

**Redefining the Griot
A History of South African Documentary Film**

By

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ABSTRACT

The South African film industry, like the rest of the country, has gone through a very difficult and trying time over the last century and has been faced with enormous challenges since 1994. South Africa is still in a process of transition and the turbulent era of Apartheid is still vivid in our memories and our collective national identity.

What is especially exciting about studying the history of the South African film industry, is that it was through film, television and the media at large, that we witnessed the evolution of this history. On a microscopic scale, the history of the film industry, is that of the country, and many of the effects of Apartheid that are being experienced in South Africa today, are likewise being experienced by the film industry. Thus by seeking to understand the historical relationship between film and politics in South Africa, we are enabled to comprehend and contextualise the circumstances that have determined film's socio-political, economic and cultural place in society today.

It was with this intention that I began to investigate the documentary film industry in South Africa. My particular interest was in the development of an independent, progressive documentary film movement that tentatively originated in the late nineteen fifties and established itself in the late seventies and eighties as a major force in the resistance movement. Concentrating on organisations such as the International Defense and Aid Fund to Southern Africa (IDAF), Video News Services/Afravision, and the Community Video Education Trust (CVET), as well as many individual anti-Apartheid

filmmakers, the focus of this paper and documentary film, *Redefining the Griot*, is thus limited to an analysis of the history of socio-political documentary filmmaking in South Africa, in particular, the anti-Apartheid film and video movement that emerged both in reaction to the ideologically-specific and restrictive State control of media, film and eventually television, and as a cultural weapon in the liberation struggle.

Understanding this history enables valuable insight into the nature of the documentary film and video-making industry today - one that is still considered emergent in terms of having a homogeneous national identity.

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INTRODUCTION

SOCIO-POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING IN SOUTH AFRICA

Socio-political filmmaking in South Africa came from conservative beginnings and became polarised into two extreme and conflicting industries after the coming to power of the National Party government and their Apartheid policies in 1948. Films made by the State, were 'educational' propaganda, intended to persuade national and international audiences of the merits of racial segregation. The films produced by the independent anti-Apartheid filmmakers and anti-Apartheid organisations sought to expose the horrific social reality being experienced by the majority of South Africans and promote resistance from within and outside South Africa. That persuasion was foremost for both these polarised industries meant that the only commonality in their ideology regarding filmmaking, was the power of the moving image as a significant propaganda tool.

Despite the long history of filmmaking in South Africa, the deliberately focused political agenda that consumed much of the energies of documentary filmmakers of the State and the independent industry and the restrictions under which the latter were produced, meant that during the Apartheid years, a unique and truly representative South African identity in filmmaking could not emerge. The urgency with which the films were made and distributed, especially by the independent sector, created a void in which the aesthetic and intellectual aspects that define an artistic film movement were ignored. Further, the ubiquitous censorship laws of the eighties, that encompassed independent filmmaking, and reporting of South Africa's situation at large, prohibited creative and intellectual

freedom to approach storytelling and alternative subject matter that was viewed as corrupt or amoral by the State. These conditions further restricted the individual voices of each filmmaker. The ideological specifications that defined the anti-Apartheid documentary film movement, were that films served the purpose of fighting an oppressive regime; to these ends, filmmakers of this movement were politically and ideologically united.

To define socio-political documentary filmmaking during Apartheid would be to say that it was it was unidirectional and unchanging in its political ambition. It changed only in its degree of intensity; in line with the degree of intensity that the resistance movement itself grew. Since 1994 and the beginning of democracy, however, the film industry has undergone radical and liberating changes. The urgency that had been so implicit and vexing in the process of filmmaking disappeared; filmmakers had the liberty of time to explore their social reality when and how they chose. As filmmakers found their individual voices and a new generation of filmmakers began to tell their own stories, a new representative South African film industry began to emerge and the nature of the documentary film movement began to shift. Topics and subject matter previously forbidden could be tackled and the lifting of censorship created a new audience to witness and engage in material that was now readily available on television and in film festivals.

Despite the positive changes that have occurred, the film industry over the past decade has been faced with enormous challenges. Financial support from the government for film, in a country where housing, education and health care are the priorities, is minimal

and investor confidence, of private businesses, in the film and television market is low.¹ The industry is not yet self-sufficient and therefore needs to export or enter into co-production agreements, which often result in the intellectual property rights residing in a foreign country.² Although there has been the emergence of black filmmakers and new voices in the industry, such as Zola Maseko, Dumisani Phakathi and Khalo Matabane, to name a few, filmmaking is still very much in the hands of white, male filmmakers – few black filmmakers own their own facilities and equipment and still have to pay white-owned companies to produce their films. Black people are still more often the subject in many South African films as opposed to the creators and the producers.

It was my intention, then, to examine the origins and establishment of the independent, progressive anti-Apartheid documentary film movement in South Africa and determine the nature of that independent industry today. In choosing to look specifically at socio-political films that have been produced, the tone of both this paper and the accompanying film is political – one cannot escape the political when looking at a history of South Africa, in any form or medium. Electing to investigate and present the history of the South African documentary film industry on film, allowed for a complete exploration of the visual medium to document the visual material of the films, the filmmakers and archive material of the period, and evince the atmosphere of filmmaking at the time.

¹ Creative South Africa – A Strategy for Realising the Potential of the Cultural Industry, A Report to the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology by The Cultural Strategy Group, July 1998, pg 22

² Ibid, pg 21

DOCUMENTARY FILM – ITS DEFINITION AND HISTORY

Before embarking on an examination of a documentary film industry and documentary movement, it is important to define the term ‘documentary’, and as a future point of reference. The term documentary is a much debated and contentious one and its defining characteristics have been widely discussed by historians and film theoreticians.³ The history of the documentary film is relatively short; John Grierson first coined the term with reference to Robert Flaherty’s film *Moana* (1925). Stemming from the French word, *documentaires*, to identify the travelogue⁴, Grierson suggested that the medium could literally produce a ‘visual document’ through the creative treatment of actuality - where “the use of natural material, (that) has been regarded as the vital distinction” of ordinary newsreel, magazine and educational items, can be exploited in an art form “to arrangements, rearrangements and creative shapings of it.”⁵ Grierson is quick to point out that the filming of actuality does not in itself constitute ‘truth’, but rather, actuality footage must be subjected to a creative process of editing and manipulation of the narrative to *reveal* its truth.⁶

Satyajit Ray challenges Grierson’s suggestion that a “creative treatment of reality” exclusively distinguishes the documentary and non-fiction film. As Ray asserts, many fiction films deal with human relations and issues that are firmly entrenched in reality;

³ John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, Great Britain, 1946, Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film*, London, 1952, Erik Barnouw, *A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, New York, Oxford, 1993, Richard Meran Barsam, *Nonfiction Film – A Critical History*, London, 1974 and Plantinga CR, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*, UK, 1997 are some works which contribute to this debate.

⁴ Grierson, John; *Grierson on Documentary*, Great Britain, 1946, pg 78

⁵ *Ibid*, pg 79

⁶ Welles, Paul; *An Introduction to Film Studies*, London, 1999, pg 1

Fables, fairytales and myth's are at once creative interpretations of reality.⁷ The Soviet cinema tradition of the 1920's, of Dziga Vertov and Eisenstein, avoided neat categorisations of terms such as fiction, non-fiction and even documentary, and engaged in so-called 'expressive realism.'⁸ The principal reason in Soviet thought for the existence of film was to influence politics and society and the principal product was propaganda based on Marxist and constructivist ideology. Their intention was to draw attention to the construction of a film through rapid editing and create meaning by the juxtaposition of certain images in that editing process – a process of intellectual montage.

Bill Nichols argues that documentary film consists of texts and conventional practices that change or are subject to historical change and which requires a representation, case or argument about the historical world; its socio-political purpose distinguishing it from the factual film which merely represents reality rather than questioning it or making a statement about it.⁹ As is the desire of any artist, the documentary filmmaker wants to influence, inspire and persuade an audience, and to construct a piece that will have a profound effect on a particular, receptive audience. Documentary in this sense, almost always has a propagandistic purpose, being described as the 'hypodermic' needle or a 'magic bullet' powerfully delivering messages which masses are unable to resist.¹⁰ Government and independent documentary filmmaking in South Africa during the eighties especially, can be defined as propaganda with the sole intention of reaching a

⁷ Plantinga, CR; Rhetoric and Representation in Non-Fiction Film, United Kingdom, 1997, pg 12

⁸ Barsam, RM; Nonfiction Film – A Critical History; London 1974; pg 20

⁹ Barsam, RM; Nonfiction Film – A Critical History; London 1974, pg3

¹⁰ Reeves, N; The Power of Film Propaganda: Myth or Reality; London, New York, 1999, pg4

mass audience in an attempt to either persuade audiences of the merits of Apartheid or convince people of its oppressive and violating nature.

As poetry and prose are distinct from fiction writing, so does the documentary separate itself aesthetically from the systematic narratives of a mainstream, studio-styled drama. Dealing with reality as a central point of creative rendering, documentary film requires a specific treatment of the material. It is this 'defining' treatment that has altered throughout history and which has fueled the debates of what should constitute a documentary. What is evident when looking at the past ninety years of documentary film, is that the term is a transitory one, that changes over time and place and with the progression of technology and the development of new schools of thought, it is a term that will continually reform itself.

The documentary film is just one genre or category of non-fiction film. The non-fiction film performs a distinct social function - it is based on *actuality* as opposed to fiction to enlighten, educate and influence cultural and societal behaviour and understanding.¹¹ The early newsreel films began this tradition. Initially without sound, they merely recorded events and eventually added a superficial commentary that contextualised the images. The information films and travelogue journals fulfilled an educative function, going beyond the simplicity of the newsreel but offered little in the way complex socio-political understanding and criticism. These were the films of choice of the Department of Information and early Film Board in South Africa. 'Social Reality' filmmaking, such

¹¹ Plantinga, CR; Rhetoric and Representation in Non-Fiction Film, United Kingdom, 1997, and Barsam, RM; Nonfiction Film – A Critical History; London 1974; discuss the different forms of the non-fiction film

as the VNS/Afravision documentaries produced in South Africa, can best be described as a broad category, which encompasses fiction, non-fiction and documentary, the intention of which is to examine, portray, question, represent and make sense of society, and by extension politics and culture. Although many documentaries fall into the broader category of the 'social realism' film, they are not necessarily characterised by it.

Understanding the various styles of documentaries and the place documentary has in the wider context of non-fiction film, is perhaps a better way to better grasp the notion of what 'documentary' is and how 'documentary' should be defined. What becomes clear in this process is that the definition of documentary changes according to the intention of the filmmaker and how and where the film is eventually used. Many of the documentary films of the anti-Apartheid film movement, for example, employed a direct, verite style; the intention of the filmmaker being to record the harsh reality of most South Africans and use the films as anti-Apartheid propaganda.

Bill Nichols divides the documentary film into five broad categories.¹² The Expository Documentary is characterised by the omniscient voice-of-god narrator who remains off screen and relates the story as truth, in an unquestioning educative and factual manner.¹³ Observational Documentary filmmaking stems from the Cinema Verite tradition and often characterises ethnographic films. The camera is a mere spectator in the process of recording events as they unravel in front of the filmmaker.¹⁴ Reflexive Documentary

¹² Buckland, Warren; *The Non-Fiction Film: Five Types of Documentary* in Film Studies, 1998, pg 105

¹³ *Ibid*, pg 105

¹⁴ Buckland, Warren; *The Non-Fiction Film: Five Types of Documentary* in Film Studies, 1998, pg 109

filmmaking is characterised by making known to an audience the subjective role of the filmmaker and process of filmmaking, thereby challenging the impression of reality created by the other modes of filmmaking.¹⁵ To varying degrees this self-reflexive style was achieved in the filmmaking tradition of Goddard and the French New Wave, and theorised by Vertov in his kino-eye manifestos.¹⁶

Interactive documentary filmmaking allows for the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject to be known; the filmmaker can be either an on-screen participant, as in the films of Nic Broomfield, or off-screen interviewer as in the case of the film under discussion – *Redefining the Griot*, where the interviewees speak directly to the camera. Finally, the Performative Documentary, or docu-drama has the dual effect detracting attention away from reality, and turning it towards the “expressive dimensions of film”¹⁷ *Come Back Africa* (1959) is such a film that employs a dramatic narrative to portray social realism based on actuality.

REDEFINING THE GRIOT AS FILM HISTORY

It is significant to note that the films that were produced during Apartheid were both a product of that time and exemplified that time. In context of this topic, filmic representation was especially effective because the dynamic nature of the images that were produced, especially of violence and resistance to Apartheid, convey the sense of

¹⁵ Buckland, Warren; *The Non-Fiction Film: Five Types of Documentary* in *Film Studies*, 1998, pg 115

¹⁶ For a fuller understanding of the Cinema Verite tradition and role of the camera in the filmmaking process see Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*; (ed) Annette Michelson, Translated Kevin O'Brien; California, London, 1984 and Erik Barnouw, *A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, New York, Oxford, 1993

¹⁷ Buckland, 1998, pg 117

the environment in which films were produced far more articulately than the written word. The power of the visual medium to recreate that history through the images that were recorded during that time is arguably more suited than written work, to chronicling and recounting that period. The film *Redefining the Griot*, is based on interviews with filmmakers who discuss not only the South African filmmaking environment, but their own productions as well, and is thus a representation of the films produced as part of the documentary film movement. A film format allows for the use of clips as examples of the films being discussed, displays their style, and at the same time offers so much more in the way of information about the context in which the films were produced. This is clearly exemplified in the footage from the African Mirror Newsreel that emerged out of a more conservative filmmaking environment, compared to the types of progressive films that were being produced during the eighties under severe censorship laws, at the height of resistance to Apartheid. The emotive and voyeuristic force film offers in bearing *witness* to history is unparalleled when compared to the written word.

The title of the film, *Redefining the Griot*, immediately draws attention to the oral tradition of storytelling and history-telling implicit in the medium of documentary film. The Griot in West African culture and tradition fulfilled the acclaimed and respected position of bearer of history and storyteller; his role was that of poet, praise singer, storyteller and spiritual advisor. Famous West African filmmaker, Ousmane Sembene, suggests that the Griot no longer exists in today's society, but has been replaced by the filmmaker as "the link between the past, the present and the future, a man of good sense

and knowledge, who does not isolate himself in the ivory tower of literature.”¹⁸ He sees his role as fulfilling an important social function and preserving the oral tradition in a mostly illiterate society. Film is thus seen as a contemporary extension of the oral tradition and a safeguard of African culture.

The relevance of this argument in *Redefining the Griot*, lies in the oral discourse that forms the core of an interview-based style of filmmaking.¹⁹ Orality is the basis of the film as well as the basis of the films within the film; there is thus a multiplicity of levels of oral and visual storytelling that cannot be attained, in their essence, in a written discourse. Documentary filmmaking has become one of the most powerful mediums to relate and archive the stories of South Africa’s turbulent social and political past. Among all the art forms, “cinema and television have an unsurpassable size of audience”²⁰ and the far-reaching and influencing ramifications of the medium have helped shaped South African culture and identity in much the same way as traditional oral storytelling of the past.

The difficulty of approaching the history of the documentary film movement in South Africa in a film format is the limited scope of thorough and intensive treatment that this

¹⁸ Wynchank, Annie; *The Cineaste as a Modern Griot in West Africa*, Oral Tradition and its Transmissions: The Many Forms of the Message, Durban, 1994; pg14

¹⁹ The space in this paper does not allow for a detailed discussion of Oral history and its place in the wider parameters of historical discourse and visual and written records. It needs to be said however, that orality, in the context of an interview-based documentary, allows the voice of the ordinary person to be heard, and in line with the Annals School of social history delimits the scope of historical enquiry and moves it beyond the traditional, elitist realm of academic history. For further discussion on the debates regarding Oral History, see Vansina, Jan, Oral Tradition as History, London. Nairobi, 1985, Thompson, Paul, The Voice of the Past: Oral History, Oxford, 1978 and Edgard Seinairt, Meg Cowper-Lewis, Nigel Bell (eds) Oral Tradition and its Transmissions: The Many Forms of the Message, Durban, 1994

²⁰ Feinberg, Barry; *Shaping the Future: A Reflection on Film and Video*, Culture in Another South Africa; 1989; Zed Cultural Studies, Zed Books; London, 1989; pg 106

format provides. Although it offers a comprehensive visual context through a variety of images, the relating of history through a visual medium is denied the sophistication of argument and critical analysis that might otherwise be attained in a written paper. This was particularly challenging in the editing process, and in order to be as extensive as possible and demonstrate a fuller history of the evolution of the documentary film industry, one needed to render a multi-layered tapestry of images – still photography and film and video footage, - interviews, voice over and music. The type and quality of the material used, from the filmed archival footage of the African Mirror Newsreel to the video material of the eighties and digital footage of the nineties, reflected detail of the changes in technology and the music contextualised, both temporally and culturally, the period under discussion.

The length of the film also prohibits the amount of detail that is included, suggesting that the film-history is even more subjective than its written counterpart. For this reason, the individuals and representatives of organisations whose interviews were ultimately used in the film, were those who best articulated and represented the issues and experiences of the movement as a whole. One cannot claim that this is by any means all-encompassing or representative of all the filmmakers, organisations and films that were produced, but it does enable an understanding of the general character and nature of the documentary film movement in South Africa and experiences of the filmmakers.

ANTI-APARTHEID DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING AS A ‘MOVEMENT’ AND OTHER ACADEMIC WORK PERTAINING TO THE INDUSTRY

For the purposes of this paper, the “Film Industry” refers to the collective forms of film (16mm, 35mm) and video; although specific identification of each format will be acknowledged in the individual analysis or examples of films and videos in the paper, the generic term will be used when referring to the industry, to mean the industry as a whole. “Industry” has also been a much-disputed term, in that many argue that a truly independent *Industry* did not exist before the late seventies, before which there were only isolated examples of independent filmmaking that went against the tradition of the politically-specific State produced films and culturally-specific Afrikaans features.²¹ Be that as it may, filmmaking has occurred in this country since the early 1900’s and up to the point of the inception of that truly independent and progressive movement, many films were produced in South Africa. It is for this reason and in this discourse that the ‘industry’, as encompassing all film and video-making in South Africa shall be acknowledged as such.

My interest in the documentary film industry in South Africa stemmed from the study of other film movements that have emerged around the world. When looking globally at the development of various film movements, the most common features are that they arose out of social and political change in a country, a subsequent lack of a homogeneous National identity and an intellectual questioning of their socio-political and cultural

²¹ See Tomaselli, Keyan; *The Cinema of Apartheid; Race and Class in South African Film*, London, 1989 and Unwin, Chas and Belton, Colin; *Cinema of Resistance – The Other Side of the Story*, pg 277-300, *Movies, Moguls and Mavericks, South African Cinema 1979 – 1991*, Cape Town, South Africa, 1992 who work contributes to this debate.

situation. This is true of the use of film to reclaim an African identity in post-Colonial West Africa; an attempt to understand German identity in post-World War 2 Nazi Germany; and the Neo-Realist and New Wave trends that emerged in mid-twentieth century Italy and France. The emergence of such film movements is particularly true of documentary and 'social-realist' films.

These film histories have been researched, and discussed at length and the literature regarding their origins, development and efficacy is extensive.²² My concern was that the documentary film movement in South Africa, that originated before and established itself during Apartheid, and the influential force it had on the documentary industry today, had not been examined with the scope and intensive treatment with which other film movements had been considered. In view of the major influence that film and video, as part of the wider cultural movement, had in bringing about change in South Africa, and the united ideological and political motivation that defined the movement, the documentary film movement in South Africa warranted a detailed analysis. This is not to say that there have been no academic publications produced on the film industry in South Africa. To the contrary, research into the film industry has gained prominence in South Africa since the late seventies and eighties, especially after the introduction of television and recognition of its pervasive and influencing effect on popular culture, and in light of the growing universal appreciation of the value of film theory and cultural studies.

²² A fuller description of these various film movements can be read in Thompson K and Bordwell D, Film History, An Introduction, USA, 1994, Bazin Andre, What is Cinema Volume II, California, London, and G Nowell-Smith (ed) The Oxford History of World Cinema, Oxford, 1997

The nature of intensive research of documentary film in South Africa, has however, been either in the context of the media– valuable examination and insights on representation and of the effect of the moving image on culture and have been researched by Keyan Tomaselli²³ – or in the wider context the fiction and documentary film industry as a whole; the works of Martin Botha, Johan Blignaut, Keyan Tomaselli and Adri Van Aswegen²⁴ are relevant here. The work produced by Jacqueline Maingard²⁵ has been specific and essential to understanding the nature of the documentary film industry in South Africa, but much of her research has been limited to the alternative film movement during the period between the seventies and early nineties and to a critical analysis of the films produced during this time. Other works include essays regarding resistance films and the context in which they were made, by the filmmakers themselves – Harriet Gavshon, Barry Feinberg and Lindy Wilson, to name a few²⁶. The way in which my research differs from this previous material is two-fold; firstly my objective is to examine specifically the progressive, anti-Apartheid film movement of the seventies, eighties and

²³ Tomaselli, K, Tomaselli, R, Steenveld, L, Williams, W; Myth, Race and Power: South Africans Imaged on Film and Television; Bellville, 1986 and Tomaselli K, Appropriating Images – The Semiotics of Visual Representation, Denmark, South Africa, 1996

²⁴ Works on the South African Film Industry include, Botha, M and Van Aswegen, A, Images of South Africa: The Rise of the Alternative Film, Human Sciences Research Council, 1992, Tomaselli, Keyan; The Cinema of Apartheid; Race and Class in South African Film, London, 1989 and Botha, M and Blignaut, J (eds); Movies, Moguls and Mavericks, South African Cinema 1979 – 1991; Cape Town, South Africa, 1992

²⁵ See Maingard, J; *Trends in South African Documentary Film and Video: Questions of Identity and Subjectivity*, Journal of African Studies, Vol. 21, 4, December 1995, Maingard, J, *Representations of History for South African Television Audiences in the 1990's: Ulibambe Lingashoni – Hold Up the Sun and Soweto – A History*, South African and Contemporary History Seminar Paper for Department of History and Institute for Historical Research, University of the Western Cape, September 1997, and Maingard, J, *Fruits of Defiance: Narrating Popular Consciousness*, Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa, vol 9, 1, April 1997 for some of her work.

²⁶ Gavshon, H, “*Bearing Witness*” - *Ten Years Towards an Opposition Film Movement in South Africa* Radical History Review, *History From South Africa: Alternative Visions and Practices*, Philadelphia, 1991 and Feinberg, B, *Shaping the Future: A Reflection on Film and Video*, Culture in Another South Africa, Zed Cultural Studies, London, 1989

early nineties *in context of its origins and its influence on the industry today* and secondly to present my findings in a documentary film.

Aside from legislation or papers presented in forums and discussions on the state of the industry - many of which have been presented in the contexts of rallying support for financial assistance or initiating change in broadcasters' approach to audience and local content²⁷ - very little substantial and critical academic work has been produced on the film industry post-1994. Although the scope and space of this documentary film and paper does not allow for an in-depth and thorough examination of the industry as it is today, it is my hope to offer some perspectives and insights that will encourage debate and lay the groundwork for further investigation and discourse of this period – an area which I intend to research and present more fully in a future doctoral paper.

²⁷ Creative South Africa – A Strategy for Realising the Potential of the Cultural Industry, A Report to the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology by The Cultural Strategy Group, July 1998, The White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage, produced by the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, drafted according to submissions from a variety of sources but most predominantly the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG), June 1996 and The Discussion Paper on the Review of Local Content Quotas compiled by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa, December 2000 are some examples of these papers.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION: THE TENTATIVE BEGINNINGS OF AN INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARY FILM MOVEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA:

The progressive anti-Apartheid film movement of the nineteen seventies and eighties emerged in reaction to the limited nature of early conservative filmmaking practices and an oppressive system of State-control of film and the media. The evolution of 'social reality' filmmaking and subsequent development of an alternative, independent documentary film industry developed within the confines of a turbulent political climate, the ideological nature of which was characterised by propagandistic filmmaking by the State which validated official policies of Apartheid. The development of this later industry was further hindered by the cultural boycott and pressure through sanctions that the rest of the world placed on South Africa. The propaganda machinations of the National Party government in film, eventually operated through the medium of television, which was introduced in the mid-seventies for these subversive purposes. That television enlarged the skills-base within the film industry and eventually video-making industry, meant it had the ironical effect of training filmmakers who would inevitably challenge and rebel against the filmmaking policies set up by the State.

The first major South African initiative in reality cinema, was the long-running, conservative newsreel, *The African Mirror*. Beginning in 1913 and continuing until 1984, it changed its name from African Mirror to South African Mirror in 1970, and then to Mirror International in 1977²⁸. Established by the company, African Film Productions

²⁸ Moses, T; Film Archivist, Pretoria National Film and Sound Archives, Interview, June 2001

in Kilarney, Johannesburg²⁹, it was first screened in black and white once a week before a movie at the cinema and attempted to present 'life as it was'. The newsreels were accompanied by orchestral music until July 1939, when sound bites were introduced, but even with sound, the news reports remained superficial portrayals primarily of white society. Investigative journalism and critical storytelling were not qualities of its character.

Before the advent of television in 1976, the *African Mirror* newsreel would be the prominent source of news items viewed by the South African – albeit mainly white South African – public. The stories it did tell of Black, Indian or Coloured communities were often either trivial in nature, or showed a sanitised and patronising view of political protests and uprisings. Although it did not necessarily support and advocate the policies of Apartheid after 1948 through the newsreel, it did little in the way of taking a stand against it.

The greatest coverage it gave to a South African political event was of the 1976 Soweto uprising, which was given a two-week devotion, and included in their regular commemorative specials. The *African Mirror* approach to the event exhibited a sympathy for National Party policies by reflecting an example of resistance to the State but illustrated in a context devoid of motivation and cause. Even throughout the period between 1960 until its closure in 1984, when resistance to Apartheid was at its most

²⁹ Neither the company nor the building still exist.

intense, the reports avoided political criticism and remained focused predominantly on a stable and detached white society. Likewise, its audience remained the white minority.

The 1950's were a significant period of resistance against Apartheid. The Defiance Campaign was the beginning of a mass movement aimed at fighting the oppressive policies of the government, especially laws such as the Population Registration Act, Group Areas Act, Bantu Education Act and the more severe pass laws and forced removals policies. Organised by ANC Youth League members, it saw outright protest; burning of pass books, disregarding "Europeans only" and demanding service at "White's Only" counters of shops and post offices. The campaign brought together members of the ANC and the South African Indian Congress and led to the formation of new organisations such as the S.A. Coloured People's Organisation (SACPO) and the Congress of Democrats (COD), an organisation of white democrats.³⁰ Together with the S.A. Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), they formed the Congress Alliance which came together to organise the Congress of the People, through which demands for housing, education and workers rights were made. The list of demands was written into the Freedom Charter, which was adopted at Kliptown on the 26th June 1955. The government response was to accuse 156 congress members of communism and treason, which led to trial that went on until 1961, when the last of the accused was acquitted.

³⁰ Feinberg, B and Oodendaal, A (series eds), Mayibuye History and Literature Series, no 48; 1994; Mayibuye Books and the African National Congress, South Africa

Filmmaking during this period was two-fold. The government through the Department of Information had begun to produce 'educational' films, which explained their racial policies or represented a powerful white South Africa 'dealing' with a racial problem, and there were isolated moments of filmmaking by independent filmmakers, who challenged the view of the State and sought to expose the social reality of Apartheid.

Although different in content, the tone and style of the State-produced films were similar to that of the African Mirror newsreels. They were predominantly expository documentaries, which made use of an off-screen narrator to relate a story from a white point of view. In the case of these State-made films, however, they attempted to 'sell' the government's racial policies to white South Africans and engender national pride. *Order out of Chaos*, *John Citizen and the State*, and *Where to from Here*, were three examples of films produced by the government, circa 1955, which showed what the government was doing for the white population through the country's administrative structures and which aimed to portray South Africa as a powerful and modern economy. Within this context, the films looked at what the government was doing for the black population to encourage equal but separate development through Bantu Administration, to justify their Apartheid policies.

The Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 and subsequent State of Emergency, and the publicity that the Treason Trial had received internationally, threw South Africa into the international spotlight. The growing disdain the international community had for the government's political ideologies, was further being felt in sanctions and boycotts – the

cultural boycott being called for during the early sixties by Arch Bishop Trevor Huddleston.³¹ The cultural boycott, although an effective weapon in the resistance movement, isolated South African filmmakers from the global developments in film and cinema. It effectively impeded the development of a film industry in that neither fiction nor documentary films could be distributed to countries overseas who supported the boycott, and in addition to the censorship laws in South Africa meant audiences were confined to view only what the State allowed them to see. The boycott was therefore a fundamental factor in the development of an independent anti-Apartheid film movement, in that it encouraged independent filmmakers to use film as a cultural weapon against the State and produce films underground to expose the conditions in South Africa abroad.³² The films found distribution potential in the anti-Apartheid organisations and countries that supported the boycott.

In an attempt to refurbish its image and retain foreign investment and support, the National Party government established a National Film Board, which was aimed specifically at producing Apartheid propaganda.³³ The establishment of a National Film Board is significant because it laid the foundation of centralised government propaganda, which the independent film movement of the seventies and eighties would eventually react against. A National Film Board had been considered since 1943, and between then

³¹ United Nations Centre Against Apartheid, *Some important Developments in the Movement for a Cultural Boycott Against South Africa*, Boycotts Against Apartheid, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/boycotts/cultural.html>

³² Feinberg, Barry. Interview, July 2001

³³ Hees, E, Tomaselli, K; *John Grierson in South Africa: Afrikaner Nationalism and the National Film Board*, July 1999; adapted from Tomaselli, K "Grierson in South Africa: Culture, State and Nationalist Ideology in the South African Film Industry: 1940-1981"; *Cinema Canada*, 122(1985)27-27 and Hees, E; "The National Film Board of South Africa: A Short History"; *Annale University of Stellenbosch*, no 1 (1991):1-18

and 1964, when the board was eventually established, four committees investigated the role of cinema in South Africa and the place the government should have in the production of films.³⁴ The initial intention was to set up a National Film Board that would administer to the public relations needs of the government and preserve and promote Afrikaner cultural identity and policy. The principles of the Devilliers commission (1955) on which the board was eventually established, however, were that the board should use film as a means to justify the government's race policies and Apartheid ideology overseas, and should further have a direct hand in the promotion and development of the independent film industry as well as be given a censorship role and a role in the administration of film subsidies.³⁵ Although these policies met with strong criticism, they were still the policies that were eventually accepted by the State and that led to the formation of the Film Board in 1964.

An example of the propaganda films produced by the State at this time, was Antony Thomas', *Anatomy of Apartheid* (1964). This expository, 'educational' film exemplifies the delusions that were created by the National Party government regarding the racist policies of Apartheid and the 'good' it was doing by assisting blacks with problems such as housing and employment. It represents a complete mystification of the reality of

³⁴ See, Hees, E, Tomaselli, K; *John Grierson in South Africa: Afrikaner Nationalism and the National Film Board*, July 1999; adapted from Tomaselli, K "Grierson in South Africa: Culture, State and Nationalist Ideology in the South African Film Industry: 1940-1981"; *Cinema Canada*, 122(1985) 27-27 and Hees, E; "The National Film Board of South Africa: A Short History"; *Annale University of Stellenbosch*, no 1 (1991):1-18 for a detailed examination of the four investigative committees employed by both the United Party Government and National Party government between 1943 and 1963, to explore the viability of setting up a National Film Board.

³⁵ From the DeVilliers Report, 1956, Union of South Africa, unpublished, pg 24-25 as quoted in Hees,E and Tomaselli,K; *John Grierson in South Africa: Afrikaner Nationalism and the National film Board*; pg 13

Apartheid and serves as a mouthpiece to justify policies such as forced removals and the Group Areas Act. Although Thomas subsequently reformed his own political ideology, he displays the naivete that 'liberal' whites had regarding Apartheid policy, whom the government successfully swayed into believing that it was geared towards the upliftment of blacks. The film attempts to create the sense of discontent within black communities regarding their own existence and employs images and narrative that portray blacks as grateful for what the government is doing for them, which offers them so much more in the way of a better life than their present situation. That their present situation is government inflicted is obviously ignored.

The nature of this early government involvement and manipulation of the cinema was to have a lasting effect on the film industry in South Africa. Despite the National Film Board coming to an end by 1979, when television had replaced film as a pervasive propaganda medium, the censorship policies and dictatorial role instituted by the government during its existence, grew more severe and the fissure between government filmmakers and the growing independent progressive film movement tore further apart.

The Key feature that brought about the closure of the National Film Board and fuelled the early development of an alternative documentary film movement, was the introduction of television in 1976. The decision to introduce television into South Africa was hotly debated in government. Although there was immense potential for the pervasive disseminating of racist propaganda, it also increased the chance of the social condition in South Africa being exposed. The pressure from the public to institute television, as it

was a widespread form of entertainment internationally, and the potential economic benefits that the medium offered, eventually swayed the government in its favour, and television was implemented under the control of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC).³⁶

What the government had not counted on were the many people who were trained to work on productions within the SABC and who eventually became frustrated with the lack of creative freedom within the tightly controlled system and took their skills and left to produce independent films. Kevin Harris was one such example. Having completed his training, he was employed by the SABC in 1978 as a junior director and watched as many of the older and more established directors became frustrated and began to resign in the face of the restrictive censorship laws implemented by the State. When the time for him to produce and direct his own film he chose to look at Baragwanath hospital in Soweto, *Bara* (1979). The SABC believed the film would show what the white government was doing for blacks in Soweto, through a State-run hospital. His intention, however, was to look at the social nature of the diseases caused by poverty and overcrowding in the townships, allocated to blacks by the government, that afflicted many of its patients and at the problems facing the hospital, such as limited financial resources and lack of medical equipment. After being asked to make some cuts to the film, which Harris refused to make, the film went out uncut on television and he was fired within 24 hours. Thus was born his career as an independent filmmaker.

³⁶ Feinberg, Barry, Interview, July 2001

The effect of this censorship at the SABC was that local audiences were seldom shown what was really happening in the country. Although it became increasingly difficult to ignore the severity of the situation in South Africa, The SABC went to every effort to prevent the South African story from getting out. A major event that the SABC was unprepared for was the Soweto Uprising of 1976. This event again threw South Africa into the international spotlight, but also brought the story into the homes of the South African public. The images of the heightened political conflict of the late seventies were difficult to contain and the newly established SABC could do little in the way of controlling their reception.

Another significant reason for television contributing to the rise of a progressive documentary movement was that in order to set up the broadcast service in 1976, the embargo on video technology was lifted which introduced small format camera's and recorders into the country.³⁷ This, along with the improvements of Super-8 technology, allowed filmmakers greater accessibility and freedom to film with light-weight equipment, and the introduction of film and video studies at some universities in the late seventies meant that students and staff made use of this smaller, cheaper equipment and produced films outside of the mainstream industry.³⁸ Beyond this, these courses offered the study of film theory and film analysis, which engendered a critical approach to filmmaking within an academic environment and in many cases, trained students who eventually produced films independently for the resistance movement; Jeremy Nathan, Brian Tilley, Keyan Tomaselli and Harriet Gavshon are some examples.

³⁷ Tomaselli, K; The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South African Film, 1989, Great Britain

³⁸ Ibid, 1989

Throughout the period between the fifties and the late seventies, there were isolated examples of independent progressive filmmakers, who often had been educated and trained outside of the country, who produced films in South Africa outside the domain of the State and the SABC. Two films that stand out as examples are *Come Back Africa* (1959) and *Last Grave at Dimbaza* (1974). Both these films display elements that make them forerunners of the later resistance filmmaking movement of the eighties. Chas Unwin and Colin Belton describe these elements in general terms as involving a co-production or solitary assistance from progressive non-South Africans; the significant involvement of South Africans with most, if not all, spheres of production; and the problematic of exhibition and distribution.³⁹ Although there were very few of these truly unique attempts at portraying visually the ills of Apartheid and offering criticism through film of the government's policies, they paved the way for the development of an alternative film movement which would be exposed to similar challenges and context as these early examples.

Come Back Africa (1959) has been considered one of the first resistance documentaries to be produced in South Africa.⁴⁰ Although distributed as a fiction film, *Come Back Africa*, blurs the boundaries between the fiction and non-fiction genres and employs many of the techniques of the performative documentary or docu-drama.⁴¹ Shot in Sophia Town, the

³⁹Unwin, Chas and Belton, Colin; *Cinema of Resistance – The Other Side of the Story*, pg 277-300, in Botha, M and Blignaut, J (eds); *Movies, Moguls and Mavericks, South African Cinema 1979 – 1991*; 1992; Showdata; Cape Town, South Africa, pg 277

⁴⁰Unwin, Chas and Belton, Colin; *Cinema of Resistance – The Other Side of the Story*, pg 284

⁴¹ See Buckland, Warren, *The Non-Fiction Film: Five Types of Documentary*, in *Film Studies*, 1998, USA for a detailed description of the Performative Documentary and Plantinga, CR, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*, 1997 Cambridge U.K. for discussion regarding the 'blurred boundaries' between fiction and non-fiction genres.

film makes use of actuality footage of daily life and popular culture in Johannesburg and as a recognised style of contemporary documentary filmmaking, the performance and reconstruction of actuality employed in the film, arguably define *Come Back Africa* as documentary. Adopting the techniques used by realist filmmakers, producer/director Lionel Rogosin favoured unprofessional actors in natural settings with improvised dialogue and scenes. His self-confessed influences were the neo-realist tradition of de Sica and the American documentary filmmaker, Flaherty.⁴²

Having spent a year in South Africa before shooting, Rogosin's familiarity with the place and subject matter is evident in the reconstruction he creates of particular scenes. One such scene, which is used in *Redefining the Griot* and best displays his penchant for realism and the use of improvisation and natural language, is the 'Shabeen scene'. Lewis Nkosi, who acted in the film, points out, that the improvised scene displayed the kind of talk, both in subject matter and dialect that could only be found in Shabeens at the time and "made available to the filmmakers, a whole lot of new film languages."⁴³ The authenticity with which these reconstructions were produced, make *Come Back Africa* one of the most powerful representations on film of the social reality experienced by blacks in South Africa in the 1950's. Rogosin did not want to make a stereotypical Hollywood film *about* black South African existence, he wanted the story to come from within, that told of black experience as by black South Africans.⁴⁴ In keeping with this,

⁴² Davis, P; In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the Jungles of Cinema's South Africa, 1996, South Africa, Ohio

⁴³ Davis, P; In Darkest Hollywood, 1996

⁴⁴ See Davis, Peter; In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the Jungles of Cinema's South Africa, 1996, South Africa, Ohio, for a detailed analysis of the making of the film, *Come Back Africa*. Davis' book also discusses the representation of blacks in film in South Africa and offers a wider context of the film industry in South Africa in terms of the fiction filmmaking environment.

Lewis Nkosi and Bloke Modisane, two of the journalists that he worked with, wrote the script and the actors, many of whom he found on the streets of Johannesburg, were unprofessional.

The characters, of course, were found in and came out of the place itself. But they were molded, according to their dramatic, humorous and symbolic significance, to what the system of repression was doing to them. Since they were all its victims, I let them express and bring to the surface the deep, emotional effect of 'Apartheid'.

- Lionel Rogosin⁴⁵

That it dealt with the harsh reality of black life as explained to and witnessed by Rogosin, and which is reconstructed and portrayed in the film, and that its central theme, is the reality of Apartheid, suggests that it is one of the first examples of resistance documentaries to be produced in South Africa.

"It was an outstanding film because it gave you a glimpse into the life of black people in South Africa which nothing else could at the time."

- Barry Feinberg⁴⁶

The genre of docu-drama and technique of reconstruction were used by a few documentary filmmakers who produced 'social reality' films rather than definitive anti-Apartheid films in the sixties. *Let my People Go* (1961), for example, reconstructs the Sharpeville Massacre with newsreel footage and reenactment and *90 Days* (1967) which tells the story of Ruth First's imprisonment and solitary confinement, was written and

⁴⁵ Quoted from Rogosin, L in his essay 'Interpreting Reality' in Peter Davis' *In Darkest Hollywood, 1996*

⁴⁶ Feinberg, Barry, Interview, July 2001

performed by her.⁴⁷ These films challenged the parameters of a ‘documentary’ film and blurred the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, creating a genre and style in South African filmmaking that would be employed by some of the later anti-Apartheid documentary filmmakers in films such as *The Biko Inquest* (1984) and *We are the Elephant* (1987).

In 1969 the first documentary made for or by a political organisation, by a South African was *Phela Ndada* (End of the Dialogue), by Pan Africanist Congress filmmakers, including Nana Mahomo.⁴⁸ The film, shot secretly in South Africa and edited overseas, offered a hard-hitting perspective on Apartheid policy and intended to expose the social reality experienced by black South Africans to an international audience. Nana Mahomo, one of the first black South African documentary filmmakers, went on to produce *Last Grave at Dimbaza* (1974) under similar clandestine conditions.

The making of the film, in itself legendary, was a difficult process of secretive filming and then refilming after all the footage was destroyed in a London edit suite and the crew was forced to return to South Africa to reshoot the film on a minimal budget.⁴⁹ The film examines the “genocidal effects”⁵⁰ of the bantustan policies and makes use of a direct, expository style of filmmaking, intended to educate an international audience through an uncompromising narrative juxtaposed with recurring images of poverty and death

⁴⁷ Unwin, Chas and Belton, Colin; *Cinema of Resistance – The Other Side of the Story*, pg 277-300, *Movies, Moguls and Mavericks, South African Cinema 1979 – 1991; 1992*; Showdata; Cape Town, South Africa, pg 284

⁴⁸ Unwin, Chas and Belton, Colin; *Cinema of Resistance – The Other Side of the Story*, pg 285

⁴⁹ Mahomo, Nana; Interview filmed for the *Unbanned Series*, SABC, 1993,6 courtesy of Lindy Wilson

⁵⁰ Maingard, Jacqueline; *Trends in South African Documentary Film and Video: Questions of Identity and Subjectivity*, in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol, 21,4,Dec 1995

surrounding an oppressed people. Although *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, and Mahomo's other films, differed stylistically from the interactive and verite mode of the later 1980's anti-Apartheid films, it represented the beginning of a homogeneous ideological approach towards resistance filmmaking which sought to produce radical, oppositional material to be used as a propaganda tool against the State.

The accusatory nature of *Last Grave of Dimbaza* and negative publicity the South African government received because of the film, led to a strong reaction from the State in the form of the counter-documentary, *To Act a Lie* (1978). Produced with the intention to destroy the credibility of Mahomo's films, the State filmmakers who produced *To Act A Lie*, attempted to manipulate the images produced in the films by "reinterpreting them, and then representing them to both local and international audiences as 'Communist propaganda'."⁵¹

When BBC was about to screen *Last Grave at Dimbaza* the South African Embassy in London caused such a controversy, that the BBC eventually conceded and allowed *To Act a Lie* to be shown alongside it.⁵² The battle between the State and independent filmmakers had been set up and paved the way for the propaganda war that would be fought in the following decade – a war which was founded on the contradictory representation of the South African image.

⁵¹ Tomaselli, Keyan; The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South African Film, 1989, Great Britain, pg 211

⁵² Mahomo, Nana, Interview, 1993

Last Grave at Dimbaza is also significant in that it takes a critical viewpoint of the exploitative nature of foreign businesses in South Africa⁵³, which the film implies, support Apartheid policy by contributing to the South African economy. Produced with the intention to be screened internationally, the film contributed to the external pressure to end Apartheid that was placed on South Africa.

Both *Come Back Africa* and *Last Grave at Dimbaza* are films which exemplify islands of progressiveness that mark the tentative beginnings of a future independent progressive film movement in a milieu of staunch State control and severe cinematic censorship.

⁵³ Maingard, Jacqueline; *Trends in South African Documentary Film and Video: Questions of Identity and Subjectivity*, Journal of Southern African Studies, vol. 21,4,Dec 1995, pg 658

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INDEPENDENT ANTI-APARTHEID FILM MOVEMENT

CONTEXT - AN OVERVIEW

Independent cinema is understood as that which works outside the mainstream, formulaic conventions set up by either the State or the dominant cinematic system and industry. In terms of the anti-Apartheid film 'movement' that established itself during the eighties, there are certain criteria that have defined it as such and shaped it as an alternative approach to the prevalent filmmaking practices of the conservative nationalistic cinema already in existence.⁵⁴

It must be made clear that the anti-Apartheid film 'movement' has been called a movement in hindsight; the filmmakers who were producing resistance films in the late seventies and early eighties did not necessarily know like-minded filmmakers across the country and were not at this stage, working in an unified, consolidated direction against the State. Although they perceived their work to contribute to the larger resistance movement, they did not necessarily believe they were part of a united film movement.

The establishment of this movement, or the trends of filmmaking that developed this movement, during the eighties can be identified through a variety of approaches.⁵⁵ There

⁵⁴ Tomaselli identifies six general broad categories of independent cinema, namely, intention, alternative exhibition venues, censorship, low budget, relationship between cost and content and that independent film pave the way for the not yet possible all of which can be attributed to the South African independent documentary film movement. For additional detail on these categories and discussion of the terms 'radical' and 'oppositional' cinema see Tomaselli, K; *Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South African Film*, 1989, Great Britain and Unwin, Chas and Belton, Colin; *Cinema of Resistance – The Other Side of the Story*, pg 277-300, *Movies, Moguls and Mavericks, South African Cinema 1979 – 1991*; 1992; Showdata; Cape Town, South Africa.

⁵⁵ Maingard, Jacqueline; *Trends in South African Documentary Film and Video: Questions of Identity and Subjectivity*, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol, 21,4,Dec 1995, pg 658

are examples of individual filmmakers such as Lindy Wilson, Mike Gavshon, Clifford Bestall and Peter Davis who produced resistance films independently of the mainstream and with no affiliation to particular political organisations and there are groups or collectives of filmmakers who established anti-Apartheid film organisations, often working directly through or in conjunction with political organisations such as VNS/Afravision who became the filmmaking outfit for the ANC and the Community Video Education Trust (CVET) who worked in close alliance with the UDF; these filmmakers and organisations will be discussed separately and in more detail later in my paper. One can also examine the individual films as indicators of the development the resistance film movement. What is clear, however, is that “the documentary ‘movement’ in South Africa has not developed in a linear, homogenous way that can be easily categorised, but rather has formed around diverse trends that relate to a number of variables: aesthetics and style, content, censorship, the States of Emergency, funding and distribution, audiences equipment and technical resources, education and training, networking the film and broadcasting industry and access to screening and broadcasting outlets both locally and internationally.”⁵⁶

The political context in which this independent industry found itself, was that of growing resistance and outward protest by the masses against the dictatorial authority of the Botha regime. After the 1976 Soweto uprising, the youth were more determined to fight against the security forces and Umkonto Isizwe grew in stature and strength and attacks were

⁵⁶ Maingard, J; *Trends in South African Documentary Film and Video*, Journal of Southern African Studies, vol. 21,4,Dec 1995 pg 658

carried out mostly in the form of bombing National monuments and businesses. New organisations led by the youth, students and women began to spring up and the governments response was an attempt to appease black communities by introducing reforms and policies such as the Tricameral Parliament and Black Local Authorities in African Townships.⁵⁷ Despite these new reforms, the government continued to exert repression and strength through the military and security forces, which only led to renewed resistance from the ground.

In 1983 the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) embodied this renewed mass movement of confrontation and action against Apartheid laws. In conjunction with other congresses established during this time, such as the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and the Congress of Trade Unions (COSATU), they mobilised their members in school boycotts and worker rallies and pursued an unrelenting resistance movement on National level. A state of emergency was declared in various parts of the country in 1985 and in 1986 a National emergency was declared which remained in place until 1990.⁵⁸

It was within this environment of violence and insubordination that the independent anti-Apartheid film movement established itself as a weapon in and of the Struggle with the intention to reclaim a people's history and record popular memory. The film environment at this time was still dominated by State-made political propaganda and the

⁵⁷ Feinberg,B and Oodendaal,A (series eds); Mayibuye History and Literature Series, no 48; 1994; Mayibuye Books and the African National Congress, South Africa; pg 20

⁵⁸ Ibid; pg 24

Broederbond-controlled film houses, which produced fiction films and television programs often with assistance and subsidy from the State with the intention to preserve Afrikaner culture.

These films were comedies and dramas that favoured stereotypical representations of the Afrikaner usually as “uncomplicated and untainted by city life”⁵⁹ and had very little relevance to the wider South African social situation. Films such as *The Gods must be Crazy* (1978) and its sequel in 1982, *Skelms* (1980) and the television series, *Nommer Asseblief* (1980) and *Die Bosveldhotel* (1981)⁶⁰ are examples of Afrikaans genre films that protected the image of the Afrikaner and avoided social responsibility and criticism in their narratives.

“It couldn’t be described as South African cinema or South African television because it was so ideologically specific, so racially specific, and so unlike what South Africa really is and that’s a country full of immense contradiction, vibrancy and difference. And these films are all about a sameness, a similarity, an ideological pureness.”

- Brian Tilley, Director, interview

Towards the late eighties the tax subsidy system that the government implemented to encourage Afrikaans feature filmmaking led Afrikaans filmmakers to concentrate on the commercial viability of projects and they chose to produce American-style genres and formulas that were considered “safe and apolitical.”⁶¹ Examples of successful television shows and novels that were turned into full-length features are *Liewe Hemel Genis*

⁵⁹ Pretorius, William; *Afrikaans Cinema; Soothing Images*, pg 377, Movies, Moguls and Mavericks, South African Cinema 1979 – 1991; 1992; Showdata; Cape Town, South Africa.

⁶⁰ Pretorius, W; *Afrikaans Cinema*, pg 377

⁶¹ Pretorius, W; *Afrikaans Cinema*, pg 376

(1986), *Agter Elke Man* (1990), *Circles in the forest* (1988) – *Kringe in die Bos*. Many were also translated into English.⁶²

“I think there was still this notion of being able to sell a positive image of South Africa through these different film companies that were part of the establishment... So they took an interest and helped financially and I think a lot of the established film industry, the people involved, became quite wealthy. Even though they might have made shocking films, just everything was so in their favour in terms of government support, that they actually made quite a lot of money. So within a very, very small confined circle there was quite a thriving industry.”

- Lawrence Dworkin, Director/Producer, interview

Many of the filmmakers who established anti-Apartheid film and video organisations were white students whose political consciousness and interest in film led them to explore the medium as a vehicle to initiate change and as an instrument for communities to use to create a space for new voices. At this stage black people who were involved with film were either ushers or cleaners employed by the established film industry or possibly had had some experience and training of technical skills with foreign news journalist who came out to South Africa to report on ‘the story’. These foreign companies, such as Viznews, ITN, WTN and Channel 4, hired black people to train as assistants because of their access to the townships.⁶³ They became trained as sound

⁶² Ibid pg 381

⁶³ Dworkin, Lawrence; Interview, August 2001

recordists and cameramen and eventually wanted to produce their own films that “would use indigenous imagery (to) portray their reality in South Africa.”⁶⁴

Although there were these instances of black filmmakers beginning to produce their own films, they are isolated examples within a white-dominated industry. Even within the anti-Apartheid movement the skills base was largely amongst whites – the movement itself was never truly representative of the people it sought to represent.

“I felt that what film would do would be to become an amazing vehicle for communities to know each other and to know each other’s struggles. And instead of the situation at the time where you had these kind of fragmented community struggles, film could help kind of defragment those kind of struggles. So you put people here in Alex in touch with people in Gugulethu in Cape Town. I mean ideally, that was the ideal that drove me to become interested in the medium.”

- Nyana Molete, Director, interview

The advent of video technology in the early 1980’s was a significant development in terms of widening access to filmmaking and reaching a wider audience. The evolution of the camcorder and portable video and television equipment, meant that films being produced could be distributed and exhibited far more quickly than had been the case previously. Venues didn’t need film projection equipment and films could be shown in school halls, churches and community centers. At this stage universities began to teach film and video production and film theory courses which procured small but enlightened

⁶⁴ Botha, M; *South African Short Film Making from 1980-1995: A Thematic Exploration*; <http://www.unisa.ac.za/dept/press/comca/222/botha.htmlpg> 3

audiences who supported the movement; “there was a whole social movement in which filmmakers could imbed themselves in terms of recording a much wider set of situations that hadn’t been the case previously. So it was really the advent of video technology that changed everything.”⁶⁵

The reaction from the State to this growing movement was one of severe restrictions and violence. In some ways, film and video, although one of their own propagandistic tools, was also one of their greatest threats. Up to 1963 film censorship mostly applied to imported material since local reporters and filmmakers rarely challenged the status quo.⁶⁶ The Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963 for the first time made formal provision for the censorship of locally produced material, which was regularly reformed and tightened through out the seventies and eighties.⁶⁷

The fear of the South African story, and what was happening in the country, becoming exposed internationally, led the Botha regime to implement censorship laws and restrictions on the media “which aimed first at blotting out public awareness of the mass, semi-insurrectional resistance which characterised South Africa in 1984-1985 by banning reports on events.”⁶⁸ Under the emergency regulations of 1985 and 1986, the State banned the reporting of unrest and the actions of the security forces ‘containing’ this resistance, and Home Affairs minister, Stoffel Botha, was granted the power to ban or

⁶⁵ Tomaselli, K; Interview, July 2001

⁶⁶ Tomaselli, K; The Cinema of Apartheid; Race and Class in South African Film, Routledge, London, 1989, pg 14

⁶⁷ Ibid; pg 14

⁶⁸ Badela M and Niddrie, D; Restrictions on the Media – A Reflection on Journalism, Movies, Moguls and Mavericks, South African Cinema 1979 – 1991; Showdata; Cape Town, South Africa, 1992

suspend certain newspapers and publications.⁶⁹ These and other laws that were introduced later in the eighties received world-wide criticism and led to the more enterprising journalists and filmmakers, who continued reporting the story from an anti-Apartheid position, facing brutal reaction from the security forces and the implementation of further restrictions. Within this prohibitive environment, journalists and filmmakers became the punching bag of the regime who were frustrated with the negative international reaction at the curtailing of freedom of the press and poor exposure South Africa was getting internationally. The anti-Apartheid productions were subject to confiscation and being destroyed and the filmmakers themselves endured harassment, imprisonment, solitary confinement, violence within the context of the situation they were filming and direct violence from the security police, as in the case of Brian Tilley who was shot in the leg in 1987.

Another reaction to the censorship laws of the nineteen eighties, was the founding of the Weekly Mail Film Festival in 1987, set up specifically to challenge the censor board and screen material otherwise forbidden publicly in South Africa. It had exemption from the cultural boycott because it was secretly supported by the ANC and became a platform for independent filmmakers to screen and discuss their work.⁷⁰ Government regulation permitted them to screen each film only once and to select audiences.⁷¹ The publicity engendered by the commotion the festival organisers caused when taking on the Appeals Board, as all the films had already been banned, and because their exemption from the

⁶⁹ Badela M and Niddrie, D; *Restrictions on the Media – A Reflection on Journalism, Movies, Moguls and Mavericks, South African Cinema 1979 – 1991*; Showdata; Cape Town, South Africa, 1992

⁷⁰ Key, Liza; Interview; June 2001

⁷¹ Wilson, L; Interview, August 2001

boycott permitted them to screen films that Ster Kinekor wasn't allowed to show, meant that they drew the support of large audiences. The festival remained in existence until 1994 when in light of the first democratic elections the necessity for it to continue fell away.

There were other platforms and forums during the eighties that allowed filmmakers to meet and screen and discuss their work. One of the first major events was the Culture and Resistance Festival in Gaborone, Botswana, in 1982, at which filmmakers from in and outside South Africa pledged their alliance to the liberation movement and agreed to use their skills in a "conscious and organised way" against Apartheid.⁷² The Culture in Another South Africa (CASA) conference and festival held in Amsterdam in 1987, hosted 300 artists, both exiled and from within South Africa, and consisted of ten days of debates regarding the role of all forms of culture in the struggle for democracy. Nadine Gordimer captured the message of the conference; "Art is at the heart of liberation."⁷³

⁷² Quoted from Barry Feinberg, *The Role of Social Documentary Films in our Struggle for National Liberation*, November 1983 by Unwin, Chas and Belton, Colin; *Cinema of Resistance – The Other Side of the Story*, pg 277-300, *Movies, Moguls and Mavericks, South African Cinema 1979 – 1991*; 1992; Showdata; Cape Town, South Africa.

⁷³ Gordimer, N; *The Value of A Conference*, in *Culture in Another South Africa*, Zed Cultural Studies, 1989, London. See *Culture in Another South Africa*, Zed Cultural Studies, 1989, London, for a collection of essays on the role of film, poetry, music, journalism, theatre and photography in the anti-Apartheid movement that were presented and produced at the conference.

THE FORMATION OF KEY ORGANISATIONS AND COMMUNITY VIDEO INITIATIVES:

CASE STUDIES

The emergence of organised film collectives came about in several ways. Harriet Gavshon suggests that many of the community film and video organisations came out of the community organisations themselves and therefore “inevitably coincide with the re-emergence of organised political opposition in the early eighties and the formation of the UDF in 1983.”⁷⁴ They aimed to document events within these political organisations and in some cases facilitate training programs and community film and video projects.

Others developed as film and video outfits that were directly affiliated with the ANC or organisations like COSATU and made films that were distributed internationally to rally support for the resistance movement from abroad, or distributed underground within South Africa to educate members of these organisations. Some were made up merely of a loose alliance of individual filmmakers whose similar political ideologies and desire to make films led them to joining forces to produce anti-Apartheid documentary films and videos.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, these organisations did not form at the same time in a linear fashion, but rather out of a need in separate communities and organisations, at different times, to document the Struggle and use images to wield change.

⁷⁴ Gavshon, Harriet; “*Bearing Witness*”: *Ten Years Towards an Opposition Film Movement in South Africa*, in *Radical History Review*, 1991, Philadelphia

International Defense and Aid Fund (IDAF):

IDAF was an organisation originally established in South Africa during the fifties by the chairman of the Christian Action group, Canon John Collins, to raise finance for legal aid to assist prisoners who had been imprisoned under Apartheid. After successfully raising funds and support from abroad to defend the Treason and Rivonia Trialists, IDAF was banned in South Africa and retreated overseas to set itself up as an international organisation.⁷⁵

Part of its responsibility in its commitment to South Africa was to raise funds from other governments abroad and for this it needed a propaganda unit, which became known as the Research Information Department.⁷⁶ Barry Feinberg, who with his family, had gone into exile when the State of Emergency had been declared after Sharpeville in 1960, headed up the unit. “Our job was to supply first-hand irrefutable, unchallengeable information about what was happening in South Africa at a time increasingly when you couldn’t get information from South Africa.”⁷⁷

The unit focused on their own film and video productions, often in collaboration with other South Africans in exile, to bring to the international community “a clear picture of what the ANC and the wider liberation movement saw as the solution for South Africa’s problems.”⁷⁸ One of the first films made within the jurisdiction of the Research Information Department, was *Isitwalandwe, The History of the Freedom Charter* (1980),

⁷⁵ Feinberg, Barry, Interview, July 2001

⁷⁶ Feinberg, Barry; Interview; July 2001

⁷⁷ Feinberg, Barry, Interview, July 2001

⁷⁸ Feinberg, Barry; Interview; July 2001

made on both video and 16mm film. Filmed in conjunction with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the drawing up of the Freedom Charter in Kliptown in 1955, the film sought to explain to the international community why the Freedom Charter represented the majority of South African's aspirations for the country, so they could understand what the liberation movement wanted, as it had been typecast by international media as a terrorist organisation inspired by communist ideologies.⁷⁹

“So that was the first movie and we were totally amazed by the response to it. I think the response came about as a result of two things. The first was the content of the movie which was new to the international community who had up to that point only seen rather boring cyclo-styled documents spelling out these materials and suddenly they were faced with a line-up of all the leaders of the liberation movement interviewed and talking about the origins of the Freedom Charter and how it was all organised, the whole history of it, the response of the police, and who turned out to be intensely human individuals. I made sure that in the interviews with people like Oliver Tambo and others, we brought out a kind of personal dimension so that people could evaluate them as people as well as purveyors of ideas.”

- Barry Feinberg (IDAF), Interview

The film was subsequently invited to several international film festivals, predominantly in countries which supported the liberation movement such as the Netherlands, Great Britain and Scandinavia, where it won numerous awards and was also used internally by the ANC as an educative tool concerning their own political ideology.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Feinberg, Barry, Interview, July 2001

⁸⁰ Feinberg, Barry, Interview, July 2001

Following the success of *Isitwalandwe*, IDAF continued to produce several anti-Apartheid documentaries throughout the eighties. *The Anvil and the Hammer* (1985), examines the violence of Apartheid and the growth of the resistance movement in South Africa; *Song of the Spear* (1986), looks at the role of culture in the resistance movement and features Amandla, the cultural ensemble of the ANC and *Any Child is my Child* (1988) examines the horrific environment and brutality that children had to endure under Apartheid, focusing on the children's conference held in Harare.

The style of filmmaking used in *Isitwalandwe* was mostly conventional and expository; an instructional or educative narrative complemented the images, which consisted of newsreel and actuality footage of events. The later films took on more of an interactive, verite approach using ambient sound and "juxtaposing contradictory images."⁸¹ *Any Child is my Child* uses the Harare Children's conference as a backbone to the film and the children's testimonies are interwoven with images of police brutality, violence and the children themselves, exhibiting gun shot wounds and other evidence of violent assault. Interviewees were framed in a very direct way, so they spoke directly to the camera and therefore directly to the audience. Bill Nichols argues that the closer an interviewee comes to the zero-degree eyeline, when the subject looks directly into the camera, the stronger the "demonstrative proof" of what is being said and shown.⁸² In terms of *Any Child is my Child*, and many of the other films produced by both IDAF and

⁸¹ Unwin, Chas and Belton, Colin; *Cinema of Resistance – The Other Side of the Story*, Movies, Moguls and Mavericks, South African Cinema 1979 – 1991, Showdata; Cape Town, South Africa, 1992, pg 288

⁸² Referred to by Jaqueline Maingard in her essay, *Fruits of Defiance: Narrating Popular Consciousness*, Current writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa, vol 9, no. 1, pg 61 April 1997 from Nichols, Bill; Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media, Indiana University press, 1981

VNS/Afravision, the relationship between image and interviewee consistently reaffirms the testimony presented on the screen.

IDAF's films were unequivocally on the side of the resistance movement and therefore offered little in the way of criticism of the anti-apartheid movement or political organisations within it; they were made solely with the intention to "keep the conscience of the world alive to the issues at stake in southern Africa by providing authoritative, comprehensive and well documented information."⁸³

The other objective that the IDAF film unit had was to create an opening for South African producers working in London to secure footage of events happening within South Africa to keep their own productions authentic and up to date.

"So if I was making a film on a particular aspect of the liberation struggle and needed particular footage, we had a way of secret communication where I would pass on my needs to them and what interviews I wanted, even down to what kind of shots I wanted at the interviews and they would tailor the job in South Africa and send the stuff out to me, so that I only had to cut it and incorporate the shots into whatever movie I was making."

- Barry Feinberg (IDAF), Interview

Filmmakers such as Richard Wickstead and Mark Kaplan, who was deported from South Africa in the early eighties and went back to Zimbabwe, shot the footage for *Any Child is my Child* and the filmmakers of the VNS/Afravision collective, which eventually had an office at the IDAF premises, collaborated on many of the IDAF projects.

⁸³ Quoted from the IDAF audiovisual catalogue in Unwin, Chas and Belton, Colin; *Cinema of Resistance – The Other Side of the Story, Movies, Moguls and Mavericks, South African Cinema 1979 – 1991*, Showdata; Cape Town, South Africa, 1992, pg 288

IDAF continued producing anti-Apartheid films and supporting South African filmmakers until 1994, when the propaganda unit was shut down and by 1991, when the IDAF resources were transferred to the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape, nearly 100 productions had been completed.⁸⁴

Video News Services (VNS) / Afravision:

“VNS was a group of people who had film skills who wanted to basically make films about this country, from the point of view of people living in this country.”

- Nyana Molete (VNS/Afravision), Interview

One of the units within South Africa that was set up in part to make available material for IDAF, was VNS/Afravision founded in 1985. The founding members of the unit, Laurence Dworkin, Brian Tilley, Nyana Molete, Elaine Proctor and Tony Bensusan met in 1980 and produced the film, *Forward to a People's Republic* (1980) on 16mm film. The film showcased the 1980 Republic Day celebrations by portraying “the dynamics of conflict in the country in the early 1980's by juxtaposing the people's militancy with white militarisation.”⁸⁵ People in the townships had begun to mobilise around the Republic Day celebrations and not very many news crews were out covering the event, which led to the group of filmmakers documenting and producing unique footage that had not been seen before. After approaching IDAF in London, they secured a vehicle for distribution and returned to South Africa to continue producing material of the resistance movement.

⁸⁴ Freedom Struggle Video Series insert, Mayibuye Centre, University of the Western Cape

⁸⁵ Botha, M; *South African Short Film Making from 1980 to 1995*,
<http://www.unisa.ac.za/dept/press/comca/222/botha.html>

“We were really part of the masses at the time and I think that really sort of established our contacts with people on the ground, in the townships, in the community, because they basically saw that we were being exposed to the same kind of treatment and harassment as they were.”

- Laurence Dworkin (VNS/Afravision), Interview

What began as a small film unit with minimal equipment and resources, went on to become one of the major producers of film and video material of political meetings, workers struggles and the resistance movement in general. Its intention was to distribute material within South Africa through trade unions, youth and community organisations and through groups like IDAF to the ANC externally.⁸⁶ It went on to run a training project full time and was funded by various governmental organisations in Scandinavia, the International Defense and Aid Fund in London and by selling material to Channel Four, BBC and Dutch television. As such, it was partially funded and partially self-sustaining.⁸⁷ It operated as Video News Services in South Africa and as the alternative news distribution agency, Afravision, in London, in collaboration with IDAF.

Although concerned about the growing hostility of the government and the security forces towards independent progressive filmmakers, the members of VNS/Afravision developed a strategy whereby they would work in close association with the foreign news media, as a service organisation to the crews that were filming in South Africa and hide behind them in terms doing the actual work they wanted to do.⁸⁸ Being in close

⁸⁶ Tilley, B; Interview; August 2001

⁸⁷ Tilley, Brian, Interview, July 2001

⁸⁸ Dworkin, L, Interview, July 2001

affiliation to the ANC, meant that they operated as a clandestine, underground collective and right through to the early 1990's, none of their films has end credits on them.

The type of films that they produced varied in style and length. Many of the earlier films like *Forward to A People's Republic* (1980) and *Sun Will Rise* (1982), which examined the armed struggle in the resistance movement and looked at among others, Solomon Mhlangu, the first Umkonto Isizwe freedom fighter to be executed, were twenty to twenty five minute-long documentaries filmed in a mostly observational, verite style with natural sound and no voice over narration. As the eighties became increasingly volatile and the urgency with which the films needed to be distributed became more pronounced, the collective became more involved in producing video pamphlets covering events like the railway strikes, miners strikes and protest marches.

Jacqueline Maingard points out, because documentary attempts to represent 'reality', the representative-ness of subjects and subject matter are key in authenticating documentary productions; in South Africa in the eighties and nineties, "the concomitant need for identifying and defining political positions" suggests that "documentary films can be seen to have been 'burdened' with the need to be representative."⁸⁹ In terms of VNS/Afravision films, representatives of workers, cultural groups and communities spoke on behalf of the individual, with images of mass meetings and events to validate their point of view.⁹⁰ *Compelling Freedom* (1987), which reflects workers' cultural

⁸⁹ Maingard, J; *Trends in South African Documentary Film and Video: Questions of Identity and Subjectivity*, Journal of Southern African Studies, vol21, no4, December 1995

⁹⁰ Maingard, J; *Trends in South African Documentary Film and Video: Questions of Identity and Subjectivity*, Journal of Southern African Studies, vol21, no4, December 1995, pg 660

groups exemplifies this approach. The film examines a variety of cultural groups within trade unions that present protest poetry and theatrical productions, which challenge the western socialisation of culture and aim to mobilise and inspire fellow workers in a unified movement for workers rights. The interviewees are however, union officials rather than the performers themselves. This division between the personal and the political characterised many of the later VNS/Afravision productions.

Several of the films that were made by VNS/Afravision during the late eighties and up until the early 1990's are included in *Redefining the Griot*. The vast amount of films that were produced by VNS/Afravision and the limited space that the documentary film format allowed, necessitated a collage sequence of VNS/Afravision's films and therefore could not reflect adequately the above-mentioned dynamics of the interviews in the films. All VNS/Afravision films employed an observational and verite style of filmmaking, using interviewees' stories as the central narrative and images of various aspects of the Struggle to illustrate what was being said. Only ambient sounds were included and music or songs that may have accompanied the opening sequences, came from within the community or organisations themselves.

Films produced by the collective, some of which are included in the collage sequence in *Redefining the Griot* are *Song of the Spear* (1986) in collaboration with IDAF which examines protest theatre and music, and focuses specifically on the training of *Amandla*, the cultural ensemble of the ANC. The film follows the group's preparations and rehearsals juxtaposed with their various performances abroad; *COSATU: A Giant has*

Risen (1986) reflects on the history of the trade union movement and the formation of COSATU – for whom VNS/Afravision produced many documentaries and video pamphlets, recording workers struggles and protest marches. The film makes use of footage shot throughout the years of COSATU’s existence and again juxtaposes these images with interviews of union members and officials. *Growing up Under Apartheid’s Feet* (1987), examines resistance to the State through four movements, the church, workers, women and the media. Each film is between ten and fifteen minutes long and interview-based. *Certain Unknown Person’s* (1988) provides a visual and critical investigation into the ‘accidental deaths’ of political prisoners, and incorporates interviews with family members and fellow activists.

It is significant to note that none of the films produced by VNS/Afravision, in addition to not including credits, ever included the interviewer’s image or voice. In order to protect the film unit and continue working within the confines of censorship and police harassment to fight Apartheid, the presence of the filmmakers’ was unidentified and the films remained devoid of authorship. Harriet Gavshon points out, that while filmmakers in the wider anti-Apartheid film movement remained protected, many of their subjects were not.⁹¹ Throughout the many raids and confiscation of material from filmmakers, footage was kept by security police members and often used against the people whom the films sought to represent.

⁹¹ Gavshon, Harriet; “*Bearing Witness*”: *Ten Years Towards an Opposition Film Movement in South Africa*, in *Radical History Review*, Philadelphia, 1991

The Delma's treason trial was one such example, where footage that had been presented in an earlier treason trial in Pietermaritzburg but was not admitted because the filmmaker had moved overseas after spending six months in detention and therefore could testify to its authenticity, was admitted to be used as evidence by the judge presiding over the Delma's trial.⁹² Although many of the interviewees in films knew the risk involved in being portrayed on screen, it raises the question of the filmmakers responsibility, especially regarding children, in the production of anti-apartheid films and videos.⁹³

The films and videos produced by VNS/Afravision, (many in collaboration with IDAF), served the solitary purpose of recording and distributing material of the struggle to mobilise action against the Apartheid State. In light of this, the films offered an uncritical account of the ANC and liberation movement policies and can thus be best defined as anti-Apartheid propaganda.

"Our focus was making films with a very, very strong anti-apartheid bias. We saw ourselves not just as a group of filmmakers who were making films for ourselves or were making films to become famous. We saw ourselves as part of this broad movement that was challenging the system at the time. And that is what kept us going. And, in fact, I don't know if you can call us filmmakers in the kind of traditional sense, because we had a definite focus."

- Nyana Molete (VNS/Afravision), Interview

⁹² Harriet Gavshon, in her paper, "Bearing Witness": Ten Years Towards an Opposition Film Movement in South Africa, in *Radical History Review*, 1991, Philadelphia pg 336

⁹³ Harriet Gavshon, in her paper, "Bearing Witness": Ten Years Towards an Opposition Film Movement in South Africa, in *Radical History Review*, 1991, Philadelphia, discusses the responsibility of the filmmaker in this regard, and concludes that despite the risk involved, the situation under Apartheid meant interviewees wanted to offer testimony and be a witness without hiding their identity because the 'power and eloquence' of the medium of film, allowed 'the images to bear witness to their lives.' As such, the means justified the end.

“We were deliberately opposition filmmakers. We saw ourselves as radical filmmakers. Our ideology was part of our filmmaking. And I think that’s what united the people in Afravision was a loose agreement around politics. We all wanted to see the apartheid government go and a new government come in, so in a way our films were propagandistic, in that it was a polarised society.”

- Brian Tilley(VNS/Afravision), Interview

As Apartheid drew to a close in the early nineties, Afravision was allowed more space and time to develop film projects and approach subject matter of a slightly different thematic nature. In 1989, they produced *Fruits of Defiance*, which although still looked at recent resistance in Cape Town, was filmed in an environment where the whole mood had changed and was characterised by a sense of achievement. The film represented the Defiance Campaign that had been launched by the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) just before the government was to hold elections for its tricameral parliament, and which brought together the “largest mass alliance of anti-Apartheid protestors across all sectors of South African society.”⁹⁴ *Fruits of Defiance* captures this spirit of mass protest and unified political consciousness, documenting in particular the march to parliament, which became known as the ‘Purple Rain March’ after police turned water cannons filled with purple dye onto the protestors. The filmmakers and camera have an unseen but consistent presence in the film and in some instances, seem to influence the nature of events. During the ‘Purple Rain’ incident for example, a camera placed in a building above the scene, films a policeman running toward a camera on the ground and as it seems he is about to attack, the camera on the ground captures him in a close up freeze-frame. This

⁹⁴ Maingard, J; *Fruits of Defiance: Narrating Popular Consciousness*, Current writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa, vol 9, no. 1, April 1997

technique is used throughout the sequence and serves to pull the audience into the chaos on the screen.

Fruits of Defiance, which is the last of the Afravision films illustrated in *Redefining the Griot*, reflects the changing environment in South Africa and is in a way a product of that environment. The film moves beyond the simple but direct narratives of earlier VNS/Afravision material and plays with new techniques and different filmic strategy. It incorporates the *narrative* of Mark Splinter, a Mannenberg resident, as the *narration* of the film thus having “the effect of highlighting Splinter’s relationship with Manenberg, but somehow removing him from it.”⁹⁵ Using Splinter immediately suggests the filmmakers have been accepted by the community and Splinter himself, provides a voice and testimony, for the community. The film, therefore, in its use of camera techniques and narrative structures, appears come from within the community and the audience ‘witnesses’ the events as through the eyes of any individual who may have been a participant.

Ulibamba Lingashoni (1992), a film made after the unbanning of political parties and political leaders, is a five-part series on the history of the African National Congress, which took about two and a half years to make. The political urgency that had distinguished their earlier filmmaking, began to fall away and the series offers a detailed analyses of the ANC – its origins, ideology and passage through South Africa’s Apartheid history. VNS/Afravision closed down in 1994, but remains as a distribution

⁹⁵ Maingard, J, *Fruits of Defiance: Narrating Popular Consciousness*, Current writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa, vol 9, no. 1, April 1997

wing of all the films that were produced. Most of the filmmakers who were involved in the collective went on to make films independently and are still producing documentaries today.

Community Video and Education Trust (CVET):

“There is some sort of democratic right in CVET’s philosophy, the belief that as a tool of communication, people should have access to it.”

- John Tindall (CVET) discussing video, Interview

Originally established as the Community Video Resource Association (CVRA) in 1977, CVET was begun as a subsidy project of the University of Cape Town and the Cape Town International film festival. At the first Cape Town International film festival in 1977, the concept of film and video as a catalyst in social development was investigated in a two-day seminar. From that seminar, a group of people, including Mark Kaplan, John Tindall and Liz Fish emerged to form CVET.⁹⁶

Co-ordinated by Mark Kaplan, the organisation functioned as a vehicle for community organisations and activists to “document their experiences, work and the socio-political effects of Apartheid” through the experimental use of video.⁹⁷ The CVRA was based on the Canadian Film Board’s Challenge for Change program, which sought to develop

⁹⁶ Tindall, John; Interview; May 2001

⁹⁷ Maingard, J; *Trends in South African Documentary Film and Video: Questions of Identity and Subjectivity*, Journal of Southern African Studies, vol21, no4, December 1995

methods of community filmmaking in working class communities in Canada in the 1970's, ensuring the means of representation were "in the hands of the citizens."⁹⁸

"I worked with oppositional groupings of one sort and another of different tendencies in a project that was seeking to, I suppose, help mobilise people around very basic requirements – the need for electricity in people's houses, the need for equal education and so on. These were issues that I was interested in anyway, and it helped me feel comfortable at that time as a white South African. My work was very much that of trying to facilitate a process of getting other people to document their own lives so I was training people, who in turn were becoming trainers so the human resource pool was growing, and slowly also the equipment we were using was getting better and becoming easier to use."

- Mark Kaplan, Interview, July 2001

One of the few video organisations that has remained in existence beyond 1994, and is about to celebrate its twenty fifth anniversary, CVET's vision was, and still is, to utilise video tape in contributing to the development of people in terms of upliftment of their socio-economic and socio-political conditions, thereby seeing video playing a major role in the upliftment of marginalised communities.⁹⁹

"At the same time, the project as modest as it was, was one of the few places where people who tended to kind of have these major conflicts with one another nevertheless all felt comfortable coming to learn skills which would facilitate communication. At the time Bishop Lavis had an electricity problem, Hanover Park had an electricity problem, there was little communication between them. It was important that they saw what was

⁹⁸ Quoted from D. Henaut, 1970 mimeo, pg 9 in Maingard, J; *Trends in South African Documentary Film and Video: Questions of Identity and Subjectivity*, Journal of Southern African Studies, vol21, no4, December 1995

⁹⁹ Tindall, J; Interview, May 2001

going on in each other's back yards and it promoted a resurgence of very strong community responses."

- Mark Kaplan, Interview, July 2001

Functioning as a video production and training house in the eighties, CVET had seen several independent filmmakers, who are still working in the industry today, go through their doors. As an archive, it has many of the works of individual filmmakers who worked outside of organisations such Mark Kaplan and Liz Fish – both of whom produced films within CVET and independently, - and Clifford Bestall, Mike Gavshon, Lindy Wilson and Gavin Young among others, who produced films of community struggles and attempted to document what was happening within the country.

Last Supper at Hortsley Street (1983), for example, directed by Lindy Wilson and filmed by Clifford Bestall, is a narrative film that makes use of reconstruction to document a coloured family's last night in District Six after being forced to relocate. The film examines the effect of the Forced Removals Policy on the family, as told by the family, whose history and culture were deeply rooted in District Six. *Passing the Message* (1981), the first film made by Clifford Bestall and Mike Gavshon, examined workers rights and the trade union movement. At the time in Cape Town, there were very few South Africans filming for the international news media and Bestall and Gavshon began recording political events.

"There was also a lot of trade union activity at that time. The government had decided to unban trade unions or to allow certain trade unions to operate provided they were registered, but a lot of trade unions didn't want

to register with the government and continued their activities. We saw this as the sort of vanguard of the political movement at the time."¹⁰⁰

Produced for Dutch television, *Passing the Message* focuses on one worker and how he became a trade unionist and through him, examines the general conflict between workers and their bosses, and the unions and the government.

Liz Fish, who succeeded Mark Kaplan after he was deported in the early eighties, went on to use a community approach in her 'independent' film, *The Long Journey of Clement Zulu* (1992), outside of the organisational structures of CVET. The film examines the lives of three of the last political prisoners to be released from Robben Island and their reintegration into their communities. Focusing in particular on Clement Zulu, the film follows him back to Natal where he fears assault from Inkatha members and documents his struggle to find work, reunite with his family and settle down.

Fish's style of filmmaking, although remaining community-based, varied throughout the eighties and early nineties. An example of one of her earlier films was the *Bellville Community Health Project*, which examined a particular health project in Bellville and looked at the need for community-based health plans generally in South Africa. The approach of CVRA at the time was to act as the 'people's camera', where the 'community determines exactly what they want and you operate the camera and they

¹⁰⁰ Bestall, C; Interview, August 2001

make all the decisions.”¹⁰¹ As a result, many of the films were not technically proficient, but they addressed problems directly affecting a community and are documented from that community’s perspective.

Wannedan, produced in the late eighties by Fish, was commissioned by the cultural officer of the Cleansing and Transport Municipal Workers Association (CTMWA), to document a ‘go-slow’ organised by the union.¹⁰² Jacqueline Maingard notes that the striking feature of this documentary was that it represented differing perspectives on the union’s decision to stop the ‘go-slow’ and accept an increase offered by management. In contrast to the VNS/Afravision films of the time, which offered no critique of union’s or political organisation’s actions and ideology, *Wannedan* gives the viewer the option of choice.¹⁰³

CVET also functioned as a ‘clearing –house’ for pirated material that had been sent out or brought out secretly from BBC or other international news agencies; material that had been shown overseas but banned in South Africa, which were copied and distributed through CVET to political organisations or various groups within the resistance struggle. As a result of these actions, CVET became the subject of security police harassment – the offices were raided, tapes were confiscated and in 1982 Mark Kaplan was arrested, imprisoned and held in solitary confinement for 180 days, released and subsequently rearrested and then deported.

¹⁰¹ Quoted by Maingard, J from and interview with Liz Fish, September 1988, in *Trends in South African Documentary Film and Video: Questions of Identity and Subjectivity*, Journal of Southern African Studies, vol21, no 4, December 1995

¹⁰² Maingard, J, *Trends in South African Documentary Film and Video*; 1995

Much of the work that was produced at CVET was not necessarily put together as finished pieces, rather they remained visual documents to be used either in other films or produced at the request of or in collaboration with trade unions as records of their meetings and events. CVET worked in close affiliation with the United Democratic Front (UDF), for whom they acted as a media agent, recording meetings and events and acting in a distribution medium to disperse footage to the wider liberation movement.¹⁰⁴ This was particularly risky in that if the tapes got into the wrong hands, they could be used as evidence against the people who had led the meetings and could identify and expose those who had spoken out against the State.

Originally an association of NGO's, CVET, as with most progressive film organisations during Apartheid, has always suffered from a lack of funding. During the Apartheid years, it was heavily funded by overseas organisations for example church organisations in Canada and Holland, but today direct funding has been halted. Most of these groups who do still offer financial assistance to South Africa, fund the government directly to distribute as they see fit. Obviously video equipment being relatively expensive, means that it is considered a luxury rather than a necessity and in light of priorities such as housing, health and education, community video training has suffered.

Today part of CVET's aim is still to train young people and empower those who may not have the financial resources to attend film schools, to enable them to enter the film industry, but the other part is to see the product contributing back into the community,

¹⁰³ Maingard, J; *Trends in South African Documentary Film and Video; 1995*

¹⁰⁴ Tindall, J; Interview, May 2001

rather than being broadcast internationally.¹⁰⁵ Training in video thus becomes both an educational experience and an educational tool, enabling people to discover the potential of video within the framework from which they come and then use the medium in their own communities within a social development program.

Film Resource Unit (FRU):

The Film Resource Unit began in 1986 as a small video resource library that operated as an underground distribution network during Apartheid, to facilitate the distribution and exhibition of documentary and feature films that were being produced by local filmmakers, but not being seen by the public.

One of the key activities that FRU became involved in, was taking these film and videos into the townships and screening them under clandestine conditions, as in order to get the message out, they had to build strong links with organised community structures such as women's groups, youth groups and political structures across the board.¹⁰⁶ The intention was not just to screen these films, but to use these meetings as an exercise to use film as a discussion base to engage people on issues that affected them.

“So issues of visual literacy were addressed in those debates. Very lively debates. Issues of how can I constructively or critically interpret a message, an audio-visual message. What is the angle the filmmaker uses, how do you interpret those angles, how do you read the film, what is not shown, what is not addressed in the production. To begin to educate

¹⁰⁵ Tindall, J; Interview, May 2001

¹⁰⁶ Dearham, M; Interview; June 2001

ordinary citizens given the deluge of propaganda that was coming through the SABC; to be able to read between the lines.”

-Mike Dearham, Chairperson, Film Resource Unit, Interview

Most of the material they catalogued at the time was either material shot in South Africa by progressive filmmakers or material from South African filmmakers overseas who had been exiled, and news reports from foreign media organisations such as the BBC. Films such as *Last Supper in Hortsley Street* (1981, Lindy Wilson), *Certain Unknown Persons*, (1988, VNS/Afravision) and *Generations of Resistance* (1980, Peter Davis) contributed to their product portfolio of resistance documentaries. As with Afravision and CVET, FRU became the source of harsh police brutality and was subjected to confiscation's and raids. FRU continues to exist today and has become one of the largest distributors of African film. It is a non-governmental film distribution and education organisation, specialising in development communication.

Free Film-Makers

“Free Film-Makers was at best a loose group of friends and associates and it was essentially made up of filmmakers who felt that they could not work with the SABC.”

- Angus Gibson, Interview, July 2001

Free Film-Makers, a collective of independent filmmakers, established themselves in the mid-eighties as an organisation that produced films with which a training process for aspirant black filmmakers would be associated.¹⁰⁷ Each production had an assistant

¹⁰⁷ Gibson,A; Interview, July 2001

cameraperson and assistant sound person, and these trainees would eventually produce their own films.¹⁰⁸ The collective produced various fiction and documentary films during the late eighties, most of which were shown internationally but their most well known project came about during the early 1990's, to document the transition in South Africa. The first *Ordinary People* series, was commissioned by the SABC in 1993 and produced in collaboration with Weekly Mail Television and was the first time an independent company had been commissioned by the SABC to examine South African reality and society.¹⁰⁹

Directed by Clifford Bestall and produced by Harriet Gavshon, the series attempted to document 'ordinary' South Africans in a process of transition, based on the format idea of filming an event over one day, and which would look at the experience of three separate protagonists associated with the event.

"It didn't matter who they were, if they were a far right winger or an MK returnee or what ever, they were treated as human beings, as ordinary people, which we felt was very important, because it felt pointless to sort of restate stereotypes at the time"

- Harriet Gavshon, Ordinary People producer, Interview

Set up in the form of observational/interactive documentaries, the series represented a significant break with past programming at the SABC and reflected changes both in the country and in the broadcasting environment. The protagonists spoke in their mother tongue, and subtitling was pioneered. The events which formed the unifying aspect of each program, were frequently political meetings, rallies and marches, which had the

¹⁰⁸ Gibson,A; Interview, July 2001

auxiliary effect of bringing South Africa's news to the public, in a neatly bundled story and alternative format.

Ordinary People was a complex series that illustrated the South African story through the eyes of South Africans, overcoming past taboos, and creating a weekly space on television for the voices of ordinary citizens to be heard. It was flawed in that each program was only 26 minutes in length, in which the characters were introduced and their perspectives identified, the event had to take place and the whole lot summed up within that time frame – the series was a little too neat and over simplified which prohibited a critical understanding of the complexity of the situation. Nonetheless, it denoted a significant step forward for South Africans and the television industry and a similar format has subsequently been adopted in the Middle East as an exceptional way to document and aid transition.¹¹⁰

The progressive filmmakers working within the dominion of a State-controlled film industry broke new ground in their attempt to get the story of Apartheid out; using limited resources in an adverse environment, they redefined the boundaries of what was possible achieve through the medium of film. Not only did they achieve the seemingly impossible in the face of pernicious hegemony, they proved the value of film as a cultural tool and initiative of political and social change.

¹⁰⁹ Gavshon, Harriet; Interview, June 2001

¹¹⁰ Gavshon, Harriet; Interview, June 2001

The significance of these filmmakers and organisations' work and risk during Apartheid needs to be recognised both as fundamental catalysts of a changing and representative film industry and major cultural weapon in the resistance struggle contributing to the fall of Apartheid. Although no single film can ever entirely be accredited as a force of change, the movement as a whole exhibits the power of culture and the power of images in affecting popular perceptions and protecting popular memory and history.

CONCLUSION

TRANSITION AND REFORM: DOCUMENTARY FILM IN THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA:

As mentioned earlier, the limited space of this paper prohibits me from giving a detailed analysis of the documentary film industry post-1994. It is my intention, therefore, to mention the most significant changes that have occurred and how those changes have affected documentary filmmaking in South Africa over the last decade.

Arguably the most significant change in this new era of documentary filmmaking, is that independent filmmakers have enjoyed greater creative freedom to approach the histories of the Apartheid years and subject matter of particular thematic nature that was forbidden by the National Party government and conservative Afrikaans censor board. In April 1996, the first hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were held. The commission represented a monumental and unique process of a country acknowledging and coming to terms with its past and the stories that were told became sources of material for filmmakers who wanted to explore this era with greater freedom and creativity than had been the case during the Apartheid years. One of the films that stands out as best portraying both the process of the TRC and the stories told within it, is Lindy Wilson's *Guguletu Seven* (1999).

Employing the stylistic device of a fiction film detective genre, the documentary film suggests and exemplifies new ways of approaching the stories of Apartheid. Relating the

history of the Guguletu Seven and the effect of their deaths on their families, the film tells the story through the eyes of investigator, Zenzi le Khoisan and the narratives of the family and security police at the TRC. Wilson was able to get access to of all the TRC records, the police video that had been shot of the incident and various photographs and material that make the film a valuable historical, visual document. In its style and format it exemplifies a shift from earlier documentaries in its attempt to “tell stories not just give messages.”¹¹¹

The socio-political reality of Apartheid has been a predominant theme in documentaries post-1994. These films have enlightened audiences about the past and aided South Africa’s transition through the rendering of many individual and community histories. As the 1990’s have progressed, audiences have to a degree, tired of Apartheid politics and the focus of documentaries has shifted to social and political issues that are manifestations of the Apartheid era, such as Aids. The recent STEPS initiative, one of the first major South African/international co-productions to take place, is a programme of twenty six separate documentary, fiction and short films told by various filmmakers dealing with the AIDS virus and is to be broadcast in South Africa and internationally in early to mid 2002. It reflects the changing nature of social realism in filmmaking over the decade in South Africa from portraying the past to portraying the present and further reflects the various styles and techniques of filmmaking that have emerged to best document these new and shifting realities.

¹¹¹ Markovitz, Steven; Interview, May 2001

Within these shifting parameters, marginalised filmmakers have been empowered to address material of an alternative thematic nature. Although there were pockets of gay and lesbian filmmaking in the late eighties, for example, Melanie Chait's *Out in Africa* (1989)¹¹², the genre has really only been substantially examined during the 1990's. Films such as Jack Lewis' *District Six* and Luiz de Barros' *Granny Lee*, to name a few, have portrayed themes of gay liberation through documenting the stories of people who have dealt with homosexuality within the conservative Apartheid society. The establishment of the Gay and Lesbian film festival in 1999 has further developed a space for filmmakers and audiences to engage with homosexuality in the cinema.

The films of Craig Foster and Craig Matthews demonstrate a growing interest in the politics and society of race and ethnicity beyond the borders of South Africa. *The Great Dance* (2000) and *Ochre and Water* (2001) are two recent examples of documentaries that have gone beyond the representations of Jamie Uys in their depictions and story telling of ethnic groups within Africa, by examining the effect of globalisation and encroachment of white society in Africa, and the subsequent destruction of traditional lifestyles. Both films have won several awards and have been shown internationally to great acclaim.

New comer, filmmaker Dumisani Pahkathi's interest has been the reflection of various subcultures in South Africa. Having made a variety of different inserts on subcultures for the SABC, he produced his first documentary *Rough Ride* (2000), which is essentially

¹¹² Both, Martin; *South African Short Film Making from 1980 to 1995*.

about the evolution of the mini-bus taxi. As one of the biggest subcultural revolutions in South Africa, his concern was that the media had never understood and reflected its complexity.¹¹³ Bridging the gap between the political and the cultural, the film looks at the emergence of mini-bus taxis to fulfill the essential need of transportation in a country whose public transport system had neglected the majority of the population - except in providing the means to get from home to work - and the cultural manifestation of a system of signs and symbols that characterised the evolution.

What is clear from the thematic diversity of these films, is that the landscape of documentary filmmaking in South Africa has broadened dramatically since the Apartheid years and become more representative of the nation as a whole and its complex and heterogeneous identity.

Since 1994 many film festivals and showcases for documentary film have originated; the most prolific being Close Encounters, the South African Documentary Film Festival held annually in Cape Town and Johannesburg. The aim of this festival is to build a cinema-going documentary audience and create an exchange between international and local filmmakers for future collaboration.¹¹⁴ An additional component of the festival is the laboratory, which gives first time filmmakers the support to co-produce their own films with the intention to have them broadcast on E-TV.

¹¹³ Phakathi, Dumisani; Interview, June 2001

¹¹⁴ Markovitz, S; Interview, May, 2001

Other showcases for documentaries have been the recent Input Television Indaba and the annual film market Sithengi. The South African Women's Film festival and Molweni film festival both established in 2001 have given space to marginalised groups of filmmakers to present their work publicly and have both been well supported by audiences. A future development for the Molweni Festival is to work in conjunction with Ster Kinekor's mobile cinema unit to take locally produced feature films and documentaries out to the townships and into communities of Cape Town, who are unable to afford to come into the cities to watch these films. A similar project is being run by the Film Resource Unit, which administers to the needs of Gauteng and surrounding areas.¹¹⁵

The immense support with which all of these various exhibitions of documentary and locally produced films have been met, suggests that film is a powerful medium to develop and engender cultural understanding within a multi-faceted population in South Africa which contributes to an appreciation of national diversity and true national identity.

Although filmmaking in the nineties has been characterised by liberating and exciting possibilities, the process of transition and transformation has not always been an easy one. Financial resources for film in a developing country are not a priority, the broadcasting environment is still undergoing transformations and ownership of resources are still largely in white hands. Years of isolation and the long history of political

¹¹⁵ See African Film Catalogue, Film Resource Unit, Johannesburg, 2000, for further detail regarding their mobile work.

filmmaking so specific to South Africa, allude to a national industry still in its infancy and filmmakers have been faced with the challenge of bridging the divide between the two extremes of conservative and radical filmmaking that had until then characterised the film industry in South Africa.

In his opening speech in 2001, President Thabo Mbeki identified the film industry as one with enormous economic and cultural potential, and endeavored to support filmmakers through the government's subsidiary organisation, the National Film and Video Foundation.¹¹⁶ Founded in 1999 as an independent, statutory body of the Department of Arts and Culture, the NFVF, was set up to make available funds for the development and production of films and videos, with particular emphasis on short films and documentaries. Although this is a minimal R10 to R12 million a year, which includes funding for festivals and training, it exemplifies a recognition from the State of the film and video industry in South Africa. Despite this advance in the government's approach to the film industry, there still needs to be greater collaboration between broadcasters, the government and the filmmakers themselves to truly ignite a self-sustaining industry. The greatest challenge facing filmmakers today, as with independent filmmakers globally, is the lack of financial resources available to produce films.

¹¹⁶ Address by the President of the Republic, Debates of the Joint Sitting, Third Session-Second Parliament, 9 February 2001

The documentary film industry over the last decade reflects a major shift in the paradigms of film production within the filmmaking environment since the Apartheid years. The development of a truly national cinema tradition has been characterised by greater freedom to explore diverse subject matter and the use of the medium to address issues facing a country in transition. It has not been easy though, and the film industry will continue to suffer under the burden of the legacy of Apartheid for many years to come. Although there is now a space for new stories to be told and a new generation of filmmakers to explore the possibility of the medium of the documentary, it is still a white dominated industry in which black filmmakers are more often the subject rather than the producers and creators.

This is gradually changing with the advent of cheaper, more accessible digital technology and the increasing number of international co-productions, bringing foreign money into the industry, and reflecting the regard with which foreign broadcasters and buyers hold South African documentaries, and the potential they offer for future investment. Fewer feature films are being produced annually than ever before, but documentaries as a less expensive option have superceded feature filmmaking in quality, content, international acclaim and audience support. . Documentary film has emerged as the strength of the South African film industry.

The elimination of the urgency with which earlier documentaries had been produced, and the greater collaboration between filmmakers and the government, empowered filmmakers to focus on the aesthetics of filmmaking and the possibilities that the medium

provided with respect to techniques and storytelling devices. Unique stories are being translated into films in an idiosyncratically South African way, and the emergence of new voices within the industry, signifies the development of a distinctive South African film identity and homogeneous national film industry.

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