

# Short Filmmaking in South Africa

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## SHORT FILMMAKING IN SOUTH AFRICA AFTER APARTHEID

### Historical Context

Although 1994 saw the birth of democracy in South Africa the South African film industry is much older. In fact, our great documentary film tradition dates back to 1896 and the Anglo Boer War<sup>(1)</sup>. Surprisingly only a few books have been published regarding the history of one of the oldest film industries in the world and one of the largest on the African continent. Between 1910 and 2008 1434 features were made in South Africa (Armes 2008). Approximately 944 features were made in the period between 1978 and 1992, as well as nearly 998 documentaries and several hundred short films and videos (Blignaut & Botha 1992).

South African film history is captured in a mere twelve books. Developments in early South African cinema (1895 - 1940) have been chronicled in Thelma Gutsche's *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940* (1946/1972). Other significant studies include Keyan Tomaselli's *Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South Africa* (1989), Johan Blignaut and Martin Botha's *Movies Moguls Mavericks: South African Cinema 1979-1991* (1992), Martin Botha's edited volume, *Marginal Lives and Painful Pasts: South African Cinema After Apartheid* (2007), Jacqueline Maingard's *South African National Cinema* (2007), André Le Roux and Lila Fourie's *Filmverlede: Geskiedenis van die Suid-Afrikaanse speelfilm* (1982), Peter Davis's *In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the Jungles of Cinema's South Africa* (1996), Martin Botha and Adri van Aswegen's *Images of South Africa: The rise of the alternative film* (1992), Tomaselli's compilation of revised and reworked papers and chapters published elsewhere, *Encountering Modernity: Twentieth Century South African Cinemas* (2006), as well as Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela's edited volume, *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa* (2003).

During the 112 year history of South African cinema only two books have been devoted to South African film directors: Martin Botha and Hubert Dethier's *Kronieken van Zuid-Afrika: de films van Manie van Rensburg* (1997) and Martin Botha's *Jans Rautenbach: Dromer Baanbreker en Auteur* (2006a). Veterans such as Jans Rautenbach (*Jannie Totsiens*, 1970), Ross Devenish (*Marigolds in August*, 1980), Manie van Rensburg (*The Fourth Reich*, 1990) and the younger generation of the 1980s challenged moral and political censorship during apartheid, a severe lack of audience development and inadequate film distribution to shape progressive texts, which became the foundation of a new, critical South African cinema during the 1990s<sup>(2)</sup>.

The year 1994 could be regarded as a landmark for the South African film industry due to the historic democratic elections and the birth of a post-apartheid society. A comprehensive study by the research institution, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), into the restructuring of the entire South African film industry was completed and forwarded to the newly established Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (Botha *et al.* 1994). The report of 400 pages received widespread praise throughout the local film and television industry, especially by members of the Film and Television Federation (FTF) (Botha 1997). The HSRC research team recommended that state aid to the local film industry should be administered by a statutory body referred to as the South African Film and Video Foundation (SAFVF). Commercial viability should not be the sole criterion for government support of locally made films. All types of films, including short films<sup>(3)</sup>, should benefit, and a developmental fund should be used to support first-time filmmakers from previously marginalized communities. It was noted that under apartheid many voices were silenced in the mainstream media, especially those of the black majority, political dissidents, gays and lesbians

The South African Minister of the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Dr Ben Ngubane, formalized an Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG), in August/September 1994, to counsel him on the formulation of policy for the newly established democratic government. In November of 1995, four months after the final ACTAG document was published, Dr Ngubane appointed a Reference Group to write up the Film Development Strategy document. This Reference Group comprised fourteen disparate members: individuals from the film industry; academics such as Prof. Keyan Tomaselli; the head of the HSRC research

study into the film industry, Dr. Martin Botha, as well as Beschara Karam. The Reference Group met over a period of four weeks to discuss the drafting of the document, using the ACTAG document as the foundation for this paper. The first draft of the Film Development Strategy document appeared at the beginning of 1996, and a revised version was published later in the year. The writers proposed that the South African film and video industry be administered by a Statutory Body, known as the South African Film and Video Foundation (SAFVF).<sup>(4)</sup>

The rest is history. Thanks to the efforts of ACTAG and the writers of the White Paper the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) was finally established by the end of the 1990s. One of the long-term aims of the Foundation is to facilitate the placement of the South African film industry on a sound commercial footing and enable it to become internationally competitive<sup>(5)</sup>. Despite the fact that the White Paper was an uneasy blend of progressive and neo-liberal thinking it remains a valuable document, which gave birth to a national film commission (see Balseiro & Masilela, 2003, for a critique of the White Paper)<sup>(6)</sup>.

In March 1995, the old South African film subsidy system, which was merely based on box office returns, ceased to exist, and an interim film fund became in operation<sup>(7)</sup>. Ten million rand were annually distributed among various projects, which included funding for short filmmaking. In 1998, for example, R110,000 was allocated to the development of short films and R1,010,000 for the actual production of short films. During 2000 the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) started to support the local film industry, including short filmmaking<sup>(8)</sup>. It was noted that the short film provided a training ground for aspirant filmmakers and would make it financially viable to tell a diverse range of South African stories on film (Maingard 2007).

The revival in short filmmaking in South African cinema has thus far received little attention by scholars. Among the abovementioned books on South African film history only Botha (2007) and Maingard (2007: 157 - 166) focused on a significant development in post-apartheid South African cinema. Hundreds of short fiction and non-fiction films have been made in South Africa since 1980. The themes of most of these films were initially limited to anti-apartheid texts, which were instruments in the anti-apartheid struggle (Botha 1996). Since the late 1980s and early 1990s short-film makers have also explored themes other than apartheid, for example equal rights for gay and lesbian South Africans.

### **Short Filmmaking During the 1980s and Early 1990s**

Since the 1980s various short films portrayed events which were conveniently left out of official South African history books and of a contemporary context in actuality programmes on national television under control of the apartheid regime. Therefore, they became guardians of popular memory within the socio-political process in South Africa<sup>(9)</sup>. Some of these films portrayed the forced removals of black communities from their places of birth under the laws of apartheid. In *Dear Grandfather your right foot is missing* (1984), for example, director Yunus Ahmed created an imaginative and lyrical film about the destruction of Cape Town's District Six. Ahmed returned to the bulldozed landscape of his place of birth and through innovative film techniques, he evocatively recalled the spirit of the formerly thriving community. Set to the haunting sounds of Jean Michel Jarre, the endless tracking shots mercilessly explored the desolate plains, as if filmic interrogation would restore this place to its former life. The film became a lyrical lament for a lost area lying on the right foot of Table Mountain (the grey old Grandfather of Cape Town).

Acclaimed director Ross Devenish also made a short film about the movement of a family under apartheid's racial laws. In *A chip of glass ruby* (1982) the Banjee family lived in a small house in an area of Johannesburg which was reclassified as a white residential area. Although the family had lived there all their lives, they were forced to relocate to a new Indian development. In *Cato Manor: people were living there* (1989) director Charlotte Owen created a visually exciting, revealing and visually stunning history of Cato Manor, which was changed from a thriving and bustling active township of mixed African and Indian people to become its present unhappy ruin. *Last supper at Horstley Street* (1985) is a moving short documentary and true drama of one family's poignant experiences when they were removed from their traditional home in District Six and their attempts to adapt to their new environment, which was without amenities or traditions.

One of the most moving explorations of popular memory is Lance Gewer's *Come see the bioscope* (1984), a film about Sol Plaatje and his attempts at the beginning of this century to educate rural blacks about the Land Act of 1913. The film resembled the oral narrative structures of West African cinema (for example *Wend Kuuni* from Burkina Faso<sup>(10)</sup>) and led to several later

attempts by young filmmakers to explore oral storytelling in short films (e.g. Harold Hölscher's *iBali*, Garth Meyer's *Killer October* and *Bitter Water*, as well as Teboho Mahlatsi's *Meokgo and the Stickfighter*.)

In 1989 Melanie Chait's *Out in Africa* became the first South African film to deal with the struggle for equal rights for gays and lesbians in South Africa. This short film is a moving tribute to two gay South African men, Simon Nkoli and Ivan Toms, who were respected internationally for their stand against apartheid. Dr Toms was the first white South African to refuse to serve in the South African Defence Force; Simon Nkoli was one of the Delmas trialists. The film portrayed what it meant to be gay under apartheid and claimed that the South African liberation struggle is a movement for political as well as gay equality. Under apartheid gay and lesbian voices in film and television were silenced. In a seven year study of the depiction of gays and lesbians in African, Asian and Latin American cinema Botha (2003b) notes that homosexual experience is unique in South Africa, precisely because of our history of racial division and subsequent resistance. Our gay identities have been formed by a long history of racial struggle. Our gay identities were also deformed by an oppressive system, which classified us into those with freedom and those without. Apartheid legislated who we were, where we could live, with whom could we associate, and even what kind of sex we could have. Asserting a lesbian and gay identity in South Africa became a defiance of the fixed identities - of race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality - that the apartheid system attempted to imposture upon *all* of us.

Despite a new constitution which prohibits discrimination against gays and lesbians, as well as a strong gay movement, our images of gay men and women are limited and still on the margin of the film industry. One ends up with less than twenty short films, a few documentaries, less than ten features with openly gay and lesbian characters and virtually no television programmes during the past hundred years of South African cinema!

An important new voice in the creation of a South African gay and lesbian cinema is Luiz DeBarros. Most of his early short films were screened at the short film competition of the Weekly Mail Film Festival. DeBarros was a third-year BA student at the University of the Witwatersrand when he made *Pretty boys* (1992), a film about two male prostitutes discussing their lives. The film attempted to explore the possibility of prostitution as a positive experience. *Clubbing* (1994) revolved around six 20-something-year-old friends who meet one evening before they go out clubbing. In the film DeBarros captured the decline of a white ruling class in a society in which the rules were changing. They must come to terms with a future of uncertainty, a future no longer assured of privilege. His film, *Hot legs* (1994), is a revenge fantasy which revolves around Tim, a young gay doctor who wants to take revenge on Dave, a man he once loved, by holding him captive in a motel room for six days. Together the two characters relive their past and look at how they became the people they are. It deals with the homophobic character of South African society<sup>(11)</sup>.

During the late 1980s the annual *Weekly Mail* film festival became an important forum for the screening of short films. A short film competition also encouraged new and young film makers to present their work at this festival. In the early 1990s short films about socio-political changes in South Africa and how people relate to them have become thematically dominant at this festival. In the 1980s the contours of South Africa's political landscape were transformed by massive black popular protest and government promises of a 'new' South Africa. Between black political mobilization and a state attempting to manage a disintegrating economy existed another reality - an embattled white working class struggling to defend a way of life in the face of loss of privilege based on race. Against this background, Guy Spiller's short film *The Boxer* (1990) explored the effect which wider socio-political changes in South African society had wrought in the intimate space of a white working-class family in Johannesburg. In particular, the film documented the hopes and fears of a young champion boxer in a society where the passage from youth to manhood involves entry into a world moulded by a violently defensive culture which is bound by a narrow patriotism and captured by the rhetoric of far right-wing politicians.

One of the most remarkable films about adapting to the socio-political changes in South Africa is Catherine Meyburgh's *The Clay Ox*. (1993) This visually stunning film portrayed the brief meeting of two young (white) Afrikaners at the foot of the Drakensberg. He is a pacifist who is fleeing from military conscription. She is an activist who is preparing a suicidal bomb attack on a military target in Pretoria. In a highly symbolic landscape Meyburgh addresses the patriarchal, repressive society under apartheid. White Afrikaner

mythology is examined by using numerous symbols and references to (white) Afrikaner history.

Throughout the 1990s various developments within the South film industry stimulated the production of especially short films, a significant development in the growth of the post-apartheid film industry. The pay-television station M-NET initiated a project entitled NEW DIRECTIONS to give talented first-time South African and other African filmmakers and scriptwriters a break into the film industry. By 1999 M-NET's MagicWorks had completed 20 short films and two features. This project became a showcase for new talent in this country, and has led to some outstanding short films such as *Come See the Bioscope*, *Angel* and *Salvation*. First-time directors and screenwriters, some of them female and/or black, explored a diversity of themes. Director Khalo Matabane and scriptwriter Mtutuzeli Matshoba, for example, created an award-winning comedy *Chikin Biz'nis* about the vibrant South African informal economic sector, which provides millions of unemployed urban South Africans with alternative livelihood. Russell Thompson and Patrick Shai explored South Africa's culture of violence respectively in *The Pink Leather Chair* and *Stray Bullet*, while directors Dumisani Phakathi and Tamsin McCarthy highlighted intimate relationships against the background of the new South African democracy respectively in *An Old Wife's Tale* and *Cry Me A Baby*. Relevant social problems such as drug abuse (*Stimulation*) and abortion (*The Apology*) were also explored in these M-NET short films.

Regional initiatives further encouraged short film production. The former Cape Film and Video Foundation<sup>(12)</sup> and the South African Scriptwriters Association (SASWA) in collaboration with The National Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology funded three short films, entitled *Kap an Driver*, a beautiful exploration of racial relations in the "new" South Africa; *On the Rocks*, about an affluent white man's encounter with Cape Town's homeless people; and *Stompie and the Red Tide*, also about Cape Town's homeless. The Southern African International Film and Television Market (Sithengi)<sup>(13)</sup>, which was held annually in Cape Town until 2006, became an important forum for locally made features and short films

The year 1998 highlighted an important Pan-African short film initiative, called *African Dreaming*. The array of six short films was a major co-production, the first of its kind on the continent, which had drawn on talent from Mozambique, Namibia, Senegal, Tunisia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. International funding came from the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the Hubert Bals Fund in the Netherlands, Cable channel La Sept/Arte in France, YLE TV2 in Finland, HIVOS and NCDO in Holland, the CNC in France, the French Ministry of co-operation and Video Lab in South Africa. Deals and contracts were co-ordinated by one of South Africa's leading producers, Jeremy Nathan, through his company Catalyst Films. The South African film, *Mamlambo*, a love story between a black boy and a Chinese girl, gave first-time female and black director, Palesa Letlaka-Nkosi chance to direct a fiction film<sup>(14)</sup>.

During the 1990s short filmmaking in South Africa finally received international acclaim. Among the other short films, Gavin Hood's *The Storekeeper* stood out<sup>(15)</sup>. It is a devastating portrait of the culture of violence in South Africa. Without relying on dialogue Hood tells the story of an elderly man who owns a small, isolated shop in rural South Africa. After several burglaries he takes the law in his own hands - with shocking consequences. Hood's film won as overall best short film at the Nashville Independent Film Festival. It also won the bronze for best dramatic short at the Houston International Film Festival.

Ironically only a few directors in the M-NET series moved on to features, for example, Ken Kaplan (*The Children and I*) directed the award-winning black comedy, *Pure Blood*; Russell Thompson (*The Pink Leather Chair*) made the gangster movie, *The Sexy Girls*, and Zola Maseko (*A Drink in the Passage*) directed *Drum*.

### **Thematic and Aesthetic Concerns in Post-apartheid Cinema**

Post-apartheid cinema in general is characterized by the emergence of new voices and a diversification of themes. One thinks of a new generation of filmmakers such as Zola Maseko (*The Life and Times of Sara Baartman*, *Drum*, *A Drink in the Passage*), Ntshavheni Wa Luruli (*Chikin Biz'nis - The Whole Story*, *The Wooden Camera*), Mark Dornford-May (*U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, *Son of Man*), Gustav Kuhn (*Ouma se Slim Kind*), Rehad Desai (*Born into Struggle*, *Bushman's Secret*), Donovan Marsh (*Dollars and White Pipes*), Akin Omotoso (*God is African*, *Rifle Road*, *Jesus and the Giant*), David Hickson (*Beat the Drum*), Teboho Mahlatsi (*Portrait of a Young Man Drowning*, *Yizo Yizo*, *Sekalli sa Meokgo*), Dumisani Phakathi (*Christmas with Granny*, *Waiting for Valdez*), Ramadan Suleman (*Fools*, *Zulu love letter*), Maganthrie Pillay (*34 South*), Sechaba Morojele (*Ubuntu's Wounds*), Gavin Hood (*A Reasonable Man*, *Tsotsi*), Zulfah Otto

Sallies (*Raya, Don't Touch*), Teddy Mattera (*Max and Mona*), Andre Odendaal (*Skilpoppe*), Tim Greene (*Boy called Twist*), Riaan Hendricks (*A Fisherman's Tale*), Khalo Matabane (*Chikin Biz'nis, Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon*), Jason Xenopoulos (*Promised Land*), Madoda Ncayiyana (*The Sky in Her Eyes, A Child is a child, My Secret Sky*), Portia Rankoane (*Tsietsi, My Hero*), Thabang Moleya (*Portrait of a Dark Soul, Case 474*), Willem Grobler (*Considerately Killing Me*), Louis du Toit (*When Tomorrow Calls, 'n Roos vir Mari*), Tristan Holmes (*Elalini*), Garth Meyer (*Killer October, Bitter Water*), Inger Smith (*The One that fits inside the Bathtub, Love Poem*), Harold Holscher (*iBali, 'n Sprokie*), Neill Blomkamp (*Alive in JHB*), Dean Blumberg (*Under the Rainbow, Black Sushi*), John Warner (*Note to Self*), Brett Melvill-Smith (*Tracks*), Bryan Little (*Tagged Toilets*), Nina Mnaya (*Life is Hard*), Matthew Cowles (*The Tooth Fairy*) and Norman Maake (*Soldiers of the Rock, Homecoming*).

*Marginalized communities get a voice*

For the first time South African audiences are exposed to certain marginalized communities, such as the homeless in Francois Verster's remarkable documentary *Pavement Aristocrats: The Bergies of Cape Town* (1998), the Himbas of Kaokoland in Craig Matthew's *Ochre and Water* (2001), AIDS victims in *Shouting Silent* (2001), the gay subcultures of the fifties and sixties in *The Man Who Drove With Mandela* (1998)<sup>(16)</sup> and the San Bushmen in the Foster Brothers' visual poem *The Great Dance* (2000)<sup>(17)</sup>.

A gallery of marginal lives is seen in a variety of features, documentaries and shorts<sup>(18)</sup>:

- Homelessness and poverty
  - *Angel, The Wooden Camera, The Flyer, Under the Rainbow, Boy Called Twist, Stompie and the Red Tide, Pavement Aristocrats: The Bergies of Cape Town, Malunde, Hillbrow Kids, Faith's Corner, Tsotsi, Boesman and Lena, Tracks, Azure, Life is Hard, Zimbabwe, Meisie.*
- AIDS orphans
  - *Shouting Silent, The Sky in her Eyes, A Child is a Child, Lucky, Zimbabwe.*
- AIDS victims
  - *Yesterday, It's My Life, Beat the Drum, Considerately Killing Me, Nkosi.*
- Gays and lesbians
  - *Proteus, Property of the State: Gay men in the Apartheid military, The Man Who Drove With Mandela, Skilpoppe, Apostles of Civilised Vice.*
- "Cultures under threat"
  - *Ochre and Water, The Great Dance.*
- Foreigners in South Africa and xenophobia
  - *The Foreigner, Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon, A shadow of hope, The Burning Man.*
- Victims of institutionalized violence during apartheid
  - *Zulu Love Letter, Ubuntu's Wounds, Forgiveness, Red Dust, The Guguletu Seven, What happened to Mbuyisa?, Between Joyce and Remembrance, Betrayal, Drum.*
- Victims of colonial racism
  - *The Life and Times of Sarah Baartman.*
- Victims of child rape
  - *And there in the Dust*
- Intellectually challenged youths and the community's discrimination - *Ouma se Slim Kind*
- Victims of drug addiction
- *Ongeriewe*

Marginalized communities finally have a voice in our post-apartheid cinema. Over the past fifteen years one has observed the remarkable revival in short filmmaking. Among the M-Net New Directions series Barry Berk's lovely film on the homeless in *Angel* (1996) and Dumisani Phakati's poetic coming-of-age tales, *Christmas of Granny* (1999) and especially *Waiting for Valdez* (2002) tower above the other shorts. Berk's *Angel* focuses on a group of homeless people in Cape Town. By contrasting their desperate situation with the beauty of the city and its surroundings, Berk has created a very moving portrait of people living on the margin of South African society. Phakati's *Waiting for Valdez* is a visually eloquent evocation of a twisted society seen through a child's eyes. Set against the backdrop of forced removals in the 1970s the film deals with the popular memory of many South Africans, who lived during that dark period. The film deals consciously with themes about identity, especially racial identity and its complexities (Maingard 2007). But the film is also a lyrical, poignant tale of a young boy torn between his love for his dying grandmother and the desire to sneak out for nightly street recitals, around a drum fire, of movies his friends have seen at the local cinema.

One of the most impressive recent short films, which examines the impact of AIDS on South African society is Willem Grobler's multi-award winning (2005). Winner of Best South African Short (Newcomer) at the 2006 Apollo Film Festival the short is the tragic tale of love and loss. It takes an introspective look at the life of John, a young South African filmmaker who has to deal with issues common among young adults today. John is confronted with the unstable political climate of Southern Africa and the rest of the world on a daily basis. He struggles as the local film industry is difficult to break into, and in trying to escape from the harsh realities of this world he submerges himself in a sea of hedonism, which results in his HIV/AIDS condition. *Considerately Killing Me*

#### *Confronting the past and the present*

Another important theme in post-apartheid cinema is how South Africans are dealing with the traumatic past and how they are adjusting to the dramatic socio-political changes in contemporary South African society.

*Ubuntu's Wounds* (2003) is a landmark in our post-apartheid cinema. While several local documentaries have dealt with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission<sup>(19)</sup>, Sechaba Morojele's film is the first attempt outside documentary film making to examine the effectiveness of the process and it questions whether real forgiveness is possible in response to truly inhuman acts. And it is a considerable achievement to raise and examine these questions in less than 35 minutes. The film also shows off Morojele as an actor's director, eliciting strong performances from his ensemble cast.

Zola Maseko's moving *A Drink in the Passage* (2002) is a powerful short film about a touching encounter between a white and black man in South Africa during the 1960s. A celebrated black sculptor recalls the curious events, which led him to share a drink of brandy with a white family during the height of apartheid. It is a complex contemplation on the personal dimensions of enforced segregation and the power of art to transcend the divide.

The criminal past and leaving it behind is the theme of Zulfah Otto-Sallies's *Raya* (2001), a story of three generations of women, their struggles and reconciliation. It is a visually beautiful insight into a closed, conservative community not often reflected on our screens.

*When Tomorrow Calls* (2003) is an important short film by a young graduate, Louis du Toit, from one of South Africa's film schools, the CityVarsity School of Media and Creative Arts. In only eleven minutes the poetic and highly symbolic narrative depicts an old order of the apartheid years making way for a new dispensation of hope and reconciliation in the story of an Afrikaans boy and a Xhosa boy facing each other as human beings. Shot in Afrikaans and Xhosa the film also depicts an Afrikaner nuclear family clearly characterised by the absence of the mother, and a father belonging to the past and unable to assist his son to adjust to the changing socio-political landscape of a post-apartheid South Africa. These cultural indicators are surprisingly also present in the Afrikaans short films of a new generation of directors: Rudi Steyn's *Senter* (2003), J-H Beetge's *Trionfeer* (2002), Danie Bester's *Skitterwit* (2003) and Johan Nel's *Swing Left Frank* (2003). Despite working independently from each other, the same images of the Afrikaner nuclear family in a post-apartheid society appear in these exciting shorts, especially with regard to the absence of

the Afrikaner mother!<sup>(20)</sup>

Nel's work especially is important as deliberate deconstructions of the soothing images of white Afrikaners in South African cinema of the 1970s. With a few exceptions Afrikaans language films ignored the socio-political turmoil of the period, as well as the realities experienced by black South Africans. Most Afrikaans language films communicated by means of obsolete symbols that had little multicultural communication value. They painted a one-sided and stereotypical portrait of the Afrikaner, leading to a misconception about who and what the Afrikaner was. Furthermore, the negative portrayal of blacks as a servant class in these films is a visual symbol of the deep-seated apartheid ideology. Nel has attempted to look at Afrikaners in all their ugliness and multi-facets: In a series of short films ranging from *Malpit* to his best, *Swing Left Frank*, the idealized image of the white Afrikaner is challenged and analyzed in a critical manner<sup>(21)</sup>.

#### *An experimentation with form*

Film schools have become vital in a post-apartheid South African cinema to expose students to international cinema, as well as to focus on the technological, social, aesthetical and political highlights in the development of cinema in all its facets. Apart from skills training South African film schools have the responsibility to nurture new voices in an industry, which has a long history in which many voices were silenced - those from the black majority, women, gays and lesbians<sup>(22)</sup>. Film is not only for getting bums on seats, but *also* a means of self-expression by voices which were silent during the apartheid years. Those voices could belong to blacks, women, gays and lesbians, and others, who never had the opportunity to express themselves in the cinema under apartheid.

Some award-winning short films from graduates should be mentioned here:

At the 25<sup>th</sup> Stone Awards Evening of the National Television and Video Association (NTVA) in 2003 Holscher's short *iBali* not only picked up a Stone Award for overall excellence, but garnered craft awards for directing, acting, cinematography and animation. The film is a magnificent blending of magic realism and African mythology, with touches of the urban alienation of Michelangelo Antonioni (Holscher is an admirer of *Zabriskie Point*), the surrealism of Djibril Diop Mambety and the beautiful compositions of Stanley Kubrick. Holscher states that *iBali* "came from an idea of living one's heritage, one's culture." He is fascinated by myths and fables, especially in the cinemas of Mambety and Kusturica. The plot of *iBali* conveys how African heritage is passed from generation to generation through the art of story telling. It is a mythical tale about a boy discovering the essence of water.

The film is one of the first from a local film school, which actually explores the possibilities of orality in South African film narrative. It aims at an indigenous mode of aesthetics and judged by the national and international recognition, seems to succeed. *Ibali* was selected for the 14th African Film Festival in Milan and formed part of the best of the shorts compilation. It was also selected for the Commonwealth Film Festival in Manchester and also toured the United Kingdom as part of the best of the festival. It was invited to the 7th Genova Film Festival, as well as the 2004 Cape Town World Cinema festival.

Holscher graduated from the CityVarsity School of Media and Creative Arts with a list of awards that testify to his talent. During 2002 his experimental musical narrative *In Progress* won awards for directing and the overall production. In the same year he received awards for *'n Sprokie*, another "fairytale like *iBali*", characterized by exquisite visuals (another craft award), shot on 16mm. Adapted from an Afrikaans story it tells the sad tale of a woman waiting for her son to return from the war in Angola, but he will never return and the war has been lost...

Another graduate of CityVarsity School of Media and Creative Arts, the 26 year old John Warner has so far won no less than 11 local awards for his short films, music videos and advertisements. His greatest achievement to date is a short entitled *Note to Self* (2001), which won Gold and a craft award for directing at the 2001 NTVA Stone Awards ceremony. The film was screened in the official *Ten Years of Democracy in South Africa retrospective* at the 7th Genoa film festival and Warner was an invited guest.

Highly ambitious for a final year 35mm student production *Note to Self* is a surreal, almost Lynchian glimpse of the traumatic past still haunting our present. Two stories, one about a young man who kidnapped a girl, the other about two lovers who intend to meet for a Valentine's dinner, are seamlessly integrated into a dreamlike narrative. It is also a textbook of intertextuality: In only 12 minutes references are made to *Blue*

*Velvet*, *The Cell*, *Wild at Heart* and *Natural Born Killers*. But this postmodern piece remains Warner's own original vision and has been acknowledged as such by the juries, who gave him an award for his direction. Technically it surpasses the majority of final year student productions by local film schools. It was selected in 2003 as one of the Best of RESFEST Africa and was screened in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg to a very warm reception especially from young audiences. Wherever it was screened in Cape Town audiences were stunned by the technical quality and beauty of the surreal images. *Note to Self* displays another characteristic in Warner's body of work, namely the deliberate subversion of movie genres. Throughout his shorts Warner played around with genre conventions and making references to various film examples.

Equally impressive is *Killer October* (2004) by Garth Meyer, also a graduate of the CityVarsity. By means of stunning visuals and an evocative sound design Meyer tells the story of a young boy, who loses a loved one due to an unknown disease. The film hints at AIDS, which currently ravages Zimbabwe and could be the "killer" of the title. The boy embarks on a mythical journey to find a resting place for the ashes of his parent. Documentary and African myth are impressively integrated in this short, which had its South African premiere at the Apollo Film festival in Victoria West, where it won Best South African short film, and its African premiere at Zanzibar during 2005. Meyer's *Bitter Water (Marah)* is even more impressive than *Killer October*. The 37 minutes short explores the link between old beliefs in supernatural forces and modern social deterioration as a result of failing morals in a rural community. The approach is magical realism. Two parallel plots involve a boy's story of revenging his sister's death and the more subliminal story of the *inyanga's*<sup>(23)</sup> power to "make" a child for himself by using his powers. Oral storytelling is vividly explored.

Oral storytelling in recent short filmmaking reached an aesthetic peak in Teboho Mahlatsi's *Sekalli Le Meokgo (Meokgo and the Stickfighter)*. Visually ravishing this innovative short tells the story of Kgotso, a reclusive, concertina-playing stickfighter, who encounters the spirit of a beguiling woman, Meokgo, and rescues her from an evil horseman. Kgotso lives a solitary life high up in the Maluti Mountains of Lesotho.

Whilst tending sheep and playing his concertina, he sees a beautiful and mysterious woman staring at him dreamily from the water. This story of unrequited love and sacrifice captures both the cruelty and the beauty of African magical beliefs. The film is in fact a fable that draws equally on Mozart's "The Magic Flute" and the living power of magic in traditional African cultures. Mahlatsi brilliantly uses bold, iconic images to build an elemental conflict worthy of a Sergio Leone western.<sup>(24)</sup>

## Conclusion

Any overview of the revival in South African short-film making is incomplete without a brief reference to an exciting animation cinema which has been emerging since the 1980s. The most important exponent is the artist William Kentridge. In *Vetkoek fete galante*, an animated silent film, Kentridge made fun of the State of emergency of the 1980s. It was made during that period, but before blank spaces was declared subversive. The short chronicled the history of one such blank space. At the Twelfth Durban International Film Festival four of his short animation films were presented under the title *Animations by William Kentridge 1978-1989*. Kentridge used various techniques in creating these animation shorts. His Soho Eckstein saga depicts the battle between Soho Eckstein (property developer) and Felix Teitlebaum for the hearts and mines of Johannesburg. One of the shorts in the saga, *Mine*, subtly but scathingly indicts the mining industry. *Monument*, animated by means of a charcoal technique, chronicled the life of Soho as a civic benefactor. The whole saga has been assembled into a full-length feature film *9 Drawings for Projection*, which was screened for the first time in South Africa in 2004.

In recent animation shorts such as *The Shadow Boy* (2007) and *The Mbulu's Bride* (2006) by Justine Puren, oral storytelling, African mythology and animation are creatively integrated.

This article is a mere mapping of a very significant field. Future studies of post-apartheid cinema need to take the significant revival of short filmmaking in South Africa into account. Exciting directorial voices such as Garth Meyer, Dumisani Phakhati, Willem Grobler, Teboho Mahlatsi, Justin Puren, Inger Smith, Johan Nel, Nina Mnaya and John Warner hold immense promise for future feature filmmaking in post-apartheid South Africa.



## Notes

1. A historical overview of South African documentary filmmaking between 1895 and 2007 is provided by Botha (2006c).
2. The significant contribution of directors such as Rautenbach, Devenish and Van Rensburg has been explored in Botha (2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2007), as well as Botha and Dethier (1997).
3. For the purpose of this article short films are defined as audiovisual material on film, video or DVD which is shorter than 60 minutes in duration.
4. The establishment of the NFVF and its role in the development of a post-apartheid film industry is documented by Botha (2003a).
5. See Botha (2003a).
6. The impact of South African film policies on the national identity of the post-apartheid cinema is currently under investigation by Astrid Treffry-Goatley in a PhD study at the University of Cape Town.
7. The former South African subsidy scheme is documented by Tomaselli (1989), Botha and Van Aswegen (1992), Blignaut and Botha (1992), as well as Botha (2003a, 2004).
8. See Botha (2003a).
9. See Gabriel (1989) for a comprehensive discussion on popular memory and cinema.
10. See Diawara (1996) for a discussion on oral storytelling in African cinemas. Chirol (1999) provides an analysis of the narrative structure of *Wend Kuuni*.
11. See Peach (2007) for the most comprehensive history yet of queer filmmaking in South Africa.
12. A new structure, the Cape Film Commission (CFC) was established during 1999.
13. Sithengi was later incorporated into the Cape Town World Cinema Film Festival.
14. When one studies the first 100 years of South African cinema it is clear that the industry was extremely male dominated in terms of directors. Only a few female directors managed to make features (Katinka Heyns, Elaine Proctor, Helena Noguiera) and only since the 1990s were black female directors able to break into the industry (Palesa Nkosi, Xoliswa Sithole, Meganthrie Pillay, Zulfah Otto-Sallies and others).
15. Hood later won an Oscar for *Tsotsi* (2006).
16. See Botha (2003b).
17. See Van Vuuren's brilliant analysis of *The Great Dance* (Van Vuuren 2007).
18. See Botha (2007) for a comprehensive discussion on Marginality and post-apartheid cinema.
19. See Pichaske (2007) and Marx (2007).
20. Botha (2006a) examines these cultural indicators in Afrikaans cinema from the 1960s till 2006.
21. An in-depth analysis of the film is provided by Rossouw Nel (2007).
22. See Botha, MP. 2003. Homosexuality and South African cinema. *Kinema* 19(Spring):39-64. The article provides a history of the oppression of gay voices in a cinema under apartheid.
23. Traditional healer.
24. An excellent discussion on old beliefs and modern lifestyles in a selection of recent South African films, including shorts, is provided by Wozniak (2007).

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