

Post-Apartheid Film Industry

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Representation, Creativity and Commercialism in the Post-Apartheid Film Industry

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, South Africa has been in the process of redefining itself as a nation. The newly elected government recognised the potential role of cinema in democratic transformation and economic empowerment and established a number of strategic interventions and government bodies to foster the growth of the local industry. Similar to other forms of cultural production, cinema is informed by the national Constitution of 1996, which celebrates multiculturalism, freedom of expression, and transformation. However, it is questionable whether this vision is compatible with the state's ambition to build an internationally competitive, and commercially successful film industry. This paper provides a critical analysis of the economic and ideological workings of the post-apartheid feature film industry. The focus is on international co-productions, which have been encouraged by the state since such arrangements are seen to facilitate skills transfer to local filmmakers and also to attract foreign currency. The paper is informed by relevant state strategy documents,⁽¹⁾ qualitative interviews conducted with 43 film industry professionals from 2007 to 2009, and through the textual analysis of the post-apartheid co-production, *Drum* by Zola Maseko, 2004. The aim is to assess the extent to which the larger economic and ideological framework has informed the production of this post-apartheid film.

This paper is part of a larger, PhD study of the post-apartheid film industry, which is concerned with the representation of national identity in post apartheid cinema. This context of a fragmented society attempting to reinvent and re-present itself as a democracy is an interesting site for an analysis of national identity representation in cinema. However, discussions about national identity are always a complex in nature because, despite its frequent use, this is a notoriously difficult term to define (Hayward, S., 2005:ix). Moreover, national identity is also problematic because it can be linked to modernist tendencies to essentialise people and their associated cultural characteristics. Therefore, it is important to note, that in this study, national identity has not been approached as fixed, or homogenous. Rather, films are analysed in terms of their representation of different racial, cultural, language, economic, geographic and gender groups. Nevertheless, these 'groups' are not seen to be exclusive or to have solid boundaries. Instead, they are recognised as being complex, multifaceted, and overlapping entities with individuals identifying with multiple groups at any given time.

The concept of representation is also relevant to this study as it can be linked to the aforementioned processes of re-invention and 're-presentation' and to the exchange of meanings between members of this new democracy (Hall, S., 1997:15). However, similar to national identity, one needs to be careful when applying this term in analysis since it is easy to fall into the trap of searching for 'authentic' or real representations of South Africa and this would be a repeat of the modernist, oppressive approach where people, in particular African people are expected to remain timeless and real (refer to discussions in Harrow, K.:2007), while the rest of the world is free to embrace the hybridity and changes of globalisation. Furthermore, as Harrow argues it is more productive to focus on who has authority in the text rather than whether the text is authentic or not (Harrow, K., 2007:xii-xiii). Therefore in analysis, rather than looking for the real or the authentic, I focus on who has produced the text, and especially which market they have produced it for. I discuss how such forces have shaped the films at hand, in particular the characters, paying attention to any occurrences of 'stereotyping', where people or places are simplified or essentialised (Hall, S., 1997:257).

Before progressing however, it is important to provide a brief introduction to the South African film industry. The film industry comprises two distinct parts namely (i) the service industry, which provides technical and logistical support for foreign productions and (ii) the local industry that produces local films for the local and international market. South Africa has become very popular as a destination for 'runaway' or service industry productions. This is motivated by relevant state production incentives, stable weather conditions, affordable and well-skilled technicians, beautiful, diverse locations and the relatively weak currency. The local film industry on the other hand, faces many challenges, as the geopolitics of apartheid created a racially divided

society including a segregated cinema-going culture (Botha, M., 2004). This has led to major distribution problems since almost all cinemas are located in shopping malls which are in traditionally white and affluent 'black' areas and almost no cinemas can be found in poor township and rural areas where most of the population resides. Furthermore, township dwellers that are employed and therefore represent potential audiences of local cinema, do not tend to travel to watch films in the city after work due to expensive cinema tickets, poor public transport system and the high rate of violent crime in the country. Therefore, the 'core audience' in South Africa consists mostly of those who were privileged under apartheid, namely white, young and middle class individuals. However, this audience has been fed American culture since childhood and as a result generally prefer Hollywood films to local counterparts. This has further diminished the audience for local films, which has made it very difficult for South African filmmakers to re-coup production costs at the local box office.⁽²⁾

Post-apartheid film industry stakeholders have been searching for solutions to these problems of sustainability. Some have applied new digital technologies to film production and have successfully made cheaper films for the current audience.⁽³⁾ Nevertheless, given the 'narrow' make-up of South African cinema audiences, there is a danger that films targeted at these viewers may reflect the associated racial divisions and homogeneity. It would seem that to create a greater diversity of films, one needs to encourage diversity in the cinema audience. This can either be created by reaching the local cinema audience using new platforms and technologies, or by targeting wider, international markets. The leader in the area of local audience development is the Film Resource Unit (FRU), which is a non-profit organization that works with state bodies to establish township/rural based audio-visual facilities. However, in 2007, FRU faced closure due to serious financial problems and although it was subsequently 'saved' by the Department of Arts Culture, Science and Technology (DACS) its former strength has not been regained. (Dearham., 2007 and Angela Van Schalkwyk (ed.), 2009:8-9). A second important development is the shopping malls that are being opened in township areas. These commercial centres are designed to cater for the increasing black middle class and have provided the opportunity for major exhibition companies to open cinemas in these areas. The first cinema of this kind is the Ster Kinekor theatre that was opened in the Mafanong Mall in the Soweto Township outside Johannesburg in 2007. However, this approach can be criticized for being too slow since it is reliant on major infrastructural changes. A third development is the mobile film units that have been used to take movies to township and rural audiences. These units rely on revenue from advertisers to show movies for free to audiences who do not have easy access to traditional cinemas. However, although these units are an innovative solution to the aforementioned problems, since they essentially 'force feed' people content it is unlikely that they will provide the long-term solution to audience development. New technology appears to provide a variety of solutions to problems of access since it can effectively lower distribution costs through cheaper, digital screens and also allows the possibility of digitizing content and streaming it online. Local pay television channel Mnet's *African Film Library* can be linked to this latter approach, since it is in the process of acquiring large quantities of African (including South African content) to be made accessible through regular television broadcasts and 'distribution through other media platforms' (Chemhere, M., 2009:4). 'Pay-per-view' arrangements will be one such 'platform' whereby customers can pay to stream a film from the Internet. However, due to the expensive, slow Internet service in South Africa, the full potential of this library is not yet exploited by local consumers. However, when the new *Seacom* Internet cable is connected in July 2009, this vision of digitized distribution may become a reality.⁽⁴⁾

Thus, there are a number of initiatives in place that are likely to improve the local distribution of post-apartheid films. There is, however, a second, sometimes overlapping approach, which aims to make films reach wider, international markets, and this is where co-production agreements fit in. It is important to note that there is a clear distinction between official co-productions, which are bound by official treaties between states and unofficial co-finance arrangements that are private agreements between production companies. The state has provided support for both official and unofficial co-productions agreements. Firstly, the state offers generous rebates for official co-productions and also international/co-finance production through the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) rebate.⁽⁵⁾ Secondly, production finance is available through the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC).⁽⁶⁾ Thirdly, the state has supported the development of official co-productions by signing treaties with four countries including Italy, Germany, the U.K. and Canada. Fourthly, in 2008 and 2009, the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF), which is the main mechanism of state assistance in the film industry, held conferences entitled 'South Africa your co-production partner of choice'

at the Cannes Film Festival.⁽⁷⁾ One might argue that this support for co-productions can be partly linked to the overarching neoliberal agenda of the state, which was adopted in 1996 with the Growth, Employment And Redistribution (GEAR) policy. GEAR effectively promotes 'privatization; fiscal discipline and collaboration with the private sector to produce export-driven growth' (Sparkes, A., 2003 p.193). This commercial, export-driven emphasis is evident in the NFVF's vision, where one finds a combination of this business-orientated agenda and a discourse of development and democratic redress:

A South African film and video industry that *mirrors and represents the nation*, sustains *commercial* viability, encourages *development* and provides a medium through which the creative and technical talents of South Africans are able to *reach this world* (NFVF Value Charter, 2004:3, own emphasis).

The export-orientation of the above vision, can be linked to the GEAR policy, as can the fiscal prudence which the state appears to have adopted with regards to the NFVF's budget which is a meagre R26 million (\$3.5 million) per annum. This has had a major impact on the average investment that this organisation is able to make into the production cost of films. In fact, the NFVF has become more and more reliant on external sources of funding to achieve its mandate of redress and development. This has encouraged the NFVF to promote co-productions because filmmakers can use such agreements to source international finance, which not only takes the burden off the NFVF to finance films, but brings valuable foreign currency into the country. Co-productions thus share the risk of filmmaking between multiple partners, offer products wider, international markets and also provide local filmmakers with the opportunity to work with more experienced, foreign artists and technicians, which can potentially facilitate the transfer of skills.

However, co-productions do not come without a fair share of difficulties. Most of these relate to the loss of editorial and creative control. The fact is that South Africa's economy is much weaker than that of its European and North American partners. This has resulted in South Africa often being the 'junior partner' and filmmakers being relegated to 'junior' artistic and editorial decisions. Furthermore, because the foreigners often have a higher financial stake in the film at hand, the films are targeted towards their (often more stable) domestic markets. Thus, although 'snippets' of other languages are sometimes included to add local flavour, these films are predominantly English, which is more accessible to international audiences. Casting is also influenced by these financial arrangements, with foreign stars often given preference in lead roles since they are more familiar to the target audience at hand. The stories themselves are also affected since there is a tendency towards didacticism and factual inaccuracies, which, although inappropriate for local audiences, are designed to make the stories more understandable and/or digestible for foreigners.⁽⁸⁾ Below, I provide a very brief discussion of *Drum* by Zola Maseko, outlining how some of these aforementioned tendencies have surfaced in this production.

Drum is a feature film made in 2004, by Zola Maseko, a black South African. It is an unofficial co-production between South Africa, Germany and America. The film had a budget of R30 million which is rather high by South African standards. Maseko explained in an interview that his 'whole ethos in filmmaking is to celebrate black stories - we are not just hoes and drug dealers and gangsters and thugs and wife beaters and just dying of AIDS, there is also some inspirational stories' (Maseko, Z., Johannesburg 2008).⁽⁹⁾ Maseko chose to write a story about a courageous black journalist from *Drum* magazine that spoke out against apartheid. It important to note however, that this original script was re-written by American screenwriter Jason Filardi (who was also *Drum's* executive producer) when American company Armada Pictures became involved. The story is set in Sophiatown, which was a multi-racial neighbourhood outside Johannesburg. This was one of the few places in the country where black people were entitled to own their own property and despite its poverty, in the 1940s and 1950s, it became a centre for music, dance, parties and progressive political ideology. Tragically in 1955, under the Group Areas Act of 1950, this neighbourhood was demolished by the Apartheid police. The film *Drum* highlights both the cultural vibrancy of this neighbourhood as well as its violent demise.

Maseko explained in an interview that he made this film to inspire the new generation of South Africans in their building of post-apartheid society:

1994 brought us to a place where we had a moment of self definition ... and I just felt that Sophiatown almost 50 years had also come to this juncture with history where as black people there was a self defining renaissance and a definition of what it meant to be black and this renaissance expressed itself musically in

literature, in journalism, in politics, in clothing and fashion. There was just this whole period where urban black people were putting in a mark and saying this is who we are and I wanted to revisit that area and hopefully it would inspire this new generation of South Africans basically to find materials in our own pasts, and to not keep looking outside or abroad or to the West for models (Maseko, Z. 2008).

It was originally intended to be a television series but when this did not receive the support of the national broadcaster, he decided to make it into a feature film. However, he noted however that it was still difficult to raise the funds because people are not necessarily interested in seeing films about black people that do not fit the aforementioned stereotypes (Ibid.). Thus, after eight years of struggling to raise the funds in South Africa, Maseko decided to go abroad in search of international finance and in the end the film was funded by South Africa, Germany and America and distributed by Nu Metro, Armada Pictures and Kinowelt Filmverleih.

Maseko argues that if one wants to make an internationally competitive film then one is almost forced into co-productions since you simply are not 'able to raise enough money in South Africa, unless you make a very small budget film' (Ibid.). However he notes that co-productions can be problematic, and that in the case of *Drum* after trying to make the film for ten years, he eventually 'sold out' to secure foreign finance. Thus, he gave the lead roles of journalist Henry Nxumalo and photographer Jürgen Shadenburg to American actors, Taye Diggs and Gabriel Mann respectively. Furthermore, although the film is set in a black South African community (where a mixture of local languages such as Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, Sotho and Tswana would have been spoken) it was written predominantly in English to make it more accessible to foreign audiences. Maseko was disappointed by such decisions and notes that at the film's premiere at the Toronto Festival, Canada, Diggs said that his role should have gone to a South African actor because the local actors showed the Americans up (Ibid.).

This film can also be criticized for the revisionist approach that has been adopted in the portrayal of South Africa's history. The film ends with the death of Nxumalo set against the backdrop of the Sophiatown's destruction. The closing scene shows homes being destroyed while people scramble to save their meagre belongings. Into this scene marches the funeral procession led by Nxumalo's wife, Florence (Moshidi Motshewa). As they move through the town, singing songs of freedom, people stop what they are doing and join them, effectively halting the demolition process. This scene therefore brings a somewhat happy ending to this tragedy. However, since Sophiatown was indeed demolished causing thousands to be displaced, the conclusion of this film can be accused of being inaccurate or revisionist in nature. One might easily argue that this revisionism is a symptom of the influence of the classic Hollywood formula in the production, which requires a sense of triumph at the end. Although a detailed analysis would be necessary to take this discussion any further, it is interesting to note that although Maseko won a number of film festival prizes including the 'Golden Stallion of Yennenga' award in 2005 at FESPACI, *Drum* has otherwise struggled to win over local and international audiences.⁽¹⁰⁾ This failure may be due to the cultural compromises made in its production and its resultant inability to capture the imagination of its audiences.

In conclusion, I think it is clear from the above discussions that the current emphasis on co-production financial arrangements in state rhetoric and policy can be connected to wider forces of neoliberalism within the country. In my brief discussion of the film *Drum* above, I have raised issues concerning the influence of a film's foreign partners and foreign market on ways in which South African people, cultures and histories are portrayed on screen. Although it is not my aim to judge whether such representations are 'correct', I do however think that it is important, given the country's socio-political history of oppressions and misrepresentation, to consider whether the current neoliberal, capitalist and export-driven paradigm gives sufficient support for the multiculturalism, freedom of expression, and transformation envisioned by the New Constitution.

Notes

1. Particular attention has been paid to the following government strategy documents: Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. 1998. *Cultural Industries Growth Strategy Report*, National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF). 2001. *Indaba Report*, NFVF. 2004. *Value Charter*, Human Sciences Research



Figure 1: *Drum* publicity poster

Council. 2004. *South African Film and Video Industry Survey*, Cape Film Commission's (CFC). 2004. *Audience Development Report*, NFVF. 2005. *Indaba Report*, Department of Trade and Industry. 2005. *Film and Television Strategy Document*, Western Cape Department of Economic Development and Tourism. 2005. *Film Sector Micro Economic Development Strategy* and CFC. 2006. *Audience Development Report*.

2. This is with the exception of films involving the comedian Leon Schuster such as *Mr Bones* (2001), *Mama Jack* (2005) and *Mr Bones: Back from the Past* (2008), and Afrikaans language films *Poena is Koning* (Willie Esterhuizen, 2007) *Bakgat* (Henk Pretorius, 2008), which have all been hits with local audiences.

3. Please refer to: *Poena is Koning* (Willie Esterhuizen, 2007) *Bakgat* (Henk Pretorius, 2008), *Big Fellas* (Phillip Roberts, 2007), *Meisie* (Darrel Roodt, 2008) and *Confessions of a Gambler* (Rayda Jacobs, 2008) for example, which were all made for under R3 million.

4. Please refer to for more information about this cable.

5. While the DTI provides a rebate of up to 35% on qualifying production expenditure for official co-productions (and local films), it also provides a rebate of up to 25% for large budget productions, including unofficial co-productions and international productions.

6. The IDC funds a maximum of 49% of a production, and has been an important source of film finance for official and unofficial co-productions, including the award-winning South African/British unofficial co-productions *Tsotsi* (Gavin Hood, 2005) and *Drum* (Zola Maseko, 2004).

7. Such conferences were held in conjunction with partners DTI, IDC and DACS. Details on 2008 and 2009 conferences available at:

<http://www.screenafrica.com/news/industry/153220.htm>

and http://www.screenafrica.com/latest_edition/655606.htm.

8. Please refer to writings about films *In My Country* (John Boorman, 2005) and *Red Dust* (Tom Hooper, 2005) by Martha Evans (2007).

9. The theme of the black gangster is evident in the award-winning *Tsotsi* (2005) by Gavin Hood, and *Jerusalema* (2008) by Ralph Ziman, while *Yesterday* by Darrel Roodt (2004) and *Beat the Drum* (2003) by David Hickson are examples of a post-apartheid film that deal with poverty and HIV/AIDS.

10. Since *Drum* has only been in the market since 2004, it is not possible to calculate the total amount that

it will earn on local and international box office, DVD and television sales. However, the local exhibitor and distributor, Ster Kinekor has provided the figure R917.368 for the gross local box office earnings. Since this amount is not even a thirtieth of the total production expenditure, I think that it is fair to say that it is most unlikely that *Drum* will be a financial success.

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