

Depictions of Queer Female Characters
in
Contemporary South African Documentary Film

by
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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in African Cinema at the University of Cape Town. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates representations of Black South African lesbians in contemporary local documentary films. In order to do so, the author focuses on two films: *Breaking out of the Box* (dir. Zethu Matebeni and S’bu Kheswa, 2011) and *Difficult Love* (dir. Zanele Muholi and Peter Goldsmid, 2010). These films are analysed in the light of a number of questions regarding the depiction of Queer Black women, including: the frequency and qualities of such representations, in which kinds of films such identities are represented, which techniques such films utilise, and which themes are addressed. One issue addressed in both films is the matter of so-called “corrective” rape and this dissertation examines the complexity of depicting this specific theme.

Because the subject matter is related to a number of distinct yet intersecting subjects, resources from a variety of fields are utilised – including, but not limited to, Queer theory in general and research on Queer Film specifically, documentary film theory, and historical studies of South African cinema. The films are analysed within the context of the socio-political environments in which they were created as well as in relation to theoretical contexts relating to representation in film and other media.

Findings indicate that the representation of Black South African lesbians has grown in recent local documentary films. A significant portion of these films utilise personal approaches to documentary filmmaking, which proves particularly suitable for depicting the sensitive and personal nature of the subject matter. The films challenge prevailing beliefs about homosexuality within the African context and defy notions of essentialism in favour of highlighting diversity. Juxtaposed with the growth in documentary film representation, Queer female representation in local fiction film is negligible. Depictions of Queer male identities are comparatively more widespread, yet even these still tend to rely on negative or one-dimensional stereotypes. On a more encouraging note, there appears to be an increase in representation of Queer Black South African documentary filmmakers, which constitutes an increase in the variety of voices represented in a previously limited (and limiting) film industry. These filmmakers’ work also opens interesting questions around representation and self-representation.

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INDEX

Glossary	1
1. Introduction and Methodology	7
2. Content in Context	11
2.1 “Corrective” rape and homophobic violence	11
2.2 Homosexuality as un-African	12
2.3 Political context and background	13
3. Literature Review	17
3.1 Queer Theory, Queer Film	17
3.2 Documentary Theory	21
3.3 South African Documentary Film	31
4. Discussion	38
4.1 Synopses	38
4.2 Context and significance	40
4.3 Form	44
4.4 Contents, themes, issues	48
4.5 Aims and functions	55
4.6 Self, other and camera: presentation and re-presentation	60
4.7 Relationship with the viewer	67
4.8 Documentaries and Fictions	68
5. Conclusion	73
List of Works Cited	75
Articles	75
Books	77
Chapters	79
Films	81
Online	82
Theses	84
Appendix A: I break the boxes	85

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Triptych, from the series <i>Being</i> , Zanele Muholi	16
Figure 2: <i>Breaking out of the Box</i> – Victim of homophobic violence	43
Figure 3: <i>Breaking out of the Box</i> – Portia Modise	46
Figure 4: <i>Breaking out of the Box</i> – Charmaine “Fino” Dlamini in studio	47
Figure 5: <i>Difficult Love</i> – Muholi and visitors at gallery	49
Figure 6: <i>Difficult Love</i> – Viola May	50
Figure 7: <i>Breaking out of the Box</i> – Family	50
Figure 8: <i>Breaking out of the Box</i> – Fikile Vilakazi	52
Figure 9: <i>Difficult Love</i> – Millicent Gaika	53
Figure 10: <i>Difficult Love</i> – Zanele Muholi	57
Figure 11: <i>Breaking out of the Box</i> – Yvette Abrahams	59
Figure 12: <i>Difficult Love</i> – Muholi talking to virginity-testers	64
Figure 13: Apinda Mpako and Ayanda Magudulela, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2007. From the series <i>Being</i> . Zanele Muholi	66

All images by Zanele Muholi (figures 1 and 13) from the series *Being* © Zanele Muholi.
Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg

All images from *Difficult Love* (figures 4, 5, 8, 9 and 11) © Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of
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All images from *Breaking out of the Box* (figures 1, 2, 3, 6, 7 and 10) © Zethu Matebeni and
S’bu Kheswa.

GLOSSARY

As this dissertation will utilise theory drawn from a diverse range of fields, definitions and discussions of some key terms will now be provided for the sake of clarity and contextualisation.

Black: “The word ‘black’ functions as an electric and complex thread within the energies of South Africa, and wrestles with class, ethnicity, apartheid experience and ancestry.”¹

This dissertation’s deployment of the term “Black” is situated within a complex context and is intricately linked to South African history and the legacy of the past. One argument that has been raised suggests that the usage of terms indicating “race”² is archaic and contrary to the notion of a non-racial South Africa. However, completely discarding references to racial identity within the contemporary South African climate would be naively idealistic and would entail ignoring the fact that the country’s history of racial division and unequal treatment still has ramifications in the present. The apartheid government did not utilise the term “Black” as one of its official racial categories, which instead included “African,” “Indian” and “coloured.” However, the term “Black” has been used as a political tool by various movements:

During the growth of anti-apartheid movements, the term ‘black’ was claimed as a term of unity against apartheid systems and ideologies, first explicitly by the Black Consciousness Movement (where ‘black’ referred collectively to people who were not of ‘coloured,’ ‘Indian,’ ‘Afrikaans’ or ‘English’ descent) and later by people working with the underground [African National Congress] and the United Democratic Front. Here, ‘black’ was deployed as a term of revolutionary solidarity across all apartheid race categories, except ‘white.’³

This dissertation uses the term Black within this specific political context. It will aim not to project the term onto those who do not self-identify as such, and the term will be used in its broader and more inclusive sense – including, for example, those identities that would have been categorised as “coloured” by apartheid legislation.

¹ Nonhlanhla Mkhize, Jane Bennett, Vasu Reddy and Relebohile Moletsane, *The Country We Want to Live In: Hate crimes and homophobia in the lives of black lesbian South Africans* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2010), 14

² This dissertation acknowledges that the very notion of race is a contentious one, and that simplistic racial categories are insufficient in describing the complexity of human genetics.

³ Mkhize et al, 13

“Corrective” rape: The occurrence denoted by this term is not a new phenomenon. This description of it has, however, recently become increasingly widely used, specifically in referring to a series of violent crimes committed in South Africa, often in townships. It commonly indicates a Queer person⁴ being raped for reasons connected to their gender and sexual identity as punishment for transgressing social norms and/or in an attempt to “cure” the person of what are seen as “incorrect” or unacceptable identities and behaviours.

The term itself is problematic, as is investigated and explicated by Mary Hames⁵ (who happens to feature in *Breaking out of the Box*⁶). Hames points out that this term might be used in a sensationalist manner, that its use raises questions relating to “language and the stereotyping of race and class and accountability,” and highlights the history of violence in South Africa being “approached through the lenses of race, gender and class.”⁷ Furthermore, Hames points out that the term “corrective” would imply the presence of something to be corrected, such as a sickness or mental disorder, despite there not being anything inherently in need of “correcting” about lesbian identities.⁸

Finding a more insightful and politically sensitive manner of referring to this occurrence proves difficult. Possible alternatives might include “homophobic rape,” “gender- or sexuality-based hate crime in the form of rape,” or some other more specific description. The presence of inverted commas in this dissertation’s use of the term indicates a cynicism towards the alleged corrective or curative effect of such rapes, and the phrase itself is used with some irony. The “corrective” aspect refers to the ostensible justification or reasoning offered by perpetrators and by no means indicates acceptance of this thinking. Furthermore, the term may be (mis-)understood as suggesting that there are different kinds of rape, which in turn may incite a hierarchical structuring of more and less serious “forms” of rape. In contrast to such ideas this dissertation suggests and works from the principle that rape, in itself, is a universally-occurring atrocity committed by and to people of various ages, sexes and genders, using any of a variety of body parts or objects. Contexts within which rapes occur, violence that may accompany it,

⁴ A lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or otherwise non-gender-conforming person

⁵ Mary Hames, “Violence against black lesbians: Minding our language,” *Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity*, 25.4 (2011), 87-91.

⁶ Zethu Matebeni and S’bu Kheswa, 2011

⁷ Hames, 88

⁸ *Ibid.*, 89

and “motivations” for its occurrence, are viewed as additional factors, not as modifiers or qualifiers of the “kind” of rape. Simultaneously, it must be emphasised that the contexts in which those incidents investigated in the films, and thus discussed in this dissertation, are specific, complex, and significant.

Heteronormativity: As one definition explains it, “this is the idea, dominant in most societies, that heterosexuality is the only ‘normal’ sexual orientation, only sexual or marital relations between women and men are acceptable, and each sex has certain natural roles in life, so-called gender roles.”⁹ Heteronormative ideology assigns lesser value to “other” sexualities and gender identities, and defines them according to their differences from the supposed “norm.”

Homophobia: This term denotes a range of beliefs, attitudes or ideological perspectives that include irrational fear, disgust or hatred towards homosexuality and homosexual people. These beliefs inform prejudiced behaviour. Rather than being limited to the fear implied by the word’s literary roots, homophobia often manifests as more diverse emotional responses, including hatred, suspicion, antipathy and distrust. Those who hold homophobic beliefs tend to (attempt to) rationalise their views, based on – amongst others – religious and/or cultural backgrounds. One specific manifestation of homophobia that will be discussed in this investigation is the notion that homosexuality is somehow “un-African”.¹⁰

LGBTI: This acronym is commonly used to refer to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersexed. It is something of an umbrella-term, aiming to integrate a variety of non-conforming or minority genders and sexual identities. However, the term has the potential to be used problematically, since it may be falsely understood as signifying homogeneity in a group that is tremendously diverse. The experiences of, for example, various people who identify as lesbian, vary vastly and are influenced (although not neatly dictated) by factors including age, nationality, culture, class, race, political and religious beliefs. Subsequently, the challenges faced by individuals and groups within the so-called LGBTI community (which might be more accurately described as a group of several distinct but related communities) are different. Its use in this dissertation is for the sake of convenience when

⁹ ActionAid. (2009) *Hate crimes: The rise of ‘corrective rape in South Africa*, <http://rapeoutcry.co.za/home/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/correctiveraperep_final.pdf> [Accessed 5 February 2014], available on *Rape Outcry* website, <<http://rapeoutcry.co.za/home/>>, 6

¹⁰ See section 2, ‘Content in Context’

referring to the notion of a collective constituted by various non-heterosexual identity groups and the author by no means intends to ignore or downplay the multiplicity or specificity of individual identities and experiences by so doing.

Lesbian: Like other terms used to indicate sexual identity, “lesbian” can signify a “very wide variety of people.”¹¹ Some prefer the descriptions “women who love women” or “women in same-sex relationships,” yet the former might evoke questions regarding different kinds of love (including amorous and platonic love, for example) while the latter would exclude those women are not in relationships but who identify as lesbian, gay, homosexual and/or as being attracted to individuals of the same sex. While some hold rather essentialist views of the definition of the term “lesbian,” this dissertation aims to utilise it with sensitivity and caution. The author will not, therefore, utilise it as a prescriptive or narrowly-defined label and will instead respect it as a concept with which some people choose to identify. It may be understood to mean women who love women – where “love” is used in the romantic, amorous and/or erotic sense – but is not limited to this.

Queer: The meaning and use of this political term has been debated at length. It seems to be used more frequently in academic contexts than in everyday life. One researcher describes the development of the term’s meanings and changes as moving along a “spectacular journey:”¹² while initially a pejorative term used to insult peculiarity, the term was reclaimed by sexuality activists and incorporated into the academic world of gender theory, in the process coming to signify a “collective agency and militancy”¹³ with an inherently oppositional stance to the norm.

Judith Butler’s work in gender theory exerted a large influence over Queer theory, specifically in its emphasis on the constructed nature of supposedly-fixed categories of gender and sexual identities. Instead of this, Queer perspectives embrace notions of fluidity, diversity and changeability. Static and essentialist categories are viewed as having been superficially imposed upon a flux of sexual possibilities. Queerness is considered by some theorists to have broader implications:

¹¹ Mkhize et al, 12

¹² Jeffrey Weeks, “Queer,” in *The Languages of Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 144

¹³ *Ibid.*, 145

Queer is not just about gender and sexuality, but the restrictiveness of the rules governing them and their intersection with other aspects of identity. To be really queerly there is to apprehend ‘the complexity of what actually happened ‘between’ the contingent spaces where each variable [race, class, gender] intersects with the others.’¹⁴

There is also an apparent juxtaposition within notions of Queerness, since Queer may be considered “both as an invocation and as a problematisation of the notion of a collective identity rooted in sexual and gender commonality.”¹⁵ Within academic and activist contexts, the “‘queer use of *queer*’ did not represent the assertion of a new political identity but rather the organisation for political action around a ‘fracturing of identity’” [italics in original].¹⁶

Some have noted the usage of the term Queer as a substitute for gay and lesbian, while others have positioned it as a replacement of feminism.¹⁷ However, the usage of Queer within this dissertation can be usefully employed alongside feminism, as well as studies of gender and sexuality. The appropriation of “Queer” as a synonym indicating “gay and lesbian” is ironic, since the very definition of Queer moves beyond such rigid categories and emphasises the diversity of identities that do not conform to societal norms of gender and sexuality.

Not only is the usage of “Queer” within an African context relatively new, but the very meaning of the term within Africa is also still being questioned, investigated and discussed.¹⁸ Ricardo Peach, when using this term while writing about South African cinema (specifically with a capital “Q,” presumably to distinguish it from the more mundane adjective), explains the broad spectrum he uses it to denote as including “lesbians, gays, bisexuals, straight Queers, trans-

¹⁴ Michele Aaron, “New Queer Cinema: an Introduction,” in *New Queer Cinema: A critical reader*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 7. Included citation from Kobena Mercer, “Skin Head Sex Thing,” in *How Do I Look?*, ed. Bad Object Choices, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 193

¹⁵ Bob Nowlan, “Queer Theory, Queer Cinema,” in *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century*, ed. JoAnne C. Juett and David M. Jones (Newcastle upon Thyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 4

¹⁶ Nowlan, 5, citing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick et al, “Identity Crisis: Queer Politics in the Age of Possibilities,” *Village Voice* 37.26 (30 June 1992), 27

¹⁷ For a more detailed discussion, see Suzanna Danuta Walters, “From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can’t A Woman Be More Like a Fag?),” *Signs: Feminist Theory and Practice* 21.4 (Summer 1996), 830-869

¹⁸ Pioneering work within this field is offered in Zethu Matebeni (curator), *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer perspectives on sexual and gender identities* (Cape Town: Modjaji Books, 2014)

genders, intersex and other individuals who challenge heterosexist ideas of sexuality and gender by virtue of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation and practices.”¹⁹

For the purpose of this dissertation, the term “Queer” is utilised to signify a space of inquiry within which various notions of gender, sexuality and identity (amongst others) are questioned. Furthermore, the term is utilised in referring to a variety of non-conforming or diverging identities and practices that oppose and fall outside of normative hegemonic notions of gender, sexual orientation and identity.

Visibility: Within the context of Queer film theory, this term refers to the presence (or absence) of queer or LGBTI individuals within films and television. This presence is argued to be necessary for a number of reasons, including LGBTI viewers’ desire to be able to “recognise” themselves in filmic representations (or at least to be able to relate to them), as well as the notion that the absence of queer characters from filmic narratives constitutes an erasure of queer identities from public imaginations and thus denies their existence.

Amy Villarejo points out the significance specifically of lesbian visibility in film by pointing out how “...it seems that it is on the terrain of the visible that gender binarism is most strictly enforced,”²⁰ and adds that, “[t]o promote representations of lesbian lives is to promote representational presence in public culture and therefore heightened public authority.”²¹

¹⁹ Ricardo Peach, “Skeef Cinema Entja: A Brief History of South African Queer Cinematic Cultures,” *Marginal Lives & Painful Pasts: South African Cinema After Apartheid*, ed. Martin Botha (Cape Town: Genugtig! Publishers, 2007), 52

²⁰ Amy Villarejo, *Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 11

²¹ Villarejo, 14

1. Introduction and Methodology

It's important that we show movies that will never, ever be shown on big screen or in mainstream... It's important for gays and lesbians because sometimes people need to see themselves or tell a story... Our story is not being told on TV or in mainstream cinema – straight, mainstream cinema... Our stories get hidden away.²²

While post-apartheid South African film has been characterised by broader representations of previously ignored and marginalised identities,²³ there are still identity groups whose stories are comparatively under-represented in local film and other media. This under-representation sometimes accompanies – or rather, perhaps, reflects – negotiations and power struggles situated within lived social experience. Black South African lesbians seem to be situated in a peculiar space: they may be faced with discrimination based on at least three aspects of identity (being black, female and homosexual) and, while their rights are legally enshrined in the South African bill of rights²⁴ and they have the legal right to marriage,²⁵ members of this group have been subjected to a spate of violent crimes apparently motivated by their identities as homosexual women. While their stories are rarely told – and when they are, the representations are far too often one-dimensional and essentialist – some recent documentaries made by and about Queer black South Africans are changing this. This dissertation will analyse two such films: *Difficult Love* (2010), directed by Zanele Muholi and Peter Goldsmid, and *Breaking out of the Box: Stories of Black South African Lesbians – Personal Stories in a Political Landscape* (2011), directed by Zethu Matebeni and S'bu Kheswa.²⁶ These films are remarkable not only

²² Theresa Raizenberg, in *Breaking out of the Box: Stories of Black South African Lesbians – Personal Stories in a Political Landscape*, Zethu Matebeni and Busi Kheswa (directors), 2011.

²³ As analysed in Martin Botha (ed.), *Marginal Lives & Painful Pasts: South African Cinema after Apartheid*, (Cape Town: Genuktig! Publishers, 2007).

²⁴ Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Section 9, Clauses 1, 3 and 4: “1. Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law,” “3. The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth,” and “4. No person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds in terms of subsection (3). National legislation must be enacted to prevent or prohibit unfair discrimination,” <<http://www.constitutionalcourt.org.za/site/constitution/english-web/ch2.html>> [Accessed 23 August 2014], from *Constitutional Court of South Africa* website, <<http://www.constitutionalcourt.org.za/site/home.htm>>

²⁵ Civil Union Act, No. 17 of 2006, in *Government Gazette* vol. 497 (17 November 2006), <www.gov.za/documents/download.php?f=67843> [Accessed 23 August 2014], from *South African Government* website, <www.gov.za>

²⁶ Mr S'bu Kheswa was credited as Busi Kheswa at the time of the film's production but, in the spirit of respect, the name he prefers (and under which he has more recently published articles) will be used instead.

because they document generally underrepresented identity groups, but also because they display the diversity found within these groups. In doing so, they elaborate on Gevisser and Cameron's point that there is "no single, essential gay identity in South Africa"²⁷ by highlighting that there is also no single, essential identity within the sub-group of black lesbians in the country.

The questions that this dissertation will attempt to address revolve around filmic representations of Queer Black female identities in contemporary South African documentary films. More specifically, these questions will enquire whether such identities are depicted within this genre at all – and if so, how and by whom. Contingent to the question of "how," the author will analyse the forms of those films found to represent these identities, as well as the themes and topics connected to them within the films' contents. Finally, questions regarding the reasons for the presence or absence of filmic representations of Queer Black female South African identities will be considered, with specific attention paid to which filmic forms display greater visibility of this section of the South African population, and why this may be.

These questions are related to a variety of themes – including, but not limited to, documentary film, gender and sexuality, representation in film and the contemporary South African context – and thus it becomes necessary to draw upon a diverse array of theories and approaches. While a variety of theories are utilised, they are drawn together through a post-structuralist approach, embodied in a qualitative filmic analysis. The two focal films will be considered in a comparative analysis in addition to being analysed and discussed individually.

Post-structuralist thought influences many of the texts and theories that are utilised in this dissertation, as well as the films being analysed themselves. Perhaps the most valuable and integral aspect of post-structuralism, in the context of this dissertation, is the rejection of essentialist binary systems, which values and allows for diversity and fluidity of both sexual identities specifically and identities more generally. Both films – and, to some degree, the subjective approach and emphasis on identity as subject matter that has characterised recent South African documentary films – move beyond simple, taken-for-granted notions of what it

²⁷ Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron, ed., *Defiant Desire: gay and lesbian lives in South Africa* (New York, London: Routledge, 1995), 3

means to be any of a number of social categories: a woman, a lesbian, a South African and, specifically, a Black South African. While many films produced in post-apartheid South Africa emphasise themes of unity, reconciliation and what have been wryly referred to as “rainbow-nation narratives,” these documentaries highlight the diversity of identities and experiences existing within the nation. While the metaphor of a rainbow is alluring in its unification of various “colours,” it is all too easy for the public imagination to reduce this symbol to seven simple, separate and distinct colours rather than being a broad spectrum of various tones, tints and shades where colours overlap and blend. Similarly, “rainbow-nation narratives” unfortunately too often sacrifice individuality and difference for the sake of cohesion in an effort to mitigate a history of division. However, those Queer theories that have been informed by post-structuralist thinking emphasise that diversity need not necessitate division.

This dissertation takes as its starting points the intersectional nature of identities and the notion of identity as a site of negotiation and fluidity. This sensibility will be extended to the theoretical framework with which the films are analysed. In much the same way as identity is constituted and influenced by a variety of factors, each film is situated in a particular nexus affected by a number of perspectives. For the sake of clarity, this dissertation will utilise three particular fields of study in analysing the films’ form, content, and contexts. The films’ form necessitates the use of documentary film theory, their contents require consideration of Queer film theory; and their context – perhaps the most significant aspect to be analysed – requires some investigation of the history and nature of filmmaking in South Africa. While there will be points at which these fields overlap, this is not considered to be a drawback.

The information-gathering process for this investigation, as well as the original motivation for the questions it seeks to address, was inspired by particular interests in both gender representations in film and studies in African Cinema. Zanele Muholi’s photography and films stimulated absorbing debates – both in academic classes and in personal social contexts – regarding depictions of Queer identities in Africa. This interest led to the initial choice of the film *Difficult Love* as the sole focus of this investigation, due to its relative novelty in terms of its combination of subject matter and form, as well as the socio-political relevance of Muholi’s art and the public reaction that it had caused.²⁸ While gathering and studying literature, it became clear that Muholi was very likely the most widely recognised and discussed Black

²⁸ See section 2.3, “Political context and background”

female South African artist to self-identify as lesbian and to incorporate this identity as a central theme in her work. An awareness of, and questions regarding, the dangers of essentialising so fraught a subject as identity led to a search for another documentary film on the subject with which to compare *Difficult Love*. *Breaking out of the Box* was found to offer an interesting complement and juxtaposition to the presentation of South African Black female Queerness to that offered by *Difficult Love*. Resources were gathered through libraries, online databases, and film archives and by attending events related to the subject matter.

The primary problem encountered in researching this topic is the relative lack of academic studies focusing on filmic depictions of lesbians and/or Queer women in the South African context. This lack may be due – at least in part – to the fact that there are not yet many local films depicting such identities, especially within the realm of fiction film. South African documentary films yielded more representations, the possible reasons for which will be considered later. Male homosexual and/or Queer identities are comparatively more often represented in local films – albeit often problematically and too frequently in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes – and relatively more academic research has investigated this terrain. However, there appears to be a need for further analysis and academic consideration of the representation of lesbian and/or Queer feminine identities in South African film. This dissertation will aim to contribute to this field. It should be noted that this investigation will focus on depictions of Black South African women who self-identify as lesbian and as such will not focus on other Queer female identities, such as bisexual women or transgender women, or on identities including other racial identifications. Hopefully, the need for studies considering the representation of these identities will be addressed in future publications.

2. Content in Context

Before attempting to analyse and comment on the selected films, a certain amount of contextualisation is required in order to better understand their content. While they differ in their subject matter and approaches, there are some correlations between the two films. Most pertinently, both films document the experience and existence of Black South African women who identify as lesbian and/or Queer. Within this subject, both films touch upon two significant themes: the apparently increasingly popular belief that homosexuality is an “un-African” thing (and the homophobia that is associated with this belief), and the occurrence of what has recently been commonly referred to as “corrective” rape. This term refers to incidents of women who identify as lesbian being raped, ostensibly on account of their sexual orientation. These women are targeted based on the highly problematic notion that a lesbian may be “cured” of her supposedly deviant sexuality by means of forced heterosexual intercourse. In some cases, victims of “corrective” rape are also murdered.

2.1 “Corrective” rape and homophobic violence

The occurrence and impact of “corrective” rape is noted in a publication by the Human Sciences Research Council:

...lesbians (and in particular black lesbians) are the subject of much violence in township and some urban settings. Violence against black lesbians, precipitated by culturally sanctioned homophobia and hate speech, often results in physical, mental and emotional harm inflicted on such women (mostly by men). Consequently, these women... face problems of, among others, disempowerment, stigma, rejection, ignorance and isolation.²⁹

Mkhize et al point out that, while obviously being fuelled by patriarchal and heteronormative ideology, various factors contribute to the occurrence of “corrective” rape and other violent crimes perpetrated against lesbian women – including religious and cultural beliefs as well as a split in activism that occurred after 1994 between groups focusing on violence against women and those who espouse LGBTI rights.³⁰ The situation is further complicated by some survivors

²⁹ Nonhlanhla Mkhize, Jane Bennett, Vasu Reddy and Relebohile Moletsane, *The Country We Want to Live In: Hate crimes and homophobia in the lives of black lesbian South Africans* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2010), x

³⁰ Mkhize et al, x and 6

being afraid of reporting instances of “corrective” rape due to inefficiency on the part of, and risk of further victimisation by, the South African police, thus making it difficult to obtain statistics for the prevalence of this occurrence. This situation is exacerbated by the prevailing disappointment in and distrust of the legal system, which further lessens the rate at which survivors report attacks.³¹

A number of South Africans – both male and female – have also been murdered due to their gender and sexual orientation or for having supported Queer rights.³² Like statistics of “corrective” rape, it is difficult to determine how many South Africans have been murdered due to their gender or sexual identity. However, some sources suggest that at least 31 South African lesbians were murdered in cases fuelled by homophobic hatred during the first decade of the 21st century,³³ while another source refers to “at least seven people [having been] murdered between June and November 2012 in what appears to be targeted violence related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.”³⁴

These forms of homophobia-fuelled violence, while not being a new occurrence, have recently received more media attention, due in part to activist art by individuals such as Zanele Muholi³⁵ and increased work by gender activists.

2.2 Homosexuality as un-African

One factor contributing to the spread of hate crimes against lesbians is the aforementioned belief that homosexuality is an “un-African” concept, which is also addressed by both

³¹ ActionAid, *Hate crimes: The rise of ‘corrective rape in South Africa (2009)*, <http://rapeoutcry.co.za/home/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/correctiveraperep_final.pdf> [Accessed 5 February 2014], from *Rape Outcry* website, <<http://www.rapeoutcry.co.za>>

³² Some of the South Africans recently murdered, allegedly due to their sexual orientations and gender identities, include Zoliswa Nkonyana (d. 2006), Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Masooa (2007), Eudy Simelane (2008), Nontsikelelo Tyatyeka (2011), Nqobile Khumalo (2011), Nokuthula Radebe (2011), Duduzile Zozo (2013), David Olyn (2014) and Gift Makau (2014)

³³ Khuthala Nandipha, “‘Corrective rape’: Lesbians at the mercy of powerless men,” (15 July 2013), <<http://mg.co.za/article/2013-07-15-00-violence-against-black-lesbians-is-a-struggle-for-power>> [Accessed 20 July 2014]; from *Mail and Guardian*, <<http://www.mg.co.za>>; and Pumza Fihlani, “South Africa’s lesbians fear ‘corrective rape,’” (30 June 2011), <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13908662>> [Accessed 20 July 2014], from *BBC* website, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/>>

³⁴ Amnesty International, *Making Love a Crime: Criminalization of Same-Sex Conduct in Sub-Saharan Africa*. (5 June 2013), <http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/making_love_a_crime_-_facts__figures.pdf>, from *Amnesty International USA* website, <<http://www.amnestyusa.org>>

³⁵ See, for example, Raél Jero Salley, “Zanele Muholi’s Elements of Survival.” *African Arts* 45.4 (2012), pp. 58-69

documentary films under consideration. This claim smacks of ethnic essentialism and oversimplification and is reminiscent of the popular “tendency to flatten Africa into a single, monolithic entity.”³⁶ Before categorising something as not belonging to or originating from Africa, one must first ask, after all, what could be defined as “African?” On a continent so large and diverse, any such sweeping statements should be considered critically. By what criteria could “African-ness,” or its opposite, “un-African-ness,” be defined: culture, race, geographical location? Opting for either of the first two criteria would overlook the multiplicity inherent in African cultures and people, while the other criterion – geographical location – would deny the experience of the diaspora.

Besides being a problematically simplistic statement, if the claim that homosexuality is “un-African” is understood to mean that homosexuality is entirely alien to indigenous African cultures and never occurred before the advent of colonialism, the claim turns out simply to be false. Numerous academics and authors have published examples of specific same-sex practices amongst various African cultures.³⁷

In a specifically South African context, a crucial document of the history of Queer identities is offered in the seminal *Defiant Desires*, edited by Gevisser and Cameron.³⁸ This text offers evidence of, among other things, diverse Queer cultures that flourished in South Africa in the decades before the country became democratic.

2.3 Political context and background

While there is much talk about gay and lesbian rights, for many lesbian women these rights are merely paper rights as women struggle to cope and live with the challenges of a society with rampant inequalities. Furthermore, gay and lesbian people continue to face resistance from a

³⁶ Lizelle Bischoff, “Women in African Cinema: An aesthetic and thematic analysis of filmmaking by women in francophone West Africa and lusophone and anglophone Southern Africa,” PhD diss., University of Stirling, November 2009, 1

³⁷ See, for instance, Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa, ed., *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa* (Johannesburg: Jacana Press, 2005); Marc Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013); Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, ed., *Boy-wives and female-husbands: studies in African homosexualities* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1998); Jessie Kabwira Kapasula, “Challenging sexual stereotypes: Is cross-dressing ‘un-African’?,” *Feminist Africa* 6 (2006), 68-72

³⁸ Gevisser and Cameron, *op. cit.*

society entrenched with patriarchy and notions of homosexuality as “unAfrican”.³⁹

Queerness in South Africa, in terms of culture, legislation and experience, is a particularly complicated subject. On the one hand, South Africa is unique in being the only country on the continent that has legislation protecting individuals from discrimination based on sexual orientation, as well as being the only African country that allows and recognises same-sex marriage. To some Queer individuals from other African countries, South Africa may seem to be a safe haven. Thus, it is ironic that the reality of Queer life in the country is marked by contradictions and is far removed from the safety one might imagine based on legislation. The existence (and arguably the prevalence) of the aforementioned “corrective” rape is one example of this irony. LGBTI activists have petitioned the government to recognise “corrective” rape as a hate crime, although as yet without success.

The existence of homophobic attitudes in South Africa is exemplified by a number of incidents where politicians made clearly homophobic statements in recent years. Only a few examples will be provided, to create a sense of context, as a comprehensive survey would constitute a thesis in itself. Current president Jacob Zuma infamously stated in 2006, “[w]hen I was growing up, ‘ungqingili’ [isiZulu for homosexual] would not have stood in front of me. I would knock him [*sic*] out.”⁴⁰ At the same event, he also allegedly described same-sex marriage as a “disgrace to the nation and to God.”⁴¹ Zuma subsequently apologised for the statements. In 2008, Jon Qwelane wrote a homophobic article that appeared in the *Sunday Sun* tabloid,⁴² lamenting the “rapid degradation of values and traditions by the so-called liberal influences of nowadays” and wondering “what it is these people have against the natural order of things.”⁴³ Qwelane, who was criticising both the rights of homosexuals and requests for women to be ordained as bishops in the Anglican religion, likened same-sex marriage to bestiality, which was reinforced by an accompanying cartoon depicting a man marrying a goat. A hate speech

³⁹ Zethu Matebeni, “*Vela Bambhentsele*: Intimacies and Complexities in Researching Within Black Lesbian Groups in Johannesburg,” *Feminist Africa* 11 (December 2008), 89

⁴⁰ Jacob Zuma, cited in article by staff reporter, “Zuma earns wrath of gays and lesbians,” (26 September 2006), <<http://mg.co.za/article/2006-09-26-zuma-earns-wrath-of-gays-and-lesbians>>, from *Mail and Guardian* website, <<http://www.mg.co.za>>

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Jon Qwelane, “Call me names, but gay is NOT okay,” *Sunday Sun*, (20 July 2008), <http://www.mambaonline.com/images/features/sundaysun_small.pdf>, from *Mamba Online* website, <<http://www.mambaonline.com>>

⁴³ Ibid.

case brought against him is still underway. In the meantime, Qwelane was appointed as the South African High Commissioner to Uganda in 2010⁴⁴ - a state of affairs made especially ironic by Uganda's 2014 Anti-homosexuality Act⁴⁵ (which was subsequently repealed based on technicalities).⁴⁶

The final example offered bears particular relevance to one of the films to be analysed. In August 2009 an art exhibition in Johannesburg named *Innovative Women* featured photographs by Zanele Muholi.⁴⁷ Some of these photographs featured a pair of Black women, nude together in bed (although partially covered by a sheet), composed to evoke a moment of intimacy and tenderness. Then-minister of Arts and Culture in South Africa Lulu Xingwana was so shocked by Muholi's work that she stormed out of the exhibition opening before delivering a scheduled speech, describing the photographs as being "immoral, offensive and against nation-building."⁴⁸ Afterwards, Xingwana denied that her statement was homophobic in nature, and claimed not to have noticed the sex of the photographs' subjects nor known anything about their sexualities, having been offended by the subject matter of "naked bodies presumably involved in sexual acts." Xingwana further claimed that "[t]hose particular works of art stereotyped Black women."⁴⁹ The minister's explanations are self-contradictory, claiming ignorance of the sex or gender of photographic subjects and thereafter making statements regarding the stereotyping of Black women.

Evidently, there is a discontinuity between South African legislation and the lived experience of being Queer in South Africa. Within this context, the creation of documentary films such as the two analysed within this dissertation take on greater political meanings and face greater challenges than might similar films created in different contexts.

⁴⁴ *Who's Who South Africa* website, "Jon Qwelane," <<http://whoswho.co.za/jon-qwelane-37896>>

⁴⁵ Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Act 2014, <<http://www.politicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Anti-Homosexuality-Act-2014.pdf>>, [Accessed 5 September 2014], from *Political Research Associates* website, <<http://politicalresearch.org>>

⁴⁶ David Smith, "Uganda anti-gay law declared 'null and void' by constitutional court," (1 August 2014), <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/01/uganda-anti-gay-law-null-and-void>> [Accessed 23 August 2014], from *The Guardian* website, <<http://www.theguardian.com>>

⁴⁷ Co-director of *Difficult Love*, as well as narrator and – often – subject of the film

⁴⁸ David Smith, "South African minister describes lesbian photos as immoral," (2 March 2010), <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/02/south-african-minister-lesbian-exhibition>> [Accessed 2 May 2013], from *The Guardian* website, <<http://www.theguardian.com>>

⁴⁹ Lulu Xingwana, cited in Verashni Pillay, "Xingwana: But is it art?" (4 March 2010), <<http://mg.co.za/article/2010-03-04-xingwana-but-is-it-art>>, [Accessed 20 July 2014], from *Mail and Guardian* website, <<http://www.m&g.co.za>>



Figure 1: Triptych, from the series *Being*. Zanele Muholi

3. Literature Review

The complexity of the subject at hand necessitates that a variety of sources be drawn upon in attempting to construct a theoretical framework with which to consider the questions introduced by and addressed within this dissertation. Amongst others, theories regarding the documentary form shall be included, as well as literature concerning Queer theory (specifically, although not exclusively, within film), identity (including notions of fluidity and the interconnectedness of various factors such as class, sex, gender and race) and representation. Furthermore, these theories and ideas should be considered whilst bearing in mind the specifically contemporary South African context, since the expediency of these concepts depends on their applicability to the films being focused on. For the sake of simplicity, three broad areas will be considered: Queer film theory, documentary film theory, and film theories related specifically to South African cinema.

3.1 Queer Theory, Queer Film

The branch of film theory devoted to Queerness in film, while relatively young, has developed quickly over the past three decades. However, while some approaches may be useful in analysing international films, many Western theories of sex, gender and sexuality are not necessarily applicable to or useful within an African context. As Botha points out, there is no such thing as a “single ‘gay identity,’” and “what has passed for the ‘gay or QUEER experience’ has often been that of white men and women in North American and European films.”⁵⁰ Drawing on the work of Peter A. Jackson, Botha further explains that “Queer theory is one of the most contested movements in contemporary sexual politics and several scholars such as Jackson argue that global queering requires both empirical studies of queer cultures beyond the West and a re-assessment of Western-derived queer theory.”⁵¹ This section will aim to highlight some generally valuable ideas before focusing on more context-specific theories.

⁵⁰ Martin Botha, “Queering African Film Aesthetics: A Survey from the 1950s to 2003 – *Portrayal of Homosexuality in International Films*,” in *Critical Approaches to African Cinema Discourse*, ed. Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014), 64

⁵¹ Ibid.

In 1981, Vito Russo published *The Celluloid Closet*,⁵² which examines portrayals of gay characters in Hollywood films from the beginning of the twentieth century until the end of the 1970s. While one might think or hope that these analyses would by now be archaic, Russo's observations are still alarmingly prevalent. Russo's identification of stereotypes casting gay men as either villains or victims, and the cliché of the gay man as a sissy-figure who is either humorous or threatening, are still all too familiar. Other harmful stereotypes identified that are still present in contemporary society include the notions that homosexuality revolves only around sex (as opposed to, and exclusive from, love, romance or affection), the idea that homosexuals are evangelical in trying to force their "beliefs" and lifestyles onto others, and that gay males are "not quite men" (and necessarily effeminate) while lesbian females are "not quite women" (and necessarily tomboyish or "butch"). Russo also draws attention to the tendency to erase or deny the existence of homosexuality in order to "maintain a more comfortable illusion,"⁵³ since its existence in society is seen as being threatening to hegemonic and heteronormative patriarchal social ideology.

3.1.1 Disparities between gay men and lesbians

The majority of Russo's analyses draw on depictions of gay men, not because he intended to focus on depictions of homosexual masculinity, but because of the scarcity of depictions of lesbian women on screen. This relates to a broader occurrence that is still relevant, wherein gay men are afforded more visibility than lesbians. This is still the case in South African fiction films, as will be discussed later. Russo offers the suggestion that "lesbianism is never allowed to become a threatening reality any more than female sexuality of other kinds."⁵⁴ The combined ideologies of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and homophobia represent the Queer male as inferior because of his "failure" to meet expected standards of masculinity. The Queer female, however, is dismissed and erased, or reduced to a site for masculine conquest: Russo writes about the omnipresence of "lesbian eroticism in the service of male sexuality,"⁵⁵ and the manner in which lesbian characters are portrayed as "creatures to be conquered or defeated."⁵⁶ This may be understood when considering the threat that women's desire, when individually owned as opposed to being socially dictated, may pose to the patriarchal system. Within the

⁵² Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 58

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 154

context of studying historical depictions of lesbian identities in literature, Epprecht contends that the notion of women being sexually and/or romantically satisfied by each other "...was in many ways far more threatening to hegemonic African masculinity than acknowledging situational male-male sex."⁵⁷ Shari Zeck goes as far as to state that "...the greatest threat to male dominance lies precisely in women redefining their own relationships to each other without regard to their patriarchal obligations to men and the institutions of marriage and the family."⁵⁸ This suggests a potential explanation of why lesbian characters are so rarely depicted in film or television and why, when they are, they tend either to be reduced to one-dimensional characters and stereotypes, or to have their Queer sexuality function merely as a narrative device wherein the "deviant" woman is "cured" and sexually conquered by a heterosexual male.

Lest these suggestions be accused of displaying purely abstract feminist theory, one may consider the nature of anti-homosexual laws in Africa. According to recent statistics,⁵⁹ homosexuality is a crime in 38 of the 54 African countries. In ten of these countries, legislation specifically outlaws sex between males, but same-sex female relationships or sexual activities are either not mentioned or not criminalised.⁶⁰ Here, one might be tempted to believe that Queer women are not discriminated against as much as Queer males are, since legislation outlawing sex between females is less common than legislation outlawing sex between men. However, this may alternatively be read as another instance of women being silenced or disregarded. There is a belief, fuelled by patriarchal and misogynistic ideology, that sex is defined as penetration of the female genitals by the male – thus rendering it "impossible" for women to have sex with one another. This myth is not only sexist and simplistic in its gender assumptions, but also ignorant of the scale and diversity of human sexuality. Bearing this in mind, the comparatively fewer countries outlawing female homoerotic sex (compared to male homoerotic sex) might be a reflection of this denial of the very possibility of female homosexuality.

⁵⁷ Marc Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age the AIDS* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 143

⁵⁸ Shari Zeck, "Female Bonding in *Cagney and Lacey*." *Journal of Popular Culture* 22.3 (Winter 1989): 143

⁵⁹ Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Facts and Figures: Making Love a Crime: Criminalization of Same-Sex Conduct in Sub-Saharan Africa*, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/making_love_a_crime_-_facts__figures.pdf>, [Accessed 20 July 2014], from *Amnesty International USA* website, <<http://www.amnestyusa.org>>

⁶⁰ For a comparative example, see *International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's* interactive map, <<http://ilga.org/ilga/en/organisations/ILGA%20AFRICA>> [Accessed 23 August 2014], from *International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association* website, <<http://ilga.org/>>

3.1.2 Visibility

Invisibility is the great enemy. It has prevented the truth from being heard, and it will continue to do so as long as the celluloid closet is inhabited by lesbians and gay men who serve Hollywood's idea of homosexuality.⁶¹

Another theorist whose work provides useful tools in the representation of Queer identity is Judith Butler. Her theories around gender – that it is produced through performance, and that its links with sex and sexuality are cultural constructs⁶² – influenced the development of Queer Theory, and subsequently the formation of the New Queer Cinema. This movement, which consisted of innovative films that were released in the early 1990s, was recognisable not so much by specific aesthetic or narrative devices as by a shared attitude – or, as Nowlan suggests, a “sensibility.”⁶³ Michele Aaron suggests that the unifying factor between these films was a spirit of defiance⁶⁴ directed against mainstream heteronormative society. This movement constituted significant progress and diversification in the international representation of Queer identities and narratives in film. According to Aaron, it left a legacy of positive influences, including a comparatively greater visibility of Queer characters, growth in academic investigations of Queer film, and a loosening of rigid notions that actors' own sexual identities should dictate the characters they play.⁶⁵ However, even within such a progressive movement, problematic issues around Black Queerness and its representations (or lack thereof) emerged. Daniel T. Contreras draws attention to the relative “invisibility of Queer filmmakers of colour” even within this movement,⁶⁶ and points out the potential value of Queer perspectives in challenging not only essentialist constructions of sex and gender, but also of race.

⁶¹ Russo, 246

⁶² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge 2006)

⁶³ Bob Nowlan, “Queer Theory, Queer Cinema,” in *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century*, ed. JoAnne C. Juett and David M. Jones (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 14

⁶⁴ Michele Aaron, “New Queer Cinema: An Introduction,” *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3-14

⁶⁵ Aaron, 9-11

⁶⁶ Daniel T. Contreras, “New Queer Cinema: Spectacle, Race, Utopia,” in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 119-127

3.1.3 Queerness in Africa

Homosexual identity in Africa is complicated by a number of factors, including racial and cultural constructions of gender. Thus, when considering African homosexual identity or identities, the intersection of various aspects of identity politics becomes pertinent. While it would be insulting and naïve to assert that heterosexism and racism are completely alike, one may imagine that there are some similarities between experiences of discrimination based on various aspects of a person's identity. Many of the subjects and creators of the films being analysed within this dissertation identify as being located within a specific intersection of several such aspects, all of which have been marginalised and discriminated against. These include being female – women are assigned lesser value within misogynistic and patriarchal societies; being Black or of colour – categories that were systematically discriminated against by the racist apartheid system in South Africa, the consequences of which still remain; and identifying as lesbian or Queer – identities which are designated as being “other” and inferior within heteronormative, heterosexist societies. Thus, individuals within this segment of society face marginalisation and challenges on a number of fronts.

3.2 Documentary Theory

While the nature of documentary film has been a subject of great debate, this investigation will make use of the definition proposed by John Grierson: that documentary film is the “creative treatment of actuality.”⁶⁷ This approach opens discussions of a number of key issues, including the apparent contradiction between “creativity” and “actuality,” the subjectivity suggested by the choice of the word “treatment,” and the existence of a broad range of possible methods and styles used in creating documentary films. Matters relating to subjectivity and creativity will be discussed in more detail in a later section focusing on documentary film within the South African context. Another useful definition is offered by Stella Bruzzi, who contends that “documentaries are a negotiation between filmmaker and reality and, at heart, a performance.”⁶⁸ This notion of negotiation will also be discussed, particularly in relation to the responsibilities of documentary filmmakers.

⁶⁷ John Grierson, “The Documentary Producer,” *Cinema Quarterly*, Vol. 2 Issue 1 (1932)

⁶⁸ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary* (London: Routledge, 2006), 154

3.2.1 Modes of documentary

Documentary film, like any form of art, has exhibited certain developments over time. Bill Nichols, reflecting on the history of documentary film, suggests six “modes” that he presents in an apparently linear chronological order.⁶⁹ Before summarising the modes that he suggests, it should be noted that his theory is flawed. As Bruzzi points out, “...the fundamental problem with Nichols’ ‘family tree’ of documentary modes is that it elides differences between films that are similar in one formal respect whilst simultaneously imposing a false chronology onto documentary history.”⁷⁰ Similarly, Paul Ward points out that presenting the development of the documentary film form as a “tidy, chronological ‘evolution’ is highly problematic.”⁷¹ Indeed, the majority of documentary films will likely contain elements of more than one of these modes. Bearing these valid criticisms in mind, however, Nichols’ scheme may be useful in providing terms for what one might think of as archetypal approaches to documentary film, which may be utilised in identifying and discussing certain elements of films.

The six modes that Nichols suggests will now be briefly summarised and described. Perhaps the most recognisable is the “expository mode,” which places emphasis on relaying information, addressing issues, and – often – makes an argument for or against something. This mode is characteristically identified with “voice of God” voiceover commentary. Typical examples might include “traditional” nature and history documentaries, the films of John Grierson, and news broadcasting. While the expository mode focuses on the rational presentation of facts, the “poetic mode” places emphasis on more abstract approaches and technical choices. As Nichols puts it, the poetic mode aims to “reassemble fragments of the world poetically,”⁷² and may value communicating sensory or emotional impressions rather than scientific or rational facts. Examples might include films such as *Night and Fog*⁷³ and *Baraka*.⁷⁴ Nichols’ next mode, the “observational mode,” is related to the Direct Cinema and Cinema Verité movements of the 1950s and -60s. This method aims to portray its subject

⁶⁹ Bill Nichols, “Chapter 6: What Types of Documentary Are There?” in *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 99-138

⁷⁰ Bruzzi, 48

⁷¹ Paul Ward, *Documentary: the Margins of Reality* (London: Wallflower, 2005), 27

⁷² Nichols, 138

⁷³ Dir. Alan Resnais, 1955

⁷⁴ Dir. Ron Fricke, 1981

matter in an objective fashion by observation, without (apparent) intervention by the filmmaker or re-enactment. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back*⁷⁵ is a well-known example of this mode. The "participatory mode" revolves around the interaction between filmmaker and subject. Whereas the director is not directly visible or audible in many of the other modes, the participatory mode relies on situating the director within the film itself, highlighting the manner in which his or her presence influences that which is filmed, and often including interviews. Nick Broomfield is one of the directors whose work is sometimes cited as exemplary of this approach. The fifth mode offered – the "reflexive mode" – signifies a shift away from a style that aims to conceal the constructed nature of film. The reflexive mode displays an awareness of its nature as a constructed text, as opposed to the observatory approach (which aimed for a more "direct" representation of its subject matter). Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*⁷⁶ displays characteristics of this mode in its literal "exposure" of the very methods of film production (including filming and editing processes). The final mode suggested by Nichols is the "performative mode." This mode emphasises, acknowledges, and embraces the subjective aspect of documentary film. Like the poetic mode, the performative mode places more value on emotive response than on ostensibly objective facts. This mode utilises an inherently more personal approach to its subject matter. *Tongues Untied*⁷⁷ is one example of this mode.

Bruzzi insinuates that all contemporary documentaries are, to some extent, a mixture of modes – the notion of any film fitting neatly into one of Nicholson's categories is difficult even to imagine. Bruzzi also writes about what she refers to as the performative documentary, although her definition differs from Nichols'. For Bruzzi, the performative nature of documentary films lies in that they "function as utterances that simultaneously both describe and perform an action" that "herald a different notion of documentary 'truth' that acknowledges the construction and artificiality of even non-fiction film."⁷⁸ Thus, Bruzzi draws attention to contemporary performative documentary films' disillusionment with notions of unconstructed pure "truth" in film, and suggests this performativity can be divided into two broad categories: those that "feature performative subjects and which visually are heavily stylised and those that are inherently performative and feature the intrusive presence of the filmmaker."⁷⁹

3.2.2 Objectivity and subjectivity

⁷⁵ Dir. D.A. Pennebaker, 1967

⁷⁶ Dir. Dziga Vertov, 1929

⁷⁷ Dir. Marlon Riggs, 1989

⁷⁸ Bruzzi, "The Performative Documentary," in *New Documentary*, 186

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 187

Another ongoing debate surrounding the subject of documentary film revolves around its relationships with objectivity and subjectivity. While the latter was at one stage considered a weakness, some more recent documentary film forms embrace subjectivity. Connected to this debate are matters of propaganda, bias, persuasion, and falsification and, while they are related, these terms are often conflated. An extreme perspective in support of the necessity of objectivity in documentary film might contend that subjectivity necessarily taints veracity, and instead presents only biased views. However, this view is overly simplistic. Bruzzi draws on the work of Noël Carroll, who points out that selectivity does not necessarily entail bias, nor is it impossible for films to be “persuasive without bending the facts.”⁸⁰ Furthermore, a film’s acknowledgement of its own selectivity may work to strengthen its position. What may be truly problematic is covert, unacknowledged bias, as this creates the potential for propagandistic use. While all forms of representation are necessarily limited, and the influence of subjective perspectives impossible to avoid entirely, an awareness of this creates the potential for self-reflection. A detailed and insightful discussion of objectivity and subjectivity in documentary film is offered by Liani Maasdorp,⁸¹ who suggests that “documentary film can be defined as much by the subjectivity it captures implicitly as the reality it attempts to depict overtly.”⁸² Maasdorp’s discussion demonstrates that subjectivity in documentary film is inevitable, and subsequently, acknowledgement of this opens possibilities for accepting and utilising potential advantages of this inherent subjectivity.

Using an illuminating comparison between documentary film and (print) journalism, Nancy Graham Holm draws parallels between more personal and/or subjective documentary films and narrative journalism, as opposed to more traditional documentaries and journalistic practices.⁸³ While the two mediums are different, Holm’s comparison offers some useful perspectives – particularly around the matter of objectivity. One specific distinction that Holm suggests is that between “top down” and “eye level” perspectives. Whereas the former tells stories “from outside looking in,” the latter is told “from inside looking out.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, Holm identifies three elements asserted as necessary in television journalism, which might also be

⁸⁰ Noël Carroll, cited in Bruzzi, 56

⁸¹ Liani Maasdorp, “Cutting Real: Self-Reflexive Editing Devices in a Selection of Contemporary South African Documentary Films,” (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2012). 16-30

⁸² *Ibid.*, 29

⁸³ Nancy Graham Holm, “Narrative Journalism: No Longer a Dirty Word,” *P.O.V.* 22 (December 2006)

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

relevant to documentary film: “information, identification, [and] fascination.”⁸⁵ “Top down” narratives are those that place the most value and emphasis on information, objectivity, and an intellectual approach, while “eye level” stories are more concerned with identification and emotion, and may be more easily associated with embracing subjectivity. Once again, it would be foolish to assume that all documentary films must fall neatly into either (or any) category – the distinction between these two approaches is more useful when viewed as lying on a spectrum. Generally speaking, the top down approach is reminiscent of Nichols’ expository mode, whereas the eye level may be more compatible with the participatory, reflexive and/or performative modes. Obviously there is a need and a place for top down documentary films, but the eye level approach has the potential to achieve different objectives. The former is useful in conveying broader depictions of information, including statistics and “bigger picture” perspectives. However, there is the danger that such representations, in themselves, might evoke predominantly intellectual interest. More personal, eye level stories – with their emphasis on individual experience and identification – have the potential to complement this intellectual interest by encouraging more emotional responses in viewers, thus inspiring in viewers a deeper impact and interest in the subject at hand.

Linda Williams provides a useful perspective on the relationship between documentary film and truth:

Truth is not ‘guaranteed’ and cannot be transparently reflected by a mirror with a memory, yet some kinds of partial and contingent truths are nevertheless the always receding goal of the documentary tradition. Instead of careening between idealistic faith in documentary truth and cynical recourse to fiction, we do better to define documentary not as an essence of truth but as a *set of strategies to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths*.⁸⁶ [emphasis added]

This notion of a set of strategies between which audience members can choose – or, better yet, which can be used to form one’s own opinions – offers a more respectful and less didactic attitude towards viewers.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Linda Williams, “Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary Film,” *Film Quarterly* 46.3 (Spring 1993),

Ruby suggests that depriving viewers of the awareness that documentary films are constructed by filmmakers deprives the audience of the ability to form a “sophisticated and critical understanding” of these texts,⁸⁷ and goes so far as to argue that documentary filmmakers have a “social obligation *not* to be objective.”⁸⁸ Instead, Ruby seems to suggest, documentary filmmakers ought to accept and welcome their roles as interpreters of actuality.

Ultimately, one may argue that all approaches in documentary film strive to depict and convey a sense of authenticity. Whereas more traditional approaches would contend that objectivity is the only means to authentic representations of reality, more personal, reflexive, and performative documentary modes utilise subjectivity in order to access a different kind of authenticity – or, perhaps, to access a comparable authenticity using different methods.

3.2.3 Reflexivity and performance

It would be inaccurate to state that all early documentary films aimed to conceal their constructed natures, as demonstrated by Vertov’s aforementioned experimentation with reflexivity in 1929. However, such approaches were relatively uncommon at the time. Many filmmakers believed that “audiences are not supposed to see backstage. It destroys illusions and causes them to break their suspension of disbelief.”⁸⁹ In contrast with this traditional tendency “predicated upon the realist assumption that the production process must be disguised,”⁹⁰ later shifts towards reflexivity and performativity in documentary film would “herald a different notion of documentary ‘truth’ that acknowledges the construction and artificiality of even the non-fiction film.”⁹¹ The specification that this is a *different* notion of truth is significant. The self-awareness of these films should not be misunderstood as an abandonment of the aim of truthful depiction – quite the contrary. The use of reflexivity in film can be compared to Brechtian techniques of distancing – moments that remind viewers of the artificial nature of what they are watching and, in that distancing, encourage active

⁸⁷Jay Ruby, “The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film,” *New Challenges for Documentary*, 2nd ed., ed. Alan Rosenthal and John Corner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 35

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 45

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 35

⁹⁰ Bruzzi, 186

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

reflection and engagement with the material (as opposed to more passive and simple acceptance of film as truth).⁹²

3.2.4 Political Aims

Another perspective from which to examine documentary films is by investigating their aims – diverse as these may be. The view that documentaries must have a “serious” purpose is no longer applicable (if it ever was). More light-hearted films such as *Porselynnkas Dokiementêr*⁹³ demonstrate that entertainment is not the exclusive domain of fiction film. Some more traditional goals within the documentary genre include broadening viewers’ experiences, providing information, investigating “truth” (or some interpretation thereof), telling “real” stories, documenting history or current events, and utilising film as a political tool. Documentary films can also be empowering: when representing marginalised or previously misrepresented subjects, films have the potential to foster deeper understandings of misunderstood people or identities.

This notion is particularly significant within the African context, since people from the continent have historically been misrepresented and/or spoken for in film, both during and after the colonial era. Early ethnographic filmmaking, which often took African people as subjects, constructs meaning along lines of difference: a binary system of “us” and “them” in which the colonial power is privileged with both the means of production and positive representation, while the “other” is situated as inherently different and as a result inferior.⁹⁴ Such values were upheld in a shocking number of films made about African people during the colonial era. There

⁹² Playwright and director Bertolt Brecht developed a critique of traditional theatre based on Marxist principles and his approach has also been used in film. Brecht’s approach to narrative and technique aimed to cultivate an “active, thinking spectator,” achieved through distancing and reflexivity. Brecht’s “alienation effects” served to draw audiences’ attention both to the constructed nature of theater (and, by extension, film) and to defamiliarise what would generally be comfortably taken for granted. Examples of Brechtian distancing techniques in film might include direct address, reflexivity, and other techniques that interrupt the illusion of reality. These methods are used to shock the viewer, to disrupt the suspension of disbelief, and to encourage active reflection. For more, see Robert Stam, “Alternative Aesthetics,” in *Film and Theory: An anthology*, edited by Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2000), 257-264

⁹³ Dir. Matthew Kalil, 2011. This film documents artist Sjaka Septembir [sic] reuniting with other members of Porselynnkas, a performance poetry group that emerged in Stellenbosch in the 1990s. The humorous and experimental subject matter is complemented by innovative and playful filming and editing techniques, visible in the film’s tagline: “the most well documented non-event in the history of whatever.”

⁹⁴ For a thoughtful analysis, see Keith Beattie, “Chapter 3: Constructing and Contesting Otherness – Ethnographic Film,” in *Documentary Screens: Nonfiction Film and Television* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 44-62

are also specifically gendered codes: as Bischoff points out, the African female body has been “subjected to the greatest level of exoticisation and eroticisation through simultaneous desire and repulsion in the colonial mind,”⁹⁵ visible in myths conceptualising Black women as hyper-sexualised yet dehumanised.⁹⁶ Filmmaking now offers African women “ways of regaining subjectivity,”⁹⁷ as well as the challenge of finding new ways to portray previously exploited identities.

Related to these issues of representation, and relevant also to Russo’s analysis of the tropes of victims and villains in representations of Queer identities, Chandra Mohanty offers an insightful analysis of “the production of the ‘Third World Woman’ as a singular monolithic subject in some recent (Western) texts.”⁹⁸ Whether South Africa could be accurately described as a Third World country is debateable, but Mohanty’s points regarding representation seem quite applicable to representations of South African women from Western feminist perspectives. Specifically, Mohanty criticises the tendency to depict women globally as somehow homogenous, and – more specifically – investigates the problems inherent in simplistic depictions of African women as being sexually oppressed victims:

Although it is true that the potential of male violence against women circumscribes and elucidates their social position to a certain extent, defining women as archetypal victims freezes them into ‘objects-who-defend-themselves,’ men into ‘subjects-who-perpetrate-violence,’ and (every) society into a simple opposition between the powerless (read: women) and the powerful (read: men) groups of people.⁹⁹

Instead of such oversimplification, Mohanty suggests that violence against women should be investigated within the social contexts of its occurrence, in order to create change based on situation-specific understanding rather than exacerbating generalisations. Her observations also demonstrate the complexity of representation: not only are historical stereotypes of Black women highly problematic, but even more recent and apparently well-intentioned depictions –

⁹⁵ Bischoff, 12.

⁹⁶ For a more detailed analysis, see Lola Young, “The rough side of the mountain: Black women and representation in film,” in *Reconstructing Womanhood, Reconstructing Feminism: Writings on Black women*, ed. Delia Jarrett-Macauley (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 175-201

⁹⁷ Bischoff, 12.

⁹⁸ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (Autumn 1988), 61

⁹⁹ Mohanty, 67

ostensibly furthering empathy for women as victims – may also be tremendously harmful and patronising.

3.2.5 Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking

Since the documentary form, unlike its fictional counterpart, necessarily uses aspects of reality as its subject matter, it is subjected to specific ethical considerations. Prominent documentary film theorist Jay Ruby outlines three distinct yet related moral issues that concern documentary filmmakers: the “moral contract to produce an image that is somehow a true reflection of the intention in making the image in the first place,” the “moral obligation” towards the subjects of the film, and the “moral obligation” to potential viewers.¹⁰⁰ The first of these issues, related to intention, could be understood as a measurement of a documentary film’s success in relation to what it sets out to achieve. The second matter, regarding the filmmaker’s relationship with those being filmed, is somewhat more complicated. Here, notions of agency come into play. Many contemporary debates about subjects within the field of documentary filmmaking can be compared with the production of knowledge within the field of anthropology – which Ruby argues is in some fundamental ways a “parallel pursuit” to documentary filmmaking.¹⁰¹ The “crisis of representation” that developed during the 1980s – relating especially, although not exclusively, to visual anthropology – raised crucial questions when “anthropologists [were] called to task for their unself-conscious production of visual representations.”¹⁰² Specifically, objections were raised to the imperial legacy that had been prevalent in anthropological depictions of other cultures, as well as their claims to objectivity. This led to considerations of the power relations at play in visually documenting others and the moral responsibilities that accompany the practice, as well as the propensity for setting up uneven situations wherein those being documented are represented as an exotic “Other” inherently different from and inferior to the “Self” of the person behind the camera. In order to avoid this, documentary filmmakers have attempted different strategies to ensure that those people whom they film are treated and depicted with respect and are afforded agency. Within this context, Jacqueline Maingard

¹⁰⁰ Jay Ruby, “The Ethics of Image Making; or, ‘They’re Going to Put Me in the Movies. They’re Going to Make a Big Star Out of Me...” in ed. Alan Rosenthal and John Corner, *New Challenges for Documentary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 211

¹⁰¹ Ruby, “The Ethics of Image Making,” 211

¹⁰² Nancy Lutkehaus and Jenny Cool, “Paradigms Lost and Found: The ‘Crisis of Representation’ and Visual Anthropology,” in Carolyn Handa (ed.), *Visual Rhetoric in a Digital World* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004), 116

highlights the role of those people filmed as “speaking subjects,”¹⁰³ and points out that consideration should be given not only to who the subjects are – and, by omission, who is absent and thus not presented – but also the extent to which the filmmaker grants power to the subjects’ voices and ability to relate their own stories and perspectives.

The third issue mentioned by Ruby, concerning the filmmaker’s responsibility towards the audience, also raises a number of points. Ruby considers it ethically imperative that documentary filmmakers reveal what he calls “the covert,”¹⁰⁴ thus ensuring that viewers be made or kept aware of the fact that the documentary film is a necessarily subjective construct – that it shows *an* image or representation of the world, as opposed to “*the*” representation. On a related note, Ruby mentions a popular assumption that “art should be a little mysterious to be successful,” and reflects on clichéd forms of extreme filmic reflexivity which may give the reflexive approach “a bad name because of its mistaken association with narcissism, self-consciousness and other forms of self-contemplation.”¹⁰⁵ While reflexivity certainly does not imply the presence of such negative characteristics, reflexive techniques should be used cautiously to avoid such extremes – something that will be discussed during the analysis, specifically, of *Difficult Love*. Another aspect of the relationship between filmmaker and audience that inspires debate revolves around the tone with which the viewer is addressed: more specifically, invoking questions around the balance between being informative and being didactic. Stella Bruzzi, in one analysis of a documentary film, concludes that it “reaches no conclusions, although it suggests plenty.”¹⁰⁶ This distinction between reaching conclusions and suggesting them is crucial: in leaving room for interpretation to the viewer, rather than dictating understanding, filmmakers treat viewers with more respect and acknowledge their agency for independent thought.

3.3 South African Documentary Film

¹⁰³ Jacqueline Maingard, “Framing South African National Cinema and Television,” in *To Change Reels: Film and Culture in South Africa*, ed. Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 117

¹⁰⁴ Ruby, “The Ethics of Image Making,” 210

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 215

¹⁰⁶ Stella Bruzzi, “Narration: The film and its voice,” in *New Documentary*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 60

The history of documentary film in the South African context reflects not only the country's past, but also broader trends relating to socio-political, economic and cultural developments. While sharing some similarities with South African fiction cinema, local documentary films have evolved in ways that may be read more specifically as characterising the zeitgeists of the particular contexts in which they are made – not only in terms of content, but also in form.

Francois Verster offers an insightful reflection on the South African documentary film in the first decade of the twenty-first century.¹⁰⁷ In his analysis, Verster notes that the local documentary industry at the time of writing had been characterised by a significant shift towards creating films of a more personal nature, both in terms of subject matter and in the technical natures of these films. In order to contextualise this development, Verster considers the history of the South African documentary film.

Another enlightening study of the history and development of South African documentary is offered by Kristin Pichaske.¹⁰⁸ Pichaske's article focuses to some extent on the politics of representation. She also considers questions regarding the need for transformation in the South African documentary industry, owing to the problematic history during which Black individuals' stories were documented exclusively by white filmmakers for decades.

3.3.1 History of South African Documentary

The Cinema of South Africa is one of the oldest in the world,¹⁰⁹ having a documentary tradition dating back to 1896.¹¹⁰ Despite this, however, the growth and development of a national film culture – and, more specifically, of South African documentary film – were severely hampered by censorship due to the country's political history. The apartheid government banned television in South Africa until 1976 – a decision that Verster and others have suggested was motivated by a fear that films and television might be “a potentially dangerous medium, both

¹⁰⁷ Francois Verster, “Redefining the Political: A Short Overview and Some Thoughts on Personal Documentary Films from the New South Africa,” in *Marginal Lives & Painful Pasts: South African Cinema After Apartheid*, ed. Martin Botha (Cape Town: Genugtig! Publishers, 2007), 107-127

¹⁰⁸ Kristin Pichaske, “Black Stories, White Voices: The Challenge of Transforming South Africa's Documentary Film Industry,” in *Marginal Lives & Painful Pasts: South African Cinema after Apartheid*, ed. Martin Botha (Cape Town: Genugtig! Publishers, 2007), 129-157

¹⁰⁹ Martin Botha, *South African Cinema: 1896-2010* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 21

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9

politically and morally.”¹¹¹ Here, already, the potential of the audio-visual medium for social and political significance is reflected.

Once television was allowed in the country, however, it was largely utilised for the broadcasting of government propaganda. The documentary films that were locally produced and aired served the political interests of the ruling party of the time, supporting a conservative ideology that espoused racial separateness. Botha describes this era in South African film as being distinguished by “an idealistic conservatism [...] characterised by an attachment to the past, to ideals of linguistic and racial purity and to religious and moral norms.”¹¹² Political realities of the time were censored. The experiences of Black South Africans were hardly ever represented and when they were the representations were neither fair nor accurate, and certainly did not serve the interests of their subjects.¹¹³ Moreover, as Pichaske points out, “documentaries were rarely, if ever, screened to Black audiences,”¹¹⁴ and the majority of South African documentaries were subsidized or created by the State.¹¹⁵ Thus, the majority of the country’s population was denied both access to documentary films and meaningful, accurate representation within them. Verster offers the pithy observation that “reality was thus ‘whitewashed’ in more than one manner,”¹¹⁶ and a significant portion of South Africans’ voices were silenced through the omission of their stories from popular memory preserved in the documentary film format. While these points refer to South Africa’s Black population, which was marginalised despite forming the majority of the populace, this lack of representation and access may also be extended to other groups that were marginalised during the apartheid era, including those groups consisting of or providing space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and/or Queer identities.

In addition to depicting subject matter in a conservative manner, the majority of apartheid-era South African documentaries were traditional in form, in a style reminiscent of the aforementioned expository mode of documentary. Such films are typically didactic and rhetorical in nature. This archetypal form relies on voice-over narration, using a “voice of

¹¹¹ Verster, p. 108

¹¹² Martin Botha, “Post-Apartheid Cinema: Policy, Structures, Themes and New Aesthetics,” in *Marginal Lives & Painful Pasts: South African Cinema after Apartheid*, ed. Martin Botha (Cape Town: Genugtig! Publishers, 2007), 24

¹¹³ Pichaske, 132

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 131

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 132

¹¹⁶ Verster, 109

God” approach – which, as Bruzzi notes, is linked to “all the insinuations of patriarchy, dominance, [and] omniscience that term harbours”¹¹⁷ – in order to educate viewers of certain arguments or views and focus is placed on communicating ideas in a supposedly objective manner, rather than on investigating subjective perspectives or different aspects of an argument. Verster elaborates on this observation by pointing out that there was little, if any, room for creativity, individualist approaches or “art” documentaries in documentary films made during this time.¹¹⁸ While it would be disingenuous to claim that all apartheid-era documentaries were made in the expository mode, it is significant to note the extent to which the form influenced the non-fiction films made in South Africa at the time.

While discussing how this specific approach typified South African documentaries for decades, Pichaske notes that these films relied on “simple, binary representations”¹¹⁹ in which subjects were typically reduced to basic stereotypes. Moreover, Pichaske points out that the subjects of these films had very little influence on the final products, that relationships between filmmakers and their subjects were often non-existent, and that “audiences were told what to think rather than encouraged to draw their own conclusions.”¹²⁰ These notions of collaboration – or lack thereof – between filmmaker and subject and the relationship between filmmaker and viewer will be revisited when analysing the films that form the subject of this investigation.

While anti-apartheid films were made as early as the 1950s, the majority of these were produced by foreigners.¹²¹ Those South Africans who did try to make documentary films that were critical of the government at the time had to work in secret. Even when they succeeded in producing films, these were generally “not accessible to the public until the 1990s.”¹²² During the 1980s, a shift occurred as the anti-apartheid movement gained momentum internationally. Local filmmakers began documenting the political situation in the country, and the films of this period were “marked by a sense of urgency: content and revelation of the truth often [took] precedence over artistic or personal considerations.”¹²³ While the subject matter had shifted, these documentaries to a great extent retained the form of their predecessors,

¹¹⁷ Bruzzi, 49

¹¹⁸ Verster, 109

¹¹⁹ Pichaske, 132.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Verster, 109

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Verster, 110

relying on omniscient voice-overs and presenting narratives with unambiguous representations of “good” and “evil.”

The 1990s marked another development in South African documentary films. Unsurprisingly, the documentary films produced locally focused on the process of transition itself as the country moved to its first democratic elections in 1994. During this decade, newly-found freedom of speech made it possible for filmmakers to tell stories that would previously have been censored. Verster offers a concise summary of one of the greatest preoccupations in local 1990s documentary films’ subject matter in stating that “the past became a central theme.”¹²⁴ During this period, some of those whose voices had been silenced for decades were finally documented and the urgency of making up for lost time, combined with the excitement of the long sought-after freedom of expression, took precedence over stylistic developments.

3.3.2 Documenting the Personal

The South African creative bunch [has] exhausted the political apartheid story. They are tired of it, sick of it... People are over that... They need to start telling stories about life in South Africa. That is the new aesthetic.¹²⁵

The next development in South African documentary filmmaking became noticeable around the turn of the century. After the angst and euphoria surrounding South Africa’s political transition in the 1990s, and the subsequent rush to document stories that would previously have been banned, South African documentary filmmakers – and local citizens, in general – were faced with more complicated questions. After the elation of the birth of the so-called rainbow nation, new questions around identity arose: what did it mean to live in this newly created democracy? It is at this point that documentary filmmakers in South Africa began to shift their focus towards more personal subjects – although, as will be discussed below, a greater emphasis on the personal by no means implies a movement away from the political.

Reflecting on the early 2000s, Verster notes that “a radical shift towards identifying a less historically located present started taking place [...] Many of the newer films began to focus

¹²⁴ Ibid., 111.

¹²⁵ Lee Hirsch, interviewed by Ives Maes. “Conversation with Lee Hirsch,” in *Roetes: Conversations and Reflections on South African Cinema*, ed. Boonen and Vermeren (Film Festival Opendoek, 2005), 37

on what the New South Africa actually ‘means’ – that is, exploring *identity* in terms of politics, nationhood, and the individual.”¹²⁶ This more personal approach has been characterised by documentary films that focus on individual stories rather than – or more than – on broader themes or arguments. These films are character-driven, and may in some ways be understood as adopting a more cinematic approach to documentary film. Subjects’ lives, experiences and stories are often arranged in a narrative structure – rather than in a “logical,” supposedly objective or argumentative, structure – and may include the character arcs associated with tales of personal journeys. The characters forming the central focus of such films may be the filmmaker him- or herself, or they may be individuals whom the filmmaker studies and/or interacts with. In addition, while more traditional, expository documentaries are often characterised by the search for an answer to some question or debate, the more personal approach favours documenting personal lived experience, from which not only answers but also new questions may arise, and which may lead viewers to find interpretations of socio-political meaning extracted from individual narratives. Greater themes often emerge from seemingly simple, individual narratives – this is at least as true, if not more so, in documentary films as in their fictional counterparts.

Some examples of these personal documentary films from the early 2000s include films made by Verster himself, such as *When the War is Over*¹²⁷ and *The Mother’s House*,¹²⁸ as well as other directors’ work such as *Rape for Who I Am*,¹²⁹ *Simon and I*¹³⁰ and *Lost Prophets*.¹³¹ The two films discussed in this dissertation, *Difficult Love* and *Breaking Out of the Box*, could also be understood as forming part of this movement, although they were produced some years later.

The slogan mobilised by second-wave feminist theory in the 1960s, claiming that the personal is political, can almost be accepted as a truism today. The significance of political influence is experienced in daily life and in the search for personal identity – something that is acutely felt in contemporary South Africa. As Verster points out, at the time of his writing, identity was a crucial matter in South Africa, and “...the search for identity across the board [had] become an act of prime political importance in itself, which [suggested] the potential for a greater level of

¹²⁶ Verster, 111

¹²⁷ Dir. Francois Verster, 2002

¹²⁸ Dir. Francois Verster, 2005

¹²⁹ Dir. Lovinsa Kavuma, 2006

¹³⁰ Dir. Beverly Ditsie and Nicky Newman, 2002

¹³¹ Dir. Dylan Valley and Sean Drummond, 2006

artistic or personal exploration within political film.”¹³² This is particularly applicable to explorations and representations of identities that have previously been under-represented, misrepresented or silenced. Furthermore, the emphasis placed on the advantages of individual diversity in post-apartheid South Africa seems not to have been easy or desirable for some to implement or accept. As Verster points out, in spite of “...ostensible racial equality, people are for the most part not yet mixing, and do not yet know or understand the ‘other side’.”¹³³ This observation draws attention to the racial divisions that remain within South African society, yet it could be applied with equal relevance to segregations based on class, gender, and sexuality. This raises the point of the potential value of documentary films in allowing audiences inside the lives of people whose experiences are entirely foreign to them, and hopefully in the process facilitating greater understanding and possibly acceptance. To cite Verster again, “[b]ecause of political change, documentary film has [...] become a political tool in that the public now has access to under-represented or otherwise unseen worlds.”¹³⁴ These notions shall be further discussed during the analytical section of this dissertation, since the two films may be better understood from this position.

Content, however, is not the only aspect in which documentary films may experiment with adopting a more personal method: form, too, can take such an approach. Such technical choices may include the avoidance of traditional documentary styles, such as the reliance on the so-called “talking heads” technique, which consists of fast intercutting between various interviews. The traditional use of an apparently omniscient, unidentified voice-over is sometimes avoided entirely, or replaced with voice-overs either by the subjects of the films or by the filmmakers, commenting on the creation of the film after having introduced themselves. Overall, the more personal and subjective approach to documentary filmmaking lends itself to a more creative and innovative approach. This is reminiscent of the aforementioned definition of documentary film suggested by Grierson.

One of the defining characteristics of these character-driven, personal documentaries is that they embrace subjectivity. Within the context of South Africa’s history of documentary film and television, context-specific factors should be considered. Given the historical ubiquity of government propaganda disguised as objective truth, one may well imagine that South African

¹³² Verster, 112

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 114

audiences (and perhaps contemporary audiences in general) have, to some extent, grown suspicious of claims of veracity or absolute truth in film. When a documentary filmmaker instead declares their presence and perspective – whether doing so by directly appearing and introducing him- or herself in the film, including voice-over that discusses the decision to film the subject, or similar techniques – this may be read as an acknowledgement of the inevitability of subjectivity, and possibly as a more “honest” and transparent approach. Pichaske comments on South African documentary filmmakers’ increasing use of such approaches:

The move toward more personal and subjective storytelling is also a step forward with regard to the politics of representation. Given the seemingly unavoidable tendency to filter the experiences of other people and cultures through their own lens, filmmakers in South Africa – as elsewhere – are increasingly using modes of documentary that frame the text as personal experience, rather than objective fact.¹³⁵

Pichaske further suggests that the opinions represented in these filmmakers’ works are legitimised by their being acknowledged as being opinions.¹³⁶ Verster makes a similar point, arguing that due to the history of control and censorship in South Africa, audiences are “more likely to trust films where the authorial position is declared.”¹³⁷ While subjectivity was once frowned upon as something to be avoided in documentary film, it has since emerged as a potential tool for finding different forms of truth in South African documentary filmmaking.

¹³⁵ Pichaske, 149-150

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 150

¹³⁷ Verster, 114

4. Discussion

4.1 Synopses

Without intending to describe each film in detail, the following section will provide brief introductions to the films being analysed and to the people documented in them.

Difficult Love, commissioned by SABC2, offers an insight into the life and perspective of visual activist Zanele Muholi, which is supplemented by interviews with members of Muholi's family, her partner, her late mother's former employers, some of the people whom she has photographed, and a number of authorities in the fields that Muholi discusses and documents in her photography, namely gender and sexuality. Muholi is the main subject of the film, as well as a co-director, and she discusses a range of issues, including her art, her background, and her personal and socio-political beliefs. Below is a brief introduction to other individuals featured in the film.

Viola May, who has modelled for Muholi, dreams of becoming pregnant through artificial insemination and raising her child. Petra Brink and Praline Hendricks are a lesbian couple living under a bridge after having been forced to leave a homeless shelter due to their sexual orientations. Gazi Zuma is a lesbian woman who is accepted and supported by her family and community. She states that, while she is not victimised for being a lesbian, it hurts her that others are. Millicent Gaika is the survivor of an atrocious act of violence, having been beaten and raped for hours, who discusses her experience shortly after its occurrence in what is probably the most harrowing section of the film. Nkunzi Nkabinde is a sangoma¹³⁸ whom Muholi has photographed. She discusses having an identity including both feminine and masculine aspects – in Nkunzi's own words, “where my heart is, where my soul is – there's that man's spirit that lives in me.” Nkunzi also discusses her spiritual views, which combine aspects of traditional African beliefs and Christian elements. Liesl Theron is Muholi's partner at the time of shooting. Ndumie Funda, founder of the Luleki Sizwe Project¹³⁹ (although not

¹³⁸ isiZulu term; a traditional healer or diviner

¹³⁹ Luleki Sizwe is a Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Women's Project that aims to support victims of “corrective” rape, <http://www.ambafrance-rsa.org/IMG/pdf/luleki_sizwe-presentationx.pdf>, from *French Embassy in South Africa* website, <<http://www.ambafrance-rsa.org>>; and “Luleki Sizwe,” <http://www.change.org/en-GB/organisations/luleki_sizwe> [Accessed 3 May 2013], from *Change.org* website <<http://www.change.org>>

credited in the film as such), discusses the prevalence of “corrective” rape in Gugulethu with a group of friends. One of these friends is Funeka Soldaat, founder of Free Gender¹⁴⁰ (although, again, not credited as such in the film), identified as a survivor of “corrective” rape and assault who reflects on her enthusiasm about a young lesbian soccer team and the support they receive from the community. The film also includes interview sections with women who provide “expert opinions,” including Gail Smith, a journalist and critic, Nomboniso Gasa, a gender and political analyst, Michael Stevenson, director of the art gallery that represents Muholi, Wendy Isaacs, a Human Rights lawyer, and Nthateng Mhlambiso, editor of *Behind the Mask*, an African LGBTI news website. Muholi also pays a visit to Mick and Kathleen Harding, who were Muholi’s mother’s employers, and visits her sister Ntombizane Muholi.

Breaking Out of the Box – Stories of Black South African Lesbians: Personal Stories in a Political Landscape is a film supported by the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW). This documentary presents sketches of a number of women via interviews, showcasing a diverse range of opinions and personalities within the identity group(s) of Black lesbian South Africans and discussing a number of contemporary topics of relevance. Below is a brief summary of those women featured in the film.

Fikile Vilakazi is a programme director at the Coalition of African Lesbians. She is also training to become a sangoma. Dr Yvette Abrahams, a commissioner at the Commission for Gender Equality, discusses her history as a comrade in the South African struggle after having grown up in political exile. Theresa Raizenberg is an administrator and co-founder of the Out in Africa film festival. Charmaine Dlamini, better known by the nickname Fino, works as a DJ at the radio station Jozi FM and also as a tour guide. Portia “Bashin” Modise is a well-known professional soccer player who has played for the South African national women’s team, Banyana Banyana, as well as in international club football. Mary Hames is the director of the Gender Equality Unit at the University of the Western Cape. In addition to extensive interviews with these six women, the film also features briefer interviews with three women working with Open Closet Entertainment Solutions – which aims to provide safe spaces where lesbians can relax and mingle – as well as two poets.

¹⁴⁰ Free Gender is a Khayelitsha-based black lesbian organisation and gender advocacy group for lesbian, bisexual and transgender women. Official website: < <http://freegender.wordpress.com/about/> > [Accessed 3 May 2014]

4.2 Context and significance

Before analysing and comparing *Breaking out of the Box* and *Difficult Love*, the contextual significance of these two films will be investigated.

Besides being significant for their topical subject matter and the manner in which they embody some characteristics of contemporary South African documentaries, these two films are also important due to the identities of their creators. *Breaking out of the Box* was directed by Zethu Matebeni – a Queer activist, academic and documentary filmmaker who participates in Queer, lesbian and transgender communities – and Sibusiso “S’bu” Kheswa - a trans-man¹⁴¹ who runs transgender organisation Gender Dynamix in Cape Town. *Difficult Love* was directed by Zanele Muholi – who identifies as a Black lesbian visual activist, implying that her gender and sexuality activism takes the form of visual arts (including photography and film) – and Peter Goldsmid – a South African producer and writer-director. It is significant that the creators of these films include South African filmmakers from a number of gender identities, sexes, cultural and professional backgrounds – for a number of reasons.

One of these factors is the fact that some of the filmmakers are female. As Botha points out, “during the [...] history of South African cinema only a few female directors managed to make features [...], and only since the mid-1990s have Black female directors been able to break into the feature and short film industry.”¹⁴² This relates to a broader context outside South Africa. While Lindiwe Dovey suggests that African cinemas have collectively exhibited a number of “strong female characters,”¹⁴³ she also notes the “relative absence, historically, of female-authored perspectives in the African film *oeuvre*”¹⁴⁴ and suggests that this is not unique to the continent – that on a global level, women working in film industries are much more likely to be involved in administration, organising film festivals or working as actresses than being

¹⁴¹ A transgender person is someone who does not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. This is opposed to a cis-gendered person, whose gender identity correlates with the sex they were assigned at birth. A trans-man is a person who identifies as male, although he was assigned a female identity at birth. Trans-men may or may not have – or desire to have – surgery altering their bodies to “align with” their identities, their gender expression may or may not be masculine, and their identities as transgender do not dictate their sexual orientations (i.e. some trans-men identify as heterosexual, some as homosexual, some as bisexual, and so forth).

¹⁴² Botha (2012), 53

¹⁴³ Lindiwe Dovey, “New Looks: The Rise of African Women Filmmakers,” *Feminist Africa* 16 (July 2012), 18

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 21

employed as directors or producers. When African women do make films, they are faced with a specific challenge: that of “regaining for women the power of self-definition and self-representation.”¹⁴⁵ The same could be said of Queer filmmakers, who – like African women – have been (mis-)represented and defined by others for decades.

As mentioned in the Literature Review, Pichaske points out that the local film industry is still predominantly controlled by white people. Botha confirms this:

Thanks largely to the legacies of apartheid, the already high barriers to entry into the documentary field are considerably higher for people of colour in South Africa. For this and other reasons, black South Africans remain more often the subjects of documentaries than their makers.¹⁴⁶

This is not to say that South African filmmakers should be restricted to making films exclusively about members of their own racial identities or cultures – matters of intent, knowledge and approach are at play in a complex field. However, it is undeniable that the number of voices represented in South African documentary – and local cinema at large – is in need of expansion to include a more diverse and representative number of identities and perspectives. Thus, it is encouraging that the two films under discussion were created by people from racial identities and/or cultural backgrounds that have not been historically represented in South African filmmaking.

The assorted genders and sexual identities of the filmmakers contribute to the films exhibiting more diverse and open-minded approaches to gender and sexual identity than might otherwise have been the case. In the instance of Muholi’s work, it is valuable that the topics of Black South African lesbian experiences and identities are considered from the perspective of someone who identifies as a Black South African lesbian. The filmmakers of *Breaking Out of the Box* also associate with identities that are considered gender-nonconforming: Matebeni as a Queer activist, and Kheswa as a trans-man. Furthermore, these three filmmakers identify as gender- and sexuality-related activists or are involved in such work. As such, Matebeni, Muholi and Kheswa may be viewed as filmmakers who are not only part of gender non-conformist communities, but are also aware of the political aspects of marginalised identity

¹⁴⁵ Frank Ukadike, *Black African Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 194, paraphrased in Bischoff, 3

¹⁴⁶ Botha (2012), 195

groups and representations of their members. This variety and involvement lends itself to an appreciation of, respect for and sensitivity towards the complexity inherent in themes of gender and sexual identities.

The identities of the filmmakers – specifically, the diversities in terms of gender, sexual identity, race and/or culture, and their professional backgrounds – influence the documentaries that they create in a manner that encourages more politically-conscious, sensitive, and diverse perspectives on the subject matter than might be found in general mainstream South African filmmaking. The presence of Black filmmakers, and specifically Black female filmmakers, may optimistically be read as part of the broadening of voices and perspectives that is so crucial to the development of South African cinema. Finally, the variety of gender and sexual identities found in this small group of filmmakers already points to the multiplicity of identities that are too often grouped together under the notion of a homogenous LGBTI community – something that is reinforced by the multiplicity of identities depicted in the films.

The significance of these two films is enhanced by the socio-political context in which they were created. As discussed before, the early years of the twenty-first century in South Africa, in terms of rights related to gender and sexual identities, have been marked by both progressive and disturbing events. The legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2006 was viewed as an expansion of the South African Constitution's provision for equal rights and treatment irrespective of, amongst other factors, gender and sexual orientation. On the other hand, problems and potential setbacks have included an apparent escalation in homophobic opposition of these laws, a persistently high rate of rape and violence against women (including the so-called “corrective” rape of lesbians), the proposition of the Traditional Courts Bill¹⁴⁷ (which, if approved, could have led to setbacks in women's rights, and was finally rejected) and a number of offensive statements by local politicians. There has also been growing marginalisation of gender-nonconforming groups in other African countries – including legislation that prohibits homosexuality in thirty-eight African countries, some carrying the risk of capital punishment, and a series of homophobic public remarks made by the presidents and political leaders of various countries.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Traditional Courts Bill, <<http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/bills/2012-b01tradcourts.pdf>> [Accessed 23 August 2014], from *Department of Justice and Constitutional Development* website, <<http://www.justice.gov.za>>

¹⁴⁸ These include leaders and politicians from Zimbabwe, Uganda, Nigeria, Namibia, Gambia, Kenya and Liberia. For some examples, see Tristan McConnell, “Uganda's New Anti-Gay Law: Part of a Broader Trend in Africa,”



Figure 2: Victim of homophobic violence (Breaking out of the Box)

Finally, these two films also emerge during a time when identities and categorisation related to gender and sexuality in Africa are being questioned, within both academic and political contexts. The applicability of Western theories of sexuality and gender within African contexts has been interrogated by a number of scholars. Stella Nyanzi, for example, stresses that “queer Africa must necessarily explore and articulate local nuances of being non-heteronormative and non-gender conforming,”¹⁴⁹ and points out aspects of African cultures and indigenous understandings that are not explored or acknowledged in Western Queer and/or LGBTI texts. Because of the socio-political and economic contexts of contemporary South African life, as well as the intersectional nature of identity politics, themes of gender and sexual identity in South Africa are too complex to be viewed merely in the light of a struggle against homophobia. As is highlighted in both films, the experiences of participants are informed not only by their gender and sexual identities, but also by issues related to race, class, culture, and the political history of South Africa. Thus, attempting to apply Queer and/or gender theories of European and/or American countries blindly to the South African context proves insufficient to generate any comprehensive understanding, and would ignore a wider and more complex range of influencing factors. European and American theorists within the fields of gender and sexuality, for example, have not needed to grapple with notions that homosexuality is foreign to their continents or countries in the same way that their (South) African peers have. Thus,

(28 February 2014), <<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/02/140228-uganda-anti-gay-law-smug-homophobia-africa-world/>> [Accessed 23 March 2014], from *National Geographic News* website, <<http://news.nationalgeographic.com>>

¹⁴⁹ Stella Nyanzi, “Queering Queer Africa,” in *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Identities*, curator Zethu Matebeni (Cape Town: Modjaji Books, 2014), 67

while global understandings and theories around gender and sexual identities may yield some useful tools and insights, they are not sufficient for or always applicable to African – and more specifically, South African – contexts.

Thus, these films may be seen as being representative of the contexts in which they were created. Both films constitute and encourage investigations and reconsiderations of what it might mean – to some, at least – to be Queer in South Africa.

4.3 Form

While the content of *Breaking out of the Box* and *Difficult Love* share some commonalities, there are also remarkable dissimilarities. At the most obvious level, the films' forms differ.

Difficult Love utilises a wide range of techniques. It draws on traditional forms, utilising text screens to convey information, showing clippings of newspaper articles and including “vox pops” (or brief snippets from interviews with unidentified citizens or “people on the street”) and interviews with “experts” (or people who are considered well-equipped, through academic or professional experience, to comment on the subject matter). Juxtaposed with these relatively conventional methods, the filmmakers also use more performative techniques: Muholi is both the narrator of the film and, to a great extent, its subject, which is reminiscent of Bruzzi's category of performative documentary in which the filmmaker features within the film. Early in the documentary, after a brief introduction sequence, Muholi introduces herself directly to the camera as a “visual activist.” This departure from convention – the direct address of the camera, also known as breaking the metaphorical “fourth wall” in an expression borrowed from theatre practices – creates a sense of intimacy and immediacy, and simultaneously alludes to the constructed nature of the film. It is, however, noticeable that Muholi is the only participant who looks directly at the camera, aside from a few moments when others interviewed steal brief glances. Furthermore, the extent to which Muholi narrates the film, and reflects on personal views and experiences, creates the sense of a semi-autobiographical documentary. The modifier “semi-” is used because she is not the sole creator of the film, having collaborated with Peter Goldsmid, and because in addition to these introspective sections, the film also contains interviews with others. Occasionally, Goldsmid's involvement is apparent, such as those scenes in which Muholi is filmed using visibly hand-held camera technique, as well as

one exceptional moment – when interviewing Petra and Praline – where a male voice is heard from behind the camera, asking a question: presumably this is Goldsmid’s. Besides these moments, Goldsmid seems relatively absent from the film. The overall atmosphere is reminiscent of the “diaristic” documentary form, where the camera’s function is somewhat akin to that of a journal, with Muholi as author.

Muholi and Goldsmid’s film contains elements of a number of the modes of documentary suggested by Nichols, including the performative, the participatory and the reflexive. The performative aspect is perhaps the most visible; Muholi’s direct participation in various aspects of the filmmaking process forms the crux of the film. Her role as participant is also clearly acknowledged when the film displays her interactions with those people whom she photographs. The film foregrounds the creation process of her photography. While photography and filmmaking are separate, the two are closely related fields, and the filmic representation that shows the photographic project “behind the scenes” yields not only a sense of intimacy with both photographer and photographed but also an insight into the creative process. One pertinent example occurs when Muholi is photographing Viola, where a studio light is visible. Traditional modes of photography and filmmaking would conceal the use of such an artificial tool in order to encourage the impression of untainted realism, and thus this inclusion illustrates a certain level of reflexivity within the film.

Breaking out of the Box consists of intercutting between a series of interviews with a number of women, six of whom are interviewed at length: Fino, Fikile, Mary, Portia, Theresa and Yvette. The film’s sub-titles actually provide a very acute description of its form as well as the perspective from which it was created: “Stories of Black South African Lesbians – Personal Stories in a Political Landscape.” The first sub-title foregrounds the structure of the film: a collection of Black lesbians’ personal stories, arranged in a manner that is reminiscent of – to use a literary analogy – a collection of short stories. There are links between the women’s stories, which are used to segue from one narrative to another: for example, after Theresa discusses the importance of role models that people can relate to – speaking within the context of Queer filmic representation – Portia Modise is introduced and her interactions with youths from her neighbourhood, as well as interviews with some boys who know her, characterise her as being a role model for younger members of her community. The second sub-title, “Personal Stories in a Political Landscape,” provides the context for the interviews and may be read as part of the motivation behind the film’s creation and/or an explanation of the significance of

these women's stories. It also draws attention to and supports the notion, discussed before, that the personal is political, in that it is influenced and shaped by political factors, while in turn political beliefs and activism arise from personal beliefs and experiences.



Figure 3: Portia Modise (*Breaking out of the Box*)

The filmmakers behind *Breaking out of the Box*, Zethu Matebeni and Busi Kheswa, are not as directly present (visually and audibly) in their film as Muholi is in *Difficult Love*. Matebeni may be spotted in a group photograph near the beginning of the film, as well as in some of the footage of an event hosted by Open Closet Entertainment Solutions at a club, but this would only be noticeable to those who know Zethu. However, the film does not have the tone or ambiance of a story told by outsiders looking in – the voice-over narration, for example, uses the personal collective pronouns “we” and “us” when referring to Black South African lesbian communities. This sense of intimacy is enhanced by the comfortable manner with which those interviewed relate to the (off-screen) interviewer. Additionally, the film does not strive to hide its constructed nature, or to conceal the effects that the camera has on its subjects. This is particularly evident during a sequence in which members of Portia's community are interviewed. While two schoolboys whom Portia coaches in soccer discuss their opinions about their coach, the camera cuts away to show Portia standing a few metres away, watching the two boys with amusement. Younger children move around her, gazing openly at the camera with obvious curiosity. Similar moments reflecting the participatory and reflexive aspects of the film's creation also occur in other interviews. There is awareness at a meta-level of the creation and distribution of film and other media forms: examples include Theresa's

discussions of the film screenings initially organised by ABIGAIL¹⁵⁰ that developed into the Out in Africa film festival, video footage of a theatre performance arranged by the Gender Equity Unit where Mary works, footage of live poetry readings and Fino's conversations about her work as radio DJ as well as behind-the-scenes glimpses of her working space before and during a show. Moreover, the film's structure is framed by a poem by the late Buhle Msibi,¹⁵¹ which inspired the film's title. Excerpts from the poem are included in a number of sections, displayed as white text against a dark background, accompanied by a soundtrack of women singing, which serve to open and close the film and introduce certain themes. Thus, the film includes and refers to a number of works in different art and media forms, as well as the process by which these works are created, and in this way displays a level of self-reflexivity.

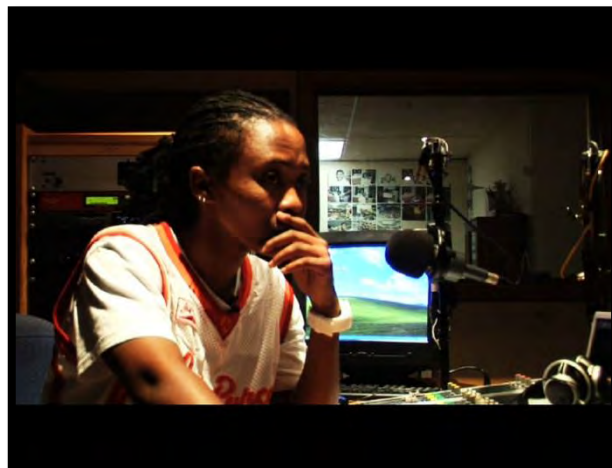


Figure 4: Charmaine "Fino" Dlamini in studio (*Breaking out of the Box*)

Both *Breaking out of the Box* and *Difficult Love* make use of still photographs. In *Difficult Love*, Muholi's photographic work forms one of the central subjects of the film and many examples are used between and during interviews. *Breaking out of the Box* draws on photographs from more varied resources and with multiple styles: some, such as a group photograph of participants in the film near its beginning, are obviously posed. Others include stock footage of apartheid-era crowds, police forces, and military training; more contemporary photos of various LGBTI marches and protests; and images of women injured in homophobic attacks and photographs of a funeral from 2007.¹⁵² The differences between the general styles of the photographs used in the two films informs the distinct impressions that they create:

¹⁵⁰ The Association for Bisexuals, Gays and Lesbians

¹⁵¹ See Appendix A for the complete poem.

¹⁵² That of Sizakele Sigasa, to be further discussed later in this section

Difficult Love's extensive use of Muholi's work associates the film more with an artistic praxis (albeit one informed and inspired by political realities), while *Breaking out of the Box* is infused with a more directly political atmosphere.¹⁵³

4.4 Contents, themes, issues

Both films address an array of issues within the broader field of gender and sexual identities. Various aspects of experience and beliefs related to gender and sexuality are investigated: both films address homophobia, heteronormative prescriptions of gender roles, relationships between homosexual identities and traditional religious or spiritual beliefs, the increasingly prevalent notion that homosexuality is “un-African” or that homosexuality is a *chosen* and “unnatural” sexual orientation, the occurrence of “corrective” rape, and other forms of discrimination and violence.

Difficult Love also examines interracial relationships by documenting Muholi's relationship with Liesl Theron and, more broadly, issues of race in South Africa. Both Muholi and Liesl discuss how race and culture influence their relationship: Liesl reflects on how she and Muholi discuss and compare having grown up on opposite (racial) “sides” of apartheid, and Muholi ponders the influence of racial themes in her photography. An emotional section of the film focusing on this occurs when Muholi visits the Besters, for whom her late mother used to work as a domestic worker. The relationship between the two families – the Besters and the Muholi's – is portrayed as close and caring, although a more critical reading might interpret some of Mrs Bester's comments as being well-intentioned yet condescending. However, this sequence does create a sense of genuine caring between individuals across racial, cultural and generational divisions, and Muholi's emotional response to their discussion of her mother – as well as the Besters' reaction – testifies to this. Another sequence highlighting matters of race and culture assumes a much more light-hearted tone: when Muholi and Liesl visit a *shisa nyama*¹⁵⁴ together, Muholi must translate for her partner when a Zulu-speaking man tries to “befriend” Liesl with what appear to be more than platonic intentions. After the man requests Liesl's

¹⁵³ As an aside, *Breaking out of the Box* uses some of Zanele Muholi's photography – creating an interesting link between the two films.

¹⁵⁴ Informal braai (barbecue) venue, often in a township setting, usually owned by a butchery from which meat for the braai is purchased – thus functioning as a “buy and braai” setting.

telephone number, she tells him that she already has someone to “take [her] out,” and the surprise evident in the man’s facial expression when Liesl reveals that this “someone” is Zanele is highly amusing.



Figure 5: Muholi and visitors at gallery (*Difficult Love*)

The subject of class is also addressed, specifically when Muholi reflects on a childhood in which she had no access to or awareness of art galleries and museums. In order to change this, she arranges for those people whom she photographs and members of their families, communities and friends to attend gallery exhibitions where photos of them are displayed. In depicting this, the film highlights the extreme class-division still present in South Africa, and the resulting access or lack thereof to significant aspects of society, based on one’s income and living area. Muholi also discusses her attempts to empower some of the people whom she photographs by teaching them about photography, although unfortunately none of her students’ photographs are included. The significance of finance and class is again highlighted when Petra and Praline talk about how much they enjoyed one of Muholi’s photography workshops, and how eager they are to take photos – if only they had access to a camera.



Figure 6: Viola May (*Difficult Love*)

Viola’s story introduces another contentious matter: that of homosexual people as parents, and the means by which they have children (whether through adoption, bearing children themselves, or artificial insemination, for example). Viola discusses how she must save for the expensive procedure of artificial insemination, and how others criticise her for this, asking why she does not “simply” sleep with a man instead. Such statements highlight the lack of information or understanding prevalent in society regarding homosexuality and parenthood. This is linked to a subject that Muholi discusses: the ubiquity of the nuclear family model, which is often socially prescribed as the only acceptable form a family can take. In addition to the heteronormative nature of this model, it also neglects and disrespects those single parents who raise children alone. Linked to this topic, Muholi also points out the harmful nature of social prescriptions regarding gender roles, standards of beauty, and behaviour.



Figure 7: Family (*Breaking out of the Box*)

Breaking out of the Box also introduces more themes: Yvette's and Theresa's stories highlight connections between the South African anti-apartheid liberation struggle and rights related to gender and sexuality. This is endorsed by Fikile, who reflects on the dehumanising effect that the apartheid system had on Black people, and suggests that Black people under this system experienced "a whole range of things that are probably similar to what we go through now in terms of being lesbian [women]..." She reflects further on the intersectional nature of identity and the influence of historical contexts on the present when she says, "We come from that deep history of isolation, of exclusion, of marginalisation – that informs who I am today, in all my identities." While not suggesting that discrimination based on race is the same as discrimination based on gender or sexuality, it is worth remembering the intersectional nature of identity, in which factors including race, gender and sexual orientation are inherently interconnected. Experiences based on these combinations are related to and influenced by each other.

Breaking out of the Box also includes more detailed focus on and discussion of activism and various non-governmental organisations related to gender and sexual identities, including FEW, ABIGAIL, the Commission for Gender Equality, the Coalition of African Lesbians, and the Gender Equity Unit at the University of the Western Cape. Somewhat mysteriously, *Difficult Love* avoids identifying two of the participants featured in the film, Ndumie Funda and Funeka Soldaat, as being activists and/or involved in gender and sexual identity-related NGOs. The reasons for the omission of this information may only be speculated at, especially since others who are somehow employed in positions related to gender and sexual identities – such as Nthateng Mhlambiso and Nomboniso Gasa – are credited as such. The film does refer to activism, but mostly in terms of Muholi's own work.

It is significant that each film includes a woman with a lesbian or Queer identity who is deeply involved in traditional African culture: sangoma-in-training Fikile in *Breaking out of the Box* and sangoma Nkunzi in *Difficult Love*. Representing these two characters refutes the assertion that homosexuality is "un-African." Both Fikile and Nkunzi identify as African – detractors would struggle to argue against this – and their spiritual/religious practices connect them directly to an indigenous African belief system. Nkunzi speaks of having both masculine and feminine attributes within her, defying heteronormative ideas that would divide human identities into simplistic binary constructions of "pure" and supposedly mutually exclusive masculinity or femininity. This leads to Nomboniso reflecting on the apparent need to

construct “the African identity” (if such a singular concept could even be imagined to represent such a large and diverse continent) as a homogenous one, despite what she explains as “an understanding that there are people who have different notions of sexual identity” that have “always” existed across the continent. Furthermore, Nkunzi’s discussion of spirituality refers to both traditional beliefs – such as a connection to the ancestors – and Christian iconography, in the form of the Virgin Mary. Again, this reflects a rejection of simplistic binary classifications, this time in relation to religion and spirituality. In *Breaking out of the Box*, Fikile expresses feeling insulted by the idea that her sexual identity is un-African, and later shares poignantly: “I’m born in Africa. I would argue that I am an African. And I’m a lesbian woman... my ancestors love me the way that I am, as a lesbian woman, as an African.”

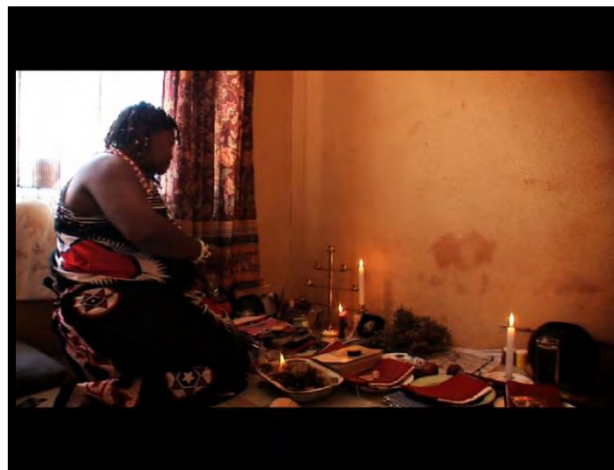


Figure 8: Fikile Vilakazi (*Breaking out of the Box*)

While the two films both address the theme of “corrective” rape, they depict the subject in different ways. A number of participants in *Breaking out of the Box* address the topic, although not from the perspective of someone talking directly about the experience.¹⁵⁵ Fikile phrases the irony of the situation in South Africa aptly, saying,

...we’ve got beautiful legislation, but how many lesbians in South Africa are still being raped? [...] Laws on their own have never changed people’s lives [...] Social transformation is the key.

¹⁵⁵ This does not imply or assume that none of the women interviewed have or have not experienced such violence, only that they do not comment on it in such a capacity.

Fino attributes the fact that she has not personally experienced such an ordeal as “pure luck,” since she knows that there are “a lot of Black lesbians who have gone through such experiences – physical and violent abuse, rape...” Portia states that she has no fear, but also stresses the importance of being careful, advising that one should go home once darkness falls, and not walk in the streets once they become quiet. This provides a link to Yvette’s point when she observes, having experienced working with gender-based violence, that “women get killed from all walks of life – but that said, there’s a lot of things about middle-class-ness that makes you safer.” One of these advantages of the middle class is access to safe transport. Thus, the film contextualises the issue of “corrective” rape as being situated in a space that is influenced not only by homophobia and intolerance, but also by class and living environment. Simultaneously, *Breaking out of the Box* avoids the stereotypical kinds of depictions that would lead viewers to imagine that every single Black lesbian in South Africa lives in constant fear, anxiety, and crippling poverty. The film also includes photographs taken at the funeral of Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Masooa, two lesbian women from Soweto who were murdered in July 2007.¹⁵⁶ These images are accompanied by a voice-over that discusses the circumstances of their deaths and lists other victims of homophobia-driven murder. More photographs are later included, depicting victims of homophobic violence and hate crimes. A voice-over accompanies these images, in which Yvette describes these crimes as forming part of “the patriarchal backlash.” The film is dedicated to a number of people, including some victims of homophobic crimes, whose names are listed in the closing credits.



Figure 9: Millicent Gaika (*Difficult Love*)

¹⁵⁶ Baldwin Ndaba, “‘Hate crime’ against lesbians slated,” (13 July 2007), <<http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/hate-crime-against-lesbians-slated-1.361821#.VBFj7RZdBPC>> [Accessed 5 July 2014], from *IOL* website, <<http://www.iol.co.za>>

Breaking out of the Box, while raising the topic of “corrective” rape and murder, focuses primarily on documenting the feelings and opinions the women interviewed have about the subject. The approach assumed by *Difficult Love* is in some ways more explicit: it includes an interview with a survivor of “corrective” rape, Millicent Gaika, and showcases some of the photographs that Muholi has taken of victims and survivors of such attacks. The interview with Millicent is probably the most harrowing and difficult segment of the film to watch and has perhaps the greatest emotional impact. The interview could not have taken place very long after the incident, for Millicent’s bruises are obvious, some stitches are still visible, one eye is swollen shut and her voice is hoarse from having been choked – visually evident in the marks on her neck. She recounts in vivid though concise detail her experience of having been assaulted, raped and tortured by a man from her community whom she had known for years – an ordeal that dragged on for around five hours. Before she is introduced to the viewer, we see a hand, its fingers rubbing nervously against each other, which are revealed to be Millicent’s. This foreshadows the atmosphere of the sequence: while its contents are deeply disturbing, the documenting of Millicent’s account is recorded in a sensitive and intimate way, focusing on little details (such as her fingers) to convey horror and anxiety that are too great to express in words. Millicent’s account of her experience is supplemented by an interview with the rapist’s neighbour. This man is clearly shaken by the event, describing how he and his brother intervened by breaking into the house where the rape and torture occurred after having heard “the kinds of sounds” that he had never heard before, and confirming the length of the incident. The fact that Millicent agreed to talk to Muholi and Goldsmid at such an excruciating time is doubtlessly influenced by the fact that Muholi had photographed her before she suffered this act of violence, and thus a relationship of trust and respect between the two women had already been formed. One of the photographs that Muholi had taken before the incident is included in the film. It not only signifies the relationship that predated the attack but also serves to emphasise just how violent Millicent’s ordeal was: her face is almost unrecognisable. The subject is raised again in the film when Ndumie, Funeka, Muholi and two other women discuss the occurrence of “corrective” rape in Gugulethu, and how best to respond to its prevalence. An unidentified young woman expresses anger: “We are like this. We love ourselves, our families love us. Why do we have to now suffer for unnecessary things? Why lesbians?” Later, Muholi echoes this question: “Why should I be killed for loving someone?”

Both films also include speculation as to the motivations underlying the rape and murder of lesbians. Muholi’s sister Ntombizane, in a voice-over, suggests that some men fear that

lesbians might “steal” their girlfriends, and that “men don’t want anyone to be a man except themselves” – the latter statement revealing assumptions (not necessarily on Ntombizane’s part) that conflate being a lesbian with being a man. In *Breaking out of the Box*, the reasons or motivations for these attacks are linked to the patriarchal system by more than one woman: Fikile views lesbians and transgender people coming out (i.e. living openly as homosexual, Queer and/or gender nonconforming) as being situated in defiance of “that particular kind of culture which emerges in patriarchy over time,” supporting Yvette’s suggestion that “corrective” rape is part of “the patriarchal backlash,” while some women refer to the generally high levels of violence within the country.

Thus, while both films document the subject of so-called “corrective” rape, they utilise different strategies to do so. *Breaking out of the Box* places more emphasis on the irony of the contemporary South African situation, where progressive laws protecting the rights of minorities are juxtaposed with harsh realities and experiences for some. The film also makes clear links between the violence experienced by some members of Black lesbian communities and the patriarchal system, and profiles some of the gender and sexuality-orientated NGOs that work in these fields. *Difficult Love*, on the other hand, highlights the matter on a more direct and personal level – specifically through the interview with Millicent – and otherwise represents the subject’s influence on Muholi’s art.

4.5 Aims and functions

The purposes of the two films overlap in some ways: both portray experiences of living in contemporary South Africa as Black lesbians. The different approaches taken in portraying these experiences may be read as emerging from the respective filmmakers’ differing aims. *Difficult Love* focuses to a great extent on Muholi’s art and the experiences and encounters that inspire its creation. The film includes stories shared by some of the people whom Muholi has photographed, namely Viola, Nkunzi, Petra and Praline. However, the film’s focus returns to Muholi and her work as its primary theme. This is partly, but not exclusively, due to the prominence of Muholi’s authorial voice. Throughout the film, Muholi addresses the camera directly and guides the viewer using voice-over. Some of Muholi’s remarks on the film’s creation seem to shed light on the intention with which the film was made:

The film was commissioned by SABC, and was pitched by Peter Goldsmith [*sic*]. He approached me in 2008, and wanted to do a film about me and those around me. Seeing that the story is about my life, and [since] I know my life better than any other person, I asked to be co-director [...] I decided to invite some of the people who feature in my photographs to speak for themselves.¹⁵⁷

Additionally the film's form – specifically its introduction – may encourage viewers to read the film as Muholi's response to various critics. In order to investigate this reading, the introductory sequence will be examined in more detail.

The very first images in the film are photographs from Muholi's series *Being*, which was displayed at the exhibition that provoked Lulu Xingwana's controversial reaction. These images are followed by a shot of a newspaper clipping with the headline "This is not art!" above the sub-heading "Minister refuses to open exhibition after she is given preview of photographs." The shot then zooms in on two separate photographs accompanying the article, one of Muholi and one of Xingwana, positioned in such a way that the two seem to be facing one another. Next, a text screen summarises the incidents of August 2009.¹⁵⁸ This is followed by a voice-over, which is gradually accompanied by its visual match as footage of Gail Smith fades in, apparently arguing against the minister's judgements: "her work is so obviously not setting out to titillate, which is the object of pornography... Zanele's work is so obviously art..." More of Muholi's photographs are shown while Smith talks, followed by an article about Muholi written by Smith. Muholi introduces herself next, followed by "vox pops" of people criticising homosexuality, before the film's title is displayed.

¹⁵⁷ Zanele Muholi, interviewed by Lisa van Wyk, "From the Outside Looking In," (19 September 2011), <<http://mg.co.za/article/2011-09-19-from-the-outside-looking-in>> [Accessed 2 May 2013], from *Mail and Guardian* website, <<http://www.m&g.co.za>>

¹⁵⁸ For more detail, see section 2.3, "Political Context and Background"

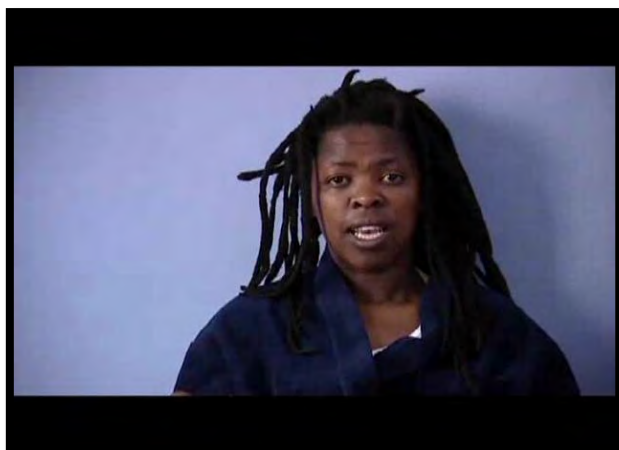


Figure 10: Zanele Muholi (*Difficult Love*)

This structure creates the impression that Muholi is responding to critics – both of her work in particular and of homosexuality in general – with the support of authorities such as Gail Smith. It is uncertain what prompted the decision to reference the Xingwana incident so prominently this early in the film. It may be intended to demonstrate the national significance and/or impact of Muholi’s work, to set the film up as Muholi’s response to such criticism, or to serve as an introduction to the types and forms of homophobic (and at times racial) discrimination experienced by Muholi and many of those people whom she photographs.

Breaking out of the Box places comparatively more emphasis on highlighting the diversity within Black lesbian communities and thus demonstrating that there is no such thing as a single gay (or lesbian) identity. This emphasis echoes theories raised by Gevisser and Cameron¹⁵⁹ and reiterated by Botha.¹⁶⁰ Muholi’s work is admirable and valuable and the singularity of its success indicates just how underrepresented Black lesbian identities are in South Africa.¹⁶¹ However, there is a danger that over-emphasising depictions of Black lesbian identity within the context of “corrective” rape – and specifically within the body of Muholi’s work – may essentialise perceptions of Black South African lesbians by limiting their identities solely to these representations. Black South African lesbian identities and cultures are hardly ever mentioned in the media except in reports of “corrective” rape, which may inspire public

¹⁵⁹ Gevisser and Cameron, 3

¹⁶⁰ Botha (2014), 64

¹⁶¹ This underrepresentation extends to the African continent more broadly, but that is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

perceptions around these identities to be reduced to this phenomenon. Muholi herself has addressed this problem, pointing out that

...the common picture that comes to mind when you think about black lesbians in South Africa is bloody. If you Google ‘black lesbians in South Africa,’ you find hate crimes, and curative rapes, brutal killings. You will not find anything about black lesbians and their families, about black lesbians and their children, black lesbians and education. You don’t see anything about black lesbians taking over the movement, using art as means to rebel. We do not have records where we look at queer art. We read more about death than we do about life, and love.¹⁶²

This is not to say that work such as Muholi’s and films such as *Difficult Love* or *Rape for Who I Am* should not exist or receive attention and acclaim. “Corrective” rape and hate crimes fuelled by homophobia are relevant and alarming issues which should be discussed. However, these should not be the only kinds of filmic representations of Black South African lesbian identities. *Difficult Love*’s focus on Muholi and her art aside, “corrective” rape is one of its most visible themes. This makes the focus on other aspects of South African Black lesbian life in *Breaking out of the Box* all the more important.

Breaking out of the Box highlights the diversity of Black South African lesbians on several axes, including age, cultural background, location, class and political beliefs. The film depicts this diversity through striking juxtapositions of, for example, the experiences of an older woman reflecting on her memories of the struggle against apartheid, with those of a young DJ, or the life of a sangoma in training with that of a soccer star. Similarly, the interviews conducted in the women’s homes depict a variety of different living conditions. While Yvette reflects on returning to South Africa after having grown up in exile, Portia and her neighbours talk about her childhood in Soweto. This multiplicity challenges the tremendously limited images of Black South African lesbians portrayed in the media. Additionally, the women here are shown in a variety of spaces, some intimate, and some more public: at their respective homes, in their places of work, on the streets of their neighbourhoods, and in places of worship. Images from both Cape Town and Johannesburg are recognisable. The film may be seen as countering essentialist representations that focus exclusively on Black lesbians as (potential) victims of violence living in abject fear. Instead, the women in *Breaking out of the Box* discuss,

¹⁶² Muholi, interviewed by van Wyk

and are seen engaging in, numerous aspects of their lives: love, work, dreams, families and communities, socialising, and relaxing.



Figure 11: Yvette Abrahams (*Breaking out of the Box*)

Significantly, *Breaking out of the Box* is not composed of simplistically “positive” images – the threat of “corrective” rape and other problems faced by Black South African lesbians is acknowledged and discussed. However, the film also features stories of other aspects of these women’s lives, experiences and hopes. They are not portrayed as simplistic “poster girls,” aimed at countering stereotypes with one-dimensional positive images to soothe homophobic fears of decadent difference, instead, they are represented as complex and diverse autonomous subjects.

The titular box being broken out of may be symbolic of any number of restrictions. Some of these are clearly identified within the poem that is interspersed throughout the film: limitations, prescriptions and discrimination related to and based on racism, sexism, misogyny, homosexuality and requirements around supposedly authentic African-ness. Moreover, the film’s depiction of multiplicity within Black South African lesbian identities may be read as breaking out of the very limited and shallow “box” of media representations, stereotypes and misconceptions regarding this group.

More broadly, the films may be read as venturing beyond the objectifying stereotypes that have dominated filmic representations of Black women for decades. These still-prevalent images, rooted in colonial and imperial ideologies, continue to inform the eroticisation and exoticisation

of Black women in film and other visual media – a point that Bischoff also highlights.¹⁶³ Thus, it is crucial for “female African filmmakers [...] to reclaim ownership of the black female body, and to reinsert female subjectivity and agency through representation.”¹⁶⁴ These two films may be considered to achieve just that.

4.6 Self, other and camera: presentation and re-presentation

The matter of representation – in terms of who documents whom and how power relations are distributed – has been a source of debate within the realm of documentary film for decades. The so-called “crisis of representation”¹⁶⁵ has influenced these discussions significantly.

Questions of perspective relate to the outlook from which a film is made – both literally, in terms of how the camera positions its subjects within the frame, and more abstractly, in terms of the manner in which a film is inherently shaped by the stances, opinions and beliefs of those who create it, irrespective of intentions of objectivity. On the simplest level, the creation of documentary film evokes questions related to theoretical considerations of self and Other.

Ironically, one could argue that more conventional, traditional documentary approaches – despite their ambitions of objectivity – often result in a colder, more clinical treatment of subjects, in which power lies almost exclusively with the filmmakers as opposed to those filmed. Considering the points raised by Verster about more personal documentary filmmaking in post-apartheid South Africa, including subjective treatments of subject matter, it seems that a considerable portion of contemporary local documentary film has placed more emphasis on humanising their subjects and stories than on producing “strictly factual” depictions, and that this shift has created opportunities for power, control and respect to be more equally shared between filmmakers and those being filmed.

In his final interview, documentary pioneer John Grierson distinguished what he called presentation – the depiction of a subject from an outsider’s perspective – from representation

¹⁶³ Bischoff, 144

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 147

¹⁶⁵ See section 3.2.4: “Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking”

– an insider’s depiction of local events, or “presentation of the local story by local people.”¹⁶⁶ While his nomenclature’s differentiation between “presentation” and “representation” might cause some confusion, the value of Grierson’s observation lies in its recognition of the significance of telling stories from an insider’s perspective, which creates greater possibilities of autonomy and insight. This is not to say that an insider’s perspective on a story or subject will necessarily be completely accurate – subjectivity is inevitable. However, a certain quality of authenticity or veracity is impossible to understand or document from an outsider perspective.

This point may be considered in relation to both *Difficult Love* and *Breaking Out of the Box*. In the former, Muholi relates her own experiences, thoughts, and feelings, as well as those of people with whom she has formed close personal or artistic relationships. When she introduces herself early in the film, Muholi clearly states her position and artistic aims:

I want people to know more about our lives as Black lesbians - we come from families, we work, we think, we care, there is so much going on in our lives... we exist as human beings, women, who love other women... So this is me, presenting myself, out there in the world - for people to know more about who I am.

This statement makes it clear that Muholi identifies as part of a collective “we” – the group that she is representing. Simultaneously, she draws attention to the fact that she is (re-)presenting herself as an individual situated within that group.

As mentioned before, *Breaking out of the Box* is narrated not from an outsider’s perspective, as a story of “them” or the “Other,” but from an insider’s perspective, using the personal pronouns “us” and “we.” Both films could thus, as stories related by those inside them, be seen as consistent with Grierson’s notion of representation. This is particularly significant because of the filmmakers’ and subjects’ identities as female, Black and/or identifying as gender-nonconforming in some way. As Pichaske reminds us, filmmaking practices of white directors documenting Black experiences have dominated the history of South African documentary film. This does not necessarily entail that these portrayals would be superficial, that none of the directors engaged deeply on the subject matter, or that there is no place for documentaries made by white directors – Verster’s *The Mother’s House* stands out as an

¹⁶⁶ Elizabeth Sussex, “Grierson on Documentary: The last interview,” *Film Quarterly* 26.1 (1972), 27

example of a director documenting the lives of a family from a different cultural background to his own in a sensitive and engaging manner, due in large part to his commitment to the project, the long period over which it was created, and the relationships the director formed with the family being filmed. However, it is crucial that South African filmmaking – including documentary filmmaking – develops a wider variety of voices by encouraging more diversity in filmmakers.

Recalling Maingard's reference to people within documentary films as "speaking subjects," both films seem to grant their subjects agency to relate their own stories. This is particularly evident in *Breaking out of the Box*. While the interviews in both films have, obviously, been edited, the women interviewed seem to have been given space to relate their stories without too much interference by the filmmakers. *Breaking out of the Box* appears to give more room to its subject's voices than does *Difficult Love*. The interviews are lengthy and the tone is conversational throughout the film. While the interviews are edited to show only the women's responses, their answers imply that the questions posed during the interviews were open-ended and intended to prompt the women to tell their own stories, rather than to elicit specific answers desired by the filmmakers. The women interviewed in *Difficult Love* are also allowed to speak for themselves at times – for instance, when Viola discusses her dream of having a child, and when she is shown talking and laughing with Muholi. There are, however, points where *Difficult Love's* interviews seem to be directed more by the filmmakers than by the interview subjects, particularly in some moments with Petra and Praline. The scene where Muholi goes to visit them in their "home" under a bridge feels awkward, specifically when Muholi introduces the viewer to her location and then greets Petra and Praline as she enters their residence. While Muholi clearly expresses her empathy for these two women, the encounter feels staged. The sequence has a quality that suggests its having been scripted beforehand, which contradicts the apparently natural encounter it is portrayed as. Through this, the scene creates the impression of the filmmakers speaking for Petra and Praline, rather than giving them a space in which to speak for themselves. This is echoed later in the film, when Petra and Praline talk about how much they enjoyed attending a photography workshop hosted by Muholi, and how they would love to take photographs of "everything" – if only they had cameras. This point creates a bittersweet atmosphere, for it raises the question of how much Muholi's work actually helped the women. This does not imply that Muholi exploits these two women, nor does it invalidate the skills and pleasure that the photographic workshop must have

offered them, but the film does not engage in further discussion of the socio-political factors that caused them to be unable to utilise their newly-developed skill.

None of the subjects in either film are cast as antagonists. The only perspectives shown in a more negative light are those condemning homosexuality, which are voiced by vox pop-style interviews in *Difficult Love*. The men and women interviewed in these brief clips remain unidentified, and are not directly judged, but the sequences that frame them invite readings which suggest that these opinions are at best puzzling, or – less sympathetically – highly ignorant and problematic. However, these unnamed individuals are not entirely vilified. Later vox pops include different people condemning “corrective” rape, providing something of a balance to earlier homophobic statements. In an interview near the middle of the film, Muholi is shown speaking to – or rather, being spoken to by – a group of women. One of the women holds what is presumably one of Muholi’s photographs and tells her, “I would never allow my child to take such photographs. You see, something like this gives us a bad picture – to us as virginity-testers and black people. Our image has been dented by this thing. This whole thing is for whites, because it causes people to become gay.”¹⁶⁷ This segment, while brief, depicts a number of things: the kind of disapproval that Muholi’s work has inspired in some, the interesting relationship between race and culture that influences local debates around homosexuality, and some of the misperceptions around the nature of homosexuality – such as the idea that photography (or any other form of art) could somehow “make” people homosexual. *Breaking out of the Box*, on the other hand, does not depict homophobia through interviews with people espousing it, but instead discusses homophobic views – both in the voice-over and in the conversations of subjects – and displays some of their consequences.

¹⁶⁷ The woman tells Muholi this in isiZulu – this citation is from the English translation in the subtitles.



Figure 12: Muholi talking to virginity-testers (*Difficult Love*)

It has been argued that the subjective approach and insiders' perspectives adopted by these two films create the potential for greater emotional impact and viewer empathy than more objective approaches might have achieved. Attempting to depict events and experiences from an objective outsider's perspective, especially when portraying such inherently personal matters as identity, race, gender, sexuality and rape, might be either entirely unsuccessful (in failing to understand the intricacies and nuances of the subject matter) or so factual as to make its depiction of very little importance or relevance to those viewers who do not already have a developed interest in the subject matter. Drily factual news reports of "another lesbian 'correctively' raped" may become just more bad news: the victims are rendered relatively anonymous and the nature of the events becomes concealed behind a phrase so frequently heard as to desensitize the audience to the atrocity it describes. Meeting people who have survived these experiences – or family members, partners and friends who have lost loved ones to them – allows the viewer to engage with their lives, experiences, and characters, to contextualise and recognise them as people rather than statistics. Thus, depicting these issues from a personal, subjective viewpoint has the potential to evoke greater audience interest, which can in turn give rise to understanding and empathy – through the relatively simple action of humanising the people portrayed.

The relationships and interactions between documentary filmmakers and their subjects remains a contested topic, since the creation of film is a site where power over the image is negotiated. Muholi has expressed distaste for referring to those people whom she photographs as her subjects:

I keep saying to people I don't want to call them 'subjects' or 'models' because I deal with people, who shape me... And coming from a history where black people were subjects or objects of science, of anthropologists, of art, I have never liked using those terms. I don't deal with subjects, I deal with human beings.¹⁶⁸

Instead, the photographer refers to those she photographs either by their first names or as "participants." The interaction between Muholi and her "participants" does seem to be more interactive and collaborative than the average photo-shoot, and the relationship between Muholi and Viola is shown to be friendly and playful during the photo-shoot that is filmed in *Difficult Love*. This approach may be read as indicating Muholi's awareness of the power negotiations and the significance of representation inherent to photography – and, by extension, film. Pertinent to these concerns, Muholi also points out that she does not intend to speak on behalf of others,¹⁶⁹ and attempts to empower people to "speak for themselves" by training women in photography, as discussed before. While this does not indicate that her photographs or films are neutral or egalitarian in their power distribution, Muholi's awareness of these matters and her engagement with her "participants" in the creation process do imply at least an intention to treat those whom she photographs with respect. However, this is not a simple matter. It is noticeable in Muholi's photography that those people whom she photographs very often look directly at the camera,¹⁷⁰ creating a powerful gaze and a sense of power in the photographed "participants."¹⁷¹ Conversely, the only person in *Difficult Love* who directly addresses and faces the camera is Muholi herself. Combined with the previously mentioned fact that Ndumie Funda and Funeka Soldaat are included in the film but not identified as gender and sexuality activists, this creates a different dynamic in the film than that prevalent in Muholi's photography. This is reminiscent of Jay Ruby's comments about extreme forms of reflexivity in film leading to what might be read as a narcissistic or self-absorbed approach.¹⁷² This is not to say that Muholi treats the other people featured in the film disrespectfully but

¹⁶⁸ Zanele Muholi, cited in Zingi Mfeka, "Candid take on life in the marginal lane," originally from *The Sunday Times* (2 August 2009), < <http://muzane.wordpress.com/2009/08/02/candid-take-on-life-in-marginal-lane-by-zingi-mkefa/> > [Accessed 2 May 2013], from *Muzane's Weblog*, <<http://muzane.wordpress.com/>>

¹⁶⁹ Muholi, interviewed by van Wyk

¹⁷⁰ Especially those in her series *Faces and Phases*

¹⁷¹ For a discussion of the gaze in this series, see Raél Jero Salley, "Zanele Muholi's Elements of Survival," *African Arts* 45.4 (Winter 2012), pp. 58-69

¹⁷² As discussed in section 3.2.5, "Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking"

rather that, in this instance, the power negotiations are different and the film is – as Muholi has pointed out – primarily about Muholi herself.

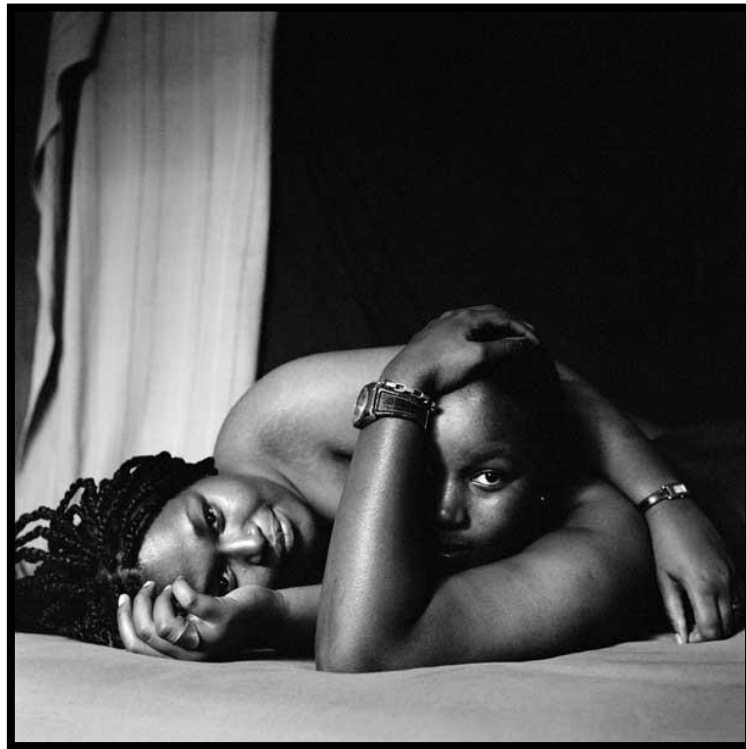


Figure 13: Apinda Mpako and Ayanda Magudulela, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2007.

From the series *Being*. Zanele Muholi

Bearing in mind the notion of speaking for oneself, it is also interesting to note that both films include a number of languages: those filmed often speak in their mother tongues, at times mixing languages. English subtitles are provided for those sections in other languages. This creates a more comfortable and intimate atmosphere within the interviews than would have been possible had the subjects all been required to speak only English, or had the services of an on-site translator been used. This technical decision further allows participants to both literally and figuratively speak for themselves, thus lessening the potential for them to be subjugated into submissive or subordinate positions.

Both *Breaking out of the Box* and *Difficult Love* approach and treat the people that they document – whether termed subjects, collaborators, participants, or characters – with respect. Both films also display a certain awareness of the complex issues surrounding filmic

representation, particularly in terms of power and autonomy negotiations between the filmmakers and those filmed.

4.7 Relationship with the viewer

Another relationship that warrants examination is that between the film and the audience. Neither of the films in question dictates to the viewer what to believe – instead, room is left for interpretation. At the end of *Difficult Love*, Muholi encourages the viewer to “go home and think about it, create your own meanings, it’s allowed – [because] I’ve done my bit.” This closing statement is preceded by a segment of an interview with Gail Smith, who discusses responsibility: specifically, she talks in what seems to be a frustrated tone about how “it’s always gays and lesbians who have to teach heterosexual people about how they are oppressing them,” and compares this with the tendency where women to “have to” explain feminism to men. Smith concludes that it is not the artist’s responsibility to change society, but rather the responsibility of society itself. These statements, and their placement in the film, lend the end of *Difficult Love* the air of a disclaimer. Smith’s comments tap into complex issues around responsibility and oppression, while the debate around what exactly an artist’s role within society should be has preoccupied critics, art historians, philosophers and artists for millennia. However, this discussion includes some paradoxes. Is one of the aims and functions of *Difficult Love* not, after all, to promote greater visibility, representation and understanding of the experiences of Black South African lesbians? In an interview with Lisa van Wyk, Muholi stated that her intention was to “keep the film accessible to both audiences, to the LGBT community and the broader public,” and explained that the documentary was “aimed at educating people about our lives.”¹⁷³ In this way, Muholi’s art is not necessarily merely about self-expression: she intends for her art to stimulate something in viewers, even if that is only a reconsideration of the common beliefs about sexuality and culture. While the author considered the tone of Smith’s closing remarks to be defensive, perhaps her statement was made in the context of the criticism of Muholi’s work, or perhaps she meant merely to encourage society to take responsibility for oppressing particular individuals. Whichever way, the juxtaposition in tone between this penultimate sequence and Muholi’s closing statements complicates the film’s ending.

¹⁷³ Muholi interviewed by van Wyk.

Whereas many more “traditional” or conventional documentary films would aim to convince audiences of a specific perspective, *Breaking out of the Box* and *Difficult Love* seem more intent on encouraging discussions and contemplation. These films are not impartial or objective, nor do they pretend to be – and since they are trying to inspire debate, they need not be. The filmmakers could have created films documenting debates around certain issues, representing views from both individuals within LGBTI communities and from people who believe that homosexuality is for some reason immoral, “un-African” or otherwise objectionable. However, in doing this they would have created something with much less impact: an assortment of arguments and counter-arguments. The films as they stand, as profiles and character-studies lending visibility to a group of identities that are too frequently judged and criticised, too commonly harassed, raped and/or murdered, but far too scarcely understood, have a far greater impact on the viewer.

4.8 Documentaries and Fictions

Considering a broader picture of contemporary South African film, it would seem that Black lesbian identities are comparatively more visible in documentaries than in their fiction counterparts. The author is aware of only three South African fiction feature films featuring overtly lesbian characters,¹⁷⁴ namely *Quest for Love*,¹⁷⁵ *The World Unseen*¹⁷⁶ and *My Black Little Heart*.¹⁷⁷ The first is a love story about two women, starring respected Afrikaans actresses Sandra Prinsloo and Jana Cilliers. Despite the relatively high profiles of the lead actresses, copies of the film are difficult to find. *The World Unseen* is about two South African Indian women in love with each other, set in apartheid-era Cape Town. The film is based on a novel written by the British filmmaker of South African descent Shamim Sarif – complicating the extent to which it might be considered a South African film.¹⁷⁸ In *My Black Little Heart*, which chronicles the experiences of two drug-addicted women in the criminal underbelly of Durban, the main characters Chloe and Katie could be read as lesbian, bisexual or having other

¹⁷⁴ As summarised in Botha (2012), 248, and based on personal research.

¹⁷⁵ Dir. Helena Nogueira, 1987

¹⁷⁶ Dir. Shamim Sarif, 2007

¹⁷⁷ Dir. Claire Angelique, 2008

¹⁷⁸ The definition of what qualifies a film as being “South African” is subject for another study – for the purposes of this study it is sufficient to mention that it is a matter of contestation.

sexual orientations. Both characters sleep with men and women. A reading of the relationship between these two women as being lesbian in nature could be convincing, although not the only possibility. However, despite filmmaker Claire Angelique having been the Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year in 2009 and the involvement of an acclaimed production studio, cinematographer and score composer in the production of *My Black Little Heart*, this film is also incredibly difficult to find a copy of for viewing purposes. While information on the film's release is limited, it seems to have been screened in South Africa primarily at film festivals and independent cinemas, rather than at mainstream cinemas. A number of factors might be understood to have influenced this, including issues regarding ownership of the film,¹⁷⁹ a style and structure that diverge from mainstream conventions, and relatively dark subject matter, including drugs, prostitution, abortion, abuse and rape. While these factors cannot be ignored, it is unlikely that the Queer elements of the film did not contribute in some way to its relative inaccessibility to the general South African cinema-going public.

The author thus considers it uncontroversial to say that lesbian characters have been almost entirely absent from feature-length South African fiction films. Since the characters in both *Quest for Love* and *My Black Little Heart* are white, this absence is even more pronounced when considering Black lesbian characters. Comparatively speaking, however, Black South African lesbian identities have been represented more frequently in South African documentaries, including *Difficult Love*, *Breaking Out of the Box*, *Simon and I*, *Beyond Hate Crimes*¹⁸⁰ and *Rape for Who I Am*. The majority of these documentary representations are relatively recent. Thus, the question arises: why is this specific range of identities effectively invisible in South African fiction films while being comparatively visible in local documentary films?

Queer male characters are relatively more visible in South African fiction films – examples include characters from *Skilpoppe*,¹⁸¹ *Die Ongelooflike Avonture van Hanna Hoekom*,¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Discussed in Andrew Worsdale, "Shocking and unyielding: my black little heart is a nonlinear tale of drugs and porn that comes at you like the worst trip you've ever had," (12 February 2009), <<http://kaganof.com/kagablog/2009/02/12/shocking-and-unyielding-my-black-little-heart-is-a-nonlinear-tale-of-drugs-and-porn-that-comes-at-you-like-the-worst-trip-youve-ever-had-writes-andrew-worsdale/>> [Accessed 20 July 2014], from *Kaganof* website, <<http://kaganof.com>>

¹⁸⁰ Dir. Musa Ngubane, 2005

¹⁸¹ Dir. André Odendaal, 2004

¹⁸² Dir. Regard van den Bergh, 2010

Proteus,¹⁸³ *Promised Land*¹⁸⁴ and – arguably – *Skoonheid*.¹⁸⁵ Only one of these films offers a Queer male character that is not white – Klaas Blank in *Proteus* – while the majority of these examples only include gay male characters in comparatively minor roles. Some still rely on single-dimensional and/or stereotypical representations of homosexual identities. In the case of *Skoonheid*, it is debatable whether any of the characters are actually Queer: they certainly do not identify as such, and same-sex desire and intercourse are represented in contexts of pathology, rape and orgies. As Botha points out, the film’s screenplay includes “underdeveloped characters and a lack of realism.” *Skoonheid* ends up reiterating the stereotype of male homosexuality as comprised of “villains and victims,”¹⁸⁶ the essentialist trope identified by Russo in the early 1980s.¹⁸⁷ Nonetheless, even if local fiction films portray Queer male characters in limited and at times problematic ways, white male Queer identities are at least significantly more visible than their female and/or Black counterparts.

A number of reasons may be suggested for the near-complete absence of Queer female identities from South African fiction films. Firstly, the production costs of documentary films can be considerably lower than those of fiction films, without being detrimental to production quality. Unlike fiction films, documentaries do not generally need to budget for actors, make-up artists, props, and locations. Funding for documentary films, depending on their subjects and aims, may often be supported by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – such as the involvement of FEW in the case of *Breaking out of the Box*. Fiction films, on the other hand, generally need to be financially supported by corporate or private investors, or production companies. Unlike NGOs, for whom financial profit is not an immediate aim, investors in fiction films generally wish to see films they have funded return profits. This difference affects not only the production of films, but also their distribution. In the South African context, documentary films are relatively rarely screened at mainstream cinemas. Instead, they are typically accessible to audiences at film festivals, screened for educational or research purposes, or rented from DVD stores. A certain amount of local television programming is

¹⁸³ Dir. John Greyson and Jack Lewis, 2003

¹⁸⁴ Dir. Jason Xenopoulos, 2002

¹⁸⁵ Dir. Oliver Hermanus, 2011

¹⁸⁶ Martin Botha, “The Representation of Gays and Lesbians in South African Cinema 1985-2013,” *Kinema* 40 (Fall 2013), <<http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=543&feature>> [Accessed 11 September 2014], from *Kinema* website, <<http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca>>

¹⁸⁷ Russo, 1981

also dedicated to screening documentary content. Both the production and distribution contexts of South African documentary films differ from those of local fiction films.

The relatively lower pressure to be lucrative and potentially reduced production costs also make documentary film production more easily accessible to young or upcoming filmmakers and reduce the necessity of mainstream appeal. Documentary filmmaking – being less likely funded by entities with primarily financial goals – may offer filmmakers more freedom in and control over their film’s subject matter and depiction thereof. Considering the increasingly homophobic social context, fiction films including well-rounded Queer female characters might evoke negative reactions from some audience segments, which might present too great a risk for investors in commercially-orientated South African fiction cinema. As noted,¹⁸⁸ gay male characters have been historically been comparatively more visible in film than their female counterparts. Thus, the inclusion of gay men as minor characters in fiction films seems to be considered less threatening to audience appeal than the presence of lesbian characters.

In her preface to a study of lesbian representations within documentary films, Amy Villarejo explains her focus on this genre:

Not only are documentary film’s channels of production, distribution, and exhibition more available to exploration than those of the commercial narrative cinema, but its *raison d’être* is not, ultimately, profit [...] lesbian documentary serves distinct social and rhetorical purposes within the context of dominant cinema: to express lesbian’s [*sic*] autonomous form, to record lesbian’s history, to promote lesbian’s visibility.¹⁸⁹

Villarejo suggests another potential reason for the disparity between fictional and documentary representations of Black lesbian identities specifically, and Queer female characters in general, relating to the very aims of documentary film and its potential to investigate intimate, personal matters.

Verster comments on what he sees as the relative superiority of South African documentaries in comparison with their fictional counterparts for a period in the country’s cinematic history. He suggests the reason for this to be “...exactly because [local fiction films] attempt to

¹⁸⁸ See section 3.11, “Disparities between gay men and lesbians”

¹⁸⁹ Villarejo, 11

construct realities which are not yet defined or understood, with all the baggage of the past coming directly into play in the politics of representation,”¹⁹⁰ while the documentary form “allows the active exploration of identity in a directly engaged manner.”¹⁹¹ This observation seems particularly perceptive. Before screenwriters can create three-dimensional, sensitive depictions of Queer characters – whose gender and sexual orientation are not used merely as narrative functions, or depicted as stereotypes instead of properly fleshed-out characters – they must understand the various experiences of Queer identities in the South African context. Additionally, directors, producers and others involved in the production process should go through the same process of learning understanding. This is precisely one of the greatest potential values of films such as *Breaking Out of the Box* and *Difficult Love*: such films, in engaging with the “active exploration of identity” from personal perspectives, can broaden public understandings and challenge commonly-held fallacies.

¹⁹⁰ Verster, 111

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

5. Conclusion

After considering some of the few South African films to depict Queer female identities, it becomes clear that the most significant depictions of such identities occur within the genre of contemporary documentary film. More specifically, a number of contemporary South African documentary films have depicted Black South African lesbian identities. There is a complete lack of depictions of Queer Black female identities in contemporary South African fiction films, in which such characters seem to be almost completely invisible. While Queer white male identities, on the other hand, have gained some visibility in South African fiction films, these depictions remain complicated and are often problematic.

A close analysis of two contemporary documentaries, *Breaking out of the Box* and *Difficult Love*, reveals certain recurring subjects, forms and patterns in depictions of Black South African lesbian identities. The issue of “corrective” rape is a prominent theme in these depictions, investigated in both films – albeit with different focuses – as well as in other, related films not considered by this dissertation. Another recurring topic which might warrant a more specifically-focused analysis in itself is the depiction of sangomas who identify as lesbian. This confluence of seemingly disparate identities is particularly relevant within the socio-political context of the growing belief in South Africa – and other African countries – that homosexuality is somehow “un-African.” *Breaking out of the Box* and *Difficult Love* both refute such essentialist views. Informed by a post-structuralist perspective that rejects simplistic binary classifications, these films demonstrate and support diversity and awareness thereof, even of so marginalised a group of identities. It is encouraging that local documentary filmmakers are engaging with issues of Queerness situated specifically within South Africa, since Western theories of gender, sexuality and Queerness are not always appropriate or sufficient for understanding these issues within African contexts.

It is also significant and encouraging to note that a number of contemporary local documentaries about issues of sexual identities are being made by filmmakers who identify as Queer or in some way a part of LGBTI communities. Similarly, it is promising that more and more Black South African directors are producing films. These phenomena are significant for similar reasons: both Black people and Queer or LGBTI-identified people have been under- or misrepresented for decades, both as subjects of film or as filmmakers. Thus, the increasing number of Queer and/or Black directors may be considered to signify an increase in the

diversity of voices represented in local film. Given the complexity of identity politics such filmmakers could potentially explore aspects of the Black and/or Queer South African experience that would be inaccessible to “outsiders,” namely heterosexual and/or white filmmakers.

In terms of form, it emerges that Francois Verster’s description of a movement towards more personal documentary filmmaking and an embrace of subjectivity is still relevant to at least a portion of contemporary South African documentary films. Given the complexity of the subject, this approach seems particularly suitable and effective. The technical choices based on such methods have the potential to reveal personal stories and truths about human experience that could not be communicated via more formal, apparently objective, approaches. Furthermore, these methods often match the content of the films and serve to open possibilities both for increased self-representation and for more intimate and conscious interaction with the people being filmed.

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APPENDIX A

I break the boxes

Today I break this box I have lived in for being black
I break this box that said to me I can't
Today I break this box I have been left in for being a woman
A box that said my place is in the kitchen
A box that said I do not deserve education
A box that said my duty is to give birth and raise children

Today I break this box that I have been forced to live in for being homosexual
This box that said I am un-African
This box that said I am abnormal
A box that said I need a man to change
That subjected me to the scorns of the society
Today I break this box that said I can not be a good mother and a lesbian
That I can not love my son and date women
That I can not love a woman and be a mother

Today I break this box that said I deserve HIV; it's a punishment from God
That said I deserve to die of AIDS it an illness of the wicked
Standing here today allowing myself to cry
Healing the child and teenager in me who suffered hate
Healing the mother in me who suffered discrimination
Healing the lesbian in me who suffered stigma
I break all thee boxes
And free as a bird I fly to the great blue sky above

Buhle Msibi (1981-2006)