SACOD and the Three Continents Film Festival, the event was described by co-founder Rehad Desai as South Africa's "first full-scale, dedicated documentary conference," and "a timely indication of

the growth and development of the local industry.” According to the organizers, the conference arose from the need to enhance the role of documentary in South Africa, Africa and the South.

Globalisation... threatens to weaken the value we attribute to the relevance of local stories. Conformity to telling the stories pertinent to the interests of the dominant world order, risks perpetuating the inequalities and injustices upon which such interests are premised... It is our contention that documentary film making in the South can stem the global tide responsible for demonising and polarising people the world over, especially if our documentary storytelling commitments are able to express a more representative and equitable social order. The source of such stories lie within our grasp, they are our own people’s stories told from our own perspectives” (SACOD 2007).

Accordingly, through a series of panel discussions, debates, and master classes, the conference sought to address several theoretical, historical, and political concerns. These included discussion of the National Indigenous Television Channel (NITV) launched recently in Australia, and a critical examination of the validity of the 1960s “Africa Addio” representation of postcolonial Africa, among others. The conference is hereafter scheduled to take place every two years with the hopeful result of engendering in local filmmakers a sense of the unique cultural and political responsibilities that come with their craft.

A subject of frequent debate at the inaugural conference was South Africa’s critical role in the “African Renaissance.” Noting that South African filmmakers are better positioned than their peers in southern Africa to produce and widely distribute high-budget, high-quality representations of Africa and its people, participants brought to light an important concern for documentary filmmaking in South Africa: the notion that filmmakers there are representing not only their own people and culture, but to some extent that of the entire continent – a task which should not be taken lightly.

### **6.3 CURATED SERIES**

The South African documentary industry has received a considerable boost in recent years as a result of a few high-profile series which provided critical funding and mentoring for emerging talent, and elevated the stature of local films at home and abroad. Produced between 2003 and 2005, they are Project Ten, Steps for the Future, and Black on White. These projects had a significant collective impact on the industry and each had a particular emphasis with regard to ethics and aesthetics that warrants further examination.

### **6.3.1 PROJECT 10: REAL STORIES FROM A FREE SOUTH AFRICA**

The South African creative bunch have exhausted the political apartheid story. They are tired of it, sick of it... People are over that... They need to start telling stories about life in South Africa. That is the new aesthetic. That will get the new generation excited (Lee Hirsch, Director, *Amandla*, quoted in Vermeren 2006: 31).

In 2003, the SABC, NFVF and The Maurits Binger Film Institute in the Netherlands came together to create Project Ten, a series of documentaries celebrating ten years of democracy in South Africa. More than a collection of films, the project was meant to help nurture a new and more diverse generation of filmmakers, and encourage a shift from history and politics toward more in-depth personal narratives about the nation's transformation.

Thirteen proposals were selected to go through a rigorous workshop-based production process. A large team of trainers and consultants worked with the filmmakers extensively on everything from technology to production skills, story development, and feedback on rough cuts. The budget for each film was nearly double that of the average SABC commission and filmmakers were encouraged to spend significantly more time developing their projects and getting to know their subjects. "That was totally new to us," recalls filmmaker Zulfah Otto-Sallies. "That is part of why our doccies look the way they look is that they were shot over ten days because that was what [the SABC] allowed... I learned that when you have that kind of time to develop a project, it is so much richer and deeper" (Otto-Sallies 2006).

The project was not without its criticisms. Most notably, there were complaints about the selection of consultants and trainers, most of whom were American or European. Organizers have countered that this lack of African presence was tempered by concerted efforts to encourage the filmmakers to find their own voices and Otto-Sallies agrees with this assessment.

In the beginning the international thing bothered you. The question is always, where's the black trainers? But you gotta be realistic. At the time, there weren't a lot of people with that kind of skill and experience in the country... And people like Arne Bro, from the Danish Film School – I think those people no matter what colour they are or where they are, they will have impact because... he's about developing me. He's not about developing Danish film. He was all about finding your voice, your aesthetic, your way of telling things (Otto-Sallies 2006).

Certainly each of the Project Ten films has a distinctively personal feel, characterized by opening narration in which the filmmaker – in his or her own voice – provides a sense of what he or she set out to discover in making the film. All are observational in nature and very much driven by plot and character development.

Highlights include *Belonging*, a personal essay by Kethiwe Ngcobo about her struggle to find a place for herself in the New South Africa after growing up in Britain as the daughter of political émigrés. In *Meaning of the Buffalo*, Karin Slater provides a poetic and humorous account of her visit to a rural village, where she tries to unravel the mystery of why its people worship an animal many of them have never seen. *Hot Wax*, by director Andy Spitz, is a charming portrait of Ivy, an entrepreneurial black beautician whose wealthy white clients confide in her their deepest secrets and their diverse perspectives on the new South Africa. In *Umgidi*, filmmaker Sipho Singiswa prepares to undergo a delayed rite of passage ceremony while his younger brother refuses to participate, arguing that the tradition has no relevance to him as a modern, gay man.

Thanks in part to the large publicity surrounding the tenth anniversary of democracy, the series received a great deal of attention. The programs were widely screened locally and at some of the world's premiere film festivals, including Sundance, Hot Docs, the

Toronto International Film Festival and the Berlin Film Festival. The reaction of local audiences was mixed. Though the series was popular, the style and content of the films caught many by surprise. Unused to personal films and expecting a broader “factual” statement on the state of the nation, some criticized the series, arguing that South Africa should be making political films rather than giving voice to the “angst” of certain individuals.

Though the quality of the films is spotty, collectively they represent an important contribution to South African documentary. “A lot of the films are quite bumpy and have various issues,” says Executive Producer Steven Markowitz. “But as a training exercise, if one looks at where these people were before Project Ten and where they are now, it was very successful” (Markowitz 2006). Indeed, most of the filmmakers have gone on to create more and better films.

In the years since Project Ten’s release, an increasing number of filmmakers have been exploring personal subject matter and incorporating their own voice and opinions into their work, and audience expectations are following suit. This reflects a “catching up” with global documentary trends and also a realization of the ideals of a New South Africa -- one that supports diverse viewpoints and free speech as opposed to being told what to think.

The move toward more personal and subjective storytelling is also a step forward with regard to the politics of representation. Given the seemingly unavoidable tendency to filter the experiences of other people and cultures through their own lens, filmmakers in southern Africa – as elsewhere – are increasingly using modes of documentary that frame the text as personal experience, rather than objective fact. In films like *Ochre and Water* (Craig Matthew and Joelle Chesselet 2001), *Bushman’s Secret* (Rehad Desai 2006), and *A Kalahari Family* (John Marshall 2002), outsiders tell the stories of indigenous people, but in each case, the filmmaker has an active presence in the film and the narrative is cast as his own personal journey of discovery. In this way, the filmmakers seek to legitimize their outsider opinions by acknowledging them as such.

### **6.3.2 STEPS FOR THE FUTURE**

The Steps for the Future series merits considerable attention because it provides a successful model for social issues filmmaking in South Africa that adheres closely to Tomaselli and SACOD's ideals of "participatory/observational" filmmaking. One of the largest film projects ever produced in Africa, Steps brought together dozens of local and international filmmakers, broadcasters, consultants and NGOs to create 36 documentaries about life in Southern Africa in the wake of HIV/AIDS.<sup>81</sup> The initiative had three stated aims: "1) to produce a collection of documentaries and short films that examine the lives of people living in Southern Africa whose lives have been affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic; 2) to provide invaluable training to Southern African filmmakers with the support of some of the best filmmakers drawn from around the world; and 3) to distribute the films to regional AIDS organizations for use in AIDS education and training" (Day Zero 2003).<sup>82</sup>

Steps was spearheaded in South Africa by Day Zero Productions, a company founded and headed by longtime political activists and documentarians Don Edkins and Lawrence Dworkin. Recognizing the challenges of using documentary film as a political tool, Edkins and Dworkin took great care to ensure that the films would have a direct and measurable impact on the HIV/AIDS crisis. This effort encompassed all aspects of the project, including the design of the films themselves, as well as the significant outreach campaign that followed. A summary of the project's key strategic elements follows.

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<sup>81</sup> Steps Partners include: the Finnish Broadcasting Company/YLE2 Documentaries, Day Zero Film and Video, Government of Finland, Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation (SIDA), Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA), Department for International Development (DFID, UK), Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), Government of the Netherlands, The Soros Documentary Fund, Danish Film Institute, Swedish Film Institute, Norwegian Church Aid, One World Group of Broadcasters, The Open Society Institute of Southern Africa, UNESCO, International Youth Foundation, Southern Africa AIDS Information Dissemination (SAfAIDS), Spormedia Tollfilm, Zimbabwe Film and Video Training Project, European Documentary Network, Sithengi Film and TV Market, Film Resource Unit, Southern Africa Communications for Development (SACOD), SBS/Australia, SVT/Sweden, RTBF/Belgium, TV2/Denmark, NPS/Holland, NRK/Norway, YLE/Finland, ORF/Austria, WorldLink TV/USA TV Ontario/Canada, CBC/Canada, BBC/UK, ARTE/France – Germany, SABC/South Africa.

<sup>82</sup> For more information about the Steps series, see Day Zero Films, <http://www.steps.co.za>.

***Use of Strong Personal Narratives.*** Seeking to provide an alternative to “the scare tactics and didacticism of many public health broadcasts,” the Steps films center on strong, positive, personal narratives (Englehart, 2003: 73). The stories are predominantly observational in nature and contain no didactic overarching commentary. Narration is either used sparsely and presented in the subjective voice of the filmmaker or omitted altogether. This approach was driven in part by the producers’ desire for the series to serve as a catalyst for open dialogue about HIV/AIDS.

The Steps films aim to dispel existing stereotypes and provide a forum for those affected by HIV to discuss, debate and exchange information and opinions at an individual and community level... Unlike condom campaigns that aim to change people’s sexual practices, apparently with little effect, the Steps films focus on individual stories with the intention of eliciting emotional responses from viewers. The aim is to set in motion social change through individual transformation (Dworkin et al, 2003: 8-9).

***Local talent, International Support.*** The Steps series producers were adamant that the films had to be produced by local talent – both to ensure their appropriateness for local audiences and to leverage the project as an opportunity to develop the local industry. The selection and production process was therefore designed to combine local directorial talent with outside training and support (Edkins 2006).

A call for proposals was released at the South African International Film and TV Market (Sithengi) in 2000 seeking story ideas from local directors. A total of 200 proposals were received and through a series of workshops these were narrowed down to 40, which were selected for further development. Filmmakers whose projects were chosen were provided with a three-day master workshop covering all aspects of production. Additionally, a group of accomplished documentary professionals from 15 countries were brought on board to work with the filmmakers. While this practice generated some anticipated controversy about foreign influence over South African storytelling, the series producers and filmmakers alike have argued that it was critical to both the project’s success and the development of emerging local talent (Dworkin et al, 2003: 9). Steps Director Dumisani Phakathi contends, “I learned more in four months [through this process] than I ever could have learned at any university” (Phakathi 2007).

**Community Outreach.** In the tradition of development communication, Steps was committed to use-value first and foremost. While the films were screened widely on television and at film festivals throughout the world, the project's primary goal was to reach people affected by the disease in southern Africa. Project leaders therefore conceived an extensive HIV awareness campaign from the outset, which reached out to that audience through a variety of channels.

The entire Steps collection was distributed to NGOs, community centers, churches, youth organizations, health organizations, educational organizations and regional broadcasters throughout southern Africa. Selected films have been versioned into as many as 15 different languages, many of them African. A mobile screening unit was developed to bring the films to remote communities.<sup>83</sup> A facilitator's guide was produced for the series, which outlines key issues raised by individual films and questions for discussion. Finally and most importantly, dozens of facilitators were trained and dispatched to lead community screenings and discussion throughout southern Africa. Many of these facilitators continue to lead screenings today, years after the last Steps film was completed (Edkins 2006).

Held in a variety of locations ranging from church halls, to clinics, universities, private homes, and police stations, the Steps screenings are designed to facilitate discussion in areas where HIV/AIDS education is needed most. Format varies, but generally the screenings are led by the subjects of the films along with trained facilitators, and in some cases, the subjects themselves have been trained to facilitate.

Visual Anthropologists Susan Levine and Lucinda Englehart traveled to many of the Steps screenings to study their impact and each attests that the approach has been extremely effective. Englehart attributes this largely to the group viewing experience that the screenings create, noting that the "physical presence [of the subjects] before audience members often creates a critical relationship that seems to open up new and unusual opportunities for discussion and potentially for action" (2003: 74). Specifically, she observes that the opportunity to share fears about HIV and gain a sense of

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<sup>83</sup> The work of the mobile cinema unit in Lesotho and reactions of community audiences were documented in the follow-up Steps film, *Ask Me, I'm Positive* (Edkins, 2003).

community support often moves people to act (by getting an HIV test, seeking treatment, etc.), whereas they might not if they had merely watched one of the films in isolation. In addition, viewers who attended the community screenings commented that seeing “normal people” like themselves being confronted with HIV had a strong impact in terms of de-stigmatizing the disease (2003: 74).<sup>84</sup>

Levine makes a broader observation that the Steps series was significant because it was the first time many audiences had ever seen their own neighborhoods and their own language on video.

That was huge about the Steps series. It was the first time so many communities in Africa had seen themselves filmed... Being able to speak and ask questions about HIV was very directly linked to seeing people and landscapes that they recognized. All of a sudden, it was so real. We went back to Mozambique and everyone loved *A Miners Tale*.<sup>85</sup> They all said, “our neighbor had that story,” or “we had that story.” That was what was happening so it was such a validation (Levine 2008).

By all public accounts, the Steps program has proven exceptionally successful in reducing risk-taking behavior with regard to HIV/AIDS – a challenge that has thwarted many other forms of activism (Biella 2003: 3). Thus from a social impact standpoint, the Steps series can be viewed as a giant leap forward for documentarians and HIV activists alike.

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<sup>84</sup> One of the more illustrative case studies Englehart chronicles involves the film *Mother to Child* (Jane Lipman, 2001), a documentary about two pregnant women who are HIV positive. Englehart describes a screening at a pre-natal clinic in which the audience is comprised entirely of women who are pregnant – some of whom are HIV positive and others who have refused to be tested for fear that they might be infected. As the film demonstrates, testing is critical as HIV positive mothers can greatly reduce their chances of passing the disease on to their babies with preventative drugs. Englehart attests that after the screening she observed, the women who attended lined up for testing. Moreover, staff at the clinic claimed that the Steps program had “revolutionized the way women are responding to HIV” (Englehart 2003: 77-78).

<sup>85</sup> Directed by Rehad Desai, *A Miner's Tale* tells the story of a migrant laborer from Mozambique who has extramarital relationships while he is away working the mines and struggles to tell his wife that he has contracted HIV as a result.

**Filmmaker-Subject Collaboration.** The Steps films typically are not subject-generated, but neither do they adhere strictly to the practice of the “expert” filmmaker speaking on behalf of “marginalized” subjects. Englehart positions the films somewhere in between the old practice of ethnographic filmmaking and the newer movement toward collaborative and subject-made films.

Ideally, the Steps film narratives were developed in collaboration with the film subjects, but control of production was still with the directors, producers and editors whether they were seasoned professionals or first-timers. However – and this is the reason the *Steps* case-study is so interesting and deserves to be included in histories of media activism – through the Steps community outreach design, the real activism does not take place in the production process but in the screening rooms (2003: 73).

Englehart’s point is a critical one – one which suggests that collaboration need not be confined to the production process, but rather can and should extend to the distribution phase. This not only adheres to SACOD’s aims of consulting target communities in regards to distribution strategies, but also speaks to Ruby’s concerns about the limitations of collaborative filmmaking. Where subjects have the opportunity to travel with films, the degree of control they retain over the construction of their own representations is heightened considerably.

For subjects who act as facilitators at community screenings, the Steps outreach process generated several added positive outcomes including some material benefits (i.e. a paying job), as well as the pride of becoming leaders in their community. It also stands to reason that the subject/facilitators’ own level of awareness – and subsequently their health – has been improved through their participation in the program. This is supported by Englehart’s observation that they regularly draw comments from audiences and their communities about how “surprisingly” healthy they appear, despite their HIV status (2003: 81).

Naturally, the work the subject/facilitators do can at times be challenging. Many have discovered that coming out about their HIV status in such a public manner can be

difficult.<sup>86</sup> Yet on the whole, it appears that the Steps series generally passes the *Individual Rights vs. Public Good* test. That is to say that it has had a significant positive impact on public awareness and behavior, while the subjects generally agree that the benefits to their personal lives have outweighed the costs of revealing their HIV status.

On another level, Steps has had positive impacts on the South Africa documentary industry by significantly raising its international profile. The series injected a large number of high-quality films into the global market and was distributed widely and to much acclaim, thanks in part to the international partnerships that were secured from the project's inception. Moreover, in a departure from historical trends in social issues filmmaking in South Africa, the series made a concerted effort to present *positive* and empowered representations of Africans living with HIV/AIDS. This not only furthered the project's primary aim of de-stigmatizing the disease and opening up dialogue at home, but also served to counter negative patterns of African representation in the media elsewhere.

Finally, the success of Steps for the Future has served as a critical springboard for its umbrella organization known as STEPS (Social Transformation and Empowerment Projects). Income generated by the series has been reinvested in distribution, training, and new media projects based in southern Africa. The latest STEPS project, titled Steps for Democracy, was released in 2007 to even greater acclaim. Applying similar methodology to the subject of democracy as practiced throughout the world, Steps for Democracy produced several extremely successful films, including the Academy Award-winning *Taxi to the Dark Side* (Edkins, 2008).

Thus, the Steps team have not only proven the effectiveness of their approach to their worldwide partners but have also created a sustainable model for building the film industry in South Africa and elsewhere. The mere fact that the project is based in Cape

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<sup>86</sup> One subject named Joyce provides a useful case in point. After being raped and diagnosed with HIV in 1994, Joyce's story was documented in the Steps film *Tsoga* (Ramotoai, 2001). After the film was released and the outreach program was launched, members of Joyce's own community began accusing her of making the story up just to get a job as a facilitator, arguing that she looks too healthy to be HIV positive (Englehart 2003: 81).

Town has elevated the prestige of South African filmmaking and this in itself is a significant accomplishment.

### **6.3.3 BLACK ON WHITE: REVERSING THE LENS**

White people make films about black people; white people make films about white people; black people make films about black people; why are there no films made by black people about white people? (SABC1/Encounters 2003)

In 2003, the Encounters Lab, in partnership with the SABC, put out an innovative and controversial brief for a series called “Black on White.” The document read as follows:

We want six contemporary, challenging, provocative, humorous and subversive films about what black people actually feel and think about white people. We want six black writer/directors who have the courage to say that race matters in this country, and who can express these ideas using the different traditions and genres of documentary film.

We do not wish to prescribe the content of the films, nor do we know what to expect. What we do know is that there are untold stories—experiences, feelings, and thoughts – about race, which are not publicly expressed. We believe that Black on White is a vehicle for those expressions (SABC1/Encounters 2005).

Given the dramatic historical imbalance of white-on-black story-telling that exists throughout African and all of its negative impacts, Black on White could be considered a refreshing and long-overdue effort to redress the wrongs of the past. Yet in a country where “nonracial society” is the order of the day, the project was not received as such. Immediately the brief drew criticism from all sides. Some found the concept racist. Others suggested that it was patronizing to black filmmakers. The series was pitched to a number of broadcasters, all of which turned it down (Markowitz 2006).

Nonetheless, the Black on White series went forward. While the filmmakers selected were more experienced than their Project Ten counterparts, they also went through a similar series of intense workshops led by local and international filmmakers. Endless debates about issues of race, identity, and representation took place throughout this process, and ultimately the films succeed in rising above the project's critics to present a series of reasonably objective, thought-provoking insights about race and racial attitudes in South Africa.

Vincent Moloi's *Men of Gold* is an empathetic portrait of two white faux jewelry sellers working the streets of Johannesburg to support their drug habit. The film contains a powerful reflexive moment when, well into the narrative, Moloi first speaks to his subjects from behind the camera and his own racial identity is revealed. The sudden revelation that this film about poor white drug-addicts is being produced by a black man creates a jarring moment for the viewer. That moment soon gives way to enlightenment, because of course, the only reason *Men of Gold's* premise feels jarring is that audiences are so accustomed to seeing the opposite: poor, black individuals documented by white filmmakers. When, toward the end of the film, Moloi buys Leonard a new suit in an effort to help him turn his life around, one can't help but once again be struck by this unusual role reversal.

Rehad Desai's *Heart of Whiteness* is a journey film that explores what it means to be white in the New South Africa. Desai's quest leads him to the infamous town of Orania, founded by a group of Afrikaner purists in 1990 and to this day an exclusively white community. Desai's stance is angrier than some of the other filmmakers, and the characters he meets on his journey create an unflattering picture of white South Africa's racial attitudes. But he softens after he arrives in the "heart of whiteness" and is greeted with surprising warmth and openness. Here again, any instinct toward criticism has the power to encourage reflection about role reversals and the importance of hearing both sides of South Africa's racial story.

Sipho Singiswa's *Inja Yomlungu!/White Man's Dog!* takes a more light-hearted approach by examining the "curious" relationship white people have with their dogs. Noting the popular South African perception that white people have more respect for their pets than for black people, Singiswa attributes their attachment to pets to a breakdown in

community or “ubuntu.” It’s an interesting perspective, albeit one that white audiences may have a hard time accepting. But this perhaps is part of the point: in a country characterized by diverse perspectives, all have a right to be heard.

The films have generally been well received, with *Men of Gold* winning the audience award at the 2006 Encounters Film Festival. Certainly they have sparked a great deal of debate in South Africa and elsewhere, and the training, support and networking opportunities provided to the filmmakers have given an added boost to some already rising stars. While some of the programs have been criticized for oversimplifying the culture and attitudes of white South Africans, one can’t help but think that this must be exactly the reaction black audiences have had to films made about them by white filmmakers for ages. This, ironically, may be the most potent insight the Black on White series has to offer.

#### **6.4 THE CURRENT STATE OF TRANSFORMATION**

Despite the challenges, a new generation of black documentary filmmakers is emerging in South Africa. Many of the directors previously cited in this study have already created substantial bodies of work. Rehad Desai has produced several films of note, including the highly successful *Born Into Struggle* (2004), which reflects on his father’s career as a political activist and the strain this placed on this family, and *Bushman’s Secret* (2006), which investigates the exploitation of the San Bushmen by international pharmaceutical companies. Sipho Singiswa followed up on his success in both Project Ten and Black on White with an interesting film called *Chasing the Ancestors*, in which he and his wife and filmmaking partner, Gillian Schutte, take a road trip along the path where their ancestors fought each other in the Dutch/Xhosa wars 300 years ago. Vincent Moloi has produced several documentaries including *I am a Rebel* (2003), a portrait of the well known poet and activist Dennis Brutus and the more recent *A Pair of Boots and a Bicycle* (2007), which is his most technically and aesthetically sophisticated film to date.

Others include Dumisani Phakathi, who in many ways epitomizes the popular ideal of transformation in South African documentary film. Born in a poor, rural area, he has become one of South Africa’s best known documentary directors. His films reflect his heritage, capturing subcultures and experiences that are familiar to the majority of South Africans and enlightening to the rest of the world. In *Rough Ride* (1999), Phakathi

explores the history of the taxi industry in South Africa, celebrating the characters who pioneered the concept and the subculture that has grown around it. In the Steps film *Wa'n Wina/Sincerely Yours* (2001), he revisits the rural area where he grew up and engages old friends in conversation about love, relationships and HIV. In *Don't F--- with me, I have 52 Brothers and Sisters* (2006) – Phakathi's most personal film yet – he embarks on a journey to meet his many long lost siblings and come to terms with the ghosts of his father and their distant relationship.

Khalo Matabane, another of South Africa's more celebrated filmmakers of the moment, takes an entirely different approach. Determined to defy the expectations of a public that would have him make traditional films about his roots, he instead creates films that take risks and experiment with form. As Matabane explains:

I know what is expected from African filmmakers. I could make a story about a woman being raped in Soweto or a woman with HIV. I grew up in a rural area. I could go back and do a simple film about stuff in the rural area, going to fetch water every day. And I know Europeans will praise me and think I'm great. I could do those kinds of films but I've chosen not to. I'm trying to be complex (quoted in Vermeren 2006: 69).

Matabane is, without a doubt, one filmmaker whose work is deeply rooted in the history, politics, and theory of cinema. Many of his aesthetic choices stem from an understanding of the colonialization of cinema and a desire to break with Western conventions.

The mainstream American image of the world has a very strong hold on people... It's so hard to oppose it. You see it even in the work of the most progressive filmmakers. It's so strong...The audience around the world is colonized by the images put out by Hollywood. When you oppose those images, when you try to do something new, to try to say something, the resistance is huge (quoted in Matthews 2006: 1).

Matabane has indeed encountered some resistance to his often experimental methods, particularly in his home country. Yet it is the same willingness to experiment that seems

to garner attention for his work overseas. In *Love in a Time of Sickness* (2001), Matabane constructs an entire 26-minute film using only a dinner scene in which he tells the story of a woman he once dated, intercut with segments of on-camera interview in which he reflects on his dating history. The film is difficult to watch in some respects, but a delayed reveal in which the woman in Matabane's story discloses her HIV positive status packs quite a punch. His more recent film, *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* (2005) moves beyond inward explorations of South Africa's psyche to examine the nation's new role as a destination for refugees from neighboring countries in turmoil. An awkward blend of narrative and documentary, the film has been screened widely on the international festival circuit to some acclaim, despite its rough edges. However, according to Matabane, in South Africa, the film was "dismissed" by critics who said it was "undeveloped" and "this isn't how films are made" (quoted in Matthews 2006: 1). More recently however, Matabane has achieved great success at home with his new drama series *When we were Black* (2008). Produced for SABC1, it was the most highly lauded program at the South African Film and Television Awards, taking home the prize for best tv drama and best director in tv drama, among others.

For emerging and established voices like these, opportunities are relatively abundant. The task of funding documentary films is never easy – in any country or for any filmmaker. Yet in South Africa at least, a need for more diverse voices has been identified, and broadcasters and funders alike are looking to support transformation. "There are obviously problems," argues Johannesburg Producer Neil Brandt. "But the fact is that there are a lot of young first-time black filmmakers who are making films. It's easier for a first-time filmmaker to get his or her film on television here than it is in Europe or in America" (Brandt 2006).

While this appears to be true, it is equally true that the number of successful black filmmakers working in South Africa remains disappointingly low. Given the barriers of audience development, education, and economics outlined earlier, too few aspiring black filmmakers find a way into the industry and stand poised to take advantage of the opportunities available. This notion is substantiated by the NFVF, which reports having difficulty meeting its diversity targets. The organization has launched efforts to combat the problem including a recently created Indigenous Language Film Contest that awards production funds to black directors, and an inter-provincial committee that is

investigating ways to help stimulate growth in underserved rural areas (Son 2006). Yet it will take a far greater sustained effort to combat this, transformation's biggest hurdle.

Retention also remains a concern. Many of the aforementioned directors straddle the worlds of documentary, fiction, and television work – for reasons both economic and personal. It remains to be seen whether they will follow the path of predecessors like Zola Maseko (*The Life and Times of Sarah Baartman* 1998, *Drum* 2005) to find success in the feature film world and leave documentaries behind. Already, many promising documentary directors of this generation have been recruited into managerial positions, their filmmaking careers cut short by economic pressures and the larger demands of the system.

Thus the industry's foothold on transformation remains tenuous. Concerns about this are exacerbated by the fact that even when black directors succeed in making their own films, they are typically forced to rely on white-owned companies for production equipment and facilities, as well as funding. Many argue that a true diversity of South African voices will not be heard until white hegemony is broken and black filmmakers can produce films on their own terms, with their own resources.

## **6.5 WHITE ON BLACK: THE CASE FOR SUBJECT EMPOWERMENT**

I am told constantly that I have no right to make films about black people. I have a fear that I won't be able to make films here in the future. Or maybe I'll have to work more for foreign TV. There's a lot of politics and as black filmmakers become more confident and more prolific and so on, I see a lot of older filmmakers becoming tutors and things. I can do that. But my passion is making films. (Liz Fish, Director, *The Long Journey of Clement Zulu*, 2006)

Some have argued that white filmmakers have no business making films in The New South Africa. After decades of benefiting from a corrupt regime, they should now step

aside and focus their efforts on supporting a new generation of black filmmakers whose voices have yet to be heard. Some of the older generation have done just that.<sup>87</sup>

Others argue that in a nonracial society, this line of thinking is not productive. Apartheid may have prevented white filmmakers from accurately knowing or representing black culture in the past, but in an era of democracy, where people of different races and classes can mix freely, this no longer need be the case. “I would like to believe that we live in a world where those things matter less,” says Lee Hirsch, the (white, American) director of *Amandla*. “I don’t think that stories are to be told by the people that are part of the story. We live in a world where, if your heart is in the right place... it doesn’t matter who you are” (quoted in Maes 2006: 35).

Indeed, signs of progress in this regard are appearing. In 2000, brothers Craig and Damon Foster released *The Great Dance*, a remarkable documentary about the hunting skills of the San Bushmen. One year later, Craig Matthew and Joelle Chesselet completed *Ochre and Water*, about the encroachment of Western civilization on the lives of the Himba of Namibia. The socioeconomic gulfs between the makers of these films and their subjects were enormous. Yet the resulting films (the latter is described in detail in the following chapter) provide relatively authentic and reverential portraits of indigenous communities. They are among the most highly respected documentaries ever produced in South Africa. This success is the result of many years of relationship building and collaboration, including screenings of footage for the subjects, who in turn provided input – a process that helped gain the trust and understanding of the characters and enable them to more fully contribute to the finished productions.

As noted earlier, this type of collaborative methodology has been commonplace in the making of anthropological films for some time. More recently, similar “democratic” methods of filmmaking are being applied to all manner of documentaries in South Africa. In effect, the collaborative spirit pioneered by Lionel Rogosin in 1959 and further developed by Liz Fish in 1992 is being taken to a new level. Francois Verster’s *The*

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<sup>87</sup> Don Edkins and Lawrence Dworkin of Day Zero Productions are one very high-profile example. In addition to executive producing both *Steps* series’, the pair engage in a wide variety of mentoring projects.

*Mother's House* (2006) represents a culmination of sorts in this regard and is therefore the subject of the final chapter in this study.

## **6.6 CONCLUSION**

This chapter has outlined several issues that affect racial transformation in South Africa's documentary film industry. Ultimately, these can be reduced to the same basic factors required for transformation throughout the nation at large: time, money and collaboration. The foundations of a democratic and functional independent film industry have only existed in South Africa for roughly ten years. Many of the current generation of filmmakers have been making films for less than a decade. It will be decades still before the emergence of the first generation of South Africans to grow up with the benefit of exposure to a diverse documentary culture, sufficient training opportunities, and a more equitable society.

In many respects, the level of diversity that has been achieved in this time and under the circumstances is impressive. Yet local filmmakers who have traveled overseas and mingled with their international counterparts note that the South African documentary film industry is distinguished by its impatience. Where filmmakers elsewhere expect to spend ten years or more working toward their first film, South Africans "want it now."

There isn't a culture of sacrifice. You don't have filmmakers doing internships. You don't have filmmakers going to film school. A young black director declares himself a director before he or she is willing to work their way up the system the way you would in other places.... There is not a real culture for suffering to make your film (Lee Hirsch, quoted in Maes 2006: 36).

After years of struggle, it is understandable there should be hunger for change. Still it must be noted that documentary film is a uniquely complex industry – one that requires a great deal of time, training, funding and sacrifice, with little or no profit. Consequently, it is an industry in which the barriers to entry are high throughout the world.

More than anything, cultivating a more diverse documentary industry will require progress in the larger economic sphere. As long as bright young South Africans are unable to afford the cost of a tertiary education or driven toward more lucrative careers as a means of lifting themselves and their families out of poverty... and as long as funding for documentaries remains scarce... the industry will struggle in its efforts to transform.

In the shorter term, what can and is being achieved is a great transformation in the means by which South African documentary filmmakers approach their subjects. The next and final three chapters will examine three of the most successful (commercially and otherwise) documentaries produced in South Africa during the past five years. Each employs a different set of documentary modes/strategies described in within this study. One of these films was produced by a black, South African filmmaker who is a member of the community being documented, while the other two were produced by white “outsider” filmmakers. One is predominantly observational, while the other two are participatory and reflexive. My goal in selecting these three films is to provide a diverse set of case studies, which collectively illustrate most if not all of the “best practices” for South African documentary outlined in this study, and a basis for comparison of these different approaches.

# CHAPTER 7

## SUBJECTIVITY, REFLEXIVITY AND OUTSIDER STORYTELLING IN *OCHRE AND WATER: HIMBA CHRONICLES FROM THE LAND OF THE KAOKO*

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### 7.1 BACKGROUND

Full of artistry, humanity and scientific accuracy, *Ochre and Water* is a lucid meditation on those thorny issues of development, post-colonialism and culture. It is the kind of film that can - and should - be watched over and over. Anywhere. (Sonnekus, 2002<sup>88</sup>)

In the wake of both the crisis of representation and the end of apartheid, white South African filmmakers are finding the practice of documenting indigenous people increasingly difficult, both politically and aesthetically. Craig Matthew and Joelle Chesselet's *Ochre and Water: Himba Chronicles from the Land of Kaoko* (2001) stands out as a rare case in which two white filmmakers have produced a documentary about indigenous people that has won praise from mainstream viewers, the documentary industry, and environmental and indigenous rights organizations alike.

The film tells the story of the Himba, an indigenous tribe of nomadic cattle herders living in northwestern Namibia. The focus is on their efforts to oppose a hydroelectric dam development that threatens their pastoral way of life. Like many indigenous African tribes, the Himba have close ties to the land. The dam would destroy not only their food source but also hundreds of ancestral graves along the banks of the Cunene River, which are central to their culture. *Ochre and Water* is described by the filmmakers as a classic "David and Goliath" tale in which the Himba take on the forces of Western development, using their own traditions of oral discussion as a powerful weapon.

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<sup>88</sup> Quoted in *Sense Africa*. (See [http://www.senseafrica.com/other\\_creations/Doxa/Ochre.html](http://www.senseafrica.com/other_creations/Doxa/Ochre.html). Last accessed July 2007.)

### 7.1.1 DUAL IDENTITY: DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION MEETS ETHNOGRAPHY

*Ochre and Water's* ability to engage multiple audiences lies partly in the fact that it functions on two distinct levels. On one level, it is a social issues film with a distinct development communication agenda. Here the goal is to raise awareness of the proposed dam and its potential harms. In a broader sense, the film also serves as a cautionary tale about globalism and the encroachment of Western development on indigenous cultures. On yet another level, the film functions as an ethnography of sorts. Because the argument against the dam hinges on the importance of preserving Himba culture, Matthew and Chesselet have taken great pains to explain Himba culture in a way that enables the Western viewer to appreciate its value. As a result, the film has sparked interest among ethnographers and is often used in anthropological classrooms.

In order to accommodate this dualism, Matthew and Chesselet have applied a unique mix of methodologies. The filmmakers have clearly brought to bear extensive knowledge of the history and theory of ethnographic film in an effort to make the film authentic. At the same time, they were determined to make a film that would be palatable to mainstream audiences, as opposed to merely students and anthropologists (as is so often the case with films that adhere to rigid ethnographic standards). According to Matthew, this necessitated a series of carefully considered compromises.

I'm interested in what Rouch and others did, but I was interested in breaking the rules on both sides. I felt that I was sort of bridging these two worlds – the film world and the academic/ethnography world... Because, you can take it to the extreme – there's a whole argument about close-ups and wide shots which go back to Rouch and those guys, which are interesting, but you have to take it with a pinch of salt because you want to make a film that people are really going to watch outside of an academic environment. You must use film language, and have the texture and the layers and the cutaways you need. You must

compromise. You can't be such a purist that you lose the language of filmmaking because of theoretical constructs.<sup>89</sup>

This approach results in a film with a rare mix of ethnographic integrity, entertainment value, and use value. Herein lies the reason *Ochre and Water* merits significant attention in this study.

### 7.1.2 ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

*Ochre and Water's* hybrid methodology is made possible by the varied experiences of its makers. Directors Craig Matthew and Joelle Chesselet both have long histories of documenting environmental and social issues in southern Africa. During the last decade of apartheid, both covered the Struggle for the international news media – Matthew as a cameraman, Chesselet as a journalist. As apartheid drew to a close, they transitioned into documentary filmmaking and later founded a production company they named Doxa Productions. The company moniker reveals much about its founders' political motivations – alluding to both the changing zeitgeist in South Africa and global trends away from absolutist representations and toward hybridized notions of identity.

The word Doxa, which means the people's version or the common sensibility, was chosen as our "brand" name because in Ancient Greek it distinguished itself from both the religious and the scientific realms, dogma and truth. In apartheid South Africa, freedom of thought was jammed between ideology and religion. The word Doxa signified, and still does signify to us, the gift of space and legitimacy for the expression of the experience of individuals and its understanding through communication. The challenge for us is to make what is being said and sensed in the scientific, sociological and spiritual realms part of "the Doxa" using art – and in this case, making multimedia as a bridge.<sup>90</sup>

Doxa has produced several political documentaries, including *This Crazy Thing Called Grace* (1997) about Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Truth and Reconciliation

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<sup>89</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotes included in this chapter and attributed to Craig Matthew were drawn from my own 2008 interview with the filmmaker.

<sup>90</sup> This quote appears on the Doxa Productions website. See <http://www.doxa.co.za>.

Commission and *Lifelines of Western Namibia* (1995), which documents threats to the delicate eco-systems of rivers in the Namibian desert. With the latter project, the filmmakers established a successful model for using documentary film as a tool for social change. By producing the film in collaboration with a steering committee comprised of various stakeholders, they were able to draw attention to the issue of water conservation in Namibia, while building a network of political allies and an effective methodology that would prove instrumental for *Ochre and Water*.

In addition to the pair's background in political filmmaking, Matthew has extensive experience working as a cinematographer for environmental and ethnographic films. Of particular note is his experience working with ethnographic filmmaker John Marshall on the acclaimed series *A Kalahari Family*. Matthew credits Marshall with having a strong influence on his work.

Marshall's work was diametrically opposed to the fast news business and also generally to the broadcast environment where documentaries are seen as a kind of product. The way he shot his stuff wasn't so much about the product as recording particular things and subjects and just following them. That really interested me because suddenly it opened up a whole lot of other areas artistically and intellectually... I became much more interested in following particular subjects over a long period of time where the process became more important than the end product. So I started following several different subjects – the Himba being one, the Bushmen being another and just politics here generally, like the TRC, being a third. I stuck to several threads and over time as things came up I would go out and do more shooting around these particular subjects.

It was this process of "following particular subjects" that ultimately led to the making of *Ochre and Water*. In addition, Matthew's experience with Marshall sparked an interest in ethnographic filmmaking and the film bears the distinct imprint of his studies in this area.

### 7.1.3 PROJECT HISTORY

Matthew and Chesselet's connection to the Himba dates back to the late eighties, when the pair first made a documentary about local elephant and rhino poaching regulations that affected the Himba community. Their interest in the Cunene Dam Scheme took root in 1994, when the Swedish International Development Agency hired the team to produce a series of "Dispatches from the Cunene," which collectively documented the details of a feasibility study and environmental impact assessment of the proposed project.<sup>91</sup>

The opportunity came about because I heard there was this issue around trying to build a dam up in the area. I wouldn't have necessarily chosen that as my way into the [Himba] story, but because it was an issue, I felt it was a way I could raise money to go up and film there. I'd heard that the Swedes had funded the feasibility study so we approached the Swedish embassy and said to them, 'you've got an accountability because the study is technical, economic, social and environmental. And if it's to be done in an honest and open way, you not only need to do those studies but you need to make them public.' So we convinced them [to commission] dispatches that would be made available to the public broadcaster free of charge. The contract with them was to deliver certain finished products, but I would be able to keep the material.

In making the dispatches, the filmmakers again collaborated with a steering committee consisting of stakeholders, which ranged from the Ministry of Mines and Energy and Ministry of Water Affairs to Earthlife Africa and the Department of Nature Conservation. Each of the stakeholders participated in the production of the videos through online

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<sup>91</sup> The *Dispatches from the Cunene* series is comprised of the following four titles: *Milestones* (a brief chronology of the feasibility study and the environmental impact assessment into the Epupa Hydropower Dam Scheme); *Data, Development and Technology* (about the technical processes of the feasibility study and the context of the Namibian economy); *Impacts on the River Wild* (a journey along the river from catchment to mouth which examines impacts on flora, fauna and landscapes); and *Memory, Landscape and the River* (an overview of the complex social impacts that the proposed scheme could have on the people who will be most directly affected).

script reviews and/or in-person rough cut screenings and discussion. The dispatches were then distributed to environmental organizations, indigenous people's organizations, universities, and members of the public. They were also broadcast on Namibian television just before the final public hearing of the feasibility study (Matthew and Chesselet 2000).

In 1997, with the feasibility study and the environmental impact assessment complete, the Cunene Film Project came to a close. Matthew and Chesselet then began developing plans for an hour-long documentary that would use the footage they'd acquired through the feasibility study project and expand it to reach a wider audience in a more aesthetically satisfying format. With this in mind, Matthew continued to return to Namibia regularly to follow up on developments with the proposed dam and in the Himba community.

## **7.2 PROCESS**

By the time post-production of *Ochre and Water* was complete, the production team had spent a total of seven years documenting the Himba. Matthew, who conducted all of the shoots, developed particularly strong ties with the community and the level of understanding this afforded him proved to be integral to the film's success.

### **7.2.1 ACCESS AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING**

The relationship-building process was a long and arduous one, given the limitations of time, geography and funding, as well as the significant cultural divides that had to be bridged. Initially tied to the feasibility study coordinators, it took Matthew many months to branch out and begin making personal connections among the Himba. He attributes his ability to make inroads with the community partly to the fact that he was seen as an advocate with regard to the dam. "A couple of the headmen had been overseas several times with these NGOs... so they understood television, they understood the power of the camera," he recalls. "Not many other people understood, but obviously because the headman gives me that power and he understands, that respect filters down to the community." This appreciation was augmented by the many services he provided to the Himba during his visits. Like many ethnographers who conduct long-term research in the field, Matthew was obliged to play any number of roles, from doctor and pharmacist

to taxi-driver and fetcher of water. Though he is forthright about the many favors he did for the community during his shoots – and even alludes to this aspect of the relationship in the film – Matthew contends that he was extremely strict when it came to questions of reverse-exploitation.

They tried to exploit me all the time but I'm quite hard core with that. Some people who came up with me were a bit shocked because you come up there as a sort of lefty do-gooder and they're all so beautiful and people bend over backwards and sort of become their slaves and they will exploit you and push you as far as they can. That's a part of African culture for me. They will push it. I think I've become quite hardened, having had to shoot things like famine and war. But people respect you when you do put your foot down and have rules. It's also my culture that you've got to respect me. And I have to draw the line because I've got my work to do. I think there was an understanding there.

### **7.2.2 TRANSLATING CULTURE**

While time spent and favors procured enabled Matthew to gain access and build a relationship with the Himba, achieving a true understanding of their culture would require considerably more effort. One important step was to form a collaborative relationship with a German anthropologist who had been living among the Himba and studying them for years. Even more important was the relationship he formed with a Himba named Cornelius Mukuema Tjuma, whom he hired as a translator.

Cornelius is a classic example of a young Himba boy growing up in Angola. Through a leg injury he ended up at a South African military hospital and that led him to become more involved in Western culture. Inevitably what happens is that these guys get missionised... So he's a classic example of someone who bridges that world of tradition and modernity. And he was a great character to work with. He's not just a translator. He's a million things. Through his eyes, I started to see the world in a completely different way.

For instance, there's a thing called the mopane tree, which is one of the dominant species. As a Westerner, you've got this way of labeling things, but you know nothing. Suddenly the mopane tree becomes hugely important because it has dozens of practical, medicinal and ritual uses, and so just one element like that becomes charged with a whole lot of other meanings. By traveling with Cornelius and working together, all the veils and the meanings of these things became more and more evident.

Various subtle details are embedded in the film (including the appearance and use of mopane trees), which speak to Matthew's deep understanding of the culture. "It's things like that, which might not be didactically explained in the film, but I am aware of them," he says. "I feel that that authenticity, even if it is unconscious to most viewers, comes through in subtle ways."

### **7.2.3 BEING THERE: THE OPEN-ENDED APPROACH**

One critical lesson that Matthew took from his experiences working with John Marshall and applied to the making of *Ochre and Water* was the importance of "just being there" – a term he uses to describe the ethnographic approach to filming, which involves long hours of observation with little sense of what might unfold before the camera. "I think that was my most important lesson with John," Marshall recalls. "He used to say, 'Yes Craig, but you've just got to be there.' John would sit at the village all day and roll 20 hours of tape and nothing would happen. You can't take it to those extremes [as a filmmaker] but it was enlightening."

This approach stands in stark contrast to the world of broadcast documentaries, in which narratives are typically pre-conceived, scripts are written, shoots are planned to fit into tight schedules, and scenes are often set up. However, as a result of his background in television news, Matthew was already accustomed to working quickly with a handheld camera to capture unscripted action. He was therefore able to work in a way that was quite different from what he refers to as "the National Geographic approach." In the tradition of direct cinema, he avoided set-ups, interviews, and instigating action, and instead captured events as they unfolded without an agenda or even a sense of how they might later be used. In addition, thanks to the commissioning of the *Dispatches*

from *Cunene*, Matthew found himself in a position to spend long periods of time filming the Himba without a script or an agenda. “I had to make sure I was covering enough of the hard material to do the dispatches and fulfill my contract, he explains, “but at the same time, I had huge amounts of time and the luxury of just being there.” Seven years and 250 hours of footage later, Matthew found himself with an arduous task in the edit room. Nonetheless, he credits this open-ended approach with enabling him to stumble onto some of the film’s most critical moments.<sup>92</sup>

In the early days you would find something that seemed very banal and unimportant and only later the next day the penny would drop and you would see that it was actually very important and you missed it because you were too lazy to pick up your camera. There’s no way you can teach those things to a student. It’s just that constant training of not having those preconceived notions of what you are going to hear.

For me, the film started to fall together with these very symbolic moments – moments you don’t have to narrate because they say everything you want to say about a particular aspect of the story... Some of these things seemed so banal at the time, but take on such importance as the story unfolds. It’s really that thing of watching a situation unfolding in front of you and you never stop rolling. That’s John Marshall.

#### **7.2.4 COLLABORATION**

Filmmaker-subject collaboration was extremely limited in the making of *Ochre and Water*, a point which hearkens back to theoretical discussions presented in chapter four. Certainly it can be argued that the Himba worked with the filmmakers on some levels. Tjiuna in particular played a critical role in lending an insider’s perspective to the film, albeit indirectly. In addition, various other members of the Himba community provided in-depth translations of ceremonies and daily activities filmed in their community over the years. However, when it came to sharing editorial control and creative decision-making, Matthew contends that neither the Himba nor the filmmakers wanted to engage in a

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<sup>92</sup> Several pivotal scenes in the film emerged from this practice, including the burial and baptism scenes that are discussed later in this chapter.

collaborative process.

I'm not into collaboration. I'm the author of the film. Without being patronizing, [the Himba's] terms of reference were such that... that's sort of an academic folly for me. In fact, when I made the feasibility films, I gathered the headmen into one of the lodges and I showed them to them, but again without being patronizing, it was the kind of thing where everyone screams with laughter when they see themselves in the film. It's not that I'm not interested but I'm very realistic about what those relationships are about... I am an advocate because I am concerned that the dam would destroy their lives. But I'm not going down that road of giving everyone a say.

This stance may appear troublesome in light of the many arguments in favor of collaborative filmmaking and “shared anthropology.” However, Pryluck's commentary about the limitations of collaboration also ring true in this case. Genuine collaboration is difficult to achieve if filmmaker and subject do not have equal knowledge of the medium and all that it entails; it is nearly impossible to achieve when working with an indigenous community that has very little interaction with or interest in film and video.<sup>93</sup> In this case, the amount of training that would be required in order for the members of the Himba community in question to achieve a level of parity with the filmmakers was surely beyond the aims and means of both parties.

With this pardon comes one important caveat: whereas collaboration absolves filmmakers from a certain measure of ethical responsibility toward their subjects with regard to the pitfalls of informed consent and uncertain outcomes, Matthew and Chesselet would have no such recourse. The decision to forego collaboration (if in fact it can be characterized as a decision) placed an additional burden on the filmmakers to cultivate a genuine understanding of the culture and to create a representation that is both accurate and respectful.

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<sup>93</sup> While some Himba certainly interact with the mainstream media, it can be said that the community on which *Ochre and Water* focuses does not. Thus any Himba with media expertise who might have been recruited to collaborate on the project would not really qualify as having insider status vis-à-vis the true subject matter.

## 7.3 ANALYSING THE FILM

### 7.3.1 SUBJECTIVITY AND REFLEXIVITY

The fundamental conclusion of Ruby's seminal work, *Picturing Culture* (2000), is that ethnographic films should be produced as reflexive narratives in which the maker tells the story of his or her experiences in the field. "Within this tale," he argues, "the methods employed, the underlying theoretical assumptions and relevant components of the ethnographer's persona would need to be revealed" (266). This is precisely the approach employed in *Ochre and Water*. One might attribute this to Matthew's knowledge of ethnographic film theory, but it is probably tied even more closely to his involvement with Marshall's *A Kalahari Family* – the most high-profile example of personal/reflexive ethnography to emerge in the past decade.

*A Kalahari Family* is both an ethnographic study of the Kalahari Bushmen and a deeply personal account of Marshall's own life experiences. It opens with Marshall's first encounters with the Bushmen as the child of well-known anthropologists and chronicles the changes that have taken place in the region in the decades since. Much of this change can be attributed to the encroachment of Western civilization – a process in which the Marshall family unwittingly colluded, since they were among the first to draw attention to the region and build roads that would pave the way for outside visitors. Throughout the narrative, Marshall openly reveals the complex web of relationships among himself, the bushmen, the land, and the powers of Western development that are threatening the Bushmen's way of life.

Matthew and Chesselet have applied a strikingly similar approach to their subject matter in *Ochre and Water*. Indeed, the fact that Matthew worked as a cinematographer on the *Kalahari Family* series can hardly be seen as a coincidence. *Ochre and Water* is likewise told as a subjective tale narrated in the first-person and couched in Matthew's own impressions of and experiences with the Himba. In addition, it deals with the broader theme of Western encroachment on indigenous culture.

According to Matthew, the filmmakers did not initially intend to include his voice in the film. However, it became apparent during the editing phase that the first-person

narration would be required to flesh out the narrative and address certain “postmodern issues.”

I never planned up until a very late stage to include my voice in the film... but in consultation with Joelle and the editor – who was very important in this – I realized toward the end that there was no way around this. Ninety percent of the time, I wasn’t able to get the documentary to talk for itself through the Himba. So you are constantly in this dilemma of, ‘how am going to get a narrative in this thing that doesn’t just deaden it from the word go?’ I find that it’s a problem in all documentaries. You can watch the high-end stuff from Attenborough because there is so much eye candy. But there’s a small percentage of documentaries that work very well because of the limits of how you build a narrative structure. All of these things create more and more distance between the subject, the filmmaker and ultimately the viewer...

Also, there are all these issues around deconstructionism and postmodernism and you are in the film... I think if the viewer is aware from the beginning of a real person behind the camera – not just a “director” – so that the camera itself is a character, is a real person, then suddenly that all falls into place. It just became obvious that that was really where it was all going because that completed everything.

The filmmakers’ desire to frame the story in subjective terms is firmly established at the film’s outset. *Ochre and Water* opens with a short sequence depicting a Himba seer’s dreams about the future destruction of his culture by the dam scheme. Immediately thereafter, Matthew introduces the premise of the film in voiceover:

*This is the story of a journey I made as a filmmaker from South Africa. It’s about the damming of the Cunene River for electricity. It’s about the 7000 Himba herders who base their lives on either side of the river. In small family groups, they follow the pasture that springs up in these semi-desert planes. For centuries, the herders have buried their dead in sacred graves that the dam will flood. My guides through the homesteads*

*and gravesites in the land of Kaoko are Himbas, like Katjira, the seer and storyteller....*

*...For the next seven years, I will visit the Himba frequently to make a unique record of their struggle and witness a people dismissed as backward confront enormous national and international forces.*

Here, Matthew has immediately cast the film's narrative as a subjective one, acknowledging openly that the Himba have guided him and aligning himself with their cause. His voiceover is not presented as the omnipotent, all-knowing voice-of-god, but neither is he cast as a mere outsider without qualifications. The specifics of his relationship and the significant time he has invested in studying the issue at hand are laid out for the viewer so that he or she might decide just how qualified the film's representations might be.

Throughout the film, Matthew's voiceover continues to lay bare much of his methodology and his own underlying assumptions – for better and for worse. This includes references to his own biases (as shaped both by both his Western upbringing and by his personal relationship to the Himba), the nature of his interactions with the community and the ways in which the experience of making the film have further shaped his mindset. The sum total of these references help to reveal what Ruby would term “relevant components of the ethnographer's persona,” which enable the viewer to interpret the film's assertions with an appropriate measure of qualification.

This self-reflexive narration is supplemented by the film's many reflexive observational moments, which continually remind the viewer of the mediated nature of the film and further illuminate the relationship between filmmaker and filmed. This pattern is also established during the film's opening, in which Matthew explains in voiceover how Katjira dreamt of the dam and of his arrival. The scene includes a wide shot of Katjira in which a shadow of Matthew and his camera is plainly visible at the seer's side. While Matthew contends that the filming of his own shadow was not intentional at the time, the decision to use the shot and others like in the edit was very much a conscious one aimed at building a measure of self-reflexivity into the film.



Figure 7.1: A Himba woman looks directly into Matthew's camera lens.

This practice continues throughout the film and includes various other moments in which the Himba directly address the camera and/or make references to the filmmaker. While these moments continually remind us of the general presence of the filmmaker and the ways in which that presence inevitably alters the Himba's behavior, other observational moments clarify the relationships between filmmaker and filmed. Members of the Himba community ask Matthew for a ride to a meeting or help fetching water, some come to visit him in a hut presumed to be his local dwelling, and so on.

It is worth noting here that the filmmakers have managed to avoid the two most common pitfalls of reflexive filmmaking: disruption of the narrative and self-indulgence.<sup>94</sup> The risk

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<sup>94</sup> C.f. page 48 of this study and Ruby (2000) in which he argues, "To remind the audience of the constructive and interpretive nature of images is regarded by some as counterproductive, if not actually destructive, to the nature of the film experience – that is, to the creation of an illusion of reality. Moreover, some people regard such revelation as self-indulgent, in that it turns the audience's attention away from the film and toward the filmmaker. For many... being reminded that the images have an author disrupts the fantasy (145).

of interrupting the narrative is mitigated by fact that Matthew is both narrator and character in the story. Therefore, the brief moments in which the audience sees evidence of his existence become part of the narrative as opposed to moments which “break the spell.” (By contrast, the sudden presence of a filmmaker’s disembodied off-screen voice can be quite jarring, often requiring a moment for the audience to ascertain its origin). At the same time, *Ochre and Water* avoids turning the audience’s attention away from the film and toward the filmmaker, as is sometimes the case in *A Kalahari Family*. Here, the emphasis remains squarely on the Himba and the dam project, not on Matthew himself. In fact, the filmmaker never appears fully on screen. Rather, we see only partial images – fragments, shadows cast on the ground, a partial shot from behind, a close-up of a hand writing in a journal... These elements signal the presence of the filmmaker without foregrounding it.

### **7.3.2 CONTEXTUALIZATION: UNLEARNING WESTERN WAYS OF SEEING**

A second key function of the film’s narration is that it allows for the filmmakers to add critical analysis to events that unfold before the camera. Whereas *Very Fast Guys* uses speaking subjects to contextualize gangsterism, this approach would not suffice for *Ochre and Water*, because the observational/participatory mode is insufficient to translate the words of the film’s indigenous speaking subjects for Western audiences. Matthew and Chesselet therefore use narration to contextualize Himba culture. In both cases, the added measure of context serves to humanize the film’s characters. However, it takes on added significance in *Ochre and Water* because of the film’s ethnographic qualities.

As ethnographic filmmaker Tim Asch began arguing in the 1970s, analytical commentary is particularly critical in ethnographic film because Western audiences (including Asch’s own students) generally lack the knowledge required to accurately interpret the customs and behavior of indigenous peoples without it.<sup>95</sup> Asch has further noted that without sufficient analysis (the likes of which can only be provided through narration or supplemental information of some kind), there is always the danger that ethnographic

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<sup>95</sup> This argument was substantiated by Wilton Martinez’s 1990 study of anthropological students at the University of Southern California. (See Martinez 1990.)

films will simply reinforce negative stereotypes about the inferiority of one culture versus another.

The lesson of anthropology is that [in order] for every culture to survive, [it is necessary] to have a strong set of values that everyone shares in and that are inculcated in the youth. The problem is that these values have always been at the expense of, or in contradiction to, the values of every other society. Because it is necessary to feel this way about their own set of values in order to survive, it's very tricky" (Asch, quoted in Ruby 2000:131).

This is where *Ochre and Water's* voiceover narration becomes doubly critical. In addition to subjectively framing the text, it provides exposition that is critical if Western audiences are to accurately interpret Himba culture. Taking this one step further, the filmmakers often anticipate and pre-empt racist assumptions. One example is the way in which the narration deconstructs Western notions of wealth:

*The Urip'i's houses are scarcely luxurious. Manuela's position is limited. And they live on the move without labor-saving devices. These basic conditions initially conceal from a **Western observer like myself** the sophisticated strategies the Himba have evolved. They are in fact one of the wealthiest cattle herding groups in Africa (emphasis mine).*

Here, Matthew is not merely pointing out that the Himba are wealthier than they may appear; he is pointing out the limitations of Western ways of seeing. Moreover, by acknowledging his own inability to see such things, he effectively pardons viewers for their own naivete. This formula is used consistently throughout the film as a means of making the film's message more palatable. Matthew again airs his own initial misconceptions in the following passage about the significance of the ancestral graves:

*When I first came to the land of Kaoko, I filmed the burial of... the Himba clan chief. I never knew him, but the open display of emotion and the funeral ceremony struck me deeply. He will be gently placed in his coffin, just as his father was, just as Katjira will be. In his finest blanket, the chief*

*departs, but he has not left for good. He joins the world of the ancestors, still to be consulted on a daily basis. Close male relatives will uncover their hair as a sign of mourning. But at first I could only see strangeness, experience far from my own.*

This last sentence of narration accompanies footage of several Himba men with long, wildly unkempt hair. They stare blankly at the camera, as if crazed with grief. Here we see precisely the sort of imagery that might have been used by colonial filmmakers of the past to portray Africa as a savage and foreboding place. In this instance, however, Matthew turns the familiar imagery on its head – using it not to reveal aspects of Himba culture, so much as to reveal aspects about the viewer and the Western gaze. By acknowledging that he himself saw “only strangeness” at first, he pre-empts and pardons the natural reaction of an audience that has been conditioned to view such images as uncivilized, thereby opening the viewer up to a change in mindset and a movement toward empathy.

### **7.3.3 NARRATIVE STRUCTURE: THE JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY**

The scenes outlined above form a larger narrative arc within the film which centers on Matthew’s own journey toward understanding the cultural forces at work within the Himba community and the Westernized government that would destroy them. *Ochre and Water* is thus driven by two parallel narratives: 1) the unfolding situation with the dam scheme and efforts by the Himba to oppose it, and 2) Matthew’s own story of how he came to know the Himba and cultivate a profound understanding of their culture. The latter narrative arc takes the form of a journey in which Matthew is strategically positioned as a bridge between the (ignorant, white, Western) viewer and the (enlightened Himba) subjects. Rather than asking audiences to immediately see things in a way that defies the beliefs they have held all their lives, Matthew takes the viewer, in effect, step by step on the road to understanding and empathy for the Himba, just as he experienced it.

The filmmakers also take pains to underscore the importance of our embarking on this journey, continually conveying the very damaging and inhumane effects of a larger society that has not taken the time and trouble to do so. This culminates in a series of

scenes in which we see the cumulative impact of Western infringement on Himba culture. The first scene observes several women as they apply ochre to their bodies, while narration explains the aesthetic and practical benefits of the ritual. The next scene captures a baptism in which a preacher lures a Himba woman into the river and instructs her to wash off her ochre in the name of Western religion:

*I can baptize you in this water but if you don't believe in Jesus' ways, it will be meaningless. If you don't believe in what I tell you, it will only mean that you took an ordinary bath and you will go back to your dirty old ways... If you decide to take off your ochre, do it once only. Then never go back to the ochre again.*

As these words are spoken, the young woman removes her ornamentation and walks toward the preacher, her steps tentative as if she is being lured toward her doom. Haunting music portends a sense of loss. The preacher dunks her head into the water three times and the woman's fate is sealed. This image then dissolves to a close-up of a fly landing on a page of Matthew's journal as he synthesizes the meaning of the preceding two scenes:

*Religion, tourism, the departure of some of the young men to earn cash, all fill my diary. The dam is a concrete manifestation of the many pressures the Himba face. The test of a tradition is not whether it is a living fossil, but how it adapts to new situations...*

The sum total of these scenes is quite powerful. One sees the essence of Himba culture being “washed away” by the encroaching forces of Western civilization – forces with limited understanding, who don't see the Himba as wholly human. Here Matthew is reminding us of the peril of seeing outsider as Other.

### 7.3.4 QUESTIONS OF STEREOTYPES

The subject of stereotypes is perhaps the most complex issue *Ochre and Water* presents. It is here that the film's dual nature as political film and ethnography becomes potentially problematic. As a social issues film and when viewed as such by broad audiences, the film stands out as an example of exceptionally accurate, respectful and authentic representation. However, its ethnographic qualities invite anthropological scrutiny and with it, less favorable reviews. In the following section, I address three different concerns related to the broader issue of stereotypes, which emerge from viewing the film through different frameworks.

#### ***The Tradition Of The Victim***

When viewing *Ochre and Water* as a social issues film in the Griersonian tradition, the question that must be addressed is whether or not the film upholds the "tradition of the victim." Many such films (including *A Kalahari Family*), fall into neocolonial patterns in which white filmmakers take it upon themselves to educate indigenous communities and lead them to salvation. Here, however, Matthew and Chesselet have neither initiated the campaign against the dam nor engineered any of the Himba's efforts therein. Even the subtle ways in which the presence of Matthew's camera added weight to the Himba's campaign are not foregrounded. This distinction is critical as it speaks to issues of control, as well as the representations that result.

The filmmakers further underscore the self-empowerment of the Himba by building a thematic metaphor around the Himba term *tanauka* – or "turnaround" – which alludes to the Himba's ability to determine their own fate. This metaphor is established in an early scene in which rainstorms quickly transform parched desert into a lush, green landscape. All the while, Matthew explains in voiceover:

*The Himba do know that things can change in an instant. They even have a word for this change of fortune: tanauka, or turnaround. To the Himba the word water also means plentiful, wet, green. Tanauka, the turnaround, can affect everything, like the sudden transformation of the desert after rain. Attitudes too can be turned around.*

The film returns to this metaphor in a later scene in which the Himba band together and travel to the capital in protest. Group shots of the Himba walking determinedly with powerful, self-assured rhythms pulsing in the background give the impression of an army marching to war. Matthew further frames the event in voiceover:

*It is time for "tanauka," that sudden turnaround in the situation. They travel to Windhoek, the capital, thirsty for electricity. They are here to defend a way of life. They have no wish to exist as a tourist attraction. At a private meeting with the feasibility consultants, the Himba set out to question just how seriously their views are being taken into consideration.*

Here again, the narration is precise in its phrasing, not only refuting notions of the Himba as artifacts, but also noting their own awareness of Western civilization's tendency to see them as such. In the scene that follows, one of the Himba who has traveled to Windhoek articulates this point with stark clarity:

*When the government first proposed a hydro electric dam at Epupa, they came to our homesteads and asked us. Right from the beginning we said no. But then the government went ahead and contracted outside consultants. Now we want to ask the government: when we have already said we don't want the dam to be built, why bring in consultants?*

Following this statement, a group of white men who represent the dam scheme look about in discomfort. In a particularly telling shot, one of the men leans over to confer with another; for a brief moment, he looks self-consciously at the camera, clearly troubled by what has just transpired in front of its lens. Through triumphant moments like these, *Ochre and Water* highlights rare examples of an indigenous culture successfully standing up to the forces of globalization – albeit tentatively and with uncertain results.

### ***Postcolonial/African Stereotypes***

As the filmmakers point out in their own literature about the film, traditional Himba culture is, "AIDS, unemployment and waste-free, three curses of the modern age" (Matthew and Chesselet, 2000). As a result, the picture *Ochre and Water* presents actively counters

stereotypes about Africa as a place of poverty, crime, and suffering. (Efforts to clarify the hidden wealth that the Himba have amassed further underscore this fact.) In fact, the film would have us believe that the only threat to the Himba's health and happiness is the infringement of Western powers. While this may be an oversimplification, it serves the film's larger anti-colonial message.

Indeed, unlike the ethnographic films of the colonial era, *Ochre and Water* is not designed to uphold the forces of Western hegemony. On the contrary, the goal of the film is to undermine the existing hegemony. One way in which the film works to accomplish this by making the viewer self-conscious of the West's dishonorable past and the ways in which the Himba are being Othered by the government, their rights denied in a way that would not be acceptable were they white. One of Chief Kapika's councilors addresses this point directly during a dialogue with officials in Windhoek when he states, "The only conclusion to understand [this situation] is that independence and freedom are meant for people who wear modern clothes, and not for Himbas like me." This comment is particularly jarring in its insight. If any in the audience have not at this point in the film felt the same level of empathy for the Himba as they would feel if their own friends and neighbors were being driven from their homes and their way of life, their oversight now becomes painfully self-evident.

### ***Ethnographic Stereotypes: The Noble Savage***

Matthew and Chesselet are quick to point out that *Ochre and Water* is not an ethnographic film and should not be read as such. Nonetheless, the ethnographic observations the film makes invite such scrutiny to a certain extent. When viewed through an anthropological framework, the film raises concerns in that it presents a narrow portrayal – one that dehistoricizes and romanticizes the Himba considerably. In particular, the film fails to take into account the many ways in which the Himba have interacted with Western society in past decades and evolved as a result. There is no mention, for example, of the many Himba who were conscripted to fight in the war in Angola, no discussion of those who attend Western schools, and certainly no representation of Himba like Tjuma, who are educated, bilingual, and live very Westernized lives (Levine 2008).

Filmmakers typically view this form of simplification as essential to the cinematic form, which demands a simple three-act narrative structure, archetypal characters and so on. However, for anthropologists and ethnographers, such reductionist representations amount to a troubling perpetuation of the century-old stereotype of the “noble savage” – the uncivilized Other who “resides in a cultural paradise of stressless activities, sexual freedom, and ecological balance” (Ruby 1995:186). Though often reverential in intent, the noble savage model is detrimental in its oversimplicity, feeding into notions of indigenous cultures as artifacts to be preserved for the purposes of observation and the consumption of tourists. This description does ring true within *Ochre and Water* to some extent, though arguments can be made to the contrary.

On the one hand, the film does not suggest that the Himba culture is entirely divorced from Western society. The Himba are shown to interact with modern technology, for example, as in the case of borrowing Matthew’s truck to fetch water, as well as some of the younger generation going to work for the feasibility study. One of the most compelling examples of Himba interacting with modernity comes in the film’s final scenes, when Chief Kapika travels to Europe and is pictured atop a London bus and at the BBC studios rallying support from the international community. Never the stereotypical wide-eyed native-come-to-the-big-city, Kapika appears unfazed by the urban environment, and even quite savvy as he has his picture snapped by the press.

On the other hand, as Anthropologist Susan Levine argues, *Ochre and Water* is “very much about [Matthew’s] nostalgia – and the nostalgia of the elders he depicts in the film who are pretty fierce about wanting to maintain Himba ways.” To be certain, the film focuses on traditional elements of Himba culture and paints them in an idealized light, while ignoring some of the potential harms of perpetuating the culture or the ways in which the Himba have modernized (Levine 2008).<sup>96</sup>

For his part, Matthew contends that it was never his intention to make a film that would stand up to such strict ethnographic scrutiny.

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<sup>96</sup> One example Levine offers of the harms of “hanging onto the culture” is the severe backlash that has been perpetrated against some Himba who have chosen to pursue a Western education. (See Chesselet and Levine 2004.)

Of course I could have made a more social realist film about all the problems but I wanted to make something lyrical. I wanted to make something that was inspiring. I wanted to open people's eyes to this culture, but also I wanted to tell the story of the dam. At the end of the day, I had to make a 53-minute film. So you narrow it down to a few things... I'm not interested in any kind of ethnographic authenticity. I will use my poetic license however I feel, because it's my film.<sup>97</sup>

### ***Hybrid Methodology, Hybrid Aesthetics***

In the final analysis, what makes the preceding argument plausible is that the filmmakers have employed several formal strategies that cue the viewer to read the film as an aesthetic creation, rather than an ethnographic film with scientific intent. Firstly, the film's narration has an element of poeticism that distinguishes it from ethnographic films of an academic nature. Second, the filmmakers make ample use of special effects. The film's opening is rife with dissolves and layerings, immediately suggesting that the tale to follow is an artistic narrative, rather than a scientific document.

In addition, Matthew's cinematography takes on certain editorial qualities, which stand in direct contrast to the objective camera employed by ethnographers. Where the latter would stick to wide shots, "objective" framing, and preservation of context, Matthew makes frequent use of extreme close-ups that emphasize detail, as well as low, wide-angle shots that exaggerate the expanse of the land. He uses shallow depth of field to set objects apart from their context and emphasize select details in the frame.

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<sup>97</sup> Subsequent to screenings with anthropologists, the filmmakers have endeavored to document the culture of the Himba through a variety of means that they felt could better serve the aim of preserving its true complexity. Chesselet teamed up with Levine to write a paper titled "The Heart of the Cheetah: Biography, Identity, and Social Change in North-Western Namibia," which documents the life of translator Cornelius Tjiuna as a means of challenging reductionist notions of Himba identity. (See Chesselet and Levine, 2004.) Matthew has expanded his documentation of the Himba to include multi-media studies which enable users to explore the culture in greater depth by freeing the subject matter from the shackles of linear narrative. Both of these endeavors are part of a larger collaboration with the University of Cape Town and the University of Koln titled *The Spacial Knowledge Archives Project: Proposal for Piloting Interactive Archives of Historical and Contemporary Ethnographic Data in the Kaokveld (Namibia) and the Area Indegina do Uaca (Brazil)*.

In addition, images associated with the proposed dam are shot and edited in a manner distinctly different from those of the Himba and their natural environment. Helicopters, bulldozers, scientists, and geo-physical drilling “interrupt” the more pastoral scenes of the Himba and are distinguished by faster cutting, noise, smoke, clamoring... aesthetic choices which not only embody the chaos and destruction the dam project represents for the Himba, but also heighten the sense of constructedness for the viewer.

Finally, while ethnographic films as a rule do not use nondiegetic sound, *Ochre and Water*'s sound design weaves together an eclectic mix of natural rhythms recorded on location, traditional Himba singing, and contemporary music from the band The Kalahari Surfers. The result is a hybridized sound that parallels the hybrid nature of the film.

I wasn't going to make an ethnographic film with just the Himba music. I wanted a fusion film with my Western stuff because that's what it is. The film is a fusion of my tradition with their tradition. If I were to pretend that it is just about their tradition, that would be a lie. Any academic who tries to pretend it is just about those people is lying because it's always more about you. And so to make a soundtrack that was a fusion of those things was a clear expression of that relationship. So the soundtrack was just another layer of that reflexivity (Matthew 2008).

#### **7.4 USE VALUE AND OUTCOMES**

In terms of use-value, *Ochre and Water* functions on several levels. Firstly, the filming of the feasibility study served to draw some critical public attention to the study process and the impact the dam would likely have on the Himba. Here, as with so many development communications projects, the production process itself created a space wherein participants were encouraged to reflect more seriously on the matters at hand.

The very fact that I was filming up there brought up a lot of issues that would be easy to avoid if things were being delivered on paper. Now they could see the Himba and whatnot and it became quite charged. The technocrats were quite thrown by the fact that there really were people living in this area that were going to be affected. It's so easy to brush

these things aside in reports – the dam engineers are sitting around the world and get data and are just told to design a dam. It's so indicative of the alienated way we work in the postmodern world (Matthew 2008).

Of course, the completed film also has the potential use-value of supporting the Himba's fight against the dam scheme. Both *Ochre and Water* and footage from the initial dispatches were widely broadcast internationally and surely helped draw some attention to the cause. However, here the film's impact is somewhat murky. While the dam has not yet been built, this could be attributed to many factors, including the war that was taking place in Angola at the time. While Matthew contends that the film had an impact, he also acknowledges that the dam will most likely be built anyway. "It will happen," he concedes, "because now, even if the World Bank doesn't approve, they can go get the funding from China. The whole geopolitics of the situation have shifted and Angola is at peace, so they can go ahead and plan without the insecurity of a country being at civil war."

Evaluating the film's effectiveness as a political tool is difficult in part because, unlike the Steps series, *Ochre and Water* was not produced as part of a larger, multi-faceted political campaign designed to advance the Himba's cause. Distribution strategies were not tied to this end, nor were impact studies conducted and reported back to donors. In this regard, the film opens itself to criticism.

Yet the filmmakers would argue that preventing the dam from being built was not exactly the point. In fact, as Matthew has acknowledged, the dam scheme itself was a means to an end, serving mainly as an opportunity to film the Himba over a period of many years in the same spirit in which John Marshall spent decades filming the Ju/Wasi. Therefore, the ultimate use-value of *Ochre and Water*, as conceived by the filmmakers, was "to make people understand the world around them and use the Himba as an example of how you can see things around you in a different way" (Matthew 2008). This falls in lock step with Ruby's argument that the most important contribution anthropologists can make to society at large is to teach others "to see human beings from an anthropological perspective" – i.e., to use the concept of culture as a means of "understanding our humanness" (2000:160). The ability to impart this lesson is perhaps *Ochre and Water's* greatest gift.

## 7.5 CONCLUSION

Matthew and Chesselet's essay format provides an ideal balance between objectivity (research, analysis, presenting both sides of the story) and subjectivity (personal narrative, reflexivity, transparent methodology). Unlike other contemporary essay filmmakers like Michael Moore and Nick Broomfield, Matthew and Chesselet do not exploit the genre as an excuse to sensationalize or manipulate. Rather, they have employed this approach for the purpose of foregrounding their own process, thereby adding to the film's integrity. The result is a more tempered, thoughtful, persuasive argument than the majority of essay films provide in this age.

*Ochre and Water* has been screened in every single major Western country in the world and has won more than a dozen international awards. According to Matthew, it is used in anthropology courses and human rights conferences around the world, and he continues to receive regular requests for the film years after its initial release. "It has shown me several things," he concludes, "One is that an authored film has a life of its own because it hasn't just been churned out by National Geographic. Another is that I am just starting to touch on oral tradition... as a means of helping people understand the world around them and learning to see things in a different way."

Finally, *Ochre and Water* demonstrates the potential for outsider filmmakers to produce accurate representations of indigenous people, using the right methodology. At the same time, this case study highlights the immense training, resources, and personal sensitivities such filmmaking requires. The average South African filmmaker would be hard-pressed to secure the funding required to spend seven years working on a single project. As it relates to the ongoing debate about who has the right to make films about whom in South Africa, *Ochre and Water* demonstrates the critical role funding can play in dictating the ethical and aesthetic treatment of subjects.

## CHAPTER 8

### PARTICIPATORY INSIDER STORYTELLING IN *WA 'N WINA* (*SINCERELY YOURS*)

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*Wa 'N Wina* is a love letter which I send to my street and to the inhabitants of Soweto. Amidst the catastrophe, it is my way of saying that people are persons, not statistics. It is also the recognition of the people's will to survive in the age of AIDS (Phakathi 2007<sup>98</sup>).

#### 8.1 BACKGROUND

Dumisani Phakathi has been described as “one of the most authentic black South African voices in documentary today,” and *Wa 'N Wina*, as his most powerful documentary to date (Brandt 2006). The film is a deeply personal one in which Phakathi returns to his childhood home in Soweto to investigate how HIV/AIDS is affecting the lives of his childhood friends and neighbors. With camera in hand, he engages people in candid discussion about sexuality, gender inequality, poverty, and many other social problems which have helped fuel the AIDS epidemic.

The picture *Wa 'N Wina* paints is a bleak one. Many of Phakathi's old friends are poor, struggling, unemployed and depressed. In startlingly candid fashion, they reveal the countless social ills that pervade their lives and community, and lead them to take risks with their health and their futures. Yet, the film's tone is relentlessly matter-of-fact, as if to suggest that this daunting state-of-affairs is simply everyday life for the people of Soweto.

A film that only Phakathi could make, *Wa 'N Wina* speaks to the powerful potential of insider storytelling. Blending his dual perspectives as insider (by birth) and outsider (having moved to a white suburb many years ago), Phakathi arrives at some genuinely unique insights on the gap between AIDS education campaigns and the people they are meant to address.

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<sup>98</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotes attributed to Phakathi in this chapter were derived from my own 2007 interview with the filmmaker.

### 8.1.1 ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

Born in Soweto in the 1970s, Dumisani Phakathi represents for many a perfect archetype for the future of South African documentary. Just one year after the country's first democratic elections, he became a trainee-director at Johannesburg-based television production company Urban Brew. Soon after, he conceptualized a new youth reality program called *The Electric Workshop*, which remained on the air for five years. In 1996, he began exploring theatre through a training program at the Market Theater Laboratory. Phakathi's first big break as a director came in 1999 when he was accepted into M-net's "New Directions," a program that provides training and funding to new and emerging South African directors. Through *New Directions*, Phakathi directed his first short film, *An Old Wife's Tale*, which won several South African Television Awards, and his career as a film director was born.

Industry players describe Phakathi as an eminently likable character whose heart has enabled him to bootstrap his way from township to international notoriety. Some argue that his underprivileged background is his chief advantage, noting that foreign festival-goers seem to enjoy the notion of a "poor, black South African filmmaker making his way in the world."<sup>99</sup> Whether this is true or not, there can be little doubt that a good part of his success stems from his ability to provide an insider's perspective on a world previously documented exclusively by outsiders. His first feature documentary, *Rough Ride* (1999) was a colorful look at the sub-culture of South African minibus taxis. *Wa 'N Wina*, reveals many social problems behind the spread of HIV which have long been

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<sup>99</sup> Both Khalo Matabane and Lee Hirsch have, in published interviews, contended that foreign audiences gravitate toward films by black filmmakers which document the filmmaker's (rural and/or disadvantaged) culture. (c.f. Vermeron 2006: 69-70; Maes 2006: 38.) Their sentiments were echoed by several filmmakers interviewed for this study. This phenomenon can be seen as a sign of progress – indicating a desire among festival audiences for the decolonization of African cinema and more authentic representations of African culture. However, such attitudes have also been criticized as paternalistic toward filmmakers of color. Matabane argues, for example, that foreign audiences tend to pigeonhole black filmmakers – wanting them to make films about their humble roots, rather than seeing them as capable of exploring broader subject matter. In addition, Hirsch argues that support for black filmmakers is often driven by a desire to stroke "feelings of guilt," rooted in a colonial past. This complex web of arguments is indicative of the debates about race and documentary in South Africa, which often involve a collusion of valid yet conflicting arguments.

ignored or misunderstood by Western efforts to curb the epidemic. His latest documentary, *Don't F--- with me, I've got 52 Brothers and Sisters* (2006), illuminates the common South African problem of absentee fatherism through Phakathi's own dysfunctional family history.

Today, Phakathi continues to produce a mix of documentary and fiction. Unlike some of his contemporaries who have abandoned documentary in favor of the more glamorous and/or lucrative worlds of feature films and fictional television, he claims that he will always have an interest in documentary, attributing this to a strong sense of personal and political obligation, as well as the emotional connection he feels toward real people.

I am from Soweto. The more I live there, the more I realize I am supposed to do what I am doing. It's not by chance. I really love my people. I think that they got a raw deal from 1642. So it's real for me. I got a heart and I feel.... Someone asked me once if I do political films and I said the mere fact of me is political. Once you start thinking and are aware as an artist, it is the nature of things that life is politics.

### **8.1.2 PROJECT HISTORY: THE STEPS SERIES**

*Wan 'N Wina* is one of 37 films produced as part of the Steps for the Future series. As such, it received an injection of funding and distribution support, while the director received considerable training and mentoring from international experts. That process, along with the film's success, helped catapult Phakathi's career into high-profile status, making him one of the project's noteworthy success stories.

The Steps films were designed with specific use values in mind (as discussed in chapter six) and this provides an added lens through which the film must be evaluated. This chapter therefore includes analysis of *Wan 'N Wina* not only in terms of process and product, but also in terms of its effectiveness as an advocacy tool within the larger Steps HIV/AIDS awareness campaign.

## 8.2 THE FILMMAKER AS INSIDER

Being an insider is huge. Wherever there was a huge movement in social documentaries, one thing always stood out: there was always empathy for the subject matter... I mean I could wake up tomorrow and say, 'Fuck the Khoi, that's intellectual.' I make my films from the heart. I have to in some way feel something for them. I have to love them actually (Phakathi 2007).

### 8.2.1 PERCEPTIONS OF INTIMACY

Without question, one of the most striking features of *Wan 'N Wina* is the intimate relationship between filmmaker and subjects. Phakathi's status as a member of the community, combined with his empathetic nature and easy social manner, enable him to have interactions that no other filmmaker could. In addition, it elevates his credentials as a narrator vis-à-vis the audience.

Phakathi wastes no time establishing his relationship to the community. His opening lines of narration are brief and to-the-point: "I've been told that half of the people my age are going to be infected with the HIV virus by the time they are 30. I went back to my neighborhood to see how people are negotiating with their lives in this time of AIDS." The scenes that follow quickly substantiate this premise. Old friends greet him on the street in a series of brief interactions – some talk about what he was like as a child, the soccer field where they used to play, or how his mother used to yell at him. Others ask if they can be in his film. In turn, Phakathi introduces some of the film's key characters with nostalgic reminiscences. ("Timothy, my friend – he always got the girl.")

This casual familiarity gives way to some uniquely frank and revealing conversations, like the exchange Phakathi has with his friend Zonke:

Phakathi: *How are you?*

Zonke: *I have a hard-on. What about you?*

Phakathi: *Why do you always say that when someone greets you?*

Zonke: *Having a hard-on is a sign of life? ...And what about you? Do you have a hard-on?*

Phakathi: *No, I don't have a hard-on.*

Zonke: *That's not good. You must get some traditional medicine to help you.*

Phakathi: *But seriously, how are you?*

Zonke: *Just surviving... I don't have AIDS yet.*

It is interactions like these – casual to the point of being crude – which distinguish *Wan 'N Wina* as an insider's account. The exchange reveals much about the degree to which sex lies at the forefront of the young male psyche. In addition, scenes like these humanize the characters, for they are addressing the filmmaker – and by extension, the audience – not as subjects being observed or experts being interviewed, but as friends engaging in casual, honest conversation. This reversal of historical codes of spectatorship is critical and will be examined in greater detail later in this chapter.

Phakathi's familiarity with his subjects also opens up emotional access. Some powerful moments result, including a scene in which he sits with a friend flipping through the pages of an old family photo album. As the camera comes to rest on a close-up of her father, the young woman breaks into tears and leaves the room. Phakathi sits alone with the album in uncomfortable silence until she returns to explain that her father has left the family and rarely visits. The scene provides exactly the kind of intimate moment outsider audiences crave and are likely to view as a mark of insider authenticity.



Phakathi on location filming *Wan 'N Wina*

## 8.2.2 ACCESS AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

In the case of *Wan 'N Wina*, the work of obtaining informed consent and building relationships was largely unnecessary, given that Phakathi was filming his own friends and former neighbors. In fact members of the community can be seen in *Wan 'N Wina* approaching Phakathi on the streets of Soweto and *asking* to be included in the film. This premise is no doubt buffeted by what I have described previously as the “great urge to communicate” out of loneliness, insecurity and/or bottled up complexes. Given the poverty and marginalization that characterize Phakathi’s former neighborhood, such issues are all the more likely to be at play and evidence of this can be seen in much of the footage.

As a result, *Wan 'N Wina* presents a stark contrast to the case study provided by *Ochre and Water*. Whereas Matthew and Chesselet required seven years to research and produce *Ochre and Water*, Phakathi’s ease of access and familiarity with the subject matter enabled him to produce *Wan 'N Wina* in a mere four months. Is this as it should be? Is it possible that the level of familiarity Phakathi enjoys with his subjects opens the door too wide – relieving him of the ethical responsibilities required of outsiders in order to gain access to the community?

As I have argued, many subjects are not assiduous or sophisticated enough to consider the potential implications of being filmed. This tends to be all the more true when the filmmaker is perceived as a friend. Moreover, if we accept Pryluck’s argument that “those least able to protect themselves require the greatest protection” (1976: 28), then it follows that Phakathi’s subjects – who are not only undereducated but often drunk at the time of filming – need a good deal of protection indeed. These issues, combined with some of the film’s compromising scenes, do raise concerns.

On the other hand, I have also argued that the existence of a meaningful relationship between filmmaker and subject is one of the strongest guarantees of ethical and authentic representation. Phakathi’s personal ties to the community suggest that he would be held accountable and is more likely to apply the kind of ethical standards that would allow him to screen the film amongst his old friends and neighbors with a clear conscience.

Ultimately, this scenario cannot be judged *prima facie*. The question here is whether or not the subjects were represented ethically – a question which the remainder of this chapter seeks to address.

### **8.3 ANALYZING THE FILM**

#### **8.3.1 MODES: PARTICIPATORY OBSERVATION**

*Wan 'N Wina* was a move away from my kind of fact-based, tripod, interview, talking heads, archive, classical documentary. It was more about people and the way they live their lives and more observation, and in a way more real because what is there is there (Phakathi 2007).

The methodology employed in making *Wan 'N Wina*, is very much in keeping with the trend away from expository filmmaking and toward more observational/participatory approaches that characterized South African filmmaking at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Much of the film's footage is strictly observational and shot in a fly-on-the-wall manner. Indeed, Phakathi concedes that he was not able to set up scenes in the manner he had intended.

In the beginning, I was very naïve, 'I can do this, it's very easy a film set in my street.' It turned out to be the most difficult film I have done to date. The street swallowed me and the camera. I was no more the calculated and meticulous auteur, I was just a guy with camera. I fought with the street, it was not quiet when I wanted it to be and busy when I wanted it to, people where not saying what I hoped they would say. It did not rain.

After a few weeks I learnt not to fight with the street. It had a life of its own far greater and important that my aesthetical motif. After accepting [this], things changed. They changed for the better. I was learning (Phakathi 2003: 1).

Approaching *Wan 'N Wina* as a spontaneous and collaborative enterprise proves effective on many levels. First, as with Matthew's "being there" approach, it opened the door to several of the film's more compelling moments. In one of the film's early scenes, for example, Phakathi encounters a young woman on the street who suggests to him that he should make a film about teenage pregnancy. Rather than brushing her aside, as might an auteur with a preconceived agenda, Phakathi asks her if she has something to say. His openness is rewarded as the young woman proceeds to tell a heart-wrenching story that is actually quite relevant:

*Woman: My son's father refuses to pay child maintenance. If I ask for maintenance, he tells me about what he has to buy for his girlfriend. He knows that the baby was born prematurely and that he is always sick. When I tell him about our baby's health, he tells me that the kid is better off dead.*

*Phakathi: Why is he behaving like this?*

*Woman: Women. He's going out with an older woman who tells him what to do.*

*Phakathi: How old were you when you had [the baby]?*

*Woman: I was seventeen.*

*Phakathi: Why didn't you use a condom?*

*Woman: He lied to me and told me that I wouldn't fall pregnant. He told me that if I sleep with him with a condom it means I'm promiscuous... and I believed him.*

*Phakathi: Was he your first boyfriend?*

*Mother: Yes.*

It is a powerful scene, made more so by the fact that it appears to have happened completely by accident. That Phakathi could encounter someone with such a pointed personal tale by chance on the street speaks volumes about the pervasiveness of social phenomena behind risky sexual behavior and the AIDS epidemic.

A second benefit of Phakathi's unscripted approach is that it gives the characters greater agency in determining the film's text. While Phakathi does "set-up" certain scenes, he does so in strict Rouchian fashion – endeavoring only to orchestrate the situation, not its outcome. "Of course you can't not plan anything because usually then there's nothing," he explains. "I arranged some scenes. I would say to some guys I want to get together

and go to some house... and I'd say, we're gonna talk about manhood, what it means to be a man." Once these dialogues begin, Phakathi steps back from his role as director and becomes just "one of the guys," engaging in the conversation without seeking to control it. Because he enjoys a legitimate role as a character in *Wan 'N Wina* (not merely in the Michael Moore or Nick Broomfield sense but as someone who is actually a member of the community with relevant opinions), he is able to take part in a manner that feels organic and does not detract from the film's authenticity.

The aforementioned dialogue about manhood provides an interesting example of Phakathi's dual role as director and character and the ways in which he tempers his own level of power within these two roles. The scene takes a turn when members of the group suggest that being a man is about suffering. Here Phakathi disagrees, arguing, "I don't think being a man is about suffering. The truth is we are the ones who rape, who refuse to use condoms." Demonstrating a commitment to empowering the voices of his subjects over his own, Phakathi then grants the last word to one of his cohorts, who counters, "That's when you are dead inside and nothing else matters anymore." This statement concludes the scene, in effect lending greater weight to the beliefs of others than those of the director.

This is indicative of Phakathi's self-styled role in the making of *Wan 'N Wina*. His job is not to synthesize, to analyze, or to judge. He is simply there to observe and to interact in a manner in which any friend might interact with his peers. As someone who is both inside and outside of the group (both in life and in the context of the filmmaking process), he offers a unique and valuable perspective. However he does not impose that perspective on the film or subsume the voices of others into any pre-determined argument of his own. In fact, the preceding example is one of the few moments in which Phakathi voices his own opinion at all.

### **8.3.2 REFLEXIVITY**

While predominantly observational and participatory in nature, *Wan 'N Wina* does also include elements of reflexivity. However, these elements do not fully serve the theoretical aims presented in this study. While the film is narrated in the first person, this strategy is not fully exploited for the purposes of exposing Phakathi's methodology, his

approach to the subject matter, or any preconceptions he may have had. Rather, it is used as a structural device – a means of introducing new ideas or characters, and linking scenes together.

Phakathi has also included some reflexive footage that alludes to the production process, such as shots of himself making adjustments to his camera or cleaning the lens. While these appear to have been shot accidentally, their inclusion in the film serves to remind us continually of the presence of both filmmaker and technology in crafting the film. Here there is an element of duplicity, however, in that the “outsider” filmmakers who assisted him in the making of the film remain hidden from view. In this sense, the film’s reflexivity creates a false assumption, suggesting that the entire film was created by Phakathi and his friends when in fact, consultants from Steps had a hand in the process. True reflexivity, in the spirit in which Nichols and Ruby propose, would have revealed the many ways in which outside producers, editors and consultants collaborated on the project – a factor which surely had significant impacts on the film.



Consultants on location during filming of *Wan 'N Wina*  
(Source: Steps Website, production stills. See [www.steps.co.za](http://www.steps.co.za))

### 8.3.3 HOME MOVIE AESTHETICS

Phakathi augments the already significant sense of authenticity and spontaneity in *Wan 'N Wina* through formal choices that evoke a home-movie-like aesthetic. His cinematography is frequently shaky, uncomposed, out of focus and/or poorly white-balanced. Those reflexive moments in which he is seen interacting with his camera further this aesthetic and indeed this may be their primary reason for being. It is not clear to what degree any of this is intentional – Phakathi has minimal training as a videographer and sometimes hands the camera over to friends who presumably have no training whatsoever. Regardless of intent, the effect is useful in that it encourages a reading of the film as unscripted, raw, and personal.

In addition, the film's subjects frequently address the camera directly, either speaking to Phakathi (who is operating the camera) or performing for the lens. This practice is evocative of the common home-movie practice of “aping” for the camera. It increases our sense of intimacy with the characters because they are speaking directly to the lens – and by extension, the audience.<sup>100</sup>

In some cases, Phakathi takes home-movie aesthetics to a level that borders on sophomoric and yet in doing so, still serves the film advantageously. In one instance, he and his friends spend several minutes examining a lascivious poster advertising a peep show. The camera pans over the poster randomly, revealing various debaucherous images, while Phakathi and his comrades make jokes like a group of titillated school boys:

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<sup>100</sup> It is a generally accepted tenet of documentary filmmaking that the closer a speaker's eye-line comes to addressing to the camera lens directly, the greater the sense of intimacy perceived by the audience. The effect is one in which the speaker makes direct eye contact with the audience and the interviewer's presence as intermediary vanishes. This premise provided the basis for Errol Morris's invention of the “interretron” – a device which uses teleprompter technology to superimpose an image of his own face onto the camera lens as he asks questions, thereby prompting the interviewee to look directly into the camera while answering (Morris 2003). (See also a relevant discussion on Morris's website: <http://www.errolmorris.com/content/eyecontact/interrotron.html>)

Phakathi: *What do you think this poster is about?*  
Unidentified voice: *Oooh, those black things in the background are vibrators...*  
[Laughter] all different types of vibrators. Look at this one.  
Zonke: *Ooh, it's a peep show, a play about dicks...*  
Timothy [now operating the camera]: *Are you going to watch the show...?*  
Zonke: *No, I am going to get a hard-on. No ways.*  
Timothy: *How do you feel about sex generally?*  
Zonke: *That's an interesting question my brother. But I'll answer it some other time.* [Laughter]  
Timothy: *What about you, Dumisani?*  
Phakathi: *I'm a virgin.* [laughter]  
Zonke: *I've never heard such a lie.*  
Phakathi: *Timothy, go inside the library and give me the camera. You are the subject, I am the director.*

As the conversation winds down, the film cuts to a close-up of the poster, then quickly zooms in and out repeatedly – a visual schtick that suggests that the cameraman is masturbating.

While one might expect such antics to end up on the cutting room floor, Phakathi has decided to include the scene in the film. Juvenile though it may be, the moment does reveal something of the characters' attitude toward sex. More importantly, it reeks of authenticity. One assumes that the group were playing around at the moment of filming – being themselves, having a laugh, and never imagining that the footage would actually wind up in the finished film, particularly as they are mocking the director and his interrogatory process. That this scene has been included bears witness to the fact that Phakathi is not afraid to “put it all out there,” even if it means being poked fun at or exposing his own unflattering reality.

*Wan 'N Wina's* home-movie aesthetic is also furthered by its highly fragmented editing style. Much of the film – especially the first half – consists not of fully developed scenes but of fleeting snapshots. These range from single shots with no clear context or message to brief segments that provide little more than a glimpse of something or someone – of what, the viewer is often unsure.

Even Phakathi's narration sometimes gives the appearance of being off-the-cuff. In stark contrast to the lyrical, complex narration of *Ochre and Water*, Phakathi's style is extremely minimalist. Sentences are short and simple. Words contain few syllables. New characters and scenes are introduced with as little flourish as possible. For example, a lengthy segment chronicling the troubled relationships among Timothy, his ex-girlfriend and their child is introduced with the simple words, "Timothy loves his baby. Cede loves Timothy."

Thoughtful scrutiny suggests that there is indeed artistry here, artistry that creates the artifice of casualness. Phakathi is not attempting to be a poet, a lecturer, an artist. He is attempting to portray himself as an ordinary guy from the streets of Soweto. At this he succeeds and as a result, the film reads more authentically for township audiences and Europeans alike.

Collectively, these aesthetic choices conspire to give *Wan 'N Wina* the appearance of a spontaneous, dialectical slice of life on the streets. The most powerful affect created by the film's raw aesthetics is a certain sense of matter-of-factness that can be quite startling for outsider audiences. That Phakathi could happen upon so much pain and dysfunction seemingly by accident – and that everyone including the filmmaker could talk about it all so casually – suggests that what may seem shockingly harsh to the outside spectator is but unremarkable reality for the film's subjects.

## **8.4 POLITICAL ANALYSIS: REINFORCING STEREOTYPES OR COUNTERING HEGEMONY?**

### **8.4.1 HIGHLIGHTING THE DYSFUNCTIONAL**

While Phakathi does not overtly make his opinions known in the *Wan 'N Wina*, there are certainly more subtle forms of editorialization at work here. Through addition of non-diegetic music, juxtaposition of shots, and other editing techniques, he often colors the meaning of his footage significantly. Nowhere is this more true than in his choice of music. Throughout *Wan 'N Wina*, Phakathi layers upbeat and sometimes frenetic jazz riffs over his observational footage. Completely foreign to and seemingly at odds with

the diegesis, the music tends to create a sense of dissonance, often heightening a sense of the absurd.

Two scenes stand out as examples of this practice: one depicts a beauty contest and the other, a party which took place afterward.<sup>101</sup> Both are presented as montages with no context, no dialogue, and no sense of what the event is about – just a series of images that illustrate attitudes about sex in the community. Cut to a series of increasingly shrill jazz riffs, they take on a highly charged emotional tenor.

The party scene depicts a large public gathering in which participants drink, smoke, dance... and play with condoms wrapped in iconic red AIDS awareness packaging. Used completely out of their intended context, the condoms are strewn across the floor, trampled on by careless dancing feet, blown up like balloons, and played with by children. As the montage progresses, the scene grows increasingly chaotic. Partygoers get more and more drunk and amorous, the level of revelry heightens, conga lines form and children hold blown up condoms in front of their crotches like oversized penises. Parallel editing draws our attention to the concurrent rise in sexual tension and mockery of safe sex. Just as this scene reaches the height of tension and absurdity, both music and picture abruptly lapse, cutting to a quiet, still shot of a baby in the street, staring innocently into the camera's lens. As suddenly as the child appears, she is gone and Phakathi moves on to the next scene without comment. Once again, the audience is left slightly shell-shocked. Is this just another Friday night in Soweto, not even worthy of comment?

According to Phakathi, both the beauty contest and the after-party were filmed and edited with the intent of highlighting the collision of incongruous cultures which so often occurs in urban, black South Africa to ill effect:

The event was simply a beauty contest... so in a way it was quite innocent, but aspects were absurd and I went for that. Of course there were people drinking and it was like a meat factory. It was an imported culture, first and foremost. It was out of place in that community. Most

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<sup>101</sup> Though these two events were filmed in succession, they appear separately in the film, as if unrelated.

caucasians know the culture and it doesn't drive their hormones crazy, but you take it into another culture... I knew already that the contest shouldn't be happening. There's something vulgar about it, the way they set up that place, the poverty, the messed up relationship between girls and boys... And I saw these men just looking at the girls drooling. They were thinking, 'fuck those thighs, fuck her private parts...' so I wanted to say this is an absurd situation. This event is out of place in this community.

And as luck would have it, there were these kids later with condoms that are supposed to be for protection. I went looking for all that. I knew it was there. Once I edited the scene, I knew I couldn't use music that was there because then the scene would be literal. So by adding the jazz tune that had an urgency and an abruptness about it, it made the scene what I wanted it to be: crazy.

Phakathi does succeed in creating a sense of craziness through his chaotic cutting and dissonant music. Yet to what end, one has to wonder. His observation that the beauty contest event was inappropriately imported from another culture is an interesting one, but this observation is not communicated in the film. Phakathi does not mention it overtly and the images and music in no way hint at this notion. This lack of contextual analysis leaves much up to the viewer's interpretation – a grave concern given how little interaction white/Western/outsider audiences tend to have with poor black township communities. One fears that, like the students of Tim Asch, outsider viewers will apply negative and even racist stereotypes to their reading of the text and reach any number of aberrant conclusions.<sup>102</sup>

#### **8.4.2 QUESTIONS OF STEREOTYPES**

As the beauty contest scenes illustrate, the open-ended observational nature of *Wan 'N Wina* is in some ways problematic. Overall, Phakathi succeeds in avoiding didacticism and judgment, and in this there is gain. Yet there is also a loss in that the film fails to

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<sup>102</sup> I refer here to the phenomena documented by Martinez (1992) and Ruby (2000), which were previously discussed in section 3.3.2 of this study.

provide critical information viewers need in order to interpret his images instructively and empathetically – a practice which Phakathi himself has argued to be of critical importance:

You can do a thing about women killing babies but that's not documentary. The filmmaker's job is to take something like that and look at it so deeply so that people can watch and find out what happened... We have to do research and read. We have to place a situation in such a way that people can see it and start to think differently about where they are and start to act differently. It shouldn't be a news article. If you really care about someone you've got to... dig deep.

### ***Negative Images***

The process of “digging deep” is particularly critical in a film like *Wan 'N Wina*, which otherwise threatens to uphold negative stereotypes. The film presents a veritable symphony of pain, suffering, and dysfunctional behavior. Even when Phakathi has not augmented the absurdity of his subjects' behavior through formal choices, they often cement negative stereotypes outsiders have of Africans. In one scene, for example, members of a local choir group struggle to start practice because several of the members are drunk and arguing incessantly. After an extended scuffle about the group's rules (which happen to include a ban on drinking), and a lengthy rant about the pain of being in love, they finally begin to “practice.” This consists of a few people singing while one member complains that they should talk about money first, others pass around a pitcher of beer (some singing at the same time), and various conversations continue in the background. Needless to say, this scene may not reflect well on the community. One has to wonder whether it was even ethical for Phakathi to film the practice in the first place, given that so many of the subjects involved were inebriated. The scene is typical of a film that thrives on chaos and dysfunction.

While assailing the viewer with a litany of similarly negative images, Phakathi fails to provide any evidence of a positive side to the community. This is surprising, coming from a director who is known for being adamant about the need for more positive portrayals of (South) African society. In his own words, Phakathi has argued:

The people you make a film about need the film to confirm not only how fucked up they are but also reconfirm that beauty that you don't always see. Like, "look, when you are quiet how beautiful you are," or, "When your daughter sleeps on your shoulder, look how beautiful you are..." I just believe in balanced portrayal and balanced I don't mean right/wrong, fact/fiction, but in an energy/spirit kind of thing. It could be a simple matter of a character on a morning standing at the gate and a sun comes up and the sun is shining – a moment of quietness and beauty.

Phakathi makes an important point here. And yet he has failed to live up to his own standard in *Wan 'N Wina*. When pressed on the matter, he explains that he attempted to capture a more balanced, positive reflection of the community, but his efforts were thinly rewarded at best.

It was so hard [to find something positive] in *Wan 'N Wina*... There were very few instances when I could do that. You can't create it. If it's not there, it's not there.... I had to consciously think, 'this is all talking about sex, and people playing with condoms and the girls wanting to cut off her tits and become a boy.' I had to look pretty hard.

It was little things. Something as small as kids playing with water on spring day and putting a good jazz tune there. The dustbins. When people get their dustbins, it's really nothing. But when I found out that was gonna happen, I thought that must mean something and then I met the old woman who was happy because she hadn't received anything new for so many years.

This explanation appears sincere enough, particularly given Phakathi's larger track record of representing South Africa in a more positive light. Nonetheless, the "little things" that Phakathi enumerates in his list of positive imagery are not only few and far between but also questionable in terms of their impact. Does the act of receiving a dustbin really constitute a "beautiful moment?" It seems more likely to endear pity, particularly as the scene concludes with an old woman explaining that she plans to keep

her new bin in her house even though it is small because “otherwise they will steel it to make a fire.”

### ***(De)Contextualization***

While Phakathi sometimes hints at the roots of social problems in *Wan 'N Wina*, he never provides any significant analysis of the external forces that have shaped many of the community's dysfunctions. One is typically left to feel pity or frustration over a community that seems dysfunctional to its core, its situation hopeless. Phumla, a teenage mother who serves as the film's focal character, provides a salient example. Phumla's life comprises the full spectrum of problems women often face in her community. After losing her virginity to her first boyfriend, she became pregnant with his child. The father left soon after and they have not communicated since. She has since developed a drinking problem, begun acting out, and gotten into trouble at school and with the law. She claims she drinks to forget the stress of having to provide for a baby while still at school and that it is “better to commit to the bottle than to a man.”

Phumla is a bright, articulate and strong-willed person – and one who is also better able than her peers to explain the root causes of her troubles than her peers. As Phakathi explains:

She's a wonderful person before she's a troubled teenager. Usually wonderful people are very straightforward. They tell it like it is. So Phumla was a character who just said, 'I'm fucked like this and like that and I think I'm fucked because of this and that.' Most people can't even say that today. And there's this girl who's 18...

Phakathi does right by Phumla in preserving this aspect of her character on screen. She is particularly enlightening in that she appears strong and smart, and yet she has still gotten caught in the common trap of teenage single parenthood. Phumla herself is very clear about this, stating in no uncertain terms that if she hadn't gotten pregnant, she would still be “the same old Phumla [her mother] knew,” instead of the troubled, alcoholic version of herself that exists today.

While this context humanizes Phumla and encourages the audience to identify with her, it does little to create empathy for the community as a whole. The blame for Phumla's troubles – and those of just about every other woman in the community – seems to be laid squarely on black South African men, who rape, commit adultery, refuse to use condoms, and leave their girlfriends when they fall pregnant. All of this begs the question, what are the root causes of male misbehavior? Moreover, why does the larger society tolerate their infractions?

To these questions, Phakathi offers no answers. The conversations he instigates with men from the community – filled with lascivious jokes, tough talk, mockery of HIV awareness campaigns and complaints about slack vaginas – do little to explain the male attitude or inspire confidence that the problem can be solved, much less point the way forward.

At its conclusion, the film alludes vaguely to the broader social forces at work when an old woman complains that this is not her country but instead belongs to the white man. This is the closest the film comes to exploring the ways that colonialism and apartheid have directly contributed to the breakdown of the nuclear family and other social ills, and even here there is a sense of resigned helplessness – a portrayal of black South Africans as victims of the white man's oppression, as opposed to strong independent people in control of their country and their destinies.

That Phakathi has not taken pains to refute this stereotype is disconcerting – particularly since he is clearly aware of many important external causes for his neighbor's troubles, as well as the importance of making them known.

I was really scared when I had my first screening of the film in my community... I feared they were going to think this guy just came here to expose. Sometimes I understand that you can have fucked up existences. They didn't choose it. The wave of oppression that came for decades was so huge that they even forgot why they became the way they are. So I was afraid that there was no perspective that explained the way they were. There's just this reality that gets filmed and broadcast with no context. I was afraid that if some township intellectual were there

he would raise his hand and say, 'Fuck you. Where are these people coming from and why are they the way they are?' I thought about incorporating that, but it just didn't work. It was just a slice of reality. That's the funny thing about documentaries. There's the right thing and then there's the film (Phakathi 2006).

Here, the tension between aesthetics and ethics in documentary filmmaking is clear. Phakathi's aesthetic vision for the film called for an interactive, open-ended cinema vérité style of observation with minimal authorial control or comment. On an aesthetic level, this succeeds in creating a raw, authentic, matter-of-fact portrayal with significant power to reveal. And yet from an ethical standpoint, it fails to provide enough contextual information to enable viewers to make enlightened, empathetic judgments.

What is particularly puzzling is that, as the film's narrator, Phakathi has a platform at his disposal for providing this context. Why does he not at least briefly allude to some of the astute thoughts in his head: his desire to show something positive and his frustration in failing to do so... his beliefs about how the intrusion of white culture has helped lead to the demise of African culture and caused so much of the suffering his camera has observed...? When film theorists argue for openly subjective and reflexive modes of storytelling, as they so often do, it is with the intent that the filmmaker's voice will be used for the purpose of adding clarity. In *Wan 'N Wina*, Phakathi is the politically correct filmmaker employing the ethically correct mode of storytelling, but he has failed to use the tools at his disposal to achieve the most ethical representation possible.

What appears instead is a form of truncated essayism, much like that which pervades the Project Ten series. Phakathi's use of the subjective voice is largely cosmetic. It positions him as an insider into the story and allows him to convey small bits of information and make surgical links between scenes. However, ultimately, from a representational standpoint, the film lapses into some of the common shortcomings of the observational mode, making it not as clear as perhaps it should be.

Herein lies the ultimate dilemma raised by *Wan 'N Wina*. On the one hand, exposing chronic social problems that are driving a health epidemic seems a laudable goal, and if anyone has the right to do so, it is a member of that community. Many early

practitioners of direct cinema would argue that these sorts of representations are justified, and even necessary, in order to illuminate aspects of the human condition. Director Richard Leacock was notorious for arguing this line of reasoning.

Sometimes it's illuminating to see a person in a staggering situation... Now why are we filmmakers doing this? To me, it's to find out some important aspect of our society by watching our society, by *watching how things really happen* as opposed to the social image that people hold about the way things are *supposed* to happen. And by seeing discrepancies, by revealing the *things that are different from what is expected*. I think that people can find out something very important about themselves (Leacock, quoted in Blue 1965: 19).

On the other hand, listing a litany of social ills with no positive counterbalance and no contextual analysis threatens to present a negative and exploitive representation of the community. Given a century of negative representations which have created deep and abiding stereotypes of South Africa as a place of poverty and suffering and little else, can a film like *Wan 'N Wina* be justified?

#### **8.4.3 IMAGERY VS. METHOD: THE VALUE OF REPOSITIONING THE SPECTATOR**

My analysis has thus far privileged the framework presented in chapter five of this study, which makes a strong argument against the reinforcement of African stereotypes through negative images. And yet there is a counterpoint to this position that must also be considered. Shohat and Stam contend that the “preoccupation” with the search for positive images of Africa can be counterproductive – particularly if this framework is applied in isolation or taken to the extreme.

A cinema dominated by positive images, characterized by a bending-over-backwards-not-to-be-racist attitude, might ultimately betray a lack of confidence in the group portrayed, which usually itself has no illusions concerning its own perfection... A cinema in which all black actors resembled Sidney Poitier might be as serious a cause for alarm as one in which they all resembled Stepin Fetchit (1985: 639).

Shohat and Stam further argue that the common overemphasis on positive vs. negative imagery overshadows other important formal concerns, such as the point-of-view presented and the positioning of the audience vis-à-vis the subject (1985: 640). They illustrate their point by examining a scene from *Battle of Algiers* in which three Algerian women are shown committing terrorist acts against their colonial oppressor. The authors argue that the “negative” act being carried out by the women is not as important as the “mode of address and the positioning of the spectator,” which defy conventional codes. What makes the film revolutionary are its “mechanisms of cinematic identification,” which include close-ups that individualize the women, as well as POV sound design and editing that bind the audience to the perspective of the female terrorists. Through these means, the film encourages the viewer to identify with the women to the point where we come to understand their act of terrorism as a response to colonialism, and even wish for them to succeed. Thus, *Battle of Algiers* makes a strong anti-colonial statement despite its lack of “positive” imagery (642-43).

Applying this same logic, one might reach the conclusion that *Wan 'N Wina* is likewise subversive to hegemonic conventions. Firstly, the mere fact that the story is told by a black, South African director who comes from the community in question (as opposed to a white outsider) represents a significant leap forward. Moreover, Phakathi's authorship reverses certain historical point-of-view conventions, positioning the spectator alongside Phakathi and his fellow township residents, rather than on the outside looking in. We see the street through Phakathi's eyes. We are addressed by his subjects as if they are our own friends. We are thus encouraged to identify with both the filmmaker and his subjects.

In addition, the film's participatory format gives the subjects a degree of agency in determining the text that is counter-hegemonic. *Wan 'N Wina's* subjects are not reduced to objects of our gaze. While there is a certain amount of spectacle on display, the subjects look and act, as opposed to being merely looked at or acted upon. Moreover, the intimacy we are afforded foregrounds aspects of their social context and their personal complexity – and therefore their humanity. African women, in particular, have a voice in *Wan 'N Wina* and the film does an admirable job of airing many of their long ignored concerns. In these ways, *Wan 'N Wina* is a great improvement over South

African films of the past – including well intentioned anti-apartheid documentaries such as *The Search for Sandra Laing*.

#### **8.4.4 WAN 'N WINA AS THIRD CINEMA**

Further political justification for *Wan 'N Wina* can be found in the theories of Third Cinema, which call for precisely the sort of Marxist filmmaking the documentary embodies. To begin with, *Wan 'N Wina's* home-movie aesthetic eschews Western notions of formal perfection, instead aiming unabashedly for the kind of low-cost, imperfect cinema Solanas and Getino prescribed for Third World filmmakers.<sup>103</sup> This approach is entirely appropriate, given the nature of the subject, intended audiences, and the financial limitations of the filmmaker. (While Steps budgets were generous by most South African standards, there were not nearly as generous as counterparts in the West.) Phakathi has effectively harnessed the power of low-cost video and adhered to a short production timeline, demonstrating that effective cinema can be produced within South African means.

More importantly, *Wan 'N Wina* stands in direct contrast to slick, sugar-coated representations of township life found in First Cinema counterparts, such as *Tsotsi*. The escapist themes associated with Hollywood cinema, the promotion of bourgeois values, and the individualist aims of auteur cinema are likewise avoided. Here the focus is on the realities of everyday people and their struggles. In the spirit of Solanas and Getino's initial manifesto, *Wan 'N Wina's* chief aim is to document, bear witness, and deepen our understanding of the truth of the situation – however unflattering it may be (1976: 55).

Not surprisingly, *Wan 'N Wina* is not a perfect model of Third Cinema – few films are. Firstly, the presence of foreign funding and influence defy the tenets of Third Cinema. (It could be argued however, that this is indicative of the type of self-defeating dogma Third Cinema proposes; without the Steps funding, it is unlikely that the film would have been made.) More importantly, the film's reluctance to prescribe any sort of call to action represents a significant shortcoming – one that has implications both in terms of Third Cinema framework, and in terms of the film's use-value and outcomes.

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<sup>103</sup> See Solanas and Getino, 1976.

## 8.5 USE VALUE AND OUTCOMES

### 8.5.1 AUDIENCE RESPONSE

While *Wan 'N Wina* may present a tragic picture of the lives of its characters, Phakathi contends that the subjects themselves were wholeheartedly pleased with the film.

The characters loved the film... they loved it for something I didn't think they would love it for: they loved it that the place they were from appeared on TV. I understand that if you come from a part of the world like that, you never feel connected to the bigger existence of Rosebank, Sandton, or Cape Town or the beach.

In this sense, the “need to be heard,” which Pryluck casts only as a problem in the pursuit of informed consent, takes on new meaning. It may indeed be true that the characters of *Wan 'N Wina* were eager to open up to Phakathi and bear their souls of a pathological need to communicate. It may also be true that this need – so powerful in a community that has so little voice – could have opened the door to exploitation. And yet, if there is satisfaction in being heard, then the film should be lauded for granting that satisfaction to a community that appears very much in need of it.

Beyond the community of its subjects, *Wan 'N Wina* has had remarkable reach. Among the Steps films, it is one of the most widely broadcast and has received a slew of international awards. This bears testimony to the film's many strengths – intimate, in-depth portrayals, strong characters, relevant themes, and the ability to reveal something genuinely new about a much-discussed topic. It is also likely, however, that some measure of the film's success stems from its ability to shock and dismay. As one writer asks of the film, “has such work become the new exotica for Europe, replacing the exhausted paradigm of ethnographic film that can no longer titillate audiences?” (Ginsburg and Abrash 2003: 7).

## 8.5.2 SOCIAL IMPACT

As a political tool in the fight against AIDS, *Wan 'N Wina* has clear but limited potential. The film does not attempt to tell local audiences anything they do not already know. Yet when the atrocities of daily life appear on a large screen and/or in the presence of a trained facilitator, they often take on greater significance. Because the film is presented in the language of the streets and because it actively highlights the practice of open dialogue, it has the potential to stimulate equally straight-forward dialogue among young audience members. Phakathi contends that he has seen some of these effects firsthand:

I have met a few kids... who come from black middle class backgrounds and who grew up in suburbs and they really didn't just like the film but took a lot from it... For a long time, I used to find out through friends that people were talking about the film on the trains and mothers would say to the kids, "don't be like that girl in the film." So most of the feedback I got was hearsay, that mothers were glad to see it that it showed the problem with getting pregnant young.

However, in the context of the Steps outreach program, *Wan 'N Wina* has had little impact. A stated goal of the series – and one that has proven critical to its success in the outreach arena – was to highlight *positive* examples of people living with HIV and stress the importance of taking personal responsibility for the disease. According to the project team, such positive narratives have proven very helpful in destigmatizing the disease and encouraging people to get testing and treatment, as opposed to seeing HIV as a death sentence and feeling helpless (Dworkin et al, 2003: 11-12). In addition, these films and the characters who present them provide living examples of how to live productively with HIV – modeling positive behaviors like seeking testing, getting treatment, practicing safe sex, etc.

*Wan 'N Wina*, however, offers no positive role models and prescribes no course of action. It is partly for this reason that the film is not one of the more widely used outreach films in the series. To date, it has not been translated into any languages other than English and its success as an international showpiece has clearly outpaced its use

on the home front. “When I did outreach, I never thought to use that film,” says facilitator Susan Levine. “It didn’t have the kind of direction that the other films had – it’s more of an expose of the street. And it was too long. As soon as the films got too long, we didn’t use them” (Levine 2008). Even in the context of international screenings, this is problematic. Left without hope that the social problems found in Phakathi’s community can be corrected – much less any sense of how to help – audiences are not moved to take action, to provide support, or to seek policy redress.

## 8.6 CONCLUSION

To its great credit, *Wan ‘N Wina* is perhaps the most successful documentary to date when it comes to revealing all of the social ills driving the AIDS epidemic in poor South African communities. This is undoubtedly its greatest asset and no small accomplishment. At the same time, it could be regarded as the film’s biggest flaw. While Phakathi’s “snapshot” of urban township life is careful not to judge, it does open the door for others to do so.

Some would argue that as a previously oppressed black South African, it is Phakathi’s right to tell the story of his people as he sees fit – just as so many white directors have done before him. If his films fail to conform to the standards of the white, Western, male-dominated world of film and ethnographic theory but please the subjects who are represented and speak to the communities for whom they were intended, then so be it. At the very least, he has given poor South Africans – and in particular poor, South African women – a voice.

In Phakathi’s view, the social problems facing black South Africans today are such that filmmakers need to be blunt. When the anti-apartheid documentaries of the 1980s were being made, many corners were cut – ethically and aesthetically – in the name of responding to the crisis. As Phakathi argues, the war is not over, and to fight against the problems that continue to plague his people demands frank dialogue, not academic theory or aesthetic complexity.

South Africa as a country is in trouble. But black people as a people, are in trouble really. Aside from the cars, and the glitz, and the World Cup...

as a people we are really in trouble... I think film, and documentaries specifically have an important roll in building a bridge over this crocodile infested shit we are walking over as a people and as a country. It's like people aren't acknowledging where we are.

In the end, *Wan 'N Wina* should not be evaluated in isolation but as part of a larger body of work within a larger media landscape. If, per the counsel of Bill Nichols, we view the film not as a solitary representation by a single voice that must fulfill all, but as one of many diverse voices and perspectives that should be brought to the fore, then surely it is justified in its existence. Where *Wan 'N Wina* is the only film seen by an outsider audience without any added analysis or context, that may be problematic. But perhaps in a world where more positive films about Africa existed, this wouldn't be such a problem. Phakathi's larger body of work does much to contribute to that sort of world and for this too he deserves credit.

# CHAPTER 9

## OBSERVATIONS OF AN OUTSIDER IN *THE MOTHER'S HOUSE*

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In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture. In the realm of culture, outsidership is a most powerful factor in understanding... We raise new questions of a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise for itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths... Each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched (Bakhtin, quoted in Willemsen 1990: 26).

### 9.2 BACKGROUND

One of South Africa's best known documentary makers, Francois Verster has built a successful career on documenting the lives of marginalized South Africans. His first film, *Pavement Aristocrats* (1998) presented a graphic portrayal of homeless people living on the streets of Cape Town and was, at the time, the highest rated documentary program ever to air on the SABC. His follow-up, *When the War is Over* (2002), is an equally gritty portrait of two freedom fighters struggling to come to terms with life after the Struggle. In 2004, he produced the Emmy Award-winning *A Lion's Trail*, which tells the story of Solomon Linda, a Zulu musician who wrote the internationally famous song "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," but was denied a share of the song's immense profits.

Verster's next offering and the focus of this chapter is *The Mother's House*, which was released in 2006. In the film, Verster and his longtime producer Neil Brandt again document life on the margins. This time the focus is on the troubled relationships among Amy, Valencia and Miche Moses – three generations of women living in Bonteheuwel township on the Cape Flats. The emphasis is on Miche, the youngest, and how her life is shaped by the violence that surrounds her, her mother's HIV status, and other problematic aspects of her environment. Weaving together pivotal scenes from her formative years, Verster creates a coming-of-age story that centers on the question of

whether or not Miche will break free from the negative cycles of behavior in her family and community and take advantage of better opportunities (theoretically) afforded to her in a newly democratic South Africa.

### 9.1.1 CONTROVERSY

*The Mother's House* has generated controversy from the moment Verster and Brandt announced their intentions to pursue the project in 2003. In an industry fraught by racial tension, the very idea of two “privileged” white filmmakers documenting the lives of a three impoverished black women immediately drew criticism that the filmmakers were reifying colonial patterns of representation.<sup>104</sup> “There was almost this aggression toward us,” says Brandt. “It was as if we were the whites filming the savages.” In fact, finding initial funding for the project was difficult, in part because of the political issues that surrounded it. “I wondered in a way if I wasn’t being a bit belligerent in pushing ahead,” Verster recalls, “but my reasons for wanting to make the film and theirs were valid.”

Interestingly, Verster contends that much of the resistance came from white filmmakers. He is also quick to point out that the film’s critics often failed to take into account many important particulars of the project:

Most of the grief was given before the film was made... There was a huge debate about it at SACOD. They called it racist and said it was exploiting black women’s pain. Then at INPUT, there was one commentator who had this thing about how maybe Miche needed a friend instead of a film. Then there were the usual lines about how we as white people came in and exploited. That’s a knee-jerk reaction. It doesn’t look at the actuality of the film.

Ironically, the politically treacherous nature of the project appears to have contributed to its success. Verster and Brandt both credit the charged environment with elevating their

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<sup>104</sup> This chapter makes a number of assertions about public reactions to *The Mother's House*. Evidence of various responses to the film was gathered through multiple sources including SACOD reports and Forum transcripts; interviews with the Moses family, Verster, Brandt, and other filmmakers who offered their opinions on the film; as well as my own attendance at screenings, including events at Encounters and at the University of Cape Town, which included post-screening audience discussions.

game. Knowing that they would be critiqued every step of the way, they engaged in an exhaustive process of self-examination about their intentions and methodology, which had positive affects both for the film and for its subjects. In the end, the film would provide compelling evidence that white filmmakers can document black subjects authentically and ethically.

Ultimately, *The Mother's House* is a film that centered on process more than product. This chapter therefore emphasizes the methodology employed in making the film more than its form and content. The lessons found therein provide an important model for white-on-black filmmaking in the New South Africa, and it is for this reason that *The Mother's House* is the focus of the final chapter of this study.

### 9.1.2 PROJECT HISTORY

The impetus for *The Mother's House* emerged from Verster's earlier film *When the War is Over*, in which Valencia Moses was intended to be a character. Verster had conducted a series of shoots with the family over a period of two years for that film, but for practical and aesthetic reasons, the material did not end up being used. However, a relationship had developed between Verster and the Moses family over the course of those two years and he felt a sense of obligation towards Valencia. Sensing that there was another story to be told, he eventually began making plans to produce *The Mother's House* with encouragement from the family members.

The genesis of the film actually came from them to some degree. We were sitting at their brother's house and they were speaking about all the things that had happened to the family. I was astounded. They had no idea how radical this stuff was. Renecia was saying they should write a book and I said, "why not make a film?" Valencia was very keen in the beginning – I think now because she saw it as a way to get back at her mother. This was going to be about abuse and how it affects the family. I felt this was an important story to be told and hadn't been done in this intimate way and I was in a position to do it (Verster 2006<sup>105</sup>).

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<sup>105</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the quotes attributed to Verster, Brandt and members of the Moses family in this chapter are derived from my own 2006 interviews with each.

From the beginning, Verster was particularly impressed by young Miche, who demonstrated an exceptional ease and charisma in front of the camera. Miche confesses that she was equally enthusiastic about the project. “I loved being in front of the camera,” she says. “I love the spotlight.”

Thus, from the inception of *The Mother's House*, several important factors were in place. A personal relationship existed between filmmaker and subject and that relationship translated into a desire on Verster's part to do right by the family (as opposed to only a desire to make a good film). Everyone involved had an understanding of the filmic process as a result of the two years of filming that had already occurred. Finally, Verster was drawn in particular to Miche as a likeable character – a point which is not insignificant because the presence of a strong, positive central character provides a critical defense of the film on which I will elaborate later.

## **9.2 PROCESS**

### **9.2.1 CREATING A CONTRACT**

Recognizing the sensitivities the project demanded, Verster and Brandt brought in ethical consultant Lucinda Englehart and worked with her to create an explicit contract with the Moses family from the outset. “From the beginning of *The Mother's House*, we were very clear that this had to be about process as much as about product,” Verster recalls. “You had two white males opting to make a film about a family of black women – impoverished black women who are HIV positive. It's a clear model of the empowered and the disempowered.” Hoping to level the playing field, clarify expectations on all sides, and strengthen the bond of trust between himself and his subjects, Verster made a series of formal pledges to the family.

### ***Informed Consent***

First and foremost, guidelines were established to ensure that filming would not proceed without proper informed consent. “Even if you don’t actively create expectations, they happen anyway,” Verster observes, echoing Pryluck’s sentiments. “You need to be ethically clear why you want to do it and [subjects] need to be clear why they want to do it, which they won’t always be.”

Verster maintains that he and Brandt were “as clear as possible” about the implications of the film and any possible outcomes. Verster pledged that the family would always have a say as to when filming would take place and that he would turn the camera off at any time at their request. They would be consulted on an ongoing basis with regard to process and needs. In addition, the subjects would have the option of pulling out of the project up until one year into filming. “I didn’t want to do it if they didn’t want to do it,” he explains. Finally, Verster felt that the process of gaining informed consent would have to be an ongoing one. In light of the fluid, observational nature of the project, he pledged to continue consulting with the family with regard to the evolving vision for the film and why it was being made.

### ***Editorial control***

In the interest of securing the family’s trust and comfort, Verster agreed up front that they would have a say in the edit. A series of cuts would be screened for family members and consensus would have to be achieved among the family and the filmmakers – a process which would prove difficult, but ultimately rewarding for both parties.<sup>106</sup>

### ***Psychiatric Help***

Understanding that the filming process would be an invasive one with the potential to draw out difficult issues, Verster pledged that psychiatric help would be made available

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<sup>106</sup> Of course, Ruby and Pryluck would argue that allowing the subjects input in the edit room does not constitute true collaboration because Verster still controlled the means of production and better understood the filmmaking process and all of its implications. Here again, Verster cites his intentions and relationship with the family as the key factors that would ensure the most ethical collaboration possible. In the end, the film’s positive outcomes for the family suggest that the collaboration was valid enough.

during and after production. At the same time, he was hopeful that the filmmaking process might hold psychological benefits for the Moses family.

We also undertook to try to have a process of stimulating understanding and conversation amongst family members. Our plan very naively was that because they had difficulty speaking to each other, we would record interviews and show them to the others and that this would stimulate debate. We very actively had this idea that this film would be a beneficial way of engendering change and understanding within a very conflicted family. I think overall we achieved that. I don't know how much (Verster 2006).

### ***Financial Assistance***

As noted previously, the subject of money can be a tricky one when it comes to negotiating access with underprivileged subjects. Verster and Brandt were therefore careful to define a series of financial terms that were clear enough to protect everyone involved from disappointment and/or exploitation. It was agreed that 50 percent of any profits generated by the film would be given to the Moses family – an arrangement designed to avoid the ethical pitfalls of “paying for participation,” while respecting the material needs of the subjects and the value of their contribution. The producers were very clear that “profit” would be defined as being reached only after expenses had been covered and that this might never happen. In addition, they stipulated that profits shared would support specific aims that would have a discernible positive impact on the family, such as educational expenses.

The terms of Verster and Brandt's contract with the Moses family went above and beyond the typical subject-filmmaker agreement. Yet the filmmakers describe it as a fair trade-off that would ultimately benefit both sides. “That was the agreement we made with the characters,” says Brandt. “We got access to their lives and we agreed to exercise discretion.” Like the producers of *Deal*, they would eventually find that the degree of trust afforded them as a result of this promise outweighed the cost of concessions made.

### **9.2.2 IMMERSIVE PRODUCTION**

Made over a period of six years, *The Mother's House* was an exhaustive project on many levels. Verster shot more than 110 hours of tape with the Moses family, working almost entirely alone and recording both sound and images himself – a practice driven not only by budget constraints, but also by a desire to maintain intimacy with the family.

For this kind of film, I believe you should always shoot yourself and not take a crew. I did everything that way except the first chapter. The benefit of that is that you have continuity of camera person. You have someone who understands and has trust. You obviously learn to read certain situations better because you've been there longer. It gives you flexibility to shoot whenever you want. You don't know what's going to happen – something might not happen or you might want to go for 15 minutes and you can't always afford to hire someone (Verster 2006).

In addition, Verster notes that working alone enabled him to leave a small footprint, which was particularly important when shooting in the Moses family's small home. "My ability to disappear was vastly improved by being the only person there," he explains. "When you don't want to interfere, it's difficult to direct someone." Without question, many of the film's more compelling scenes would not have unfolded as they did if a full two-person camera crew had been present.

### **9.2.3 REVERSE-EXPLOITATION AND MAINTAINING CONSENT**

Beyond the significant physical and mental demands of shooting alone, the production process involved many interpersonal challenges. Both Verster and the family concede that the process was extremely burdensome for the filmmaker – a fact which stemmed in part from the many contractual concessions he had made.

Firstly, just as ethnographers in the field are often trapped in the role of power-broker, Verster claims he frequently found himself being taken advantage of, caught in the middle of family squabbles, or thrown out of the house altogether.

I think opening up the door to negotiation so much was at some stages abused. Obviously people living under stressful circumstances will take advantage where they can... You give someone an arm, they take the leg. Sometimes I knew I was getting misused, like using my phone or giving lifts, but because you've set that up you can't stop. I was also often very consciously played up by one family member against another (Verster 2006).

On several occasions, the project was threatened by the subjects' wavering commitment. At one point, Valencia became unsure as to whether or not she wanted to disclose her HIV status on national television and aspects of the story were thrown into question until she regained her confidence. At another stage, one of the film's main characters threatened to drop out entirely. Each of these situations had to be negotiated delicately with the subjects, sometimes with assistance from psychiatric professionals.

At one point, things started getting really difficult. After about 14 months, I had no money. The family was at odds and Amy and Valencia were both cross with me. They would shout at me when I got there, as if to let off steam with me. Neil was in Johannesburg. I had no support and I thought, why am I doing this? At that point it was basically because I'd gone that far and because I wanted to do something for Miche. I love Miche. At that point, she was getting older and there wasn't such a clear relationship with her and it was heartbreaking to see this wonderful human being under such unbearable conditions (Verster 2006).

Verster's experience in many ways contradicts the popular argument that "privileged" filmmakers hold an unfair power advantage over marginalized subjects. "I was not always the empowered one," he argues. "I was often the subject of their manipulation. People try to say you have all the power as the filmmaker and it's just not like that. You can't make a film without your subjects, and some people use that as a manipulation tool."

#### 9.2.4 OBSERVATION VS. INTERVENTION: AN ETHICAL DILEMMA

At the same time, troubles emerged during filming in which Verster felt genuinely obliged to intervene. At the age of 14, Miche began doing “tik,” a highly addictive drug commonly used in the Cape Flats. According to Verster, the decline in her state became apparent as she sunk deeper and deeper into addiction and yet the problem was not being discussed among family members. At this point, he decided to take action and provided the fees required for Miche to get drug treatment, which would eventually enable her to overcome her addiction.

For many filmmakers, the choice to intervene in a subject’s life in such a fashion is problematic. Direct cinema purists would argue that there is no place for such intervention in the observational genre, for one cannot hope to capture the unvarnished truth and become an agent of change at the same time. Even more moderate directors argue that if one wants to reveal the gritty realities of life in Bonteheuwel, softening that reality is counterproductive and arguably misrepresentative.

Verster, on the other hand, describes the decision to get Miche into treatment as “a no-brainer,” arguing that relationships and human decency must remain the biggest driving force behind filmmaking, particularly if one wants to document the intimate details of people’s lives. “No one was doing anything about it,” he says. “We were in a position to do it. We weren’t about to do nothing for the sake of objectivity.” Brandt takes this line of reasoning one step further:

I don't think that helping her go to drug rehab was in any way related to the filmmaking process. It was born out of a personal relationship between Francois and the family. Just by virtue of being there as a filmmaker, you are changing the situation, so what do you do – watch Miche get deeper and deeper into her drug habit when rehab could play a role in her getting better? I don't want to make that kind of film. I don't think that's right.

While the ethical demands of friendship clearly support Verster’s actions, the ethics of observational filmmaking are more complex. One could argue simply that Verster’s

brand of documentary “truth” mimics that of Rouch – i.e. “the truth of what happened before the camera,” as opposed to what would have happened if *The Mother’s House* had not been made. The difference between Verster and Rouch, however, is that Verster is not reflexive about his interventions. While the film documents Miche’s drug rehabilitation, it does not reveal his hand in the process (in fact, he does not have any overt presence in the film at all). While this may constitute a form of audience deception, the real question is whether or not the deception is of consequence. Would audiences read the film, its characters, or the “realities” of life on the Cape Flats differently if they knew that the filmmaker was paying for Miche’s drug counseling? One suspects not.

A similar ethical conflict arose when a fight erupted between Valencia and her sister Tammy and the two came to physical blows while Verster was filming. Here, a classic filmmaker’s dilemma came into play: should Verster continue filming, turn the camera off, and/or break up the fight before someone got hurt? Again, direct cinema purists would argue that his role was not to intervene, but to capture the events as they unfold. Others would argue that it is in bad taste to continue filming – both because the footage is exploitive, and because it is inhumane to allow the two to physically harm each other. Settling somewhere in between these two perspectives, Verster filmed the battle’s inception but eventually intervened before anyone was hurt. “In the end, I kind of stopped the fight by blocking the way,” he says, “Because they are your friends. If your friends start tearing each other’s hair out, that’s what you do.”

Beyond the moment of filming lay the difficult choice of whether or not to include the incident in the film. In the end, it was included and the decision has, predictably, drawn some fire.<sup>107</sup> Critics contend that the footage smacks of voyeuristic excess and that its inclusion in the film was disrespectful to the subjects. Miche admits that she finds it

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<sup>107</sup> The scene in question includes a verbal argument between the two sisters, leading up to the moment when Valencia throws the first punch. Verster then quickly cuts to the film’s only reflexive moment: an image (presumably captured by mistake) of his audio cables dangling from the camera. The shot which barely hints at his own act of intervention. In the next shot, the scene transitions to the aftermath. The sisters are silent and remorseful and Tammy eventually leaves the house as Valencia looks on sadly. The sum total of these events could be described as tasteful and minimalist. Verster has included just enough footage of the feud to make clear what has happened and no more. The physical fighting lasts for but a few short seconds, ending before one really has a chance to register what has happened, much less engage in the sort of voyeuristic gazing that might render the scene distasteful.

painful to watch. However, Verster counters that the decision to include the scene was not taken lightly. In a film about family violence, it is hardly gratuitous. Moreover, all of the family members, including Valencia and Tammy, agreed that the scene could be included. Whether or not everyone involved had a clear sense of the potential consequences, no one can say, though none have been reported.

### **9.2.5 COLLABORATION**

#### ***Production***

*The Mother's House* provides a clear example of how consent and collaboration are often problematized by questions of how well subjects understand the filmmaking process and their own motivations for participating. Given a family history of violence and abuse and the personal nature of the family's relationship with Verster, there was a risk that the subjects might unburden themselves before the camera without a clear sense of how the process and the film's release might affect them later. Verster cites one particularly illustrative example of how this factor impacted the production process:

There was one very big strand that we decided not to put in the film. We had been filming but we half followed it because we weren't sure. It concerned Leandra and she kept changing her mind about whether she wanted it in. We took her to a psychologist to try to assess whether it would be a good thing for her or not... We decided [there were] too many legal and moral issues. In the end Leandra wanted it in, but we felt that in the long term it would do more harm than good.

The process employed here is instructive as a response to Pryluck's demands for informed consent. Understanding that neither the subject's consent nor his own predictions about outcomes would provide a sufficient basis for moving forward, Verster managed to do his due diligence by employing an outside expert to help make the judgment call.

### ***Post-Production***

Collaboration in the edit room would prove to be yet another challenging process, though not in the manner one might expect. “The problem with consensus was not between them and us, it was amongst themselves,” explains Verster. “The stuff that Amy got furious with was stuff that Valencia wanted in and vice-versa... It was an incredibly difficult process.” While no single version of the film could accommodate each of the family member’s ideals, the filmmakers did eventually arrived at a cut that met everyone’s approval. While Verster describes the final result as “a little gentler than it could have been,” all of the family members contend that the film accurately represents them and their situation. In addition, it is clear that they are pleased to have had a hand in constructing the film, particularly in the wake of its success.

### ***Distribution***

The process of collaboration did not end with the final edit of *The Mother's House*. Miche has traveled with Verster to many of the film’s screenings to participate in question-and-answer sessions afterward with audiences. This process has provided an important opportunity for her to continue exercising a degree of control over the shaping of her own public image – particularly with local audiences. An added benefit is that it has allowed Miche to directly experience positive feedback from audiences.

## **9.3 ANALYZING THE FILM**

### **9.3.1 MODES: PARTICIPATORY OBSERVATION**

*The Mother's House* is a classic participatory/observational film made in the development communication tradition. Most of the film’s content consists of unscripted observational scenes, shot and edited with the aesthetic aims of realism in mind. As a result, the film has a way of pulling audiences into a state of “suspension of belief” and absorbing them in the narrative.

The film is participatory in that it includes several informal interviews with the characters. Countering Winston’s claims that interviewing constitutes an “unnatural act,” Verster has crafted his interviews in a very open-ended manner. Here the goal is not to elicit a particular response but to engage the subjects in dialogue and encourage them to reflect

thoughtfully on the events unfolding around them, including their own behavior. As a result, the interviewing process functions less as a means of directorial control, and more as a means of empowering the subjects to open up and speak for themselves.

As in the case of *Red Ribbon* and *Very Fast Guys*, two important use-values emerge from this practice. Firstly, the characters engaged in a process of reflection that prompted new insights about their own behavior. (Where the gangsters in *Very Fast Guys* were moved to reconsider their criminal lifestyles, members of the Moses family were moved to improve their family dynamic.) Secondly, the interviews give the characters a platform for contextualizing their own actions. Though the film exposes a fair amount of unsavory behavior, the family members are allowed to comment, analyze, and apologize for their mistakes. Valencia bemoans the love and attention she sought but never received from her mother. Amy confesses that she was too young and inexperienced as a parent and that her overly strict manner fed Valencia's aggression. Miche confides that she has been doing tik and her eyes tear up as she explains, "I have no one to talk to. It is the only thing that is mine." These insights are critical in terms of contextualizing and humanizing the characters' behavior for audiences.

### **9.3.2 INTIMACY AND QUESTIONS OF VOYEURISM**

*The Mother's House* draws much of its power from its sense of intimacy with the characters. This stems largely from Verster's close relationship with his subjects and the therapeutic nature of their conversations. Their trust in him is apparent in the scenes they have allowed him to film and deeply personal thoughts they express to him on camera. Verster also demonstrates a real talent for drawing insights and emotions out of people through his questioning manner. "I am an emotional invader," he confesses. "I ask people intimate questions very quickly, which is not always a good thing... In the filming, directing, I am always reading a situation emotionally."

This sense of emotional intimacy is also reflected in Verster's shooting style, which includes many extreme close-ups of his characters that highlight their facial expressions and other emotive details. "Nearly all the members of the family have some kind of brooding, powerful quality in the way they stare at things," Verster explains. "I filmed many tense, long-held shots" (2006: 2).

The intimate nature of *The Mother's House* is one of the film's greatest strengths, but also a point of contention for critics who feel that certain scenes, which expose the family at their worst, are overly voyeuristic. In addition to footage of Valencia and Tammy coming to blows, the film includes countless family arguments, as well as footage of neighbors fighting in the street. Particularly troubling are instances in which tangential characters are caught on tape using illegal narcotics. In one scene, guests at Miche's fourteenth birthday party are shown smoking marijuana and the presence of broken light bulbs clearly attests to the presence of tik. In another instance, a teenage boy declares on camera that he only does "quarter grams" because larger doses make him paranoid. The choice to broadcast these moments is questionable, particularly when involving minors who may have little idea of the potential consequences.

The classic justification for these indiscretions, as argued for decades by Leacock, Grierson, et al.,<sup>108</sup> is that there is social value in exposing such moments as a means of generating reflection, discussion and self-awareness. In his official director's statement, Verster articulates a similar line of reasoning as his motivation for making the film:

The socio-political reasons for making a film like this are... fairly obvious: more than a decade after Apartheid, violence still has a huge impact on people's lives within poor communities. The battle against racial discrimination has now been replaced by a battle against new problems such as ongoing poverty, AIDS and the more widespread availability of harmful illegal drugs. The position of women in poor areas, even if extensively furthered by South Africa's new constitution, has hardly changed at all. Much is made in the media about gangsterism, about rape, about child abuse and familial dysfunctionality – but the voices of the people inside those families themselves affected are seldom heard. It seemed to me that it would be through the medium of observational documentary that insight could be obtained into certain types of situations in the Cape Flats – a question not of numbers and hard facts, but of association and empathy with people that are actually living through the

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<sup>108</sup> I refer here to the various statements by said filmmakers previously discussed in section 4.4.2 of this study.

effects of Apartheid and broader patriarchy, and are having to deal with new issues facing their communities, individual selves and families on a direct level.

The intention with the film is not to lecture, not to put forth a polemical argument, but to give the viewer an experience of what it may be like to be there as a young woman, and to gain insight into the kind of family conflicts that can easily be racialized from the outside. Social workers, sociologists and psychologists usually work with the issues explored in the film at a remove. This film, however, observes life under difficult circumstances as it occurs firsthand, and in that way has for me great value as an intimate document of at least one life in the process of being shaped.

Of course, the popular counterpoint to this line of reasoning, as argued by Pryluck and Ruby, is that little is typically gained by such efforts to expose the plight of the poor and the pathological and therefore the public “right to know” should not be seen as outweighing the individual’s right to privacy.<sup>109</sup> While these opposing positions can be argued ad nauseum, the real question again is one of outcomes – what real impact did the film have for both its subjects and the world at large?

Verster contends that no harm came to any of the people who appeared in *The Mother's House* as a result of the film. Miche concurs, adding that it was common knowledge that the youths in question were regular drug users, and that indeed the film was helpful in getting the community to begin talking more openly about drug use. A variety of other positive outcomes support this argument, each of which will be addressed later in this chapter.

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<sup>109</sup> See Pryluck (1976), and Ruby (1971, 1991, 1995, 2000), as well as prior discussion in section 4.4.2 of this study.

### 9.3.3 THE INVISIBLE AUTHOR

A second popular criticism of *The Mother's House* is that it lacks reflexivity and transparency. The rationale here is that if an “outsider” like Verster wants to document the most intimate details of other people’s lives, he is at the very least beholden to reveal his own biases and methodology just as Craig Matthew has done in *Ochre and Water*. A strict application of Ruby’s theories supports this conclusion. However, to suggest that the reflexive mode is the only appropriate mode for an outsider to employ is overly essentialist. Plantinga’s arguments against privileging the reflexive mode above all others supports this.

In addition, one must consider that films like *The Mother's House*, which have vaguely ethnographic tendencies but stray far from any sort of strict definition, do not purport to be academic, positivist, or all-knowing in nature. Unlike *Ochre and Water*, *The Mother's House* makes no direct overarching claims about the culture of an entire ethnic group. Rather, it represents the personal story of but one family, with the community serving only as context. The presence of a clearly delineated dramatic story arc within the film further signals to the viewer that the film has employed a certain artistic license and should not be read as any sort of scientific study.

Judged by Nichols’s standards, the use of the observational mode would not be considered altogether inappropriate (1991: 41-42), though it may be said to raise potential concerns about creating a false sense of objectivity. To this notion, Verster himself makes an eloquent counterpoint:

I do not believe in objectivity in documentary film – integrity is a more important concept here. So if a filmmaker can consciously – and through deliberate ongoing self-questioning – keep track of why and what they are doing and then combine that with honesty and respect towards what they encounter, it will go a long way towards finding the film – or filmmaker’s ‘voice.’ Authorial presence does not have to mean including the filmmaker on screen. That kind of self-consciousness often works against being able to experience the subject fully.

This notion of “experiencing the subject fully” speaks to the strengths of the observational mode, which *The Mother's House* exploits effectively. Moreover, by choosing not to impose himself as a character and his voice as the voice of authority, Verster has heightened our sense of the Moses family’s agency. As Maingard argues, representation is driven by a combination of “the voice of the filmmaker and the voice of the speaking subjects.” This in films where the voice of the filmmaker dominates (through first-person narration and reflexivity), the voice of the subjects feels diminished and potentially undermined (1995: 179-80). In *The Mother's House*, there is a sense that the characters are empowered to tell their own story without interference. Indeed, the film’s participatory elements cannot be discounted. Verster has given his subjects a good deal of agency in terms of constructing their own representations – both by giving them direct voice in the film and by giving them a say in the production and distribution process.

#### **9.4 QUESTIONS OF STEREOTYPES**

The most popular criticism of *The Mother's House* is that it perpetuates negative stereotypes, presenting a damaging picture of poor, black women and perpetuating stereotypical notions that South African townships are filled with violence, poverty, drug use, and HIV. Certainly these social problems are all a part of the film, just as they are all a part of Mische’s reality. Yet, the film’s portrayals are sufficiently complex and mixed with positive imagery that to accuse it of stereotyping constitutes a false reduction. Such critics would do well to heed Shohat and Stam’s critical insights with regard to the common preoccupation with exposing negative “stereotypes” on film.

[This preoccupation] can lead to a kind of essentialism, as the critic reduces a complex diversity of portrayals to a limited set of reified stereotypes. Behind every black child performer, from Farina to Gary Coleman, the critic discerns a ‘pickaniiny’, behind every sexually attractive black actor a ‘buck’ and behind every attractive black actress a ‘whore’. Such reductionist simplifications run the risk of reproducing the very racism they were initially designed to combat (1985: 640).

To suggest that *The Mother's House* is a racist portrayal constitutes precisely this sort of oversimplification for several reasons, which I shall now examine.

#### 9.4.1 EMPOWERED AFRICAN WOMEN

Firstly, the existence of strong, independent black women in *The Mother's House* defies historical representations. African women – like most of their Third World counterparts – have long been presented in the media as impotent and one-dimensional, as Mohanty has argued:

The average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc.) This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the 'freedom' to make their own decisions... These distinctions are made on the basis of the privileging of a particular group as the norm or referent (quoted in Saks 2003).

*The Mother's House* not only gives voice to three generations of black women but also defies the tradition of representing African women as ignorant and victimized. The Moses family are clearly strong and in control, despite their difficult circumstances. Valencia embodies this quality when she talks about the disappearance of her husband with resolute toughness:

*I missed a period and found out I was pregnant... My husband decided he didn't want to be there and left. And that's about it, I suppose. I've managed to cocoon this thing around me and me alone. I'm trying to cut this off Miche as much as possible.*

Valencia is similarly resolute with regard to her HIV status. Defying taboos about discussing HIV in her community, she declares, "I have too much to deal with to worry about how others feel about my illness. If my mother or sisters are embarrassed, that's

their problem. Those are petty issues. All these people outside are petty.” Moreover, Valencia takes all the right measures to ensure that the disease is not passed on to her unborn child, seeking regular medical care, asking pointed questions of her doctors, and demanding redress when the clinic fails to deliver the baby’s test results. Like the most successful films in the Steps series, *The Mother’s House* provides a critical positive example of someone living with HIV.

Miche likewise provides a positive counterpoint to notions of poor, victimized, African women. In contrast to the many young women in *Wan ‘N Wina*, who are manipulated and mistreated by men, Miche demonstrates an uncommon confidence and a charming innocence in her dealings with boys. In one scene, as “the Barbie doll of the school” seeks male attention by posing for the camera and the boys, Miche confidently differentiates herself:

*I’m not like that because I know I have a lot of boys as friends but they’re only friends. In the morning, the girls will hug the boys but I’d rather shake Peter-Lee or Junaid’s hand, boy-style. The girls are modeling at school... They press out their boobs and wear short skirts. No, that’s definitely not me.*

While Miche makes some mistakes along the way (using tik, for example), the film demonstrates that she has the capacity to learn from those mistakes, to correct them, and ultimately, to succeed in life. Ultimately, Miche demonstrates that, given just a little more advantages than her mother was given in the prior regime, she has the wherewithal to rise above her circumstances.

#### **9.4.2 POSITIVE IMAGES**

The film’s depiction of the Moses family is further justified by the fact that the troubles in their lives are counterbalanced by many “moments of beauty” (to use Phakathi’s words). When Miche gets her ears pierced, she exudes exactly the same girlish excitement and pride that one would expect from any white, upper-middleclass girl of her age. The birth of Valencia’s baby is a source of joy within the family, despite the concerns attached to the baby’s health. This thread runs throughout the film – from scenes of Valencia’s baby

shower to the tender moments that Miche spends mothering the child. The occasion of the child's birth is particularly touching. Here, Verster replaces diegetic sound with a tinkling melody reminiscent of a music box – eliminating all distractions and focusing our attention on the internal diegesis of the family members – all joy, peace and happiness at that moment.

The same technique is echoed at the end of the film. The conclusion begins with the celebration of Miche's confirmation. Grandmother Amy is proud and Miche is beautiful and beaming. Dressed in white and walking down the church aisle to the sounds of a children's choir, she is the picture of happiness. The film closes with a montage of shots of Miche and Valencia together – walking down the street, arm-in-arm, dancing, happy – and finally some images of Miche at a skating rink with her friends. Again, diegetic sound is removed and the film's innocent, child-like theme returns. Miche appears happy and healthy. The film's closing titles suggest a brighter future:

Soon after these events,  
Miche joined a private educational college with the help of her aunt.  
Valencia moved into her own home  
and decided to become an HIV counselor.  
Two of Amy's six children continue to live in their mother's house.

### **9.4.3 CONTEXTUALIZATION**

Another point of contrast between *Wan 'N Wina* and *The Mother's House* is that the latter takes care to demonstrate the historical and environmental factors that drive the negative behavior patterns displayed by the characters. For example, great care was taken to explain the root causes of Valencia's anger in a manner that would allow her to feel fairly represented.

When we did the tv cut originally, Valencia felt very strongly and Tammy as well that her reasons for being so angry were not clear enough. She comes across as this angry bitch who just fights and moans and is miserable and we don't get enough of a sense of where this comes from.

And I agreed. As a result, we put in more stuff about her mother (Verster 2006).

More importantly, *The Mother's House* takes pains to properly contextualize the Moses family's problems within the broader social context of post-apartheid South Africa. The film's opening titles allude to the lingering affects of apartheid on coloured communities and how the resulting prevalence of poverty and drug use affect the development of young people like Miche. Miche's own ability to pinpoint the connection between the Struggle and her family's current dysfunctions is remarkable, as the following comment demonstrates:

*My generation's mothers and grandmothers all lived under apartheid. My mother's been through fighting and is automatically going to teach me to fight. Starting from apartheid, it's an ongoing cycle. They know no better way... Whenever my granny and my mommy shout at me and I know that I'm right and they're wrong, I tell myself, there's point number one: When I have children, don't offend them and blame them for the things that I do. Try to find a better job, finish school, get good marks, stuff like that... Try to do things better than they did, or are still doing.*

This statement embodies the fine line that Verster has managed to tread between context and victimhood. Context is one of the key themes of *The Mother's House* and in fact much of the film's social value lies in the ability to illustrate how one extremely likable character (Miche) can be stretched to the brink by the negative influences in her environment. However – and this is a critical point – the film resists portraying its characters as helpless victims of circumstance. Ultimately, we are left with a sense of hope that the strong can survive and a profound respect for those who do.

## **9.5 OUTCOMES**

### **9.5.1 AUDIENCE RESPONSE**

Audience reactions to the *The Mother's House* have, for the most part, been very positive. In South Africa, the film impressed audiences and won best documentary

awards at the Sithengi, Durban International, and Apollo film festivals, as well as the SAFTA Awards. Internationally the film has screened widely at festivals and on heavy-hitting networks such as the Sundance Channel and Canal+. Over time, controversy surrounding the film seems to have died down as the success of the film has risen and industry insiders have become increasingly aware of the process involved.

### 9.5.2 IMPACTS FOR SUBJECTS

Brandt is quick to point out that what is most important in such cases is not theory or politics or the opinions of other filmmakers, but the impact on the subjects and their community. “They didn't care about what people think overseas or at UCT, they care about what people think of them in their neighborhood,” he argues. “There is a lot of respect for their courage.” Those present at festival screenings couldn't miss the obvious admiration and respect audiences had for Miche. By all accounts, the reaction of the Cape Flats community to *The Mother's House* was overwhelmingly supportive, and as Miche attests, the impacts on the family have been very positive:

The outcome was very good. Afterwards, a lot of people started coming to my mom as if she's a counselor, telling her about their HIV status. People respect me now... Everywhere I go people ask, 'How are you doing? How's your mother?' I feel like we were the start of something very good.

Verster adds that the community seems to have benefited greatly in the form of pride and a sense that their story has been told to the broader world. “We had huge numbers of people telling us that they saw their own emotional lives reflected in it and... all three main characters received a massive amount of interest and support as a result,” he says (Verster 2006). Here too it appears that the “desire to be heard” is a powerful factor in Bonteheuwel and one that has been satisfied in part by the film.

More importantly than all of the public attention, perhaps, is the process of healing the project has stimulated within the family. “Things in my family changed drastically,” Miche says. “There's no more secrecy or ill treatment of any daughters. There's nothing like that... I think it's that we could see ourselves [from the outside]. It really makes you

think.” Verster echoes this sentiment, noting that he has seen a definite positive change in the family dynamic:

I think the biggest thing actually, as Valencia will tell you, is what she describes as three years of free psychotherapy. I was someone she could speak to with a kind ear for a very long period. For Miche, obviously it gave her a lot of confidence, especially after the film came out. When that film was honoured on tv, all of them got complete support from the community. For months people from the community came and offered help. People would come to them and say, ‘we really know what you are going through...’ I think it made them feel that it was ok to have lived those lives because so many people were actually going through the same things. It was extremely courageous of them to go through with all that and they actually gained respect for it.

In addition, the film has resulted in a variety of practical and material benefits for the family. Valencia was offered a job as a direct result of the film and Miche has received attention from drama and film directors, bringing hopes that the film could serve as a launching pad for a career in the media. Finally, while the film had not yet earned a profit as of late 2006, the filmmakers nonetheless began making financial contributions to the family – paying for a range of expenses from school fees, to professional training programs to home improvement projects.

## **9.6 INSIDER VS OUTSIDER: A FINAL ANALYSIS**

A fundamental, if not defining and historical, characteristic of ethnography has been that it expresses the view of an outsider... The chief value and inherent limitation of all ethnography still remains that it is the product of professional outsiders – people whose lifelong loyalties, commitments, obligations and so forth do not lie exclusively with the community represented. The agendas of people representing a culture in which they are native have to be different from those who are not (Ruby 2000: 31).

As Ruby's preceding statement suggests, the presence of an outsider as storyteller has both positive and negative implications. The Moses family insist that Verster's status as an outsider was critical to the project's success – in terms of both maintaining the film's objectivity and encouraging them to open up about issues like HIV, which is rarely talked about in their community. "If someone from the community had made this film, it wouldn't have been such a big success in terms of solving our family problems," Miche argues. "How can someone who's inside the box critique someone who's in the same box?" Verster agrees:

I think what they found in the end, especially because I was an outsider was that I made them look at themselves and their lives through a lens that they otherwise would not have looked at. My outsidership was a benefit. If someone from the community had made the film it would have been different... I basically decontextualized what was normal for them – being this invasive person always asking questions.

At the same time, Miche is quick to point out that Verster really is no longer an outsider to her. After six years of shooting with the family and many more years of working in Bonteheuwel, the filmmaker has close ties to both the family and community. Verster speaks the local dialect and is intimately familiar with local customs and characters, just as they recognize him as a familiar face. Verster therefore finds it troubling that his critics so often define his status as an outsider solely by the color of his skin.

These essentialist questions – like why didn't I have a black female producer... I don't think you can assume that a black woman can be more sensitive to everything. Maybe some things. We showed it to a broad spectrum of people including Neil's partner who's a black woman. [My partner] is a black woman who had more say in this thing than just about anyone. We had a black AIDS activist and consultant who we worked with... But I have a problem with this thing that because someone has a certain racial background they come with all this insight. It's not like that. People presume because I'm Afrikaans that I have all this insight that I don't really have [about Afrikaans culture].

In a way I would go so far as to say that at the time of making *The Mother's House* there were certain things I knew about Bonteheuwel slang and whatnot that a middleclass coloured person from Wynburg might not understand because they haven't had that exposure. There's huge division among classes within the coloured community as well, and it's racist to assume that because someone is not coloured that they don't understand the Cape Flats.

It's tricky because as a white person you cannot be too sensitive to things like imbalances of power. And I think a lot of black people in the country get [upset] because white people speak without self-awareness. So you cannot be too self-aware. But on the other hand, a lot of the knee-jerk divisions in terms of race agenda are nonsense. It just doesn't work like that. It is endlessly more complicated.

Above and beyond Verster's familiarity with the Cape Flats community, his relationship with the family surely makes him as much of an expert as any with regard to the intimate details of their lives. Their many years spent together have created a genuine and abiding friendship. Valencia describes him as "a brother." Miche as "a great friend." Verster and Brandt both contend that the family will always be a part of his life. In a still divided South Africa, their relationship is a rarity.

I love Miche. She is not my family. I have no duty toward her over and above respect for her as a subject. But I want to see Miche succeed. I will always have an interest. If we could find a way for her to go to school, pay for university... When you make a film, those people are with you for the rest of your life (Brandt 2006).

For many filmmakers like Verster, the desire to make documentaries is often driven by a desire to know and understand different people and build relationships across socioeconomic lines. "The whole thing about white males.... you could say its voyeuristic but on the other hand it's a way of me engaging with the world around me and understanding the forces at work in my country," he says. "I've learned more about this country from making documentaries than any

other way.” In this sense, the filmmaking process has the potential to become an act of reconciliation in itself.

## **9.7 CONCLUSION**

*The Mother's House* is a film driven by process over product, ethics over aesthetics. It affirms Winston's contention that “the paramount issue is not what was or was not done during the filmmaking process but what relationships existed between the filmmaker and the subject” (1983: 12). The success of the project – for filmmakers, subjects, and broadcasters alike – also validates Hirsch's contention that any filmmaker can make an ethically sound documentary about any subject, so long as his heart is in the right place (Maes 2006: 35).

The type of collaborative, in-depth filmmaking described here is a difficult process and one that demands greater time and resources of the filmmaker, but it is increasingly essential if documentary filmmakers are to remain viable and meet the demands of a democratic and racially sensitive society. By working collaboratively with subjects and empowering them to tell their own stories, filmmakers of all socioeconomic backgrounds can find a place in serving the larger goal of diverse local content. Where filmmakers like Verster rise to meet this challenge, their efforts should be applauded.

# CHAPTER 10

## CONCLUSION

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This thesis has explored the question of whether and how race matters in the making of documentary films in a democratic South Africa. As a starting point for this discussion, I have established the existence of a counterproductive preoccupation with race among South African documentary filmmakers, who find themselves divided as to who has the right to represent whom, how to develop a broader base of black documentary filmmakers, and what should be done to fill the need for more diverse voices in the meantime. The research presented in this study has sought to identify the root causes and concerns associated with this issue, and explore emerging trends in terms of who is making documentaries in South Africa and how, as well as the representations of race that result. Finally, through a thorough analysis of three key films produced in South Africa between 2003 and 2006, I have investigated the ethics and authenticity of documentary practice on the part of black and white filmmakers alike.

### 10.1 A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING SOUTH AFRICAN DOCUMENTARIES

The framework I have created for this study interweaves documentary and ethnographic film theory with theories of Third cinema, development communication, and other scholarship that situates the films in their (South) African context. This framework prioritizes not only content and aesthetics, but also ethical process, attention to use-value and outcomes, and the need to subvert inappropriate Western/colonial/racist cinematic codes.

#### 10.1.1 FORM

In chapter three, I explored the ways in which documentaries can present more authentic representations through attention to formal approach. Using Bill Nichols's typology of documentary modes as an overarching framework, I have argued for a trend away from the didactic expository forms of the past (e.g. voice-of-god narration, authorial argumentation, didactic claims to truth), in favor of more open-ended forms of documentary (i.e. observational cinema which allows for multiple viewpoints and

interpretations, and participatory filmmaking in which subjects are empowered to exercise a greater degree of agency over the film's text). In addition, the theory supports reflexive filmmaking as a means of subverting documentary's problematic claims to truth. In South Africa in particular, reflexivity provides filmmakers who would document cultures other than their own the opportunity to openly acknowledge their outsider status, their methodology, and any relevant predispositions they may have toward the subject matter.

### **10.1.2 PROCESS**

In chapter four, I explored key ethical concerns associated with the practice of documenting the Other. Here, the emphasis was on process rather than product, acknowledging that ethical process is equally critical as – and often tied to – ethical representation. Drawing extensively on the lessons learned from ethnographic film theorists, I reached several conclusions.

First, I argued that the process of obtaining “informed consent” is significantly problematic and warrants greater caution than is typically exercised, particularly in those cases where a socioeconomic imbalance exists between filmmaker and subject, as is so often the case in South Africa.

Second, I contended that while filmmakers are increasingly learning to harness the power of documentary to create social change, this sort of impact can in no way be assumed as an excuse for the exploitation of subjects. Just as filmmakers are morally obligated to weigh anticipated outcomes for both their subjects and the public before they begin filming, so too must any documentary viewer take into account a film's *actual* impacts before engaging in critique. As early public reactions to *The Mother's House* illustrate, this point is all too often forgotten when discussions of documentary ethics become tainted with racial essentialism.

Third, I argued that collaborative filmmaking (“documentary with the Other”) and insider filmmaking (“documentary by the Other”) – while critical, if inevitable, developments in the global drive to democratize and diversify documentary practice – should not be seen as a cure-all for misrepresentation. While many argue that only “insiders” have a right to

document black culture in a democratic South Africa, Pryluck has convincingly argued that “we are all outsiders” when we seek to film anyone but ourselves (1976). Moreover, as Ruby argues, no one group has privileged insight into its own history, nor does any particular group of people have “the corner on being self-serving or adjusting the past to fit the needs of the present” (2000: 205). Therefore, a measure of caution is warranted, lest insider filmmaking become characterized by the same suspect methodology that pervaded white-on-black representations of the past.

Finally and most importantly, I argue that the presence of a meaningful relationship between filmmaker and subject is the single greatest determinant of ethical documentary filmmaking. This is neither the sole domain of the insider filmmaker, nor unavailable to the outsider filmmaker (as it all too often assumed). Rather, it is the obligation of both.

As I noted at the outset of chapter four, the subject of ethics has long been neglected in the realm of documentary theory, particularly as it relates to process. While countless documentary analyses have been published, few focus on the means by which films are made, as opposed to the representations that result. This provides fruitful territory for further study. In South Africa, where subjects have historically been abused and the ethics of representation are fraught with complexities, better ethical guidelines must be conceived. This study has endeavored to take an important first step in this direction. However, it will require a weighing in by the broader community of scholars and filmmakers to reach a consensus on such matters.

### **10.1.3 HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND QUESTIONS OF RACE**

In chapter four, I explored the question of how documentary’s colonial roots have led to the racialization of cinematic conventions – a factor which continues to have implications for contemporary filmmakers and critics. Tracing the development of nonfiction cinema from its early roots at the height of imperialism, I argued for the legitimacy of claims by black South Africans who would reclaim their cinema, their history, and the right to represent themselves. Certainly, an awareness of the Western/Euro-centric conventions that have been inscribed onto cinematic practice across the globe and their potential to encourage racist stereotypes is critical not only for South African filmmakers, but filmmakers everywhere.

While Third Cinema constitutes the most popular response to this problem, I have argued that its theories offer limited relevant insight for the practice of making documentaries in South Africa. As an alternative, I have advocated for Tomaselli's development communication theory – a framework which effectively interweaves all of the pertinent theories discussed in the preceding chapters, providing an appropriate mix of practical, ethical, and formal guidelines for documentary filmmaking in the Global South. Drawing on Nichols's typology, Tomaselli advocates for a hybrid mode of documentary he calls "participant observation," in which observational footage is combined with the participation of speaking subjects. This mix of modes has the power to harness the unscripted reality of observational cinema with the empowering, contextualizing and humanizing properties of subject commentary. Emphasizing ethics, Tomaselli argues in favor of immersion as a means of building relationships and understanding between filmmaker and subject. Taking into account the colonial roots of both cinema and development initiatives, he argues that it is critical for documentary makers to collaborate with their subjects – not only for the sake of allowing them an appropriate degree of control over their own representation, but also for the sake of ensuring that messages are properly received by southern African audiences. Finally, Tomaselli's theory emphasizes use-value and outcomes – important criteria if filmmakers are to continue justifying the scrutiny of others' lives and cultures in the name of social progress.

While Tomaselli's theories on development communication provide a critical starting point on which this study has expanded, the theory is still a nascent one. Further elaboration of development communication theory, as well as further publication and analysis of the SACOD Forum discussions from whence it came, would be critical contributions to the industry. Within the context of development communication lie several other areas that merit attention.

The area of impact studies remains largely underexplored by documentary producers and theorists. While the ineffectual nature of early social films made by Grierson and the NFB are well-documented, advances in this area have received scant attention. As the internet increases the global reach of documentary films and thereby their potential as agents of social change, a wealth of critical case studies are emerging. Yet theoretical

texts and production handbooks alike have been slow to engage with the emergent practice of documentary activism. As Tomaselli has noted of SACOD producers, “The relationship between the production and social change remains vague in that few producers seriously consider how to materially impact the communities or subjects with which they work. The critique is there, to be sure, but the follow-through is often lacking, often for good reasons” (2004: 18). The Steps producers have created one effective model for using documentaries to affect social change. However, this example has not found its way into documentary literature.<sup>110</sup> A more thorough investigation of this and other case studies with an eye toward developing new methodologies for maximizing use-value and impact would be an invaluable contribution to the field of development communication, and indeed to southern Africa at large.

Another related area that demands further study is that of audience reception. Where Asch and Martinez have greatly illuminated the field of ethnography through their investigation of student readings of ethnographic texts,<sup>111</sup> documentarians have been slow to investigate such matters. This forces a degree of speculation on the part of both filmmakers and theorists. With South African audiences, given all their diversity, questions of how a film may be received are particularly difficult to predict. As Tomaselli puts it, “not all spectators make sense of videos in the way intended by producers, or in terms of the interpretive frames they bring to viewing experiences, or in terms of their political positions” (2004: 18). In addition, the application of Third Cinema theory in a South African context by Maingard et al without regard to evidence that township audiences are predisposed against this form of cinema<sup>112</sup> suggests a disjuncture between South African theorists and the majority audiences they mean to serve. In short, the gap between theory and on-the-ground audience reactions is wide and must be closed if documentaries are to fulfill their promise of creating positive social change.

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<sup>110</sup> Strangely, the only academic analysis of the Steps outreach process can be found not in documentary literature, but in *Visual Anthropology Review*. C.f. Dworkin et al (2003), Englehart (2003), Levine (2003). A book authored by Steps Executive Proder Don Edkins is forthcoming.

<sup>111</sup> C.f. Asch (1992), Martinez (1990), Ruby (2000).

<sup>112</sup> See Maingard (1995), as well as further discussion in section 5.4.1 of this study.

## **10.2 HISTORICAL BARRIERS AND THE STATE OF TRANSFORMATION**

Chapter six outlined several issues that affect who is making films in South Africa about whom and to what effect. Here, I have argued that the conditions created by apartheid not only prevented the emergence of black filmmakers and a black film culture, but also inhibited white filmmakers from developing the sort of meaningful relationships with black subjects that might empower them to craft ethical and accurate representations.

### **10.2.1 INDUSTRY TRANSFORMATION**

Predictably, my research demonstrates that the changes required to transform South Africa's documentary industry parallel the larger needs for transforming the country. Put simply, this task demands time, money and collaboration. While the desire to achieve parity now is understandable, the realities are such that it will be decades before we see the fruits of the first generation of black South Africans born into a democratic society with a documentary culture, sufficient training opportunities, and the economic resources required to pursue a career in film. As South African film schools come of age and more black students graduate from these programs, the number of black filmmakers should grow exponentially in the next few years. Still it must be noted that documentary film is a uniquely complex industry – one that requires a great deal of time, training, funding and sacrifice, with little or no profit. Consequently, it is an industry in which the barriers to entry will remain high in South Africa, just as they remain high throughout the world.

Needless to say, a great deal of work remains to be done if the industry is to reach an acceptable state of racial parity. From a research standpoint, the question of funding is paramount. Several documentary filmmakers interviewed for this study posited that documentaries have the potential to create more jobs and affect more social change than narrative films but are ignored by national development initiatives in favor of the glamour and high profile of latter genre. This may be true, but an objective case based on factual research has yet to be made. The industry would benefit greatly from a study that pinpoints the social and economic benefits of documentary filmmaking in South Africa.

Education and training is another area that requires significant additional study. There are countless community-based projects in South Africa that aim to bring video technology to the underserved, but most of these are undocumented and therefore identifying resources and establishing best practices is difficult. Research into this area would help establish successful models and underserved in areas where those models should be replicated. In addition, a thorough investigation of formal educational institutions that offer studies in film production is warranted in order to identify redundancies, enforce the highest standards of education, and ensure that the field of documentary is not being underserved. The NFVF has been granted federal funding to pursue its long unfulfilled mandate of researching the feasibility of a national film school. The findings of this study – if not too heavily politicized by the existing network of training institutions and their own interest in self-preservation – should be illuminating.

### **10.2.2 TRANSFORMING METHODOLOGY**

While the work of transforming South Africa's documentary industry will require several decades, what can be accomplished in the meantime is an evolution in the way South African filmmakers of all kinds approach their subjects. Significant advances have already been made in this regard. Once limited almost entirely to the expository mode of filmmaking, South African filmmakers have increasingly moved toward observational, participatory and reflexive filmmaking. As a result, South African modes of address are catching up with international standards and filmmakers are demonstrating a higher level of ethics and authenticity. While there is still much room for improvement, the case studies presented in the latter chapters of this study demonstrate that white South African filmmakers, now faced with increasing scrutiny of their work, are beginning to do the difficult work required to level power imbalances and work toward more collaborative means of documenting the lives and cultures of others.

### **10.3 CASE STUDIES**

In the final three chapters of this study, I endeavored to bridge theory and praxis by examining three key films produced by South African directors. Through a careful application of the theoretical framework established earlier, I sought to approach film analysis in a manner that respects the historical abuse of black subjects by white

filmmakers and the need for redress, while avoiding racially essentialist argument. Looking beyond questions of whether or not the filmmaker was “racially qualified” to tell a given story, I explored the particulars of that filmmaker’s relationship to his subjects, the modes of address employed, the positioning of the spectator vis-à-vis the subject, and how the film actually impacted subjects and society at large. While the realities of South Africa do not yet warrant an entirely nonracial approach to film criticism, I have sought to demonstrate that white filmmakers have a place in the South African industry so long as they are willing to do the extra work required to demonstrate that their films ethically and accurately represent the viewpoints of black subjects.

### **10.3.1 OCHRE AND WATER**

In chapter seven, I examined the practice of subjective outsider storytelling in *Ochre and Water*. While the premise of two white filmmakers creating a film about indigenous Africans with Swedish funding may suggest little positive impact on transforming South African documentary, I argued that *Ochre and Water* represents progress on several counts:

- 1) The filmmakers have employed careful methodology that adheres to the guidelines presented in this study, including seven years of semi-immersive research and observational filming in the open-ended tradition of ethnography.
- 2) The film employs an effective combination of the observational, participatory, and reflexive modes of documentary. Of particular significance is the way in which Matthew narrates the film in the first-person, taking care to cast the story as a subjective account of his own personal impressions and lay bare his methodology and his Western preconceptions of the Himba.
- 3) The film’s message is fundamentally counter-hegemonic in nature, speaking out against the forces of Western development and exposing the limitations of Western ways of seeing.
- 4) The film resists reductionist stereotypes of the “noble savage” ilk by acknowledging (to some extent) the Himba’s interactions with Western culture, the hybridity of their

existence, and their ability to stand up to complex and formidable national and international forces.

Thus *Ochre and Water* bears out many of the theories presented in the early chapters of this study. The film demonstrates that careful attention to research and immersion in the subject matter, proper selection and use of documentary modes, and sensitivity to the ill effects of colonialism and racist attitudes can enable a filmmaker who is extremely far removed from the community he is documenting to produce laudable results.

### **10.3.2 WAN 'N WINA (SINCERELY YOURS)**

In chapter eight, I looked at Dumisani Phakathi's *Wan 'N Wina*, a first-person account of the how Phakathi's own friends and neighbors are navigating the challenges associated with HIV/AIDs. The significance of this film's premise should not be understated. Reflexive, personal, and produced by a previously disadvantaged filmmaker about his own community, it is precisely the sort of film South Africa needs to support. Phakathi works within the politics and aesthetics of Third Cinema, exploiting low-cost technology and a home-movie aesthetic to lay bare the harsh realities of life in Soweto. Predictably, audiences at home and abroad have reacted favorably to the authenticity the film projects as a result of Phakathi's insider status and casual style.

Yet *Wan 'N Wina* also raises concerns with regard to the practice of insider filmmaking. Where filmmakers like Matthew must go to great lengths to secure the trust and consent of their subjects, Phakathi is granted carte blanche. Subsequently, the film is rife with drunken behavior and other representations that cement negative stereotypes. At the same time, *Wan 'N Wina* is short on the sort of contextualization that might humanize such behavior for audiences. Finally, the sense of hopelessness the film conveys and its lack of call to action are such that its social impact is minimal. In the end, Phakathi argues that such theoretical concerns about colonial stereotypes and ethics are less important than generating straight talk about the significant social problems that exist in South Africa today. These problems need to be dealt with head-on, he argues. Proponents of Third Cinema would agree.

### **10.3.3 THE MOTHER'S HOUSE**

In chapter nine, I examined Francois Verster's intimate observational film, *The Mother's House*. Though the project was criticized by the industry on the basis of Verster's status as a privileged racial outsider documenting the troubles of poor, black women, I argued that such criticisms fail to take into account the filmmaker's scrupulous methodology and positive outcomes, and that in fact that film provides a useful model for ethical representation.

Whereas Matthew looked to form and content as the primary means of arriving at authenticity, Verster instead focused on process and relationships. By making a series of contractual commitments to his subjects at the project's outset, he successfully negotiated the complexities of informed consent, effectively assessed potential outcomes for the subjects, and granted them a say in the process and the end product. Most importantly, the presence of a meaningful and enduring relationship between filmmaker and subjects had great rewards in terms of both improving the film and ensuring a measure of respect and authenticity in the film. Ultimately, I argued that Verster's outsider status was not only acceptable but beneficial to the project – a viewpoint that is supported by both the filmmaker and his subjects. By lending an objective, outside perspective, Verster shed a great deal of healing insight on the family's lives.

#### **10.4 FINAL CONCLUSIONS**

To be aware of the problematic political dimensions in making a film about a less privileged group – or anything that can problematically be constructed as other – is crucial when making documentary films in South Africa. But racial essentialism in deciding who makes films is counterproductive... I guess the ideal balance lies between respecting that you do not understand everything on the one hand and seeing certain things more clearly from the outside on the other. Apart from this, I strongly believe that because we have such a divided past in this country, documentary is valuable as an active and direct way of trying to understand other people or situations (Verster 2006: 1).

#### 10.4.1 TOWARD BALANCED SCRUTINY

My reading of *Wan 'N Wina* and *The Mother's House* respectively suggests a troubling trend with regard to race and documentary film in South Africa. Whereas *Wan 'N Wina* raises concerns vis-à-vis this study but has escaped criticism, *The Mother's House* stands up to a careful and methodological testing, but has been highly criticized on surface grounds. Both audiences and filmmakers, it seems, are quick to see *Wan 'N Wina* as a highly authentic portrait because it was made by an “insider,” and view *The Mother's House* with skepticism because Verster is an “outsider.”<sup>113</sup> Verster does not bemoan this extra measure of scrutiny, but sees it as a potential advantage. “Maybe the political situations has made us white males more sensitive to what we should be sensitive about, which is a good thing,” he notes.

But what of the flip side of this comparison? Unfortunately, there is little literature available governing the work of insiders documenting their own friends, families and communities. Moreover, in the South African context, there is also little political will to critique black filmmakers who want to document their own people. While black directors need to be supported under the new dispensation, surely some measure of objective critique is warranted. This lack of scrutiny is problematic if the goal is to generate fair and accurate representations across the board. Furthermore, letting some filmmakers get away with anything and others get away with nothing on the basis of their race is likely to foment existing tensions.

#### 10.1.2 VALUING DIVERSITY

Ultimately, it seems that diversity is the single greatest quality the international documentary industry must strive for if it is to accurately represent the lives, cultures and experiences of the world in all its multifaceted complexity. That means a diversity of approaches, a diversity of voices, and diversity of perspectives. As Ruby has argued:

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<sup>113</sup> I have placed the terms “insider” and “outsider” in quotes here because both adjectives require qualification. Just as Phakathi is only partially an insider (having moved away from the community he is documenting years ago and being outside of the scope of his own documentation), while Verster is only partially an outsider (having spent more than ten years making films in and around Bonteheuwel). In respect to documentary filmmaking, these two terms are rarely absolute.

Once it is acknowledged that no one can speak for or represent a culture but only his or her relationship to it, then a multiplicity of viewpoints is possible and welcome – some from within and others from without and all the marvelously gray areas in between (1991: 31).

Herein lies, perhaps the most useful lesson for South Africa. Clearly, efforts must be made to rectify the imbalance of voices being heard in the South African media. However, this should not be taken to suggest that everyone should represent only himself or herself. Nor does it mean that there is no place for white filmmakers in South Africa anymore, as some have argued.

By all accounts, South Africa does not yet have enough skilled and trained black talent to fill the national demand for content. Documentary filmmaking is no simple task. It is fraught with technical, creative, aesthetic, and political complexities. Hence, while the arguments in this study support the cultivation of diverse voices, they also speak to the need for a tremendous amount of intellectual skill and political sophistication for the successful practice of documentary. Unfortunately, in today's South Africa, these two are often at odds, given the legacy of unequal education.

At the same time, it cannot be said that white filmmakers have nothing to contribute or teach the country or their black colleagues. They too can serve the ends of diversity in a variety of ways – whether that be through developing alternative modes of documentary, sharing an objective outsider perspective on the majority culture, collaboration with their subjects, or helping to train a more diverse new generation of filmmakers for the future.

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*Broken String* dir. Don Edkins, 1996  
*A Brother with Perfect Timing* dir. Chris Austin, 1987  
*Blood Diamond* dir. Edward Zwick, 2006  
*Bowling for Columbine* dir. Michael Moore, 2002  
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*The Great Dance* dirs. Craig and Damon Foster, 2000  
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*I am a Rebel* dir. Vincent Moloi, 2003  
*The Search for Sandra Laing* dir. Anthony Thomas, 1978  
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*A Kalahari Family* dir. John Marshall, 2002  
*Karoo Kitar Blues* dir. Lisa Key, 2004  
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*Last Supper at Horstley Street* dir. Lindy Wilson, 1985  
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*A Lion's Trail* dir. Francois Verster, 2001  
*The Long Journey of Clement Zulu* dir. Liz Fish, 1992  
*Long Night's Journey Into Day* dirs. Francis Reid and Deborah Hoffman, 2000  
*Long Walk of Nelson Mandela* dirs. Brent Huffman and Katerina Monemvassitis, 1995  
*Love in a Time of Sickness* dir. Khalo Matabane, 2001  
*Man with a Movie Camera* dir. Dziga Vertov, 1929  
*The Mother's House* dir. Francois Verster, 2005

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*Mother to Child* dir. Jane Lipman, 2001  
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*Night and Fog* dir. Allan Resnais, 1955  
*No Lies* dir. Mitchell Block, 1970  
*Nuclear File* dir. Peter Davis, 1979  
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*Ressemblage* dir. Trihn T. Mihn-ha, 1983  
*Rhythms of Resistance* dir. Chris Austin, 1979  
*Robben Island, Our University* dir. Lindy Wilson, 1988  
*Roger & Me* dir. Michael Moore, 1989  
*Rough Ride* dir. Dumisani Phakathi, 1999  
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*Startup.com* dirs. Chris Hegedus and Johaine Noujaim, 2001  
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*Story of the Weeping Camel* dirs. Byambasuren Daava and Luigi Falorni, 2003  
*Swenkas* dir. Jeppe Ronde, 2004  
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*Tongues Untied* dir. Marlon Riggs, 1982  
*Tsotsi* dir. Gavin Hood, 2005  
*Unprecedented: 2000 Presidential Election* dirs. Richard Perez and Joan Sekler, 2002  
*Very Fast Guys* dir. Catherine Muller, 2002  
*Waiting for Valdez* dir. Dumisani Phakathi, 2002  
*When the War is Over* dir. Francois Verster, 2002  
*When we were Black* dir. Khalo Matabane, 2008  
*White Laager* dir. Peter Davis, 1977  
*Why We Fight* dir. Eugene Jarecki, 2005  
*Witness to Apartheid* dirs. Kevin Harris and Sharon Sopher, 1986  
*Working for Britain* dir. Anthony Thomas, 1977

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*The Accused*  
*A Day with the President*  
*If Truth be Told*  
*Judgment Day*  
*Mommy's Prize*  
*The Other Side*  
*School Days*

**Steps for the Future Series (2001-2003):**

*Ask me, I'm Positive* dir. Teboho Edkins, 2004  
*The Ball* dir. Orlando Mesquita, 2001  
*Love in a time of Sickness* dir. Khalo Matabane, 2001  
*A Miners Tale* dir. Nic Hofmeyr and Gabriel Mondlane, 2001  
*Red Ribbon Around my House* dir. Rankwane, 2003  
*Tsonga* dir. Ramotoai, 2001  
*Wa'n Wina/Sincerely Yours* dir. Dumisani Phakathi, 2001

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**Project 10 Series (2004):**

*Being Pavarotti* dir. Odette Geldenhuys, 2004

*Belonging* dirs. Minky Schlesinger and Kethiwe Ngcobo, 2004

*Cinderella of the Cape Flats* dir. Jane Kennedy, 2004

*The Devil Breaks My Heart 10 Years Later* dir. Lederle Bosch, 2004

*Home/Ikhaya* dir. Omelga Hlengiwe Mthiyane, 2004

*Hot Wax* dir. Andrea Spitz, 2004

*The Meaning of the Buffalo* dir. Karin Slater, 2004

*MIX* dir. Rudzani Dzuguda, 2004

*My Yeoville* dir. Sello Molefe, 2004

*Solly's Story* dir. Asivhanzhi Mathaba, 2004

*Through the Eyes of my Daughter* dir. Zulfah Otto-Sallies, 2004

*Umgidi/Shadow Dancing* dirs. Gillian Schutte and Sipho Singiswa, 2005

**Black on White Series (2005):**

*Different Pigment* dir. Omelga Mthiyane, 2006

*The Glow of White Women* dir. Yunus Valley, 2007

*The Heart of Whiteness* dir. Rehad Desai, 2006

*Inja Yomlungu!/The White Man's Dog!* dir. Sipho Singiswa, 2006

*Men of Gold* dir. Vincent Moloji, 2006

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