

**Absences, exclusivities and utopias:  
Afrikaans film as a cinema of political impotence, 1994 –  
2014.**

by  
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**1.**

“Images, properly speaking, are the things of the world. It follows logically from this that cinema is not the name of an art: it is the name of the world”

Jacques Ranciere, *Film Fables* (2006:109).

**2.**

“[T]he master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”

Audre Lorde (quoted in Rodness 2014:64)

**3.**

“The objects of the commodity world of capitalism ... shed their independent ‘being’ and intrinsic qualities and come to be so many instruments of commodity satisfaction”

Fredric Jameson (1979:131)

## ABSTRACT

This thesis develops a conceptual and theoretical framework within which to position contemporary Afrikaans cinema as a cinema of political impotence.

Afrikaans cinema is first located within the tensions of democratic post-transitional South African society and linked to the identity politics of being identified as 'Afrikaner' or 'Afrikaans speaking'. The thesis provides a critical overview of film scholar Thomas Elsaesser's studies of (New) German Cinema and Hollywood, identifying key notions such as double occupancy to inform the study's vocabulary, and discussing how certain cultures have responded to traumatic events in which they were complicit. The thesis then links Elsaesser's studies to Fredric Jameson's views on political cinema and the political failures of postmodernism.

This conceptual and theoretical framework identifies and problematises the neoliberal structures that guide much of Afrikaans filmmaking, and offers a historical overview of key moments and figures in South African (primarily Afrikaans) filmmaking in order to demonstrate that there is precedent for political potency in Afrikaans cinema. The study positions the comedy *Hoofmeisie* as the current nadir of neoliberal Afrikaans filmmaking.

The study proceeds to critically discuss two major figurations of political impotence: the vulgar cinema of Willie Esterhuizen and the *Volkstaat film*. In their respective ways, both figurations are conservative iterations of an aesthetically impoverished cinema that aims to preserve a sense of Afrikaans white male agency and ethnic exclusivity in a socially dynamic South African landscape. Esterhuizen's films emphasise Afrikaans males' claims to victimhood as an appropriate response to political change and promoting the patriarchal legacy of Afrikaans cinema in its focus on the visibility of the penis. The *Volkstaat film*, with its emphasis on the pastoral rural idyll inhabited by Afrikaans speaking characters, and privileging trajectories of white male actualisation, serve as a cinematic formation of Afrikaans siege-culture. In this regard, a minority's political idea of self-governance is constellated as fantasy in films such as *Prêville*.

In light of the above, the thesis finds that contemporary Afrikaans cinema's attempts at representing a multicultural South Africa only highlight the cultural exclusivity in most of these films, and that these films are often contemporary instances of the conservative Afrikaans cinema developed by Hans Rompel in the 1940s. As framed within the vocabulary developed through this study, contemporary Afrikaans cinema is a cinema of forgetting that sustains socio-cultural binaries and places market output above aesthetic value.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>List of Figures</b>	iv
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</b>	1
1.1 Chapter introduction	1
1.2 Background and rationale	2
1.3 Research question and aims	13
1.4 Introduction to the conceptual theoretical framework	15
1.5 Research design	24
1.6 Chapter outline	25
<b>CHAPTER TWO: AN ELSAESSERIAN FRAMEWORK FOR FILM</b>	28
2.1 Chapter introduction	28
2.2 Thomas Elsaesser and cinema: an introduction	29
2.3 Hollywood, history, cinema, experience, or: what is cinema?	38
2.4 Elsaesser on visual language	43
2.5 Elsaesser and political cinema	49
2.6 A political allegiance: Elsaesser and Jameson	55
<b>CHAPTER THREE: AFRIKAANS CINEMA BEFORE AND AFTER POLITICAL TRANSITION: CONTEXTUALISING AFRIKAANS CINEMA AND POLITICAL CINEMA</b>	63
3.1 Chapter introduction	63
3.2 A matter of history	67
3.3 Cultural complexities, complications and controversies in post-apartheid South Africa	80
3.4 Political cinema: towards a conception of cinematic political impotence	91
3.4.1 Film and politics	91
3.4.2 Film, forgetting and impotence	107

3.5 A selection of political filmmaking in apartheid South Africa	111
3.6 Afrikaans political cinema in apartheid South Africa	122
3.6.1 Manie Van Rensburg's cinema of Afrikaner fallibility	122
3.6.2 Jans Rautenbach: the Afrikaans <i>auteur</i> as politically conscious artist	125
3.7 Towards a political economy of contemporary Afrikaans cinema	129
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: THE CINEMA OF WILLIE ESTERHUIZEN AND ITS COMIC CONTEMPORARIES</b>	144
4.1 Chapter introduction	144
4.2 Measuring masculinity in Esterhuizen's comedies	148
4.3 The failure of white male actualisation in selected films of Willie Esterhuizen	152
4.3.1 Humiliation and erection in <i>Poena is Koning</i> (2007)	154
4.3.2 Domesticated masculinity and anality in <i>Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat</i> (2008)	158
4.3.3 Masculinity at the intersection of pleasure and pain: <i>Stoute Boudjies</i> (2010)	162
4.4 The political impotence of the cinema of Willie Esterhuizen	166
4.5 Post-Esterhuizen Afrikaans comedy	168
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: THE VOLKSTAAT FILM</b>	178
5.1 Chapter introduction	178
5.2 Forms of <i>verstrooiingsvermaak</i>	179
5.3 Landscape, space and <i>Volkstaat film</i>	187
5.4 Some Afrikaans films reconsidered	193
5.5 <i>Prêtville</i> , space and exclusivity	196
5.6 Conclusion	202

<b>CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION</b>	204
6.1 Chapter introduction	204
6.2 Summary of the study	205
6.3 Afrikaans cinematic political impotence	208
6.4 Strengths and limitations of the study	210
6.5 Suggestions for further research	212
6.6 Conclusion	216
<b>SOURCES CONSULTED</b>	219



## LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1: Screen capture shot of Angelique Pretorius and Chris de Clerq in the *Stilte* (Roodt, 2012) trailer 189
- Figure 2: *Prêville* (Korsten, 2012) DVD cover 197

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Chapter introduction

This study aims to position Afrikaans cinema between 1994 and 2014 as a cinema of political impotence, a cinema devoid of a political voice. I argue that contemporary Afrikaans cinema (Afrikaans films released between 1994 and 31 December 2014) reads as a cinematic body of work devoid of political potency in two ways: its content, both manifest and thematic; and its aesthetic, the visual configuration of its content. These two ways speak to the Godardian dictum that while one may have political film (in its content, in what is manifestly represented in dialogue, setting and theme), the film is not necessarily political (aesthetically, in its visual language) (Elsaesser 1985:95).<sup>1</sup> As Thomas Elsaesser already stated in 1985, “[i]t would take more than one article to list the many divergent uses of the term ‘political cinema’ since Godard first urged his profession not to make political films but to make films politically” (1985:95), that is, to make films that are not simply political in content – socially conscious filmmaking; films that overtly address notions of struggle and resistance – but to make films that additionally speak a political visual language by way of its opposition to convention and established aesthetic norms.

Given that film style is ideologically determined (Gabriel 1982:54), Rodowick (1988:287) sensibly argues that *Cahiers du Cinema*’s statement that “all films are political” should be restated, rather, as “all films are ideological”. As such, Afrikaans cinema has the capacity to shape and inform cultural memory of both past and present, acknowledging how social and cultural processes interact with memory and perception (Green 2008:116).

This chapter presents the background and rationale to the study of the political impotence of contemporary Afrikaans cinema. It also introduces the conceptual and theoretical framework (expanded in Chapters Two and Three) and outlines its research aims, research design and chapters. I am cognisant of the fact that concepts and ideas can be protean; I anticipate continually revisiting, revising and

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<sup>1</sup> A dictum is a formal pronouncement from an authoritative source ([www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dictum](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dictum)).

expanding on the notion of “cinematic political impotence” as the study progresses so as to establish a framework of and for an Afrikaans cinema of political impotence.

## 1.2 Background and rationale

Contemporary South African cinema – to use an umbrella term that broadly groups together the varieties in and of South African film output – has provided some important social issue films, such as the Oscar nominated HIV/Aids drama *Yesterday* (Roodt, 2004) and the Oscar-winning crime-redemption drama *Tsotsi* (Hood, 2005). In addition, the short films of Zola Maseko (such as 1994’s *The Foreigner*) foregrounded issues pertaining to the South African reality of xenophobia, while the feature film *Skoonheid* (Hermanus, 2011) was awarded the so-called ‘Queer Palme’ at Cannes in 2011.<sup>2</sup> Most post-1994 South African films reflect the interests of a wide variety of filmmakers concerned with the plight of certain minorities, such as the marginalised children of *Zulu Love Letter* (Suleman, 2005) and the homosexual female characters in *The World Unseen* (Sarif, 2008). South African filmmakers were and are dissecting and representing numerous issues – economic, historical, social – associated with South Africa’s political transition and the tempestuous aftermath of democracy. South African democracy, its policies and practices are under constant scrutiny [see Mattes (2002) for a discussion of democratic failings eight years after the first democratic elections, or Pumla Gqola’s ([sa]:6-7) criticism of the “proudly South African” campaign], while Cuthbertson (2008:299) notes how “unbridled crime” and “police complicity” in criminal activities demonstrate a national shift from the celebration of democracy “to censure”.

As these films indicate, after South Africa’s official transition to democracy in 1994, South African cinema would often address key socio-political issues of the country’s past that inform its present, such as individual and collective redemption in the political drama *Forgiveness* (Gabriel, 2004) and coming to terms with an Afrikaner patriarchal legacy in *Promised Land* (Xenopoulos, 2002). *Kalahari Harry* (De Villiers, 1994) follows the release of *Die Prins van Pretoria* (Marx, 1992) (Van Nierop, *Daar*

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<sup>2</sup> I am wary of presenting an overview of Afrikaans films that amounts to little more than a catalogue of releases. In Chapters Four to Six, I investigate specific films to demonstrate key ideas pertaining to the study, and brief references to numerous other Afrikaans films serve to contextualise these films and provide a broad frame of reference to Afrikaans cinema from 1994 to 2014 in general.

*doer in die fliek*, 24).<sup>3</sup> The comedy *Kaalgat tussen die Daisies* (Roets, 1994), like *Lipstiek Dipstiek*, mocks religious hypocrisy, but the form of its mockery – vulgarity and scatology – lack political purpose and permanence. Fu and Murray (2007:127) explain that “[w]ith the end of apartheid, film-makers have struggled with finding their voice to express the ambiguities, contradictions, and nuances of the ‘new South Africa’”, and the films mentioned above foreground these ambiguities, contradictions and nuances. Apartheid means “‘separation’ or literally *aparthood* (or ‘apartness’)” and as a system of social control it “[officialised] different rights and obligations for different racial groups in South Africa” (Verdoolaege 2013:136). Shepperson and Tomaselli (2001:42) point out that South Africans experienced a socio-political situation where a white Afrikaans speaking minority exercised great influence on public and private life of all citizens, a situation that evoked considerable radical political resistance.

This resistance contributed to the eventual fall of white Afrikaans minority rule. South African cinema speaks to this tradition of resistance in the films of, among others, Andrew Worsdale, but Afrikaans film since 1994 has been silent about its privileged political origins. Following Elsaesser’s (1996:167) assessment of the *Kristallnacht*, I suggest that 1994 had become, for Afrikaans cinema, an over-determined date where two events (the fall of apartheid; the rise of democracy) ended up silencing each other, making up for their absences with fantasies of minority privilege and political legitimacy. As Flanery (2009:239) asks, “why has South African film failed to come of age? Why are its products so often either aesthetic, narrative, critical, or commercial failures, both within South Africa and in the global marketplace and mediascape?”<sup>4</sup> When I substitute “South African” with the more specific “Afrikaans”, Flanery’s (2009) comments on failure ring even clearer. I am focusing specifically on Afrikaans fiction feature films that received a cinema release.<sup>5</sup> I will discuss selected Afrikaans films in this regard, taking my cue from Elsaesser’s (2005:19) position that

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<sup>3</sup> In cases where there might be discrepancies in a film’s year of release, I use the information provided by the academic source material I consulted.

<sup>4</sup> Flanery (2009) may not have intended this specific use of the term, but as Appadurai’s (1990:299) definition of mediascape is highly appropriate: “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives”.

<sup>5</sup> Both Nel (2010) and Botha (2012) discuss the socio-political significance of Afrikaans short films; these and other films fall outside the primary scope of the current study, although Chapter Three will refer to key Afrikaans short films as demonstrative of political filmmaking.

I write about films that provide some sort of symptomatic revelation about themselves or that serve as some kind of cultural event. Here, the event of cinema itself is understood as a “modern political cinema that does not represent reality, but instead operates as a performative speech act that plays a part in constructing reality” (Pisters 2010:208), an approach that is aligned with Elsaesser’s studies.

In my research approach, I am cognisant of Hook’s (2014:9) methodology in *Post-apartheid Conditions* which “favours episodic interventions, unorthodox combinations of theory and problematic, varied points of focus and lines of approach” (Hook 2014:9). In addition, he employs Said’s contrapuntual method: bringing ‘dated’ ideas to contemporary objects in an attempt at understanding and meaning construction (2014:11). It is in this latter sense that I introduce Fredric Jameson’s work in this study as a complementary theoretical framework. This study also takes the position of criticism as intervention with an aim to “examine the significant omissions, gaps and absences” in film (Gabriel 1982:50).

Writing from a personal position, I align with Hannah Arendt’s famous statement that “if one is attacked as a Jew, it is necessary to respond as a Jew” (Kohn 2003:xi). While I am not “attacked” as an Afrikaans speaking person by the films that the Afrikaans film industry produces, I take offense to their banality, their lack of political potency, and their comfort in stylistic and thematic mundanity.<sup>6</sup> It is as an Afrikaans speaking (Afrikaans first language) film scholar that I undertake this particular study. I refrain from identifying myself as an Afrikaner since such identification – accurately or inaccurately – may evoke a particular and problematic political affiliation of a predominantly conservative nature. Annalet Steenkamp, director of *Ek, Afrikaner* (2014) – a documentary nine years in the making – describes herself as a “white

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<sup>6</sup> In the words of Cedric Nunn (Jacobs & Nunn 2011:288):

We, that is, all South Africans, have an obligation to examine where we stand. This is largely a taboo subject. How do we see fellow South Africans, and how do they see us? This question should not be the preserve of ‘people of mixed descent’, but must be addressed to all South Africans. While it’s perfectly natural for us to be this way since we were carefully scripted in the Apartheid experiment, it’s certainly not normal of us to accept this status quo. In denial we remain way off the mark. It’s inevitable that we make this journey; it’s simply a matter of when we choose to start it.

African” who interrogates a variety of cultural myths ingrained in Afrikanerdom, for instance the belief that God had promised the white Afrikaners African soil (Van Zyl 2014: [sp]). Upon seeing the film, acclaimed documentary filmmaker Francois Verster predicted that the film will be “rejected ... cause outrage ... will deeply disturb, that will change minds, that will be loved”. Besides focusing on her family members, Steenkamp also included Joshua Mokwena, “[the man] who raised me”, as a key presence in the film. In the end, however, Steenkamp made his presence in the film less visible, asking, “How can I tell his story? I cannot. That idea that white people tell black people’s stories... that’s bullshit. Everyone needs to tell their own stories” (Van Zyl 2014:[sp]). “What is an Afrikaner?” Steenkamp asks. “What is a *boer*? I still do not know what it is” (Van Zyl 2014:[sp]). *Ek, Afrikaner* confronts the viewer with various socio-political and emotional contradictions without offering any solutions (ibid), but has yet to see general distribution beyond the film festival circuit.

As Botha (2012:203) states, marginal communities finally have a cinematic voice in post-1994 South Africa by way of socially conscious documentaries, narratives that confront the legacy and impact of apartheid on contemporary South Africa and a renewed interest in the possibilities of oral storytelling for and in cinema.<sup>7</sup> Even in a more generic form such as the gangster drama of *Jerusalema* (Ziman, 2008) or the ruralised romantic comedy conventions of *White Wedding* (Turner, 2009), these films would consistently speak to key issues of race and class. Absent from this type of cinematic political engagement is Afrikaans film, which was the dominant film in South African cinema for decades and now exists as a minority cinema with little state support (see Chapter Three).

The term ‘Afrikaans’ is itself a politically loaded notion given the language’s position in South African history. The films selected for analysis in this study were selected on their primary (often exclusive) use of the Afrikaans language. Coombes (2003:25) explains that Afrikaans was an “imposed language at all levels of public (and often private) intercourse”. Historically, Afrikaans was a language of domination, control, power; it was Afrikaans that “gave the world ‘apartheid’: a word that has so seared

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<sup>7</sup> I am cognisant of Marx’s (2002:61) warning that one must be careful to not turn apartheid into “the *ultima ratio* of Western thinking, the highest stage of capitalism”, but one should also not undermine the severity of apartheid in dictating South African economy and culture before and after 1994. After all, the apartheid state was fascist in an oligarchic, racial sense (Olivier 2004:24).

itself into the global imagination that it requires no translation” (Dlamini 2010:136). While the characters in the selected films cannot all be identified as Afrikaners, the Afrikaans language, with its historical socio-political significance in place, binds these films together.<sup>8</sup> ‘Afrikaans’ and ‘Afrikaner’ are not interchangeable terms. Similar to William’s (2009:423) observation that the notion of being ‘African’ emerges as aporic, slippery, and prone to regular reinvention (2009:424), ‘Afrikaner’ is a contentious and shifting notion.

While there are certain films that espouse an Afrikaner mythology of superiority, it would not be possible to include *Skoonheid* and some other Afrikaans films under ‘Afrikaner cinema’. To conflate ‘Afrikaner’ with Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid transgressions is not only misguided, says Giliomee (2003:xiv), but ahistorical.<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of this study, Afrikaans is a more inclusive notion. Where relevant, I will emphasise Afrikaner constructs in certain films. I will refer to Afrikaans cinema as a range of films characterised by connotations of, amongst others, dominant histories of privilege as well as current claims to privilege and exceptionalism. For purposes of brevity, I will use ‘Afrikaans cinema’ to mean ‘Afrikaans language cinema’. I will refer to Afrikaner cinema to refer to a particular type of Afrikaans cinema, one which has a socio-historical position in apartheid-era South African film.

My interest in contemporary Afrikaans cinema’s position in post-apartheid South Africa is motivated not only by the stimulating conceptual and theoretical issues such a discussion arouses, but also by a personal recognition that, as a white Afrikaans speaking person, contemporary Afrikaans cinema does not include or reflect me in its narratives of exclusivity [*Liefing* (Kruger, 2010) and *Platteland* (Else, 2011)], scatological excesses [the films of Willie Estherhuizen, starting with *Lipstiek Dipstiek* (1994)], romantic road trips as negation of political accountability [*Pad Na Jou Hart* (Smit, 2014)] and conservative nostalgic necrophilia that yearn for a space and time that is either dead and past [*Stuur Groete aan Mannetjies Roux* (Eilers, 2013)], or that in all likelihood never existed in the first place. Afrikaans film releases since

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<sup>8</sup> Although Afrikaans is by no means a language spoken exclusively by white South Africans, it is overtly connected to processes and instruments of oppression during the apartheid era when the white Afrikaans speaking minority ruled over the country.

<sup>9</sup> Furlong (2003) challenges Giliomee’s historical revisionism and makes for critical reading to accompany Giliomee’s chapters on apartheid.

1994 include the farcical *Lyk Lollery* (Coertze, 2000), the melodramatic *Ouma se Slim Kind* (Kuhn, 2006) and the attempted inspirational drama *Jakhalsdans* (Roodt, 2010).<sup>10</sup> I take these three films to be in their content and visual language indicative of a larger cultural phenomenon: Afrikaans cinema does not reflect processes of political engagement and interrogation as other, ostensibly similar post-conflict cinemas do. Afrikaans cinema reads as a homogenous rather than heterogeneous cultural phenomenon. Afrikaans films obtain funding from various sources: personal or venture capital; state support; and as commissioned work, for instance. Afrikaans television company kykNet, headed by Karen Meiring, is involved in developing Afrikaans filmmakers according to certain narrative aesthetics and conventions. kykNet's filmmaking initiatives mostly serve their own corporate interests by commissioning and creating content for their own television channels and utilises the trappings of various genres in its storytelling. While kykNet's *Silwerskermfees* ("Silver Screen Festival") has achieved a measure of success in repositioning Afrikaans cinema as a vibrant presence in the South African entertainment industry, its impact has been mostly on Afrikaans short films and the development of local talent within that area.<sup>11</sup>

This critical study of contemporary Afrikaans cinema is performed from a position of inquiry, exploration and interrogation. I am cognisant of the limitations I myself bring to this study, of a certain post-Marxist bias and a sense of disdain in what is happening (and has been happening) in Afrikaans cinema over the past twenty years on an industrial, ideological and aesthetic level. I position myself as researcher in the following way, aligned with how Holloway (2005:104) positions the political theorist interested in revolution and resistance: "the theorist is no hero. She is not a knower. Theory does not stand above the fray but is simply part of the articulation of our daily existence of struggle. It does not look down at society from above, but is part of the daily struggle for emancipation, striking out at the forms that negate our subjectivity".

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<sup>10</sup> The chapter outline at the end of this current chapter provides the titles of the films that will be analysed in this study. Some films are mentioned solely for contextual purposes and will not feature in a detailed analysis.

<sup>11</sup> M-NET's director of Afrikaans channels, Karen Meiring (2015:[sp]), describes the *Silwerskermfees* as a South African Cannes Film Festival. Given how culturally exclusive the festival is, catering only for Afrikaans speaking filmmakers and content, her praise is hollow. To add insult to injury, the way in which Meiring describes the successes of previous *Silwerskerm* festivals simply confirms that the majority of award-winning participants develop their work as content for kykNet.



As is clear from the above, this study exclusively focuses on Afrikaans cinema and not on South African cinema in general. This difference already indicates the significance of this study; while much has been written on South African cinema's engagement with apartheid and post-apartheid politics in terms of identity and place (see Chapter Three), thereby suggesting a definite political project in South African (English language) cinema, Afrikaans (language) cinema does not feature prominently in this discussion at all. Indeed, what Jamal's (2005:4) says about local arts festivals can be applied to Afrikaans cinema as well: "cultural expression continues to be stalked by the apartheid imagination". This study will demonstrate how, in the political safety and comfort of homogeneity, these films are unified by their apparent insistence on the banal, rather than seeing different themes and issues being addressed in various ways by specific filmmakers. In contrast, consider New German Cinema's attempts to address issues of its past once the war and unification were over. Rosenstone (1995:4) recounts how filmmakers globally "[struggle] to find new ways to come to grips with the burden of the past". These new ways may occur spontaneously or in a more formalised manner, as with the Oberhausen Manifesto below.

The foundational manifesto of New German Cinema, the Oberhausen Manifesto, was launched in 1962 (Nagib 2013:104). The manifesto is seen as a mythic starting point for the New German Cinema (Corrigan 1991:116), a call to critical reflection and artistic representation of Germany's political transgressions and in birthing New German Cinema (see Chapter Two). *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, Von Donnersmarck, 2006) is an overtly political film that addresses espionage and cultural repression in East Germany, while Michael Haneke's *Das Weisse Band* (*The White Ribbon*, 2009) is equally political in a different manner, addressing the German pre-war psyche and Germany's social constitution without any content that directly speaks to these issues.<sup>12</sup> Many cinemas emerged from major conflicts or

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<sup>12</sup> *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, 2006) is the first German film to address the GDR without reverting to a form of nostalgia (Reinhard Mohr quoted in Enns 2007:489). Croombs (2014:1) elaborates on the presence of the political in Haneke's films, primarily *Cache*, in light of French-Algerian relations, past and present. He describes Haneke's approach to French national history as "indirect"; while often in plain sight, the presence of the political is not necessarily visually foregrounded. However, Mirzoeff (2011:257-258) problematises *Cache* and its exploration of "the psychology of civil war and fascism, and the viewpoint of the child" (2011:257) and states: "[f]or all its excellent intentions, *Cache* exemplifies what Walter Mignolo has called the 'Eurocentric critique of

politically transitory events and then responded to these conflicts and events. In ways similar to German cinema, much of Australian cinema and Irish cinema demonstrate a sense of political engagement and interrogation, as evidenced by the films of Peter Weir (*The Last Wave*, 1977) in Australia and by Steve McQueen (*Hunger*, 2008; *12 Years a Slave*, 2013) and Ken Loach (*The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, 2006) in Ireland. Merivirta (2013:238) reads the Irish prison drama *Hunger* as a political film, where the body of the male prisoner represents the contested Irish nation and its borders, a theme that visually repeats throughout the film. Indeed, “filmmakers in Soviet Russia, Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Franco’s Spain recognized the potential of film as an artistic mass medium that could be exploited for political and social purposes” as early as the 1920s (Britton 2010:179). There are also French cinematic responses to pivotal political events, such as Jean-Pierre Melville’s *Army of Shadows* (1966), which interrogates French resistance to German occupation, while many African cinemas have provided their own post-conflict or post-transition cinematic voice to narratives about the end of colonisation [see Gugler (2003) with Ousmane Sembene from Senegal identified as a key figure in African political filmmaking (Landy 1982)<sup>13</sup>].<sup>14</sup> The figures referred to here are voices exploring and interrogating resistance, oppression, power; broadly speaking, then, these filmmakers address and use film in a political way to explore and interrogate politics.

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Eurocentrism’. Indeed, much of the discussion of the film has centered on the ever-elusive ‘universal’ values it supposedly embodies. What matters for *Cache* is the impact of Algeria on French lives and minds. [...] Majid’s suicide is unintelligible except as a device to shock watching (Western) viewers” (Mirzoeff 2011:258). Mirzoeff positions *Cache* as a political failure by privileging the Western (French transgressor) experience of an oppressive past-to-present dynamic instead of the Algerian (victim) perspective on these events.

<sup>13</sup> Harrow (2007:1) sees Ousmane Sembene as “a harbinger of a cinema of revolt”, even though the director often excels at what Harding (2003:80) identifies as narratives about ordinary daily life in Africa. In addition to Sembene, filmmakers that address African decolonization and its aftermath include Abderrahmane Sissako and Raoul Peck (Adesokan 2011:109).

<sup>14</sup> In Zacks (1995:8), Ferid Boughedir categorises African films according to their main aim, or “principal tendency”: as political, moralist, commercial, self-expression, and finally the narcissistic intellectual tendency. The latter tendency is a subcategory of the self-expression tendency, and is “characterized by the naïve idealization of traditional African culture and perpetuation of myths about Africa”. Wilmsen (1995:3) argues that major cultural and literary South African figures such as Laurens van der Post “invented [in their writing about South Africa] a fictive primal world as a foil to a present world which confronted [him] with an existential crisis”; this sense of crisis was amplified by the lingering destruction of World War II.

I draw on Thomas Elsaesser's studies of primarily German cinema history and politics as well as Hollywood cinema as outlined in numerous books and articles in order to investigate how other cinemas have responded to the end of a particular political conflict. In addition, such an Elsaesserian framework will allow for an exploration of cinematic impotence with specific reference to Afrikaans cinema. As Elsaesser (1994:30) explains, "if the [German] past is as monstrous as that for which [Rainer Werner] Fassbinder's generation felt obliged to account, then the representation, in the light of which it has to make sense, will necessarily bear features of this monstrosity". While the *auteur* Fassbinder's films made reference to Germany's political pasts and presents, Afrikaans cinema seems oblivious to its own 'indebtedness' to a specific identifiable historical "monstrosity".<sup>15</sup> It is not that Afrikaans cinema attempts to represent the unrepresentable, as Elsaesser (2013:118) puts it, but that there is no acknowledgement or awareness of anything unrepresentable (history, exploitation, political killings, effects of migrant labour and so forth). Given the absence of what can be considered unrepresentable, I was drawn to the issue of cinematic impotence by a growing realisation that Afrikaans cinema is a cinema that fails to come to grips with South African history and politics in general.

This observation was especially convincing in light of how German cinema clearly addressed its tumultuous political past, the 'oppressors' making films that spoke to and problematised their changed role in a post-conflict Germany.<sup>16</sup> For example, Hake (2008:199) points out that post-unification German cinema was characterised by a return to genre, ushering in an emphasis on teen romance and family matters, as well as teen comedies and slacker films (2008:205). The proposed study will frame such a turn towards genre cinema [evident in Afrikaans romantic films such as *Semi-Soet* (Rous, 2012) and *Klein Karoo* (Van den Bergh, 2013)] as contributing factor to Afrikaans cinema's political impotence. In this sense, this study is a sober

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<sup>15</sup> An *auteur* is a filmmaker whose work has become viewed as singular. An *auteur's* oeuvre suggests films that share thematic and visual motifs.

<sup>16</sup> I do not suggest an easy comparison between post-war and post-unification German cinema, which is itself rather diverse and emerged from a different notion and event of conflict, and post-apartheid Afrikaans cinema. Instead, I aim to use certain developments and 'moments' from German cinema, as guided by Thomas Elsaesser, to further inform and contextualise my understanding of political cinema. Similarly, Nel (2007/2010) has suggested a useful comparison between German and South African political and historical narratives.

response to Tomaselli's (1989:229) reflection that "[j]ust how the South African film industry will define its responsibilities in the worsening political context remains to be seen". As the political crisis signalled by state of emergency-era apartheid South Africa transitioned into democratic South Africa, these responsibilities became diffuse.

Thackway (2003:24) explains that "the collapse of modernist authority" associated with colonial and imperial rule signifies the de-centering of the authoritative white male voice that is also historically associated with South African and Afrikaans cinema. Fanon (2004) positions the colonist as creator, and conqueror, as author of a uni-dimensional, all-encompassing grand historical narrative where the colonist, in a position of uncontested power and privilege, "*fabricated and continues to fabricate the colonized subject*" (emphasis in original) (Fanon 2004:2). As demonstrated by *De Voortrekkers* as long ago as 1916, the colonist's life is an epic odyssey: "[w]e made this land", says the colonist (Fanon 2004:15).

This study will demonstrate how much of Afrikaans cinema refuses such decentring and continues to promote both whiteness and patriarchy, even when films seem to explicitly state the opposite. What is striking, given the presence of politically charged world cinemas inviting active engagement with notions of nation, history, identity and other associated ideas, is the absence of such discourse in post-transition Afrikaans cinema. This difference is particularly evident in light of certain politically engaged Afrikaans films released from the 1960s and 1970s onward, a period Botha (2012:51) describes as "unremarkable from an aesthetic viewpoint". As Botha (2012:28, 47) explains, a visual emphasis on pastoral beauty would dominate "unremarkable" Afrikaans cinema for decades (see Chapter Four).

This fixation on rural retreat, local landscapes and small towns far removed from cosmopolitan urban sites, is problematised in Chapter Five. In the tension between the rural and urban setting in South African cinema, the country (*platte land*) and the city emerge with specific connotations and webs of associations provided by various visualisations of these spaces. For instance, in *African Jim* aka *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* (1949), we witness what Marx (2000:128) refers to as "the trauma of the young black man's migration from the country to the town. Jim's trauma will be

treated light-heartedly in this fairy-tale and the film is careful to elide or soften a number of issues that had become central to black South African experience". For Jim, the city provides opportunities for inadvertent heroism as well as upward social mobility (Marx 2000:128).

As suggested above, while South African cinema in general can be described even in vague and descriptive terms as political, and as much as there was a form of political engagement in earlier Afrikaans film, the same cannot be said for contemporary Afrikaans cinema. One reason for this lack of political engagement is related to the relationship between capital and art. As Negri (2011:xi) explains, the fact that labour is immersed in the world of the commodity implies that art, too, is irrevocably immersed in it. There are industrial reasons in part explaining Afrikaans cinematic impotence. Such industrial reasons may risk the loss of cinema's expressive power (Negri (2011:xi) refers to it as the loss of *potenza* (see Chapter Three). Consider the *faux*-history fetishizing musical *Prêville* (Kruger, 2012); the leaden South African War-inspired tale of political treason, *Verraaiers* (Eilers, 2013); the small-town based romantic comedy *Klein Karoo* (Van den Bergh, 2013).

This notion of political impotence is of particular significance in light of previous periods in Afrikaans cinema where the filmmaking, both in form and content, can be described as politically engaged; consider Jans Rautenbach's *Die Kandidaat* (1968), *Katrina* (1969) and *Jannie Totsiens* (1970) in this regard.<sup>17</sup> While there was a small but visible element of political cinema in Afrikaans cinema, a cinema of resistance to Afrikaners rule by Afrikaner or Afrikaans speaking filmmakers, post-1994 Afrikaans cinema has abandoned a sense of political urgency in favour of as narratively safe and politically sanitised features. Pretorius (1992:390-393) describes Afrikaans cinema from the 1980s already as a succession of "soothing images", films that fail to transcend their genre trappings and seem to reify stereotypes of Afrikaans speaking South Africans in especially comedies, to not even mention the

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<sup>17</sup> Rautenbach has enjoyed considerable acclaim as an auteur of Afrikaans cinema (see Botha 2006 and 2012). Looking back over the past 18 years of Afrikaans cinema, there is no contemporary substitute for Rautenbach's explorations of power, morality and societal control. At the time of writing he was in pre-production on his first film in three decades, *Abraham*. This film was due for release in September 2014 but its release was delayed indefinitely. Since *Abraham* will be a late 2015 release at the earliest, it falls outside the scope of the current study, which includes Afrikaans films released between 1994 and 2014.

conspicuous absence of blackness in these films – again, the primacy of white patriarchy is made visible.

### **1.3 Research question and aims**

Based on the above, I suggest that Afrikaans cinema is a politically impotent cinema. While the notions involved – ‘Afrikaans’; ‘political cinema’; ‘impotence’ – require further interrogation, I can already present the following research question in anticipation of the terminological, conceptual and theoretical complexities this study presents:

How can Afrikaans cinema (1994-2014) be positioned as a cinema of political impotence?

To answer the above research question, the following sub-questions need to be addressed:

- What are the markers and features of historical and contemporary Afrikaans cinema in discussing a ‘political’ cinema?
- How have other examples of world and national cinemas engaged with problematic, controversial and challenging histories?
- How does one construct a vocabulary for a cinema of political impotence, and against what sort of ‘politically potent cinema’ is this framework measured?
- In light of the above, how can the work of Thomas Elsaesser inform and shape an understanding of and an argument towards Afrikaans cinema as a cinema of political impotence?
- How does a sense of cultural conservatism undermine the political potential of Afrikaans cinema?
- How does contemporary Afrikaans cinema privilege, despite its post-transitional context, male character trajectories and a sense of righteous privilege?
- To what an extent do neoliberal funding structures keep a cinema of political impotence in place? In addition, how do specific stakeholders in the Afrikaans film industry operate in determining which films obtain funding?

Throughout, Thomas Elsaesser's conceptual and theoretical framework will guide the study in responding to these questions in articulating an understanding of Afrikaans film as demonstrative of cinematic political impotence. The above notions will thread through much of the study but do not necessarily indicate formally separate sections of investigation in the study. In a sense, the proposed study will present a *conceptual chronicle* of Afrikaans cinema since 1994, ending with Afrikaans films released in 2014. In 2014, South Africa celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the fall of apartheid, and marking two decades of post-apartheid Afrikaans cinema. Such a conceptual chronicle contextualises and analyses the films selected for inclusion and discussion in a manner similar to but different from Elsaesser's work in *New German Cinema*, for instance (see Chapter Two).

This study is not a purely historical or hagiographic study of the past twenty years in Afrikaans cinema, nor is it interested in presenting an overview of recent Afrikaans cinema in a manner that in calculated terms can be described as 'objective'. Given that academic writing within the arts can never (and should not) lay claim to a banal universalising 'objectivity', the biases and prejudices that characterise my life-world, my subjectivity, will be acknowledged as I develop a particular voice in engaging with Elsaesser.

Furthermore, this study does not strictly identify itself as a study of national cinema or identity, even though the study does allow for an entanglement with Afrikaans film as a historically homogenous national cinema. There are already studies that discuss an inclusive South African national cinema, such as Treffry-Goatley's (2010) incisive study of neoliberal South African national cinema. Finally, I am not suggesting any intentionality or particular political alignment on behalf of the directors and screenwriters whose films I address in this study. Instead, this study presents a critical reading of Afrikaans cinema by way of a conceptual chronicle.<sup>18</sup> As such, this study offers a diachronic and synchronic study of contemporary Afrikaans cinema by locating films in and against a particular temporal context and

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<sup>18</sup> This conceptual chronicle of Afrikaans cinema acknowledges the erosion between so-called high and low art to promote no such distinction. As Meisel (2010:x) states: "[t]he myth of pop culture – Adorno's myth – is that it is not dialectical. The truth is that it is. Like high art, pop, too – *contra* Adorno – has a conversation both with its sources, which it revises and transforms, and with cultural authority as a whole, which it also revises and transforms".

by then interrogating individual films that were produced and released at a certain point of time (Green 2008: 128, 130).

#### 1.4 Introduction to the conceptual and theoretical framework

A brief survey of a *New Statesman* article (2010:1-2) provides an idea of what may popularly be seen as political film: *All the President's Men* (Pakula, 1978), *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1920), *In the Loop* (Iannucci, 2009), *Land and Freedom* (Loach, 2007). These films are characterised by their overtly political content and aesthetics, from Russian montage cinema to British social realism and political satire, and suggests that political films can be overtly political in content as well as visual style.<sup>19</sup> That much I can agree with, but I am more interested in how films are demonstrably politically impotent. This approach involves more than a discussion of manifestly politically conscious content and different aesthetics due in part to each film's moment of production. *Potemkin's* rapid editing and tightly framed close-ups are visually vastly different from *All the President's Men's* slow panning camera and long shots. Rather, I propose a critical theoretical approach based on a textual and contextual approach to Afrikaans cinema. According to Elsaesser (2000:106), textual analysis explains a film as a coherent, continuous experience concerned with "how a film creates the impression of a world 'out there' (of which we are merely the invisible witnesses) when all the while the film itself only exists for our benefit, 'in here' (in and for our minds), cunningly disguising that its sole aim is to address us". Simply seeing film as a reflection of a given culture's primary beliefs and convictions is an intellectually primitive approach, and one especially fraught with problems in the culturally compounded South African cinescape.<sup>20</sup>

Culture can be defined, according to Edgar and Sedgwick (2008:82), as "the complex everyday world we all encounter and through which we all move," beginning where "humans surpass whatever is simply given in their natural inheritance". The

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<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Rosenstone (2013:58) describes Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein as a director of "innovative historicals" that "bring the masses into history and history into the masses", thereby activating a type of political participation.

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps Terry Eagleton offers the most succinct definition of culture as "a reciprocal relation between species and environment" (Meisel 2010:xiv), emphasising the relationship between the individual and their materiality.



notion of a natural inheritance is deceptive as it neglects the formative power of materiality. The above definition needs to be complemented with Gramsci's simple definition of culture as "the ways in which class is lived in particular time and places" (Crehan 2002:199), and Botha's (2005:8) definition of culture as referring to material and aesthetic production. As Friedman and Hudson (2015:190) explain, Hall "criticised British Marxists for elevating class to a 'master concept' which was supposed to explain everything and therefore rendered race invisible". Abandoning the concept of class entirely, however, leaves one at a disadvantage when discussing large-scale, systemic inequalities that characterise contemporary societies (Crehan 2002:189) such as the residual power structures that have remained in democratic South Africa. In the following quote, Fanon (2004:55) may as well have written about South Africa and how the country is constructed in contemporary Afrikaans cinema:

The country finds itself under new management, but in actual fact everything has to be started over from scratch, everything has to be rethought. The colonial system, in fact, was only interested in certain riches, certain natural resources, to be exact those that fuelled its industries. ... As a result *the young independent nation is obliged to keep the economic channels established by the colonial regime* ... The colonial regime has hammered its channels into place and the risk of not maintaining them would be catastrophic (emphasis added)

South Africa became an open society after apartheid (Du Preez 2014b:1) against a historical political trajectory wherein Afrikaner nationalism inhibited any such openness or transparency (2014b:2). In addition, this openness is mostly artificial (2014b:3). In fact, in addition to social inequalities, "[r]ampant corruption, nepotism, violent crime, weak governance, [and] disastrous education" indicate the sheer fragility of South Africa's socio-political stability (2014b:6). For the purposes of this study, then, culture involves the production of the material as well as the symbolic (Green 2008:2). Within the framework of culture, Hall offers two perspectives on cultural identity: puritanism (or essentialism), and contextualism (non-essentialism). While the former denotes "an essence which defines belongingness or exclusion regardless of time [and] space", contextualism foregrounds "what history has done to us ... what the narratives of the past have done to our becomingness" (William 2009:427). While this study is not about identity *per se*, puritanism and contextualism

indicate two opposing yet overlapping perspectives which indicate how culture (and cultural patrimony) can negate the importance of spatio-temporality in cultural representation, or emphasise how history and materiality inform individuals of their belonging (as can be amplified in cultural representations).

Dyer (2002:1) explains that how a social group is represented repeatedly in cultural forms and media “have to do with how members of groups see themselves and others like themselves, how they see their place in society” [see also Dyer (2002:4)]. These ideas of ‘speaking for’ and ‘being spoken for’ have long permeated Afrikaans cinema, which locates the centre of its power in the whiteness of its protagonists. While this study is not a study of whiteness, the sense of cultural validation and the historical prominence of whiteness in the South African culture industry requires that it be acknowledged. Whiteness “both disappears behind and is subsumed into other identities” (Dyer 2002:127), says Paul Gilroy. In the British film *Being White*, Britishness, for instance, is seen as a sub-category of whiteness, much like being an Afrikaner or Afrikaans speaking are occasionally sub-categories of whiteness, and when these sub-categories take over, “the particularity of whiteness itself begins to disappear” and the participants turn their attention to discussing black stereotypes (2002:128).

Wolpe noted “that the terms ‘black’ and ‘white’ are ‘continuously formed and transformed’, and so there may be tensions between black and white but also between classes within each group” (Friedman & Hudson 2015:190). Again, class and its associations of privilege, voice and access to resource emerge as a centrally unifying notion, more so than race itself. As Bottomley (2012:39) states, whiteness can be a marker of quality and suggests certain benefits, especially in apartheid South Africa. Whiteness denotes various forms of power: economic, social, political (2012:40). Yet whiteness is fragile given that the borders of whiteness cannot be pinned down (2012:41).

Turner (2012:178) explains that the notion of reflection in a cultural cinematic sense is restricted because seeing film as a mirror to society negates the very present “competing and conflicting cultural, subcultural, industrial, and institutional determinants”. Turner (2012:179) pinpoints two broad cultural approaches to films:

the textual and contextual. While the textual approach reads cultural functions and meanings from film as a text or a body of texts, the contextual approaches “tend to analyse the cultural, political, institutional, and industrial determinants of – most often – a national film industry” (2009:179). Contextual approaches investigate issues related to cultural production (which in film would include notions of censorship, government intervention, and so forth) rather than issues of representation (Turner 2012:180).

Ideally, the textual and contextual approaches would be combined to illuminate (a) film, with the two approaches linked through ideology (Turner 2009:181), which Kornbluh (2005:131) defines as a formula of why individuals subscribe to their own oppression where “culture comprises the practices of everyday life and the narratives that lend those practices the veneer of sense”. Ideology is always contradictory, and functions optimally when it stitches together “contradictory lines or argument and emotional investments – finding what Laclau called ‘systems of equivalence between them’” (Hall 2011:713). For Gramsci, ideology is deeply informed by popular thought (Hall 1996:431), as every individual is conceived of as a philosopher or intellectual given the individual’s capacity for thought and thinking. Importantly the shape and structure of ideology “do *not* precisely mirror, match or ‘echo’ the class structure of society” and are irreducible to their economic content (1996:434). The proposed study aims to combine the textual (the problematics of Afrikaans cinema texts in constituting a cinema of political impotence) as well as the contextual (with an emphasis on the funding and distribution of Afrikaans films within a neoliberal capitalist industry) as guided and informed by Thomas Elsaesser.

Elsaesser (2009c:50) uses the term “double occupancy” rather than similar notions like ‘diversity’ or ‘multi-culturalism’ to “signal our discursive as well as geopolitical territories as ‘always already occupied’” (related notions of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism are discussed in Chapter Three).<sup>21</sup> Elsaesser (2009c:51) positions double occupancy as a “condition of possibility, as the conditions of entry, even, into the European political space”. Double occupancy thus facilitates a presence in a designated political space. In elaborating on Europe’s political situation, Elsaesser

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<sup>21</sup> Unless spelled differently in quoted source material, I write multiculturalism without the hyphen.

(2009c:51) views Europe as doubly occupied by its history (including the Holocaust and more contemporary historical events) and its colonialist activities and consequences.<sup>22</sup> Buettner (2011:1), in her study of Holocaust images, suggests that catastrophe mobilises different (new) aesthetics as part of the process of coming to terms with catastrophe. Buettner (2011:3) cites Ross Chambers' notion of the obscene as containing that which "we do not want to see and acknowledge, the things that haunt us and yet we push off-stage". Here, Chambers refers to South African apartheid as one of these hauntings that many individuals, even politicians, would prefer people to forget.

Following apartheid, and the continuous coming to terms with that catastrophe, South African cultures are what Chambers would refer to as "aftermath cultures" that are governed by a combination of denial and acknowledgement of trauma (2011:3). Aftermath cultures thus grapple with the various dimensions of double occupancy. For Elsaesser (2009c:54), double occupancy can also be an aesthetic strategy. There has been "a shift from realism versus illusionism towards a different pair of alternatives: from *claiming* the real to *performing presence*" (emphasis in original), which requires "a different way of thinking about cinema's relation to fiction, to the mode of 'as if'" (Elsaesser 2009c:55).

In addition, Elsaesser's (2009:56) notion of "absence as presence, presence as parapraxis" explains "the peculiarly present non-presence by which this relationship [between the Jews and Germans post-WWII, one of guilt, confession and reconciliation in public life] was thematized [in German cinema]". In this instance, parapraxis refers to a slip of the tongue, specifically its connotation of performances of failure as excessive, tragic or even absurd in films such as Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). This type of performativity, with its emphasis on failure, as Elsaesser (2009c:57) explains, is a way of allegorically performing (enacting) failure or futility, for instance the egomaniacal Fitzcarraldo's quest to build an opera house in the remote middle of the Amazon rainforest. Elsaesser also located a sense of performativity and failure in American cinema as pertains to race, or rather, the

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<sup>22</sup> Double occupancy has a very real 'lived' dimension. In this regard, Balibar coins the phrase "European apartheid" (Celik 2013:224) to refer to "a zone that puts the migrant labour at the service of European citizens yet, much like a colonial regime" at the same time expecting these labourers "to reproduce, socially and sexually, outside the EU" (ibid).

failure of interracial communication and racial harmony in the aftermath of America's racist history. Here, Elsaesser hypothesises for instance that *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994) and *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, 1985) "enact quite elaborate, but also very hidden, forms of [racial] passing" (2009:57). In another example, Elsaesser (2009:57-58c), here quoted at length, finds that *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994) in its "blackface minstrelsy",

(allows) one to see – in the very failure to 'represent' racial encounters other than in inverted, absurd or comic form – what it would take to have a cross-dialogue in contemporary America that might actually 'work'. Here, the double occupancy would be the way these mainstream or cult films take a first-order genre-reality and re-inscribe it into a second-order hypothetical reality, which stands to the first not as recto and verso, or each other's *mise-en-abyme*, but as each other's mimicking or 'signifying' double.

Double occupancy is thus a cultural as much as a textual notion, and a way to read and respond to the failure of (racial) representation. Failure is a key idea for Elsaesser (2008:19) who appropriates the term 'constructive instability' which suggests "the idea that 'failure' has a place in the narratives of adaptive, 'dynamic' or emergent situations, for one of the points often made about self-regulatory systems is that they are inherently unstable". As such, the idea of failure forms part of this study and is included in Chapter Two. Here the correlation between failure and impotence will be explained and related to cinema.

Elsewhere, Elsaesser invokes Lacan to inform understandings of the real (2009:58). He agrees with Žižek's claim that, as demonstrated by *Eyes Wide Shut* (Kubrick, 1999), the individual needs a fantasy ("a 'symptom'") to be able to exist in reality and in relationships with other individuals and to prevent oneself from being overwhelmed by the Real (Elsaesser 2009:59). Elsaesser discusses Kubrick's film in the context of what he refers to as post-mortem (as opposed to post-modern) films; these are films that "do not indicate the difference in register between fiction and reality, the dead and the living, the real partners and imagined companions, those who know about their post-mortem status and those who [do not]" (Elsaesser 2009:59).

In Elsaesser's (1989:127) view, many films subscribe to Ernst Bloch's dictum that "utopia is the return to a childhood not yet lived", for they situate history between apocalypse and *tabula rasa*. This statement's indication of the extremes at the ends of nostalgia, the end of the world and a blank slate beginning, is descriptive of some Afrikaans films that position history between catastrophe and emptiness. Elsaesser (in Guillen 2011:5) acknowledges that nostalgia is an economic imperative. As Elsaesser (1985:109) explains it, the classical narrative (that many Afrikaans films invoke) is characterised by a filmic process "diegetically coherent and embedded in an ideology of presence"; that is, a coherent, continuous experience (see above). The study will show how this 'presence' is related to cinematic devices around nostalgia in Afrikaans film. Furthermore, Elsaesser occasionally refers to psychology, especially psychoanalysis, to explain certain issues. According to Mitscherlich, the German nation "would have to make the passage to independence by reliving and restaging the ambivalences of primary narcissism: the rage and anger of abandonment, and the desire for merging and doubling" (Elsaesser 1989:243). In this view, the above ambivalences can be relived (reconstructed, represented) and engaged with cinematically.

In addition, Elsaesser (1989:254) also refers to Baudrillard's notion of retro-scenarios to refer to history films. In Baudrillard's view, "contemporary societies, locked into political stasis, nostalgically dream and imagine through the cinema – the traditional refuge for myths – a time where history still involved human agents and individual victims, forces and causes that mattered and decisions involving questions of life and death" (1989:254). Such films invent a time of agents and victims clothed first and foremost in fictions. In the end, some films reveal the present as operating as a fetishised trauma (Elsaesser 1989:254).

In addition to processes of fetishisation, Elsaesser (2005) refers to what Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek have called 'interpassivity', according to which "belief, conscience, guilt but also pleasure and enjoyment, are being 'outsourced', as it were, and delegated to others, so that one can participate in 'life' by proxy" (2005a:60). Pleasure and enjoyment are experiences that 'others' possess. Who does participate in pleasure and enjoyment and who does not often contribute to the tension between who and what are visible and who and what are not. Indeed, for

Elsaesser, one of the major recurrent themes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is “the difficult realignment of public and private sphere, of exclusion and inclusion, and – most subtly – exclusion *through* inclusion” (emphasis in original). This study will demonstrate how the idea of exclusion through inclusion suggests a particularly insidious form of discrimination in cinematic political impotence. The study also takes into account the idea of a star system of celebrity commodities. In an interview on film festivals and national cinema, Elsaesser (in Guillen 2011:2) says “[i]f Godard and Truffaut could use Jean-Paul Belmondo, it was because he was already well-known from commercial French cinema” (emphasis in original). Clearly a star system is imperative to a financially functional film industry and as its own commodity forms part of a neoliberal capitalist industry (see Chapter Three).

In addition to mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion mentioned above, O’Shaughnessy (2010:39) maintains that violence is central to political film, and he uses Žižek in this regard to explain how subjective violence can be linked to systemic violence, which is superficially peaceful and “resides in the ‘smooth’ functioning of our economic and political systems” (2012:46). [See also O’Shaughnessy (2003) on post-1995 French cinema’s renewed commitment to a French political cinema; indeed, French film can also be seen to have helped “rebuild the grounds for critique and opened spaces for public deliberation” (O’Shaughnessy 2011:343)].<sup>23</sup> It is this more abstract conceptualisation of an abstract, nearly invisible and simultaneously visible ideological violence that Žižek identifies. Fanon (2004:31) writes seductively of an “atmospheric violence, this violence rippling under the skin”. Fanon (2004:51) explains that violence is a cleansing force that allows the colonised individual to throw off their sense of inferiority and passivity, instead endowing them with a sense of confidence. As Mirzoeff (2011:292) explains, “[v]iolence is the standard operating procedure of [oppressive] visuality [...] There is nothing to see here, because it has been rendered undecidable, or even in a sense non-existent”

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<sup>23</sup> O’Shaughnessy (2011:328) correctly warns that “celebration of French cinematic resistances needs to be postponed until after a critical examination of policies, industrial structures, and texts”. In 2007, French intellectuals including “Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Ranciere, Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, and Alain Badiou were amongst the leading international voices challenging the neoliberal consensus” (O’Shaughnessy 2011:337). Some of these overtly political figures from disciplines ranging from sociology to cultural studies, such as Bourdieu, Ranciere and Badiou, are cited in this study.

(Mirzoeff 2011:292). The various forms and manifestations of violence must be foregrounded in a study of political impotence.

In South Africa, Leopold (2005:163) explains, violence is the result of enduring conflict between different social groups so differentiated on physical as well as pseudo-biological grounds. Such manifestations of violence occur within the larger systemic violence framework which Žižek identifies. Into these forms of violence, Žižek introduces the pleasure of enjoyment (*jouissance*), which problematizes character dynamics in film. *Jouissance* is a particularly important notion as it denotes the “unbearable, filthy, excessive pleasure” (Žižek 1997:24) that characterizes so much of Afrikaans film’s obsession with a fantasmatic past and present.

In addition, Žižek explores notions of liberal-tolerant racism, as related to neoliberal capitalism, which links to a later discussion of multicultural racism and discrimination. This neoliberal capitalist context of production will be looked at in terms of how funding is allocated to contemporary Afrikaans films. A related idea here is postmodern racism as “a symptom of multiculturalist late capitalism, bringing to light the inherent contradiction of the liberal-democratic ideological project” (Žižek 1997:27). In his discussion of *Video de familia* (*Family Video*, 2001) by Cuban filmmaker Humberto Padron, Michael Chanan finds that he is tempted to read the film in Žižek’s Lacanian framework where the father, as big Other effectively exiles his son from the symbolic order; “[i]n short, the family as allegory of the nation” (Chanan 2011:91).

At times, I will illuminate the discussion of certain Afrikaans films with key ideas from Fredric Jameson. In addition to his contributions on nostalgia, I will also draw on Jamesonian conceptions of temporality, utopia and death as related in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) and other studies.<sup>24 25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In contemplating how influential *The Political Unconscious* was in the United States, much more so than in Europe or Britain, Young (1990:91) suggests that “Jameson presented Marxism with some panache as the one form of criticism that could acknowledge Derrida’s insights and yet go beyond them”. Derrida did not have last word in cultural criticism (pun intended).

<sup>25</sup> Deleuze’s thinking on the past and on the subject and cinematic (as nomad; in terms of the anti-oedipus) and associated ideas will occasionally supplement my argument. As Frindethie (2009:224) states, Deleuze’s rhizome, Derrida’s *archetreactre*, Lacan’s mirror stage and Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatus are all about the same thing: subject constitution, which falls outside of the scope of



## 1.5 Research design

This study follows a qualitative approach where the units of analysis represent a selection of Afrikaans films from between 1994 and 2014. The study will follow an integrated research approach where no single theoretical framework will be used, although the approach to German cinema followed by Thomas Elsaesser (1989-) will be a dominant and guiding presence. A study of this nature implies the presence of additional selected voices (such as Jameson) articulated through a single primary voice, my own authorial voice, as informed by Elsaesser. Given that this study interrogates films by way of critical readings, data-analysis occurs at a textual level and no quantitative research approach is involved. The units of analysis for the proposed study are the film texts referred to in specific chapters.

As stated earlier, this study will contextualise and analyse – through textual analysis – selected Afrikaans cinematic output over the past twenty years. The contextualisation and analysis of these texts will focus on specific cinematic devices and narrative strategies. In the end of his analysis of films by Fritz Lang and Ernst Lubitsch, Elsaesser (2000:124) states that textual analysis has specific benefits, where textual analysis is “explaining the manual”, that is, how to engage with the film text by way of key scenes such as the opening scene. Taking my cue from Elsaesser’s investigations into German cinema, I will mainly investigate these films and how they can be framed as politically impotent by looking at the *mise-en-scene* of the films, as well as paying attention to narrative strategies, characterisation, theme, and other filmic elements that inform its diegesis; the extent to which these films are self-referential; broad ideological frameworks; apparent polarities in the text (e.g. civilisation and savagery; accountability and disavowal); invented traditions;

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the current study. Spivak maintains that Deleuze ignores “the epistemic violence of colonial and imperial conceptions of the other” (Pisters 2010:202). In addition, Deleuze and Guattari are said to face a ‘postidentitarian’ problem, since the notion of the other becomes “dissolved in abstraction” (Miller as cited by Pisters 2010:202). Also, Peter Hallward (as discussed by Pisters 2010:230) accuses Deleuze of disappearing into “an impersonal cosmic vitalism”. Shapiro (1999:6) finds that Deleuzian notions of the movement and time images often inspired his own scholarship on political cinema. Adrian Konik (2011) provides South African scholarship on Deleuze and film, although he does not include any South African films in his discussion of primarily German expressionist cinema.

nostalgia; whiteness; exclusivity and isolation; and the location of these texts in an Afrikaans culture industry. The study considers whiteness as locus of cultural power, conceptually and in the films under discussion, but whiteness is not a conceptual focal point of this study.

Given the centrality of Elsaesser to this study, and in light of the secondary sources involved, this study borrows significantly from cultural studies in privileging theory in the analysis of cultural artefacts (see Hall & Birchall 2006: 2-4). As these figures and cultural studies as a whole is influenced by various ideas from Marxism, this study echoes some of these ideas<sup>26</sup>. Cultural studies “insists on the necessity to address the central, urgent and disturbing questions of a society and a culture in the most rigorous intellectual way we have available” (Hall 1992:11). Specifically, cultural studies would offer “the exposure of the settled habits and conventions and languages of an old class culture to the disturbing fluidity of new money and new social relationships” (ibid). Hall (1992:12) sees the importance of historical specificity as crucial to cultural studies. Because there are multiple racisms (plural), one must acknowledge how each racism has historical and cultural specificity across different societies (1992:13). Cultural studies demonstrate a correspondence between what and how something is represented, and how it manifests and functions in a specific society (1992:14).

Finally, as the chapter outline below indicates, the study will identify and collect visual, thematic and other types of micro-level and macro-level markers of Afrikaans cinematic political impotence.

## **1.6 Chapter outline**

The films investigated in the proposed study as case studies or case ‘texts’ are indicated and grouped and in the proposed chapter outline below. Given as this study is positioned as conceptual chronicle, films are not grouped together chronologically but rather conceptually.

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<sup>26</sup> As McRobbie (2005:2) explains: “[i]t is important to draw attention here to the influence which various forms of neo-Marxist theory have had on the formation of cultural studies from the mid 1970s onwards”.

Chapters Two and Three provide the study's conceptual, contextual, theoretical and historical spine. Chapter Two: an Elsaesserian framework for film, utilises a conceptual and theoretical framework based on the scholarship of Thomas Elsaesser to interrogate ideas of impotence and failure in (political) cinema.

Chapter Three: Afrikaans cinema before and after political transition, positions Afrikaans cinema post-1994 with reference to other cinemas that have had to cope not only with conflict but complicity in that conflict, such as German and French cinema, as part of political cinema. In reference to these national cinemas, an understanding of political cinema is constructed from available scholarship. This chapter also considers certain African-specific responses to such conflicts (such as filmmaking after colonialism). Following this discussion, Chapter Three presents a critical overview of Afrikaans film, especially in the 1960s to 1980s, to point towards cinematic moments of political potency.

Chapters Four to Five constitute the text-specific content of the study, where the framework(s) established above are used to guide a critical reading of these texts. Each of these chapters presents a limited series of films for analysis and contextual interrogation. These chapters will identify film-specific (that is, micro-level) markers of Afrikaans cinematic political impotence. These markers will be collected and collated in Chapter Six.

Chapter Four: the cinema of Willie Esterhuizen and its comic contemporaries, addresses the political impotence of Afrikaans comedy and interrogates the politically dubious comedies of Willie Esterhuizen in this regard. Given the scatological content of these films, notions of vulgarity and white male failure are foregrounded, and Esterhuizen's films are framed as antecedents of adolescent comedy as seen in the *Bakgat!* trilogy and the phallogentric, misogynistic road movie *Babalas* (which is best read as a conflation of pastiche-politics).

The films selected for critical discussion in this chapter are:

- *Poena is Koning*;
- *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat*;

- *Stoute Boudjies*.
- *Babalas*

Chapter Five: the *Volkstaat film*, interrogates and problematises the rural-urban binary in contemporary Afrikaans cinema as an extension and identification of what Keyan Tomaselli first identified as the Eden film. These contemporary Afrikaans films, which I refer to as *Volkstaat films*, offer problematic representations of the South African landscape and space.

The film selected for critical discussion in this chapter is:

- *Prêville*

Based on the film analyses in the previous chapter, Chapter Six: Conclusion, presents a summary of research, its main ideas, and key comments on each preceding chapter. It also pinpoints the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research, which considers the significance of the study for and beyond Afrikaans cinema.

## CHAPTER TWO: AN ELSAESSERIAN FRAMEWORK FOR FILM

### 2.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter utilises conceptual and theoretical frameworks introduced by Thomas Elsaesser to interrogate ideas of impotence and failure in (political) cinema. Ideas that are foregrounded include pastiche, constructive instability and political existentialism. Elsaesser's ideas will be informed, where relevant, by contributions from Fredric Jameson.

The study aims to provide a conceptually and theoretically invigorated approach to Afrikaans language minority cinema. At the methodological and theoretical center of the study is the work of Thomas Elsaesser, a renowned and celebrated film and culture scholar who has published on film history and theory, from studies of German cinema (silent German cinema, New German Cinema, the cinema of the Weimar republic) to the operation of postmodernism as mourning work.<sup>27</sup> Within the domains of film and history (as well as film history), Elsaesser is a prolific writer on German cinema, American cinema, silent cinema and cinema technologies.<sup>28</sup> What this chapter aims to accomplish is not a distillation of Elsaesser's work in order to apply this resulting idea to Afrikaans cinema, but rather to identify key ideas in Elsaesser's research that speak to notions of political cinema and political impotence. Then, I will use these notions to guide my critical discussion of selected film texts in Chapters Four and Five.

In doing so, I aim to demonstrate that an Elsaesserian film framework allows me to identify the micro and macro-level markers of cinematic political impotence in Afrikaans language cinema. Drawing on Elsaesser's body of work presents me with the necessary vocabulary to investigate and theorise Afrikaans language cinema as cinema of political impotence. In addition to the ideas introduced above, there are other secondary sources that illuminate Elsaesser's thinking.

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<sup>27</sup> New wave cinemas include Italian neo-realism (1940s) and various 'new' cinemas that came to characterise Polish and Czech cinemas in the 1960s and 1970s (Elsaesser 2005:23).

<sup>28</sup> See a list of his books and other publications here: [http://www.thomas-elsaesser.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=34&Itemid=54](http://www.thomas-elsaesser.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=34&Itemid=54)

## 2.2 Thomas Elsaesser and cinema: an introduction

Elsaesser foregrounds the relationship and tension between cinema and history, and within film history itself. Cinema “is constantly called upon to construct for itself a viable relation to history, at the same knowing full well that such a history it itself something constructed, and thus the function of a process that in many ways has just begun” (Elsaesser 1999b:61). Elsaesser (2006:17) explicitly follows Foucault when he continues that “film history is best described as a series of discontinuous snapshots that illuminate the whole topography”. Taking his cue from Lotte Eisner, Elsaesser (1990b:171-172) asks: “what precisely is the historical reality – or indeed is there a precise historical reality – to which Romantic figurations and motifs answer, and if so, why should the motifs return with such force in an apparently different context?” As in German cinema, one also notes the re-emergence of familiar character types and motifs from Afrikaans film from a different historical context. In a correlative to some contemporary Afrikaans films, Elsaesser (1981:118) frames *Tristan and Isolde* and the *Gotterdammerung* as “forms of an escape into a mythology that denies history, a blindness that is itself a product of history”, suggesting that a retreat into illusion may itself derive from a larger social, collective retreat from politics and history.

Elsaesser’s landmark study *New German Cinema* (1989) serves as the theoretical and methodological point of departure for this current study. Elsaesser (1989:1) does not present a simple survey of (West) German film, but rather conceives of a framework that frames the historical-material developments that lead to New German Cinema. In doing so, Elsaesser offers a double perspective. Firstly, he locates new German cinema as a national cinema within both the West German and European film industries, emphasising the economic development of both (1989:1). In West Germany, “[g]iven that most film production is state and television financed, the audience does not recruit itself through box-office mechanisms but via diverse cultural and institutional mechanisms” (Elsaesser 1991:89), already suggesting a certain political economy at work in West German cinema at a specific point in time. Secondly, there is an exploration of cultural issues foregrounded by independent German cinema. Elsaesser emphasises the importance of exploring issues of finance: each chapter in *New German Cinema* begins with an outline of key

historical variables that determined production funding. Often this would include information on state-funded projects as well as independent German cinema.

In Elsaesser's (1989:4-5) own words,

[t]he central argument of the book, then, is that far from the New German Cinema constituting only acts of self-expression by a small number of highly gifted and personal directors, the logic of its production, the history of its failures and successes, and the aesthetic-formal strategies that give it a degree of stylistic coherence, derive from the various ways the films attempt to address spectators.

Of considerable significance in this regard is how New German Cinema occupies a position of coherence and meaning as a fiction for the audience (1989:5). Without going into too much detail at this early stage, I anticipate that Afrikaans cinema is a corollary of German cinema in regards to establishing a "meaningful place" in fictional visual narratives. Later, Elsaesser (2001b:193) would himself point out that *New German Cinema* was a study of "an art cinema" that avoided an explicitly auteur-guided approach.<sup>29</sup> Some of the main issues Elsaesser addresses in *New German Cinema* (1989) include:

- Creating a commodity where culture functions as commerce (which extends to filmmaking and themes in German cinema as well: "[t]he very real anachronism of independent filmmaking in the age of fully capitalized media imperialism is one of the buried themes of [Werner] Herzog's work" (Elsaesser 1986:134), for instance.
- Persistent themes and motifs that characterised the era;
- The cinema of experience versus the experience of cinema, where the latter refers to genre cinema;
- Notions of patriarchal authority and legitimacy;
- Trauma and the 'mourning work'.

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<sup>29</sup> Contemporary Afrikaans language cinema does not qualify as an "art cinema", nor does the term "new" (as in New Wave or New German Cinema) apply in this instance as such movements are usually associated with political change (e.g. the French New Wave's resistance to the political and artistic establishment).

At this point I should point out my awareness of the major differences between speaking about Afrikaans cinema and German cinema: both suggest the existence of a generally homogenous society - and to a certain extent Germany in 1989 was at least ethnically homogenous, if politically fragmented – while Afrikaans cinema is part of a much larger national cinema, much like Afrikaans is but a part of a much larger cultural and ethnic heterogeneity. Hayward positions national cinema firmly within a political culture and affirms a specific national identity (Schlesinger 2005:25-26), and argues that there exist multiple national cinemas that mobilise different national myths (Hayward 2006b:15). It is in this light that Treffry-Goatley (2010:18) approaches South African cinema “as a dynamic mosaic ... that combines a multitude of different cinematic images representative of a diversity of cultural origins”. Still, the post-conflict situations of both Germany and South Africa have to do with transgressors, erstwhile opponents and even victims occupying the same country and collectively, if not cooperatively, struggling and engaging with various forms of political turmoil (see double occupancy, Chapter One).

In the studies following *New German Cinema* (1989), Elsaesser would discuss the work of individual German filmmakers in detail, often positioning these filmmakers as auteurs. In his work on the cinema of distinguished director Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Elsaesser (1994:19) is interested not in Germany as objective geographical site, but in Fassbinder’s construction of ‘Germany’: “Fassbinder’s Germany is one where writing its social history means recording the history of its social imaginary, demonstrating the mechanisms of ‘miscognition’ within recognition, and locating identification at work in identity” (ibid). Fassbinder’s *Der Amerikanische Soldat* (*The American Soldier*, 1970) reflects Germany’s shifting borders and identities – already evoking a sense of double occupancy – that have become ephemeral (Miller 2013:43). As an example of New German Cinema, this film followed in the aftermath of rubble films post-WWII as well as the Heimat films (*Heimatfilme*) of the 1950s (ibid). Rubble films, or *Trummerfilme*, are set in the ruins of bombsites; as such, the notion is not unique to German cinema (2013:44). A similar mechanism to this social imaginary features strongly in the work of some Afrikaans filmmakers as well (though they are evidently less celebrated than



Fassbinder).<sup>30</sup> Rot (2009:19) explains that Volker Schlöndorff's films, such as *The Tin Drum* (1979), are more aesthetically and generally communicative to wider audiences than Fassbinder's films. In this film, Schlöndorff proposes a detachment from the past, which stands in contrast to those German filmmakers who insist on "confronting the guilt of the war generation" (Rot 2009:31).

For Elsaesser (1991:89), most of Fassbinder's films concern sexual and social identity in ways similar to Hollywood cinema, yet with certain distinct differences: "his work seems to confirm quite strongly a heavy investment in vision itself, and a concentration on glance/glance, point-of-view shots and seemingly unmotivated camera-movements that foreground the processes of filmic signification". Elsaesser would revisit early German cinema in *Weimar Cinema and After* (2000), where he emphasises German cinema's construction of a 'historical imaginary' rather than a national identity. Here, Elsaesser investigates Weimar cinema and also interrogates specific films and their directors (Murnau, Pabst) in their capacity as contributing to the historical imaginary, which speaks to the social imaginary above.

In addition to an occasional emphasis on Pabst's work, Elsaesser (2009b) interrogates Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), where he again emphasises specific motifs related to the political sphere which guide his reading of the film. Elsaesser's (2009b:82) reading of *Nosferatu* delivers motifs of "rats, contagion, and contamination [that] speaks volumes about the unselfconscious racism of the educated classes during the last but one turn of the century". More than simply a silent era horror film, Elsaesser (2009b:83) understands Murnau's vampire film to depict "networks of contagion and contamination" as well as "secret and subversive communication"; the latter is evident in the relationships between the three main characters (*Nosferatu*, Harker, Mina). In addition to these motifs and networks, Elsaesser (2009b:85) also reads Murnau as present the text. Here, Elsaesser (2009b:85) relates Murnau's time in the German air force and his experience of flight to "the gliding camera movements and intricate spatial setups associated with the unfettered camera of *The Last Laugh*". Far from simply suggesting some sort of autobiographical catalyst for Murnau's films, Elsaesser thus locates Murnau's

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<sup>30</sup> Elsaesser (1984:[sp]) praises Chilean director Raul Ruiz for possessing an incisive awareness of the conventions of non-fiction film.

autobiography as one that informs the very aesthetics of his film.<sup>31</sup> For Elsaesser (2006:180), it makes sense that Paul Verhoeven's films *Total Recall* (1991) and *Starship Troopers* (1997) are read in the context of Verhoeven's experiences of and fascination with Nazism. Again Elsaesser views autobiography as meaningful in the creation of film, thereby allocating an auteurial dimension to creation.

This historical imaginary often implies a coming to terms with, or working through, of histories.

The 'mastering of the past' (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) which became such a slogan in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s was in no small measure a reaction to and a rejection of Hollywood doing this mastering for German society and its film-makers, while the focus on Fascism as a film subject was also ... an effective strategy of address, for it allowed the New German Cinema to discover in Nazism a subject and a genre which could only rely on audience interest and foreknowledge the world over, making even difficult films like Syberberg's *Hitler: A Film from Germany* accessible to foreign audiences (Elsaesser 1998:144).

In his later studies, specifically on Fassbinder (Elsaesser 1996), Elsaesser wrote about "the marking of the relation between Germans and Jews by the always deferred 'mourning work' of the German nation for the victims of the Holocaust" (2001:193). Elsaesser (1996:145-146) states that American cinema had accomplished much of the mourning work on behalf of the nation through its Vietnam films, a mourning by proxy by way of films such as *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino 1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979). For Elsaesser (1981:146), Syberberg provides an aesthetic dimension to mourning-work ("working through and working over the processes of introjection and projection, of self-hatred and self-pity engendered by the loss of a love-object"). In addressing this 'mourning', Elsaesser (2001b:194) first introduces his understanding of trauma theory. Elsaesser (2009a:307) refers to Deleuze as presenting a response to trauma, "relating [the] 'affection image' to the trauma of Vietnam, and the defeat of the aspirations of the

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<sup>31</sup> In addition, Elsaesser (2009b:89) suggests that Murnau's own homosexuality provides an opportunity to read *Nosferatu* in a specific way, as Stan Brakhage has. For Siegfried Kracauer, Weimar cinema "stage[d] anxieties about male self-images and male sexuality" (Elsaesser 2009:87). Elsaesser's point here is that masculinity had been part of German national cinema and beyond from the medium's inception.

Left". Trauma theorists conceive of the subject as located in and around memory and its gaps or aporias, often informed by patriarchy (2001:194).

In investigating Afrikaans language cinema as a cinema of political impotence, I aim to arrive at a notion of cinematic political impotence according to which Afrikaans films especially can be understood within the parameters of failure and impotence. Describing a film's opening sequence as a kind of manual, Elsaesser (2000:115) says that these scenes inform viewers how to read and understand the film. Discussing the opening scenes of a handful of selected films, Elsaesser makes use of a set of characteristics adapted from Thierry Kuntzel to arrive at certain points of analysis in his engagement with selected films. For example, Elsaesser (2000:115) discusses the point of entry into the film and its characters as well as visual motifs of doors and passages to signify such entrances. Furthermore, Elsaesser (2000:117) foregrounds images of significance, or "emblematic clusters", where a specific image or composition only becomes meaningful in retrospect; this image or composition serves as a "condensation of the various narrative motifs [in the film]". Elsaesser finds significance not only in images, but also in titles, where often a specific word or part of the title invites ambiguity. In this instance, the viewer needs to make sense of what the films attempt to achieve with this ambiguity.

While Elsaesser pays keen attention to film form and aesthetics (see section 2.3), film is certainly more than an artistic endeavour (Elsaesser 2000:275); film is both a commodity (in the convergence of money and culture) and a service (sale of condiments, soft seats, air conditioning). The epitome of the combination of commodity and service is the so-called 'blockbuster'. 'Blockbuster' usually refers to a massive box-office success, the type of film where good and evil operate as distinctly opposite forces (Boggs & Pollard 2003:130). Elsaesser (2002:16) defines 'blockbuster' as an efficient and evolved combination of "the two systems (film-as-production/cinema-as-experience), the two levels (macro-level of capitalism/micro-level of desire), and the two aggregate states of the cinema experience (commodity/service)". Based on this integration of consumer desire and cinema as commodity and experience, a blockbuster typically implies a massive budget and a major event that involves a youthful male protagonist on a particular mission (Elsaesser 2000:276). Succinctly, Elsaesser (*ibid*) points out that these blockbusters

are, more than anything, “miracles of engineering and industrial organization” resembling, for the author, “military campaigns”.

Financially successful blockbusters can be positioned as more than just films; they are media events, similar in occasion to public holidays or political events (2000:321). Some of these blockbuster-related ideas apply to Afrikaans cinema, such as *Prêville*'s media event-status as film, physical location (a film-set-cum-small-town in the Hartebeespoort area) and ideological frame (the notion that, as the film's marketing campaign informed us, “*Prêville* is anywhere and everywhere”).<sup>32</sup>

In the context of blockbusters, Stokes (2013:120) uses Elsaesser's essay on the highest grossing film of all time, *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009), as an example of contemporary auteur studies. Stokes (2013:158-159) provides a brief discussion of the essay, and foregrounds Elsaesser's interest in auteurism where an auteur has “the ability to exercise control over the production process and thereby stamp an authorial voice on the final product”. For Elsaesser, as per Stokes' (2013:158-159) reading, James Cameron's status as auteur is clear in three themes obvious in *Avatar* and that also manifest in the director's other films. These themes are:

- ‘Access for all’; immediate intelligibility on numerous levels, including ideology, camera angles; depending upon interpretation, a film can be read, for example, as either conservative or liberal [(in this sense Elsaesser cites *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994)];
- The enduring significance of the filmmaker as auteur, thereby “[promoting] a self-image through retelling a personal narrative”. In Cameron's case, his self-image is that of a science geek (Stokes 2013:158-159);
- ‘true lies’<sup>33</sup>: “keeping the reader aware of the story-telling: projecting the artifice while also denying it through the narrative” in, for instance, the use of 3D technology in the film while using 3D to project the film in theatres.

The auteur can work independently or within the blockbuster setting with equal visibility. Stokes (2013:159) ends her discussion of Elsaesser and *Avatar* borrowing

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<sup>32</sup> And, I want to add, “nowhere”, a fiction without a referent.

<sup>33</sup> Elsaesser is being punny: James Cameron directed *True Lies* (1994), an action-espionage film about a man (Arnold Schwarzenegger) who hides his identity as American secret agent from his wife (Jamie Lee Curtis), until she too accidentally enters the spy game.

terms from Elsaesser's scholarship to conclude that "it is these ambiguities and uncertainties, double-binds and twists of identification that engender a kind of engagement which, Elsaesser argues, are elements of the control James Cameron exercises over the film as 'auteur'". The idea of cinematic mechanisms or dynamics as "elements of control" is provocative, highlighting the extent to which film illusion is not even maintained but 'forced' onto audiences (see "true lies", above). *Avatar* is a science fiction film, and Elsaesser seems to focus on films that deal with the fantastic, or fantasy, or that can by general consensus be categorised as science fiction. Such a film is *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927), a pioneering German science fiction film that Elsaesser contextualised and analysed for the British Film Institute (BFI) in 2005. In the terms of this study, *Metropolis* was a national allegory and industrial allegory in one.

Elsaesser (2005b:7) frames *Metropolis* in the following manner: "[g]enerally recognised as the fetish-image of all city and cyborg futures, the once dystopian *Metropolis* now speaks of vitality and the body electric, fusing human and machine energy, its sleek features animated more by high-voltage fluorescence than Expressionism's dark demonic urges". Key ideas introduced in the above quote, are those of the fetish, the significance of the city, and the shift from a pessimistic reading of the film to a more productive (positive) reading thereof. Visually and thematically, Elsaesser's point of departure is thus not simply to read *Metropolis* as a dark science fiction film about the tyranny of industrialisation, but to rejoice in its visual vitality. Indeed, Elsaesser (2005b:8) finds much in the celebrated film to sustain a contemporary audience's interest, even if such an audience receives and reads the film differently than its original German audiences did:

the troglodyte workers remind us not only of docile-looking but inwardly rebellious adolescents in school-uniforms, they also recall the drill-routines of boot-camp basic training. The metallic figures of the robot Maria now takes on features of 'girl power' where its original audience might only have sensed misogynist projections of malevolence.

Elsaesser (2005b) thus opens up the possibilities of meanings available to different audiences; as he explains, the film was different after WWII than before it (Elsaesser 2005b:47).<sup>34</sup>

In contextualising the film, Elsaesser (2005b:22) explains that *Metropolis* was to be an intentionally engineered “designer-blockbuster” (anticipating the grand designs of cinematic cities and utopian or dystopian worlds in films such as *Avatar*). In providing information about the film crew, he also indicates who had previously been involved with which other German films, and also relates how the studio, UFA, envisioned the film’s production process, even commenting (if briefly) on the film’s opening night in Berlin (2000:29-30). This contextualisation of the film is followed by Elsaesser’s analysis and interpretation thereof.<sup>35</sup>

Under the heading “The Social Question and Technology”, Elsaesser (2005b:42) reads *Metropolis* in terms of the role of industrialisation in social unrest and class-struggle. Here, technology can signify progress as much as enslavement (2005b:42). Against these questions and the hostile German communist response to the film, Elsaesser reads the film *politically* as “[reflecting] the moderate wing of the social democrats, even making room for trade union views” (2005b:43). Elsaesser also captures Siegfried Kracauer’s response to the politics of the film; Kracauer found the film’s right-wing politics and designed dehumanisation “reprehensible” (2005b:45). This is the moment to pause and reflect on cinema’s location in culture and politics, and it is worth quoting Elsaesser (1990b:188) at length in this regard:

The cinema enters the social arena not by a mimesis of class conflicts or the movements of a collective unconscious, but as that form of social relation in which the *consumption of narratives and images* intervenes to block or displace the contradictions of history into effects of disavowal substitution. Films are not versions of (bourgeois) historiography; rather, they act upon another history – that of *commodity relations* and the modes of production and consumption (emphasis added).

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<sup>34</sup> Elsaesser’s book on *Metropolis* follows a specific sequence. First, he recounts the film’s origins (both industrial and mythical) and then writes about the film’s UFA-crew who made it. Elsaesser then discusses the many versions of the film (some lost to history) and writes about the numerous projects aimed at restoring the film. Following this, Elsaesser provides his interpretation of the film before finally discussing the use of sound in the film.

<sup>35</sup> UFA: *Universum Film-Aktien Gesellschaft*.

Elsaesser (2005b:53) sees in *Metropolis* the inspirational influence of Walter Scott, Victor Hugo and H.G. Wells, and locates a clear quest narrative in the film. There are Christological and Oedipal traces throughout the film. Indeed, Elsaesser (2005b:55) brings an explicitly psychoanalytical framework to the film where “Freder’s castration anxiety and the fetishized image of woman did indeed receive ample textual, as well as contextual attention” (2005b:55).<sup>36</sup> In the end, Elsaesser (2005b:56) attributes the film’s remarkability to “its power to compress [a dialectic of modernity] – made up of so many contradictory motifs and themes – into one story line”. In conclusion, Elsaesser (2005b:68) writes:

Faced with the commercial, critical, archival and performative afterlives of *Metropolis*, one is tempted to conclude that this *emblem* of Weimar culture was not so much ‘anticipating’ postmodernism, as already taking a self-critical but also perhaps, in philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s sense ‘cynical’ view of postmodernism (emphasis added).

With *Metropolis* and similar films, fantasy remains connected to Oedipal contents and trajectories signifying the potential of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In these instances, fantasy also signals the Hollywood classical narrative structure. Elsaesser (1998:153) comments that fantasy permeates the work of numerous filmmakers within a shared national context: “[t]he identity of the New German cinema, was ... founded on a series of fantasies, all of which are displaced versions of antagonism and competition, Oedipal rivalry and over-identification with and around Hollywood”. Elsaesser again makes Hollywood a seminal industrial and cultural point of reference. Understanding Elsaesser’s conceptualisation of and approach to Hollywood and American cinema illuminates one’s understanding of Elsaesser’s cinematic ontology.

### **2.3 Hollywood, history, cinema, experience, or: what is cinema?**

Taking my cue from the famous question asked of the moving image by Andre Bazin, this section explores an Elsaesserian ontology of film. An initial starting point is to ask: what does Elsaesser make of Hollywood, still the most prominent point of

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<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere, Elsaesser (1976:173) discusses emotional structure in film narrative with reference to Freud. Emotion or affect in film fall outside of the scope of the current study.

reference in global cinema? Elsaesser's (2005:120) sees film as a form of symbolic action, and not a series of images in some way representative or reflective of reality. Such an emphasis on symbolic action evokes Negri's (1989:146) observation that the political is not only symbolic but is communication: "it is the material which establishes social, productive cooperation and allows the latter to reproduce itself and produce value".

For Elsaesser (1999:98), Hollywood reflects a "cult of professionalism and the glamour of technique". This professionalism – the sheen of a well-oiled system – and emphasis on technique are intertwined with, on an ideological level, notions of ethnicity and family values as these values inform economic-institutional bonding (ibid). Hollywood has remained a key cultural construct, informing much of Western popular culture and as Herbert (2008:66) puts it, "Hollywood is a transnationally *dominant* cultural industry" (emphasis in original). To be sure, Elsaesser (1997:153) refers to Hollywood machinery as "the manifold economic pressures of a highly technocratic culture industry, forcing the author to dramatize and reconstitute his own identity by a hyperbolic act of self-stylization". Within this post-Fordist entertainment industry, cinema will retain its position in culture as long as it remains profitable (Elsaesser 1976:173).

Hollywood is indeed a transnational cinematic presence, a presence amplified in the era of the blockbuster (Behlil 2007:17) where transnational has come to refer to not only those films of diasporic filmmakers in exile, but also co-productions on an international level (2007:18). Elsaesser often discusses the European intellectual-critical fascination with Hollywood (Mulvey 2013:21) and sees Hollywood cinema as a "major component of most national film cultures where audience expectations shaped largely by Hollywood are exploited by domestic producers" (National Cinema Film Reference:[sp]), often translating Hollywood genres into national contexts and content. In comparing Hollywood to European cinema, Elsaesser (2006:183) – almost in response to Wollen's assertion that new critical or aesthetic practices are made possible only in confrontation with Hollywood (Rodowick 1988:67) – finds that "the first hidden dialectic is, of course, that there is no dialectic", only shifting relations. Elsaesser (2012:703) argues for the recognition of film festivals and government agencies in sustaining a cinema industry in which comfortably yet false



binaries of 'good' European cinema cannot be pitted against 'bad' American cinema. One must also acknowledge that there exists "a world market in media products that serve the cultural tastes of privilege minorities". Altogether, the above factors result in a film industry that is economically viable and aesthetically possible (2012:704). Fluck (2006:224) explains that Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of the American culture industry is in fact a discussion of a new type of culture that has emerged, the so-called culture industry marketing and selling "a standardized, completely commercialized product that ... is on the way to become *the* representative modern culture". In this sense, the notion of Americanisation suggests trepidation at the possibility that a certain type of American popular culture will become dominant (Fluck 2006:224).

Edgar Reitz (quoted in Bathrick 2006:144) explains the challenges independent filmmakers faced in developing a cinematic voice against the dominance of Hollywood: these independent filmmakers, even auteurs, are concerned with "individuality, the representation (*Wiedergabe*) of experiences that are uniquely bound to one specific region. In order to do so, they must develop a cinematic language to narrate these experiences." Put differently, filmmakers must construct a new idiom of expression, but this process is impeded by Hollywood's transnational cultural dominance. Kroes (2006:205) points out that Europeans tend to perceive themselves in terms of "individual heterogeneity" in opposition to the American propensity for the "uniformity of the mass". Broadly put, European culture, as Kroes (2006:211) conceives of it, vehemently opposes the American "spirit of blithe bricolage, of its anticanonical approach to questions of high versus low culture, or to matters of the organic holism of cultural forms". Elsaesser, however, understands that European cinema is in many ways conscious of its indebtedness to Hollywood.

In his discussion of the classic German film *Die Nibelungen*, Elsaesser (2010:[sp]) suggests that Lang's mytho-historical epic contains "many other films", with one scene read "as a homage to the American cinema ... as a nostalgic-ironic invocation of a filmic genre belonging to the early years of the cinematic medium, but testifying to its wit and sophistication". Even in the German silent era, Hollywood was acknowledged as the institutional point of reference of filmmakers in other countries. Elsaesser (2009a:309) broadly refers to film as participating in and constituting an

“experience economy [which makes] personal or national trauma and Disneyland and shopping malls the recto and verso of each other, or make *Schindler’s List* and *Jurassic Park* belong together under more than the heading of authorship”. With Hollywood as central in the cinematic experience economy, “[c]haracter-centered causality, question-and-answer logic, problem-solving routines, deadline plot structures and a mutual cueing system of word, sound and image are seen as typical of ‘classical’ cinema” (Elsaesser 2005:43). Here Elsaesser emphasises how accessible and easily intelligible (“access for all”) Hollywood cinema is. Such is Hollywood’s prominence as system that the relationship between itself and national cinemas across the world “has been described as a form of cultural and economic colonisation,” even as “a particular form of miscognition, as in Fredric Jameson’s Lacanian formulation of the ‘politics of otherness’” (Elsaesser 1993:123).<sup>37</sup> It is in this sense that national cinemas are simultaneously national and international (1993:122).

Referring to key figures and moments in German film history as well as Hollywood and genre cinema, Elsaesser (1981:148) explains that “[t]he deconstruction of a cinematic tradition ... goes hand in hand with the dismantling of history into a purely conceptual space, which is ‘literalized’ as the ‘Rumpelkammer’ (‘junk-room’, ‘attic’) of history” resulting in a series of fragments and fetish-objects. The notion of the fetish or fetishisation occurs repeatedly in Elsaesser’s work. “It is not the implied hidden spectator which a scene sometimes addresses,” Elsaesser (1991:87) explains, “but the always hidden camera which the scene cannot exist without that turns all object-relations in the cinema into fetishistic ones. They hold the subject in a position of miscognition or self-estrangement [...] A film either fetishizes the characters or it fetishizes the apparatus”. On occasion, it must be conceded, German films would present an *Alltagsgeschichte*, which depicted the lives of ordinary civilians under the ‘normality’ and norm of Nazi rule (Elsaesser 1996:158). The film medium lends itself to processes of fetishisation where history can be made to consist of fetish-objects rather than ‘facts’ or ‘events’:

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<sup>37</sup> Jameson is highly cognisant of Lacan’s influence on culture (see Jameson 1977; Chanan 2000), particularly in the Lacanian configuration of Real, Imaginary and Symbolic.

[A] film history is itself a function of the very different discursive or analytical spaces that one may be able to invoke. On the other hand, the cinema's presence in culture, and thus its availability for cultural analysis, is such that it almost militates against the pertinence of history as a necessary dimension of its understanding (Elsaesser 1999b:61).

Here Elsaesser (1999b:66) is interested in the "possibilist histories" of the film medium itself, what he evokes as "the archaeology of all the possible futures of the cinema". Elsaesser (1976:172) has no illusions about the system that sustains Hollywood and the entertainment industry in general:

That the cinema is nonetheless locked very securely into the division of work and leisure which is shaping and adapting most manifestations of culture to the restrictive categories of entertainment is indisputable, and so is the fact that the entertainment industry itself is an industry, organized according to the laws of the commodity market, where demand and consumption are stimulated, if necessary, by creating new needs rather than fulfilling existing ones.

The commodity market Elsaesser (1976) refers to above meets specific needs of consumption by presenting audiences with not only emotional spectacle but also emotional intensity (1976:172), which for Elsaesser is nothing other than exploitative and manipulative practices usually associated with advertising. In commercial commodity cinema's emphasis on emotion, film is an event, a text that promises its audiences a particular experience. Although going to the cinema has been a socio-cultural practice for more than a century, it remains a distinctive experience. Elsaesser (2009a:293-294) discusses experience as having three domains:

embodiment – experience as an immediate sensory presence and corporeal plenitude;  
time – experience as retroactively constructed, temporally or discursively mediated self-possession and self-appropriation;  
and agency – experience as the exposure to limits, and the recovery from extremes.

Of specific concern for Elsaesser (2009a:294) is the second domain above, which was already highlighted in the work of Walter Benjamin. With reference to Benjamin, Elsaesser (2009a:295) concludes that "under conditions of modernity, only the experiential modality of *Erlebnis* is possible, not that of *Erfahrung* [...] a cinema of *Erfahrung*, such as the classical, would indeed be an ideological construct, a

nostalgic or reactionary shoring up of the fractured nature of modern experience”.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, cinema often presents “*Erlebnis* without *Erfahrung*, a state formerly associated with trauma, but now the very definition of the media event” (Elsaesser 2009a:292). Drawing on Benjamin, Nagib (2013:71) distinguishes *Erlebnis* as “something lived through” from *Erfahrung* which is “the experience in the flesh”. In the experience economy of cinema, where the main experience is one of *Erlebnis*, “the cinema has helped carry the burden of history, or has given the illusion of carrying it, but it has also bequeathed a kind of double and parallel life, shadowing another one which is perhaps becoming ever more shadowy, as our culture’s real past becomes its movies” (Elsaesser 1992:22). Here, Elsaesser points to a stimulating tension between the past and cinema, where the moving illusion can come to constitute a narrative of history(-ies) where cultural patrimony, and not histories, is the main reference point.

## 2.4 Elsaesser on visual language

In his scholarship on early and silent cinema, Elsaesser already draws attention to the notions of *mise-en-scene* and *mise-an-abyme*. Consider the following quote from Elsaesser’s (1999b:69) discussion of the Lumiere brothers’ film *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895):

[T]he frame itself, and the camera placement in centering the eye and in the same time in containing movement, initiates a play of masking and doubling which makes the Lumiere film its own *mise-en-abyme*, far removed from any ‘referential transparency’ which traditionally is attributed to Lumiere as the father of the documentary. *Workers Leaving the Factory* is of course also a supreme example of a multiplication of internal frames: the double doors, one big, one small; the opening of the gates; the workers going out; and the closing of the gates after the last one has left.

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<sup>38</sup> For Benjamin,” Radstone (2007:160) explains, cinema was “the antithesis of *Erfahrung* (experience as recollection), and modernity entailed the erosion of *Erfahrung*” (Radstone 2007:160). In Hansen’s (2012:99) view, Benjamin saw cinema as potentially therapeutic, not consciousness-raising, in that cinema may neutralise the “mass psychoses engendered by the industrialist-capitalist misadaptation of technology”.

German fascism borrowed techniques and *mise-en-scene* of its self-image from cinema, and later representations of Nazism after WWII possess a measure of self-reference or *mise-en-abyme* (Elsaesser 1996:149). *Mise-en-scene* “refers to the complete spatial organization of the image, including framing, composition, angle, lighting and perspective” (Marion & Crowder 2013:17), and facilitates the meaning of an image as dependent on its stimulus value for an individual (2013:33). In the above quote, Elsaesser emphasise the presence of *mise-en-abyme*, or recursive imagery, in cinema. *Mise-en-abyme* is suggestive of the general self-awareness of a film, or how a film calls attention to itself, to its own construction. As Kornbluh (2005:131) explains, while a text indeed “participates in [the] process of symbolisation ... the text can interrupt the seamlessness of symbolisation, either by calling attention to itself as a creative texts, or by creatively asserting a counter-symbolic critique”. Here, calling attention to itself can occur by way of *mise-en-abyme* or similar practices indicating cinematic self-awareness.

The above extract pertaining to the Lumiere film also offers Elsaesser’s (1999) idea of reading films through and as (a series of) frames. On this point, Elsaesser (2010:[sp]) explains that even in early German cinema’s *Die Nibelungen* (Lang, 1924) such awareness of the medium was already integrated into the language of film. When the character Siegfried encounters a cinematic image ‘running’ in a stone as if conjured by magic, “[t]he treasure dangling before Siegfried’s eyes acts as a *visualisation of the allegory of the cinema itself* as a machine that plants the never-to-be-satisfied desire for palpability in the viewer, and thus makes the cinema itself into an obsessional *wish-generating but fulfilment-deferring machine*” (emphasis in original) (Elsaesser 2010:[sp]). Here, the cinema offers the capacity of a wish-generating medium, but a medium that defers the fulfilment of these wishes for palpability.

In terms of the medium’s capacity for self-awareness, Elsaesser (1999:69) reads the Lumiere film’s visual language as a direct comment on the historicity of the medium:

Right at the end of *Workers Leaving the Factory*, one worker is seen going in the opposite direction, as if to say there is no final closure: a formalist point of balance and asymmetry perhaps, but one which leads to the more specifically historical conclusion that the Lumiere films were meant to be seen over and over again, that they were built as if to parody and at the same time better the loops of Edison's kinetoscope.

The Lumiere films become a metacinema, and it's this metacinematic status that fascinates viewers (Elsaesser 1999:71-72). Here, Elsaesser's critical discussion of the Lumiere film offers a primary insight: the idea of cinematic self-awareness as contained in the notion of metacinema, and as suggested by the reference to *mise-en-abyme* as well as the significance of *mise-en-scene*. Writing about Fassbinder, Elsaesser (1991:95) asks whether the mechanism and dynamics of the filmmaker's work invite a historical (that is to say, political) reading: "[t]he structures of self-estrangement, of mirroring and miscognition, of positionality and identification with the Other, the double binds, structures that have habitually been interpreted as coinciding with the construction of the basic cinematic apparatus: might they not here be equally amenable to a historical reading[?]" Elsaesser had already referred to frames and film form in his discussions of GW Pabst and German fantasy film.

In his discussion of Pabst's *Threepenny Opera*, Elsaesser (1990a:103) emphasises the context of the *Threepenny Trial* as related to Brecht's highly productive years (1928-1933) and his "interventionist [political] thinking" (1990a:104). Elsaesser focuses on the tensions between Brecht's script treatment and Pabst's film version, and points out how both Brecht and Pabst responded to Weimer cinema in general (1990a:106-107). Pabst's protagonist Mackie Messer is compared to Lang's Mabuse (1990a:108) – for Elsaesser (1990a:109), Mackie is the "phallic hero per excellence".<sup>39</sup> This is one of many instances where Elsaesser refers to an earlier film text to illuminate a reading of a more recent film. He also finds contextual-historical correlations, such as finds parallels between "the 1830s and 1840s in Europe, and the Germany of the 1910s and the early twenties" (Elsaesser 1990b:172). Elsaesser (1990a:112) pays close attention to visual motifs, such as partitions, panes and frames to help "[define] Mackie Messer's mode of authority, based as his attraction is

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<sup>39</sup> Lang's filmography includes *Dr Mabuse, der Spieler* (*Dr Mabuse, the Gambler*, 1922) and *Das Testament der Dr Mabuse* (*The Testament of Dr Mabuse*, 1933).

on his image as a show-value”, demonstrating the interaction between filmic elements in *mise-en-scene* to suggest power relations in the film image.<sup>40</sup>

Elsaesser (1990a:114) also focuses on theme, and in *Threepenny Trial*, it is duplicity (1990a:114), which functions to initiate humour and wit. Furthermore, his interest in ambiguities remains. Elsaesser additionally comments on Pabst’s use of “distinct forms of cinematic space, all of them imaginary”: off-screen space, space toward the spectator in front of the camera; and space as “infinite regress, *en-abyme*, in which a show appears within a show, a frame framing a frame” (1990a:114).

Pabst responded to the Weimar regime in an overtly political manner, although Elsaesser (1990b:172-173) comments that “it has been suggested that Germany experiences a revival of romantic art and fantastic literature after every revolution that failed – notably 1798, 1848, 1918, 1968 – and that the prevalence of *fantasy is usually the reaction of a cultural and/or geographic minority to its exclusion from the sweep of historical events, and as such, it is the expression of a frustrated desire for change, rather than a resistance to change*” (emphasis added) (Elsaesser 1990b:173).<sup>41</sup>

As I have shown, Elsaesser is consistently interested in contradiction, ambivalence and disavowal. For Elsaesser (1990b:176), “*The Student of Prague* choice of setting and character already contains a covert social dimension that alludes to German history and its vicissitudes”. In film analysis, the social dimension suggested by a film through its aesthetics should not be ignored. Moving to films with explicit violent and sexual content, Elsaesser (1976:175) asks: “Can ‘A Clockwork Orange’ serve as a model for analysing the relation between emotional structure and ideological function in a popular movie?” Interrogating the film requires “an analysis, however sketchy, of

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<sup>40</sup> In Ophuls, Elsaesser ([sa]:282) appreciates that his is a cinema “built on gesture and hesitation and on the contrasts between substances and their emotional associations, a cinema of close-ups and part objects”, a cinema Elsaesser values for its psychological nuance,

<sup>41</sup> Elsaesser (1990b:174) himself offers a warning about Kracauer’s approach to the fantastic: “the specific formal features of the fantastic films, which alone can give us a clue about the mode of historical inscription, are ignored, in favour of ransacking them for their most obvious motifs that turn out to be those elements borrowed and quoted from Romantic literature and painting”. How to avoid this? By, as Elsaesser (1990b:174) does, interrogating concrete examples. Elsaesser’s starting point “is a specific motif, a social one: economic success and social mobility. What interests me is *how* it gets encoded in fantastic forms, and *why* – given that it is a theme not only common to a lot of dissimilar films in Germany, but one that the cinema of other countries has made use of”.

Kubrick's emotive rhetoric", which requires a critical discussion of his visionary technical accomplishments as well as "the specific situation of the viewer vis-à-vis the screen" (1976:177). For Elsaesser (1976:188), Kubrick's *mise-en-scene* functions to maintain identification between hero and spectator. Here, Elsaesser (1976:197) provides a precise description and reading of *A Clockwork Orange*'s aesthetics, emphasising lines, surfaces, symmetry, order and once again, ambiguity:

The concentration of surfaces and outlines – achieved by the tactical use of the wide-angle lens – gives a crystalline hardness which is itself aggressive since it has sealed itself off from contact by an emphatic construction of symmetry and order – though as has been seen, this clearness of outline is ultimately in the service of ambiguity and evasion.

Ambiguity and evasion are the result of and give rise to tensions around the slippage of meaning. Other tensions that Elsaesser (1976) refers to have to do with male spectatorship. A close-up of a painting portraying a woman in the throes of masturbatory ecstasy is, for Elsaesser (1976:185), to be explained "as an appeal to the male spectators [sic] unconscious"; where a shot of a vagina dentata mobilises a latent (unconscious) psychosis of castration anxiety, or castration fantasy (ibid). Fantasy, once again, is revealed as a narrative driving and unifying force, and films as thematically diverse as *Love Story* (Hiller, 1970), *The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah, 1969) and *A Clockwork Orange* gratify a *complex set of fantasies...* in the terrain of the social imaginary (Elsaesser 1976:195-196).

While *A Clockwork Orange* is overtly acknowledged as based on the book by Anthony Burgess, Elsaesser (1997:151-152) points out that the film *Apocalypse Now* does not credit Conrad's novella at all: "its presence in the title of the documentary [Eleanor Coppola's *Hearts of Darkness: a Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (1991)] suggests that we are witnessing a return of the repressed," where the documentary serves "as yet another filmic reworking of Conrad's story, with its own set of oppositions, displacements, and parallels" (1997:152). Again I note the notion of opposition and displacement, again as functions and origins of tensions in the narrative and the image. Of particular interest here is Elsaesser's psychoanalytical reference to the "return of the repressed", which implies the impossibility of limiting the visibility of, in this instance, an original source text.



Note Elsaesser's (1997:167-168) emphasis on visual language, where the use of the camera to reveal information and guide spectatorial subjectivity is paramount:

Kilgore, framed in close-up and audible, then gives orders to start the music, followed by a medium close shot of the tape recorder. The shot ends with a slight pan to the right to reveal the set of loudspeakers outside the helicopter, which are thus identified as the diegetic source of the music now swelling in volume. The subsequent medium shot returns to the soldiers inside the helicopter, who are pointing (and directing the viewer's attention) to another helicopter in the background. Three medium long shots of different helicopters follow, and in each case the camera zooms toward the bank of speakers. The whole scene is edited to the rhythm of the Wagner score, which maintains a constant volume while the volume of engine noise and the sounds of the rotor blades vary.

Here, the combination of music, camera shot and editing contribute to the film's pace, its rhythm. Discussing Syberberg's *Hitler, A Film* (1977), Elsaesser (1981:136) comments on "[a] metaphoric chain – star, tear, glass-ball – [which] concretizes the transformation of 'world', 'universe' into vision and eye, a transformation which the cinema accomplishes so effortlessly and unquestioningly". Elsaesser (1981:140) provides the following reading of a key scene in Syberberg's *Our Hitler* (1978) where Himmler is massaged. Syberberg shows Himmler "exposed to the hands of a masseur slowly kneading his torso. Here the body is depicted as a surface for contact, exchange, interaction, even mediation – precisely those erotically fluid, intermediary realms that the epidermis must not be permitted to yield to in fascist 'body-culture'" (2001c:140). Here, Elsaesser accentuates notions of surface once more, the surface of the film as well as the surface (skin) of the subject. Also, Elsaesser again comments on the sense of contradiction the film constructs: the tension between the erotic and fascist sensual restriction.

With a clear interest in tensions and ambiguities (of narrative, theme, image and character), Elsaesser offers some ideas towards political cinema. In his analysis of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), Elsaesser (2014:1) describes two iconic shots that have become, as he puts it, the film's "emblems" that guide his reading of the film. Once again, Elsaesser (ibid) recognises a film's awareness of itself as cinema. More than providing a psychologically innovative character dynamic, *Persona* also suggests a political reading, where the conflict between the two women, Elisabet and

Alma, provides the outline for class struggle between the middle and working class, a context in which “Elisabet’s silence becomes a weapon, the haughty refusal to trade in the currency of common and shared humanity” (2014:4). The following section provides an overview of the intersections between Elsaesser’s scholarship and notions of political cinema.

## **2.5 Elsaesser and political cinema**

For all its alleged visibility of participatory politics, “Western democracies have been careful to suppress [the] ‘participatory’ aspect of politics,” argues Elsaesser (1981:142):

In its commercial, mass-consumption form, the cinema offers its spectators access to plenitude, to identification with a libidinally charged self-image or love-object in the form of stars, and to immediacy or presence in the ‘realism’ of action and disaster.

Such technologies and forms are effectively distractions from political participation. Spectacle, especially, is important in distraction from political participation but also crystallising political participation. As Elsaesser (1985:97) explains, “political events, in order to attain [a] ‘truth of the image’ must necessarily pass through processes of sometimes intense specularisation”; paradoxically, “in order to become recognizable as political, actions have to be representable in terms of spectacle” (ibid). If spectacle can possess a politically productive function in film, Elsaesser cautions against the numb aesthetics of other media: “most current political film-making is involved in opposing [the] construction of the referent in television” (Elsaesser 1985:106). In this regard, Elsaesser (1981:142) is worth quoting at length:

The disappearance of history into the forms of instant live-ness and ubiquity of recall (as opposed to ‘memory’ or ‘experience’) is the characteristic of the technology which has superseded and appropriated the cinema, television. Its flow-patterns of programming within or across channels evenly distributes news coverage and talk-shows, soap-operas and current affairs ... Such a ‘naturalization’ of history, politics and personal memory via the categories of show, spectacle and direct address (euphemistically called ‘communication’) no longer needs to borrow its signifiers from mythology, whether national or classical ... Rather ... everything confirms, echoes, mirrors and corresponds to everything else;

a particular world-view and its values can be sustained by merely meeting its own reflection.

The idea of politics in film, or political cinema, takes different shapes in Elsaesser's work. For instance, in his discussion of Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), Elsaesser (2005:475) notes that the film "was political news because it started a minor civil war in Peru". Elsaesser explores tensions between humanism and anti-humanism in Herzog (Nagib 2013:103). For Elsaesser (Nagib 2013:108), Herzog's films *Fitzcarraldo* is a "Heimat film[s] in the jungle". Auteurs such as Werner Herzog "might seem to be making neither political films nor making films politically in the activist sense of a Godard or a Rocha, but [rather] a politics of cinema which does not offer a comfortable or easy seat for the European spectator" (Elsaesser 1993:120). Such political cinema is ever challenging, questioning and discomforting.

Elsaesser (1993) values the contributions of auteurism to discourse around political filmmaking: "one function of auteur cinema as a national cinema, before the advent of television, was to transcribe features of a nation's cultural tradition as figured in other art forms (the novel, theatre, opera) and to represent them in the cinema" (Elsaesser 1994b:26). The idea of the representation of a cultural tradition in film is potentially explosive, and reflects a concern of the current study on post-apartheid Afrikaans cinema, where tradition and history are often conflated and (re)presented (admittedly, without any Afrikaans auteurs that come to mind!) In middle 1960s Latin America, film was "partly modelled on European auteurism, but partly also poised to be a political cinema, influenced by Marxist or Maoist perspectives such as those voiced by Godard" (Elsaesser 1993:121).

Elsaesser is aware of political cinema as propaganda. Propaganda, as Elsaesser (1996:163) discusses Nazi entertainment cinema, highlights a certain absence: the Nazi regime's repression and destruction of other cultures and their cultural patrimony. In an essay on German filmmaker and Nazi-sympathiser Leni Riefenstahl, Elsaesser acknowledges the centrality of the body as political configuration: "the human figure can serve as a support for any kind of message, propaganda or advertising, all of which instrumentalise the body" (Elsaesser 1993a:15). He furthermore comments on a special type of film spectacle which

Riefenstahl indulges: her post-war film *Tiefland* depicts a “utopian pastoralism [that] belies the frustrations involved in its making” (Elsaesser 1993a:17). Here, the surface of the film – the pastoral tranquillity and equilibrium – represses a variety of tensions. While not aligning with her ideologically, Elsaesser appreciates Riefenstahl’s aesthetics. In his view, Riefenstahl “is responsible for two masterpieces, which, while politically abhorrent or at any rate highly suspect, nonetheless continue to be aesthetically impressive, indeed brilliant textbook examples of how to make a stirring film out of a tedious event (a political party conference), and how to create a four-hour narrative of drama, human interest and suspense out of a two-week sports meeting” (Elsaesser 1993a:15).

While films can be made to be political – to represent national concerns, ideals and tensions; to serve as propaganda; to aestheticise suffering – films are also read and interpreted as political. Elsaesser (1981:108) indicates that Fassbinder’s films as well as Syberberg’s *Our Hitler* (1978) “have been interpreted as Germany’s long-overdue *cultural reparation* for Nazism, a reparation which German post-war writers like Grass, Boll, Walser or Handke never quite seemed to deliver” (emphasis added). There is a sense of disappointment, of failure, regarding the extent to which cultural reparation following a time of conflict (even war) can provide closure or comfort. In part, this disappointment or failure derives from cinema’s inevitable *imaginary* dimension. Elsaesser (1985:105) explains:

While there are some very powerful (and well-rehearsed) arguments why, despite the cinema’s undeniable iconicity, the specific figurative operations of any filmic text ensure that the referent remains in some sense always ‘imaginary’, political film-making has, implicitly or explicitly, always challenged this position, whether by increasing the referential specificity of the fiction ( as in ‘historical’ films) or by insisting on some form of ‘materiality’ of the image (as in Farocki’s treatment of images as ‘documents’ for instance).

As a way in which to counter or compensate for cinema’s imaginary dimension, cinema can integrate the historical with the material to attempt a sense of realism. However, many attempts at realism are neutered or even nullified by mainstream narrative restrictions and conventions. Referring to American political cinema, Elsaesser and Wedel (2006:158) elaborates: “[t]he Vietnam experience could be

said to have introduced into mainstream cinema the same kinds of ruptures in realism (understood as narrative coherence, unified characters, or goal-directed story structure) that European filmmakers had introduced in the sixties” (Elsaesser & Wedel 2006:158). Somewhat paradoxically, the imaginary potency in and of American genre cinema provided a response to the trauma of the Vietnam war and American political (combat) failure in this regard. “Faced with the ‘horror of Vietnam’ ... Hollywood in the 1970s renewed itself and radically transformed its way of telling stories; it reached new audiences by upgrading the horror film into a mainstream genre” (Elsaesser & Wedel 2006:158); here, Elsaesser cites *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978) as a prime example. One non-genre response to Vietnam was Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*. Referring to the film’s politics, Elsaesser and Wedel (2006:171-172) combine up to six ideas in only two statements:

[T]he end of the journey through the blasted soundscapes of *Apocalypse Now* points only toward a further *mise en abyme*, more doublings and displacements, layers of rewriting the film author as anti-hero, the anti-hero as cultural pariah. By returning to Griffith and the origins of Hollywood, *Apocalypse Now* alludes to its own chain reaction of proxy wars: Coppola fighting Hollywood with a film about a war filmed in the middle of a proxy war in the Phillipines.

Contained in the above quote are references to sound design in the film, which contributes to the film’s aesthetic dynamic; the notion of cinematic self-awareness and recursive imagery; the construction of the anti-hero as cultural pariah (a character type already established in the 1960s in British cinema); an acknowledgement of *Apocalypse Now*’s cinematic ancestry in the epic, politically contentious filmmaking of DW Griffith; and the idea of proxy wars, where one event substitutes or stands for another.

While a film may be political in its content, it may not be politically *productive*. While films such as *Apocalypse Now* criticise American involvement in foreign wars, these films’ aesthetics, their form and their moment of production, suggest the failure of this critique. In this regard, I return to the tension between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. In the deceptive spaces where one encounters “*Erfahrung* devoid of *Erlebnis*”, one is confronted with “staged events, simulated dangers and performed identities – all made ‘safe’, ‘familiar’ and ‘closed’, this time by enacting the limits of experience

through regulated zones of access and exclusion, at once mediated and transparent, at once therapy and stimulation, in other words: policed in equal measure by force and by fantasy” (Elsaesser 2009a:303).

Below, Elsaesser (1990b:178) refers to films of the fantastic, but the statement could be applied to political cinema:

If one therefore wants to avoid making criticism a self-fulfilling prophecy, any reasoning about the social or political meaning of films of the fantastic has to respect both the *autonomy of the historical dimension* and the *autonomy of the textual level*, and seek structures – not where they overlap or mirror each other, but where there is evidence that the *text has seized, worked over, displaced, or objectified elements of the historical or the social sphere in order to bring them to representation* within the text’s own formal of generic constraints (emphasis added).

Cinema should be critically discussed in terms of the context of the film, as well as on a textual level where film form, aesthetics, *mise-en-scene* and *mise-en-abyme* are involved. However, the key point of the discussion is at the intersection of these levels and the resulting representation that the film audience consumes. Finally, Elsaesser (2001a) offers a notion which can explain the failure of some political films: the insipid. The insipid evokes sameness, similitude (Elsaesser 2001a:5). What was once stimulating and innovative later reads as devoid of pleasure and function, rendering it insipid. Or, as Elsaesser (2001a:5) describes it: “what was freshest and most vivid in [sensations collected by the Romantics] comes across the generations to us as the very epitome of the insipid, a dialectical reversal in which pure sensation turns around into its own opposite, its own absence”. The insipid epitomises the opposite of cinematic excitation, innovation, stimulation; it is “the terrible rule of the identical, the likeness, the metaphoric” (Elsaesser 2001a:6). The presence of the insipid suggests a poverty of the political cinematic imagination.

Another concept central to Elsaesser’s work, and key to the work of scholars exploring the diffusion of geo-political borders, boundaries or limits, is that of double occupancy. Peden (2013:118) states that term has not been widely used in film studies. Double occupancy often refers to filmmaking by individuals from minority

ethnicities in European cinema, such as Fatih Akin in Germany.<sup>42</sup> The work of filmmakers such as Akin represents a type of multi-cultural filmmaking that “can be located at the fault-lines of a very specific European history of colonialism, re-settlement and migration” (Elsaesser 2005:27). In this sense, double occupancy foregrounds the layering of histories and socio-political processes. For Elsaesser (2005:127), the quintessentially French world-citizen Amelie, from Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s film of the same name, is “the master or mistress of the strategy of double occupancy of site, space and time”, a multi-levelled individual presence suggestive of numerous localities.

Peden (2013:115) explores how Kaurismaki’s films constructs the idea of how ‘Europe’ occupies space in films where characters live in spaces described as bleak and urban. Here, Peden uses Elsaesser’s notion of double occupancy to examine Kaurismaki’s interrogation of identity and borders in Europe. “Double occupancy is a flexible term, but at its core is the idea that cultures and identities are in constant flux, characterized by overlaps and contradictions, and that the history of one nation is entwined with that of another” (Peden 2013:115).

As my critical discussion of numerous selected Afrikaans films will expound on and deepen Elsaesser’s work towards a theory of cinematic political impotence for an Afrikaans cinematic context, it is useful, at this point, to consider a summary of the key notions that an Elsaesserian film vocabulary has offered so far. The key ideas introduced in this chapter are, in no particular order:

- The experience economy, and its accompanying emotional intensities, excesses and spectacle
- The social and historical imaginary, and the accompanying notion of imaginary space
- Patriarchal legitimacy in the construction of male/masculine and female/feminine
- Trauma and mourning work

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<sup>42</sup> Notably, Fehrenbach (2006:111) suggests that numerous West Germans between 1945 and 1960 “consciously worked to Americanize the postwar German problem of race in order to pursue specific strategic political and social agendas”.

- Emblematic clusters and/or chains of images which call attention to themselves in a given film
- Notions surrounding the idea of blockbuster films
- Narrative legibility (“access for all”)
- *Mise-en-scene* and *mise-en-abyme*, or recursive imagery
- Paradoxes and contradictions (of and in histories, narrative, images)
- The persistence of Hollywood as aesthetic strategy
- The burden of histories
- History as fetish-object
- The cinema of experience versus the experience of cinema, as tied to notions of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*
- Utilising a film’s opening scene as a manual that informs the viewer how to watch, i.e. make sense of, the rest of the film
- Failure (parapraxis) and the insipid.

## 2.6 A political allegiance: Elsaesser and Jameson

Similar to Elsaesser’s integrated view of global and national cinemas, and the dependence of national cinemas on Hollywood film, Fredric Jameson acknowledges the link between the “globalisation of the capitalist economy (greatly intensified since the 1970s) and growing concentration of corporate power within the film industry, a linkage that recasts virtually every cinematic development in the United States and elsewhere” (Boggs & Pollard 2003:8). The process of globalisation signifies, for Hall (1993:353), “the internalisation of production and consumption, the spread of global communications networks” as the latest phase in an extended political process. The intensified globalisation of capitalism and the intensification of corporatism in film provide the structural base for postmodern cinema. While the difference between postmodernism and modernism is flexible and even overlapping (Boggs & Pollard 2003:127), the latter’s sense of optimism and Enlightenment primacy of reason stands in contrast to postmodern cinema’s plurality and ambiguity in forms of cultural expression (2003:37). Despite the political potential of notions of plurality and ambiguity, postmodern cinema is a politically impotent form of cultural expression, as Fredric Jameson suggested, due to its failure to offer an exit from or a viable



alternative to late capitalism's various anxieties (Bogg & Pollard 2003:18). In terms of postmodernism's political impotence, Elsaesser (1996:164) recognises in Steven Spielberg's films, especially *Schindler's List*, the "typically postmodern hubris" that film has the ability and capacity to redeem the past and rescue the socio-historical real. Boggs and Pollard (2003:16) identify the following trends of postmodern cinema:

- blockbuster spectacle
- an existential morass (noir, neo-noir)
- the "uniquely American slide into historical quagmire and with it the vanishing of classic hero-protagonists" (ibid)
- a sense of disorder and chaos as driving forces in and of the world
- forms of mockery and subversion, and an inversion of cinematic norms and conventions.

These trends validate Elsaesser's reflections on the cultural eminence of the blockbuster and his own commentary on the inversion (or not) of cinematic forms and conventions.

With the political impotence of postmodernism and postmodern cinema as a point of departure, cultural critic and post-Marxist critic Fredric Jameson's research on (visual) culture presents a stimulating complement to Elsaesser's work as discussed above. Jameson is often located in relation to conception and critiques of postmodernism. In Jameson's view, late capitalist societies (or, postmodern societies) are not only media-dominated, but also characterised by "a present that is multi-faceted, globalized and commodified, a culturally eclectic, shifting reality which combines what Jameson describes as a *nostalgic and conservative* longing for the past with the *erasure of the boundaries that separate past and present*" (emphasis added) (Hope 2010:105). Indeed, Jameson pioneered the study of postmodernism across the arts (Wayne 2005:105). Jameson's project, with its emphasis on modernism as an often elite artistic practice, may have led to him falling out of favour with some more contemporary theorists, but integral parts of Jameson's work remain significant elements in establishing a vocabulary which allows a critical discussion of political cinema and its unfortunate cohort, cinematic political impotence. Keucheyan (2013:56) lists Jameson as a pessimist in his typology of contemporary critical

intellectuals. Pessimists are theorists who “continue to produce forms of critical theory, while evincing scepticism about the possibility of overthrowing capitalism in the foreseeable future”.<sup>43</sup> Nealon (2012:4) comments how some neo-Deleuzian postmodern materialists often consider Jameson as outdated, his methodologies old-fashioned. Nealon (2012:5) suggests, however, that Jameson’s project might be more positive than some may suspect: “surely any such work of negation must, in a dialectical system, be compensated for by an affirmation. What about this less-discussed ‘affirmative’ Jameson?” Nealon (2012:8) continues to explain that Jameson’s work is actually “far more schizo than it is centered, more ‘postmodern’ than it is ‘modern’”.<sup>44</sup>

For Jameson, the postmodern includes popular genres in “similar experiments in time, space and perception that modernist culture developed”, experiments (such as films) produced in “centres of corporate media capital and distributed to global audiences” (Wayne 2005:108). Even if we have moved beyond postmodernism to a post-postmodernism, as Nealon (2012:x) suggests, this shift does not imply a clear break between one (temporal and/or artistic) period and another, but rather a difference in intensity as much as a difference in kind. For Jameson, postmodernism is primarily “a historical period of capitalist development rather than (or, really, as the prior ground of) understanding it as a style of artistic practice”, art movement or zeitgeist (Nealon 2012:x). Importantly, and in opposition to what some theorists may suggest, postmodernism cannot be simply archived, “precisely because it’s hard to understand today as anything other than an *intensified* version of yesterday” (emphasis added) (Nealon 2012:8).

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<sup>43</sup> Another type Keucheyan (2013:62) identifies is the innovator, a theorist who innovates by way of hybridisation. As a result, innovators’ work features “an intermingling of heterogeneous references”. Such innovators include Laclau, who “privileges the Gramscian problematics of ‘hegemony’ and ‘populism’” (2013:62-63). [Another innovator named here, Žižek, is singled out for his adeptness at hybridizing theories (2013:62)].

<sup>44</sup> See also Angela McRobbie’s appraisal of Jameson in *The Uses of Cultural Studies: a textbook* (2005). For additional reading, Jameson’s *The Seeds of Time* (1994) grapples with “the problem of how to generate a description of the complete dominion of multinational global capitalism and the accelerated plurality of its cultural styles” (Connor 1997:301). As Schweighauser (2007:586) describes it, Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005) posits science fiction as our confrontation with our own incapacity of imagining Utopia.

This intensification of the (even recent) past in culture parallels the intensification of corporatism in the culture industry, where postmodernism, and postmodern cinema, show its neoliberal colours. Neoliberalism is an “insidious political rationality” as a form of governance, and also of how one governs oneself (McNay 2014:222), and it shapes cultural patrimony. Hall (2011:706) allows neoliberalism only a provisional conceptual identity, one that is based on the notion of the “free, possessive individual”. From this view, the state is seen as oppressive, a force of intrusion rather than assistance; as such, the state has no place in regulating the (free market) economy or to interfere with individuals’ right to turn a profit and become wealthy. Wealth here refers increasingly, for Hall (2011:722), to greed, rampant consumerism and the cultivation of the individual’s desire to obtain objects that connote wealth. Hall (2011:709) provides a historical overview of neoliberalism as well. The 1880s and 1920s signify a watershed moment in the global economic arena, seeing the rise of Fordism, mass production and consumer, and mass entertainment (2011:711).

In this (post-)postmodern context that Westernised nations allegedly inhabit, Jameson argues that works of mass culture participate in processes of commodification. For Modleski (2013:41), Jameson “accurately notes that precisely in order to legitimatise the status quo, the works of mass culture must ‘deflect ... the deepest and most fundamental hopes ... of the collectivity to which they can therefore ... be found to have given voice’”. In making sense of these products of an in mass culture and commodification, Wayne (2005:108) describes Jameson’s “decoding of culture” as “relentlessly symptomatic”, an approach characterised by Jameson’s emphasis on what is “*repressed* in the text, its strategic silences and aversions to social content too problematic, too profoundly disturbing to the very basis on which life (as the text conceives it) is constituted”. Wayne (2005:109) elaborates: “For Jameson, all texts, aesthetic theories as much as aesthetic practices, are essentially narratives which form themselves around an unresolved and possibly irresolvable problem”. Understandably, Wayne (2005:119) criticises Jameson for over emphasising “the *limits* of representation” which results in a playing down of “the political significance or possibilities of what is *actually* represented *within* the limits of representation” (emphasis in original). In addition, it may be more accurate, as Wayne (2005:125) suggests, to speak of postmodernism’s continuing significance rather than referring to its enduring

dominance, a validation of Nealon's (2012) justification and confirmation of post-postmodernism.

Finally, Wayne (2005:127) warns that an "over-reliance on symptomatic readings of the political unconscious ... privileges the specialised critic's role in hermeneutic discovery and downplays the extent to which popular culture can actually express ... critical cognitions of the world". To address Wayne's (2005) concern above, cultural critics should address mass cultural products, products of cultural commodification and consumption, as critical cognitions of society that are worth taking seriously *in addition to* pointing out those absences or unresolved or irresolvable narrative points as symptomatic of some sort of societal distortion that a film commits.

For Jameson, it is "the *imitation* of style or a plurality of styles that is foregrounded in postmodernism, to the detriment of the reference (the world the sign refers to)" (emphasis in original) (2005:16). To provide a sense of what life is like for the subject under postmodernism, Jameson borrows the Lacanian notion of schizophrenia, where schizophrenia implies the increasing inability of the subject to grapple with and operate within the symbolic order; the implication for Jameson is that "the subject's capacity to use signs to map the world around them is problematised" (2005:16). Put differently, the subject may increasingly grapple with representation and self-articulation in a (post-) postmodern context. The (post-) postmodern is all-enveloping, or, as Jameson would put it, "the late capitalist social realm is inexorably 'totalized'". As Nealon (2012:22) explains, totalisation is Jameson's notion to refer to "the postmodern sense that there is no 'outside': nature is gone forever, he writes, so culture is all there is". This totalisation facilitates the type of schizophrenia referred to above, possibly through processes of de-socialisation and isolation on an industrial, economic level.

The socialisation of production thus comes into contradiction with the *de-socialisation* which dominates the capitalist mode of production: the hierarchical arrangements within the production process, the lack of popular control over the means of production generally, the lack of accountability over elites (political and economic), the competition (which cuts across and undermines cooperation) which the unquenchable thirst for profit requires, and the everyday exchanges in the market which take place as discrete *isolated acts* between buyers and sellers (denying that those changes impact on others) (emphasis in original) (Wayne 2005:115).

One cultural activity that occurs in this context of totalisation is occasional periodisation. Nealon (2012:40) borrows the idea of periodisation from Jameson: “to periodize the recent past is, of course, simultaneously to periodize the present: to begin figuring out how the cultural, political and economic axioms of today ... are related to the axioms of yesterday”. Such periodization may rely on mechanisms of nostalgia and pastiche. Jameson has singled out *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974) and *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), for serving as “debased substitutes for historical consciousness, distorting the relationship between the past and the present” (Walder 2013:149). Jameson is especially critical of regressive nostalgia as it occurs in pastiche. Pastiche is “the imitation of a peculiar or unique style [...] but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motive” (Jameson 1985:114). Pastiche, then, is blank parody [Wayne (2005:123); see also Harrow (2007:86-88)].

Pastiche superficially retains a semblance of a prior text while lacking any satirical, politically meaningful intent. In pastiche, “the sheer difference of increasingly distinct and eccentric individualities turns under its own momentum into repetition and sameness” (Jameson 1981b:114). From this position, films that attempt a multicultural celebration of diversity and ethnic plurality may instead become, somewhat paradoxically, mundane and even insipid. The insipid, here embodied by pastiche and observed across Afrikaans cinema for instance, is characterised by a repetition and similarity that makes diversity and difference into requisites for conformity. For Jameson (1982:117), art has historically aimed to develop imaginary solutions to real social issues, or contradictions, but pastiche undercuts this potential by minimising contradiction and contrast.

As Wayne (2005:112) explains, Jameson “sees the return to the 1950s [in American cinema] as an example of a pervasive nostalgia within consumer culture, ‘the deliberate substitution of the pastiche and imitation of past styles for the impossible invention of adequate contemporary or post-contemporary ones’”.<sup>45</sup> Given

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<sup>45</sup> Here, a key idea in much of Žižek’s writing comes to mind [see *Living in the End Times* (2011)]: that popular culture finds it impossible to present an end and/or alternative to capitalism even as this same cinema culture envisions the end of the world in one apocalyptic narrative after another.

nostalgia's regular reliance on pastiche, Jameson, as Nealon (2012:13) describes, "harbors very little hope for nostalgia as a mode of critical engagement – that is, Jameson argues that the political and artistic strategies of resistance born in the 1960s aren't likely to be effective in the very different social and political climate of the 1980s". These ideas of pastiche and nostalgia have informed Jameson's critical engagement with certain films over the past decades, and have resulted in some stimulating interpretations of popular films.

For instance, Cohen (1998:171) credits Jameson's interest in the bar motif in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), where Mt Rushmore is "a site 'which has no inside and cannot be penetrated'". Elsewhere, Jameson has explored thinking around paranoia in postmodernism as it manifests in what he refers to as the paranoia film. "The paranoia film is a distorted representation of advanced capitalism" (Wayne 2005:17), since paranoia is both a "response to ... capital, technology and cultural representation" as well as "a profoundly anti-postmodern sensibility insofar as it insists that *everything is connected*" (emphasis in original) (2005:106). Jameson's writing on film includes but is not limited to essays on *Diva* (Beineix, 1981) and that film's approach to ideological contradiction by way of political allegory (Jameson 1982:119). Jameson (1981b) has also written on *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980), criticising the film's insistence on pastiche (1981:114), its "depthless characters" and "mundanity of family life" (1981b:117). Jack Nicholson's character in *The Shining* is not possessed by a supernatural evil force, says Jameson (1981b:120), but rather by History itself, the American Past contained within the parameters and architecture of the Overlook Hotel (Jameson 1981b:120).

The film itself is read as a 'working out' of early 1980s American class fantasies (1981b:123). In conversation with Jameson, Michael Chanan (2000:[sp]) describes how some shots in John Ford's films are characterised by an exceptionally static camera. This device is as much as a measure to control the viewer as Hitchcock's tight framing and rapid editing. Jameson (1986:311) has also over the years criticised what he refers to as the nostalgia film's glossiness, and has criticised nostalgia films for using their "period film reality" as "visual commodity". Significantly, Jameson's (1977a) essay on *Dog Day Afternoon* (Lumet, 1975) and his emphasis on the struggles around the "representability of class struggles" set the tone for many

discussions of not only the parameters and limitations of political film, but also of American 1970s cinema. More recently, Jameson (2006) contributed an appreciative article on Russian filmmaker Alexander Sokurov, whom Jameson praises for his skill in both the documentary genre and in fictional narratives (2006:3).

This chapter's critical discussion of selected notions from the scholarship Elsaesser and Jameson provides a conceptual-theoretical framework and context, as well as a vocabulary, for the analyses of Afrikaans films in Chapters Four and Five. Having established this conceptual-theoretical framework, Chapter Three offers an exploration of South African cinema and of political cinema that links to especially Elsaesser's studies.

## **CHAPTER THREE: AFRIKAANS CINEMA BEFORE AND AFTER POLITICAL TRANSITION: CONTEXTUALISING AFRIKAANS CINEMA AND POLITICAL CINEMA**

### **3.1 Chapter introduction**

This chapter introduces key ideas around notions of political cinema and contextualises variables that inform this study's positioning of Afrikaans cinema as politically impotent. These forces and variables include neoliberalism [see Treffry-Goatley (2010)] globalisation, and culture. The chapter aims to arrive at specific definition of 'politics' in a cinematic sense, a definition that acknowledges the tension between industry and creativity. Jacques Ranciere is useful in framing a relation between politics and art: like art, politics "cuts into that great metaphor where words and images are continuously sliding in and out of each other to produce the sensory evidence of a world in order" (2006:152). A final aim of the chapter is to recontextualise Afrikaans language cinema in relation to political cinema.

Specifically, Afrikaans cinema's political economy is explored and problematised, while the contributions of key Afrikaans filmmakers (whose films can be positioned as political) are discussed in order to emphasise the political impotence of contemporary Afrikaans cinema. A case study of *Hoofmeisie* (Du Toit 2011) as the nadir of Afrikaans cinema as culture industry reads the film in terms of its adherence to economic markers (through product placement, or, brand integration) and its commitment to hegemonic narrative forms. I define product placement as the inclusion of products and brands in a film for commercial profit purposes, while product or brand integration indicates a much more intertwined and co-dependent relationship between film and product, where the removal of the latter might even nullify the former.

Throughout the study I refer to Western modes of filmmaking and Western film languages. For purposes of clarity, I borrow my use of 'West' and its variants from Alain Badiou (2012:27), who is worth quoting at length:



We shall call 'Western' the countries which proudly call themselves by that name: countries historically situated at the leading edge of capitalist development, with a vigorous imperial and bellicose tradition behind them, still equipped with an economic and financial strike force that allows them to purchase corrupt governments the world over, and with a military strike force which enables them to intimidate all potential enemies of their domination. Let us add that these countries are extremely satisfied with their state system, which they call 'democracy'- a system that is in fact particularly attuned to the peaceful coexistence of the various fractions of the governing oligarchy, which, in agreement on the basics (market economy, parliamentary regime, vigilant hostility towards anything dissimilar from them and whose generic name is 'communism') are nevertheless separated by various nuances.

'Western' is firstly, then, a self-claimed label, and secondly denotes a politically contentious history of domination and expansion (forces that infuse South African history as well). South Africa regularly foregrounds the success of its political transition as a success of democracy even as certain 'communist' and socialist tendencies may remain. The idea of democracy itself requires an awareness of its processional limitations. Dahlgren (2013:524) notes that democracy is closely linked to societal communication as utilised by political systems. In addition to the positioning of democracy in certain political systems, the reciprocal relationship between democracy and media is further informed by the relationship between democracy and the market; this relationship has a significant influence on how the media is organised (Volltmer 2013:164). The relation between democracy and the market suggests a form of openness. Democracy's "openness to the outside is simultaneously an openness to danger - it is both democracy's chance *and* its fragility" (emphasis in original) (Haddid 2013:60). That is, democracy is accompanied by risk as much as chance as democracy can provide its own self-critique as much as undermine such criticism (2013:60). Put somewhat differently, "[d]emocracy's openness to alterity also implies a certain alterity to itself" that is both conceptual and pragmatic (Cheah & Guerlac 2009:12).

For this study, I refer to 'West' and 'Western' not only in a political sense, but also in a narrative sense due to Afrikaans film's continuing reliance on classical Hollywood narrative storytelling techniques. Not only does South African cinema screen primarily either Hollywood films or so-called commercially viable art house films (Jacobs 2011:129), but Afrikaans cinema does not (with a few exceptions)

consciously work away from or against Hollywood cinema. Jameson, as quoted in Szeman (2002:820), finds the global dominance of American cinema disturbing because the hegemonic constellation of the United States has been accompanied by the decline of erstwhile possibilities of reimagined socio-cultural relations as promoted by political films of the 1960s and 70s. As Miller (2005:18) states, “Hollywood is a citadel of cultural policy”, singular in its capacity to represent the utter power and pervasiveness of capital. In short, Hollywood’s influence on other cinemas is determinative and pervasive.

The image and notion of Hollywood as citadel of cultural policy is powerful and enduring. It suggests a cultural and ideological centrality that impacts upon all other cinemas that by their less-influential status is not-Hollywood. Hollywood is aware of its dominance, as Elsaesser (2005:38) explains, as national cinema whether from Europe or Latin America are subservient to Hollywood: regardless of the variety of national cinemas across the globe (Dutch, French, Chilean), they serve first and foremost as a market for American cinema. These national cinemas often sustain Hollywood norms and practices (ibid).

Afrikaans cinema’s reliance on Hollywood narrative models and its dependence on its formulae of familiarity contribute to Afrikaans cinema’s positioning as a cinema of political impotence. In his appreciation of the work of Thelma Gutsche, Masilela (2000:57) notes how Gutsche’s book on South African film “is not really about South African cinema ... but more about the entrance of European modernity into South African film through film culture”. Botha (2012:10) explains that Gutsche, however, “approached the production of South African cinema as a historian of social and cultural institutions, rather than a film historian of artistic processes or from a concern with aesthetics of form”. Although producing significant studies on the representation of class and/or race in South African cinema, scholars such as Tomaselli (1989), Davis (1996) as well as Balseiro and Masilela (2003) were also more occupied with the social, cultural, economic and political histories of South African cinema before and during the apartheid years than artistic processes or auteur cinema (Botha 2012). Masilela (2000:63) later describes Gutsche’s “astonishing Europeanist or Anglophilic critical sensibility”. Gutsche condemns the film *The Great Kimberley Train Robbery* (1911) for “having aligned itself with American sensationalism against

European classicism”, but Masilela (2000:64) does not, in turn, condemn Gutsche for her hostility towards American cinema; “one could say she was politically correct (in the old non-American sense) in analysing American films because they were hegemonic, and were shaping the cultural sensibility of the South African imagination”, or in terms of the dominant power and policy makers, the Afrikaans imagination. Afrikaans cinema has always been, and continues to be, indebted to Hollywood cinema. While this emulation of Hollywood form and practice is not unique to Afrikaans cinema, its occurrence during two key periods that called international attention towards the country (apartheid South Africa and democratic South Africa) is important.

For now, I turn to South African and global histories to explore how a culture (and as part of that culture, cinema) can choose to respond (or not) *in the present* to the complexities and inequalities *of the past*. To introduce this section, it is worth quoting Krog (2002:238), who points out the difficulty in engaging with troubled pasts while reserving the right to initiate such an engagement:

Nowhere in our literature do you find captured the extent of the pathos, the pain, the horror, the voices of this country. The reluctance of German literature to look Auschwitz in the face, the refusal to deal with it except in school textbooks, museums and memorials, is precisely [a] fear of sacrilege ... [a]s if any attempt to give a body to the unnameable is to trivialize its holy character. It's all well and good to listen to victims in court cases, the argument goes, but artists should keep their grubby hands off the stories. German artists could not find the *form* in which to deal with Auschwitz. They refused to take possession of their own history. So the inevitable happened. Hollywood took it away from them. A soap opera laid claim to the statistic, the metaphor, the abstraction that was Auschwitz.

Krog (ibid) emphasises two key points: there is a perception in South Africa that artists should not engage with the severity of politics and certain events, and that even if artists were to do so, they might struggle to find the visual language (in film, for instance), to possess their histories and tell its stories.

### 3.2 A matter of history

For South Africans, 2014 was a year of celebration and critical retrospection. Across multiple media platforms, South Africans examined the successes and failures of their 20 year old democracy and ruminated on the road ahead given the country's challenges. The post-apartheid condition, as Hook (2014:4) describes it, is characterised by the acutely manifest social contradictions that accompany inequality. There is a desire transcend the past as well as a stalling of such possibilities due to insufficient structural change (2014:6). Hook's (2014:15) use of "(post)apartheid" denotes a break from the apartheid past while acknowledging the current period as a "sub-category ... of the apartheid past", signifying the past as indelibly part of the present (and, by implication, the future).

South Africa's transition from an overtly Christian nationalist minority regime to democratic rule was not a spontaneous event that occurred serendipitously, but the result of years of violence, toil, negotiation, sanctions and international pressure. Given the tumultuous build-up to political changeover, the transition was not an event that offered instantaneous cultural and ethnic reconciliation. The South African past – it is better, I think, to refer to its pasts – was filled with micro-narratives of sudden disappearances, the deaths of dissidents in police custody, and calculated institutional control. In apartheid South Africa, public schools (or specifically, those schools attended by white learners) and the church (specifically the Dutch Reformed Church) played key roles in supporting white hegemonic control in an Althusserian manner, training citizens to participate consensually in a system of naturalised oppression and righteous privilege, of controlled access to white inhabited areas and black migrant labour [see Althusser (1976); also see Giliomee (2003:489-498)]. As Treffry-Goatley (2010:2) succinctly puts it: "[m]ore than 400 years of colonial rule and 46 years of apartheid had resulted in a severely divided society with little sense of national identity or togetherness".

Chantal Mouffe (2005:119) describes precisely the type of situation where disillusionment follows political struggle: "[a]fter the euphoria of the 1990s where the final victory of liberal democracy and the coming of a 'new world order' were hailed from so many quarters, new antagonisms (sic) have emerged which represent

challenges that decades of neo-liberal hegemony have made us unable to confront". Political transition did not by default imply political equality or stability. Mouffe (2005:119) emphasises the importance of the "recognition of social division and the legitimation of conflict" instead of sustaining the illusionally emancipatory nature of the 'new world order'. Indeed, for Mouffe (Dahlgren 2013:525), "there is no end to the political, no juncture awaiting us which will not be characterised by conflicts and antagonisms. In a similar vein, we will never arrive at a fully realised democracy ... where unanimity prevails". Such a reconciliatory juncture remains illusional, a political fantasy that fails to reconcile the conflicts between real life and how life is imagined in film (Jaikumar 2006:240). Distiller (2008:280) recounts Kelwyn Sole's argument for why he is unconvinced by "the celebratory tone of a South African theory which locates political victory in cultural transformation". For Sole, as Distiller (2008:280) indicates, South African life remains defined, delimited and determined by race, gender and class.

The situation is so fraught with with these visible remainders of social division and discrimination that "political action oftentimes relies on the solidarity of suffering"; for this reason, as Distiller (2008:280) makes clear, it is politically significant to differentiate between culture and nature, between materiality and the environment, and biology, to "acknowledge the material realities of these inherited systems of apparent difference". Any cultural response to historical political inequality and oppression should address the material forces and the biological markers that proclaimed the differences between the 'I' and the Other. As indicated earlier, I am interested in the cultural response to the conflict and various ideological tensions presented by apartheid as a key event in South African histories, specifically a cinematic response to such histories.

Addressing a problematic past incurs challenges even beyond what Krog (2012) alluded to earlier. Speaking from a European context, Jarausch and Lindenberger (2006:3) state that European countries with their own respective histories of feudalism and revolt offer "a national glorification of the past" to appease the tourism industry (as well as, I want to add, the inhabitants of that area), which often compromises the historical and political integrity of the given past by providing a white-washed, almost amnesiac present seemingly untouched by what had come

before. Part of the challenge of addressing the past is to acknowledge the different *pasts* that all struggle for dominance in the national narrative. These pasts draw on differing and often conflicting memories and accounts of events that may or may not intersect. Jarausch and Lindenberger (2006:5) explain that where memories overlap and traverse one another, a key challenge is the cultivation of an openness to the experiences of the other. The authors advocate for an inclusive reconciliatory approach where the testimony, memories and accounts of the past of those that have been historically and politically othered will be encouraged in critical discourse about the past(s).

Such efforts at inclusion and understanding a variety of conflicting memories and experiences marked by difference are often compromised. When the past is articulated by a dominant culture, it is a past already infused and mediated by numerous myths of purity and glorious triumph. As Julie Reid (2011) demonstrates, South African culture, and cinema in particular, has its own sets of myths and counter-myths that inform (for better and for worse) how South Africa engages with the past. Reid's doctoral research offers valuable insights into such mythological mechanisms as articulated in her theoretical framework for analysing myth and counter myth (2011:159). Her extensive study explores social identity myths, for instance (2011:142), and offers a semiotic myth inventory (2011:148). Of particular interest is the construction of the new white (Reid 2011:307), but a dedicated response, evaluation and challenge to Reid's research – specifically the idea of “myths of reconciliation which encourage social cohesion” (2011:361) – falls beyond the scope of the current study.

What to make of Afrikaans films as still dominant cultural articulation of a minority culture in a larger, layered and complex system or artistic-commercial output? While ethnic minorities are prone to cultural representation through prejudice and stereotypes in the media (Volltmer 2013:166), it would be problematic to assume that the minorities are not in some way responsible for their representation, as is the case in Afrikaans cinema. Indeed, the idea of Afrikaans cinema as a minority cinema can be misleading. A minority can be defined as a social group that occupies a position of numerical inferiority in a society, and as such is vulnerable to social inferiority, marginalisation and voicelessness (Edgar & Sedgwick 2008:212). Note that an

oligarchy is a numerical minority but nonetheless ‘wields power over other social groups’ (ibid). The idea of a minority as primarily numerical social designation is challenged by Deleuze and Guattari (in Edgar & Sedgwick 2008:212). A minority can be either small or large in number; a minority can paradoxically be numerous, even infinite (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:469). To be sure, the notion of majority actually “[refer] not to a greater relative quantity but to the determination of a state or standard in relation to which larger quantities, as well as the smallest, can be said to be minoritarian: *white-man, adult-male*, etc. Majority implies a state of domination, not the reverse” (emphasis added) (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:291). Deleuze and Guattari (Edgar & Sedgwick 2008:212) distinguish between majoritarian and minoritarian systems (of representation) where minoritarian does not equal being in a minority but can indicate a position of social inferiority. In fact, minorities often rewrite their past in an assertive, legitimising narrative; for Žižek (2005:126), this “retroactive rewriting” omits “the Real of a traumatic encounter”.

In terms of Afrikaans cinema as a minority cinema, it would be misguided to perceive Afrikaans cinema as subsequently powerless and in the margins, as I will show. One should not underestimate the soft power, or soft control, that Afrikaans cinema still exerts in post-apartheid South Africa. ‘Soft’ forms of control are cultural forms of control (Wayne 2005:105); soft power involves shaping others’ perceptions. Gramsci went beyond the essentialist definition of hegemony as a sense of collective class consensus by expanding the notion (Hall 1996:425). Firstly, hegemony is a general term applicable to broadly all classes, thereby making ‘hegemony’ into a more general analytic term (1996:426). Hall (ibid) demonstrates this use and function of hegemony in terms of South Africa: the more general way of applying hegemony would refer to the ways in which in South Africa there are attempts “to ‘win’ the consent of certain subaltern classes and groups – for example, the coloured strata or ‘tribal’ blacks – in the strategy of forging alliances with against the mass of rural and industrial blacks” (ibid).

Afrikaans cinema is clearly part of a complex cultural system that constitutes South Africa, but is its own distinct, separate culture as well. Appiah (2006:118) defines culture as “whatever people make and invest with significance through the exercise of human creativity”, where interpreting culture, such as films, requires knowledge of

the specific socio-historical context. Appiah (2006:118) uses cultural patrimony to refer to “products of a culture: the group from whose conventions the object derives its significance. Here the objects are understood to belong to a particular group, heirs to a trans-historical identity, whose patrimony they are” (2006:118). In this sense, films that emerge from a specific cultural context need to be read and interpreted against that background and as part of that context, oscillating between sustaining that culture and subverting it.

A critical engagement with the past is crucial in making sense of the present, especially where the past is characterised by momentous negative events, be it the open violence of armed conflict or the insidious violence of law and policy. As Coombes (2003:8) puts it, “research on the witnessing and testimony collected in the aftermath of genocide, war, or systematic political repression (*such as in the case of South Africa*) has pointed to the impact of trauma on memory and the distinction between narrative and traumatic memory” (emphasis added). Post-conflict societies such as South Africa should be aware of the possibilities of exacerbating past transgressions, and be cognisant of how many new democracies present socio-economic hardship (Volltmer 2013:109), issues that political cinema can address. It is not sufficient for the media to not perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices, explains Volltmer (2013:195).

Rather, media should create opportunities of dialogue between citizens (ibid). Such a dialogue is crucial in avoiding a myopic film culture that fails to hold itself accountable. If Vattimo and Zabalala (2011:7) are correct in stating that major crises to have hit the United States have ironically (and devastatingly) lead to “an intensification of the politics that created these events in the first place”, Afrikaans cinema and its stakeholders should be cautious to not perpetuate the industrial and symbolic systems that had originally lead to Afrikaans cinema’s complicity (with few notable exceptions) in a system of oppression and negative media representation of specific races and classes.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Botha (2012:57, 77, 123, 139) identifies Jans Rautenbach, Manie van Rensburg and Katinka Heyns as some of the key figures in the Afrikaans film industry who criticised apartheid governance.



As Elsaesser has shown, perhaps the most visible engagement with a past characterised by violence and suffering, is that of Germany following the Holocaust.<sup>47</sup> The reference to Germany in a study of Afrikaans film is particularly resonant, as Nel (2007:7-8) suggests that it is “possible to draw a parallel between the psyche of post-Nazi Germans and post-apartheid Afrikaners. The ambivalence is brought about by inheriting an identity which is closely linked to a history of inhumanity”. Rousso (2006:30) argues that the continuing conversations about the Jewish Holocaust persist because of similar occurrences and situations in numerous other countries, “as, for example, in the former dictatorships of Latin America, in post-Apartheid [sic] South Africa, in Cambodia, and in Rwanda, which have experienced the bloodiest genocides since 1945”. Rousso (2006:30-31) offers three phases in addressing the past. The first phase, which centers around “preserving the traces of the past”, is important for national memory.

The second phase foregrounds forgetting and silence, a deliberate refusal to address or engage with the past in the present. I will return to this notion of forgetting later in this chapter (see section 2.5.2). Russo’s third stage presents a return to the voices of the past – a moment of anamnesis – where forgetting makes way for articulation. In post-WWII Germany, a culture of silence over the Holocaust “functioned as a kind of protective zone or cocoon, within which the transformation of society could take place” (Assman 2012:58).<sup>48</sup> In this instance, the forgetting and silence can forge an environment where socio-political progress is possible.

In the German context, “forgetting was not conceived of as a repression of memory; rather, it was connected to a spirit of renewal and of openness toward the future. This hope in the regenerative power of the future was a central value of the theory of

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<sup>47</sup> Referring to the production of the series *Holocaust*, Bathrick (2006:143) is mainly concerned with why this television miniseries, for all its aesthetic failure and reliance on viewers’ emotional responses, managed to elicit discussions of history and memory that, previously, rational discourse and other representations had failed to do. The concern here is with the series’ emphasis on emotion rather than argument, and its aesthetic limitations and conventions.

<sup>48</sup> Jeffries (2015:[sp]) offers an account of the Holocaust documentary *Night Will Fall* (Bernstein 1945), which was locked away from the public sphere for 70 years. Anthropologist and director Andre Singer aims to bring the film to a large audience on British television, and says that the horrific, unsettling images of the nature presented by *Night Will Fall* must be seen in order to sustain a sense of remembrance of atrocities (ibid).

modernization shared by all European countries in both East and West” (Assman 2012:59). Assman (2012) suggests that what Rousso offers as different phases can occur simultaneously, that forgetting and silencing can be accompanied by an engagement of the past (and not a decided-upon obliviousness to it). Assman (2012) also holds that forgetting and silence do not paralyse the critical engagement with history by default, since forgetting in this instance concerns making space for active collaboration towards the future. However, one should not read this negotiation between forgetting and engaging the past as a set of options available to the agents in the historical narrative that can be selected at will; Shortt (2012:120) explains that ‘forgetting’ the past was not possible after unification, given Germany’s decidedly self-reflexive memory culture.<sup>49</sup>

Germany responded to the Holocaust and the GDR in clear ways, but such a pronounced response is by no means universal. Referring to the political currents that historically informed East European cinema, Imre (2005:xv-xvi) explains that “[r]ather than an opportunity to learn from the experience of socialism and allow existing theories of global culture to be transformed by the lessons, the energy released by the fall of the Wall became *transformed into the celebration of the victory of capitalism*, which rendered superfluous a sustained engagement with the socialist past and the postsocialist present” (emphasis added). In this instance, an over emphasis on the present and its possibilities of the future is explicitly associated with a specific economic system that has at its core process of exploitation and marginalisation; as such, the victory is hollow. The benefits of the present, of the transition, cannot be celebrated without engaging with the past.

The cinematic response to the past in this instance is worth noting: while directors in East Europe have depended on historical epics as well as Hollywood style genre films to tell their stories, Imre (2005:xvii) states that “the only formula that has proven truly successful outside of Eastern Europe has been to blend the historical soul-searching mission of national cinema with an easily digestible format that employs humour and nostalgia, as in the case of the Oscar-winning *Kolya* (Jan Sverak, 1996)”. Important here is that Eastern European attempts at a historically and

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<sup>49</sup> Shortt (2012) suggests that the Holocaust had prepared Germany on how to address the GDR era in an appropriate manner, where forgetting and silence were not viable cultural responses.

politically conscious national cinema are described as “easily digestible” – where this phrase refers to an uncritical and unreflexive engagement - and uses comedy and nostalgia to sustain its project. In this regard, Roberto Begnini’s Oscar winning wartime romantic fantasy *La vita e bella* (*Life is Beautiful*, 1998) received much criticism soon after the film’s release exactly for its use of comedy and romance (which are “easily digestible”) to smooth over the cruelty and inhumanity of the Holocaust.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, the use of nostalgia and “easily digestible” film forms and narrative devices are problematic.

At least German cinema and to a lesser extent Eastern European cinema acknowledge and engage with the past, while American film ignored slavery and depicted the slaughter of Native Americans by white explorers as heroic acts (Franklin 2006:19). For much of its cinematic history, American cinema forgot and embraced silence. Even when cinema remembers and gives voice, it may be met with criticism. Longinovic (2005:40) recounts how Slavoj Žižek accused filmmaker Emir Kusturica (*Underground*, 1997) of “reflexive racism”. Žižek argued that Kusturica “[celebrates] the exotic authenticity of the Balkan Other”. In addition, Ananiadis (2005:117) states that Žižek “takes Kusturica to task for employing cultural stereotypes of the wild Balkan man”. This instance suggests the difficulty in minimising and avoiding stereotypes even when a filmmaker attempts to make political sense of his own homeland and people. Žižek dismissed *Underground* (Kusturica, 1995) as a naïve, simplified and stereotypical representation of Balkan conflict. Žižek views this film, as he does *Before the Rain* (Manchevski 1995), as products of Western liberal multiculturalism (Kosmidou, 2013:100). Žižek (1997:44) argues that

the relationship between traditional imperialist colonialism and global capitalist self-colonization is exactly the same as the relationship between Western cultural imperialism and multiculturalism ... [which] involves patronizing Eurocentrist distance and/or respect for local cultures without root in one’s own particular culture.

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<sup>50</sup> Slavoj Žižek (1999a:[sp]) provides an oppositional reading of the film, arguing that the only way to deal with the trauma of the death camps was by making a game out of the suffering, as the father character does for his son. Žižek measures the success of *Life Is Beautiful* in this regard against the “falsity” of *Schindler’s List* (Spielberg, 1994).

As such, multiculturalism is “a racism which empties its own position of all positive content ... but nonetheless retains this position as the privileged *empty point of universality* from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures” (emphasis in original) (Žižek 2007:171). Effectively, respecting the specificity of the Other is the actual manifestation of one’s own superiority.

Beyond Europe lies the legacy of colonialism, of expanding territories, the subjugation of indigenous peoples and, inevitably, crumbling empires. Of the British films depicting or aiming to depict the decline of the Empire, Gooding (2011:287) considers whether these films accept the end of the empire, and whether the events surrounding Britain’s fall are accurately represented. Gooding (ibid) suggests that films addressing the fall of the British Empire may do so through a “distorting lens” which may continue, as it had done, to depict the Empire’s decline through “[substituting] bureaucratic fantasies for daily realities”, and which occasionally even “peddled plain untruths”. Sometimes in the cinematic response to colonial power, as evidenced by the Nigeria-set *Giant in the Sun* (Samuelson, 1959), “the continuation of colonial era concerns is elided in favour of the narrative of newness, change and Independence” (2011:291), through not showing the British as a vanquished force with no further purpose in the former colony. Finally, and importantly, Gooding (2011:292) states that “[t]he British never came to terms with the end of their empire. They never mourned their loss, preferring instead to take refuge in the heady mythology and endless details of the Battle of Britain, D-Day and other such decisive and rightfully celebrated events of World War II.” Like Eastern Europe, Britain selects to celebrate triumph, and chooses not to remember.<sup>51</sup>

Yet there are cinemas that remember, and acknowledge that the present is the product of often violent socio-political and material forces. Bayart (2007:273) refers to “floating populations” – a wonderfully descriptive term referring to collections of individuals who may alternately be seen as nomadic in Deleuzian terms – whose stories are told in the films of Apichatpong Weerasehtakul, Chantal Akerman and

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<sup>51</sup> I do not suggest a complete denial or refusal to respond to colonialism; sometimes, such responses require a measure of distance. Consider Harry Hook’s *The Kitchen Toto* (1988) in this regard, with its striking images of Santa Claus at a Kenyan school: an overweight man dressed in a suit in sweltering heat handing out toys to children at a Kenyan school who often lack even basic needs. There is certainly a sense of political cinema in much of British cinema, as the films of Mike Leigh (especially those from the 1980s and early 1990s) and Ken Loach’s cinema of Irish resistance attest.

Bertrand Tavernier, stories of socially and legally marginalised individuals. Thai filmmaker Weerasehtakul's *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), for instance, subtly addresses particular political tensions in northern parts of his homeland. In addition, Szaloky (2005:82) explains that Hamid Naficy's notion of "[e]xilic cinema ... is characterized by an artisanal, independent mode of production, and is constituted by a body of films *authored* by exiled or expatriate filmmakers who seek to portray their relationships to their homeland and their painful yet inspirational experience of deterritorialization through specific thematic and stylistic means". Borrowing the term deterritorialisation from Deleuze, Szaloky (2005) here discusses a type of film that is overtly interested in exploring power and its components in national cinemas. Naficy's (2001:4) supplemental notion of accented cinema is a cinema in opposition to universalist dominant cinema because it is accented.<sup>52</sup> This type of cinema often includes transitional and transnational spaces such as "borders, tunnels, seaports, airports, and hotels" as well as "vehicles of mobility, such as trains, buses and suitcases" (2001:5).

Cinema that selects to remember, to engage with the past through the present, provides crucial counter-narratives to those narratives established by various hegemonies across numerous nations. "Counter-narratives of the nation", states Bhabha (2007:300), "that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities". Bhabha borrows the term 'imagined communities' from Anderson to indicate what is disturbed or interrupted by counter-narratives. The very idea of a nation is a political construct, and does not exist as a neutral point of reference.

Hall (1993:361) warns of the danger of forms of national and cultural identity, that adopt closed versions of culture or community and refuse to engage ("in the name of an 'oppressed white minority' (*sic*)") with the conflict and contradictions that emerge from difference. The nation is not simply inhabited; it is a symbolic formation, a system of representation (1993:355). As Bhabha (1990:1) explains:

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<sup>52</sup> Naficy (2001:30-31) describes accented cinema as an offshoot of Third Cinema.

Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation – or narration – might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west.

The mythical idea of the nation, emerging from an imagined position of purity and triumph, provides a foundational moment for a collective on which to romanticise their existence and from where to articulate their exceptionalism. Degenaar (1994:25) sets myth against ideal, specifically the *myth* of nation-building as opposed to the *ideal* of a democratic culture. Here, nation-building is nothing more than a “romantic exercise” (1994:26), where the very notion of a nation is tainted by history and the very practice of nation-building discourse “is antagonistic towards ethnicity, pluralism, regionalism, federalism” (1994:28). In addressing British colonial film tropes, Grieveson (2011:3) details the images and motifs that would repeatedly manifest in these films: intellectually superior white characters who educate the colonial subjects and train them in the use of technology; social hierarchies based on race are justified and normalised; and finally these films create the impression that the relationship between the colonial powers and their subjects is one of benevolence. As Growland and Thompson (2013:26) remind us, racial categories remain central to the classification of social groups. While the biological emphasis on race has diminished, the body becomes the manifest site on and through which the naturalisation of social inequalities occurs (Growland & Thompson 2013:28).

Often these practices, regularly condensed into the term ‘civilising practices’, draw on traditions invented by those in power to keep these figures in a position of control. Hobsbawm and Ranger foreground the fictitious historical links between present and past (Green 2008:109) in their discussion of invented tradition. Hobsbawm’s (1999:1) use of the term ‘invented tradition’ is, as he himself concedes, “broad and imprecise”, but functional. More importantly, the term refers to “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (1999:1). Invented traditions are ways of training individuals in appropriate cultural conduct. Hobsbawm (1999:9) explains that there are three related types of post-industrial revolution invented tradition.

Firstly, there are invented traditions to cement “social cohesion or the memberships of groups, real or artificial communities”. Secondly, invented traditions “[legitimise] institutions, status or relations of authority”. Finally, there are invented traditions with socialisation as its key outcome as it related to beliefs, values and even behavioural conventions (1999:9). The very idea of the nation in the way discussed above, positions it as an invented tradition in itself.

The above discussion of colonial processes and powers brings me to a discussion of South African cinema; specifically, Afrikaans cinema’s (as a form of Afrikaans cultural patrimony) relationship to a political legacy of inequality and oppression. This history of oppression can be seen, for instance, in the “[a]ccelerated dispossession and displacement of black South Africans from rural ‘white’ South Africa to densely populated Bantustan townships” which severely “eroded the conditions of reproduction of labor power and the social wage” (Hart 2002:42). The emphasis on financial and economic difference between races in South Africa is significant given the history of material difference between black and white. The fall of apartheid brought about political emancipation for South Africans and also “coincided with the ascendance of market triumphalism on a global scale, defining the terrain on which the newly elected democratic state came to embrace neoliberalism”. Neoliberalism, more specifically neoliberal *capitalist* practice, came to dominate post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>53</sup> Neoliberalism historically came to prominence in nations marked by socio-economic inequalities (Crouch 2011:162). Of course “political power and economic wealth existed long before attempts were made to subject them to democracy and the market” (2011:145), but it took neoliberalism to shape wealth and democracy into a symbiotic system that provided the blueprint for the political economy of Afrikaans cinema. The ideological triumph of neoliberalism has resulted in an overreliance on corporate forces that constitute the economy (Crouch

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<sup>53</sup> Steger and Roy (2010:11) suggest that “perhaps the best way to conceptualize neoliberalism is to think of it as three intertwined manifestations: (1) an ideology; (2) a mode of governance; (3) a policy package”. Neoliberalism has been linked to a system “designed by the United States to globalize American capitalism and its associated cultural system” (Steger & Roy 2010:x). So successful was this system that by the end of the 1990s, neoliberalism “in its various permutations and modifications had successfully spread to most parts of the world” (Steger & Roy 2010:119).

2011:166). Since being adopted globally as an economic foundation in the late 1980s, neoliberalism “enhanced the profitability of financiers while destroying industrial capacity” (Bond 2014:39). In fact, Wheen (2004:38) describes a nightmarish situation in which neoliberals celebrated the demise of outmoded work practices and the manufacturing industry.

In 1994, South Africa adopted a liberal democratic framework which included the pursuit of neoliberal economic policies. In a neoliberal approach, affluent urban audiences are seen as an ideal audience due to their financial positions. As Milton (2011:254) puts it, “[t]he wealthier the audience, the more advertising they will attract and the more broadcasters will tailor their services to attract these audiences”. Connolly (2013:7) explains that neoliberalism, with its ostensible independence of state involvement, “obscures how it itself requires a very large state to support and protect its preconditions of being” (Connolly 2013:7). Neoliberalism does not imply independence of the state, but a stealthy dependence instead where both business and the state benefit from late capitalist economic practice. Indeed, “neoliberalism solicits an active state to promote, protect, and expand market processes” (Connolly 2013:21). As a possible indication of Afrikaans cinema’s neoliberal emphasis on engineering products for consumption, Connolly (2013:21) further indicates that neoliberalism goes hand in hand with conservative Christianity and a nation consisting of marginalised minorities (such as the white Afrikaans speaking population in South Africa). However, neoliberal economic pursuit, in its operation within a capitalist framework, is not a completely recent or fresh development.

For Badiou (2012:11), “contemporary capitalism possesses all the features of classical capitalism. It is strictly in keeping with what is expected of it when its logic is not counteracted by resolute, locally victorious class action”. Indeed, “[c]ontemporary capitalism is therefore not in any sense creative and postmodern [...] It is certainly not capitalism and its political servants that are bringing about the rebirth of History, if by ‘rebirth’ is understood the emergence of a capacity, at once destructive and creative, whose aim it is to make a genuine exit from the established order” (Badiou 2012:15). According to this description of capitalism, a South African political transition that coincides with a particular economic order could not result in any



significant 'rebirth' due to the financial system's adherence to capitalism. Notions of capitalism and neoliberalism as key forces that shape the Afrikaans film industry will inform my discussion below. Indeed, according to Smart (2003:82), "following the deployment of neoliberal economic policies and the development of a new form of capitalism ('Post-Fordist', 'disorganized', 'flexible' and 'global'), market values, once again, had become dominant" and cannot be ignored in a study of a culture industry.

### **3.3 Cultural complexities, complications and controversies in post-apartheid South Africa**

In its celebration of Afrikaner invented tradition, heritage, triumphalism and, historically, its creation of social hierarchies that legitimated the oppressor-oppressed binary between white and black citizens, South African cinema has long occupied an overtly political position. Masilela (2000:75) recounts how *De Voortrekkers* was shown annually on 16 December "as a means of recharging nationalist passions by means of the invocation of historical myths", and adds: "[t]his could not but have the effect of narrowing the possibilities and options of our cinematic national imagination". Any narrowing of a collective imagination was in line with eventual apartheid practice. *De Voortrekkers* (Shaw, 1916) did not celebrate simply one race's conquering of the land, but a specific *culture's* dominance over the land and all of its inhabitants (a key scene in the film shows the religious conversion of a Zulu man to Christianity). White Afrikaans culture was hegemonic for the duration of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in South Africa, and all other cultures, often comfortably referred to in cultural short hand as 'black culture', were measured against this white system of significance, to borrow a phrase from Raymond Williams. To remain with Williams for a moment, his model of dominant, emergent and residual power provides a simple yet functional indication of the shifts in power in contemporary Afrikaans cinema. Williams' model explains that in a given political situation, there is a dominant (most powerful) force or presence, as well as what or who has remained from occupying this position of power previously (the residual). At the same time, emergent powers (new and upcoming figures and forces) challenge the supremacy of the dominant powers. A figure such as Darrell James Roodt may be seen to represent residual power, although he remains highly prolific in terms of the

regularity of his film output.<sup>54</sup> In terms of dominant power, a producer such as Linda Korsten (who oversaw production on *Liefeling* and *Prêville*) comes to mind, with the Bosbok Ses team (Sallas and Piet de Jager, and director Paul Eilers) emerging (and not yet succeeding) to challenge established powers structures with their independently funded feature films (from *Roepman* to *Verraaiers*).

Culture emerged early on in South Africa as a major exclusive paradigm. “Culture,” explain Zegeye and Liebenberg (2001:316), “was not simply an instrument for constructing communities or allocating material resources, but was marshalled as an ideological weapon for both apartheid beneficiaries and the dispossessed”. White Afrikaans culture instilled a sense of fear not only of the other, but of “manifestations of the culture of ‘others’” (Zegeye & Liebenberg 2001:316). Much of Afrikaans cinema’s political impotence derives from its excessive insistence on aspects and elements of white Afrikaans culture, as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters. As such, much of Afrikaans cinema retains a sense of cultural traditionalism, which is “a static attempt to move back to the past” that “suffers from an intense longing for a perfect hierarchically ordered community”.

Cultural traditionalism may openly invite and even reconstruct itself as cultural relativism, with the latter simply being a façade for the former. Indeed, “[c]ultural relativism, like its younger intellectual cousin, post-modernism, often becomes a cover for secondary conservatism. It has a tendency to become a defence and bulwark for the powerful” (Zegeye & Liebenberg 2001:317-318). Between manifestations of cultural traditionalism and cultural relativism, it is likely, then, that both positions are essentially conservative. As Nel (2010:129-130) demonstrates, Afrikaans music and Afrikaans theatre addressed issues such as Afrikaner Calvinism critically as in the music of Fokopolisiekar and Jaco Boucher’s play *2-21*, but Afrikaans film is absent from this self-reflexive discourse. In an interview with Ashraf Jamal (2000: 211), South African dramatist Jane Taylor states:

If by the political, we take the question to mean an exploration of the relationship to the collective, and issues of governance and responsibility

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<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Philo Pieterse was producing films during apartheid and still remains active in the Afrikaans film industry with releases such as *Platteland*.

vis-à-vis questions of private desire, then yes, I would say such issues dominate South African theatre. [...] Mike van Graan, when he writes, is very conscious of flaunting political correctness in his dialogues – showing a basic understanding of audience as a political constituency, as does Peter Dirk Uys, the comic/cabaret artist.

Says actor Gerard Rudolf (in Jamal 2000:203): “If you look at the history of Afrikaans theatre ... you’ll find a vastness of landscape that comes to the fore and occupies the minds of the audience. Rather like the early trekkers must have experienced the vastness of the interior and the fear and exhilaration it continues to evoke. This combination of fear and exhilaration is endemic to Afrikaans theatre”. The dynamics of fear and exhilaration, two dynamic forces, are thus part and parcel of Afrikaans theatre, yet absent, as I will demonstrate, from Afrikaans film, even if South African cinema as a whole is encountering politics. Marx (2000:134) identifies *Mapantsula*’s “[concern] with the fight for black masculine agency”, while she points to Paul Slabolepszy’s *Saturday Night at the Palace* as a reminder “that class stratification [cuts] across race”. Marx (2000:135) commends *Jump the Gun* (Blair, 1995) for its “slice-of-life realism of its portrayal of a wide diversity of 1990s South Africans, trying to negotiate their way through a constantly shifting world. The possibilities for new forms of being emerge through encounters across dissolving boundaries” where “identity becomes a series of performances” (2000:135). (Marx (2000:137) is nonetheless critical of Blair’s film and takes the director to task for repeatedly objectifying Gugu.)

Forms of conservatism, mostly of a political kind, pervades contemporary Afrikaans cinema seemingly regardless of who the director is.<sup>55</sup> Post-apartheid Afrikaans cinema presents a body of work from a cross-section of directors, from veterans such as Katinka Heyns and Darrel James Roodt, to emerging filmmakers such as Oliver Hermanus. Simply, there are two generations of filmmakers active in Afrikaans

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<sup>55</sup> Conservatism describes “an attitude towards politics and society rather than a political ideology” (Edgar & Sedgwick 2008:61). Conservatism is often characterised by: (1) “a negative attitude towards social change”; (2) privileging traditional beliefs and attitudes as superior to more contemporary ones; (3) “generally bleak and pessimistic view of human nature”; and (4) “the view that society is an interconnected structure of relationships constituting a community” (Edgar & Sedgwick 2008:61).

film.<sup>56</sup> Shortt (2012:117) explains the meaning of the word generation as referring to “an age-defined subgroup, where individuals are exposed to and shaped by similar historical experiences and events. In this way, it provides a space where memory and identity, and change and transformation are problematized and performed”. From the two generations of filmmakers active in Afrikaans film, twenty years of Afrikaans films presents cinematic impressions shaped and informed by numerous memories and recollections; yet, regardless of the generation, their films are cinematically politically impotent (I elaborate on potency and impotency later in this chapter). “The demise of apartheid disturbed the sense of certainty and legitimacy that many white South Africans had in terms of their identity” (Nel 2010:3), and much of Afrikaans cinema’s political impotence comes from its insistence, for most part, on a stable and uncompromised white identity. White Afrikaans identity, specifically, is a politically loaded notion. Wicomb (2001:163-164) explicates:

When black South Africans in the 80s (sic) reinflected the word Boer to signify something distasteful, they succeeded in making Afrikaners accept that meaning to the extent that the majority now disowns the name. In spite of the fact that *Boer*, in accordance with their power, was a name proudly chosen by themselves to signal their connection with the land, the word had become infected with black distaste which culminated in the Pan African Congress’s chant of ‘Kill the farmer, kill the Boer’ so that Afrikaners have abandoned what they now perceive to be a racist term.

The word ‘Afrikaner’, too, is highly politicised: “‘Afrikaner’ is perceived to exclude non-whites, while ‘Afrikaans’ is racially emancipated” (Nel 2010:18). ‘Afrikaans’ does not have the overt racial connotations that ‘Afrikaner’ has. Lewis (2001:439) even uses the totalising term ‘the Afrikaner mind’, but is cognisant of the criticism of such an approach and pre-empts such critique: “In defence of that totalising term *the Afrikaner mind*, I would draw attention again to the construction of a peculiar monolithic social identity over the last 120 years or so” in part constituted “in reaction to external forces – not least to the racial and ethnic categorization of the English” (emphasis in original) (Lewis 2001:439).

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<sup>56</sup> To reiterate: I am only focusing on Afrikaans language feature length films, and the more economic phrase “Afrikaans film” serves to indicate just that.

Van Staden and Sevenhuysen (2009:170) explain that the Afrikaner, as a social group, possesses a clearly articulated shared value system, and that historically Afrikaans cinema is often read as representative of these shared values.<sup>57</sup> Even though my articulation refers to Afrikaans cinema and not Afrikaner cinema, issues of race, if not racism per se, are necessary in this discussion of Afrikaans culture. In this study, 'Afrikaner' will refer to "a 'white' social group that speaks Afrikaans as mother tongue and comes from a cultural background that is predominantly Christian, middleclass (sic), nationalistic and patriarchal" (Nel 2007/2010:2). I appreciate Nel's (2007/2010) use of the inverted commas when referring to 'white', much as I understand Haupt's (2012) use of italics when referring to loaded racially descriptive and denotative words: *white* and *black*. For purposes of clarity and consistency, I will refer to white and black throughout the study, and only refer to 'white' or 'black' in instances where there is a specific nuance intended in these words. In a South African context especially, reference to race is crucial given the deceptive Rainbow Nation discourse that ignored the visibility, tangibility and political significance of race in favour of a celebratory and allegedly 'colour blind' South African society.

In fact, as Hart (2002:29) reports, Harold Wolpe precisely used the term 'articulation' "to refute liberal (and indeed orthodox Marxist) portrayals of the racial order in South Africa as an irrational hangover of Afrikanerdom that would melt away with the further development of capitalist market relations". The anticipation that particular representations of the racial order would dissipate under a new (representative) regime has been proven inaccurate. In South Africa's attempts to smooth over racial and by implication socio-political difference, cultural practice runs the risk of losing sight of the significance of race in South African and Afrikaans culture:

If the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on narratives and discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness': the *Heimlich* pleasures of the hearth, the

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<sup>57</sup> Van Staden and Sevenhuysen (2009) automatically assume the use of 'Afrikaner', even though one of their primary sources is titled (in translation) *The social conscience of the Afrikaans speaking people* (Nepgen, 1938) (2009:159).

*unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other; the comfort of social belonging, the hidden injuries of class; the customs of taste, the powers of political affiliation; the sense of social order, the sensibility of sexuality; the blindness of bureaucracy, the straight insight of institutions; the quality of justice, the common sense of injustice; the *langue* of the law and the *parole* of the people (Bhabha 1990:2).

As alluded to earlier, part of South African and Afrikaans culture's challenge is to locate itself in a culture industry where funding is, at least for Afrikaans filmmakers, less accessible than before.<sup>58</sup> South African filmmakers in general are often required to conform to guidelines on screenplay structure and so forth, such as the NFVF's Sediba-programme which privileges narratives of success told in traditional, dominant-American ways. Similarly, Roger Young (2013:10-11) denounces the NFVF's stringent and limiting Sediba guidelines for filmmakers. Whether young or established, filmmakers seeking financial assistance from the NFVF need to abide by the Sediba guidelines to qualify for funding.

These Sediba guidelines determines the characters used in a screenplay, their actions, and positions these characters in a clear victim-perpetrator binary in a three-act structure. When Darrel James Roodt applied for funding for his silent drama *Faith's Corner* (2005), the NFVF asked him to change the film's ending (which the director refused to do). Importantly, other filmmakers have accused the NFVF of not taking into account "local idioms that [a filmmaker] is trying to tackle" (2013:10). There is another Sediba-related caveat: without NFVF buy-in on some level, other funding entities such as the DTI or IDC are significantly less likely to grant a project further financial support. Finally, Young (2013:11) distinguishes between two types of financially successful films: Leon Schuster films and so-called Hartiwood films featuring narratives about middle-class Afrikaans characters shot around the Hartbeespoortdam.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> By using the term "culture industry" I refer to Afrikaans cinema in an Adornian sense as cultural products that are produced as standardised cultural goods (see Adorno, 2001), but also to highlight not only the capitalist but also the socio-politically inclusive nature of Afrikaans film as both culture and industry.

<sup>59</sup> Hartiwood films are "made for local audiences in Afrikaans, featuring middle-class stories shot around Hartbeespoort and are screened in cinemas in the area" (Devnomics 2015:26).

Young mistakenly cites *Bakgat!*, *Semi-Soet* and *Liefeling* at once. Of these films, only *Liefeling* is actually a Hartiwood film, as *Bakgat!* is made according to a different ethos for a much younger emerging Afrikaans target audience, while *Semi-Soet* was filmed in the Cape, mainly on the Stellenbosch wine estate Vrede & Lust. Young echoes how many films produced in South Africa use South Africa as a backdrop; South Africans are seldom in a main creative position in these films. Young (2013:10) mentions that the NFVF spends up to 26% of its R105 million budget on marketing, but offers only 20% towards developing films. According to a research report for the NFVF, Devnomics (2015:34) additionally indicates that the top three languages for local audiences to watch films in are English, isiZulu and Afrikaans (in that order).

The research report states that audiences ascribe “uniqueness” to South African films according to a film’s social commentary and cultural content; the latter is also seen as a draw card of local films (2015:36). In their feedback on the positive and negative aspects of “visual story and performance”, respondents indicated the following factors as positive: “actors and actresses performance; entertainment value; film characters; local content representative of SA languages and culture” (ibid). On the negative side, respondents listed “historical and political content” and “technical production quality” (ibid). The Devnomics report finally recommends that the branding of South African films must be strengthened, particularly by using “iconic symbols” such as Table Mountain (Cape Town) or even the South African flag, since such symbols can allegedly “distinguish SA films and serve to endear local films to audiences” (2015:39).

I am not suggesting that Afrikaans filmmakers are alone in their plight, but they, and not the entire South African filmmaking constituent, form the focus of my study. Like other South African filmmakers, Afrikaans filmmakers ostensibly abide by a measure of commercialisation in their work. In their comparative study of the South African and Nigerian film industries, Barnard and Tuomi (2008:648), comment derogatively on South African consumer and their states, observing that because South Africans regularly watch Hollywood films, such “local consumers have high expectations of the production and narrative quality of films”; in such instances, it is difficult to establish a home-grown, more or less indigenous film industry. A film industry in

South Africa, where there are attempts at sustaining and developing the film industry, can become a “[site] of so-called ‘runaway’ productions, as they occupy specialized (and quite sophisticated) niche roles in the global value chain” (2008:648). In their very brief historical overview of the South African film industry, Barnard and Tuomi (2008:653) observe a long-term linkage between the local and American film industries, with JW Schlesinger a key figure in modelling the local film industry on the American model, specifically in his appropriation of vertical integration. During apartheid, films targeted at Afrikaans speaking audiences received the most government support (ibid). After 1994, “the Department of Arts and Culture, the NFVF and the Industrial Development Corporation provided film-specific assistance, while the Department of Trade and Industry, the South African Revenue Service and some provincial governments offered more general business support” (Barnard & Tuomi 2008:653-654). Finally, South Africa’s emerging industry is aware of the high-quality of American and European cinemas. This awareness may foster a desire to learn how to achieve a similar level of production quality by developing niche areas in the South African film industry where a comparable level of quality would be possible (Barnard & Tuomi 2008:665).

Smart (2003:72) remarks that commercialisation has eroded the difference between the commercial and the cultural, and that the emphasis on marketing and branding as core activities of companies. As part of a post-Fordist culture industry, Afrikaans cinema has secured a niche demographic of audiences who will often watch Afrikaans films mainly because they are in the audience’s mother tongue.<sup>60</sup> When ‘audience’ is substituted with ‘consumer’, consider Smart’s (2003:75) statement that “it is important to emphasize the *limitations* on choice represented by the range of available goods and services. It is also important to recognize the *limits* within which consumer choice needs must be exercised” (emphasis in original). The Afrikaans film industry understands capitalism, that only certain types of product can be offered and that if one product type works (when an Afrikaans musical film is financially

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<sup>60</sup> Fordism “affirmed the interdependence of production and consumption, and calculated compensation for workers to allow them to afford to consume, at some point in time or in some quantity, the products they produce,” thereby “[ensuring] a basic correlation between production and consumption” (Kornbluh 2005:134). However, in shifting from Fordism to post-Fordism and after, “capital has become increasingly deterritorialized, floating flexibly free from production processes, and coming to rest more centrally in the orbit of symbolic exchange and information technologies” (Nealon 2012:20).



successful), similar products soon follow (more Afrikaans musical films are released).

For Bayart (2007:211-212), “[c]apitalism rests on the interweaving of desire, exploitation and violence as Marx perceived ... [and] summed up as the process whereby one person fleeces another while procuring pleasure for that other”. Bayart here suggests that the consumer of culture may be disadvantaged during the process of consumption, especially since the consumer is caught in the throes of the pleasure of what is being consumed. In this sense, Afrikaans audiences consuming pleasure from Afrikaans musical films (I use the same example type as before for purposes of consistency) may not be conscious of the troubling representations of white Afrikaans identity, to name but one issue, while consuming the product (which could be seen, after all, as part of Afrikaans cultural patrimony). This is not to suggest a passive white Afrikaans collective who fail to respond to a film’s politics, but instead to allude to such films’ successful stitching of its ideal audience into the narratives on offer.

In light of the above, and as indicated earlier, I acknowledge the systemic constraints on Afrikaans filmmakers, as it is on all South African filmmakers, which derive from neoliberal capitalist enterprise. Bluntly put, “filmmakers are constrained by financing at both the front end and back end of production” (Franklin 2006:5), meaning that filmmakers decide which movies to make but it is paying audiences that make or break a film financially. “The movies business is now a free-for-all, and for that, capitalism is a much more powerful force – and for that, feature films are more product than art” (Franklin 2006:59). Capitalist cultural artistic practice in South Africa coincides with neoliberal financial policies at macro-level. Generally, “the restructuring process and deployment of neo-liberal economic policies has radically transformed the nature of work and employment” (Smart 2003:153) in South Africa, and such changes are often reflected in cultural products such as Afrikaans films (an example of this change in labour occurs in *Skoonheid* (Hermanus 2011)). To be sure, the systemic effects of neoliberal capitalist practice are deeply tied to processes of

globalisation, of a 'flattening' of film across the world [to borrow a term from Thomas Friedman (2005)].<sup>61</sup>

Jameson (as cited in Hart 2002:48) points out that the term globalisation suggests a greater complexity than one might expect:

Globalization – even the term itself is hotly contested – is the modern or postmodern version of the proverbial elephant, described by its diverse observers in so many diverse ways. Yet one can still posit the existence of the elephant in the absence of a single, persuasive and dominant theory; nor are blinded questions the most unsatisfactory way to explore this kind of relational and multi-leveled phenomenon.

With much brevity, Robertsen (as cited in Bayart 2007:6-7) defines globalisation as “the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole”.<sup>62</sup> Bayart (2007:13) himself relates globalisation to a “universalization of institutions and ideologies”. In elaboration, Bayart (2007:25) posits that globalisation “as a historical regime of social practices, as an event, is a concept or, more precisely, an imaginary figure that refers simultaneously to its essential materiality and its fantasmatic developments”. Globalisation might be an “imaginary figure”, a spectre in the broader mythology of economy, but its practices are tangible, also in South Africa. In Duncan’s (2001:289) view, South Africa was for some time guarded from the international economic and financial initiatives associated with globalisation due to “the isolationist character of apartheid”, the country has since 1994 fully engaged with such initiatives. Hart (2002:12-13) links globalisation to the neo-liberal

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<sup>61</sup> Friedman is the author of a much praised and equally maligned book on how major world events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the application of the internet across the world, have ‘flattened’ to the world, as it were, to a smaller, more connected space. See *The World is Flat* (2005).

<sup>62</sup> Appiah (2006:xi) is concerned that the term ‘globalisation’ “once referred to a marketing strategy, and then came to designate a macroeconomic thesis, and now can seem to encompass everything, and nothing”. In addition to globalisation, multiculturalism, too, is problematic for Appiah, as multiculturalism “often designates the disease it purports to cure”. All in all, Appiah (2006:xi) finds cosmopolitanism a more solid notion, since cosmopolitanism includes a sense of obligation to other humans and learn from the differences between individuals (Appiah 2006:xiii). I will refer only to cosmopolitanism where relevant since cosmopolitanism is a term in Appiah’s ethics and not directly related to film discourse. Elsaesser (2005:110) finds multiculturalism problematic as well, stating that the notion neglects ethnic and immigrant conflict.

project, and highlights the problematic binaries that emerge when local confronts global:

The discursive power of globalization is nowhere more evident than in what I call the 'impact model' that underpins neoliberal agendas in South Africa and elsewhere. [...] A number of other binaries map onto the global/local dichotomy. In addition to active/passive and dynamic/static, these include economics/culture, general/specific, abstract/concrete and, very importantly, dichotomous understandings of time and space, in which time is accorded active primacy, while space appears as a passive container. This conflation of 'the global' with dynamic, technological-economic forces restlessly roving the globe defines its inexorable – and inexorably masculine – character.

Within a neoliberal globalist culture, one must be cognisant of the binaries Hart (2002) refers to, as well as primacy afforded to time. If Hart (2002) is additionally on point in describing the radiating economic spine of underlining neoliberal financial and cultural activity – an economic base shaping the the superstructure of cultural practice and patrimony – Treffry-Goatley (2010) has argued that it is indeed the neoliberal nature of the South African film industry that inhibits its expansion and progress. Treffry-Goatley (2010) argues convincingly for government involvement in film funding in order to establish a truly sustainable South African film industry, and her concern is underscored by Smart (2003:164), who states: “[o]ne of the central tenets of neo-liberal ‘free market’ economic philosophy has been that the scope of government must be limited if economic freedom and political freedom are to be enhanced”.

Where governments refrain from inserting themselves in business, Smart (2003:166) sees the state as integral to financial recovery, given how the state has historically intervened in contexts of financial indebtedness as well as financial instability. Indeed, as Duncan (2001:285) explains, “neo-liberal policies have placed enormous pressure on government departments to demonstrate their relevance to the competitiveness drives of their respective countries. [...] *Given that arts and culture is an especially soft target for government cutbacks, these departments have fought back by re-casting their activities in neo-liberal clothing*” (emphasis added). The arts can weather financial strain by straddling tensions that emanate from neoliberal capitalist practice, cultural patrimony, and audiences' consumptive preferences. All

of these variables can be linked to the globalising character of contemporary existence and contemporary artistic practice.

Having established a cultural and industrial location for Afrikaans cinema, it is now necessary to establish a cinematic context for Afrikaans cinema in relationship to notions of political cinema.

### **3.4 Political cinema: towards a conception of cinematic political impotence**

In embarking on this contextualisation of Afrikaans cinema in relation to political cinema, I am aligned with Milan Kundera's position on kitsch. As recounted by Zegeye and Liebenberg (2001:319): "if, as Kundera states, kitsch may be an integral part of the human condition, one should nonetheless be aware of the danger of lurking 'totalitarianism' - and to learn to laugh at it, thus 'moving it into the realm of the non-kitsch, making it lose its authoritarian power and become as touching as any other human weakness' (Kundera 1982)".

#### **3.4.1 Film and politics**

Earlier I expounded on notions of culture, and now I manifestly insert politics into understandings of culture. "Political culture, or the societal context in which distributive decisions are made, is influenced by a myriad of historical, geographical, and cultural factors" (Franklin 2006:4). Political culture is a dynamic entity with a clear societal context. Mouffe (2005:9) usefully distinguishes between 'the political' and 'politics': "by 'the political' I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organising human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political". While politics speaks more directly to the current study, notions of the political are also significant in that it highlights the presence of antagonism.

Antagonism often occurs as a result of constructed difference. Mouffe (2005:15) draws on Henry Staten's notion of the 'constitutive outside', which emphasises how identity construction "implies the establishment of a difference, difference which is

often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy” reliant on binaries such as black/white and man/woman. Importantly, every identity is relational and in “the affirmation of identity, i.e. the perception of something ‘other’ which constitutes its ‘exterior’, we are, I think, in a better position to understand Schmitt’s point about the ever present possibility of antagonism and to see how a social relation can become the breeding ground for antagonism” (Mouffe 2005:15). Mouffe (2005) explains that there is a difference between antagonism and agonism. Antagonism characterises the relationship between enemies, between groups that do not share a common ground. Agonism, however, refers to a relationship between conflicting groups where “although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, [these groups] nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents” (Mouffe 2005:20). Politically, agonism is more productive than antagonism, and offers greater possibilities for political change than the positional misgivings of antagonism.

In Franklin’s discussion, politics in film often have to do with policy options and actual interaction between filmmakers and stakeholders in certain political entities (2006:19). Even in American film, Franklin (2006:24) identifies a “set of stories that serve as metaphors for American history” – Franklin does not use the word ‘myth’. Some of these tales include “the conquest of the west”; “rugged individualists overcome adversity”; “the cult of the individual” (2006:25), where the emphasis on the individual “promotes a dynamic, vibrant, and creative society” (ibid). In this instance, Franklin (2006:26) argues, “movies affect public policy by reinforcing certain beliefs in our culture”. A final such story is the “rags to riches”, with Franklin (2006:27) here referring to a myth according to which “all wealth is earned and thus deserved, [and thus] poverty is deserved and earned as well”. In his political analysis of *Working Girl* (1988), Franklin (2006:114-116) discusses the film from a variety of political perspectives, including but not limited to libertarian, secular conservative, religious conservative, fascist and socialist perspectives. Here my own approach diverges from Franklin’s (2006): using an Elsaesserian framework for my analysis resists such simple labelling. Indeed, eventually there is something condescending

and patronisingly superficial about Franklin's take on some films as listed in his book's filmography (2006:181-206).<sup>63</sup>

Far more conceptually rigorous, Arsenjuk (2010:1) discusses the notion of political cinema as resting on two key assumptions. Firstly, the idea of political cinema suggests a definite relationship between cinema and politics, where politics can have an effect on cinema, and where cinema can produce political effects (ibid). Secondly, there is a separation between cinema and politics distinguishing both as separate, independent modes of thought (Arsenjuk 2010:1). Arsenjuk (2010:1) suggests that the notion of political cinema "can be made intelligible only as a *relation of separation* between cinema and politics", and it is in this regard that Arsenjuk (2010) uses the term 'encounter' to signify the relation of separation. This notion of an encounter "should make it impossible to maintain an idea of some schematism organizing the relationship between cinema and politics – especially when the existence of a schema typically implies that one of the two terms is able to subordinate and incorporate the other" (Arsenjuk 2010:7). While political cinema can be located and defined, Arsenjuk (2010) highlights the separation and encounter between politics and cinema as being important in making sense of both.

Historically, the conceptualisation and practice of political cinema owes much of its grounding and development to Third Cinema. Third Cinema was "a radical politics that questioned both the U.S. Empire and its domestic collaborators. Its project of decolonizing both a people and the imagination, its combination of filmmaking and criticism, and, most of all, the ways in which it turned the spectator into a guerrilla resister and an ally makes Third Cinema profoundly important for a cinematic history of resistance to neoliberalism" (Kapur & Wagner 2011:9). In the contexts of the developing world, Third Cinema is arguably the most visible form of political cinema. Oppression is the single unifying theme of Third Cinema (Gabriel 1982:20). Gabriel (1982:1) positions cinema as a cultural means of expression in the Third World, an alternative cinema that foregrounds processes and effects of decolonisation and

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<sup>63</sup> For instance, Franklin views *Twister* (1996) as the "beginning of the end of sentient life on Earth" (2006:205); *Titanic* (1997) has "an interesting riff on social stratification" (2006:204), while *Striptease* (1996) "pays homage to Moore's surgical breast enhancement" (2006:203). Franklin (2006) undermines his own political position and his argument through such smug short hand observations that fail to address the politics of each film.

liberation. From this position, any film is seen to reflect a class perspective related to the society the film represents (1982:2). Third Cinema is ideologically opposed to Hollywood cinema's political (class) views (1982:3). Gabriel (1982:3) explains that film in the Third world must decolonise minds; develop a radical or revolutionary consciousness; participate in the actual revolution of society; and develop a new film language appropriate to the accomplishment of the above. In light of these comments, cinema cannot simply be seen as form alone – it must be discussed in relation to ideology and access to resources (1982:6). For Gabriel (1982:7), Fanon traces the development of Third Cinema as obtaining a specific final result: the radical alteration of conventional cinematic production apparatuses due to “the decolonization of culture and liberation” (ibid).

At the time, Gabriel (1982:11) described Louis Althusser as “the most advanced proponent of the theory of ideology”; as such, Gabriel supports Althusser's understanding of ideology as possessing a dual aspect that both connects individuals to their world and “unites the ‘real’ with the ‘imaginary/lived’ relation” (1982:11). A brief summation of the major themes in Third Cinema, as Gabriel (1982:15-20) discusses it, reads as follows: class antagonism; the resistance of imperial cultures by indigenous cultures; the significance of religion and spirituality as a tangible part of individuals' lives; the emancipation of women in the struggle against sexism and gender stereotypes; “immediate armed intervention: as “subversive activity” in the struggle against oppression (1982:19).

Gabriel (1982:21) describes a revolutionary film as a film that examines the mechanisms of society that facilitate a particular set of socio-economic and political conditions. Here, Ousmane Sembene [“the foremost African filmmaker” (1982:22) and a self-described militant (1982:38)] warns that while the filmmaker must identify and denounce the socio-political ills in a society, it is not the responsibility of the filmmaker to also propose a solution. In this sense, film can be considered revolutionary even though it does not result in an actual revolution (1982:22). While Gabriel (1982:23) notes that the idea that a single film can effect direct social change is naïve, releasing numerous films with “similar cultural and political intent” can have some sort of result in activating audiences' political consciousness.

A Third Cinema film that uses a central protagonist will locate that individual character within a specific community and history (Gabriel 1982:24). In addition, Third Cinema can make significant use of silence, as Sembene does (1982:26). Indeed, Gabriel (1982:28) notes that African films are predominantly characterised by their “slow, long takes, wide shots and a repetition of scenes” where “the slow rhythms approximate the Africans’ experience of time” and creates a context of experience for both the characters as well as the audience (1982:28). Gabriel (1982:36) foregrounds a sense of cinematic self-awareness as a point of departure for Third Cinema aesthetics. Referring to Manuel Herrera’s *Playa Giron* (1973), Gabriel ascribes much of the film’s aesthetic innovation to its “open manipulation of cinematic reality”, especially “in a film-within-a-film context” (1982:36), which speaks to Elsaesser’s conceptualisation of *mise-en-abyme*. In the South African film *Last Grave at Dimbaza* (Mahamo, 1973) white characters shot in soft focus to suggest their existence in an alternate reality disconnected from the lived reality of the majority of South African, while in *Journey to the Sun* goes as far as to suggest a complete lack of oppression in their images of ‘natives’ inhabiting “an unaffected land” (Gabriel 1982:45-46).

Buchsbaum’s (2001:154) concern about the vague broadness with which Gabriel sweeps “all films with social and political purpose” together is valid, but does not undermine the significance of Third Cinema as political cinema. Solanas and Getino’s manifesto “Towards a Third Cinema” violently criticises the cinema of spectacle (Buchsbaum 201: 156) as such a cinema is satisfied with and encourages a passive spectator. According to this manifesto, Third cinema “must serve a serve a specific political purpose for the particular political organization using it. At the same time, films from the ‘metropolis’ might qualify as *third cinema*, or at least militant cinema” (Buchsbaum 2001:160). Militant cinema is an instrumental cinema aimed to accomplish a specific political goal depending on the concrete material circumstances in which it is utilised (Getino & Solanas 2011:[sp]).<sup>64</sup> Jenan-Paul Fargier argues that cinema “must intervene indirectly [in political struggle] through the field of ideology in the conflict between idealism and materialism” (Rodowick

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<sup>64</sup> See Getino and Solanas (2011) for an overview of how film can respond to political objectives – rather, three genres of militant cinema – as essay cinema, informational cinema, pamphlet cinema or documentary cinema.



1988:88), and identifies militant films as a type of cinema that explores the proletarian cause (1988:108). In Fargier's conceptualisation thereof, militant films have the potential to "alter film's relation to economic practice by developing oppositional modes of production, distribution and exhibition, but in the last instance, they too are judged complicit with idealism to the extent that they may have ignored the ideology-in-general produced by cinema at the level of its form" (1988:109)

Yet another iteration of political cinema is what Maltby (1983) discusses as liberal cinema. Liberal cinema presents heroes whose heroism itself was vulnerable. Whereas the celebrity was previously positioned as representative of the common man, this star figure was recast as a victim, specifically a victim of fame and the need to conform to public expectations of a star image (Maltby 1983:262). Unfortunately, liberal cinema emphasised character over action, thereby opening a film up to melodramatic plot devices such as coincidence (1983:267). Liberal cinema did not live up to its initial promise of liberation; its social protest was vague at best, with individual identity and character trajectories always foregrounded (1983:307). In elaboration, liberal cinema presents heroes whose heroism itself was vulnerable. Whereas the star (celebrity actor) was previously positioned as representative of the common man, the star was recast as a victim, specifically a victim of fame and the need to conform to public expectations of a star image (1983:262). It is this emphasis on victimhood and loss of historical agency which makes liberal cinema problematic as larger socio-political concerns are relegated in favour of narratives of individual concern (see Chapters Four and Five in this regard).

Cinema can additionally be considered political insofar as films "inspire political activities (or are *read* politically) on the part of actual audiences" (Skvirsky 2009:10), or on an industrial level in terms of "alternative modes of production, distribution, and exhibition" (2009:10). South African independent distributor Cross Kine follows a niche distribution model whereby religiously themed films – including Afrikaans productions such as *Rowwe Diamante* (Olwage, 2015) – are exhibited in church venues with tickets selling for R35 each (Barnes 2015:[sp]), but these films are aimed at a culturally homogenous target audience. Often, political cinema is defined

by its opposition to capitalism and its emphasis on social transformation (Skvirsky 2009:iv).<sup>65</sup>

In terms of the encounter between politics and cinema discussed above, Žižek (2013) provides an expectedly colourful commentary on a selection of films that are political in terms of their content and their relation to a larger political reality. Discussing Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1982), Žižek explains that the film posits a comically totalitarian Britain of the future, which reminds him of the governance of Italian president Silvio Berlusconi; to be sure, Žižek reads *Brazil* as the end result of liberal democratic capitalism (2013:27-28). Other political films include overtly political, even propagandistic, films in and from North Korea, such as *Pulgasari*, directed by none other than Kim Jong-Il. In addition, Žižek mentions *The Schoolgirl's Diary* (2007), in which a teenage girl loses her biological father but claims that she gained another, greater father in the figure and person of Kim Jong-Il (Žižek 2013:44). Here the encounter between politics and cinema is located in the condemnation or celebration of political structures and figures that exist outside of the film as well as a relation between the Father and the individual in totalitarian contexts.

There are some predictable selections in Žižek's discussion. The first *Matrix* (Wachowski Bros, 1999) film represents, for Žižek (2013:57), a particular proletarian position epitomised in a scene where human characters lie down and pretend to be dead while their energy is drained from them. Discussing love and sexuality as socio-political forces, Žižek (2013:82) names the James Bond film *Quantum of Solace* (Foster, 2008) as "relatively leftist as James Bond saves the Morales regime in Bolivia", where Bond is an unexpectedly asexual character much like Robert Langdon in *Angels and Demons* (Howard, 2009): "there is no sex. It used to be the other way around. Hollywood inserted the sex. What is going on?" (2013:82). Žižek (2013:82-83) offers an explanation for male heroes' sudden sexual abstinence:

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<sup>65</sup> Indeed, political cinema "has historically articulated its project in relation to Marxism, the theoretical tradition responsible for the most systematic critique of capitalism ever produced" (Skvirsky 2009:11). But since the 1960s, claims Skvirsky (2009:iv), politics has become predominantly identity-oriented, which Skvirsky (ibid) refers to as the ethnic turn in political filmmaking.

mainstream Western culture is a narcissistic culture, with an emphasis on “[being] cocooned and safe, and even passionate sex, giving yourself to others, is becoming sex without love – sex is good but in moderation, you know”. The demise of such cinematic sexual activity suggests a shift away from political potential to an action cinema, in this instance, of soothing images – quite conservative!

There are numerous examples of political cinema in Russian, European, African and South American cinemas. In locating socialist similarities in cinema, Chanan (2005:232-233) discusses Russian cinema in the 1920s and 1960s Cuban cinema as examples of political cinema, where both cinemas are concerned to varying degrees with overcoming class divisions inherited from the systemic discrimination of the previous government. For Chanan (2005:235), 1920s Russian cinema demonstrates a participation in political life through its depictions of transformation. Chanan (2005:236) goes on to describe how “[t]he overthrow of the old order gave license to iconoclasm, experimentation and re-evaluation in all the arts”. Importantly, Chanan (2005) emphasises key ideas in political cinema: transformation, space, and a renewed, invigorated approach to filmmaking based on an evaluation of the filmmaking status quo as politically misguided or insufficient. With reference to a different manifestation of resistance, Deltcheva (2005:198-199) explains how in Russia, political transition resulted in an immediate cinematic reflection of this political event, but then describes how filmmakers later failed to sustain a sense of political cinema and instead focused on financial success:

Unfortunately, the majority of directors adopted a poetics of sordid naturalism and simplistic two-dimensional characterization to re-create and relive the abuses of the communist regime, using sensationalist styles and lurid sequences of violence, rape and bestiality, which failed to address the painful historical realities, instead favoring cheap thrills that did not even translate into box office hits.

In the end, Russian cinema failed to engage with the country’s past in an interrogation of its present by attempting to address “painful historical realities” in such a way (“sensationalist”, “lurid”) that it undermined the entire project. Russian cinema, much like Afrikaans cinema, suffered from excess, though the nature of the excesses associated with each context are, of course, markedly different.

In France in the early 1930s, avant garde artists sympathetic to the French Communist Party pursued the privileging of tactile perception in art (Jolles 2006:17). In later decades, Jean-Luc Godard would similarly represent the notion of filmmaker as political activist and direct participant in political events. Godard visited Jordan in 1968 to film material in refugee camps and to visit Palestinian bases; such contact with revolutionary filmmakers from the West, for instance, helped shape discourse around Palestinian cinema (Gertz & Khleifi 2008:23). In the context of the French New Wave, Ranciere (2006:143) discusses Godard as overtly political filmmaker. In Ranciere's view, Godard "puts 'cinema' between two Marxisms – Marxism as the matter of representation, and Marxism as the principle of representation". The representation of Marxism in Godard's *La Chinoise* (*The Chinese*, 1967), for instance, is Chinese Maoism "as it figured in the Western imaginary at the time", with Maoism "a catalogue of images, a panoply of objects, a repertoire of phrases, a program of actions: courses, recitals, slogans, gym exercises", while the Marxist principle is that of Althusserian Marxism (Ranciere 2006:143). In *La Chinoise*, "[t]he bourgeois apartment is the frame of representation wherein Godard arranges the necessary and sufficient elements for the *mise-en-scene* of the question: what does Marxism, this Marxism, say? How does it speak? How does it turn itself into film?" (Ranciere 2006:147). For Ranciere, Godard's particular political cinema is overtly Marxist in content and mode of address, which altogether constitutes an openly political film.

Jacques Bontemps, Jean-Louis Comolli, Michael Delahaye and Jean Narboni had a seminal conversation with Jean-Luc Godard in 1968 about political cinema. The conversation followed the release of Godard's *La Chinoise*. Concerning some of the mixed responses to film's politics, Godard explains that "people who have training in politics are hardly ever trained in film too", adding that there is a gap between politics and film and that those involved in the one area can rarely comment upon the other in an informed manner (Bontemps *et al.*, 1968-1969:21). Harvey's (2000:8) discussion of *One or Two Things I Know About Her* (Godard, 1966) and *La Haine* (Kassovitz, 1995) suggests that both films can serve as examples of political filmmaking. Harvey (2000:11) remarks that

[t]he city of the future that hovers as a question mark in Godard's film is fully formed in *Hate*. Utopian longing has given way to unemployment, discrimination, despair and alienation. Repressions and anger are now everywhere in evidence. There is no intellectual or aesthetic defense (sic?) against them [...] The city incarcerates the underprivileged and further marginalizes them in relation to the broader society.

As Godard's film indicates, the 1960s and 1970s saw the release of political films that "[questioned] France's role as a colonizer and primarily focused on Algeria ... By the 1980s and 1990s, this whole mood of questioning disappears and the colonialist film becomes a retro-mode genre" (Hayward 2010:165). Also in the French cinematic context, Forbey (2002:177) identifies Romain Gulpil as one of France's seminal political filmmakers, a director for whom political filmmaking involves the condemnation or celebration of a specific subject. (2002:177-178). Gulpil was especially interested in protesting French legislation that controlled and inhibited immigrant labour and activity (Forbey 2002:184).

Gulpil's focus is clearly on those members of society who have been marginalised and Othered through the patriarchal rule of law. In addition to Gulpil, O'Shaughnessy (2011:339) refers to French directors such as Erick Zonca and Bruno Dumont whose films address levels of socio-economic violence on the individual; for O'Shaughnessy (2011:339), both directors contested the idea of the nation as shelter. The individual is vulnerable and fragile, exposed to material forces that may in part determine his fate. Referring to French cinema's dealing with migration, exploitation and vulnerability, O'Shaughnessy (2011:341) argues that

[t]he fictions are collectively haunted by ambiguity. They help restore the grounds for critique by pointing to neoliberalism's aggravation of inequalities, domination and exclusions. They reassert the possibility and necessity of struggle, showing characters who are defined not by their circumstances, as in an immobilizing social realism, but by their refusal of them. Yet, operating in the ruins of a politics, showing the remnants of the working class, they also inevitably point to a defeat and to a closing down of political horizons.

While both French and contemporary Afrikaans cinemas operate "in the ruins of politics" or major political events, Afrikaans cinema does not foreground how neoliberalism intensifies inequalities. Instead, Afrikaans cinema uses neoliberalism

for its own financial viability and points to the failure of South African democracy as determined by the political incompetence of those currently in power.

Politically speaking, it is as if contemporary Afrikaans cinema denies what Mirzoeff (2011) calls “the right to look”. Looking is a political act in itself; as Mirzoeff (2011:1) explains, “[t]he right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity”. The right to look, as it were, exists in opposition to the dominant way of seeing, or visibility. Visibility “is formed by a set of relations combining information, imagination and insight into a rendition of physical and psychic space [...] a discursive practice that has material effects, like Foucault’s panopticism, the gaze or perspective” (Mirzoeff 2011:3).

Mirzoeff (2011) discusses the Spanish film *Pan’s Labyrinth* (Del Toro, 2006) as prime example of political cinema. Mirzoeff (2011:271) comments that the film resists hegemonic violence “by mixing a specific moment of antifascist resistance with archetypes of fairytales and digital special effects created for horror fantasy films. The film is not a template for antifascism, but an instance of it that crosses national boundaries both in its production and its narrative”. In using fantasy to address fascism, Del Toro generally seems to position cinema as a contemporary mythology that speaks to politics (Mirzoeff 2011:273).<sup>66</sup> Such a link between mythology and politics is, according to Mirzoeff (2011:274), created by references to historical events, archetypes and cinematic classics, and “[t]his density of reference, whether fully understood or not, is part of the film’s compelling feel, making it impossible not to watch”. *Pan’s Labyrinth*, as a Spanish political film and national allegory, is thus aware of a certain national history as well as its own position in relation to other important film texts. Commenting on the trauma of the Spanish Civil War, Jo Labanyi cautions that “the consensus of the ‘pact of forgetting’ during the transition led to a refusal to confront the ghosts of the past” (Kosmidou 2013:26; also see section 3.4.2). The political fantasy of *Pan’s Labyrinth* makes its narrative an act of remembrance.

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<sup>66</sup> See Elsaesser’s framing of fantasy as or in political cinema in Chapter Two.

A sense of social justice is a recurrent theme in Petrie's (1974:255) exploration of Hungarian national cinema as having "a long tradition of making films designed to reveal and explore social conflicts" (1974:273). Key filmmakers Petrie (1974) mentions in this regard include Istvan Szots and Istvan Szabo. Szots' *People of the Alps* (1942) depicts beautifully filmed landscapes, yet the film is explicitly about class conflict (Petrie 1974:256) and does not simply celebrate natural wonder, while Szabo emphasises themes of time and memory as shaped by historical events such as the end of World War II (1974:268). Szabo thus allocates a measure of determinism to material events in crucially shaping characters' lives, thereby acknowledging that these characters inhabit a specific socio-political system from which they cannot just be removed.

The absence of a Palestinian historical narrative in cinema has been ascribed to the temporality of making a living – and making films – as an exilic figure (Gertz & Khleifi 2008:2). When there are attempts at creating a historic Palestinian sequence, the perils of the present are often ignored, or the film over emphasise a nostalgic sense of loss in parallel with a lamentation of the present (ibid). Films that emerge with the above features intact, often "[resemble] other histories of exile and displacement, in which everyday existence is experienced through the mediation of nostalgia for the lost nature-and-nation unity, and for the utopian homeland that remains untainted by contemporary affairs" (Gertz & Khleifi 2008:3). As a political cinema, Palestinian cinema was explicitly linked with revolution, wherein cinema was positioned as revolutionary device (2008:22). Palestinian filmmaker Michel Khleifi's debut feature, *Fertile Memories* (1980), offered audiences female protagonists located in a narrative that foregrounded issues of class, ethnic and other identities by using an individual story to illuminate a collective story (2008:75).

With reference to South American political cinema, Hanlon's (2009:75) research identifies Jorge Sanjine as central to the Bolivian political cinema movement. The author explains that Sanjine was interested by the revolutionary possibilities offered by Marxist aesthetics' sense of form and content (ibid). Referring to world cinema's indebtedness to Hollywood aesthetics and form, Sanjine, as cited in Hanlon (2009:90), would himself observe that "a revolutionary film that advocates revolution using the same commercial language is selling its content, betraying its ideology in

its form". Indeed, Hollywood cinema was the main political opponent of New Latin American Cinema, while the European auteurs were acknowledged for resisting Hollywood aesthetics (Hanlon 2009:95).

Baer (2004:154) describes how 1970s Mexican cinema enjoyed substantial state support, and that the national allegories of that period were negative about Mexico's progress towards nationalist discourse (indicating an intersection with Third Cinema principles). The substantial state support of 1970s Mexican cinema as well as the state investment in French cinema during the 1960s – the time of the French New Wave – coincided with, as Baer (2004:154) describes it, "cinematic sociopolitical engagement and artistic innovation ... [seemingly proving] that Latin America was positioning itself as a considerable presence in global cultural production". From the 1980s onward, state investment in Mexican cinema declined and independent filmmakers emerged to continue to develop a critical political Mexican cinema. The decrease in financial support from the state did not result in a paucity of critical film outputs. While *Y Tu Mama Tambien* (Cuaron, 2002) is a political film in the sense that it calls attention to the political specificity of the Mexican context (Baer 2004:158), it fails to accommodate women in its vision of the Mexican nation; in addition, the film demonstrates that the consummation of homosexual desire between the two male protagonists results in the definite rupture of their (homo)social bond (2004:163). The end of their relationship is echoed in the film's melancholic conclusion (2004:164).

Xavier (2012:41) argues that the cinema of the Taviani brothers as exemplified by the prison drama *Caesar Must Die* (2012) is blatantly political, as the filmmakers' political views and criticisms of Italian history generated a political cinema that resist the celebration of national myths and fictions. In more contemporary world cinema, Celik (2013:219) reads Greek family drama *Dogtooth* (Lanthimos, 2009) as Greek national allegory and a critique of socio-political realities in post-1989 Greece. *Dogtooth* and *Attenberg* (Tsangari, 2010) both belong to the Greek New Wave, and exemplify the Greek obsession with family (Celik 2013:221). Elsewhere, Bradshaw (2014:[sp]), in his review of Lav Diaz's *Norte, The End of History* (2014), describes the film as possessing "a kind of transcendental naturalism" in its narrative of the "tragedy of the modern Philippines and ... global capitalism". The film's protagonists



are shaped by economic imperatives (ibid) where market forces dictate the conditions of labour to the detriment of the family unit.

In American cinema, director Paul Thomas Anderson's work has been positioned as political cinema due to his films' recurrent focus on marginal figures such as gamblers, pornographers and working class struggles (Goss 2002:171). For Goss (2002:172), Anderson's films can be read "diagnostically" as "dramas that are secreted by the political climate in which they were made". While Anderson's films construct masculinity in a nuanced manner, Goss (2002:183) points out that the gay characters in his films are often presented in derogatory manners ("sycophantic, socially inept"). In her astute Marxist reading of Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997) and Ted Demme's *Blow* (2001), Kornbluh (2005:143) finds that "[a]s ideological operations, the films posit a personal resolution to broad social problems". But, as the destabilising moment of this ideological gesture, these personal resolutions fail: the heroes remain unhappy and the audience retains a palpable sense of that sadness. Far from mere obfuscations of political reality, these lingering emotions derive from a connection between libido and economy. At the base of the metaphoric substitutions (the mother as 'the economy') and ideological distortions (personal success as a solution to economic and emotional lack) lies the representation of *libidinal economy*, an irrefutable structural connection between feelings and materiality. Within these films lurks a theoretical claim that economic context effectively informs personal development, aspirations and fantasies, hopes and grudges, and emotional baggage (Kornbluh 2005:143).

Porter (2007) offers the notion of a cinema of political critique instead of political cinema in his Habermasian interrogation of the film *Pleasantville* (Ross, 1998). Porter (2007:405) suggests that the film vitalises the tension "between, what Habermas would call, 'ethical freedom' and 'ethical life', expressing a critical sensitivity with regard to how the latter may be anchored in, and governed by, traditional forms of the 'good' that necessarily curtail the autonomy of the subject". Porter (2007:408) notes that the diegetic space of *Pleasantville* is sanitised: "there is no poverty, no threats to security, no illness, no rain, no fire, no need for toilets as no one seems to need to discharge bodily functions". Such 'lacks' indicate the film's understanding of Hollywood cinema as a cinema of privilege, but also how such

privilege is sanitised by omitting key aspects of political existence such as social struggle.

Referring to cinema's potential for such observations, Porter (2007:410) argues that *Pleasantville* is a key example of cinema as political critique, where such a notion of cinema solidifies "the autonomy of film as a generator of political thought and critique". Cinema thus offers political criticism cinematically, in a specific visual language or form (2007:411). Addressing the film's visual language, Porter (2007:412) discusses how the *mise-en-scene* and the use of a low-angle shot in a particular scene in *Pleasantville* "provides the impetus for Ross's cinematically animated political critique". A film's visual language is crucial in stimulating political thought, echoing Elsaesser. Other American films that may be described as political for their examinations of corporate power, such as *The Insider* (Mann, 1999) and *Erin Brockovich's* (Soderbergh, 1996) "offer images of collective action that fall considerably short of *political* engagement; they uphold the idea of citizen initiatives only within a localized, delimited (usually legal) sphere" (emphasis in original) (Boggs & Pollard 2003:241). For these authors, the legal dimension prevalent in each of these films places limits their political criticism.

Moorman (2001:119) recounts how

[i]n colonial Angola, the politics of independence and the collectivity of the nation were in part born in relation to the experience of cinema for at least some of Luanda's elites who were intimately involved in the national liberation struggle," where "film was used as a means of propaganda, of mobilizing political support for an exiled nationalist leadership and the guerrilla war they were waging in the country.

As in Russian contexts, film can be an instrument of propaganda to promote political liberation. In a South African context, Greig (1980:14), writing in the 1970s, states that "most South African films are kitsch". For Greig, it is important to acknowledge that aesthetics in a postcolonial society implies politics, and that it is necessary "to connect ways of seeing film to the ways life is actually lived in South Africa" (1980:14). With specific reference to apartheid-era Afrikaans cinema, Greig (1980:15) notes that "the plight of the Afrikaans filmmaker is a direct result of his unwillingness to separate himself from the ideology-forming structures of society".

Greig implies that Afrikaans filmmakers look for funding from Afrikaans investors and subsequently privilege an Afrikaans subject position and perspective on history in their films (1980:15). While Afrikaans cinema had been ideologically and industrially insular, Hay (2006:138) identifies Roodt's *Place of Weeping* (1986) as a key moment in South Africa political filmmaking. As Hay (2006:138) states, political transition challenged the hegemonic position of white Afrikaans filmmakers. It is in this sense of a changing film landscape that Pallo Jordan, as cited by Hay (2006:139), said: "[i]n the past, South African cinema was falsely separated from its consumers. That is now changing. A national cinema is emerging – one that speaks for and to many individual voices, and to us as a nation, that will produce a cinematic culture that we can be proud of". Jordan here anticipates a more socio-politically and racially inclusive South African cinema.

What I aim to locate in my analysis as part of my understanding of political cinema and cinematic political impotence is to an extent what Negri (2011) describes as *potenza*, power, potency. In a letter to Giorgio Agamben, Negri (2011:32) states that the artistic act does not have to be reduced to the market, as such a reduction would declare the market as an infinite determining power.<sup>67</sup> Negri (2011:18-19) provides a detailed discussion of impotence as related to *potenza*, and is worth quoting at length:

The market destroys creativity. Potenza is withdrawn. But not even this is enough to bring about radical overturnings and a definitive implosion: without measure and without hope, without direction and without rhythm, the round-about continues its crazy whirl: a television screen commanded by ferocious zapping, between a thousand channels. Not only the image is destroyed, but also imagination. No memory is possible any longer, because it has been rendered impossible by the evacuation [sic] of desire, of rationality, of any project of singularity. Betrayal, and also falsification, become morality precisely where the absence of memory is a given.

The notion of impotence is related to notions of implosion. Negri (2011:15), drawing on Baudrillard's notion of implosion, states that "[i]mplosion = to be impotent".

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<sup>67</sup> Potere/Potenza = power-to/power-over (Negri 2011:18, translator's note).

Implosion suggests not only a sense of disastrous insularity, but also the inevitable collapse of a system onto itself, rendering the system's presence as impermanent and inconsequential. Impotence is the conceptual epitome of interpassivity (in the sense of eluded accountability) and the insipid (a poverty of the political imagination).

Having recently referred to existing approaches to political cinema and to the failures of cinematic excess, I turn to one of the most visible macro-forms of cinematic political impotence: *forgetting*. Even in certain television programmes, such as the SABC daily serial *7de Laan*, in which the spoken language is Afrikaans, operates in a framework of amnesia where the only threats to characters' well-being are of a personal nature, and not political at all (Milton 2008:270). In such programmes, urban settings are preferred while the ideas and voices of rural Afrikaans communities remain unheard (2008:270). When I refer to a macro-form of cinematic political impotency, I refer to a theme or subject that applies (or fails to apply at all) across the majority Afrikaans films and is not limited to one specific film. As the study progresses, I will also introduce micro-forms of cinematic political impotence which appear in specific Afrikaans films and do not necessarily manifest in other films.

#### 3.4.2 Film, forgetting and impotence

Walder (2013:155) argues that forgetting South Africa's traumatic past can only intensify its bearing on the present democracy already fraught with inherited inequalities. For Christian Meier, says Assman (2012:53), "it is the ability to forget that should be considered the cultural achievement; remembering is only to be recommended under absolutely extraordinary circumstances such as Auschwitz." Assman (2012:53) explains that in Meier's view:

[I]t is precisely these acts of remembering which keep the destructive energies alive for the historical actors. This premise leads him to the following conclusion: if the process of remembering sustains feelings of hate and revenge, then it is the process of forgetting which will mollify the conflictive parties, initiating the process of reintegration that is necessary for survival. Clearly, the state cannot influence the personal memories of its citizens, but it can prohibit under penalty public discussions which are predisposed to cause old sores to reopen and which may lead to the mobilization of new resentments and aggression arising from remembering old injuries and feelings of hate.

The state itself might sanction an act of collective forgetting, where citizens deliberately avoid reconstructing a past characterised by a shared history of violence. Assman (2012:54) values Meier's approach insofar it defuses a sensitive negative national legacy.

Assman (2012:61) continues: "[p]eace, according to Christian Meier, is quite a different matter from justice. Those who want to achieve justice through remembering are necessarily endangering social harmony which, as is shown by history, was again and again founded on a policy of forgetting". Assman (2012:61) explains that this process was replaced in the 1980s by Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, where remembering is therapeutic and cathartic. Forgetting can benefit nation building, but remembering has distinct advantages. Bhabha (2007:320) recounts how, for Renan, race and territory do not inform nation building, but the "will to nationhood". It is a feature of this will to nationhood that it makes safe the present by unifying historical memory. This unification of historical memory does not imply remembering; in fact, it relies on forgetting. Bhabha (2007:310) elaborates:

Renan's will is itself the site of a strange forgetting of the history of the nation's past: the violence involved in establishing the nation's writ. It is this forgetting – a minus in the origin – that constitutes the *beginning* of the nation's narrative. It is the syntactical and rhetorical arrangement of this argument that is more illuminating than any frankly historical or ideological reading. Listen to the complexity of this form of forgetting which is the moment in which the national will is articulated: 'yet every French citizen has to have forgotten [*is obliged to have forgotten*] Saint Bartholomew's Night's Massacre, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century'. (emphasis in original)

This compulsory forgetting is, in Bhabha's (2007:311) view, functional in allowing individuals to imagine and engage with various forms of cultural identification; Bhabha refers to process as liberating. While Renan and Bhabha's approach to remembering and forgetting is at least in one view liberating in its suggestion of a certain 'freedom' from past traumas and transgressions, I would heed South African Ashraf Jamal's (2005:46) cautioning: "There can be no wholesale removal from a prior history, no easy reification and displacement of it. A removal of this nature constitutes a dislocation of the most degraded order".

Forgetting is the preferred option for some conservative Afrikaans cultural figures. Controversial minority activist Dan Roodt (2000:3) states that an ideology of guilt took hold of Afrikaners and white individuals.<sup>68</sup> Such was the strength of this ideology of guilt that it impeded rational thinking (Roodt 2000:3). For Roodt (2000:5), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was little more than a history rewriting through propaganda; put differently, Roodt sees the TRC as rewriting South African history. To begin with, Roodt feigns not understanding apartheid. Roodt (2000:50) asks:

What is apartheid? At this stage, and especially after reading the TRC-report, I have to admit to only having a vague idea. It is yet another 'to be continued', a study of apartheid, an apparently simple concept but which becomes obscure through colonial and analogical thresholds. (The fantastic might and power of Afrikaans will probably allow a person to come to some sort of understanding of apartheid, because in the end Afrikaans gives one access to the crux of what it is to be a South African, the mystery of the past, our archive which gathers dust, a freedom of thought beyond the analogical.)

While I can appreciate Roodt's (2000) suggestion of apartheid as more complex than some political commentators may have suggested, it is certainly not as vague a concept as he believes. Its policies are not vague, having shaped social life in South Africa over decades. Mangcu (2008:103) cites Njabulo Ndebele as describing a "culture of callousness" evidenced by "white silence about the desecration of black bodies in present-day South Africa". This white silence is a form of conservative nationalism, a response of white perceptions to "black attacks on white entitlements". Forgetting can only inflate a sense of silence and associated privilege. Interestingly, Roodt (2000) suggests that the Afrikaans language may provide an understanding of apartheid. It may be that Afrikaans can construct apartheid in a certain way, in the language of its origin, but Afrikaans cinema has barely touched upon the subject of apartheid and its present effects.

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<sup>68</sup> Buys (2013:13) criticises Dan Roodt's strategy of promoting issues close to the Afrikaner by attempting to "prove" how unintelligent black people are. Such a destructive approach to promoting Afrikaner issues simply creates more opposition to any causes the Afrikaner associate with, and leads some Afrikaners to reject the label 'Afrikaner' completely (ibid).

The first democratic government of South Africa approached remembering the past in an overt manner that underlined remembering's reconciliatory aspects. Antjie Krog's *The Country of My Skull* (1998) provides an intimate yet comprehensive experience of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission chaired by Desmond Tutu. The TRC set out to collect testimonies from both sides of the apartheid line: those responsible for many of the crimes committed during apartheid rule as part of maintaining white minority governance as well as those who resisted the oppression. Roodt (2000:51) finds it odd that Krog could not write the book in her mother tongue, Afrikaans, and states that when Krog dedicated her book "aan 'elke slagoffer wat 'n Afrikaanse van op die lippe gehad het' ('to every victim who had an Afrikaans name on her lips')", she is actually emphasising the TRC as an overtly ethnic project.<sup>69</sup> By this, Roodt implies that Krog 'correctly' frames the TRC as a 'black' project which will almost inevitably work towards an accusatory marginalisation of (Afrikaans) 'whites'.

With this in mind, Roodt (2000:120) brings his attention back to "Afrikaanssprekendes", white Afrikaans speaking individuals that are not, in Roodt's view, included in the ethnic project of the TRC. Roodt (2000:120) recommends that Afrikaans speaking people surrender themselves to a radical forgetfulness incapable of recollecting the TRC or any part of its contents. It is then, says Roodt, that "we" (the "Afrikaanssprekendes") we will be capable of rewriting history using a completely different vocabulary. By forgetting the TRC, Afrikaans speaking people will be ridding themselves of a series apartheid related clichés (2000:125). Finally, forgetting the TRC, says Roodt (2000:126) would make it possible to remember the past. Problematically, Roodt sees the TRC, a memory and recollection-based project, as an obstacle to 'true' remembering, to an 'accurate' version of the past.

Selective remembering occurs in Afrikaans cinema over the past twenty years, and not just in Roodt's book. For De Kock (2004:18), South Africa "has been a fertile ground for foundational binary inscription, a place of blatant dualisms, such as civilised and savage, settler and indigene, White and Black, oppressed and privileged, rich and poor". In grappling with remembering, processes of selection

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<sup>69</sup> Somewhat ironically, Roodt may misremember the inscription. The inscription in Krog's 2002 edition of the book actually reads: "for every victim who had an *Afrikaner* surname on her lips" (emphasis added).

(inclusion and exclusion) and a palimpsest of binaries, De Kock (2004:12) suggests the notion of the seam as “the place where difference and sameness are hitched together – where they are brought to self-awareness, denied, or displaced into third terms”. With De Kocks’ words in mind, it is now time to see to what extent one can speak of a political cinema in South African cinema.

### **3.5 A selection of political filmmaking in apartheid South Africa**

Apartheid cinema as an industry itself suggested the broader processes of segregation and hegemonic control that characterised the artificially and legislatively divided South African society of the time. Derrida (1985:292) uses concentration camp imagery to describe the word apartheid, evoking its “[s]ystem of partition, barbed wire, crowds of mapped out solitudes ... The word concentrates separation, raises it to another power...” To speak of an apartheid cinema is to refer to a South African (and Afrikaans) cinema that as a result of these processes of mapping and privilege allowed a white minority filmmaking power to configure the national social and historical imaginaries. As Johns (2009:227) reminds us, white minority governments are notorious for their censorious approach to race in popular culture. It follows that cinema in South Africa between 1910 and 1996 was a white cinema both in terms of its industry and its audiences (Armes 2006:26). Armes (2006:26-27) cites Jamie Uys’ *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980) as a major South African film which, in spite of its “seemingly innocuous” comedy, is ideologically “impregnated by the “spirit of apartheid” (Peter Davis quoted in Armes 2006:27), and is reflective of white privilege over storytelling and image construction.

While Tomaselli “may claim that the South African film industry produced [*The Gods Must be Crazy*] with local white spectators in mind, Joseph Gugler also shows how the industry made a concerted push to export the movie abroad, not only for profit but for propaganda value” (Johns 2009:220). Locally produced and directed films were broadly aimed at international markets as well, and conveyed images of South Africa that, in the case of Uys’ film, for instance, suggested a country inhabited by simple-minded natives and goofy Afrikaans speaking characters. Films such as *The Gods Must Be Crazy* represent the narratively safe and mundane cinematic landscape of much of South African cinema in the apartheid era. This tendency to



make films that were morally and ideologically safe to fit the consumption habits of its primary audience was informed by the stringent censorship rules and guidelines legitimated during the Verwoerd regime.

As the National Party ascended to power in 1948, censorship and a fear of the world beyond Afrikaans borders increased to the point where Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd described television as having the destructive capacity of the atomic bomb (Johns 2009:227-228). As Botha (2007:24) describes the situation in the film industry in the 1960s, “[i]deology and capital came together to create a national cinema that would reflect South Africa” under Verwoerd. Films were positioned as objects with the capacity to destroy, according to the above image with its connotations of death and destruction. Films such as *Die Spaanse Vlieg* (*The Spanish Fly*, De Villiers, 1978) and *Weerskant die Nag* (*On either side of night*, Marx, 1979) were considered controversial for their treatment of sex inside and outside of marriage (Van Nierop, *Daar doer in die fliiek*). Given the numbers above, it follows that Verwoerd and his government “realised the potential influence this Afrikaner-dominated industry would have on the growth and spread of the Afrikaans language” (Botha 2003:183). Such was the dominance of Afrikaans cinema during apartheid that “[o]f the 60 films made between 1956 and 1962, 43 were in Afrikaans”, and of the remaining number, four films were bilingual (Botha 2003:183).<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the prevalence and longevity of Afrikaans films were promoted and preserved under the auspices of certain cultural organisations.

Tomaselli (2008:131) identifies two forces indicative of a bifurcation in the South African industry: the New Africa Movement (NAM) and Conservative Cultural Theory (CCT). The former represented a pro-modernity group, while the latter was anti-modern. In the 1930s and 1940s, an “Afrikaner-exclusive film movement” developed under Rompel and the *Reddingsdaadbond Amateur Rolprent Organisasie* (RARO)

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<sup>70</sup> The Afrikaans language would remain a contentious item on the national agenda of unity in diversity. As Milton (2011:261) explains, “post-apartheid ... has witnessed the erosion of Afrikaans from all levels of state bureaucracy – including a dramatic decline in the use of Afrikaans on the public broadcaster, the SABC”. The Afrikaans language thrives, however, in the Afrikaans cinema industry that falls outside of state broadcasting control.

(2008:131), which had its own distribution arm in *Volksbioskope* (VOBI).<sup>71</sup> RARO “objected to the Anglo-American imperialism prevailing in South Africa as a result of the showing of numerous overseas films” (Botha 2007:21); local films were perceived as threatened by global hegemonies. Tomaselli (2008) identifies Rompel as a representative figure of the conservative cultural theory in early Afrikaans cinema. Rompel (1942:5), a former film critic, displays an appreciation for film’s capacity to shape public opinion (1942:9). As evidence of cinema’s power to inform people and their behaviour, Rompel (1942:12) cites *I was a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (Le Roy, 1932) as example. Rompel (1942:22) cautions against a film being *skilderagtig* (like a painting); in his view, *Gone with the Wind* is not filmic. In his assessment of American dominance in the global film industry, Rompel (1942:108) is unambiguous: the American film industry, *volksvreemd* and *volksvyandig*, managed to eliminate the *volkseie rolprentkuns* (indigenous film art) of Europe. The proliferation of American films in South Africa consequently propagates various foreign life attitudes and perspectives (1942:114). Such foreign content cannot have a positive impact on South African society and, as a result, all of cinema should be seen as a negative force (1942:116).

In elaboration, Tomaselli (2008:135) outlines the differences between Rompel and South African cinema pioneer Thelma Gutsche and in so doing establishes that Rompel wanted a “*volkseie* (white Afrikaner nationalist) amateur-driven [film] industry”. In addition, Rompel “demanded an Edenic pastoral economy” wherein some sort of “Afrikaner Nationalist cultural consolidation” could occur (2008:135). Rompel supervised the production and exhibition of *’n Nasie Hou Koers* (1938), which documented the Voortrekker Centenary Celebrations (Gutsche 1972:263). Rompel specifically supervised the editing of the film, which had a running time of nearly five hours. Given the film’s length, it would usually be screened in two parts; a social ritual such as a *braai* (barbecue) would take place during the intermission (1972:345). Rompel was such a culturally esteemed figure that, during his time at the Department of the Interior, he served on sub-committee of the South African Committee of Intellectual Cooperation investigating the possibility of establishing a Film Institute in South Africa (1972:362).

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<sup>71</sup> RARO can be translated as “Rescue Action League Amateur Film Organisation” (Botha 2007:21).

Rompel's suggestions appeared in a few 1938 editions of the popular Afrikaans magazine *Huisgenoot*, as well as his own *Het Bioskoop in Diens van die Volk* (Cinema in service of the People") in two short volumes, yet contemporary Afrikaans cinema specifically addresses the idea of a *volkseie* film industry that privileges some sort of "cultural consolidation". Says Tomaselli (2008:136): "Rompel claimed that Afrikaners *reflect* their true God-given orientation in film"; for Rompel, there is only a single reality, "a God-given set of conditions, a pre-existent state of being, uncluttered by ideological (or even theological) interpretations" (2008:136). In keeping with the idea of a God-given state of privilege, Rompel argued that Afrikaans film could resist cultural influences seen as *volksvreemd* (alien) and *volksgevaarlik* (national threats) (2008:136).

Originally, an Afrikaner cinema was established as an intervention to resist the ascendancy of Anglo-American cinema in South African cinema before World War II. As Tomaselli and Eckardt (2007:231) explain, "[t]his initiative aimed to restore the nation's pastoral cultural integrity and to protect the *volk* (people) from the insidious influences of the 'city', dominated as it was by British imperialism". Where urbanity was associated with ideological contamination, the rural represented a freedom from British hegemony. For Rompel (Tomaselli & Eckardt 2007:231), a successful Afrikaner film industry would be one based on the business design and ideological template of state-controlled German cinema. In constructing such an Afrikaner cinema, resistance to Hollywood dominance was primary. Rompel was especially critical of Hollywood cinema's role in the "capitalist system" and how it nurtured "consumer subservience" (Tomaselli & Eckardt 2007:232). Instead of using Hollywood as a model for an indigenous film industry and culture, Rompel gathered ideas on how an Afrikaner cinema should function from Soviet cinema, in particular its Eisensteinian aesthetic and documentary output, but also the Weimar Republic (2007:232).<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Speaking of the significance of the film medium, Russian royal Nicolas II, as quoted in Kenez (2001:14), amusingly underestimates the political potential of the medium: "I consider the cinematography is an empty matter, which no one needs. It is even something harmful. Only an abnormal person could place this farcical business on the level of art. This is silliness and we should not attribute any significance to such trifles".

History would demonstrate the power of the moving image, a power that Rompel did not miscalculate. During World War I, Russian audiences sought a cinema of diversion and entertainment, with moviegoers interested in films about “beautiful gardens and well-appointed gardens and depicting exaggerated sentiment” (Kenez 2001:17). Russian cinema increased its output of escapist cinema as the political and economic decline in the country increased (2001:22). Eventually, the Russian cinematic cultural revolution would be initiated not by filmmakers but by politicians who wanted fewer romances and adventures and more ideological content (2001:93). In other words, direct state involvement sustained the medium financially but at an artistic price. Directors such as Eisenstein and Vertov who were overtly ideologically engaged in their work were too experimental, too formalist, for these politicians (2001:93). It remained a pivotal marker of Soviet cinema that filmmakers made films that are accessible and intelligible to millions of viewers. The emphasis on easily accessible and intelligible film would prove to be a launch pad of criticism against directors who were far more artistically and experimentally inclined (2001:94). As an overtly political instrument, Soviet cinema would be a weapon and educational tool in service of Communism (2001:94).

In this volatile Soviet context, film critics were seen as soldiers in the cultural revolution, and they understood that a new approach to filmmaking was required by the political dispensation. Kenez (2001:97) reports that these critics “respected neither past achievements nor international reputations. Artistic experimentation – cinematic innovation, then – was as indefensible an artistic value as apoliticism” (2001:97). The critics were especially vitriolic in their critique that cinema had not become as significant an instrument in political and ideological training as the medium had promised (2001:97). Even the best directors were accused of over-emphasising the significance of montage in film language, and the resulting primacy thereof in its explicit association with formalism (Kenez 2001:99-100). Iconic Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov rejected straight-forward narrative filmmaking; for him, “film drama as the opium of the people” whereas cinema should depict daily life (Kenez 2001:101). Powerfully, Vertov saw the drama film and religion as capitalist weapons, and that showing the Russian revolutionary way of life those weapons would be resisted (ibid). To the detriment of world cinema, in Stalin’s last years “[c]ultural life, including film-making, reflected [a] political order” that prohibited an engagement with

a variety of topics and themes, and “the artistic and intellectual worlds lost their last vestiges of autonomy; intellectual and artistic disputes were decided by politicians [...] No medium of art escaped the attention of the Party ideologists” (Kenez 2001:188).

The German aesthetic in turn demonstrated to Rompel the use of the free ranging camera, which prompted Rompel to further criticise Hollywood cinema’s standard shot selection of long shots, mid-shots and close-ups (Tomaselli & Eckhardt 2007:232). Rompel valued German and Soviet cinema for a variety of reasons: their “supposed closeness to everyday life, the dominance of the realistic rather than the fantastical, the simplicity and sincerity of setting and actors, avoiding sensationalism and striving for authentically strong emotional expression” (Tomaselli & Eckhardt 2007:232). In terms of film production, Soviet cinema offered certain correlatives for Rompel’s conception of an Afrikaner cinema:

- In an attempt to establish a sense of realism, actors were recruited from the masses – often on the basis of their age or occupation – although trained actors landed the larger roles (similar to the Soviet notion of *typage*);
- “the use of crowds and the isolation, in close-up, of one of its members to metonymically symbolise the emotions of the larger group” (2007:233);
- For Afrikaner cinema to be “culture-specific and nationally pure”, the way in which subject matter was approached is more important than the subject matter itself (2007:233).

Overall, “[a] nostalgia for ‘what might have been’ underlies Rompel’s objectives. It is not surprising that the recurring image of the evil city is endemic to nearly all Afrikaans cinema until the mid-1970s” (Tomaselli & Eckhardt 2007:234). During the 1970s, the majority of Afrikaans films utilised obsolete symbols that stereotyped not only the figure of the Afrikaner, but also the image of the black figure as servant (Botha 2005:4).

VOBI later introduced a four-part plan for Afrikaner cinema which would:

- “teach the [Afrikaner] youth to trust their own language”, in contrast to Rompel’s notion of a pure silent cinema;

- “[reflect] Afrikaner morals, habits, history and life views which rest on a Christian foundation”;
- “identify *volksmonumente* (monuments of the nation) and teach Afrikaners to protect what is theirs”;
- And finally, “teach that patriots speak one language, have the same culture, are descendant from the same ancestors and are inspired by the same ideals and aspirations” ( Tomaselli & Eckhardt 2007:238).

The above programme could establish a sense of cultural hegemony through the notion of cultural unity, a powerful ideological extension of *ex unitate vires*.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Tomaselli and Eckardt (2007:238) comment that the above programme corresponds to Nazi programmes aimed at covertly coding German films with National-Socialist ideology. Rompel and VOB’s concerns about a ‘pure’ Afrikaans cinema in South Africa translated into the creation of loyal white Afrikaans audiences to sustain such an industry. During the 1950s,

[t]he white Afrikaans audience for this local cinema was relatively large and very stable, guaranteeing nearly every Afrikaans-language film a long enough run to break even as long as it provided light entertainment, basically escapism, and dealt with Afrikaner reality and beliefs in an idealistic way. It meant that Afrikaners wanted their ideals visualized in these films. This idealistic conservatism was characterized by an attachment to the past, to ideals of linguistic and racial purity and to religious and moral norms” (Botha 2012:43).

Two key ideas emerge from Botha’s (2012) description of 1950s Afrikaans cinema. Firstly, financially successful Afrikaans films were films that provided audiences with an escapism and idealism removed from the socio-political reality of South Africa at that time. Secondly, this cinema is best described as conservative, given its preference for (often nostalgic) notions of ethnic and sexual purity. Given these markers of Afrikaans cinema, it follows that strict censorship would regulate which films could be seen, and also by whom. This moral censorship “in the 1960s and 1970s prevented South Africans from viewing the international landmarks such as Fellini’s *Satyricon*”, for instance, as well as the politically charged *The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo, 1966) (Botha 2003:184). Pontecorvo’s film was popular among

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<sup>73</sup> “*Ex unitate vires*” means “unity shape power”, or in Afrikaans, “eendrag maak mag”. It was the official slogan of apartheid South Africa.

Bay Area Panthers, who paid particular attention to the film's representation of terrorist acts (Bhabha 2004:xxvii), in so doing claiming the film as political in addition to its form and content. Specifically, Botha (2007:7) describes how

[t]he years 1959 to 1980 was characterised by an artistic revival in filmmaking throughout the world, ranging from exciting political films in Africa and Latin America to examples of great art cinema in Europe and Asia. National cinemas emerged in Australia, West Germany, Iceland and New Zealand ... Unfortunately, due to moral and political censorship, a severe lack of audience development and inadequate film distribution, South Africans and thus local filmmakers were not exposed to these remarkable developments in world cinema.

The films that were banned from having South African distribution and exhibition would have posed challenges to dominant, traditional Afrikaner notions of politics, race and aesthetics, while "Afrikaans films *ignored the socio-political turmoil of the period*" (emphasis added) (Botha 2003:184). However, Tomaselli (1989:41) states that certain films released specifically between 1965 and 1967 indicated a more socially aware South African cinema marked by "social criticism and the exploration of cultural themes". Although the emphasis on escapism and idealistic conservatism was pervasive, some films, including selected Afrikaans films, did address the socio-political context in which these films were produced. Films in the 1980s would often cater for audiences comfortable with the safety and ideological security of American audiences. Films such as Annie Basson's *Uitdraai* (1988) were exceptions to this market-mandated rule in that it explored, in Afrikaans, the social ostracism faced by a white woman and a coloured man who are in love. The film does not entertain any illusion that the two lovers could co-exist in 1980s South Africa. Instead, the woman marries a white farmer she does not love, while her coloured lover leaves the community in an attempt to restore his parents' honour (Botha & Van Aswegen 1992:41).

The 1980s indeed indicated both a shift as well as an intensification in South African cinema. Harrow (2007:29) cites *Mapantsula* (Schmitz, 1986) as "a truly subversive, anti-apartheid film" that helped to break down "meaningless division[s] of high, popular, commercial, or traditional culture in Africa". On the one hand, films such as *Mapantsula* as well as numerous documentaries and short films led to an

invigorated, critical cinema (Botha 2003:185).<sup>74</sup> *Mapantsula* is a gangster film made in a third cinema register (Modisane 2010:137-138), as it is driven by revolutionary outcomes (2010:146).

These films differed considerably in their content and aesthetics from the cinematic escapism manufactured by Afrikaans cinema over the previous two decades. In Tomaselli's (1989:226-227) view, 1986 and 1987 were turning points in South African film history, where films finally "critically examined the milieu, apartheid, war, racial brutality, and colonial history". For instance, *Jock of the Bushveld* (Hofmyer, 1986) depicted interracial friendship, while the sober *A Place of Weeping* explored the abuse of farm workers and *Saturday Night at the Palace* (Davies, 1987) "explored the trauma of inter-racial conflict" (Tomaselli 1989:227). Such political exploration was much less visible in Afrikaans film. *Mapantsula*'s claims to cinematic realism wherein the challenges of living as part of an oppressed majority was far removed from the idealistic and conservative portrayals of living as part of a ruling minority in South Africa. The use of the word escapism above is significant, as it indicates Afrikaans cinema's status at the time – a cinema of diversion - as frivolous, expendable entertainment that may have diverted white (Afrikaans) public attention away from pressing socio-political concerns by not even including or referring to such concerns as part of the films' content, let alone present a challenging, unconventional aesthetic that betrayed Afrikaans cinema status as illusional (delusional) apparatus.

In light of the above, it would be appropriate to refer to much of Afrikaans filmmaking (as well as South African filmmaking in general) during apartheid as a cinema of diversion. One such cinematic diversion was Louis Burke's family musical *Follow that Rainbow* (1979), to which Tomaselli (1980:51) refers to as "a mechanically engineered 'spectacular family Christmas special', a sugar-coated 'wholesome' entertainment with old fashioned values and tearjerker (as opposed to snot en tranen) sentiment".<sup>75</sup> Attempts at political filmmaking were faced with a glut of well-publicised mainstream diversions such as *Follow that Rainbow*. Tomaselli (1980:53) uses a

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<sup>74</sup> Also see Archer (2005) on short film developments in South African cinema.

<sup>75</sup> The Afrikaans phrase *snot en tranen* indicates an emotionally excessive state of non-stop, exaggerated weeping. Amusingly, Tomaselli (1980:53) describes the film as a film for "people who think that Third World cinema is Bruce Lee".



telling phrase to describe the film, calling it “a rootless experience”: the film can be set and take place anywhere, as opposed to having spatio-temporal specificity. This rootlessness indicates the English speaking South African viewer’s “lack of identification with the social history of South Africa and his continuing position as an outsider”, for “[u]nlike Afrikaans films, naïve as it may be, English renditions generally avoid any kind of reference to the history of diversity of cultures” in South Africa (1980:53).

The intensification also refers to the focused censorship of film in the 1980s. Filmmakers problematising hegemonic control over film practices did so from positions of exile or were harassed by police (Tomaselli 1986:13). Tomaselli (1986:15) recounts that raids against filmmakers peaked during 1984 to 1985, often resulting in the detention and police interrogation of some individuals. The detention and lengthy interrogation of media workers aimed at providing information for prosecution. Political filmmaking placed filmmakers in perilous positions. The comedy genre would occasionally allow filmmakers critical of the current political dispensation to satirise the inconsistencies and contradictions of apartheid. In this sense, Tomaselli (1986:13) describes the political comedy *Die Groen Faktor* (*The Green Factor*, Roets, 1984) as a hard-hitting satire in its critical, humorous approach to processes of marginalisation.

Despite these occasional highlights, the most popular films at the South African box-office would still be aligned with nationalist Afrikaner concerns, including Regardt van den Bergh’s *Boetie gaan Border Toe* (*Boetie’s Off to the Border*, 1984) and *Boetie op Maneuvers* (*Boetie on Manoeuvres*, 1985), both of which “[exhibited] a new generation of technical, textual, and *propagandistic competence*” (emphasis added) (ibid). Van Nierop (*Daar doer in die flik*, 23) describes how *Boetie gaan border toe* (Van der Bergh 1988) replaces the propaganda of the earlier Afrikaans war films with a lighter tone; it was a precursor, says Van Nierop, for later teen comedies such as *Bakgat!* and *Superhelde* (Niewoudt, 2011). Van den Bergh’s *Boetie* films paved the way for narratives of white victimhood in numerous phallogentric Afrikaans comedies (see Chapter Four).

Tomaselli (1986:14) lauds *Mamza* (Blignaut, 1985) for its exploration of struggle and conflict in a township setting where characters face various hardships and injustices.<sup>76</sup> *Mamza* (1985), directed by Johan Blignaut, was the first film to address the social realities and dilemmas faced by the South African coloured community (Botha & Van Aswegen 1992:86). The film explored issues such as social upward mobility, material wealth, alcohol abuse, unemployment, morality and class difference (ibid). Importantly, the film is shot from a coloured point of view. Botha and Vas Aswegen (1992:87) praise the film from an intercultural communication perspective for demonstrating interracial and intercultural collaboration on an Afrikaans film. The authors further highlight the film's critical interrogation of the Afrikaans language (1992:89), the language that served to mark, cinematically, 1970s melodrama.<sup>77</sup> While the film can be criticized for occasional poor framing and editing (Botha & Van Aswegen 1992:91), *Mamza's* film language can be positively evaluated for its attempts to marry *cinema verite*, improvisation and other elements of Third Cinema. Films critical of the white minority-run political dispensation were often made by non-South African filmmakers, such as Euzhan Palcy's adaptation of Andre P. Brink's novel *A Dry White Season* (1989).<sup>78</sup> These productions, including Richard Attenborough's historical adventure about Donald Woods and Steve Biko, *Cry Freedom* (1988), lead Pretorius (1992:393) to conclude that Afrikaner narratives have become annexed by non-South African filmmakers as the dominant Afrikaans cinema of diversion is perpetuated instead.<sup>79</sup> In this regard, Hees (2007:378) comments that

As is the case now, so also in the boom years of the 1960s (and later) prestige and therefore money gravitated towards those talented South African filmmakers who adopted mainstream American filmmaking models and strategies – at incalculable cost to the vitality of the local film industry. It was true of Jamie Uys, it is true of Darrell Roodt and has become true of Gavin Hood.

In one sense, then, Rompel was halfway correct: South Africa (and Afrikaans) cinema commit to “mainstream filmmaking models” and in so doing sacrifice a “vital”

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<sup>76</sup> *Mamza* never received general distribution and remains mostly unseen in South Africa, although it has been broadcast on South African premium television channels.

<sup>77</sup> See Arnott and Van der Hoven (2009) on melodrama in South African film studies.

<sup>78</sup> Brink was one of the original Sestigers, and a career-long political dissident critical of the South African government during and after apartheid. He died on 7 February 2015.

<sup>79</sup> *Cry Freedom* becomes a story, simply, of white heroism (Hook 2014:89).

South African film industry at the altars of commerce.<sup>80</sup> As indicated earlier, there were filmmakers who made films that criticised the minority government and its policies. Two such creative dissidents were Manie van Rensburg and Jans Rautenbach, who “challenged moral and political censorship” (Botha 2007:20) at a time dominated by the cinema of diversion.

### 3.6 Afrikaans political cinema in apartheid South Africa

#### 3.6.1 Manie Van Rensburg’s cinema of Afrikaner fallibility

Tomaselli (2008:141) suggests that Manie van Rensburg and Katinka Heyns, amongst other directors, “might be considered in one way or another to be products of the post-period of the New African Movement (Teer-Tomaselli & Annecke 1990)”.<sup>81</sup> Both Van Rensburg’s *The Fourth Reich* (1990) as well as Heyns’ *Fiela se Kind* (*Fiela’s Child*, 1986) recount the “*historical origins* and contemporary effects of apartheid” (emphasis in original) (Tomaselli 2006:121), exposing the viewer to the structural mechanisms of oppression on a macro (national) and micro (personal, as experienced by a character on a specific trajectory) level.

Van Rensburg was critical of the cinema of diversion and its economic emphasis: “[w]e have a system geared to promote soap operas only, which, in turn, will prevent our films from reaching any other audience ... Art goes out the door; the money comes in” (as quoted in Tomaselli 1989:41). The director would later scathingly comment on South African cinema’s alleged ignorance of the country’s socio-political realities:

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<sup>80</sup> Hees (2007) is spot-on in his evaluations of the more recent films of Roodt and Hood. Hood relocated to Hollywood after *Tsotsi*’s Oscar win for Best Foreign Film to make the American political drama *Rendition*, followed by a foray into blockbuster terrain with the critically maligned *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* and the science-fiction film *Ender’s Game* (2012). Roodt, meanwhile – no stranger to Hollywood cinema as evidenced by *Father Hood* (1993) – has opportunistically positioned himself in Afrikaans cinema, where he has directed the thematically vacuous *Jakhalsdans* (2010) and the religious drama *Stilte* (2012).

<sup>81</sup> Ross Devenish, for instance, utilised a neo-realist approach in much of his work that alienated Afrikaans audiences (Botha 2004:42). Devenish falls beyond the scope of the current study as he did not make Afrikaans language films.

It somehow seems ridiculous to make *King Lear* while the black townships are burning. It seems like sacrilege to ignore the suffering, of especially the black people, in any film one makes in South Africa. [...] The problem here, however, is that when any other images are shown, the filmmaker is easily perceived as an apologist for the Government. The challenge for the South African filmmaker is, like anywhere else, first and foremost, to make a good film, to explore the areas of South African society; to be intolerant of any form of discrimination, not to lose track of various shades and perspectives of South African life (quoted in Blignaut 1992:102).

As his films reveal, Van Rensburg was not only committed to exploring various forms of diversity in South Africa, but also to demonstrate that white people, as well as black people, can be economically disadvantaged (thereby positioning class over race). In so doing, Van Rensburg challenges Afrikaner exceptionalism and the numerous cinematic portrayals of white Afrikaans characters middle class at worst. With his Afrikaans television series *Verspeelde Lente* (*Wasted Spring*, 1982), Van Rensburg challenged the dominant Afrikaner establishment just as he did with his English films (Botha 2007:28). *Verspeelde Lente* centered on poor, lower class white Afrikaners, and as such presented an uncomfortable mirror image to a society that preferred to repress such social realities and silence the voices of those who called attention to these realities.

Botha (2007:27) details Van Rensburg's themes as a filmmaker as follows:

the psyche of the Afrikaner in a contemporary or historic situation, especially the period from the 1920s to the 1940s, the way of life of, and motivation for, individuals living on the 'edge' of society; loneliness; and the exploration of the communication potential of film and television to convey contextual and experiential information to the viewer. Within these films Van Rensburg experiments with particular filmic codes *not seen in the work of his contemporaries* (emphasis added).

What emerges from the above is an image of a filmmaker, an auteur, dedicated to exploring positions of marginality. Botha (2007:27) divides Van Rensburg's career into three periods. The first period involves his Afrikaans films made between 1971 and 1975. The second period involves his television work (1976-1987), and finally a "shift towards the international film scene" with features such as *The Fourth Reich* (1990) and *Taxi to/na Soweto* (1991), which condemned Afrikaner nationalism (Botha & Dethier 1997:52). This shift towards the international film market may have

indicated a shift towards internationally consumable films, but not at the cost of satire and protest. Botha and Dethier (1997:70) are primarily impressed with Van Rensburg's editing of *The Fourth Reich*, a film styled as a linear, realistic thriller but dealing with political content. With a R16 million budget (astronomical by 1980s South African standards), the film was a box-office disaster (the exhibitors targeted the film at a small audience only) despite getting overwhelmingly positive reviews in the press (1997:71). Van Rensburg proved with *Die Bankrower* (*The Bank Robber*, 1973) that he can operate with artistic precision within broad genre parameters (1997:73).

The filmmaker delivered incisive critiques of the Afrikaner psyche in films for the SABC such as *Die Perdesmous* (*The Horse Seller*) (Botha & Van Aswegen 1992:39), demonstrating collective Afrikaner suffering and resilience when the Afrikaner had to leave the safe parameters of their "pastoral paradise" when the Great Depression hit South Africa; as such, Van Rensburg comments on the "cultural trauma" of relocating from this 'paradise' to wage labour in mines and factories (1992:39). Van Rensburg's *Taxi to/na Soweto* (1991) explores white perceptions of black people as filtered through ethnocentrism and stereotypes (1992:125) and deflates existing us-and-them binaries (1992:132).

*Taxi to/na Soweto* (1991), a "socially serious comedic film" (Tomaselli 2006:47), was released during the build-up towards the finalisation of democratic transition. While this film is made from "quite decidedly white" position, it nonetheless promotes the idea of an intercultural perspective in a visually accessible manner (2006:58). The film is "critical of white racial attitudes and experiences" (2006:121). Van Rensburg's *The Native who caused all the Trouble* (1990) and *The Fourth Reich* constituted part of the new, critical South African cinema referred to earlier, specifically the "post-1987 new wave (Botha and Dethier 1997)" (Botha 2003:186). In his evaluation of the director's oeuvre, Blignaut (1992:176) commends Van Rensburg's films for their "humane treatment of their characters, including outcasts and the political right wing", set against a context of "distrust, paranoia and eventually betrayal". Through his films, Van Rensburg portrayed the Afrikaner (especially the Afrikaner male) as fallible and dangerous, a figure who often sets up his own demise.

### 3.6.2 Jans Rautenbach: the Afrikaans *auteur* as politically conscious artist

Botha (2012:69) positions Jans Rautenbach as a key figure in politically conscious Afrikaans filmmaking. *Jannie Totsiens* (*Goodbye Johnny*, 1970), for instance, is described as a “[challenge to] Afrikanerdom’s conservative culture”. Similarly, *Die Kandidaat* (*The Candidate*, 1968) suggests that the Afrikaner is his own worst enemy; “the white Afrikaner is going to create a madhouse for himself with all his ideologies and dogmas” (2012:64). In addition, Rautenbach’s *Pappa Lap* (1971), addressed class difference in Afrikaner circles, with an emphasis on very poor white Afrikaners (2012:69), prefiguring Van Rensburg’s similar concerns in *Verspeelde Lente* with nearly a decade. Tellingly, Tomaselli (2008:141) describes Rautenbach as “one of the few film aestheticians working in South Africa, who associated himself with the Afrikaner literary dissidents the *Sestigters* (the Sixtiers, indicating the decade of the 1960s)”, as evidenced in Botha and Steinmar’s book *Jans Rautenbach: dromer, baanbreker en auteur* (2006) (Hees 2007:377). The word *Sestiger* describes an individual such as Rautenbach “whose work was exploratory, innovative and provocative at this key moment of redefinition of what can loosely be called ‘Afrikaner identity’” (Hees 2007:377).

To be a *Sestiger* thus indicates a sense of political commitment opposed to dominant politics at during the 1960s. Rautenbach’s attempts at alternative cinema aesthetics reflected this resistance to hegemonic structures and visual conservatism as much as ideological conservatism. In the 1960s already, Rautenbach “lamented that the proven formula script will advertise itself as ‘Entertainment for the whole family’”, a formula “gelled from a little love, a few songs, a couple of jokes, a little heartbreak, a bit of drama, a few mountains and is decorated by an attractive face and a pretty figure” (Tomaselli [sa]:52). Rautenbach’s *Katrina*, *Die Kandidaat* and *Jannie Totsiens*, especially, evidence the director’s political concerns as well as his aesthetic considerations, as well as his resistance to the formula he openly detested.

For Tomaselli and Prinsloo (1992:355), *Katrina* and *Die Kandidaat* are, unlike *Jannie Totsiens*, South African instances of so-called First Cinema, which is a form of cinema “supportive of the dominant ideology, inviting belief and adherence”. Such ideological adherence is facilitated “not only by the content, but importantly also by

the form characteristic of mainstream cinema. Such films may have explicitly political content, but adopt, if critically, the language, imagery and form of mainstream cinema” (1992:355). Tomaselli and Prinsloo (1992) problematise the idea of Rautenbach as political filmmaker given the precedence he gives film form over a film’s narrative content. Yet the fact that Rautenbach’s films addressed such explicitly political content at all already privilege his films as political cinema at a time where the majority of Afrikaans films professed ignorance of such political realities.

*Die Kandidaat* (1968) was a pioneering Afrikaans feature film (Hees 2007:378). In this political drama, Rautenbach “examines various aspects of the urban Afrikaner through the events surrounding the election of a new director for the Adriaan Delpoort Foundation”, and results in a critical interrogation of the Afrikaner psyche at the time in a visually innovative manner (Botha 2007:24). *Die Kandidaat* asked questions of a multicultural South African at a time where most Afrikaans films were little more than entertaining diversions (Botha 2006:43). Specifically, the film offers revised Afrikaner character types, individuals more adept at inhabiting the fast-paced city than the pastoral landscapes favoured by other Afrikaans films (2006:51). Where Rautenbach did use the striking landscapes of the Western Cape or Klein Karoo, it is in an iconographic manner and not for purposes of pure visual spectacle (Botha 2006:63). Due to the severe censorship imposed by the Directorate of Publications, *Die Kandidaat*, insofar as its content had already positioned it as political film, received much political and cultural aggression from Afrikaner audiences (Tomaselli 2006:39).

Bickford-Smith (2010:98) explains that *Katrina* (1969) remains a seminal Afrikaans film in its sympathetic exploration of race relations, but adds that Rautenbach nonetheless demonstrates how interracial romance can only result in failure, in tragedy.<sup>82</sup> Nonetheless, its exploration of race, identity and miscegenation and romantic love set against the Immorality Act of 1957, “caused a stir amongst the South African audience” (Du Preez & Hauptfleisch 2011:283). Such was the controversy with *Katrina* and its critical approach to the artificialities of racial distinction in South Africa, that Van Rensburg shot two endings for the film in

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<sup>82</sup> Like many of Rautenbach’s films, *Katrina* was, in spite of (or due to) the surrounding controversy, a box-office success, earning R900,000 at the South African box-office (Tomaselli 1989:41).

apprehensive anticipation of negative feedback from the Publications Control Board (Tomaselli 1989:85). At the very least, the film ignited conversations about its themes.<sup>83</sup>

Botha (2006:71) describes Rautenbach's *Jannie Totsiens* as supremely modernistic, with little heed for traditional narrative structure. The film represents one of the few instances in Afrikaans cinema where the film is aware of itself and of the manipulatory processes that characterise cinema (2006:71). Tomaselli (1989:85) highlights the "allegorical implications" of *Jannie Totsiens*. The film is set in a mental institution which can be read as representative of South Africa: "[t]he insane run the asylum while the ineffectual doctor in charge represents the Prime Minister who tries to justify his position" (1989:86). Botha (2006:75) agrees, summarising the film's symbolic meaning (seeing as the film has such a vivid allegorical dimension) as "[the Afrikaners] were driving themselves insane" with the apartheid project. Similarly, in the context of New German Cinema, Xavier (2012:21) notes that Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979) is an example of the abundance of national allegory as assessment of national history. National allegories do tend to problematise the recent national past, instead of celebrating it (2012:36). Here, Jameson's comment on the notion of national allegory offers a fascinating, and falsely controversial, interpretive angle.

For Jameson, "films can function as ideological allegories on the level of plot" (Kosmidou 2013:14), where the literal narrative conveys allegorical meanings. Specifically, in the developing world "*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (emphasis in original) (Szeman 2002:807). Harrow (2007:86) calls outright for the rejection of Jameson's reading of the postcolonial text as allegorical. Coming ably to Jameson's defence, McGonegal (2005:258) accuses Jameson's critics of missing a key function of national allegory; these critics "have persistently taken his elaboration of an interpretive hermeneutic (TW texts are *to be read* as national allegories) for the thing itself (TW texts *are* national allegories...)". Szeman (2002:804) suggests that criticisms of Jameson notion of the national allegory

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<sup>83</sup> The film's ending was changed for dramatic reasons, and not due to censorial pressure (Botha 2006:59).



effectively obscured his attempt to make sense of the relationship between literature and politics in context of decolonisation. Importantly, Szeman (2002:816) suggests that what Jameson coins national allegory might as well be called political allegory as 'nation' primarily denotes "the (natural) space of the political in the third world", where national allegory is an interpretive strategy that brings film texts into focus (2002:810). As a national allegory of apartheid South Africa, *Jannie Totsiens*, as a manifestation of the relationship between art and politics in a particular political context, criticises the dominant politics of the day in a symbolic-allegorical manner.

In his interrogation of selected Rautenbach films, South African film critic Barry Ronge comments that *Jannie Totsiens* is characterised by a story that is "archetypal in its simplicity," emphasising the film's allegorical and symbolic potency; for Ronge, "the *how* functions as window dressing to shelter the *what*" (Tomaselli 1989:121).<sup>84</sup> Importantly, Rautenbach uses *Jannie Totsiens* to "[pose] a set of allegorical questions ... He does not provide answers, and has removed the film from his audience to the point where only an intellectual is able to decipher it" (1989:128). Rautenbach's use of film language here is significant: the film is "full of nervous, swirling, vertiginous camera movements which create a deep sense of menace and dislocation between people and their environment and between each other" (1989:129). Given the aesthetic innovation and self-awareness that characterises the film, Botha (2006:5) justifiably refers to *Jannie Totsiens* as an avant-garde milestone.

With *Broer Matie* (*Soul Brother*, 1984), Rautenbach, as Tomaselli (1989:219) cynically puts it, "regurgitated his inter-racial theme of the late 1960s".<sup>85</sup> The film is set in a period of political instability when the Sharpeville and Langa massacres coincided with the Afrikaans churches' self-examination over apartheid (Tomaselli 2006:37).<sup>86</sup> Tomaselli (2006:37) goes as far as describing the film as somewhat propagandistic. William Pretorius (1992), too, problematises the ostensibly 'liberal' *Broer Matie*. Pretorius (1992:384) decries the film as melodramatic, and positions it as "partisan propaganda for the new constitution". Tomaselli (1989:13) is also critical

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<sup>84</sup> Ronge is still active in film criticism at the time of writing. He publishes film reviews as well as light social commentary at <http://www.ratherronge.co.za/>.

<sup>85</sup> Tomaselli (2006:37) later translates *Broer Matie* as *My Brother, My Mate*.

<sup>86</sup> As Crouch (2011:148) reminds us, dominant organised religion has often played a visible part in sustaining state power and control.

of the racial drama's offering of inclusion: "the film's message is that 'coloureds' should be grateful to whites for including them in the 'new dispensation'". Pretorius (1992:384) echoes the concern that Rautenbach was not interested in giving voice to the marginalised coloured community, but rather suggests that coloureds should be grateful for their inclusion into a predominantly white system. As with *Katrina*, the film's Christian symbolism is clear (Botha 2006:111), and in light of Tomaselli and Pretorius' reservations about the film, may contribute to the impression that film promotes Western (religious) frameworks as necessary for redemption and even as advocating tolerance and even inclusion. Again, while *Broer Matie* should be criticised for such narrative and thematic lapses, it remains one of the few overtly politically themed films of its time.

Rautenbach left behind a cultural legacy that demonstrated political integrity in his insistence on addressing South African realities and in making it possible for other filmmakers to make political films instead of "cosmeticised melodramas catering for the (admittedly) profitable American market" (Hees 2007:379). Such is Rautenbach's cultural prestige in Afrikaans arts circles that he was appointed as chairperson of the Klein Karoo National Arts Festival (KKNK) in 2000 [see Kitschoff (2004)]. Rautenbach's first feature film in thirty years, *Abraham*, is scheduled for release in 2015.

### **3.7 Towards a political economy of contemporary Afrikaans cinema**

Botha's (2012:17) statement that the "[South African film industry] is a fragile industry, especially in the face of globalization", can be read on levels of industry and aesthetics. For the purposes of the current chapter, the emphasis is on the Afrikaans film industry's economic fragility, and the industry's subsequent attempts to address economic issues of funding and sustainability by way of product placement. While Tomaselli (2006:77) cautions that "[c]oncerns with political economy have tended to overshadow questions of origination, aesthetics and reception" (Tomaselli 2006:77), an exploration of the political economy of Afrikaans cinema is important in pointing to the structural mechanisms that drive the financing and production of many (if not all) Afrikaans feature films. An exploration of the political economy of Afrikaans cinema is a point of departure for identifying the elements that altogether constitute its

political impotence. I will refer to a single case study in this regard, the tween comedy *Hoofmeisie* (*Head Girl*, Du Toit, 2011).

The political economy of post-transitional Afrikaans cinema is characterised first and foremost by the proliferation of product placement across the majority of Afrikaans releases, especially those Afrikaans films released between 2010 and 2014. Copious product placement or product integration occurs in most contemporary Afrikaans films, including films as narratively diverse as the nostalgic thriller *Wolwedans in die Skemer* (*The Wolves Dance at Dusk*, Malherbe, 2013), utopian musical *Prêville*, romantic road movie *Pad Na Jou Hart* (*Road to Your Heart*, Smit, 2013) and young adult school espionage entertainment *Agent 2000* (Niewoudt, 2014). Olivier (2006:17) describes some popular films as having an infomercial status that serve to create new merchandise markets by way of iconic investment in consumer goods. Indeed, he concedes that capitalism's particular seduction is located in its capacity to produce enjoyment (2006:33).

Previously, Olivier (2004:28-29) had warned that such iconic investment is closely aligned with what Susan Faludi terms ornamental culture; consumers of this type of culture are rendered politically impotent. This product placement political economy should be discussed in relation to Treffry-Goatley's (2010) research on South African film funding initiatives and the relative lack of state involvement in promoting and investing in the South African film industry. In an incisive study, Treffry-Goatley (2010) has argued that the neoliberal nature of the South African film industry that inhibits its systemic expansion and progress and threatens the industry's financial sustainability. Smart (2003:166) points out that "the state has repeatedly found it necessary to intervene in the economy to deal with internal and external indebtedness and other manifestations of financial instability". Indeed, as Duncan (2001:285) explains, "neo-liberal policies has placed enormous pressure on government departments to demonstrate their relevance to the competitiveness drives of their respective countries. [...] *Given that arts and culture is an especially soft target for government cutbacks, these departments have fought back by re-casting their activities in neo-liberal clothing*" (emphasis added).

In the early 1990s, Pretorius (1992:393) cautioned that:

Afrikaans cinema remains an unknown quantity as long as the films remain embedded in the safe structures of genre nonsense. The Afrikaans film stagnated in the eighties and even disappeared. Perhaps in the nineties they'll be forced to change and reality will intrude. *The changes in South African society have been so drastic that Afrikaans films have no choice but to acknowledge them, or to become totally irrelevant when their themes are measured against the viewers' own experience.* The nineties will be a significant decade. (emphasis added)

Pretorius' concerns about cinematic stagnation and irrelevance have been confirmed by the spate of Afrikaans films engineered to perform at the box-office. A South African film that earns more than R3 million at the local box-office is seen as a financial success, but only 12 of the 36 local films released between 2008 and 2013 earned more than R3 million (Cilliers 2015:[sp]). Despite so many Afrikaans filmmakers choosing to make formula driven genre entertainment, Pieter Malan (Rapport 2013) reports that only 14 of the 36 Afrikaans films released between 2007 and 2013 can be considered financially successful.<sup>87</sup> *Semi-Soet* (2012) earned R9.6 million and is the highest grossing Afrikaans comedy; *Hoofmeisie* earned R4.2 million; the comedy of race *Fanie Fourie's Lobola* (2013) earned R3.7 million; and road trip-cum-corporate comedy *Babalas* (Hamman, 2013) earned a meagre R425,000 during its entire box-office run. Note that the films referred to above are all comedies. At North-West University in Potchefstroom, researchers in tourism found that Afrikaans films will have to improve on their quality in order to develop and sustain a loyal audience since being in the Afrikaans language is no longer enough of an audience drawing card (Cilliers 2015:[sp]). Karin Botha and Pierre-Andre Viviers note that 49% of older Afrikaans audiences (with a mean age of 41) regard Afrikaans films as of international quality, while only 25% of the younger Afrikaans audiences share this opinion. Older audiences ascribe value to the presence of familiar Afrikaans figures in a film, while younger audiences are more concerned with overall quality (ibid).

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<sup>87</sup> Comments on Cilliers' (2015) report on the Netwerk24 website indicated the following: a sense of gratitude that Afrikaans films merely exist to be watched; and, in one prolonged instance, a comparison between Afrikaans films and international films that clearly positioned Afrikaans films as superior to international films filled with blasphemy and lacking a "mooi storie" (best translated, in the vocabulary of this study, as a "safe story with soothing images").

According to Leon van Nierop (2013b), Afrikaans audiences do not attend Afrikaans films as often anymore because of the over-supply of Afrikaans films over the past two years. Afrikaans films usually stand a better chance of being well attended and turn a profit if they are musicals or comedies, as Malan's report shows. Comedy provides a space for satire or parody to defuse tensions around explosive issues of race and gender, for instance.<sup>88</sup> Van Rensburg's multilingual *Taxi to/na Soweto* was one notable example of the political potential of satire in South African filmmaking.

One screen comedy subgenre that has gained prominence through production houses such as the aptly-titled Film Factory is the Afrikaans teen comedy, as well as its derivative, the tween comedy. A tween is defined as "a youngster between 10 and 12 years of age, considered too old to be a child and too young to be a teenager" (Dictionary.com:[sp]). In addition to the already identified teen market targeted by the *Bakgat!* (2007-2013) films, this group of young individuals have come to constitute a new target market. As Alicia de Mesa reported in *Business Week* (2005) nearly a decade ago, "marketers have been quick to notice that the growing distinctions between childhood ages are pronounced enough to warrant products, services, retail stores and marketing tactics specific to the 'bridger' age group". *Hoofmeisie* (Du Toit, 2011) was the first Afrikaans tween comedy, the result of a specific economic logic that aimed to interpellate younger Afrikaans consumers to watch a specific type of film. This Afrikaans tween comedy exemplifies a culture industry – and I use this term in explicit alignment with Adorno's conceptualisation thereof – that aims to provide financially lucrative entertainment to various sectors of the Afrikaans audience.

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<sup>88</sup> *Fanie Fourie's Lobola* (Pretorius, 2013) is one of the few contemporary Afrikaans comedies that utilises comedy to defuse tensions, specifically Afrikaans race-based tensions. In a key scene, Fanie's (Eduan van Jaarsveld) uncle (Richard van der Westhuizen) tells racist jokes while Fanie's black assistant and handyman, Petrus, cleans the window in the background of the shot. The jokes center on white perceptions of crime as exclusively black. Then Petrus casually interrupts by telling the punchline to one of these jokes, only to himself launch into a series of jokes at the expense of whites that center on perceived white sexual shortcomings. These scene skilfully sets up and amplifies racial tension (at first, black and white characters occupy the same shot yet the black male is audio-visually marginalised) and unexpectedly defuses it by having black and white humorously participate in foregrounding perceptions of racial others. Using humour in this form of political engagement is absent from the majority of Afrikaans comedy, which further heightens its visibility in *Fanie Fourie's Lobola* (2013).

Between 2007 and 2013 the Johannesburg-based Film Factory produced a wide array of genre films. Their post-Fordist approach to film clearly positions their films as commodities that represent some kind of “first” in Afrikaans film, such as *Wolwedans in die Skemer* (Malherbe, 2012; labelled the first Afrikaans horror), and the first two *Bakgat!* films (Pretorius, 2008 & Pretorius, 2010; the first Afrikaans teen comedies). The Film Factory operates in alignment with a late capitalist approach to cultural outputs that emphasise low production costs and high profits, where the final film product was as polished as possible within the limitations of the budget (as is the case with *Hoofmeisie*, crews would sometimes film scenes in the homes of their colleagues). According to Van Nierop (2013b:27), Danie Bester and former collaborator Henk Pretorius gave a voice to the Afrikaans film industry. Bester (Van Nierop 2013b:27) offers that Afrikaans cinema is a space where the Afrikaner can admit to accountability and to acknowledge that accountability to the world through film, to the point where a film can encourage catharsis.

Bester produced 19 films in seven years, starting with *Ouma se Slim Kind* (Kuhn, 2007). In an interview, Bester claims to have been inspired to pursue cinema by three films, *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992), *Dobermann* (Kassovitz, 1997) and *Once Were Warriors* (Tamahori, 1994) (Retief 2014:4): a low-budget crime film, a French gangster film with a kinetic aesthetic, and a New Zealand domestic abuse drama. In Bester’s view, the Afrikaner has become so politically disempowered that many Afrikaners simply do not want to enter the political arena (ibid). *Bakgat 3* was a box-office disaster, and at the time of writing Bester was working on a film that explores homosexual awakening in a rural setting preliminarily titled *Die Stropers*. While the latter films may not make much of a box-office impact, Bester concedes, they may offer significant cultural prestige (Retief 2014:5).

However, the Film Factory’s roster suggests not a single film that can claim to position the Afrikaner in the ways Bester suggests. While Bester (and the Film Factory) later produced films with Piet and Sallas de Jager (Bosbok Ses) that did grapple with identity (however problematic these films may be in this regard, as well as aesthetically), the films he produced under solely the Film Factory – such as *Superhelde* (2011) – constitute little more than a cinema of diversions. In stronger terms, these films (like *Hoofmeisie* below) constitute a post-apartheid cinema of

diversions with superficial semblences of political awareness (of race, class and religion) that make these films even more problematic than had they not referenced such issues at all.

The Afrikaans tween comedy *Hoofmeisie* was released in South African cinemas in December 2011. The film, written and directed by Morne du Toit, tells the story of Nadia (Misha'el de Beer), a generally sweet natured, intelligent learner at Stumbo Pops Primary School. Her best friend is the equally sweet Melissa (Annemieke Kotze), and her secret crush is young rugby player Rikus (Ruan Wessels). The film sets both girls up as candidates for the title and position of *hoofmeisie* (head girl), and as such centers the film on notions of social mobility. Against the two protagonists the film sets-up two antagonists: Susan (Melissa Massyn), who is sometimes referred to as “Su-Satan”, and Hetwieg (Jamie Lawrence), a physically imposing and volatile individual. These girls are also in contention the position of Stumbo Pops Primary School’s head girl.

*Hoofmeisie* received a positive review from Leon van Nierop (2011), who described the film as good clean family entertainment, but the comedy was lambasted by other critics such as Joel Kanan who foregrounded the film’s “grossly abrasive use of product placement”, a “shameless commercial ploy as an advert for candy”. As Theresa Smith (2011:[sa]) succinctly observed in her review, “[*Hoofmeisie*] is set in the same hermetically sealed, film-created world of *Bakgat* – the one coloured girl who also throws her hat into the ring is ... a head taller than all the girls and prone to using violence to sort out her problems, so that is the kind of stereotyping the viewer has to deal with”. Van Nierop’s comment about “good clean entertainment” evokes Jans Rautenbach’s earlier remarks about the banality of such entertainment, while Kanan and Smith respectively position the film as late-capitalist product and politically context-less film: a rootless experience.

Such banality and lack of political context or awareness correlates with processes of globalisation, in which visionaries and *auteurs* such as Jans Rautenbach are made redundant in favour of smoother, safer mainstream filmmaking. Globalisation implies processes of near universal permeation and integration involving types of change such as the stretching across borders and frontiers; intensification of

interconnectedness in culture, for instance; and the speeding up of this interconnectedness via accelerated communications (Held & McGrew 2001:[sp]).<sup>89</sup> In terms of globalised film, a dominant model for film permeates into national cinemas and inserts itself into those cinemas. Hollywood is hegemonic, as Elsaesser has already evidenced, but Behlil (2008:214) correctly suggests that this cultural hegemony does not simply “declare a national agenda as universal”, but also an overt corporate agenda. As Behlil (2008:214) puts it: “[g]lobalization is criticized first and foremost for allowing corporate interests to take precedence over all else”, including aesthetic and thematic integrity in Afrikaans cinema. Indeed, the notion of corporate populism refers to the neoliberal logic of ‘let’s give the people what they *really* want’” (emphasis in original) (Conversi 2010:45); that is, a form of cultural recycling indicative of neoliberalism’s incapacity for innovation.

The visual language of American cinema, in one instance, and as *Hoofmeisie* demonstrates, has become the visual language of Afrikaans comedy. In *Studying Contemporary American Films*, Elsaesser and Warren Buckland (2002:4) state that “Hollywood cinema is a world industry, just as much as it is a world language, a powerful, stable, perfected system of visual communication”.<sup>90</sup> American cinema as a system of signification has been refined into a particularly sophisticated and dominant film model. Somewhat paradoxically, these American film-infused Afrikaans films target a minority audience by adopting globalised codes of visualisation; instead of these films claiming the right to look, to construct a subject-position of ownership and authority (see Mirzoeff, 2012), these films select, for financial purposes, to negate this right in the aim of greater commodity potential and box-office success.<sup>91</sup> If the global impacts on the local in many ways – economic, technological, cultural – the period of South African political transition encouraged an engagement with such economic forces. While the fall of apartheid brought about political emancipation for oppressed South Africans and re-constellated power

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<sup>89</sup> Unless quoted, the spelling ‘globalisation’, with an –s instead of a –z, will be used for purposes of consistency.

<sup>90</sup> In much of his scholarship, Elsaesser refers to classical, post-classical and certain other forms of cinema in discussing American film. For the purposes of this chapter, I use the broadly inclusive term ‘American film’ to refer to a specific mode of film production and narrative structure.

<sup>91</sup> I am not suggesting that Afrikaans comedies are the only South African films that borrow from American cinema so overtly, but the tension between the locality of a film such as *Hoofmeisie* (2011) and its globalised visual language creates a vivid dissonance.



relations in the country, the political transition “coincided with the ascendance of market triumphalism on a global scale, defining the terrain on which the newly elected democratic state came to embrace neoliberalism” (Hart 2002:42). Democratic South Africa is a globalised state, and within this paradigm, neoliberalism – more specifically neoliberal capitalist practice - came to dominate post-apartheid South Africa.

Elsaesser (2012:78) states that Hollywood is analysed “from the socio-economic vantage point of ‘post-Fordist’ industrial practices of outsourcing and the vicissitudes of finance capitalism” (2012:78). Film is particularly pliable to the financial needs of a globalised neoliberal marketplace. As Robnik (2010:2) states, Elsaesser “emphasises cinema’s usefulness to a post-Fordist, flexible adaptation to a degree that his argument seems to feed into an ‘economistic’ determinism (‘culturalistically’ rearticulated as it may be) which pertains to neo-liberal ideology”. Indeed, Elsaesser (2002:15) sees film as not exclusively an artistic endeavour; film is both a commodity (in the convergence of money and culture) and a service (sale of condiments, soft seats, air conditioning). The narrative structure is simple and predictable, so much so that the obligatory happy ending “[functions] like a coda in a musical context” (Elsaesser 2012:92). This narrative structure’s simplicity and predictability are so integral to American cinema’s efficiency that without it, Hollywood cinema would cease to exist (2012:86). The tween comedy, as part of a formal narrative paradigm, follows the simple and predictable, legible narrative structure promoted by American (Hollywood) cinema. Genre conventions provide unity, and they exist at the intersection of production and consumption to create, in Elsaesser’s (2012:91) words, “a relatively stable horizon of anticipated pleasure” for the consumer.

Filmmakers are themselves often economically determined, and develop “an aesthetic functionalism whose aim was perfect legibility, and only second, the individual flourish” (Elsaesser 2012:89). The filmmaker produces films that offer ‘access for all’ in the broadest, lowest-common denominator sense, abiding by a political economy in which possibilities of auteurism place a distant second. These notions of legibility and access succinctly and accurately describe the Americanistic mechanisms of *Hoofmeisie*, a ‘global’/‘globalised’ comedy despite its use of Afrikaans and the occasional reference to South African politics, given how indebted

this film is to the formal aspects of mainstream American filmmaking: elegance, precision, simplicity and legibility. Filmmakers may consciously opt to make specific films in a certain way, with Elsaesser proposing an emulation/emigration model whereby directors emulate American cinema language (as well as, quite probably, its mode of production) in an attempt to go to the United States to make more films. As examples, Behlil (2008:210) mentions that “some European, in this case German, directors such as Roland Emmerich and Wolfgang Petersen adopted a Hollywood-like style to make it possible for them to be noticed by American studios” (Behlil 2008:210).

While *Hoofmeisie* adopts a marketable Hollywood formula to tell its story, it also adopts Hollywood’s explicit product placement to amplify the film’s status as product and in encouraging commodity fetishism. This product or brand placement is most prominently displayed by the narrative justification of naming the primary school Stumbo Pops Primary, but there are many more instances of product placement. Two such instances are provided by the opening sequence. The first is the plaque on Gouws’ desk that reads: “Furniture proudly sponsored by Ferreira Furnishing”. The second instance occurs during the second part of the opening sequence which introduces the audience to Nadia. A CD by the band Kat se Snor is next to her CD player, and this is the background music to a brief sequence showing her preparing for the school day. The opening sequence paves the way for additional marketing for Kat se Snor, as they eventually perform live at Melissa’s party. Other brands or products visible in the film are Altyd Smaaklik Tuisnywerheid and Gilbert (a home bakery and a brand of rugby ball).

There are two occasions where the branding and product placement is explicitly interwoven with and integrated into the narrative at the cost of narrative coherence and plot momentum. Firstly, the newly announced prefects of Stumbo Pops Primary are sent to boot camp; not any boot camp, but the official, branded Boot Camp, which exists outside of the film as well. Secondly, there is a superfluous narrative digression in the scene set during the school’s Entrepreneurial Day, indicative of the corporate agenda of globalised film. In this scene, characters are selling products or services: Nadia is selling biscuits, while Susan facilitates camel rides and Melissa’s mother Martie (Christel van den Bergh) organises helicopter rides with real-life

Afrikaans celebrity Izak Davel.<sup>92</sup> Everything in this scene is about sales and the act of selling, and the shots are filled with brands and products that can be purchased outside of the film. Dressed in his red Speedo, Davel too is an image to be consumed and to encourage consumption as he runs and makes his way through a (literally) product-littered school ground.

Insofar as *Hoofmeisie* is reliant on product placement for its narrative, and for promoting objects that are purchasable outside of the film, the film epitomises the notion of total entertainment. This notion comes from Maltby and Ackland “to indicate the range of activities within which a specific film is both central and only one element among others” (Elsaesser 2012:333). In terms of total entertainment, *Hoofmeisie* is but a part of the entertainment system on offer: tweens are also encouraged to purchase the Kat se Snor CD and to support specific businesses.

Total entertainment refers to a “category of control, as well as access”; as Elsaesser (2012:333) explains, “individual films are merely the local, temporary instances (the means) of practices and strategies that need to be put in place at several levels and over several years (the ends)”. *Hoofmeisie* is part of a system of commodities that includes itself, its soundtrack, its featured band, and so on. Seen systemically, *Hoofmeisie* slots into the Film Factory’s project to establish a consumer base across age groups, including tweens, who will consume not only this film and its associated products, but similar films and products as well. In this sense, *Hoofmeisie* is the cultural patrimony of neoliberal Afrikaans cinema, where “the [neoliberal] ideology pushes for a total overhaul of local cultural productions, previously tied to regional and national markets ... but subsequently left to the mercy of corporate expansion” (Conversi 2010:40-41).

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<sup>92</sup> Davel is an Afrikaans actor best known for his roles in the television serials *Egoli – Place of Gold* (1991-2010) and *Getroud met Rugby* (2009-2012). In a possible attempt at satire, the camel is named Zuma; however, since there the film provides no satirical context for naming the animal Zuma, the moment is meaningless and devoid of humour.

Elsaesser (2012:334) quotes Catherine Johnson with regards to the economics of film:

The association ... of branding at the end of the twentieth century with a neoliberal agenda to replace society with the marketplace has resulted in debates around whether brands are part of an increased commercialism that threatens democracy and citizenship or a site for contemporary struggles for meaning and identity.

The Afrikaans culture industry is characterised indeed by increased commercialism which may be symptomatic of a struggle for meaning and identity, where films such as *Hoofmeisie* confront the viewer with references to South Africa's past as bracketed by numerous brands and products. Positioning *Hoofmeisie* as and in total entertainment invites a discussion of the film as blockbuster, which Elsaesser (2000:16) sees as the epitome of the combination of commodity and service.<sup>93</sup> 'Blockbuster' usually refers to huge box-office success, with an overt, simple good-versus-evil binary (Boggs & Pollard 2003:130). In his more nuanced manner, Elsaesser (2000:16) defines 'blockbuster' as an efficient and evolved combination of "the two systems (film-as-production/cinema-as-experience), the two levels (macro-level of capitalism/micro-level of desire), and the two aggregate states of the cinema experience (commodity/service)". Characteristically, a blockbuster implies a massive budget and a major event that involves a youthful male protagonist on a particular mission (Elsaesser 2000:276), but my emphasis is less on budget size and more on how blockbusters are, more than anything, "miracles of engineering and industrial organization" (ibid) resembling 'military campaigns' to the extent that certain blockbusters can be positioned as media events (Elsaesser 2000:321). This sense of engineering and organisation, with its suggestion of corporate and commercial accuracy, echoes aspects of American film identified earlier, that of elegance, precision, simplicity and legibility. It is here that the fourth mechanism of comedy in

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<sup>93</sup> Elsaesser (2005:17) resists the popular myth that Hollywood filmmaking is the death and dearth of independent or national filmmaking; economically, national cinemas need blockbusters in order to sustain the cinema culture and film industry that allows for the making of independent cinemas. Put differently, "[t]his is the germ of an argument that reverses the usual claim that Hollywood hegemony stifles national cinema, by maintaining that Hollywood's strong global market position is in fact the necessary condition for local or national diversity" (Elsaesser 2005:17).

*Hoofmeisie* emerges: the engineered nature of the narrative of the film within the context of total entertainment.<sup>94</sup>

*Hoofmeisie* packages representations of South African realities as crass commercialism. Similarly, the feature comedy *Babalas* (Hamman, 2013), a misogynistic, homophobic comedy, opens with Mia (Tammy-Ann Fortuin) watching old Castrol 'Ja Boet' television advertisements while making notes. In this, the film points to its own origins (popular television advertisements) and, in a sense, predicts its own failure. At a corporate meeting soon after her copious note-taking, Mia shows her colleagues and superiors a few more Castrol advertisements, which also serve to train the viewer in the textuality of the film. She describes the male characters in these advertisements as 'client centric', which I read as a commentary on the film's own awareness of catering to consumers by exploiting an established cultural reference point – the Kalahari characters from the Castrol advertisements – to invite audiences to the cinema, and to inform their reading and nostalgic appreciation of the film.

Mia and her all-male colleagues also discuss the controversy of a Nandos advertisement that played with South Africans' xenophobia, but the motivation for this discussion is not clear. I read this part of the opening sequence as positioning the safety of the familiar, represented by the men from the Castrol advertisement, against the unpredictability and controversy of the more 'progressive' advertisement strategies. In this sense, *Babalas* (2013) commits to a familiarity of visual language and ideas, even going so far as to borrow (and I use this term with lenience) from American films such as *The Hangover* (Philips, 2009) and American road trip tropes to inform its own text (see Chapter Four for a detailed discussion of *Babalas* in the context of Afrikaans comedy and vulgarity).

Social mobility is a prominent theme of *Hoofmeisie*. According to Elsaesser (1990:174), the more realistically the theme of social mobility is conveyed, "the more we may assume that the society in question does allow its members a degree of

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<sup>94</sup> An extreme example of total entertainment in contemporary Afrikaans cinema would be the Afrikaans musical *Prêville*, for which a small town was built. This town, just outside of Roodepoort, has doubled as a tourist attraction since the film's release in 2012, and regularly screens Afrikaans films in its own independent film theatre.

social mobility". In *Hoofmeisie*, social mobility – the pursuit of the title of head girl – should be attained at all costs, even if it means sabotaging the other candidates' chances of obtaining the title. In the excessiveness of the characters' pursuit of social mobility, the film's representation thereof is only realistic to the insular characters inhabiting the film. *Hoofmeisie* constructs scenes indicating and addressing the theme of social mobility through pastiche appropriation; the film borrows its scene and shot types from other, American films, 'extensions' of highly similar scenes in similarly themed films (Elsaesser 2005:68) [(consider the similarity between Nadia's dream at the start of the film and Kirsten Dunst's dream that opens the teen comedy *Bring It On* (Reed, 2000)]. In both instances the dreams appease a female's desire for increased social standing and provides the viewer with a point of entry to read the rest of the film: like *Bring It On*, *Hoofmeisie* constructs a narrative on making these 'dreams come true', of making personal fantasy (the desire for social mobility) a public pursuit.

*Hoofmeisie's* (2011) engineered narrative and aesthetic smoothness relates to its adherence of the American notion of continuity, a notion that extends beyond only referring to continuity editing as convention. As Elsaesser (2012:80) explains, '[c]ontinuity' stands behind this mass medium whose secret it is to be both extremely stable and highly adaptable, and it is through the contradictory dynamic of its different 'continuity-systems' that Hollywood wields part of its political-ideological power, to complement its economic-industrial power". Political-ideological power and economic-industrial power function in a complementary manner in a way that is directly reminiscent of the Althusserian conceptions of base and superstructure, where there the economic base of a society (or section of industry) profoundly informs the cultural outputs produced by that society (or section of industry). Or, as David Harvey (2000:181) would describe such a system, "[a] surface veneer of competitive capitalism therefore depends on a deep substratum of coerced operations and collaborations to ensure a framework for the free market and open trade". I quote Harvey in this regard because Afrikaans cinema seems to operate in exactly this way: the appearance of competition that, when traced back to its key participants and stakeholders, reveals a series of operations and collaborations that ensure the persistence of this system. Jean Baudrillard (1998:56) would emphasise this point stronger still: "[T]he system knows only the conditions of its survival, it

*knows nothing of social and individual contents.* That should forearm us against a number of (typically social-reformist) illusions: the illusions which involve a belief that one can change the system by modifying its contents” (emphasis in original). The political economy of Afrikaans cinema does not allow artistic vision because the economic base that shapes Afrikaans film culture proceeds only in accordance with capitalism. Any attempt to change the content of this film culture will result in failure; for the contents (themes, visual language) of Afrikaans film culture to change, the economic base – the system – needs to change.

South African film culture proceeds according to neoliberal principles that somewhat paradoxically limits and almost fixes the economic base that shapes Afrikaans feature film production. If films such as *Hoofmeisie* are engineered products instead of feature films (the difference being in the lack of thematic and visual innovation in the former), they are, like the brands they market (bubble gum, lollipops, swimwear) objects of, for and within consumption. Baudrillard (1998:75) traces a genealogy of consumption in four steps that describe the creation of a system of investment and circulation that finally results in a system of needs. These needs are not deep-seated needs that secure human survival, but instead objects and artefacts for consumption that are needs in the sense that they function to fill a gap in the market – such as the lack of an Afrikaans tween comedy such as *Hoofmeisie* – and whose ‘necessity’ becomes obsolete the moment consumption is complete.

Globalisation and neoliberalism are themselves variables in a ‘continuity-system’ that allows films to combine ideological and economic-industrial power as ‘safe’ and familiar commodities, such as *Hoofmeisie* (2011). This film adheres to continuity in the capacity of its adaptability, that a familiar narrative and theme is adapted (if only in minor ways) for a specific (tween) audience. *Hoofmeisie*’s adherence to continuity in this above sense undercuts the film’s potential to explore double occupancy, a concept that “emphasizes the ambiguous multiplicity of identities” (Kooijman 2008:194) and can also refer to the often politically charged content produced by filmmakers from different ethnic, cultural and economic contexts (Siewert 2008:198). Instead, the product placement in the film, paired with its Hollywood formula and aesthetic, situates the film as a cultural output indebted to its corporate financial and ideological benefactors. Themes of marginalisation and explorations of relationships

of power are conspicuously absent. As such, the film offers a negation of double occupancy, proposing instead a simplified identity politics within a stable order determined by select authorities (the school principal, parents, and sports coaches).



## CHAPTER FOUR: THE CINEMA OF WILLIE ESTERHUIZEN AND ITS COMIC CONTEMPORARIES<sup>95</sup>

### 4.1 Chapter introduction

Chapter One references Willie Esterhuizen's 1994 sex comedy, *Lipstiek Dipstiek* (*Lipstick Dipstick*), as an Afrikaans film that deviated considerably from Afrikaans comedy conventions of previous decades. Afrikaans comedy from the 1950s onwards came to be epitomised by the racially problematic films of Jamie Uys, and would often offer farce and slapstick instead of satire.<sup>96</sup> Given the censorious Apartheid regime's hold on cinematic outputs and the ease with which any work of art could be banned, Afrikaans filmmakers had to produce films that would be financially profitable while not opposing dominant white Afrikaans ideologies of exclusion and righteous privilege.<sup>97</sup> Righteous privilege denotes the highly assumptive nature of the privileges associated with whiteness in a specific South African context, wherein the "naturalness" of white superiority operated across social and cultural spheres to solidify its position in the country's rigid and exclusive political hierarchy. Much of the male failure discussed in this chapter can be ascribed not simply to the subject's loss of agency or parapractic performance, but, to be contextually relevant, to the loss of righteous privilege.

After South Africa's transition to democracy, Esterhuizen, who at that stage was best known for his work on the television series *Orkney Snork Nie* (*Orkney Doesn't Sleep*), seized the opportunity to make a film that explicitly transgressed against what he perceived as the conservatism of Afrikaans cinema during apartheid (interview with Van Nierop, *Daar Doer in die fliiek*, 24).<sup>98</sup> As a result, *Lipstiek Dipstiek*

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<sup>95</sup> A preliminary version of this chapter was presented in paper form at the *Work/Force: South African Masculinities in the Media* conference, Stellenbosch University, South Africa, 13-14 September 2012. A subsequent version of this chapter was published as an article in *Image & Text*, 2013.

<sup>96</sup> Comedies such as *Kaalgat Tussen die Daisies* (Roets, 1994) and *Lyk Lollery* (Coertze, 2000) are two such farces.

<sup>97</sup> See Tomaselli (1989:15-18; 25-28) regarding censorship during apartheid. Here, Tomaselli recounts Jimmy Kruger's Calvinist-inspired criticism of seminal Afrikaans films during the 1960s, and comments on 1980s South African cinema's less stringently Calvinist attitude.

<sup>98</sup> Willie Esterhuizen's *Orkney Snork Nie* (1992) helped audiences to forget the realities of daily life in South Africa on the brink of change (Van Nierop, *Daar doer in die fliiek*, 24). Esterhuizen refers to his film as social commentary because he believes that the films show people as they 'really' are: "Our people have so much to cry about, it's my mission in life to provide some relief".

showed a white Afrikaans family coping with the forces of political change in a decidedly subversive manner: the characters were having soft-core sex on screen for the purposes of having sex on screen, even if the sex served no narrative purpose. In addition, the local ministers, long a symbol of Calvinist Puritanism and a figure closely associated with theologically informed social policies of segregation, is exposed as a cross dresser. This depiction of Afrikaans individuals in film denoted a rupture from the figure of the masculine Afrikaner ideal seen in the characters portrayed by actors such as Marius Weyers [most recently the patriarch in Katinka Heyns' *Die Wonderwerker* (2012)] and Ge Korsten in films such as *Hoor My Lied* (De Witt, 1967), a socio-cultural figure often characterised by "heterosexuality and political conservatism" (Du Pisani cited by Vincent 2006:355).<sup>99</sup> Looking at Esterhuizen's films, it emerges that one of the ways in which Esterhuizen deals with issues of political change and transformation is located in how his films construct white masculinity.

Esterhuizen's films offer narratives of the failures of actualisation by exploring these failures as a result of perceived sexual or racial inadequacy. Set within the mundane trappings of middle class suburbia, Esterhuizen shows a range of young and middle aged Afrikaans males – the protagonists and their fathers – who are unable to actualise (to assert themselves in a changed South Africa as individuals capable of agency) due to the numerous external factors and forces that make such actualisation nearly impossible. As I will demonstrate in the following discussion, these Afrikaans male characters pursue sexual gratification in lieu of the possibility of actualisation, where to be actualised is to be politically relevant. In his films *Lipstiek Dipstiek* (1994), *Poena is Koning* (*Poena is King*, 2007), *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat* (*Vaatjie Falls Flat on his Bum*, 2008) and *Stoute Boudjies* (*Naughty Bum*, 2010), Esterhuizen associates white Afrikaans masculinity with a narratively prominent quest for sex, notions of social and self-control, and male social interaction characterised by scatological notions of anality.<sup>100</sup> These markers of contemporary Afrikaans

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<sup>99</sup> Even as recently as in Diony Kempen's *Saak van Geloof* (2011), the Afrikaans minister as conservative patriarch remains a prominent representational figure.

<sup>100</sup> In Esterhuizen's films, the male characters pursue heteronormative masculinity as a mechanism to undermine possibilities of homoerotic tensions between these characters. I do not suggest that this narrative neutering of homoerotic tension is in any way intentional on Esterhuizen's behalf; however, the narrative elements that constitute Esterhuizen's ideologically consistent fictions (characters, plot, dialogue) guide and inform my reading of these films as a particularly problematic exploration of

masculinity operate as part of the characters' inability to actualise, in contrast to the idyllic and idealised narratives of male actualisation discussed in the previous chapter. Esterhuizen's vulgar cinema is as politically impotent as the contemporary *Volkstaat* film. Vulgar in this context is not limited to Esterhuizen's emphasis on bland sexuality and juvenile scatology. The notion of vulgarity suggests limitation, the everyday, the middle classes, needs and satisfaction; in this regard, it is worth quoting Henri Lefebvre (2003:96) at length:

Nothing is more vulgar than distinction and the wish to distinguish oneself (to be *distinguished*); ethical-aesthetic judgement and sociological fact, vulgarity does not emanate from popular gestures and words, but from the everyday as it is secreted and decreed by the middle classes: a certain 'realism' about money, clothes, behaviour and gratifications, a realism that flaunts and asserts itself, which is part of the 'vulgar'. The everyday is limited to what is there; it has no horizons, no resonance, it congratulates itself on its limitations and retreats into them. It parades need, the object of need and the satisfaction of need; this is its 'behaviour', a self-satisfied conditioned reflex, a way of behaving that lasts throughout a lifetime and imbues it with its own tonality: vulgarity (emphasis in original)

Esterhuizen focuses on the male teenager or the post-adolescent male as a figure in pursuit of distinguishing himself sexually, if not politically. Similar to American cinematic celebrations of juvenility in masculinity such as *Jackass* (2002) that "[present] a spectacle of emasculation that is also a reassertion of the masculine" (Brayton 2007:69), Esterhuizen's focus on the younger white Afrikaans male allows for an exploration of the varieties of white anxiety and masculinities that attempt to establish themselves in a country that the characters perceive to be innately hostile or indifferent to their presence. Brayton (2007:58) explains that "some white men have adopted a marginalised positionality in an effort to reclaim the tacit privileges of being white, heterosexual and male"; put differently, white males may exalt some self-defined, dubious minority status in an attempt to recover a series of statuses associated with their righteous privilege.

In this light, one should be cautious to align with Esterhuizen's characters' claims of disempowerment, as Vincent (2006:356) points out that traditional hegemonic white

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masculinity. In any event, Esterhuizen's attempts at social and normative transgression end up being decidedly conservatively affirmative rather than liberally explorative.

masculinity may in all likelihood continue to maintain its hegemonic socio-political influence, even in contexts of socio-political transition. From *Lipstiek Dipstiek* to *Stoute Boudjies*, Esterhuizen consistently assigns power and control to the heterosexual male, privileging the traditional hegemonic centre of white normative masculinity as a space of safety and stability made manifest in the character's quest for sexual intercourse. Such conservative character constructions contradict any attempt to label his films as socially transgressive, considering the films' commitment to heteronormative hegemony where "[h]eterosexual intercourse can, as a gendered performance, symbolically demonstrate social inequalities between genders" (Dozier 2005:311), a rather significant point given the prominence of gendered inequality in dominant mainstream cinema (see Hayward 2006a:156-165).

For Badiou (2013:13), the comedy is a powerful political and aesthetic weapon. It is significant for Badiou that the comedy film "was a way of showing working-class life, its resistance to the powerful of this world, its potential victory" (2013:13). Often, such resistance would be coded in obscenity or vulgarity. In Bakhtin's view, obscenity and the grotesque provide a refuge from as well as a critique of dominant culture; they "undermine officialdom by showing how arbitrary and vulnerable is officialise and by turning it all into an object of ridicule" (Mbembe 2001:103-104). Sex comedies regularly play with ambivalences around male sexuality (Dyer 2002:92). Some sex comedies center on a male protagonist who is 'apart from' his penis, as if the two are somehow separate entities (ibid).

Sexuality, humiliation and the visible penis are key components of Esterhuizen's comedies. Esterhuizen's protagonists are all Afrikaans and white, and verbalise their perceived social positions as politically disadvantaged. As Weis (2006:263) explains, both masculinity and whiteness are inextricably challenged in contexts where class is reconsidered and remade; in other words, where righteous privilege is revoked and socio-political hierarchies have been restructured. Esterhuizen's films construct whiteness as a burden, and not as a marker of middle class privilege (though I should note that none of the characters in his films live in poverty). Indeed, these films at least superficially appeal to a sense of racial melancholia in two ways. Firstly, the white Afrikaans male characters recognise the limitations of their whiteness. Secondly, these characters find that the ideal of whiteness has been betrayed

(Straker 2004:409). Here, whiteness has come to signify an experience of loss, which in turn associates whiteness with melancholia (2004:411). Whiteness is additionally associated with a sense of dislocation brought about by macro-level social change, such as the transition from apartheid to democracy (Steyn 2004:150), a process that implies the renegotiation of whiteness in the social imaginary. Esterhuizen's protagonists occupy a position of arrested political development as the melancholia of the loss of political power and the sense of dislocation that accompanies political transition have not translated into interrogation of these character's righteous privilege and their re-located white male subject-position. Instead, Esterhuizen's protagonists appeal to a sense of victimhood.<sup>101</sup>

As Steyn (2004:148) explains, the position of victim has been prominent in discussions of Afrikaner whiteness; as Brayton (2007:58) suggests, the white male both disavows and embraces victimhood. This sense of victimhood is verbally articulated by the protagonists in the selected films and reflects pervasive anxieties about racial and cultural identity (Steyn 2004:153), of being "[a]liens in a now foreign and disintegrating land" (2004:156). The young white Afrikaans males in Esterhuizen's films perceive themselves as bearing the brunt of an unequal system of employment and seek actualisation in the pursuit of sex instead.

#### **4.2 Measuring masculinity in Esterhuizen's comedies**

With reference to the changed socio-political status of the Afrikaner male, Sonnekus (2013:36) explains:

Female, black and gay South African citizens benefit from unprecedented rights that protect them and promote equality, but simultaneously place Afrikaner masculinity under immense strain to reassure itself (and others) of its legitimacy. Its main ideological pillars, whiteness and heterosexuality, are therefore constantly reiterated as monolithic and unimpressionable, ultimately prompting heightened levels of homophobia and racism.

Here Sonnekus (2013) foregrounds the compromised status of Afrikaner masculinity, which is renegotiated in light of major socio-political and cultural change. In their

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<sup>101</sup> Regarding victimhood, see Erasmus (2004) for a discussion of the loss of Afrikaner hegemony.

interrogation of the notion of masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:830) note that the much contested notion remains meaningful in discussions of power, violence, sexuality and social change. The authors note that “the combination of the plurality of masculinities and the hierarchy of masculinities” (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:846) remain the fundamental feature of the notion of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity exists on three levels. Firstly, the local level refers to families and immediate communities. Secondly, the regional level relates to constructions of masculinity on broader cultural and national levels. Finally, the global level refers to the masculinity construction in transnational contexts such as world politics, business and media (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:849).

Esterhuizen’s films present masculinities that operate on a local (community-specific) and regional (cultural) level while constructing gender hierarchies in which heterosexual masculinity is hegemonic and homosexuality (or any suggestion thereof) is not considered masculine. In agreement with Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), Esterhuizen demonstrates that there is no unitary masculinity but rather multiple masculinities. It follows that hegemonic masculinity can have various meanings in different discursive practices. While the hegemonic masculinity in Esterhuizen’s film is consistently characterised by the quest for sex, I will indicate the hegemonic masculinity in each Esterhuizen film.

Schippers (2007:86) suggests that masculinity is a social location as well as a set of practises and characteristics collectively understood as “masculine”. There are key cultural and social effects to these practises. Indeed, hegemonic masculinity, in Connell’s view (Schippers 2007:87), legitimates male domination over women, but, importantly, over subordinate masculinities as well. Specifically, as Schippers (2007:94) finally suggests, hegemonic masculinity is “the *qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity*” (emphasis in original). Garlick (2009:608) adds that hegemonic masculinity is further characterised by notions of control. Throughout the trials and tribulations of life, the male who is in control will navigate these challenges with considerable success to affirm a sense of control and agency. Speed (2010:829) explains that the testing of socio-cultural boundaries underpins certain traditions

pertaining to the achieving manhood, where manhood is characterised by a sense of obtaining and exercising control.

Most teen comedies in Speed's (2010) discussion use the road trip trope to signify a transition from not only one space to and through others but also of boyhood to manhood, with manhood suggesting the epitome of control (and, with that, a sense of an "ending" to a process, as if the male-in-manhood has finished a project that requires no further attention). Although there are no road trips *per se* in Esterhuizen's cinema, the final light aircraft escape in *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat* and the trip to Durban for Hardus and Vaatjie in *Stoute Boudjies* qualify as moments that mark masculinity as the completion of a series of crucial decisions that lead to clear narrative resolution. In addition to teen comedies, Esterhuizen's films can also be described as "lad flicks" (Hansen-Miller & Gill 2011), a combination of buddy films and romantic comedies about "the trials and tribulations of a young man en men as they grow up and make their way in the world", a social negotiation in which masculinity is central (Hansen-Miller & Gill 2011:[sp]). These films, like Esterhuizen's, depict masculinities that are characterised by a sense of "heterosexual domesticity" where the characters' middle class masculinity is constructed as fallible, injured and unheroic" (Hansen-Miller & Gill 2011:[sp]).

Strikingly, these "lad flicks" foreground heterosexual male bonding, solidarity and homosociality, albeit accompanied by homophobic humour (Hansen-Miller & Gill 2011:[sp]). Indeed, Sonnekus (2013:27) observes that masculinity is occasionally signified through homophobia given that difference and denial historically indicate the pre-eminence of heteronormativity. With reference to homophobia, Clarkson (2006:200) refers to Kimmel's notion that homophobia is the fear that males will be revealed as failures of masculinity, suggesting that homophobia is haunted by a sense or perception of inadequacy. Esterhuizen's films evidently borrow from various internationally recognised and recognisable western tropes, conventions and types to shape its narratives, and there is a definite homophobia to the four films discussed in this chapter.

In Esterhuizen's films, the male protagonists often (momentarily) straddle attempts at male control and an indulgence in behaviour that deviates from socially consensual

norms. The latter seems to provide the male characters with opportunities for bonding as formative of a sense of kinship and solidarity. As Kiesling (2005:696) defines it, male solidarity refers to “a given bond among men” according to which men “want (and need) to do things with groups of other men, excluding women” (Kiesling 2005:696). For Whitehead (cited in Kiesling 2005:698), masculine ontology concerns the masculine subject’s search for an ‘authentic self’. Notably, such a pursuit requires a constant engagement with “performing acts recognised in cultural discourses as being associated with the self” (Kiesling 2005:698) and with being masculine, as one sees in Esterhuizen’s films. The male characters use sex to solidify their subject position as one that is masculine and can be described as “in control”.

Weighing the interactions between the male characters in the selected films - male bonding, emblematic clusters of shared experiences characterising ‘manhood’ - and the emphasis on the homosocial dimensions thereof, it becomes clear how “[t]he discourse of homosociality is a desire to return to that golden age” of male friendship located in the early teenage years before the insertion of the female into male social life (Kiesling 2005:702). Esterhuizen’s characters for most part succeed in returning to this “golden age” of homosociality: since their manhood is asserted through heteronormative sexual intercourse, they can afford to privilege homosocial relationships for much of the film.

I regularly refer to the notion of anality in the below discussion. The notion has enjoyed a privileged status due to its prominence in the psychology of Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson (Gardiner 2000:253). With reference to Shakespeare, Saunders (2004:158) evokes the figure of Iago in *Othello* as demonstrating an anality which “[links] the concept of properly handled waste to ideals of personal conduct”; anality here marks the difference between civilization and barbarism (Saunders 2004:150). In cinema, Charlie Chaplin built a popular image of social resistance and non-conformity on a persona that utilised anality; as Gunning (2010:239) describes, “Chaplin not only recalls the child who has not yet been thoroughly housebroken, but the “natural man” whose urges and bodily needs outweigh the demands of society and his own attempts at dignity”. Bodily functions here have socially subversive possibilities.



Esterhuizen's films do not use anality as mechanism of subversion. As I will show, anality mutes homoerotic possibilities and confirms masculinity as heterosexual. For Gardiner (2000:252), it is an "expulsive anality that ... is related to the ambiguities of men's roles and identities in consumer society". Expulsive anality is often accompanied by an "aggressive delight in 'grossness'" where anality marks masculinity as inevitably juvenile (Gardiner 2000:258). In this study, anality refers to bodily functions of the anus and stomach as visible (and audible) in Esterhuizen's films. Here, anality is less concerned with ascribing a civilised-barbaric binary and more with maintaining a heterosexual-homosexual binary that is incongruous with contemporary conceptualisations of masculinity (as in Connell and Messerschmidt [2005]).

*Lipstiek Dipstiek* serves as a prelude to what I read as Esterhuizen's later films' emphasis on homosociality and even homoeroticism. This homoeroticism is repeatedly neutralised in favour of heteronormative masculinity. As Sonnekus (2013:32) asserts, gayness and hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity are irreconcilable, and Esterhuizen reinforces this highly political irreconcilability.

#### **4.3 The failure of white male actualisation in selected films of Willie Esterhuizen**

Thirteen years passed between the release of *Lipstiek Dipstiek* and its ideological successor, *Poena is Koning*. During this interval, Esterhuizen was active in television, developing content for the South African Broadcasting Commission (SABC) and eventually the dedicated Afrikaans DSTV channel kykNet. Esterhuizen's television programmes in this time include *Gauteng-Aleng-Aleng* and *Vetkoekpaleis*, both continuing the lowbrow, folksy humour aimed at Afrikaans speaking audiences he started with *Orkney Snork Nie*. Esterhuizen would eventually discontinue his partnership with the South African Broadcasting Commission (SABC) in favour of moving to the Afrikaans DSTV channel kykNet; kykNet hosted a number of seasons of yet another comedy series of white disenchantment and disenfranchisement titled *Molly en Wors*, with Esterhuizen himself starring as Wors (the same Wors who features in some of the feature comedies as Vaatjie's father). In television series such as *Riemvasmaak* (2008) and more specifically *Andries Plak* (2007), changing

socio-political contexts are foregrounded; the latter series explores the plight of white male identity in flux in post-apartheid South Africa (Milton 2011:243).

Importantly, a series such as *Andries Plak* provides an idea of how ordinary South Africans might perceive and respond to the complexities of socio-political change (2011:243). In this series, the white male is disenchanted and has a knack for satire (2011:245); here, Andries forces the government to take note of the plight of white Afrikaner males in post-apartheid South Africa (2011:246). Esterhuizen's *Molly & Wors* attempts no such critical engagement, and fails to give voice to the different constellations of white political anxiety and a loss of agency.

Esterhuizen's feature debut, *Lipstiek Dipstiek* earned R6.3 million in 1994 at the South African box-office (Burger 2010:[sp]), the top earning Afrikaans film for over a decade. It introduces viewers to the young, virginal Poenie (Francois Coertze) who, on the threshold of marriage, burns his crotch with a welding rod and falls in lust with a blonde female psychologist. With Poenie, *Lipstiek* introduces viewers to the template for masculinity that echoes through Esterhuizen's entire cinematic oeuvre. Not only is Poenie's masculinity associated with the ability to resist inappropriate temptation, an indicator of control, Esterhuizen's construction of masculinity is also related to overt sexual behaviour where the definition of sex is limited to include only penetration. Intercourse, and nothing else, constitutes sex. Even when Poenie starts groping a nurse's breasts, his behaviour is seen as naïve and sweet, not sexually offensive.

Finally, Poenie's quest for sex leads to a prolonged, gratuitous climactic sex scene with the psychologist, thereby solidifying his masculinity. The climactic sex scene is followed by a brief final scene of the psychologist's former lover who is suddenly, and without any previous cues, revealed as gay. The affirmation of missionary hetero-sex, complete with soft lighting, Vaseline lens and soft-core instrumental soundtrack, is juxtaposed with the two male lovers meeting up outside their home in a mundane replication of earlier scenes with the psychologist and her fiancée meeting up. This suggestion that masculinity is visibly contrasted with sanitised, domesticated homosexuality is significant for the rest of Esterhuizen's oeuvre as the

heterosexual standard (or default) for hegemonic masculinity is consistently confirmed.

Poenie is the forerunner for Poena, the sex-starved protagonist in *Poena is Koning*. Esterhuizen seemingly without irony refers to *Poena* as a “humourous ethnic minority film” devoid of propaganda (Dercksen 2008:[sp]). *Poena is Koning* also foregrounds heterosexual sexual behaviour as indicative of masculinity.

#### 4.3.1 Humiliation and erection in *Poena is Koning* (2007)

*Poena is Koning* concerns two male best friends’ attempts at losing their virginity by the time they leave school. As such, the film draws on an American narrative tradition manifest in films such as *Porky’s* (Clark, 1981) and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Heckerling 1982). Like its American correlatives (see Speed 2010:825), *Poena* is also “profitable, low-budget and formulaic”; however, where *Porky’s* freely indulged a voyeuristic desire to reveal fully nude women to its viewers as typified in shots where the camera lingers in long shot on naked women, *Poena is Koning* only has a few fleeting nude shots, none of them full frontal. Instead, *Poena* (with the title character played by Robbie Wessels, with whom Esterhuizen had earlier completed some television collaboration), locates much of its sexual activity discursively in dialogue and symbolism, and not primarily in naked on-screen bodies. The verbalised sexual activity remains coarse and explicit throughout the film: “although sexuality seems to be about bodies, it’s not really about bodies. It is how bodily activity is reported in words” (Žižek in Fiennes 2006).

The lack of an abundance of visual sexual activity should not be read to indicate an absence of sexuality but should serve to amplify the presence of sex and sexuality. The spoken word – the literal speech act – articulates and drives the quest for sex. The pleasure of sex, whether visualised in the film or articulated in sexually explicit language, is foregrounded early in the film. Poena’s high school friend Vaatjie (Gerhard Odendaal) mentions that he is “addicted to pleasuring himself”. When one character hears that their attractive teacher, Juffrou (Perle van Schalkwyk), shaves her pubic area, he observes that if he does not lose his virginity soon, his “balls will explode”. Such imagery is the basis of masculine sexual activity in the film: men are

in constant pursuit of sexual release, running the risk that a failure in this regard will render them eunuchs. Many of the tensions introduced by *Lipstiek Dipstiek* are present. For example, the film suggests that a heterosexual virgin is possibly a “moffie” (“faggot”). Masculinity is located between sexual inactivity (virgin abstention) and sexual deviation (homosexuality). Only the act of deflowering will make the male’s heterosexuality evident; without intercourse, such a man may possibly become homosexual, thereby compromising his masculinity.

The film’s construction of masculinity becomes increasingly problematic. In one convoluted plot development, Poena is forced to hide a golden necklace by hanging it from his penis. This necklace becomes a key part in a transaction involving sexual rewards, where the necklace becomes a currency for sexual activity. This transactional quality to sexuality marks Esterhuizen’s heterosexual masculinity as rooted in sexual conquest where sex and masculinity can be bought. Upon returning the golden necklace to its owner, Juffrou, grateful for the return of her property, seduces Poena. During foreplay, Juffrou’s husband Vleis (Francois Coertze) arrives home unexpectedly, forcing a panicking Poena to flee naked over the apartment balcony.<sup>102</sup> Poena finds refuge in a gay couple’s next door apartment. Poena and one of the gay neighbours eventually listen to Juffrou and Vleis having sex – a naked heterosexual and effeminate homosexual bearing affirmative witness to the heteronormative sex act.

In addition to the quest for sex and the appreciation of the heteronormative sex act, there is an emphasis on anality in *Poena is Koning*. When Vaatjie farts in the exam venue, Poena is on hand to quickly explain that Vaatjie simply sneezes that way. As such, Vaatjie’s public anality is completely normalised and there is no need to make an excuse for it. Soon after, both boys are in the headmaster’s office, where he compares the ANC government’s ineptitude to the experience of anal pain. Anality is here associated with discomfort and failure: a sexual failure but also a political impotence.<sup>103</sup> Later in the film, Theunis van Rooyen (the late Andrew Thompson) is

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<sup>102</sup> The name ‘Vleis’ translates as ‘meat’, and can be read to refer to this male character’s interest in consuming flesh (in the sense of nourishment as well as sexual pleasure). The name can also indicate a male with limited intelligence who is physically tough and no-nonsense, as in ‘meat head’.

<sup>103</sup> Judith Halberstam (2011) discusses failure in a positive sense. It is failure that “allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal

taken to hospital after he lodges stationery in his anus during a moment of sexual self-exploration. Here Esterhuizen openly humiliates characters who express (an interest in) anal activity, especially insofar as it may be said to suggest latent homosexual experimentation.

Humiliation, especially of a socio-sexual nature, is crucial to reading the masculinity of these characters; as Speed (2010:827) explains, the vulgar teen comedy often focuses on punishing hedonistic behaviour. For Esterhuizen, hedonistic behaviour associated with anal expulsion or insertion must be punished: Vaatjie goes to the principal's office, while Theunis is hospitalised.<sup>104</sup> By now the film has clearly located masculinity as an identifiable difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality (the former possesses it while the latter lacks it) and its respective gendered performances, as well as in the frustrated attempts to obtain intercourse – with the understanding that eventually sex will be successfully obtained. If sex is obtained, the threat of homosexuality dissipates even as safe homosociality remains.

In addition, Esterhuizen's film identifies masculinity with the visibility of the penis. As in *Lipstiek Dipstiek*, male sexual arousal is visible and observed by female characters. In *Poena is Koning*, it is Poena's own mother who acknowledges her son's erection. The mother's affirmation of her son's penis is not simply an affirmation of masculinity, but also foregrounds female appreciation of the visible penis to counter the moments of anality and homosociality. For Hirdman (2007:160), the power of the heterosexual phallus is located in its invisible presence; yet, as one of the few remaining Western cultural taboos with shock value, the penis has become more visible in popular visual culture.<sup>105</sup> For Dyer (2002:90), "the symbolism

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of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods" (Halberstam 2011:3). Failure preserves a sense of anarchy which interrupts the binaried boundaries between adults and child, for instance (Halberstam 2011:3). Esterhuizen's films do not use failure in this productively subversive sense.

<sup>104</sup> Foucault (1984) would explain that the hospital is a space to correct deviance, and that Theunis's hospitalisation is not simply to tend to him medically, but to normalise him, to retrain the body to perform certain actions and to avoid other, 'abnormal' ones.

<sup>105</sup> Stephens (2007:89) suggests that the increased visibility of the penis resulted in the spectacularisation of the penis, and comments that the visible penis regularly indicate the perceived failure of the penis to measure up to the phallus, thereby compromising masculinity (2007:91; 92). In a South African context, such compromised masculinity made headline news with the painting *The Spear*. As Smith (2012:[sp]) reports, Brett Murray's painting positioned the visible penis as centrally visible, and as an entry point for discussing the political and sexual failures of South African president Jacob Zuma.

of male sexuality is ... overwhelmingly centred on the genitals”, especially the erect penis. Other body parts such as the fist raised with the elbow are symbolic of the erect penis. As such, the penis is the symbol of male potency (2002:91) while not at all objectively full of actual power. Both the shock value and artistic value of the visible penis may be explained by reference to the Lacanian conception of the phallus, which already contains ejaculate “as the constitutive metaphor for the phallicity of signification. The veiledness of the ejaculate as the vital flow reiterates the discursive imagery of heterosexual coitus which is presumed to impregnate meaning by “striking”, or fucking, the so-called passive, feminine signifiable” (Cakirlar 2011:93). The visible penis as phallus reinscribes an active-passive binary between male and female. As Del Rosso (2011:705) explains, the external visibility of the penis makes it an immediate part of any discussion of masculinity in that the erect penis’s association with power and dominance comes into play.

The visible penis must be seen by other film characters; they must bear witness to its potency. “Phallus”, says Žižek (1989:254), “designates the juncture at which the radical externality of the body as independent of our will ... joins the pure interiority of our thought”.<sup>106</sup> The penis is the paradoxical combination of male control associated with masculinity and its failure. As Žižek (1999b:471) explains, the “erection is one of the last remainders of authentic spontaneity, something that cannot be thoroughly mastered through rational-instrumental procedures”. A man who cannot produce an erection, this symbol of power raised by mere thought, is a manifest disappointment. Indeed, male potency functions to signal the presence of a symbolic dimension: the phallus “designates the symbolic support which confers on [the] penis the dimension of proper potency” (Žižek 1999:472). In this instance, castration anxiety is not about the loss of the penis but about the loss of male authority that accompanies its hoisted appearance.

Esterhuizen must make his characters’ erections visible to the audience (which he does not explicitly visually do) by making it visible to other characters and so confirm their heteronormative masculinity: the visible penis is never witnessed by another

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<sup>106</sup> Žižek draws on Lacan to inform his conception of the phallus. For Lacan, the phallus is a signifier, an ‘insignia’, an “organ without a body that I put on, which gets attached to my body, but never becomes an organic part” (Žižek 2006:34); in elaboration, the phallus is “an excessive feature ... that generates the illusion of another hidden reality” (2006:116).

male character, although male characters do comment on anal actions such as farting and cramps. The erect penis is restricted to the heterosexual domain. The heterosexual penis is made visible as homosexual connotations are muted.

In many American comedies, the homoerotic tension between male characters is often acknowledged, named, and muted, such as one character calling another “fag” after a brief hug (Troyer & Marchiselli 2005:270). Troyer and Marchiselli point out that it is possible for the perilous intimacy of male homosociality to veer into the homoerotic, citing how in *Dude, Where’s My Car?* (Leiner, 2000), for example, “Chester’s knowledge about his friend’s gastronomic functions and the overt anality of the scene make clear the screenwriter’s intentions” (2005:273) of citing male homosociality as close to homoeroticism. Halberstam (2011:58) refers to films such as *Dude, Where’s My Car?* as “male stupidity films” featuring “witless white males” (Halberstam 2011:59). Though I would be cautious to suggest some reductive link between anality and homosexuality, the positioning of anality in heteronormative narratives where masculinity is constructed as the domain of heterosexuality serves to elevate the heteronormative at the cost of any alternative, such as homosociality even. In fact, in *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat*, I read anality as formative of heterosexual hegemonic masculinity is accentuated once more.

In this film, white male actualisation is stunted, but not at the cost of the visibility of the white male, and especially not the visibility of his virility.

#### 4.3.2 Domesticated masculinity and anality in *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat* (2008)

Vaatjie, the main protagonist in *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat*, is the physically soft, bulbous and domesticated figure of Vaatjie. The name “Vaatjie”, a diminutive word for a wooden vat often filled with alcohol, is already suggestive of larger size. While Mosher (2005:61) correctly asserts that overweight males receive little narrative attention, Esterhuizen has given narrative prominence to such an individual. In this spin-off feature, Vaatjie and Theunis van Rooyen have exchanged their statuses as supporting characters to leading man and sidekick. Visibly absent from this film is the Poenie/Poena character, the male who most visibly conforms to normative ideas of physical appearance. Here the audience has no choice but to follow the character

trajectory of the obese Vaatjie. Since fatness and flaccidity signify a failure of patriarchal potency (McPhail 2009:1026), Esterhuizen bases this film on a character already assigned to impotence, to failed masculinity.

Since the main character is a constantly eating, obese male, the film's emphasis on the anal is evident from the very start as the film opens with Vaatjie literally farting himself awake. Immediately after, he steps in dog faeces. Within minutes, his family has referred to him as "poephol" (asshole) and "dikgat" (fat ass). Blapsie, Vaatjie's sister, at one stage refers to him as a "magneet vir kak" (shit magnet). These suggestions of anality are closely associated with disclosures of sexual excitation and a palpable homoerotic tension. Theunis communicates with Vaatjie via a computer video chat programme, stating: "You're naked! Is this a bad time?", followed by Vaatjie's response that he has an "enormous boner". Here the presence of the erection is verbally stated, but not visually affirmed: while male characters may verbally describe their genitals and state of sexual excitation, only female characters bear affirmative witness to the penis. As with interactions between male and female characters in Esterhuizen's films, eroticism between male characters is limited to the discursive realm.

In the absence of the hegemonic masculinity exemplified by Poenia/Poena, Theunis and Vaatjie seem to pursue a relationship that leaves space for playful homoeroticism evident in the way the two males discuss their genitals and share their accounts of attempts at obtaining sex. Note that the type of male who engages in such a relationship is defined by failure: not only does Vaatjie struggle to contain his eating habits, he has already failed in a different way to control his body. Furthermore, it was Theunis who in the previous film had stationery lodged in his anus. But homoerotic desire is abject, rupturing and disrupting notions of normative masculinity (Brayton 2007:67); indeed, the white male in this context is positioned as decidedly abject (2007:58).

Therefore, before this homoerotic playfulness threatens to disrupt narrative safety and comfort, Theunis and Vaatjie share in a striptease at the Lollipop Ranch. The important aspect here is the shared experience of the striptease as an opportunity for bonding, male solidarity and a demonstration of control; the male consumption of



the female form has to occur in public to emphasise the visibility of and validate the characters' interest in naked women. So invested in this project are Vaatjie and Theunis that they even cry together when the stripper does not remove her panties. The film spends more time on their crying than on the naked woman performing the striptease. Indeed, when Theunis goes on a date with Blapsie, Vaatjie's sister, Theunis is more concerned about Vaatjie's recent expulsion from cooking school than his date.

Again the homoerotic interest between Vaatjie and Theunis must be made safe by the explicit confirmation of heterosexual interests. Like Poenie and Poena before him, Theunis vehemently denies the fact that he is a virgin (the idea of sexual inactivity is anathema to dominant notions of masculinity) until Blapsie frames his virgin status as something positive in the sense that she would be honoured to participate in his deflowering. Later in the film, the post-coital Theunis smokes and drinks in bed to celebrate sexual conquest. This moment is echoed in *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat*, where Vaatjie (who was never before shown smoking) lights a cigarette in the time-honoured Hollywood fashion of celebrating triumphant intercourse after making a sperm bank donation. Seemingly whether a man has sex with a woman or with himself, it deserves to be celebrated.

Once Vaatjie is expelled from cooking school, he and Theunis visibly share in Vaatjie's grief by crying together and consoling one another. By now, these moments of male bonding and solidarity have been stripped of their threat to heteronormative masculinity as it is clear that both Vaatjie and Theunis are so invested in the female form that it brings them to tears. Men are allowed share emotional moments insofar as they occur in the pursuit of hetero-sex. Vaatjie visits a local video store looking for a French film that can teach him to speak French. Vaatjie explains that he's not looking for smut, but that he is also not a "moffie". As in *Poena is Koning*, a male can only be one or the other: in the practice of masculinity, you are either an oversexed heterosexual male or a queer. In addition, there is again the usual emphasis on the protagonist's disabling whiteness, Max du Preez's (2003) pale native who recognises and verbalises that history is against him. I read the quest for sex and its associations as a form of compensation for the repeated and misguided motif of white disenfranchisement in Esterhuizen's films, a motif most often substantiated by

characters' discussion around their loss of righteous privilege: employment, social status, and sexual prowess, which serve as some markers of heteronormative masculinity.

It is, however, anality that is most emphasised in *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat*. Here, anality also enters the family sphere to serve as a prominent bond between father and son. Both Vaatjie and Wors, his father, find that their stomachs get upset in times of stress and excitement and have to empty their bowels as a manifestation of their excitement over Vaatjie's eventual personal triumph at being selected to go overseas for further training. Wors even references the mother, Mollie, into the practice of anality, stating that good news will cause Vaatjie's mother to "shit herself". Referring to scatological comedy in films such as *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (Roach, 2002), Bonila (2006:20) explains how the obese, hirsute male character Fat Bastard's faeces offers the character visible evidence of his own existence. The act of defecation, the tangibility of its product, and the visibility of its by-products, are inscribed in the male's existence and foregrounds anality as constitutive of masculinity in comedy.

Shared father-son anality eventually manifests in this film as a so-called "Visagie photo": Vaatjie and Wors pull down their shorts, moon the nosy female neighbour and fart in her general direction. The neighbour topples from her balcony onto the lawn. Given her propensity for spying on Vaatjie's family, this scene makes it clear that the bodily manifest male will not be looked at; the male, in control of himself and his environment, does the looking. The suggestion of the "photo" here suggests the flash of nudity and the impermanence – not the preservation – of the neighbour, whose last moment in the film is as humiliated female. Ostensibly this results in a closer bond between father and son as the two men celebrate the moment.

In the absence of the male protagonist's constant quest for sex, *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat* foregrounds the homoerotic bonds between certain characters, and emphasises the centrality of anality to Esterhuizen's idea of masculinity. The character of Vaatjie speaks, nearly (but not convincingly) subversively, to another form of masculinity: bear masculinity. As Hennen (2005:26) explains, "[b]ears reject the self-conscious, exaggerated masculinity of the gay leatherman in favor of a more 'authentic'

masculinity that frames the socio-physical appearance of this gay male as indicative of the heteronormative ‘regular guy’“. The bear can be seen as a gender performance that aligns with a straight-acting masculinity in opposition to stereotypical constructions of feminised homosexuality (Clarkson 2006:192). The bear is much like the heterosexual male in his daily pursuits, but he is gay. Consider Vaatjie and Theunis’ moments of shared emotion, emblematic clusters depicting paradoxically strained yet indulgent male bonding: “in staking their claim to gay masculinity, Bears challenge hegemonic assumptions about male sexuality by introducing what feminists have identified as an ‘ethic of care’ (Gilligan 1982) into an objectified sexual culture perceived as alienating” (Hennen 2008:98). Contained in the trope of male bonding, solidarity and shared experience, Vaatjie is a considerate bear figure in the face of what I read as Theunis’ precarious bisexuality. Vaatjie remains the most narratively prominent character though: as Coles (2007:31) explains, men who distance themselves from the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, men like Vaatjie, operate in other contexts where they are still in some way superior to other men (in this instance, Theunis). The more traditional heterosexual hegemonic male ideal reappears in *Stoute Boudjies*.

In this film, in the absence of the singular Poena/Poenie character, Esterhuizen veers closest to an acceptance – even an endorsement – of multiple and alternative masculinities. However, the emphasis on anality – also how anality becomes a characteristic of male bonding between father and son – neutralises any such manifest possibilities.

#### 4.3.3 Masculinity at the intersection of pleasure and pain: *Stoute Boudjies* (2010).

In *Stoute Boudjies*, the male characters’ focus on sex becomes even more overt than before, with the main character, Hardus Vogel (a pun on a potent, erect penis that can be loosely translated as “Hard Cock”). Again this oversexed white male complains that the job market is not open to him (an obvious articulation of the loss of righteous privilege) because of his whiteness. The only recourse to power and agency – to control – if not through work, is through sex. The film’s opening scene finds Hardus and Vaatjie in a tent adrift on the ocean during a thunderstorm. When Hardus mentions that something’s bothering him, a concerned Vaatjie replies: “Your

cock?” In light of Elsaesser’s comments on opening scenes, *Stoute Boudjies* in this manner positions the phallus as the master signifier of the narrative, the marker not only of masculinity but also of meaning.

The men verbally surmise that being adrift on the ocean during a storm is punishment for their primary sin: too much masturbation. Here, the film offers an articulation of excess – in this case, perceived excessive auto-sexual behaviour – as sinful. Esterhuizen’s films offers heterosexual intercourse as a remedy or absolvment of the sin of excessive masturbation. Schneider (2005:379) explains the act of masturbation as “a sexual act that both waylays and encourages reproduction and qualifies in an admittedly thin sense as homosexual”. Schneider (2005:381) points to the paradox of masturbation where the act indicates entrance into puberty and pleasure while simultaneously signifying immaturity. The reference to the flaccid-to-erect-to-flaccid penis is both awesome and comical (Schneider 2005:391), as seen in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (Stoller, 2008) where the male protagonist’s nakedness and flaccid penis humourously suggest psychological vulnerability and masculine fragility [see also Stephens (2007)]. While *Stoute Boudjies* avoids full frontal nudity, the film makes the relationship between male experiences of pleasure and shame palpable. As stated earlier, male hedonism is often punished through humiliation.

Masculinity is again located as the domain of the heterosexual, as Hardus remarks to romantic interest Petro (Angelique Pretorius) that “only a fag would say no to sex” with her. Hardus more than compensates for the lack of the masculine ideal in *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat*. In fact, here again the father-son relationship is foregrounded. Whereas Vaatjie comes from a close-knit nuclear family, Hardus’s father has left his mother and taken a girlfriend. When Hardus’s quest for sex becomes visible, his mother remarks that he is “his father’s child”. Whether you have recently emerged from adolescence or whether you are middle aged, the quest for sex remains the key marker of masculinity for Esterhuizen. Unsurprisingly, the film shows us Hardus’s father receiving oral sex not once, but twice, suggesting simultaneously that such sexual indulgence is part of the male characters’ patriarchal inheritance as much as it again signifies not only the potent penis but also sexual excess.

Troyer and Marchiselli (2005:276) discuss teen comedies as coming of age films with an emphasis on masculinity, where

everything must be a rejection of what is old or past (i.e. no longer fashionable) and an embrace of the new and the now, a rejection of abstract paternal authority. To bond with one another, and to reject the father and everything he has, the boys in [so-called] dude films attempt to incorporate and justify homosocial relationships with homoerotic desires; to reclaim for themselves the trajectory of masculinist, Western history and its projected futures.

Esterhuizen's male protagonists do incorporate homosocial and homoerotic tension into their framework of masculinity and in addition incorporate the father as paternal authority: a model who is emulated in thought and behaviour, as manifest in the characters Poena, Vaatjie and Hardus.

Like his forebears, virginal Hardus vehemently denies his virginity, and is grateful for the sex he has with Petro, a sexologist. Hardus thanks Petro three times for the sex; far from an intimate moment, sex was a social transaction and rite of passage for the benefit of Hardus' status as masculine. Garlick (2003:158) recounts how, for Lynne Segal, the practice of sexual intercourse "confirms a sense of ineptness and failure and that it is through sex that men experience their greatest uncertainties and dependence in relation to women". The successful completion of the sex act gives Hardus reason to be less anxious about his masculinity, hence his gratitude to his partner. Again the emphasis is on penetration – no other sexual activity is framed as sexual. The penis – invisible but manifest in the dialogue – takes centre stage: when Petro's boyfriend Os is chasing after him, Petro consoles Hardus by informing him that he is better endowed than Os, who is a motorcycle aficionado. "The larger the bike, the smaller the dick", remarks Hardus, engaging with the colloquial view of a large motorcycle as a proxy for an inadequate sense of masculinity.

Later in the film, Os experiences what another character describes as a "a cramp in [his] asshole", and the context of the scene is intriguing and troubling: while locating Os in the machismo of biker culture, complete with leather jackets and revving engines, the film shows him experiencing anal discomfort. The scene seems to have no other purpose other than to have Os pass gas painfully. In this scene, anality

subdues Os as the overt heterosexual hegemonic masculine ideal by humiliating him. Žižek (2011:260) explains: “[I]n relation to another person’s body we know very well that he or she sweats, defecates and urinates, but we abstract from this in our daily relations – these features are not part of our fellow man.” Instead of abstracting bodily functions from his characters’ activities, Esterhuizen chooses to highlight primarily the male body as producer of waste. Masculinity is tied to bodily excess but also, in another chasm between the male protagonists and their female intercourse interests, to the potential for excess in other strata: the experience of *jouissance* or ejaculation. Far from only subduing the macho male as discussed above, I read this as a strategy to locate the masculine at the intersection of pleasure and pain (femininity, in its comparative absence, is not shown to have this range of physical possibilities.)

As seen in the above, *Poena*, *Vaatjie* and *Stoute Boudjies* foreground moments of anality as much as it does the quest for sex. I used anality throughout to include all references to bodily expulsion, excess, farting and also narrative references to the anus. Gardiner (2000:252) argues that “an expulsive anality is related to the ambiguities of men’s roles and identities in consumer society”; as Esterhuizen’s films demonstrate, masculinity is simultaneously demystified and constituted through anality. Anality can have certain positive, productive associations. Gardiner (2000:254) refers to Bakhtin, for whom “the democratic spirit of folk humor contests authority and turns established hierarchies on their heads by using imagery from what he calls the ‘material body lower stratum’, which would include a ‘slinging of excrement’ [signifying] destruction and debasement” (Bakhtin as cited in Gardiner 2000:254), yet retaining, as with urine, a notion of renewal and welfare (ibid). Such a subversive dimension to anality is absent from Esterhuizen’s films, and possibilities of homoerotic tension are muted. Across the three films discussed in this article, the pattern of heteronormative hegemonic masculinity as the only acceptable masculinity is confirmed.

In this final film, Esterhuizen returns most forcefully to hegemonic masculinity in the figure of Hardus, and the affirmation of conservative values and identities against the backdrop of post-transitional South Africa and the loss of righteous privilege. Here,

righteous privilege has become reconfigured to align power and position with sexual prowess and fantasy, instead of socio-political actualisation.

#### 4.4 The political impotence of the cinema of Willie Esterhuizen

White male masculinity is restrained and its actualisation arrested through humiliation, anality (farting, defecation references) and the quest for heteronormative sexual intercourse as an integral part of post-apartheid white masculinity.

Esterhuizen pays little heed to traditional narrative models, eschewing the dominant Western three act narrative structure for a two act model where little regarding plot, especially the heteronormative element of the plot, is addressed. Instead, the first act of Esterhuizen's films focus on maleness, masculinity and homosociality. The second act, as if cautious that the homosocial might become dominant, quickly and oddly inserts a heteronormative plot component into the narrative. Consider how, in *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat*, the protagonist falls in love with the pretty video store clerk who appears in three scenes in the entire film and serves as the heteronormative salvation of the male. In Vaatjie's case, it is especially urgent to confirm the traditional masculinity and heterosexuality of the male protagonist as Vaatjie is not only obese but also involved in domestic activities such as cooking and baking, which are traditionally associated with femininity.<sup>107</sup>

The characters of Poena, Vaatjie and Hardus in their performance of masculinity speak to the notion of the Lacanian fool, a figure who "believes in his immediate identity with himself [and is] not capable of a dialectically mediated distance towards himself", much like a king takes his being-a-king as his immediate property "and not as a symbolic mandate imposed on him by a network of intersubjective relations of which he is a part" (Žižek 1989:46). In elaboration, Žižek (1998:[sp]) explains that the fool is sanctioned to speak the political truth of a given situation, "precisely because the *performative power (the socio-political efficiency) of his speech is suspended*"

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<sup>107</sup> Given how firmly established Judith Butler's ideas on gender performativity are, as primarily detailed in *Gender Trouble* (1990), I will not rehearse those ideas here due to limited space. Butler provides insight into the repetition of gender performances in establishing notions of gender, but this chapter's interest is in how Esterhuizen's narratives neutralise homoerotic potentials by continually reaffirming hegemonic masculinity as heterosexual.

(emphasis added). As a character type, the fool can thus be properly parapractic in utilising their failed socio-political potency in a constructive manner.

Esterhuizen undermines the subversive potential of the fool, however; the characters' masculinity and their quest for sex are a given that simply needs to be confirmed, not deconstructed. Masculinity and the quest for sex occur simultaneously and in a complementary manner. The practice of social and self-control as well as the demonstration and near intuitive understanding of anality operate in the quest for sex as near-subversive markers that in the end confirm heterosexual hegemonic masculinity. Once sex is obtained and the narrative space has been made safe from threatening homosexualities, appropriate homosocial bonds are confirmed (*Stoute Boudjies*).<sup>108</sup> While none of the protagonists in Esterhuizen's films self-identify as gay, many exhibit homosocial and even homoerotic tendencies. However, the selected films continue to represent gay subjects by repeatedly confirming and affirming the cultural and political dominance of heterosexuality in often stereotypical form using heteronormativity as the yardstick for sexuality and masculinity (Sonnekus 2009:41). Hegemonic masculinity is, again, exclusively heterosexual. For Bhabha, the stereotype "is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation which denies the play of difference" (Sibley 1995:18), and it is exactly the possibilities of difference that Esterhuizen mutes.

The characters Poena, Hardus and even Theunis all personally capture the moment preceding or following a sexual conquest on camera, as if preserving (and in one instance, sharing) these sexual experiences add further legitimacy to their masculinity. Significantly, these characters manage to bed their primary female interest halfway through the film already, and not only at the climax (with the exception of *Lipstiek Dipstiek*). The quest for heterosexual intercourse drives these characters: they do their best to obtain idealised female company, and eventually, after some trial and error, they succeed. With its emphasis on sexual intercourse, (lapsing) control, anality and homoerotic tension, the hegemonic heteronormative

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<sup>108</sup> In this sense, *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat* is admittedly the odd one out, given that the perpetually sexed-up Vaatjie here assumes a more domestic and less rambunctious role. The acquisition and practise of sexual intercourse is an afterthought to his culinary achievements. The homosocial motifs from the other Esterhuizen films are even more visible in the absence of the Poenie/Poena character.



masculinity portrayed in Esterhuizen's films is exclusive and intolerant of alternative masculinities that threaten its stability. Overall, the quest for sex exists to narratively foil the homoerotic tensions in all of Esterhuizen's films.

#### 4.5 Post-Esterhuizen Afrikaans comedy

Esterhuizen has not released another comedy of white Afrikaans masculine failure since *Stoute Boudjies*. His 2013 feature comedy *Molly & Wors: Die Moewie*, is best classified as an Afrikaans family comedy, with the usual Esterhuizen characteristics of lowbrow humour and light scatology firmly in place. Some Afrikaans filmmakers have attempted to replicate American (teen) comedy formulae in a way that Esterhuizen originally pioneered in Afrikaans feature comedy. The most prominent recent such instance is FC Hamman's road movie-cum-product endorsement *Babalas*, co-written by Hamman himself, Anna-Marie Jansen van Vuuren and Carl Stemmet.<sup>109</sup> The film offers a combination of male sexuality-based humour and sexual pursuit that builds on Esterhuizen's work while not extending or deepening his explorations of hegemonic masculinity and reaffirming those conservative constructions instead.

*Babalas* (the title is an Afrikaans colloquialism indicative of a severe hangover) unabashedly bases its narrative premise around the presumed nostalgic pleasures of revisiting the Kalahari Three from 1990s South Africa's Castrol oil television advertisements. The film opens with a coloured female, Mia (Tammy-Ann Fortuin), watching and visibly enjoying one of the old Castrol advertisements. Her aim is to pitch the Kalahari Three as a main event at a major entertainment showcase to be held at Emperor's Palace. The film depicts a boardroom meeting where the characters emphasise the necessity of the showcase to stay "within the limitations of the budget". Around the conference table are numerous types of masculinity: the effeminate homosexual, the overweight Afrikaans patriarch, the greasy outsider male (clearly positioned to be the antagonist, even a marginal one at that). The men talk

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<sup>109</sup> Jansen van Vuuren (2014) privileges the hero's journey in her writing, and has delivered conference papers on South African cinema.

about how the company, Outrage Events, needs to “[be] current” in order to maintain market appeal.<sup>110</sup>

Mia’s suggestions about the Kalahari Three are met with disapproval and mockery. It is here that the term *volksbesit* (property of the *volk*, of the people) appears for the first time in relation to the Kalahari Three. These three – Boet, Swaer and Mogae – are the property of the *volk*. Then they watch the Nandos “All You Foreigners” add, which was banned from South African television in 2012. “It’s a bit controversial, isn’t it?” comments one Outrage employee, and such edgy advertising is swiftly dismissed by the gruff chairman, Theo, who insists that Mia calls him by his first name, and not “Sir”. Theo is convinced that the Kalahari Three will be perfect for the showcase after watching some more Castrol advertisements in his office. Mia has four days to convince the Kalahari men of her cause and escort them to Emperor’s Palace for the live entertainment event. Theo reminds her: “Our budget is limited”. At this stage, two main motifs stand out in the film. The first is the film’s conspicuous insistence on keeping costs low and working within budgetary means; in other words, the film overtly symptomatically emphasises financial austerity. This regular emphasis is also a comment on the film’s own aesthetic and production values, suggesting that the filmmakers made the film that they could make given their budget constraints.

Secondly, the film positions the return of the Kalahari Three as a major event, not only in financial (showcase) terms but also in cultural terms, where the return of the characters is also the film’s own return *to* these characters, especially given the film’s characters’ celebration of the nostalgia evoked by the advertisements.

After all these years, Mia finds the men exactly where the advertisements left them: at the Kalahari Oasis. Measured against what the viewer was shown in the advertisements earlier, the Oasis and the Kalahari Three appear exactly the same as before. Mia expresses her amazement that “nothing has changed” but there is no value judgment in her words: she simply articulates the observation on behalf of the

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<sup>110</sup> Leon van Nierop (2013a:[sp]) bemoans *Babalas*’ reliance on camp, limp-wristed stereotypes in the absence of narrative coherence, and recommends the film only to those viewers who generally enjoy comedies that feature foul language, “ineptly performed pole dancing and rising sheets [due to the erections they cover]”.

viewer. The nostalgic celebration of the Kalahari Three is made possible by the sameness of these characters and their setting, and its verisimilitude to what we have seen earlier in the advertisements.

A new addition to the Kalahari Three is Neef (played by Afrikaans rapper Jack Parow), who forcefully insists on “standing in” for Boet, who is not seen at the Oasis. Here, *Babalas* introduces a contemporary component to the nostalgic presence of Boet, Swaer and Mogae. Neef is the connection that facilitates the Kalahari Three’s shift into the (specifically Mia’s) corporate world. Mia is concerned to hear that Boet is in therapy and that he has, by his friends’ descriptions, “lost his marbles”. Boet is disappointed in his romantic failure with an unseen woman named Betty, and also in the somewhat stagnant relationship he has with his friends. Here Ian Roberts is acting against type and referencing his own faded irresistibility for women. Boet’s therapy session presents the film’s introduction to Hannes Muller as the psychologist, Dr Koeglenberg. Muller performs many characters throughout the film, inadvertently emphasising the “limited budget” of the film and further making visible the film’s emphasis – thematically as well as on its own production – on finances. Koeglenberg invites Mia to join the therapy session (which is notable in the doctor’s failure to obtain Boet’s informed consent in this regard). He presents Boet with technology from World War Two that can make thoughts visible and allow the psychologist to explore Boet’s subconscious. Wearing this hat-like technology, Boet gets an erection; Koeglenberg puts his hat on the aroused member to hide it from Mia’s view, but not after she and the audience are allowed to witness Boet’s male potency. Though he is still visibly virile, Boet’s age and fragility are emphasised by the number of pills that Koeglenberg prescribes.

Muller next appears as a funeral home employee, another Koeglenberg family member, who Mia passes on her way from the psychologist’s office to the Mayor’s office. Immediately after, Muller appears once more as the Mayor of Hotazhel, which is the name of the town where the Kalahari Three reside. Mia waits a long time to see the Mayor, but the reason for the delay is unclear – why would the film do this? Indeed, this scene (although it is not the only one) foregrounds this film’s inclusion of *tempts mort*, where the viewer observes time nearly devoid of action (Elsaesser

1986:139). The viewer becomes so aware of the film's passage of time that time itself attains a metatextual meaning.

The Mayor's office assistant Rageltjie (a coloured female) offers them tea and biscuits; she carries the tea cups on her breasts. Like Mia, Rageltjie is an object in service of corporate interest, and the exploitation of her coloured body has little bearing on the film's sense of self-awareness. To reiterate: *Babalas* is aware of its own political economy, but visibly unaware of its female bodies, and its use of and even policing of these bodies.

The mayor describes himself as a "tenderpreneur", using the language of contemporary South African politics which has gained a rather dubious currency in the climate of corruption and flailing democracy. He invites her to join a meeting in the Council Chamber that evening at 19:30. The Mayor had called "an urgent and special meeting" for all Hotazel inhabitants. Other council members include the two other Muller males, the funeral home employee and the psychologist. This scene provides the film with the opportunity to showcase all three Mullers simultaneously in the same shot. The Mayor, Jaap, introduces Mia, who enters the venue from the back in a tight pink dress in slow motion and against a backdrop of white mist. Boet rises first to meet her. Mia explains that the DTI had instructed Outrage Events to put together a show of "all the famous ads in the history of the new South Africa" to be held at Emperor's Palace (it is not clear why a live show would celebrate an imagistic legacy). The meeting heats up and as Boet and Swaer start to vehemently disagree with one another, Mia leaves.

The next morning, Theo phones solely to remind Mia "to keep down the costs". At the end of the call, Mia notices Boet and Swaer, now inexplicably reconciled, walking down the road towards her; while Mogae has no interest in this project, Boet and Swaer have agreed to participate. Instead of flying to JHB, they will drive there in a minibus driven by Neef. There is much emphasis on the exact costs of renting the minibus and how the characters are exploited by Koeglenberg. The men quickly talk about farting when Boet is cautioned to rather not light a cigarette, immediately making anality a marker of masculine camaraderie the first time the men are together in the same space and frame. They are stopped by a stuttering traffic

policeman, Klaas (Hannes Muller). This scene has no narrative purpose and serves to grind the narrative to a halt. Stopping for a drink on the road, the film now offers a montage of the characters drinking, then driving, then drinking some more, and stopping to drink again. Upon locating yet another watering hole, Boet starts singing the former national anthem, thereby employing a contentious marker of Afrikaans identity from before 1994.<sup>111</sup>

The travellers experience car trouble. While Swaer diagnoses the problem, Neef grills some meat on a portable braai. Here, *Babalas* employs the same masculinised motif from Esterhuizen's films, where braaiing is part and parcel of Afrikaans white masculinity. Since the travellers cannot fix their transport themselves, the minibus is towed to Vanzylsrus. Theo phones again and advises Mia "to think like them", to be one step ahead of the men. The men are watching what sounds like soft porn (but turns out to be weight lifting) on the TV while Neef helps himself to Boet's libido treatment, actually adding it to Swaer's drink. At the bar, the men run up a bill of R798 again emphasising money and expenditure. The barman now announces a R2000 cash prize for the pole-dancing competition. Mia refuses; Swaer goes first.

The men chant Mia's name while she's on the phone with Theo. Neef takes the phone and hangs up on Theo, who is immediately frustrated with and angry at himself and says: "Theo thinks with the thing between his legs!", suggesting that his trust in his manhood has failed him (and possibly not for the first time). Inexplicably, Mia downs a shot, and says: "watch and learn, boys", thereby cueing a pole dance sequence. The pole-dancing sequence, essentially a striptease, can be read as a waylaying of castration anxiety, which allows a specific male reaction (in Swaer's case, a raging erection) to an image of ravenous female sexuality: "[t]he naked thigh and, metonymically, the entire [female] body has become a *phallic effigy* ... a fetishistic object to be contemplated and manipulated, deprived of all its menace" (emphasis in original) (Baudrillard 1993:102). Boet then fantasises about seeing Mia in a leopard print bikini, while Neef sees her in a pink wig and leather outfit and

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<sup>111</sup> Afrikaans singer-songwriter and part-time conservative political pundit Steve Hofmeyr performed *Die Stem* in front of an audience of approximately 40 000 people at the 2014 Innibos Arts Festival, thereby inviting the ire of politically progressive minds across the racial and cultural spectrum. The Netwerk24 news archive ([www.netwerk24.com](http://www.netwerk24.com)) carries numerous threads pertaining to the incident and its political fallout, including Hofmeyr's deliberate exclusion from various traditionally Afrikaans arts festivals and sponsors who did not want any association with the performer.

Swaer sees her in a blonde wig reminiscent of the drag queen seen in an earlier Castrol advertisement. In all these imagined iterations, Mia embodies the political economy of the objectified female body by way of her wearing items similar to “[b]ody hugging’ tights, girdles, stockings, gloves, dresses and clothes, not to mention sun-tans: the *leitmotiv* of the ‘second skin’ and the transparent pellicle always come to vitrify the body” (Baudrillard 1993:105). The female body, Mia’s body, is transformed and ossified by her clothing and attire; the visual emphasis in the scene is on her skin, both covered and naked.

The coloured female here is the object of all three white male fantasies: a bikini-clad *Barbarella*-type tease; a dominatrix; and a masculinised female suggestive of transgenderism. Swaer’s drag fantasy is explicitly neutralised later in the film when he has a one-night stand with a black female, thereby allaying any queer possibilities that might complicate or add nuance to his relationship with Boet

Immediately after the pole-dancing fantasy sequence, Swaer is in the shower and verbally articulates his surprise at the potency of his erection, an erection of such power that it lands him in medical care. Mia meets up with the men in a clinic and unknowingly positions herself behind an x-ray machine that shows her in her underwear. The cost to address the erection is R3500, which includes a “huge discount” the doctor gives Mia in appreciation of her scantily clad x-ray body. They start travelling again and soon end up right where they started: the Kalahari Oasis. In sheer frustration Mia rips up their map and uses the GPS to navigate; she also drives the minibus for the first time. Seconds later, the film takes them to Emperor’s Palace. Here, the Kalahari Three fish in the pond and get in trouble with security when they go swimming in the fountain. That evening, the men join Mia at the hotel restaurant. As they toast to each other, Mia mentions that “the company pays for everything”. Suddenly Swaer places a koi on the dinner table for dinner; Mia is incensed at Swaer’s carelessness since the fish is worth R7500.

The next morning, before an important business breakfast, Swaer and Neef have disappeared after a night of heavy partying; this is where the film’s attempts at *Hangover*-esque comedy begins (and quickly ends). Boet goes to collect the subconscious-image-actualiser but the kombi is missing. As Mia and Boet exit the

hotel, Neef arrives with the kombi, sans Swaer. The mind-reading machine is placed on Neef's head, revealing that he has a genius IQ of 135. In his memories, Neef expresses his dismay at how Boet treats him. In the context of the memories and fantasies, Neef gets a chance to rap/perform again. When Theo phones again, Boet takes the phone and tells him off.

Mia, Boet and Neef locate Swaer in a nearby township. The kombi is stolen and the four set off after it. Swaer uses a song to recount the previous day's events. Before long, all the taxi customers are singing Swaer's song, "Thandi". Eventually, the Kalahari Three arrive at Ontbytsake where Boet and Swaer relive the success of their Castrol advertisement series. Swaer even makes the film's point explicit once more: "we became *volksbesit*". Theo threatens to fire Mia, who in turns directs her disappointment to the Kalahari Three, especially Boet, who "cannot accommodate anyone other than himself in his life". Neef phones his mom, raps, then phones Mia, hanging up with the strange line, "See you on the other side". Neef is on top of the Palace, seemingly suicidal. On the phone again with Mia, Neef laments just "never being good enough", reiterating his failure – as a man? As a friend? – in the eyes of the group's dominant male, Boet. Neef recites lyrics from "Cooler as Ekke", Parow's first popular song about class pretence. Boet goes to the roof to reconcile with Neef but instead pushes them both off of the edge; after Neef and Boet hit the pool, they are all newly committed to the show. The film cuts from their rehearsal to the big event itself, with Neef rapping. Mia tells Theo to shove his promises and compliments and quits her job.

One month later, the Kalahari Three are back at the Oasis, drinking and relaxing. The Muller-characters all join them for a drink. Mia drops in and offers Boet the worldwide position of "Mr Land Rover". In the association with the all-terrain vehicle, Boet is explicitly positioned as dominant male and the standard against which masculinity (including Neef's) is measured in the film.

*Babalas* itself exemplifies the neoliberal commodity market in post-apartheid Afrikaans filmmaking that as a film uses emotional intensities in its exploitation and manipulation of viewers (Elsaesser 1976:172). In Elsaesserian fashion, we can ask why *Babalas* makes economic success (even austerity) such a key theme in its

fantasy of the revival of the Kalahari Three. Whereas Esterhuizen's vulgar cinema simultaneously exploited and indulged the notion of righteous privilege in male (perceptions of) failure, *Babalas* creates a framework of financial austerity in which only masculinity is allowed excess: visible and verbal declarations of potency via erections, male fantasies of the disempowered coloured female, and a revitalised cultural visibility. This latter notion of cultural visibility indicates that the Kalahari Three have re-entered the cultural consciousness of the audience-as-consumer both in and outside of the film, where the viewing subject's awareness of the Kalahari Oasis characters has been reinforced. Significantly, the characters are now located around notions of masculinity and (tentative sexual-masculine) failure: instead of the Kalahari Three appearing in advertisements to market Castrol Oil, *Babalas* markets the Kalahari Three themselves. As Elsaesser (1976:173) explained 37 years earlier, popular culture must remain profitable. Within the post-Fordist political economy of contemporary Afrikaans cinema, imitation and sameness offer financial persistence by way of a familiar cinematic experience economy based on character-centred causality, problem-solving routines, and deadline plot structures that all but guarantee narrative accessibility and intelligibility. Absent from the Afrikaans comedies discussed above is the burden of history; instead, the films, especially Esterhuizen's films, offer only an ill-informed malaise of the present wherein characters' burdens are related to the loss of righteous privilege and in the case of *Babalas* to the loss of cultural legibility and relevance.

Within a broader framework of vulgar Afrikaans comedy cinema and in a manner similar to Esterhuizen's films, *Babalas* offers constant contradictory tensions between its own aims at eroticism and arousal, and fascist sensual restriction. In this regard, Esterhuizen and Hamman's emphasis on the insipid proves most significant. The insipid denotes that which is devoid of pleasure by virtue of its lack of stimulation and innovation and its appeal to sameness and familiarity (Elsaesser 2001b:5). While the insipid once had an air of novelty and sensation, the absence of such sensation now characterises the insipid (ibid). The insipid in these films speak to notions of failure within the context of the ordinary, the limited, the middle classes; not the productive failure of parapractic performance, but the many failures of white masculinity against a backdrop of a changed socio-cultural and political landscape as demonstrated across the selected films.



Esterhuizen's legacy as a pioneer of cinematic sexuality and scatology within a framework of vulgarity informed the production of other popular Afrikaans teen comedies, primarily the Film Factory's *Bakgat!* trilogy. These comedies excel at neutralising homosexual tensions. The male antagonist (played by Althus Theart) is constantly framed as hypermasculine, yet at certain intervals the films suggest, for purposes of comic relief, that he may be homosexual. His possible homosexuality is framed as his weakness. The *Bakgat!* films are so loaded with homosexual tensions that the trilogy comes to a rather uninspired and abrupt yet ideologically logical end: after three films, the main romantic couple, Wimpie and Katryn, finally get married. Lest there be any doubt, this ending neutralises any and all remaining sexual ambivalences the films may have suggested at any stage by celebrating heteronormativity.<sup>112</sup>

Esterhuizen's own *Molly & Wors: Die Moewie* (2013) is the work of a vulgar auteur, featuring a visible erection (again witnessed by the only maternal figure in the film); a trip to a strip club; female stereotypes obsessed with shoes; the presence of *Stoute Boudjies*'s Hardus Vogel.<sup>113</sup> As Steinmair (2014:8) describes it, Afrikaans speaking audiences prefer plots that develop around misunderstandings, offering a number of pranks and farts along the way, as is the case with Esterhuizen's *Mollie & Wors*. Esterhuizen calls the film his best yet, the narrative and artistic culmination of a television series that ran for 78 episodes on kykNet (2014:9). Some critics were unkind; Leon van Nierop (2014:[sp]) referred to the film as "filmed television", pointing to its narrative and aesthetic limitations, as well as some racist overtones. The film contains an opening salvo of black polygamy jokes, and articulations of white anxiety such as one character's statement that white people cannot expect

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<sup>112</sup> The minister who oversees the wedding ceremony is played by none other than Afrikaans film critic and pulp author Leon van Nierop. Here, as the *dominee* (minister), Van Nierop gives his blessing not only explicitly to the marriage of Wimpie and Katryn, but implicitly to the system of needs the trilogy represents. Van Nierop, assuming a near papal position over cinematic fiction and signification, thus endorses the motifs, themes and representations in the series of films.

<sup>113</sup> Besides the *Bakgat!* films, Esterhuizen's films configure another descendent in a feature film starring a popular Afrikaans singer. The juvenile and simple-minded spirit of Poena lives on in Robbie Wessels, who headlines the cast of *100m Leeuloop* (*100m Lion Sprint*). Ostensibly a low-budget vanity project propelled by Wessels' persona, the film turns out to be surprisingly self-conscious of its artifice and contains numerous satirical moments where Wessels ridicules Afrikaans entertainment celebrities.

much from the South African judicial system. An interesting thematic addition is the foregrounding of industrial modernisation v manual labour, as indicated by Wors' visit to a state-of-the-art battery factory in the Netherlands. This thematic inclusion – the threat of modernisation to 'noble' labour – is echoed in the *Volkstaat film*, a cinematic formation that exemplifies Afrikaner siege culture.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE VOLKSTAAT FILM

### 5.1 Chapter introduction

As reiterated in Chapters One and Three, post-transitional societies such as South Africa should be cognisant of how many new democracies present “economic hardship, uncertainty about the future and a rising level of violence in society” (Volltmer 2013:109), issues that culture and media address. Vattimo and Zabalala (2011:7) offer a compelling case to consider how major crises to have hit the United States have ironically (and devastatingly) lead to “an *intensification of the politics* that created these events in the first place” (emphasis added). As discussed in Chapter Three, Afrikaans cinema and its stakeholders have perpetuated the industrial and symbolic systems that had originally lead to Afrikaans language cinema’s complicity (with a few notable exceptions, as explained in Chapter Three) in a system of problematic media representations of race and class, a cinema that for most part was a politically dubious dominant cinema.

Public discourse about the way in which contemporary Afrikaans cinema addressed race, for instance, or whether Afrikaans cinema is interested at all in addressing the status of whiteness in a socially dynamic South Africa, is limited. In a letter to *Beeld* (Steyn 2014:[sp]), a member of the public complains about the “crude language” in the Afrikaans wedding comedy *Konfetti* (Bhyat, 2014). This letter is metonymic of the theme of the public discussions of Afrikaans films: audience members complain not about contentious content or representation, but that the films are not what is referred to as “skoon vermaak” (clean entertainment), or, technically, *verstrooiingsvermaak*. Martin Botha (2014) suggests the prevalence of *verstrooiingsvermaak*, a form of light entertainment that does not stray from mainstream established formulas for storytelling and seem oblivious to the socio-political issues of import of the past and present. This Afrikaans *verstrooiingsvermaak* is contrasted to the post-apartheid emergence of a South African cinema of giving voice to the marginalised. It is within the genre and other confines of this *verstrooiingsvermaak* that a sense of cultural exceptionalism becomes established. At the intersection of *verstrooiingsvermaak* and exceptionalism,

accountability in the sense discussed above is conspicuously absent from contemporary Afrikaans language cinema.

## 5.2 Forms of *verstrooiingsvermaak*

As this chapter will demonstrate, the majority of films that qualifies for this particular discussion offer audiences narratives of Afrikaans white male self-actualisation. These narratives offer such actualisation in specific spaces that solidify exceptionalism. In addition, themes of conservatism and a resistance to technology (where technology is framed as a threatening and dehumanising force) persist in a pronounced manner in these films. As first discussed in Chapters One and Two, the policies and practices of South African democracy are under constant scrutiny [see Mattes (2002) for a discussion of democratic failings eight years after the first democratic elections, or Pumla Gqola's ([sa]:6-7) criticism of the "proudly South African" campaign]. Cuthbertson (2008:299) names "unbridled crime" and "police complicity" in criminal activities as indicative of a national shift from the celebration of democracy to censure. Whereas crime may be a central plot and thematic element in South African films such as the action thriller *iNumber Number* (Marsh, 2013) and the gang drama *Four Corners* (Gabriel, 2014), contemporary Afrikaans cinema characteristically eschews the issue altogether, or, as *Stilte* (Roodt, 2012) does, utilises it as a minor plot point in narratives of Afrikaans white male actualisation.

This chapter explores the visual ways in which a cross-section of Afrikaans films utilise space and landscape in a perpetuation of narratives of white male actualisation, thereby negating a sense of (political) accountability within the context of *verstrooiingsvermaak* and exceptionalism. Space "exists in *socially constructed and practised forms*, intricately intertwined with socio-political relations of power, meaning and ideology" (emphasis in original) (Hook 2014:28). In a South African context, space is explicitly politicised. During apartheid, the Group Areas Act and the Promotion of Bantu Self-Governance Act impacted severely on South African socio-political contexts. As a result of these and other acts, South African history and identity are marked by contested spatial imaginations (Milton 2011:247). The spatial, then, is intertwined with the discursive (Dahlgren 2013:536). It is within such

contested and contestable spaces that Afrikaans language cinema locates its narratives of white male actualisation.

This chapter description suggests that white male actualisation occurs in the absence of similar positive gendered or raced character trajectories.<sup>114</sup> Siyanda Ndlovu argues that the notion 'race' should be used "‘under erasure’. We should think of race as a word crossed out in a textbook. Although the word is negated though the act of crossing it out, it remains legible" (Jones & Dlamini 2013:4). Even in these Afrikaans feature films, race remains present – it cannot be wholly erased or, worse, rectified in some politically correct manner. The cross-section of films referred to in this chapter will demonstrate how, collectively, many Afrikaans feature films constitute a series of *volkstaat* ("the people's land"; "land of the white Afrikaans speaking, possibly Afrikaner *volk*") films. Afrikaans political philosopher JJ Degenaar (1983:9) explains that *volk* describes "the specific lifestyle of a group of people ... their descent, past, tradition, customs, language, religion, social organisation, and political ideals". A key component of the constitution of the *volk* is the "experience of continuity based on common heritage of a land, ancestry..." (1983:46). These constitutive components – tradition, customs, language, heritage – determine the shape and content of the *Volkstaat film*. As such, this type of film constructs an exclusive minority ethnic culture, which emphasises a shared sense of identity (and where identity is fixed and unchallenged) in a community in which meaning is ascribed to events in a shared or communal manner (Degenaar 2008:293).

I will demonstrate how *Prêville* represents the intensification of *volkstaat* motifs to an ideological extreme, thereby demonstrating cinematically what Vattimo and Zabalala (2011) discuss politically. My conceptualisation of the *Volkstaat film* is partially derived from Keyan Tomaselli's (2006) work on the Eden film. As I will demonstrate, the *Volkstaat film* emphasises an exaggerated tension between urban and rural spaces that evokes comparisons to Afrikaans filmmaking from the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the work of Hans Rompel (1942).

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<sup>114</sup> Afrikaans films that offer a narrative of female actualization include the Karin Zoid feature *Susanna van Biljon* (Cawood, 2010) and numerous youth literature adaptations such as *Lien se Lankstaan Skoene* (Odendaal, 2013) and *Die Ongelooflike Avonture van Hanna Hoekom* (Van den Berg, 2010).

In addition, *Volkstaat* films perpetuate a series of intersections between race, space and place in which white Afrikaans speaking male characters enjoy a position of narrative privilege that extends to other forms of privilege as well. Krog (2013:77) argues that Afrikaners developed their own exclusionary mythology, especially where suffering was concerned. The idea of exclusion signifies that inclusion of a select group of individuals within the parameters of a cultural narrative, and within a certain community. Given how community is not simply a facilitator of social change, but often a barrier to it (Harvey 2000:170), Zygmunt Bauman frames the creation of narratives of exclusion in the following manner: “the nation created an ‘ethnic category’ to legitimise its own existence by marking the terms of exclusion and thus making the nation the preferable category of identity” (Mills 2006:373). Nation, in South African historiography, is bound to the construction of the Afrikaner as conqueror of land and land-ownership.

Historically, Africa has provided a visually appealing and comfortably othered “context for narratives of heroic ascendancy over self” as in American *auteur* John Huston’s *African Queen* (1951), while later American-European productions set in and about an appreciative retrospection on colonial life as seen in *Out of Africa* (Pollack, 1985) (Eltringham 2013:2). Such constructions have historically failed to explicate the fate of indigenous black inhabitants in South Africa, who were often deprived of their land by systems of control and power put in place by white colonial hegemonies (British or Dutch). Indeed, Hannah Arendt’s explanation of how racism developed “began with a discussion of South Africa, where the Boer settlers at the Cape were the original architects of a ruthless and practical racism that would supply new social and political rules for colonial organization elsewhere” (Gilroy 2006:17).<sup>115</sup>

This notion of cultural-ethnic exclusionism, which necessitates certain systemic processes, constitutes a form of exceptionalism. Mari (2012:280) notes that many scholars, such as Mahmood Mamdani and Sarah Nuttall, have foregrounded South African exceptionalism in “enforcing the colonial aspects of [apartheid] ideology”. Such cultural-ethnic exceptionalism is related to the status of whiteness as a minority

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<sup>115</sup> Gilroy (2006:25) has little patience for scholars such as Samuel Huntington, whose “inclusion of Apartheid [sic] South Africa on his 1960 map of the free world reveals the limits of his understanding with regard to the human resources at its disposal”.

status in South Africa. Minority group members regularly question “whether they are genuinely included in the official political definition of an authentic African, when popular perceptions emphasise cultural African tradition” (Moodley & Adam 2000:55). Narratives of exclusion, similar to exceptionalism, serve as an ideological barrier against perceived criticism on one’s culture and ethnicity. Part of this exclusionism’s problematic dynamic relates to how a group’s cultural patrimony fails to critically engage with the socio-material realities of the past and present (see Chapter Three). As Moodley and Adam (2000:53) suggest, “[h]ow to deal with a divisive past is considered by some to be a test and opportunity for unifying nation-building while others view the very exercise as deepening old cleavages”. Insofar as contemporary Afrikaans language cinema perpetuates the intensification of specific systems and structures within the film industry and the content of the industry’s outputs, its ostensible and disingenuous pursuit of rainbowism (part of the mythology of nation-building), it succeeds rather in foregrounding notions of socio-ethnic and political difference and exclusion.

The films discussed in this chapter, primarily *Prêville*, address not interrogating South Africa’s divisive past, but rather sustain certain cultural constructs, thereby continuing (or recreating) “old cleavages” by creating cinematic spaces of cultural-ethnic inclusion and, by implication, exclusion. As Trudeau (2006:423) explains, “[b]elonging is central to understanding the social control of space ... The politics of belonging thus creates boundaries that are at once social and spatial”. This chapter uses notions of boundaries and borders to interrogate the use of space in the *Volkstaat* film. In the context of spatial fortification and enclosure, Harrow (2007:118) introduces Žižek’s notion of the wall of separation: once individuals “wall in a given space’, it appears more spacious than would seem to be possible to the outsider.” Here, Harrow (2007:118) cites Žižek directly: “this disproportion, the surplus of inside in relation to outside, is a necessarily structural effect of the very separation of the two: it can only be abolished by demolishing the barrier and letting the outside swallow the inside (1991, 20)”. This enclosed space is a space of Otherness (Harrow 2007:118). In this sense, multicultural Afrikaans cinema’s attempts at cultural and racial inclusivity are obscene.

Such borders, boundaries or cultural-ethnic walls of separation can be read as a response to the “[p]ostimperial melancholia” (Gilroy 2006:109) and “cultural disorientation” (2006:125) that followed the fall of apartheid in South Africa. The former is associated with what Patrick Wright calls a morbidity of heritage (Gilroy 2006:109), while the latter “accompanies the collapse of collapse of imperial certainties into postcolonial nihilism” (Gilroy 2006:125). Melancholia and disorientation are negative processes that suggest a coming-to-terms with a traumatic event. Considering the films I discuss below, a misguided response to these processes constitute an evident persistence in rainbowism. Rainbowism is an ideology to express both “that South Africanness cannot assume a single standard ... and ... to pursue a socio-political environment in which the interests and identities of all are said to be of equal concern at the level of government and civil society” (Van Wyk 2004:91).

Van Wyk (2004:93) laments that this rainbow metaphor foregrounds race only, in the absence of class and gender, for instance. In the end, rainbowism “ventures into the ceaseless positions of the no-self which are effected through the evacuation of naming and making meaning of ourselves and others” (2004:110). Indeed, Moodley and Adam (2000:51) suggest that as the ‘rainbow nation’ emerged, race supposedly obtained an air of irrelevance in the public realm, where “the core notions of “nation-building, non-racialism and reconciliation were to express the consensual alternative to the previously imposed separation and interracial antagonisms”. The “romanticized ‘rainbowism’ of merging colours is contradicted by the reality of heightened ethno racial consciousness ... South Africa is still a deeply divided society in which racialized competition is likely to increase” (2000:54). Race remains a key marker in cultural activity in South Africa, where rainbowism has been dismantled as an impossible ideology of racial and cultural integration and co-existence (yet films such as *Prêville* demonstrate a paradoxical and socio-politically incongruent insistence on rainbowist representation).

The rainbowism evident in a feature film such as *Prêville* can be linked to notions of Lacanian fantasy. Drawing on Žižek, who in turn draws on Lacanian understandings of fantasy, Hook (2014:67) explains that there are two levels of fantasy. The first level of fantasy is related to a utopian imaginary that negates any threat to



wholeness (such as castration). The second level of fantasy offers a disturbing scene of this threat, of castration specifically, that brings to an abrupt halt an enjoyment of wholeness (2014:67). Read against this post-Lacanian understanding of fantasy, *Prêville*'s rainbowism operates as the first level of fantasy, creating and sustaining an idea of post-racial wholeness and enjoyment, while not once allowing for the second, disruptive level of fantasy to manifest. *Prêville* is the nadir of Afrikaans language cinema's social fantasy: "[e]lided, disavowed, and thus secured: this is the very condition of social fantasy: never openly declared, yet for that very reason, a constant cultural presence" (Hook 2014:72).

Afrikaner exceptionalism, here related to films made in the Afrikaans language, unironically perpetuate rainbowism, as I will show. Exceptionalism creates a space of security and belonging for a social group at the cost of meaningful interaction with other groups; the persisting I-Other dichotomy. As JJ Degenaar (Kruger 1997:194) explained shortly after South Africa's democratic turn, a new South Africa explicitly implies and necessitates a new attitude since real socio-political change is first and foremost abstract, and holds no room for exceptionalism. South Africa was, after all, a country "in dire need of a *liberating idiom*" (emphasis added) (Degenaar 1994:25). The inability to develop such an attitude signifies a lack of political maturation. Political maturation meant, in Degenaar's (1980:8) view, accepting the demise of a unifying national idiom, and instead embracing a pluralistic idiom to shape social interaction and collaboration. Pluralism, says Degenaar (1980:109-110), can be defined as a political philosophy that positions the individual within a plurality of groups. The Afrikaner or Afrikaans speaking individual does not exist in isolation, away from these groups.

The word "plural", as Degenaar (1980:110) uses it, indicates groups autonomy in the sense that the rules and regulations that guide behaviour for group members is prescribed by the group. Political maturation and plurality are the antithesis of Afrikaner siege culture, referring "to the Afrikaner's feeling of being threatened, and his fear of domination results in the continual withdrawal into a laager to protect his identity"; this self-imposed isolation results in a 'frontier mentality' and 'frontier fear' based on and feeding a fear of other (racial) groups (Degenaar 1983:51). The Afrikaner aimed to sustain a separate identity and remained wary of anyone

perceived as a threat to their identity (ibid), and it is this sense of isolation as exceptionalism that the *Volkstaat film* presents. In instances of siege culture, the Afrikaner opts purely for survival and not a more productive 'creative survival' that is guided by a process of self analysis (1983:35). As Ndeble (cited in Jones & Dlamini 2013:9) explains, "each of us, to various degrees, wants to hold onto some notion of purity that has not been tainted by the other. But, in fact, it's impossible to find such purity". However, the wall of separation remains intact, conceptually, in contemporary Afrikaans cinema. As Mangcu (2008:103) explains, "the politics of solidarity are just as strong in the white community as they are in the black community. The political vehicle or manifestation of the indifference is what the renowned African American political scientist Ron Walters describes as a conservative nationalism". This white conservative nationalism is "a form of reaction against what is perceived as a black attack on white entitlements" (Mangcu 2006:107). Exceptionalism knows only allies or enemies, and while exceptionalism may not always create these categories in explicit terms, its presence is often perceptible in the indifference to race and class that many contemporary Afrikaans films demonstrate.

While ethnic minorities are prone to cultural representation through prejudice and stereotypes in the media (Volltmer 2013:166), it would be problematic to assume that the minorities are not in some way responsible for their representation, as is the case in Afrikaans language cinema. Indeed, the idea of Afrikaans language cinema as a minority cinema can be misleading. In Chapter Three I explained how a minority can be defined "a social group which is in a numerically inferior position to others within a society" and is thus "susceptible to suffering at the hands of majority opinion," suggesting the possibility for social inferiority, marginalisation and voicelessness (Edgar & Sedgwick 2008:212).

In terms of Afrikaans language cinema as a minority cinema, it would be misguided to perceive Afrikaans language cinema as subsequently powerless and in the margins (see Chapters Two and Three). It is in maintaining a sober perspective on Afrikaans language cinema's socio-industrial position that we need to heed Nyamnjoh's (2011:19) warning that "[a]ttending to the interests of particular cultural groups as strategically essential entities risks contradicting the principles of liberal

democracy and its emphasis on civic citizenship and the autonomous individual". Specifically, Afrikaans language cinema should be careful to not "slip into meta-narratives that celebrate victimhood" (Nyamnjoh 2011:22). While a socio-politically conscious cinema can indeed interrogate notions of victimhood in a compelling and self-aware manner, Afrikaans *verstrooiingsvermaak* instead utilises victimhood as a plot device, not a theme, to further its narrative of white male actualisation (once again, *Stilte* is a telling case in point).

Recalling Chapter Three's discussion of the political economy of contemporary Afrikaans language cinema, "[a] surface veneer of competitive capitalism therefore depends on a deep substratum of coerced operations and collaborations to ensure a framework for the free market and open trade" (Harvey 2000:181) even as there seems to be multiple disparate forces and figures operating in Afrikaans language cinema. One should not underestimate the soft power, or cultural control, that Afrikaans language cinema still exerts in post-apartheid South Africa; in this light, its narratives of privilege. The soft power of Afrikaans cinema, sustained by specific industrial systems and processes, is conveyed in the visual language of Afrikaans cinema and its spatially-exclusive rainbowist narratives of white male actualisation that fail to interrogate either whiteness or masculinity, and instead often offer intensified versions of past narratives in the form of the *Volkstaat film*.

The visual style and motifs I identify in a cross-section of Afrikaans films as elements of the *Volkstaat film* suggests the presence of a specific chronotopic regime. Chronotopic regimes suggest the double presence of Bakhtin and Foucault. Chronotope means 'time-space'; as Ganser Puhlinger and Reindorf (2006:[sp]) explain, "the chronotope of a particular text thus functions as an ideological index, but can also be used to discuss a whole genre. In some chronotopes, mainly those of travel and uprooted modern life time takes precedence over space; in the more idyllic, pastoral chronotopes, space dominates time". Regime evokes the notion of scopic regime as developed by Christian Metz but also the idea that there is a set, dominant, structured visual language to a series of films. Chronotopic regime, for the purposes of the current study, refers to a structured way of representing South Africa through a series of repeated visual motifs that altogether undermine or completely negate the effects of apartheid by suggesting the pre-eminence of space over time

within a set of tensions, primarily the tension between urban and rural, city and country. For the purpose of this chapter, space refers not only to the geographical location or setting of an Afrikaans film, but also the way in which the spatial arrangements of elements in the film frame, or its visual proxemics, occurs. There is of course a third space, the space of exhibition and distribution, introduced in Chapter Three but beyond the scope of this current chapter.

### **5.3 Landscape, space and the *Volkstaat* film**

“Depictions of landscapes,” Harper and Rayner (2010:17) explain, “a complex combinations of found or chosen features, emphasize the incredible variety of possible interrelations that make up the world; cinematic landscapes ... rely on the frame to both suggest a reading and limit the range of interpretations”. Such cinematic landscapes, “while obviously part of a continuum, and equally composed of frames, can also be considered conduits to memories, and a form of time, that transcends the cinema itself” (2010:19). As D’Lugo (2010:119) explains about Spanish cinema and landscape,

[t]he evocation of rural landscapes were often juxtaposed in audiences’ minds against an opposing imagery, that of urban space and, consequently, modernity. Such a binarism was built upon a belief that local traditions, and by association the traditional community, were under siege by encroaching foreign culture and values, the latter often vaguely identified with European ideas, although expressing a more generalized pattern of xenophobia.

The idea of the “traditional community” is spatially constellated, and is very much dependent on spatial stasis and exclusivity. The cinematic construction of landscapes can be utilised in such contentious ways to suggest exclusion and exceptionalism that cultural and economic interests intersect. As Lefebvre (1976) remarked, capitalism has solidified its status as primary mode of production and consumption by occupying space and by producing space (Harvey 2000:31). *Prêville* is a supreme intensification of this idea in both a cinematic as well as non-cinematic context. Indeed, Trudeau (2006:436) argues that the notion of excluding undesirable elements is crucial to understanding landscapes.

In the context of early Soviet filmmaking, “[t]he ‘conquest’ of the vast territory ... was a clearly stated political aim. In this context, landscape assumed a new role: it was not something to be viewed, or admired, but something to be changed, and the task of revolutionary filmmakers was to echo this transformation” (Widdis 2010:77-78). Landscapes in cinema have a visible political status. Dissanayake (2010:191) offers the following explanation of landscape, and this explanation aligns perfectly with chronotopic uses of landscape:

Landscapes establish a sense of *time, place and mood*; they serve to punctuate the narrative and invest it with a more varied rhythm; they can intensify the pictoriality of films; they can enforce a sense of disjunction, an ironic juxtaposition; they can play on and manipulate our spatial consciousness; ... they can externalise inner dramas of characters; they act as visual analogies for complex psychologies of characters. (emphasis added)

Disjunction and juxtaposition often occur where city and rural spaces are involved in migratory character trajectories. A migratory character trajectory is the phrase I use to signify narratives of white male actualisation, insofar as such actualisation occurs outside of city limits either by individual agency or by force. Such character trajectories are part and parcel of the *Volkstaat film*, which privileges rural spaces as environments for the actualisation of Afrikaans white male potential. To reiterate: it is important for these characters to abandon the city space, even if only momentarily. In American film, “the city is often represented as dystopia or as a setting for crime and violence, while the rural environment is most often portrayed positively” (Kennedy, Kennedy & Kennedy 2010:283). Here, “small towns symbolize the virtues of the Jeffersonian agrarian dream” (2010:288), and in Afrikaans language cinema have become a gateway to the countryside as well, where the pastoral idyll of farm life persists.<sup>116</sup> With regard to the city-country opposition, Lefebvre (2003:143) offers the following:

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<sup>116</sup> This is not to say that cities are consistently conceived of as spaces of danger and risk. “In the early half of the nineteenth century, suburbs provided escape from the degraded physical and social conditions of the industrialized city of modernity – the perceived urban wilderness” (Kennedy, Kennedy & Kennedy 2010:289).

The countryside knows it is in the service of the city, and the city poisons nature; it devours it while recreating it in the imagination so that this illusion of activity can survive. Urban order contains and disguises an underlying disorder. The big city is nothing but vice, pollution, sickness (mental, moral, social). The alienation of the city embraces and perpetuates all forms of alienation.

Above, Lefebvre (2003) posits by now a familiar binary of positive rurality versus hostile urbanity. The notion of alienation is central to living in the city; the rural holds the promise of doing away with alienation, offering instead belonging and safe racial-cultural homogeneity.

In light of the above observations, I suggest that post-apartheid Afrikaans language cinema is best represented by this image from the film *Stilte* (2012), a religious drama by prolific director Darrell James Roodt.



Figure 1: Screen capture shot of Angelique Pretorius and Chris de Clerq in the *Stilte* (Roodt, 2012) trailer.

This image of the older, authoritative white male paired with the white female feeding a white horse can be read symptomatically as indicative of Afrikaans language cinema's sense of exclusion and privilege. In turn, this exclusion and privilege are related to the constellation of the *Volkstaat film*, an Afrikaans film type that is ideologically rooted in Afrikaans apartheid cinema. In its relation to the *Volkstaat film*, this image from *Stilte* suggests an obliviousness to the political realities that characterise contemporary South Africa. This image does not appear in the film at all. The image is used in the trailer of the film but is not included in the feature narrative. The absence of this image from the final film affirms its contentious presence: it is an image, I argue, left out of the final film not because it would not

serve the narrative or did not have a specific function, but because its political implication is assumed to be present enough in the film as it stands – as in other films – without the necessity of an image that constructs a white Eden, a sacred rural space to which only some individuals have access to, in such a literal fashion.

The contemporary Afrikaans Eden film, or the *Volkstaat film*, following on the Eden film of the 1960s and 1970s, sustains an urban-rural binary which creates additional binaries of danger and safety, destruction and healing, impairment and (white male) actualisation. This image above can be likened to a traumatic image in that it presents a semblance of what was lost (the rural idyll, where white man and nature cohabit in harmony). Such an image, to borrow from Hook (2014:58), can “[take] on a life of its own, precisely through the fantasmatic elaboration of what has been seen”. Such fantasmatic elaboration occurs in the social imaginary offered by *Stilte*, where the images that are present in the film – images of religious validation; male salvation; female subservience; the pastoral paradise – serve as ideological expansions of the above image in its absence.

Tomaselli (2006:143) recounts how Hans Rompel in the 1940s already “located the Afrikaner in an unspoiled rural setting, unthreatened by alien influences” where audiences are likewise informed of “the evils of the city” (2006:143). Indeed, Rompel’s ideas of what Afrikaner cinema form and content should look like was drawn from Soviet cinema and the Weimar Republic (2007:232; see Chapter Three). Interestingly, Rompel agreed with banning Soviet films from being screened in South Africa, fearing that local natives would not be able to carefully consider the values that Soviet cinema communicated (2007:232-233). It is here that Tomaselli and Eckhardt (2007:233) argue Rompel committed a major conceptual error: in ignoring the discursive base of Soviet cinema and by failing to engage the theory of thereof, Rompel did not see the relation between theory and practice and was “unaware of how dialectically derived film theory mediated ideological experiences in culturally specific ways through the principle of *montage*” (emphasis in original) (2007:233). Rompel drew on the German *Under the Spell of Films (Im Banne des Films, 1927)*, which conceived the film world in terms of a series of tensions between American, Russian and other national film industries (Tomaselli & Eckhardt 2007:231). From here, Rompel sees a system of total state control as preferable to Hollywood. The

Eden film that Rompel promoted implied that Afrikaners be represented as ethno-culturally pure and devoid of outside(r) influences that may have influenced Afrikaner filmmakers when they learned their craft from foreign filmmakers (Tomaselli & Eckhardt 2007:234).

RARO was in a position to develop filmmakers and film experimentation given the comparatively low production costs and the enthusiasm of such filmmakers towards alternative, innovative filmmaking (Tomaselli & Eckhardt 2007:235). VOBİ's four-tiered programme:

- While Rompel advocated silent cinema, VOBİ aimed to use sound and 'pure Afrikaans' to "teach the youth to trust their own language";
- "Films must be made on SA 'soil' reflecting Afrikaner morals, habits, history and life views which rest on a Christian foundation";
- Afrikaans language cinema should encourage a love and desire for indigenous literature and art, instructing Afrikaners to protect their heritage;
- Still in an instructing capacity, Afrikaans films must promote singularity: one culture, one language, shared ideals and aspirations (Tomaselli & Eckhardt 2007:238).

In short, "[w]here RARO was concerned with the pastoral, VOBİ with heroes and martyrs, KARFO's pragmatism aimed to redress the stereotypical image of Afrikaners created by RARO and others" (Tomaselli & Eckhardt 2007:238).<sup>117</sup> The *Volkstaat film* would emerge from the industrial and ideological intersections of these three organisations: RARO, VOBİ and KARFO. The Eden film stemmed from the myth of Eden, which suggests a state of natural environmental harmony which "offers an explanation of urban discontent and the hope of a remedy in return" (Tomaselli 2006:143). Indeed, the "recurring image of the 'evil city' is endemic to nearly all Afrikaans language cinema until the mid-1970s". These films tended to promote key values, rural values: "no sex, no violence, no cities" (2006:145). As audiences began to notice the dissonance between lived reality and the content of the Eden mythology (2006:144), later Afrikaans language cinema would acknowledge the "move to the city", even as a nostalgic desire for a return to the

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<sup>117</sup> KARFO: Churches' Afrikaans Film and Photographic Organisation.



farm persisted. Indeed, the farm remains a key space and site in contemporary Afrikaans language cinema. The farm, as Tomaselli (2006:145) explains, represents a timeless existence as well as a “cultural memory [that] represented the ‘traditions’ on which the Afrikaner ‘nation’ tried to maintain group cohesion” (2006:145), as “a guarantor for cultural integrity” (2006:149). The rural, the farm, the small town; all these spaces suggest a shift from the city to the countryside, specifically insofar as such a shift would benefit the white male protagonist of the film.

The town of Loxton in the Northern Cape has become a key site in numerous Afrikaans films. In *Die Laaste Tango* (Meyer, 2013) a policeman is sent to Loxton to heal after a traumatic case leaves him mentally scarred; in *Jakhalsdans* (Roodt, 2010) an Afrikaans singer played by real-life singer Theuns Jordaan relocates to Loxton in an attempt to find inspiration and fulfilment. Loxton has come to epitomise the small town – as inhabited by and as synonymous with a close-knit Afrikaans community – as a space where racially homogenous heterosexual coupling is affirmed; race, for what it is worth, is incidental, and black and coloured characters are relegated to characters types derogatorily described as “colourful” or “eccentric”.

This valorising of Afrikaans small town existence and demonisation of city life – providing a “Babylonian image of Johannesburg” (Tomaselli 2006:142) – contrasts with contemporary English-language South African films such as *Jozi* (Freimond, 2010), which celebrates the city of Johannesburg as an eclectic, dynamic space, and which portrays Johannesburg as a celebration of cosmopolitan diversity. As Fu and Murray (2007:280) explain, *Hijack Stories* (Schmitz, 2000) “straddles the great divide between the celebratory vision of ‘rainbow’ Johannesburg with its ‘Simunye’ [‘We are One’] pretensions, on the one hand, and the imagined urban nightmare of the lawless, miasmal city partitioned into fortified enclaves, ravaged by drugs and vice versa, and peopled by criminals and their intended victims, on the other”. Afrikaans language cinema emphasises only the dangers and pitfalls of city life; like much of American mainstream cinema, the city in Afrikaans language cinema “is often represented as dystopia or as a setting for crime and violence, while the rural environment is most often portrayed positively” (Kennedy, Kennedy & Kennedy 2010:283). Here, small towns symbolize an agrarian ideal (2010:288) away from the city’s perceived confines, and, significantly, away from the city’s multiracialism.

#### 5.4 Some Afrikaans films reconsidered

In Jaco Smit's *Pad Na Jou Hart* (2014), the protagonist, Basson, sets off on a road trip across South Africa from Johannesburg to Cape Town in order to fulfil his late father's last wishes. Basson is accompanied by Amory, whose struggles with ill health and the prospect of death serves only to further and inform Basson's character arc, which in the end offers him the realisation that the company he had inherited from his father would be better off retaining human labourers rather than replacing them with more cost effective machinery. "The Western 'road movie' is a narrative of personal development, expressed through the metaphor of a journey" (Widdis 2010:77), and it is Basson's journey – his migratory character trajectory – that is privileged. *Pad Na Jou Hart* has been described as "the first Afrikaans romantic adventure film", which is not only factually incorrect but also a cynical marketing statement. Female lead Donnalee Robert says that the film shows the South African landscape as a character that is symbolic of characters' developmental trajectories: from steely urban Sandton, to the *platteland*, to the bare Karoo (Sarie 2014).

Mynhard Kraak's *Vrou Soek Boer* (2014) follows a young woman who abandons success in the corporate world to pursue a new life (as well as an inheritance and a chance at romance) in a small South African town. In the end, she settles comfortably in the small town, its habits and rituals, and does not intend to return to the city. While the migratory character trajectory of the white male is far less pronounced here than in other Afrikaans films, the urban-rural binary is evident.

In Darrell James Roodt's *Die Laaste Tango* (2013), a detective (Louw Venter), traumatised by a recent case involving a serial killer, travels to the small town of Loxton to assist the local police there with minor cases. The detective's superiors repeat throughout the film that leaving the city would only benefit the detective's psychological well-being. In the end, a serial killer pursues the detective to Loxton, but the hero is able to finally defeat the antagonist and return to the city, now healed, and the past put to rest.

In 2013, Regardt van den Bergh's *Klein Karoo* offers a measure of social consciousness by including a plotline where the white female protagonist aims to improve the school buildings of a local community. The socio-historical reasons explaining why the school lacks basic resources and funds are not explored; instead, the heroine's efforts with the school are shown to reflect her character's sense of community engagement without exploring the mechanisms of privilege that allowed the character to develop in a specific way. Cynically, one wants to add that screenplays that include a community engagement element are more likely to receive funding than those that do not (see the NFVF funding recommendations). The film, like its title, works with evocations of the Karoo space and its innumerable romantic possibilities, framing various Karoo landmarks in spectacular ways. In addition, *Klein Karoo* also follows a migratory character trajectory, where the Afrikaans male's journey is privileged.

In *Stilte* (Roodt, 2012), a young female singer (Angelique Pretorius) loses her family in a brutal home invasion. She relocates to her uncle's farm, far away from any city or big town, for purposes of safety but also, predictably, to heal. She reluctantly befriends a local pastor (Andre Frauenstein) who helps her on her path towards addressing and overcoming her personal trauma. While ostensibly a narrative of healing in which the female protagonist actualises by initiating the process of healing, *Stilte* in fact gives narrative prominence to the male pastor, whose own undercooked crisis of faith provides the film's clearest narrative payoff.

In the above cases, the selected Afrikaans films

- privilege a migratory character trajectory (excluding, as stated, *Vrou Soek Boer*)
- offer a clear visual and thematic distinction between city spaces (negative) and rural spaces (positive)
- utilise South African spaces that have specific cultural connotations to white Afrikaans speaking individuals in which to set the narrative
- utilise the above South African spaces as spaces of consumption (of a mythologised, idyllic farm-life) and as ideological extensions of white patriarchal Afrikaans exclusion and exceptionalism.

These points above are micro-markers of cinematic political impotence markers that pertain to a specific film or type of film within the larger context of contemporary Afrikaans cinema. This exceptionalism betrays a certain cultural conservatism that does not so much fear the Other but ignores or *is almost indifferent to* the Other for most part. This indifference draws on a position of privileged conservatism. Conservatism describes “an attitude towards politics and society rather than a political ideology” (Edgar & Sedgwick 2008:61) and is often characterised by:

- “a negative attitude towards social change” (as reflected in these films’ resistance to technological innovation and spaces of change such as cities)
- privileging traditional beliefs and attitudes as superior to more contemporary ones (i.e. privileging the rural values of the Eden Film from the 1960s and 1970s)
- “generally bleak and pessimistic view of human nature”
- “the view that society is an interconnected structure of relationships constituting a community” (Edgar & Sedgwick 2008:61).

While points one and two are clearly visible in the above instances, points three and four might seem as if they do not fit the conservative framework of these films above. The *Volkstaat film* sustain points one and two, and to a certain extent point four (insofar as these films emphasise the desire and even need for a sense of community, social cohesion and belonging), but it presents the inverse of point three: instead of the “generally bleak and pessimistic view of human nature”, the *Volkstaat film* offers a very optimistic, generally positive view of human nature; Eden, in contemporary Afrikaans language cinema, has not failed, but instead became an *intensified image* located outside of the city space. This Eden is devoid of *jouissance* but driven by character’s sense of place and civic duty, shaped by an insipid and inconsequential (non-revolutionary) visual language.

The next section interrogates the Afrikaans musical *Prétville* to demonstrate how this film presents an intensification of the above points within the context of contemporary Afrikaans language cinema.

## 5.5 *Prêville*, space and exclusivity

*Prêville* is a plotless Afrikaans musical set in a mythically constructed small town called Prêville in 1950s South Africa. Crucially, the most prominent white male in this film is Steve Hofmeyr, whose image and presence connotes a series of political associations.<sup>118</sup>

What are the political implications of that same film's marketing campaign, where firstly an actual one-street town called Prêville was built first as a set and then as a space for and of public consumption close to Hartebeespoortdam, and secondly Afrikaans speaking individuals were targeted to identify themselves with signs reading "Prêville is here, Prêville is everywhere" in participating in the film's online media campaign? Canada, Australia, England: all those places are *Prêville* by virtue of the individuals inhabiting those spaces, and their claim to what those spaces are or can be. I consider these spaces, and the claims to these spaces, to form part of what Harvey (2000:15) calls the "historical-geographical materialism" of *Prêville*'s social imaginary. At this point I should reiterate that the social imaginary is a political conceptual space as much as the historical imaginary is political.

For David Harvey (2000:54), capitalism "builds and rebuilds a geography in its own image. It constructs a distinctive geographical landscape". With this in mind, if 'globalization' "signifies anything about our recent historical geography, it is most likely to be a new phase of exactly this same underlying process of the capitalist production of space" (2000:54). *Prêville*'s primary aim is then not to relay a plot, but to extend its own space as much as possible as a commodity interpellating consumers to "Koop My!" (Buy Me!), as the blue sticker indicates.

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<sup>118</sup> Hofmeyr, who started his career in the entertainment industry in the 1980s as an actor, would in the 1990s and beyond become an Afrikaans singer-songwriter and poet, as well as (in the view of some Afrikaans speaking South Africans), a political activist. Hofmeyr gained a measure of notoriety in 2013 when he and Sunette Bridges, the daughter of late Afrikaans singer Bles Bridges, hosted the Red October march which, according to numerous social critics, was a misguided attempt at foregrounding black-on-white violence. In some circles, Hofmeyr is considered as culturally conservative; at the 2014 Innibos Festival held in Nespruit, South Africa, Hofmeyr led an audience of approximately 40,000 festival attendees in singing the former South African national anthem, "Die Stem", resulting in a considerable media controversy and renewed debate in whether to include the Afrikaans portions of the national anthem which are derived from "Die Stem".

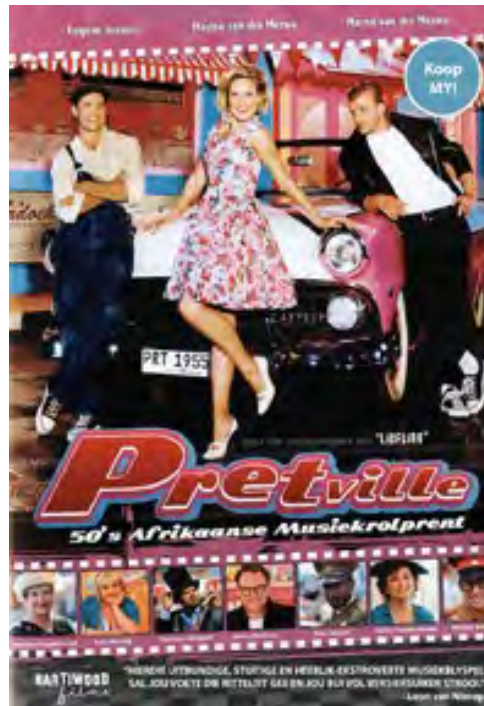


Figure 2: *Prêville* (Korsten, 2012) DVD cover.

In exploring a possible vocabulary of how Afrikaans films such as *Prêville* contribute to the social imaginary in its representation of space and race, the word “conviviality” seemed most appropriate. In the United Kingdom, Gilroy (2006:xi) uses the idea of conviviality to refer to “the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multicultural an ordinary feature of social life in Britain’s urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere”. Here, conviviality “does not describe the absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance. Instead, it suggests a different setting for their empty, interpersonal rituals, which, I suggest, have started to mean different things in the absence of any strong belief in absolute or integral races” (2006:xi). What Gilroy describes here is a socially meaningful form of conviviality.

However, I use the word in a negative manner, where the idea of conviviality suggests a lack of awareness of or interest in race or any critical issue whatsoever; in short, in this context conviviality suggests *indifference* in the space of *exclusivity* and *exceptionalism*. As in Gilroy’s definition, multicultural co-existence is evident in *Prêville*, but the dancing and recitation of romantic clichés and comic relief constitute precisely the “empty, interpersonal rituals” that Gilroy refers to.

*Prêville* is further problematised by its use of nostalgia, specifically given how the film provides a chronotope to make sense of a timespace that never historically-materially existed in South Africa in the 1950s. Instead, this chronotope is borrowed from American cultural memory to inform (and debilitate) Afrikaans cultural memory. *Prêville* aims to evoke nostalgia for an ideological construct within specific spatial parameters. As Cunningham (2013:544) explains, “[t]he instability of cultural maintenance and negotiation can lead, at one extreme, to being locked into a time warp with the fetishized homeland – as it once might have been but no longer is or can be; and, at the other, to assimilation to the dominant host culture and a loss of place in one’s originary culture”.<sup>119</sup> Such fetishisation occurs in tandem with nostalgia, as Jacob Dlamini’s book *Native Nostalgia* identified “nostalgia as a key if problematic element in the recreation of identities in a country recovering from historical trauma, yet still fraught with difficulty in the crisis-ridden present” (Wader 2013:2).

It is in this context of the crisis-ridden present that Mills (2006:371) refers to David Lowenthal’s idea that nostalgia and heritage often act “to compensate for a present malaise, for a lack of community and a need for identity in place”. The sense of malaise that Lowenthal refers to here correlates with the notions of cultural disorientation and post-imperial melancholia identified earlier. In this way, *Prêville* can be read as a cultural compensation in response to the questions and polemics surrounding white Afrikaans existence in post-apartheid South Africa. While such a response in itself is not by default problematic, selecting to compensate through nostalgia and indifference is the prime marker of *Prêville*’s political impotence. Nostalgia infuses the visual language of the film and fills its streets and other spaces. The *mise-en-scene*, such as the 1950s diner and the enhanced primary colours, point to a considerable amount of content and motifs recognisable from American mainstream cinema, and has a very limited relation (if any) to broad Afrikaans culture. As Baudrillard (1998:101) describes it, “[w]hat all the acculturated receive is not culture, but *cultural recycling*” (emphasis in original) (Baudrillard 1998:101). In a Jamesonian view, late capitalist societies experience the present as “a multi-faceted, globalized and commodified, a culturally eclectic, shifting reality which combines

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<sup>119</sup> Cunningham makes this statement in the context of his discussion about diasporic cultural expression.

what Jameson describes as a nostalgic and *conservative longing* for the past with the *erasure of the boundaries that separate past and present* (emphasis added) (Hope 2010:105).

A promotional piece in a local newspaper (Kormorant 2012:[sp]) position the ‘town’ of Prêville as a Hartebeespoort tourist attraction. Producer Paul Kruger is quoted as saying that “the entire town of Prêville is a suspended reality”. Kruger continues: “We didn’t know diners in South Africa back then (in the 1950s); had to import props from the United States or purchase it via eBay”. As associated with the film’s fantastical rendering of 1950s South Africa as a racially smooth kaleidoscope of equality, the attraction serves as a material expansion of capitalist space, and as a space of exclusionary conservatism. Insofar as *Prêville* recycles nostalgic music and images, it depends on the colours and textures of kitsch for its final success.<sup>120</sup> So powerful is the idea and object of kitsch that “[t]he kitsch object is commonly understood as one of that great army of ‘trashy’ objects” (Baudrillard 1998:109); it is an independent “cultural category” (1998:110) on its own. Baudrillard (1998:110) is at pains to clarify that kitsch does not simply serve an aesthetic function, but rather refers to a social dimension:

[The] proliferation of kitsch, which is produced by industrial reproduction and the vulgarisation at the level of objects of distinctive signs taken from all registers (the bygone, the ‘neo’, the exotic, the folksy, the futuristic) and from disordered excess of ‘ready-made’ signs, has its basis, like ‘mass culture’, in the *sociological* reality of the consumer society. (emphasis in original)

In Baudrillard’s view, kitsch offers at most an “*aesthetics of simulation*: it everywhere reproduces objects smaller or larger than life; ... it apes forms or combines them discordantly; *it repeats fashion* without having been part of the experience of fashion” (emphasis in original) (Baudrillard 1998:111). In its unsophisticated combination of nostalgia and kitsch, *Prêville* emerges as Afrikaans cinematic pastiche *per excellence*, a fantasy that meets both of Baudrillard’s elements of kitsch, above. As Harrow (2007:88) explains, Jameson sees pastiche as “the postmodern substitution for stylistic innovation, where ‘all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through

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<sup>120</sup> Daniel Dercksen (2012:[sp]) referred to the film as “Boere-kitsch” in his review on the BizCommunity website.



the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum' (1991, 18)" (Harrow 2007:88). *Prétville* is simultaneously postmodern and intensely conservative (an *intensification* of the conservatism of the 1960s and 1970s), an exclusive pastiche of race and class as (coded by) objects of kitsch. Jameson explains pastiche as

the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style [...] But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed [...] Pastiche is thus blank parody (Jameson cited in Wayne 2005:123).

Nealon (2012:x) differentiates between postmodernism and post-postmodernism by invoking the latter as indicative of a difference in intensity as much as a difference in kind. The *Volkstaat film* is postmodern in the sense that it represents an intensification of an amalgamation of familiar (older) and 'original' (recent) content, themes and motifs. As Nealon (2012:30) laments, "[w]hat do you get for the crowd that has already experienced everything? The answer: more of the same". The box-office success of the nostalgic kitsch musical *Liefling* set the ideological and industrial stage for *Prétville*.

In Baudrillard's (1998:34) understanding of the praxis of consumption, "[t]he consumer's relation to the real world, to politics, to history, to culture [...] is a relation of curiosity. On the same pattern, we can say that the dimension of consumption as we have defined it here is not one of knowledge of the world, not is it one of total ignorance: it is the dimension of misrecognition". *Prétville* is a *Volkstaat film* in that it establishes a romanticised (rainbowised) place as an actual location in the social imaginary. The film extols the virtues of small town life filtered through cultural misrecognition. In the mostly pastoral chronotope that is constituted in the film, *Prétville* privileges space over time; the film simultaneously portrays the town as a kitsch 1950s artefact and tourist attraction, and as a timeless space. It is the *space* that matters, one that includes a multiracial cast but in its use of cultural markers such as the figure of Steve Hofmeyr and its simplistic nostalgic longing reads as an excessively white and conservative space nonetheless. While *Prétville* minimises a key trait of the *Volkstaat film* - the migratory character trajectory of white male

actualisation – it sanctifies the parameters of the town as rural space and serves as an extension (ideologically and materially) of white Afrikaans exclusionism.

More recently, *Leading Lady* (2014), co-written and directed by Henk Pretorius (*Fanie Fourie's Lobola*) and produced by his production company Dark Matter Studios, is about a beautiful young teacher and aspiring actress, Jodi (Katie McGrath).<sup>121</sup> In an attempt to land the lead role of Afrikaans war heroine Johanna Willemse, the true story of one woman's heroic actions during the South African War, Jodi travels to Brandfort in South Africa to research what farming is like, and to learn the Afrikaans language. She ends up on the actual Willemse plaas occupied by Johanna's direct descendants.

From the outset, this formulaic romantic comedy-drama sets up an outsider-insider dichotomy where the female outsider figure, Jodi, is brought to self-insight through her interactions with the male insider figure, Kobus (Bok van Blerk). Instead of the *boeredogter* engaging with a foreigner, it is the *boerseun* – the male protagonist – in contemporary Afrikaans cinema who interacts with the foreign female and finally convinces her through his *boer* charm that she belongs on the farm with him.

*Leading Lady* calls attention to itself by way of its *mise-en-abyme*: it is a film about making a film while the characters perform in a concert to commemorate Johanna Willemse's sacrifice (giving her life for her love with an Englishman). The film is a white male actualisation narrative, wherein land, tradition and heritage stand central to Kobus' identity and his masculinity. Again, the absence of the father figure is foregrounded, and is it the death of the father that spurs the male protagonist to action. As in *Jakhalsdans* and *As Jy Sing*, this male protagonist is played an Afrikaans singer-songwriter, in this instance Bok van Blerk, who had gained infamy and celebrity in Afrikaans music for his nostalgic history ballads

Within the film's version of culturally homogenous and racially harmonious Brandfort, moments of race-based tension are clumsily handled: when all the furniture and

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<sup>121</sup>While *Leading Lady* is a more multilingual film than the other films selected for inclusion in this study, the film has enough of a cultural and linguistic Afrikaans component to warrant its brief mention here. Additionally, its writer and director, Henk Pretorius, is a key figure in the culture industry that envelopes much of South African and Afrikaans filmmaking.

appliances are stolen from Kobus' mother's farmhouse, the domestic worker Martha invites the family and guests to have dinner at her little house (outside, under a tree), where Japie proposes to Kobus' mother (Brumilda van Rensburg). The material simplicity of Martha's domestic space facilitates romance among the white characters. As such, *Leading Lady* features many romantic comedy clichés. Kobus is concerned about losing the farm, mostly due to a long-term drought ravaging the country. It only rains after Kobus and Jodi have sex, as if Jodi and Kobus had enacted a powerful pagan fertility ritual.

## 5.6 Conclusion

Considering the prominence of the *Volkstaat film's* exceptionalism and conservatism, I cannot really speak of a post-apartheid Afrikaans language cinema, but rather of a post-transitional Afrikaans language cinema. It is at best improper to refer to post-apartheid Afrikaans language cinema, and at worst immoral. The *Volkstaat film* perpetuates the mythology of rainbowism. Moodley and Adam (2000:51) explain that as the 'rainbow nation' emerged, race supposedly obtained an air of irrelevance in the public realm; yet, the "romanticized 'rainbowism' of merging colours is contradicted by the reality of heightened ethnoracial consciousness ... South Africa is still a deeply divided society in which racialized competition is likely to increase" (2000:54). In the post-transitional social context described above, contemporary Afrikaans language cinema's persistent constructions of spaces of exclusivity and exceptionalism in which white male actualisation is privileged, is deeply problematic.

Afrikaans musicals such as *Prétville* initiate a complete break with any socio-political reality by presenting a small South African town seemingly drawn from the realms of fantasy, positing a social and historical imaginary located in candy floss and excessive *verstrooiingsvermaak*. As such, these Afrikaans films qualify as *Volkstaat films* celebrating rural tranquillity and the return to the farm or country as part of a (male) migratory character trajectory that is thirty to forty years out of date. Instead of a concern with identity politics, the *Volkstaat film* sustains ideas of kitsch cultural homogeneity under the veneer of 'multiracial' or multicultural casting.

The *Volkstaat film* promotes a specific type of exclusivity by creating carefully inhabited and curated spaces that facilitate a cinematic *volkstaat* that accommodates Rompel's concerns about purity and conservatism. Given that a tangible geographical *volkstaat* is less than likely to exist, Afrikaans cinema allows its audience entry to an ideologically dubious cinematic *volkstaat* that exist in a self-contained diegesis with little relation to objective reality. In its insipidity, the *Volkstaat film* is far removed from possibilities of militant or liberal cinema, nor does it indicate a progressive attitude to South African race relations. It perpetuates a particular historical privilege where Afrikaans films such as *Prêville* promise the *laager* that escapes a specific type of Afrikaner or Afrikaans speaking person in real life. Reflecting on the Iranian revolution, Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski explained that "a whole nation cannot emigrate, so it undertakes a migration in time rather than space ... it goes back to a past that seems a lost paradise. The old acquires a new sense, a new and provocative meaning" (Wheen 2004:10). In the case of the *Volkstaat film*, it is the present, more so than the past, that holds the promise of paradise.

Space is central to the construction of this paradoxically exclusive multicultural paradise, given how geographical differences "are perpetually being reproduced, sustained, undermined, and reconfigured by political-economic and socio-ecological processes occurring in the present" (Harvey 2000:78). While the rural-urban binary is not unique to Afrikaans cinema during or post-apartheid, and is echoed in certain black centered films (see Paleker 2011:144), the formation of the *volkstaat* as contemporary Afrikaner *heimat* is distinctive, and where "the utopia of a harmonious society is a kind of fantasy which conceals the structural 'lack in the Other' (irreducible social antagonism)" (Žižek 2005:108).

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter offers a conclusion to the study of contemporary Afrikaans cinema as a cinema of political impotence. I provide an overview of Chapters One to Five, discuss the study's strengths and weaknesses, and offer suggestions for further research in which key conceptual and theoretical strands that emerge from the current study can be further developed.

This study is a response to a political impasse in Afrikaans cinema, and follows Holloway's (2005:2) in pursuing "[the] rejection of a world that we feel to be wrong", and to "strengthen negativity, to take the side of the fly in the web, to make the scream [of resistance] more strident" (2005:8). The idea of a political cinema should offer the acute possibility of a definite encounter between politics and cinema (Badiou 2013:145), where, in alignment with Holloway (2005), the political "is characterized by an extreme ... negativity; it is a *sui generis* moment of pure disruption fleetingly embodied in the demands of the poor and excluded" (Ranciere in McNay 2014:137).

Indeed, Ranciere "locates the truth of politics precisely in what politics is meant to conceal"; this discourse aims to locate conceptual and lived discrepancies, gaps, aporias, foregrounding the dissonance between appearance and reality (Hinderliter, Kaizen, Maimon, Mansoor & McCormick 2009:8). Although one's political aims for change may be frustrated, such frustration is nonetheless preferable to what Harvey (2000:196) refers to as "the degenerate utopianism of neoliberalism", a paralysing course that hinders expression and alterity. In fact, Žižek (1997:42) points out that politics in a postmodern context usually involves a tentative balance in the relationship between a particular ethnic entity or occurrence on a national level, and the global function of the market.

Throughout, this study has acknowledged and built upon what is summarised above in order to demonstrate the efficacy of an argument that positions contemporary Afrikaans cinema as politically impotent, as detailed in the section below.

## 6.2 Summary of the study

Chapter One introduced the study parameters and scope, as well as its conceptual and theoretical framework and research question: how can Afrikaans cinema (1994-2014) be positioned as a cinema of political impotence? Underlying this research question was the assumption that political impotence was indeed a pertinent part of contemporary Afrikaans cinema, and much of Chapter Three was devoted to explaining what is meant by political cinema, first and foremost, and in an Afrikaans cinematic historical context.

In Chapter One, I explained that I would provide micro-markers as well as macro-markers of political impotence in order to show how Afrikaans cinema is politically impotent with reference to specific films, as well as on a larger structural level pertaining to the political economy of contemporary Afrikaans cinema. I elaborated on my personal position as researcher in my response to contemporary Afrikaans cinema, and I addressed key issues a study of this nature anticipates, such as the problematics of discussing or assigning 'national cinema(s)' and the role of film in responding to political events and socio-political realities pertaining to apartheid and the post-apartheid, democratic period South Africa entered following the 1994 elections.

Chapter Two presented key notions and ideas related to my primary conceptual and theoretical framework: the scholarship of prolific film studies polymath Thomas Elsaesser. In my detailed discussion of Elsaesser's work, I provide a film studies vocabulary with which to engage and interrogate Afrikaans cinema as a cinema of political impotence. I offered an overview of his work in general, and highlighted his interest in *mise-en-scene*, *mise-en-abyme*, double occupancy and parapraxis. Much of Elsaesser's studies focus on New German Cinema, and I suggested here that Afrikaans cinema and (New) German Cinema were favourable and complementary comparative cinemas. The chapter additionally introduced the critical theory of Fredric Jameson as conceptual complement to Elsaesser. The exact links between these two figures would emerge in subsequent chapters, where relevant.

Having established a conceptual and theoretical film studies framework in Chapter Two, Chapter Three proceeded to offer a critical position of Hollywood as cultural behemoth, and of Hans Rompel's ideals of an indigenous, exclusive Afrikaans cinema. In addition, the chapter engaged the idea of forgetting the past, where forgetting is an act of erasure. In response to Adorno's "no poetry after Auschwitz" comment, Lang (1992:317) warns of the greater barbarisms of denial and forgetfulness. Such processes were seen to be set against the often debilitating backdrop of late capitalism and neoliberalism. As Lewis (2013:16) puts it, "[e]conomics can inspire wars and revolution, it is at the heart of most political struggles [...] The way we shape our economy will, in turn, shape us" (Lewis 2013:16). I then argued that Afrikaans cinema historically offers examples of political cinema, and discussed the legacies of Manie van Rensburg and Jans Rautenbach in this regard. I then proceeded to define and explain various instances of political cinema across the world before returning to political possibilities in African, South African and Afrikaans cinema. As such, I discussed some of the challenges that the Afrikaans film industry faces, such as NFVF related funding requirements, and the idea that the South African film industry as a whole is primarily positioned as a niche service industry.

I positioned the Afrikaans comedy *Hoofmeisie* as symptomatic of Afrikaans cinema's dependence on neoliberal systems of cultural patrimony, where Afrikaans films validate instead of offer resistance to neoliberal mechanisms. In this sense, Afrikaans cinema has become a mechanism not only to entertain, but also, to borrow a phrase from Lewis (2013:64), "deliver audiences to advertisers". With apologies to McGonegal (2005:256): we cannot separate the cultural labour in and of the present with the labour that preceded it.

The fourth chapter critically discussed the cinema of Willie Esterhuizen as cinematically impotent. In this sense, Esterhuizen's comedies offer characters and narratives that are deeply problematic when placed against the post-transitional backdrop of South African historical and political realities: the films foreground white male trajectories of self-actualisation, righteous privilege and vulgarity of a mostly scatological nature that fail to serve a political purpose. Esterhuizen's characters are self-described victims – the notion of white male victimhood is a pervasive theme –

and suffer from a perceived loss of agency and a sense of powerlessness. Esterhuizen nonetheless confirms these characters' primacy in a social reality characterised by heteronormativity in which possibilities for alternative or explorative sexualities are neutered.

In addition to the exclusivities created in Esterhuizen's films, Chapter Five developed the notion of the *Volkstaat film* as an Afrikaans film type that profoundly complicates the role of space in Afrikaans cinema. While I offer a contextual overview of Afrikaans films that use space to reiterate an outmoded rural versus urban binary, I focused mainly on *Prêville* as a *Volkstaat film*. The ideological feasibility of the *Volkstaat film* relies on the extent to which individuals (audiences) want to support the ideals of the dominant ideology in much of Afrikaans cinema even though these individuals are aware that these ideals cannot realistically manifest (Sim 2002:87).

The *Volkstaat film* is an extension of Rompel's cultural conservatism (see Chapter Three) and Tomaselli's notion of the Eden film that characterised much of Afrikaans cinema during the 1970s. The *Volkstaat film* offers rainbowism as a form of false cultural and ethnic narrative inclusion, while instead it effectively demarcates space as culturally homogenous; as such, this film type offers a particularly insidious form of political impotence. An ideology such as rainbowism is "*nothing but the form of appearance, the formal distortion/displacement, of non-ideology*" (emphasis in original) (Žižek 1997:30), where non-ideology, by way of Jameson, refers to "the utopian moment present even in the most atrocious ideology" (1997:30). The notion of appearance is deceptive, since it may suggest a surface semblance or consistency while, in fact, appearance "profoundly affects the *actual* socio-symbolic position of those [individuals, groups concerned]" (Žižek 1997:32). Afrikaans cinema's political impotence is marked by its insistence on multiculturalism as opposed to plurality (as Degenaar defines it), uniformity as opposed to difference.

### **6.3 Afrikaans cinematic political impotence**

As an aftermath culture, Afrikaans cinema suffers from an intensification of excess and kitsch pastiche, offering insipidity and racial passing instead of socio-political interrogation. Films such as *Pretville* offer *jouissance* as excessive pleasure and site



or erasure, where social imaginary makes way for social fantasy. In order to frame Afrikaans cinema's excesses and ideological currents, Thomas Elsaesser's scholarship provides a vocabulary in which to position Afrikaans cinema as still promoting patriarchal authority and legitimation in the construction of a social imaginary that engenders miscognition and miscegenation. Afrikaans cinema is a cinema of literality, a cinema without metaphoric chains in the Elsaesserian sense, and in its insistence on industrial and aesthetic postmodern processes negates the political possibilities of character ambiguities by instead privileging white male narrative actualisation. With this in mind, films such as *Hoofmeisie* are best discussed as "designer-blockbuster", while the *Volkstaat* film positions the individual as master over nature. In accordance with Rompel, Afrikaans cinema as a whole (with some exceptions) denies the symbolic capacity of film language and fails to find a new idiom of expression (a film language that, together with specific socio-political content, signifies a break with dominant film language). Instead, Afrikaans cinema offers its audiences an experience economy based on neoliberal structures that further place strict limitations on Afrikaans cinema's political possibilities.

As Negri (2008:25) describes it, "we are engulfed in commodity fetishism – without recourse to something that might represent its transcendence". This response of Afrikaans cinema to apartheid and the challenges of sharing a social and symbolic space with a variety of ethnic and cultural groups in democratic South Africa, reads like a romantic response to a failed revolution. The political potency of genre cinema (and its capacity to offer a critical commentary and satire possible in deconstructing masculinity in Esterhuizen's films) remains frustratingly dormant, while vaguely political actions are rendered as spectacle by way of pastiche and by characters' insistence on victimhood and disempowerment. Afrikaans cinema's emphasis on individual character concerns at the expense of greater social realities emphasises personal solutions to broad social problems (see page 116) in a way that elides commenting on political struggle past and present.

Afrikaans cinema's representation of an all-inclusive South African reality as culturally homogenous offers a multiculturalism that elides conflict but which by that very paradox highlights its own inability – and refusal – to engage with such issues. In the end, Afrikaans cinema, as seen in Esterhuizen's films, depict characters as

antagonist forces; these films do not, as other world or minority cinemas have done, demonstrate the political productivity in agonism, as Mouffe discussed it. As such, Afrikaans cinema remains a cinema of cultural and ethnic separation in spite of its multiculturalist aims. While it may be multiculturalist, Afrikaans cinema is also unashamedly conservative, an ideological intensification of Rompel's ideas for an Afrikaans cinema. Contemporary Afrikaans cinema is not a cinema of political critique and offers instead the sanitisation of social space in the *Volkstaat film* especially, constructing spaces that are ideologically homogenous and excludes oppositional views.

Tomaselli's (1989:196-197) six basic criteria for independent filmmaking can be summarised as follows:

1. Financial profit is not a key aim;
2. Films are exhibited in various alternative venues for specific audiences;
3. the possibility of not obtaining censorship clearance;
4. Low budgets, mostly financed by filmmakers themselves or certain organizations;
5. Unique position to exploit relationship between cost and content, "a virtue of its relative cheapness and financial autonomy"
6. "*to prepare the way for the not-yet-possible*" (emphasis in original)

Tomaselli's criteria were articulated in a context of censorship and an increased inevitability of political change, hence the points on alternative screening venues and censorship clearance. Points one and four to six remain relevant in a post-transitional context. Measured against these criteria, contemporary Afrikaans cinema seldom presents examples of independent filmmaking as the majority of Afrikaans films do aim for financial profit; are not made for comparatively low budgets; and assigns financial autonomy to neoliberalism as industrial core. Afrikaans cinema does not prepare the way for the not-yet-possible, but rather constructs an illusion of a present and lived sense of complacent acceptance; there is no political aim for change, and the *Volkstaat film* is no broadly inclusive utopian articulation.

Afrikaans cinema is a cinema not of difference but of conformity, its form and content far removed from South African manifestations of political cinema as oppositional filmmaking and radical cinema. Oppositional filmmaking foregrounds “the structured absences of commercial cinema and brought about by the prevailing productive forces” (Tomaselli 1989:198), where radical cinema describes films that oppose capitalist modes of production and are also “aware of their own technique/style/technology/conventions and the way in which these mold the view of the reality portrayed” (Tomaselli 1989:198). In this sense, contemporary Afrikaans cinema fails to utilise the possibilities of *mise-en-abyme* in emphasising its self-awareness (see Chapter Three).

#### **6.4 Strengths and limitations of the study**

This study addressed the paucity of research on contemporary Afrikaans cinema. In this regard, the study’s strengths are:

- It radically recontextualises and positions Afrikaans cinema as an historically occasionally political cinema, but primarily a contemporary cinema of political impotence.
- It provides a clear vocabulary drawn from the film scholarship of Thomas Elsaesser and other figures from critical theory and cultural studies with which to discuss the political potency of film, as well as the relationship between film and politics.
- It offers a viable critical vocabulary and discourse with which to address Afrikaans cinema’s political impotence.
- It offers two clear examples (and respective micro-markers) of Afrikaans cinema as politically impotent in the comedies of Willie Esterhuizen and its representations of whiteness and victimhood, and in the social imaginary of the *Volkstaat film*.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Future research on whiteness in Afrikaans cinema can position Ahmed’s (2004; 2007) research on South African whiteness as conceptual point of departure.

- It expands upon Treffry-Goatley's (2010) problematisation of neoliberalism in the South African culture industry.

The study has certain limitations.

- It could not incorporate examples of contemporary Afrikaans political cinema such as *Skoonheid* as these films are few and far between and are outnumbered by politically impotent films by a considerable margin. Additionally, the films of the production company Bosbok Ses (consisting of father-and-son team Piet and Sallas de Jager and actor-turned-director Paul Eilers) are so vast to discuss and contextualise as to require its own study.
- At the time of starting this study in late 2012, I could not foresee the sheer number of Afrikaans films that would be released between 2013 and 2015. Many films that could have been included in this study had to be excluded for reasons of time and space, such as *Faan se Trein* (Roets, 2014) and *Knysna* (Velts, 2014). In addition, key motifs shared by some of these films – such as the iconography of the *windpomp* and the steam locomotive – were not explored as a result of the above exclusions.
- As far as the conceptual and theoretical framework is concerned, this study does not address nostalgia in depth. The use and abuse of nostalgia could have been a more prominent component of the study.
- On a related point, the study does not explicitly address the absence of white Afrikaans speaking female directors from Afrikaans cinema between 1994 and 2014. The renowned Katinka Heyns directed only two films in the twenty year period, *Paljas* (1996) and *Die Wonderwerker* (2012), while Hanneke Schutte's *Jimmy in Pienk* (*Jimmy in Pink*, 2013) was released to little acclaim and an indifferent box-office.
- An HSRC research team that investigated the restructuring of the South African film industry suggested that cinematic diversity – and not a hegemonic-homogenous cinema – would improve the health of the film

industry as a whole (Botha 2004:93). Nonetheless, this study does not propose that a wholesale rejection of neoliberalism would improve Afrikaans cinema, as a quick and hence thoughtless abandonment of consumer capitalism is not only unrealistic but also undesirable because of the systemic disruption it would cause (Lewis 2013:165). While neoliberalism is identified as a systemic obstacle to a more differentiated and possible political cinema less focused on markets and profits, this study does not propose any specific solution or alternative to neoliberalism in this regard.

## 6.5 Suggestions for further research

Given the resurgence of Afrikaans cinema since 2006 especially, contemporary Afrikaans cinema is vastly under researched. This section provides an overview of some of the research areas that can be further investigated.

Katinka Heyns remains one of the few Afrikaans female directors to privilege female subjectivity and narrative primacy in her films *Fiela se Kind*, *Die Storie van Klara Viljee* and *Paljas* (Botha 2003:186). In *Die Wonderwerker*, the character Jane Brayshaw's (Anneke Weidemann) "own life story shapes our experiences of [Eugene] Marais and ... bookends the film with her encounter with Marais", writes Marx (2014:10) in one of the few recent scholarly appraisals of Heyns' work.

Moving away from rainbowist discourse, Ubuntu is the shortened form of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabatu*, which means "a human being is a human being only through its relationship to other human beings" (Marx 2002:52). Ubuntu holds the promise of inclusion, but may imply compulsory conformity (2002:52, 53). While Ubuntu was originally an attitude of inclusion and integration, it often serves to other its traditional opposite, the uniform-vague West. As such, Ubuntu becomes a new cultural nationalism that seeks to (re)discover some notion of African authenticity or purity away from the West's contamination (Marx 2002:60). The notion of *Ubuntu* as culturally hegemonic social veneer can be interrogated by way of Afrikaans cinema's engagement with race.

As the current study offers a conceptual-theoretical framework for the interrogation of Afrikaans cinema, a subsequent study could collect and explore audience response data. The NFVF report referred to in Chapter Three indicates the need for continuous audience development, and a follow-up study could examine the similarities and differences in how Afrikaans speaking audience respond to contemporary Afrikaans cinema by focusing on the responses of Afrikaans speaking expatriates as well as Afrikaans speaking South African still residing within the country's geographical borders. No Afrikaans film to date has addressed the migration or exilic status of Afrikaans speaking individuals who have left South African borders.

Given the Afrikaans film industry's neoliberal spine, one could additionally examine to what extent alternative distribution models are available to Afrikaans feature film filmmaking, as more Afrikaans film are being made available on VOD platforms such as Vimeo, Scatzy and Showmax. Such distribution models can be explored in how they expand and constrict neoliberal industry practice.

Another research suggestion could focus on the career longevity of politically invested short film directors. Such a study could chart the career trajectories of a selection of Afrikaans short film directors and what directions they pursue in employment and their production of cultural patrimony. Are these directors still exploring the lived socio-political realities of the South African past as it seeps into and shapes the present? Or are they indeed assimilated by kykNet to produce content for the broad Afrikaans viewership with access to premium pay television? Are there other Afrikaans documentarians such as Francois Verster who demonstrate longitudinal involvement in political filmmaking?<sup>123</sup>

Similar to studies dedicated to specific Afrikaans feature film directors such as Manie van Rensburg and Jans Rautenbach, subsequent studies could explore the motifs, themes and biographies in the cinema of filmmakers such as Regardt van den Bergh, whose specific body of work could be framed (for better and for worse) at the intersection between evangelical cinema and cinematic political impotence.

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<sup>123</sup> Verster's latest documentary, *The Dream of Shahrazad* (2014), for instance, explores the Egyptian revolution (see <http://dreamofshahrazad.com/>).

While studies should deservedly focus on these filmmakers, there should be room for studies of Afrikaans film criticism and the key role certain film critics have played in offering critical discourse around Afrikaans cinema content and form. Two such film critics are the politically invested William Pretorius (1941–2007) and the currently culturally dominant Leon van Nierop, both of whom are cited throughout this study. Such a study could constructively explore these figures' ethnographic investment in Afrikaans cinema, and explore how their comments and reviews have shaped Afrikaans cinema discourse.

Studies could additionally focus on case studies of Afrikaans film production companies, such as the Centurion (Pretoria) based Phoenix Films, who released *Treurgrond* and *Trouvoete* (both directed by Darrell James Roodt) in 2015. Such a study could add significant nuance to studies of the political economy of Afrikaans cinema, specifically of the Afrikaans film industry in Gauteng.

The shift from cinematic modernity to cinematic postmodernity aligned with a political economy of privileged access to resources has resulted not only in the death of the *auteur* (exemplified by Manie van Rensburg and Jans Rautenbach) but in what I refer to as the *loss of singularity*. *Auteurs* are critical to a politically potent cinema. For Elsaesser (2005:14), only Lars von Trier and some Dogme filmmakers can be considered innovative and iconoclastic, while in Spain only Pedro Almodovar provides “stylish melodramas and surreal comedies [that give] international flair and street credibility to such strictly local habitats as the gay and transsexual subcultures of Madrid” (ibid). The loss of visionary singularity is not simply the death of the author and his particular vision, signature and thematic focus as a filmmaker, but is constellated in Elsaesserian terms as a fatal attempt at recognition that results in miscognition; a neoliberal emphasis on narrative legibility, and finally a cinematic indulgence of excesses and intensities.

Significantly, those individuals in the South African film industry who became revered for the *auteuristic* work would reconstitute themselves as aesthetically poverty-stricken in contemporary Afrikaans cinema. One such individual filmmaker is Darrell James Roodt, whose post-1994 Afrikaans films as politically impotent cinema require further interrogation. As Tomaselli (1989:83) states, *auteurs* are bad for business;

indeed, “[t]o inject a film with a personal signature or an overt political content is frowned upon since this contravenes the dictum which lubricates industry practice: give the public what it wants”. With the exception of Willie Esterhuizen as vulgar auteur, and Oliver Hermanus as emerging auteur, there are no singular filmmakers working in contemporary Afrikaans cinema.

Afrikaans films have demonstrated a capacity for political potency in the form of queer Afrikaans cinema. Queer Afrikaans cinema is dynamic yet underrepresented emergent cinema constellated in two major films: *Proteus* (2006), a South Africa-Canada coproduction in which Afrikaans is the most prominent spoken language, and which Gatti (2011:21) describes as part of a new vision of South African cinema; and *Skoonheid*, Oliver Hermanus’ exploration of white male political impotence channelled as sexual repression.<sup>124</sup> While both films can be said to be politically potent insofar as they offer a revitalised (and even modernist) aesthetics as a counterpoint to the hegemonic heteronormative mundanity of the majority of Afrikaans films and comment acutely on white male agency, desire and political legitimacy, they fall beyond the scope of the current study. These films demonstrate how “[d]esire becomes thus the infinite embodiment of *differential* identity positions, for desire as productive tension threatens to subvert the unity and certainty or claim to a ‘pure’ racial or cultural identity” (Van Wyk 2004:105). Developing these films within a framework of political cinema would contribute significantly to the existing scholarship provided by Arsenault (2013).

Arsenault (2013:39) lauds *Proteus* for its “anachronistic reading of history that draws on colonialism and contemporary struggles *alongside* apartheid”. In addition, *Proteus* positions queerness in a historical narrative that sought to erase it from its records; in fact, this overt positioning of queerness is amplified by its location on Robben Island, a site of not only geographical significance, but also of a particularly heroic masculine identity (Arsenault 2013:41). When protagonists Claas and Rijkhaart choose death over living under the oppressive rule of law, they not only resist

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<sup>124</sup> After apartheid, South Africa signed co-production treaties with a number of countries, including Canada (Botha 2004:44). Botha (2004:45) views *Proteus* as a milestone film in that it signalled the beginning of queer cinema in South Africa.



traditional Robben Island prison narratives (2013:51) but also demonstrate a persistence of agency in the face of execution: they will not repent their queerness, or resent their love for each other.<sup>125</sup>

Finally, future research to emerge from the current study could interrogate the various iterations of white male actualisation, righteous privilege and the *Volkstaat film* as they may continue to characterise the Afrikaans cinescape into 2015 and beyond. In addition, the framework provided by the current study could be used to more forms of cinematic political impotence. Such studies could expand on and deepen the use of politically constructive Elsaesserian notions of parapraxis and double occupancy.

## 6.6 Conclusion

The shift from cinematic modernity to a cultural and political postmodernity in Afrikaans cinema, as promulgated and sustained by the neoliberal political economy of contemporary Afrikaans cinema, has maintained the nostalgic, aesthetically rubberised images of utopian pastoral beauty and exclusivity. Consider how “[b]oth New German Cinemas have in common one very material fact: a radical change in the way films were made and financed in West Germany” (Elsaesser 2005:212), and how Afrikaans cinema’s embrace of neoliberal industry and kykNet content creation result in a homogeneity and hegemony of film content and language. Žižek (2009:25) reminds us that capitalism “*detotalizes meaning*: it is not global at the level of meaning” and can “accommodate itself to all civilizations” (emphasis in original).

Negri (2008:19) points out that the contemporary period has often been labelled as hypermodern “all the while paradoxically thinking it in continuous relation to the modern tradition”. Jameson continues to argue that individuals exist within a modernist framework (Sim 2002:10). Drawing on Jameson, John Belton suggests that postmodern films are characterised by a shared “aesthetic exhaustion” where the neutrality of pastiche means that these films lack satire, parody or any sort of

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<sup>125</sup> As Arsenault (2013:52-53) explains, the characters die off-screen, suggesting the continuing political import of their story.

attitude towards the film's subject or style (Sim 2002:229). This aesthetic exhaustion is accompanied by a political exhaustion, which for Belton suggests that filmmakers – including Martin Scorsese with *Taxi Driver* (1976) – “have simply given up trying to make sense of their world”; in this sense, Belton sees postmodernism as an admission of defeat (2002:229). Critics of postmodernism condemn contemporary culture for its “dehumanizing vacuities and shifting, centerless visions” that are facilitated by and through pastiche, “retro-obsessionisms, and empty simulations of simulations” (Corrigan 1991:2).

Considering some retro-obsessionisms, simulations and rootless experiences, Van Nierop (*Daar doer in die fliek*, 26) describes the musical *Liefeling* as a “boere-Mamma Mia!”, while *Roepman* criticises patriarchy and religious hypocrisy. For Van Nierop, “the Afrikaner [finally] looks at himself critically, but acknowledges that they are only human” (*Daar doer in die fliek*, 26). *Konfetti* was invited to screen at two international film festivals at Beverly Hills and Julien Dubuque (Bouwer 2014:[sp]). The film was shot mostly on the Blaauwklippen wine estate outside of Stellenbosch. *Mooirivier* (Van Rooyen, 2015), produced by Kaapland Films, was filmed entirely in Potchefstroom (Cillers 2015:[sp]). Kaapland had previously produced *Klein Karoo* (2012).

Pieter Malan (2013:[sp]) paints a dire picture of Afrikaans language cinema's financial viability. Of the three major films released by Bosbok Ses (*Roepman*, *Verraaiers* and *Musiek vir die Agtergrond*), only *Roepman* broke even. According to producer Piet de Jager, serious dramas struggle the most. For Leon van Nierop (2013c), audiences are tired of scatological comedies and the market is saturated with too similar films. In the comments section on Malan's (2013) article, a self-described young filmmaker accused Malan of portraying Afrikaans filmmakers as failures and that Malan was wrong to disclose box-office realities to the public.

In their tentative preview of Afrikaans language film releases, the popular Afrikaans weekly *Huisgenoot* lists 11 feature films due in 2015. Of these films, three are romantic comedy-dramas, one film based on a 1980s television series (*Ballade vir 'n Enkeling*), and a religious drama (*Rowwe Diamante*). Regardt van den Bergh delivers the romantic drama *Uitvlucht*, while Darrel James Roodt offers two dramas:

*Treurgrond* and *Seun*.<sup>126</sup> According to screenwriter Leon van Nierop, *Ballade vir 'n Enkeling's* (Krog 2015) story is universal, and not bound to any specific time (Heyns 2014), while *Uitvlucht* (Van den Bergh 2015) promises not only another religiously themed drama, but also brings the rural Zuurveld to the fore as setting of the film (Pauw 2014:[sp]). There are two novel adaptations, including *Die Pro* (directed by Andre Velts) (Hough-Coetzee 2015:112-113). Similar to the demise of Russian cinema under Stalin, contemporary Afrikaans cinema as an art form has become marked by “the forcible elimination of individual style, and the repudiation of irony, complexity and ambiguity” (Kenez 2001:219), and considering the slate of 2015 releases, *verstrooiingsvermaak* seems set to persist.<sup>127</sup>

In stark opposition to *verstrooiingsvermaak*, the idea of potency, as Negri (2008:25) describes it, requires “a position of antagonism, or an instance of liberation”. Afrikaans cinema has not yet arrived at such a moment of transversal, of a political potency in form and content where it is comfortable or capable of showing how hope is intermingled with horror (Žižek 2013:91). Instead, Afrikaans cinema’s fantasies and imaginaries conjure worlds that one should resist and challenge. As Žižek (2009:20) puts it, what if we continue dreaming, instead of waking up from the dream? Finally, within the self-congratulatory circles of Afrikaans entertainment events such as the *Silwerskermfees*, Amit Rai’s call to consciousness (quoted in Van Wyk 2004:96) rings true: “[f]ailure should not bother us, but it might cause us to wonder at those who imagine they have succeeded”. Afrikaans cinema will remain politically impotent – a cinema offering limited response to the galvanic moment of profound political transition – as long as a lack of political awareness in theme and content is paired with a measure of aesthetic poverty in a project altogether driven by the market instead of visionary filmmakers who make films in a political way.

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<sup>126</sup> See Nel (2015) for an interview with *Treurgrond's* screenwriter, Tarryn-Tanille Prinsloo, as well as Swanepoel’s (2015) emphasis on sweeping emotion in the film.

<sup>127</sup> In Germany, the promise and potency of New German Cinema dissipated after unification in 1990 (Elsaesser 2005:14).

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