

## CHAPTER 5

### MAPANTSULA: FILM AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

This chapter explores the making and public life of *Mapantsula*, (1988) an overtly anti-apartheid *engagé* film about a petty gangster in the 1980's political unrest in South African townships. The chapter confines itself to the early public life of the film, the period from 1988 to the early 90's.

In the opening sequence of the film, the revving engine of a fearsome *kwela kwela* police van screeching around a corner spoils the merriment of children playing in a Soweto street. As they scatter in different directions, the camera steals into the back of the vehicle where anxious men and women in political slogan-bedecked t-shirts are forced to share its limited space. A man sleeps uncomfortably in the corner. His name is Johannes Themba Mzolo *aka* Panic. His flashy suit sets him apart from the rest. Panic's arrest is the result of his presence at a demonstration against rent hikes earlier that day. In prison, his captors attempt to persuade him to incriminate Duma, a trade union and civic leader. Through flashbacks, we encounter Panic's criminal exploits in the inner city of Johannesburg and unfortunate personal circumstances in nearby Soweto. His unsavoury and sometimes ambivalent relationships with various people, comrades, rival thugs, his kitchen-maid girlfriend Pat and her employer, proprietor Ma-Modise and the police, are revealed in subsequent scenes. After a long and torturous reflection, Panic declines to sign a document that would effectively amount to incriminating Duma.

Central to the chapter's exploration is the question of how *Mapantsula* relates to the public critical engagements on the nature of black identity and on the key preoccupation of the time, the anti-apartheid struggle. It inquires into the publicness of *Mapantsula* - that is the conditions of, and tendencies in the public engagements of the film. The chapter critically builds on the approaches of Kluge, and Hansen on the question of film and the public sphere, through its reflection on what I call the 'public critical potency' of

film. It attempts to develop further a public sphere perspective on South African film scholarship and to reassess the limits and possibilities that Kluge and Hansen's reflections may bring to bear on how *engagé* films relate to the public sphere. Thus, in terms of form, production history and circumstances of circulation, *Mapantsula* is significantly distinguishable from the previous films, and allows a fresh perspective into the forms of publicness that different films may constitute. The chapter argues that their approaches labour with the conceptually restrictive understanding of the relationship between 'film' and 'public', and ultimately underplay the 'public critical potency' of film. Through *Mapantsula*, the chapter further argues that under certain circumstances, the public sphere of film can be more extensive and critical than Hansen and Kluge's works suggest. It proposes that only by considering films as texts that circulate over time, as well as their generic makeup, and contexts of engagement, can we fully appreciate the nature and status of film in the public sphere. Part of the processes through which the public life of *Mapantsula* can be understood can be teased from its generic make up or form and context of production.

### **Form in *Mapantsula***

In terms of form, *Mapantsula* is made in the gangster genre and Third-Cinema register. Introduced through a manifesto by Argentine filmmakers and theorists, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, Third Cinema is a politically-charged cinematic theory that opposes what they conceptualized as First Cinema (Hollywood) and Second Cinema (European *auteur* Cinema). Solanas and Getino perceived Hollywood as bourgeois and market-driven cinema. In their view, Second Cinema represents an intellectual though modest but misplaced rapprochement with Hollywood and its attendant decadence. The manifesto consciously stressed a political element in film theory. Third Cinema was not however a model of practice, but a set of ideas in the debates about the uses of film in the Third World (Barnard 1986: 103-104). Ideally, the vision of Third Cinema is a collective, militant and *engagé* cinema that would explore all aspects of Latin American life (Solanas and

Getino in Stam 2000: 265-286). Its openness to various aspects and themes enables Third Cinema to go beyond overtly political narratives.

According to Maingard's reading of film theorist Paul Willemen, 'classical' Third Cinema is constituted by three key elements, namely, its opposition to sloganeering, refusal to prescribe an aesthetics, and emphasis on relations between signification and the social world (Willemen in Maingard 1998: 63). Part of the recent work on Third Cinema highlights its predilection for a dialectical representation of history, critical commitment to political causes, and cultural specificity- that is the recognition of culture as a site of political struggle (Wayne 2001: 14-24). Over and above this, Third Cinema encourages parallel distribution of films in order to facilitate discussions about current issues among working class audiences. This is meant to enable the achievement of its goal of raising social consciousness. In *Mapantsula*, this seems to occur in relation to Panic.

In centering Panic, a gangster genre figure – in its narrative, *Mapantsula* introduces into its Third Cinema discourse, an intratextual device that forces the audience to confront its moral and political certitudes. For film scholar Mike Wayne, Panic actually anchors the Third Cinema impetus of addressing the process through which gangsters achieve political awakening. He contrasts this tendency in *Mapantsula* to *Battle of Algiers* (1965), which he argues, elides this process (Wayne 2001: 84). However, the extent to which the film's Third Cinema backdrop, (part of which is the appropriation of a gangster genre) informs the relation of *Mapantsula* to the public sphere must be tested against the actual discursive and political context of its making and circulation.

### **In the Pangs of Freedom's Labour: the Perilous Production of *Mapantsula***

The production of *Mapantsula* in the mid-80's coincided with, and was animated by, a highly charged moment in South African politics. An increasingly antagonistic grassroots political coalition in the form of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and other organizations actively challenged the reformist apartheid state. Formed in August 1983,

the UDF was an alliance of worker, civic organizations and student movements. Membership of the UDF was open to any organization that supported the then banned African National Congress's Freedom Charter. By 1988, the UDF and several other opposition groups were virtually banned under Emergency restrictions. Demonstrations against rent hikes, civic matters and boycotting of white businesses were a common occurrence. This effectively rendered the public space in 80's South Africa volatile and highly contested.

Confronted with a paranoid and censorious apartheid state, the filmmakers, Oliver Schmitz and Thomas Mogotlane, concocted a false script for a gangster film, which they presented to the investors and authorities (Schmitz and Mogotlane 1991: 23, 31). Although the film changed, the final draft retained elements of the original gangster genre. The title also remained because of its relevance to the film. 'Mapantsula' refers to a South African township sub-culture of petty gangsters who are largely influenced by American movies of the gangster genre.

The exigencies of the anti-apartheid political atmosphere compelled the filmmakers to seek political legitimacy for their project. They found it in the underground political structures, the exiled African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC). This ensured a relatively smooth shoot in Soweto, and set the scene for an equally free international circulation of the film. At the same time, it defined the film's publicness in terms of the actual anti-apartheid struggles and enhanced its public critical potency. This occurred through relating the film to the discursive space of the anti-apartheid struggle. The organizations also protected the film against the opinion of some in the cultural boycott, that its international circulation undermined the objectives of the boycott. The then four decades-old boycott was a strategy of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Its objective was to prevent the exportation of South African cultural products, and the importation of international culture, in order to encourage the isolation of South Africa internationally, and with it, the demise of apartheid. The moral and

political authority of the ANC, PAC and grassroots political organs in the township implies that their role in the endorsement of the film was an important intervention in political terms. The filmmakers' manoeuvres around censorship, and ensuring of alternative political endorsement, foreshadowed the constrained nature of the film's publicness. It appears therefore, that the encounter between the content of films, with the circumstances of the film's production and circulation, are important to how their engagements might be set up.

However, it is precisely the film's imbrication within a terrain of deliberations across the anti-apartheid political spectrum that made *Mapantsula* more than an anti-apartheid film, or simply entertainment. Therein lay its potency for public critical intervention. In drawing upon the unfolding political circumstances, and in putting film at the service of questions that arose from it, the filmmakers provided a sharp and profound illustration of its import in public deliberation. The experiences and subjectivity of the filmmakers constituted the first site of that imbrication.

The narrative of *Mapantsula* is partly based on Mogotlane's experiences (Mogotlane T. *Sowetan*, 1988, 29 August). Mogotlane hailed from the tradition of protest theatre in South Africa. His debut in screenwriting was with the screen translation of Kente's township anti-apartheid protest play *How Long?* (1976). Having worked for Heyns films, he also boasted a background in television, as a translator. In addition to being the main actor in *Mapantsula*, Mogotlane was second unit director, casting director and co-scriptwriter in the film. His involvement in the film was historically significant because of the dearth of black filmmakers at the time. Mogotlane's participation further gave the film the advantage of an 'insider' and therefore, an authentic 'feel' to it: 'So I felt that now, it will be wonderful writing something about myself, writing something about my situation, about my people, which would be authentic and true' (cited in Davis 1996: 120).

Schmitz's involvement in underground political organizations in South Africa was a contributing factor in the production of *Mapantsula*. One of these, Video News Services operated as a 'news company for foreign commissions, but was really making work for the underground distribution for youth and political networks within the country' (Dovey 2005b, 192). In their attempts at weaving a narrative steeped in political and social reality, the filmmakers used clips from smuggled newsreels, which influenced the confrontation scenes between the police and protestors (Davis 1996: 199). The news-clips added to the historical authenticity of the scenes.

The filmmakers wished to construct a nuanced narrative that 'hit the specifics of the society' they were trying to depict, and they expressed a desire to centre marginalized images of township life, energy and humour in it. Panic's relationship with people, activists, and surroundings would become, in the filmmakers' reasoning, a lynchpin through which *Mapantsula* addressed itself to political questions. Accordingly, Panic's narrative would provoke a rational-critical consideration of the status quo. At the same time however, Panic's iconicity of political subversion, facilitated through his exploits in a recognizable township milieu, also invited the township viewer's fantastical identification with his revolutionary potential. Thus, in addition to the rational-critical approach to the film, the stress on identification with Panic and other cinematic marginalia is indicative of the filmmakers' desire to cultivate an affective rapport with the film, particularly in the marginalized viewer. This is a compelling challenge to the ascription of critical engagement on the narrow focus of the rational-critical mode of engagement. It suggests that the affect which film encompasses can be a significant contribution to public debate, and that through it, filmic aesthetics as a mode of representation can lay claim to critical public engagement.

Panic, the anti-hero of *Mapantsula* fell squarely within the filmmakers' intended audience among whom Schmitz notes the 'unemployed people and *tsotsis* who frequented the bughouse cinemas like the one in *Mapantsula*'. In his words, 'maybe the film could have

some impact on them and possibly change their lives' (Schmitz and Mogotlane 1991: 42). The bughouse cinemas were by definition, alternative - suggesting an established condition for autonomous organization of experience *a la* Negt and Kluge- by *lumpen* blacks. While such a possibility cannot be discounted, the racially segregated, limited in number and, tightly regulated cinemas in apartheid South Africa, meant that *Mapantsula* faced difficulties and possibilities in terms of garnering publicness, other than the ones Hansen identifies in early American cinema. However, the ever-looming threat of censorship, the availability of video technology, and the existence of networks of alternative distribution laid the terrain for varied ways in which film could be accessed and its themes articulated. Thus, sites of reception and spaces for articulating experience, did not rest with the cinema in its normative bourgeois state as such, but were many and unstable.

The filmmakers' projection of the film's primary audience draws attention to its public dimension. They imagined the audience of the film in terms of a collective agency, a kind of motive force and importantly, a public with a latent potency to challenge first itself, and then the state. Underlying this move is an authorial staking of the film on the political conscientization of the *lumpen* classes and contribution to the liberation struggle. Importantly, Schmitz located the role of the film, which he called revolutionary, in the interplay between the film and its audiences (Schmitz and Mogotlane 1991: 49).

The circumstances in which *Mapantsula* was made present ostensibly self-evident grounds for publicness that was oriented to liberation politics. Its underground milieu, and drive towards authenticity, indicate that *Mapantsula* was imbued with a layered history of the public sphere of grassroots liberation politics. This raises the question of whether the confluence of the film's production circumstances, with this public sphere, had or did not have a constitutive effect on its publicness. This chapter will tease out from the film's contexts of circulation, the relation of the film's publicness to the public sphere of

liberation politics. It also tracks more extensively *Mapantsula's* actual pathways of circulation, and through this, elucidates further the nature of the film's publicness.

### **Circulating Freedom Un-freely or the Embattled Journeys of *Mapantsula***

*Mapantsula* premiered in 1988 and almost immediately, the South African censorship authorities banned it. Rationalizing their actions, the authorities expressed their fear of the film's potential to incite "probable viewers" to act violently; result in friction between blacks and whites (employers and employees); encourage confrontation with the police and send the message of non-cooperation with the authorities' (in Davis 1996: 121). However, the banning did not bar its viewership by people considered adult by the Censorship Board (18 years and over), and in venues of not more than 200 seats (Davis 1996: 122). The authorities also demanded that certain cuts be made to the film. Interestingly, the banning order restricted the distribution of *Mapantsula* to video. According to Davis, the censors believed that 'the large screen amplifies the dangerous political effects the film could have on probable viewers in this country' (Davis 1996: 122).

Thus, in the censors' rationale, the large screen of the cinema approximated reality in a way, which, together with the occupation of substantially shared public space, could have easily galvanized black viewers into actual political action. Considering the germaneness of the film to black people's political aspirations, and South African cinemas' perpetuation of racially exclusive experiences of cinema, the censors were not far off the mark. Interestingly, their mistrust of the cinema appears to chime with Hansen's argument regarding the role of the structural conditions of the cinema, in relation to the public dimension of cinematic spectatorship. However, cinematic culture in the apartheid period was racially segregationist and the structures unstable. This suggests uncertainties about its capacity for the autonomous organization of experience, particularly for the oppressed urban black proletariat. Yet, its structural conditions regardless, the cinema in the apartheid era, posed a political threat to the state and capital, not only as a space for the autonomous articulation of experience, but also as a critical context for the mobilization of

agency. In contexts such as those of apartheid South Africa, it is important to cast an analytical eye beyond the structure of the cinema as a condition for the founding of an alternative public sphere. In that way, we can see that the conjunction of actual politics with *Mapantsula*- a film considered germane to such politics, constitute the measure of cinema's capacity for stimulating critical engagements in spite of the limits attendant on cinematic experience.

Ironically, the censorship also yielded grounds for the reputation or notoriety of the film as an intervention in the political conditions of the day. Access to the film on video certainly meant that its rate of travelling increased, and its journeys became unpredictable. It is notable that, due to its censorship conditions, and the reluctance of major distributors, *Mapantsula* was not exhibited in the conventional cinema complexes. This might have also enhanced its status as a potentially progressive text, at a time when such kinds of work were mostly regarded with open hostility by the state and capital, and prized by their opponents.

Maingard (1994: 238) noted that, 'the film was viewed by an extraordinary range of groups from community groups to student organizations to union meetings and street gatherings in both urban and rural areas'. Prisoners on Robben Island had their own copy, as did *uMkhonto we Sizwe* (or MK, armed wing of the ANC) insurgents in Zambian camps (Schmitz and Mogotlane 1991, 47). The primary publics then were the imprisoned, the exiled, grassroots organizations and those in the remote corners of South Africa for whom *Mapantsula* had the distinction of serving as a discursive prism and as a visual window into township conditions. The chance viewings of the film by these groupings, in spite of the prohibitive conditions around its circulation, are a signal of its circumscribed publicness and of the import of the film for them. It can thus be argued that the publicness of *Mapantsula* was in these circumstances and at that time, inscribed with the urgency of political liberation. As such, the film's resonance, and stimulation of actually existing political resistance constituted the discursive horizons of its initial publicness. It can be

surmised that the film's unplanned, clandestine distribution and, conditional banning are significant in that they played a constitutive role in its publicness. This is a publicness in which the film's militant gestures were critically appreciated within and against the actually unfolding militant character of the organizations and groupings that accessed it. A debate over the film between two exiled members of the ANC evinces this observation.

### **The Ambiguities of *Lumpen* Presences**

Between 1989 and 1990, significant public engagements of *Mapantsula* occurred, in the course of which the liberation movement wrestled with the idea of the political import of the film in the anti-apartheid struggle. This took place in the pages of *Sechaba*, a political journal publicized as the 'official organ of the African National Congress'. The debate drew attention to *Mapantsula* as a cinematic mediation of the local political circumstances and imperatives for the internationally- based activists and critics.

Ralph Mzamo, then exiled member of the ANC and an MK cadre, praised the film as a positive contribution to the fight against apartheid. He contrasted it to earlier films whose main thrust, he argued, was a reflection of 'bourgeois ideological conventions, in marginalizing the Blacks, distorting their culture, and being economical with historical fact, when not downright derisive' (Mzamo 1989: 31-2). For Mzamo, *Mapantsula* nonetheless, was 'a piece of naïve integrationism' which simply replaced the white heroes with black ones. In respect to gender, Mzamo saw women as adjuncts in a narrative that was mainly about the exploits of a male hero, a gangster genre convention. The thrust of his argument was that the film's projection of the black hero manifests an undesirable vision of 'cultural decadence and lack of organizational control'.

Thando Zuma, another ANC activist writing from Lusaka, challenged Mzamo's views. For her, the significance of the film lay in the last scene when Panic declined to cooperate with the police (Zuma 1990, 26-7). In contrast to Mzamo, Zuma found the substance of the film

in the outcome of Panic's altercations with the police and not the replay of his *lumpen* lifestyle outside prison. In Zuma's view, Panic's exploits were a narrative illustration of the conspicuous extent of apartheid effects on even those who were outside the relations of production.

Zuma resisted the interpretation of Panic's actions as more than a natural reaction that results from frustration. Accordingly, Panic's actions could not possibly constitute solutions as Mzamo was inclined to think. Further, the importance of the film, Zuma suggested, lay in the film's exposure of the situation of the domestic workers in South Africa; both in Panic's rejection of Pat's work as 'shit'; and in the film's production values, which put a black person as a senior creative artist. Zuma also commended the film for going a step further than *Cry Freedom* (1987), which she suggested 'romanticizes White liberals'. *Mapantsula*, Zuma concluded, foregrounded the fact that people like Panic, a *lumpen* element, 'do become good political soldiers'.

The engagements of *Mapantsula* by Mzamo and Zuma, constitute the film's generation of exilic or diasporic publics, and therefore of the wide horizons of its publicness. Further, the engagements evidently tested the film against the political benchmark that *Sechaba* represented. It is also notable that Mzamo's reading of Panic as a hero, in the scheme of gangster genre conventions, was made through a perspective sensitive to gender. Quite significantly, Mzamo and Zuma's observations consistently reduced Panic to a conflict according to which he could either fulfil revolutionary heroism or remain politically impotent. A difficulty in dealing with Panic's potential of fulfilling the roles they assigned him, is also manifest in the arguments presented. This suggests that the engagements are not neatly defined through the film's resonance with the anti-apartheid struggle, but actually show how the film opened up other perspectives that destabilized the certitudes of the struggle. Therefore, the engagements show that the publicness of the film was also defined by its capacity to generate reflection over social and political certitudes.

Mzamo and Zuma's difficulty of dealing with Panic was also at play in other parts of the world where the film was circulated. Writing in the beginning of 1989, film and media scholar Julian Petley, argued that *Mapantsula* was successful as 'a slice of life'. He was writing in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, a publication of the British Film Institute (Petley 1989: 19). The Institute had collected the film as part of its 'Ethnic Notions' catalogue. This catalogue is set up as 'a contribution to the ongoing transformation of British culture' which partly aims to validate black and other minority ethnic communities living in Britain.<sup>1</sup> Petley observed that the filmmaker chose a lumpen petty criminal as the main character and not an exemplary black figure. While he appears to condone this choice because, from a narrative perspective, it allowed Panic's consciousness to unfold, Petley did not totally accept him. The down side of the choice of a *lumpen*, Petley continued, is that it was harder to sympathize with Panic because some of his actions came across as dull and petty (Petley: 1989: 20). He suggested that to avoid audience alienation, the character could have been handled with panache not dissimilar to *The Harder They Come* (1989: 20).

Petley's suggestion of a more flamboyant character makes explicit his assumption about the role of film in public. Accordingly, while film could be political, not in 'a preaching sense', it ought not to alienate its audience. This view is silent on the filmmaker's point of using an anti-hero character, which is to force a re-examination of societal certitudes. However, Petley's uneasiness with Panic, does reaffirm the critical role of this character in the film's publicness.

Zuma and Mzamo's debate as well as Petley's commentary reveal the tensions between the revolutionary articulation of the liberation struggle, and the outlaw configurations of the *lumpen*, itself a powerful theme in revolutionary discourse on class relations during the apartheid era. The figure of Panic became the pivot around which the perceived progressive nature of the liberation struggle was forced to re-examine itself through the

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<sup>1</sup> See <<http://www.bfi.org.uk>> (accessed 2007, July, 05).

disturbing, or even embarrassing figure of the *lumpen*. Further, their contributions allude to the question of the representation of black identity in the film. Against the modernist impulse of progress and political heroism, qualities implied in the apprehension of black identity by liberation rhetoric, *Mapantsula* countered with Panic, an anti-hero struggling at the margins of the bigger political struggle. It can thus be argued that the critical potency of *Mapantsula*, in the discursive space of liberation politics, lay in 'forcing' part of the liberation organs to re-examine the complex interweave of racial and class identities within the struggle itself. It is this tendency to destabilize the content of notions or concepts such as blackness, when their meanings may be considered resolved, that mark the film's critical status. That the film not only occupied the discursive space of political liberation but actually transcended its objectives, is a telling example of how certain films might relate to the public sphere. However, the transnational public sphere of which Zuma and Mzamo were a part, went beyond the immediate sphere of liberation politics and also included trans-Atlantic exchanges.

### **Other Challenges of Transnational Circulation**

Following its conditional banning, *Mapantsula* found its way to Cannes where it premiered in 1988 (Mtshali cited in Ellerson 2000: 198). It was the first South African film to be invited to the prestigious festival. The invitation gave *Mapantsula* a competitive edge over the anti-apartheid Hollywood films. Joseph Gugler, sociologist and then Director of the Centre for Contemporary African Studies at the University of Connecticut, draws our attention to a significant example of the projection of the film's publicness in England.

Outside South Africa, *Mapantsula* was promoted in terms of both its political message and gangster story. Thus the British poster reproduced here shows people demonstrating and advertises that the film had been banned in South Africa, but foregrounds Panic in a gangster pose and an altogether misleading headline "Life and Death in the Streets of Soweto" (Gugler 2003: 96).

The surfacing of a gangster genre figure against the background of a political story appears to be strategic. As an independent film, *Mapantsula* faced direct competition from Hollywood anti-apartheid films which had easier access to audiences. Against this challenge, the use of the gangster genre, which has an established presence in the commercial circuit, seems to have been a logical choice. Even then, the poster is indicative of the fact that independent political films faced the test of validating themselves, a reality that signals *Mapantsula's* challenges in the transnational public sphere. Gugler forgot to add that the poster also indicated that the film is 'even more remarkable than *Cry Freedom* and *A World Apart*', adding a direct competitive edge to its international release. This claim to superiority over other anti-apartheid films, actually suggests that its makers based its value on the authenticity of its depiction of South African situation. The poster's reference to the film's 'banned' status in South Africa added impetus to this claim to authenticity. Being indicative of the extent of its aberration and ultimately its political significance, the reference to the film's misfortunes in South Africa seemed designed to provoke curiosity about how it engaged the political situation there. Accordingly, the poster made manifest the heretofore public life of the film, and at the same time projected a new public that would be alive to the film's challenges as an engaging text.

However, in time the film's circulation in the West exhibited some fissures in the appeal of its engagement with the political ferment in South Africa's townships. There are observations about the film's success in the United States from which we can make some intimations about its transnational publicness. One is by Matt Davies, then doctoral candidate at The Graduate School of International Studies at the University of Denver. The others are by cultural critics Robert Nixon and Schmitz. Davies briefly reviewed the theatrical distribution of *Mapantsula* in Europe and the United States. He wrote that it enjoyed success in England and France and critical acclaim both in Europe and film festivals in North America. Through juxtaposition with *Cry Freedom*, *A Dry White Season*, and *A World Apart*, Davies reaches the conclusion that commercial success eluded the film in the United States, only reaching a few commercial screens (Davies 1990: 98). For

Davies, *Mapantsula* like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1991), also attracted the same negative criticism, namely that it had the power to incite probable viewers to act violently (1990: 98). However, the criticism of Lee's film did not stop it from gaining commercial success. Davies concluded that even 'films that speak from black people's experiences' could and did gain commercial success.

Because of its 'images, songs and everyday acts of resistance', *Mapantsula* is in Davies' thinking, vigorously 'counter cultural'. This led him to argue that the film was an illegitimate target for the cultural boycott. In his words, 'the cultural boycott is intended to fight against the cultural apparatuses and activities of the forces of repression in South Africa, not against the culture of resistance' (1990: 99). According to Schmitz, people in London criticized the creative team for making the film in South Africa during the cultural boycott. He noted that they saw this as selling out. He also mentioned the fact that the *Daily Telegraph* in London loathed it while the American press loved it. Much of what Schmitz says about the film's distribution in America is positive but Robert Nixon (1994: 78) observed that the film gained little exposure in the United States.

Nixon (1994: 90) wrote glowingly about *Mapantsula's* 'elaborate sense of resistance culture', and called it 'innovative and representative of the South African progressive film movement'. His observations appeared in a book authored by himself about the cultural implications of the transnational cultural exchanges between South Africa and the United States. *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood* (1994) is a cultural-historical treatise that spans the period 1948 to 1994. Nixon's major argument in the book was that 'Hollywood movies in South Africa muted the radicalism of the freedom struggle, rendering it more palatable to American liberals' (1994: 3). Nixon set *Mapantsula* against this trend. He divided his argument into two: first a reading of the film and then its distribution in the United States. He also registered what I regard as the standard reading of the film, which is that it is marked by the absence of a white liberal mediating voice. Nixon observed that

*Mapantsula's* perspective was patently political in its support for the organizational strategies over the individualized and moral ones.

In terms of distribution, Nixon made the point that the film was cold-shouldered by the 'heavily centralized networks in the United States of America and South Africa.' In the United States the alternative company called California Newsreel distributed *Mapantsula* on 16 mm film and video in 1989, while Ray Gaspard also released it on 35mm the same year.<sup>2</sup> California Newsreel has since 1977 released anti-apartheid films through its Southern Africa Media Project. Moore also writes that as a non-profit distributor, people who rented or bought the film were college professors and media centres at colleges (largely in African studies) as well as activists among students, church groups and other community based organizations.<sup>3</sup> Clearly then, the film was valued by a section of the academic field and the anti-apartheid movement in the United States. It mediated public deliberations of an already engaged section of the international Anti-Apartheid Movement.

It appears that the film's failure to observe the mass-market convention of translating a radical South African narrative into a white mediated one resulted in its failure to draw a major distributor. The significant point to draw from Nixon is that his discussion surfaces the problem of ideological differences attendant on the very practice of filmmaking, and which influence their circulation. *Mapantsula's* public critical potency was therefore not only beset by problems locally but also by the assumptions and expectations of international viewers whose market is far greater than the local one. Accordingly, *Mapantsula's* circulation across the Atlantic shows that its critical and political engagement place limits on its transnational publicness.

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<sup>2</sup> E-mail communication with Cornelius Moore of California Newsreel, (2005, July, 05).

<sup>3</sup> E-mail communication with Cornelius Moore, (2005, July, 05).

## Local publicness: Between Censorship and Resistance

In 1988 *Mapantsula* became an important part of the cultural and political make-up of the alternative organizations and press in South Africa. The exhibition of *Mapantsula* at the 1988 *Weekly Mail* film festival in Johannesburg under the section *cinema of resistance*, was one instance of this development (Maingard 1994: 235). 'The festival focused on censorship in general and how it affected local film and video making in this country' (*New Nation* 1988, 11-17 August). It was a collaboration of the *Weekly Mail* and the Anti Censorship Group (ACAG). The *Weekly Mail*, predecessor of the present-day *Mail & Guardian*, was an alternative anti-apartheid English language newspaper. ACAG was an organization that monitored censorship and created awareness about it, both locally and internationally.<sup>4</sup> *Mapantsula* was allowed three screenings locally at the Market Theatre as part of the festival (*Weekly Mail* film festival supplement, 1988, 19-25 August). The permission to screen *Mapantsula* at the festival was a calculated move by the state against the option of allowing its screening in black areas. For instance, the film was banned at the Alexandra Art Centre, another example of the state's fear of the possibility of political action on the part of the oppressed black majority (*New Nation*, 1988, 18-24 August).<sup>5</sup> Effectively, it was the already politically conscientised who got to see the film.

It is apparent that the political objectives behind the filmmakers' understanding of *Mapantsula* gave way to the question of censorship at the festival. While alive to the political challenges of the day, the discursive atmosphere of the film festival, particularly around its anti-censorship agenda, highlights the changing publicness of the film. In keeping with a festival atmosphere the exhibition of *Mapantsula* under the 'cinema of resistance' section, illustrates the discursive nature that resistance assumes in such contexts, as opposed to its possible militant inflection in bughouse cinemas and organizational spaces. The festival's appropriation of the film was principally guided by its stance against censorship. Therefore, at the same time as it discursively protested against

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<sup>4</sup>See the Freedom of Expression Institute website: <"http://www.fxi.org.za"> (accessed 14 May 2007).

<sup>5</sup>Alexandra is a historically black township north of Johannesburg.

the state's imposition of censorship, the festival inflected the film with its own agenda, and not that of the filmmakers. We can tease out from this focus on censorship that the film's publicness was at this point, defined by the tension between the censorship board authorities' and festival organizers, a result of the authorities' surveillance of the festival. Therefore, the engagement of the film around the theme of censorship owes its momentum to the film's censorship itself. The engagement of *Mapantsula* at the festival, and shift from the political urgency of grass-roots politics, further highlights the importance of context in defining the nature of the film's publicness.

In addition to censorship, the theme of black identity and its representation on film was also registered at the time of its release. The *Weekly Mail* arts writer, Fabius Burger extolled the film alongside *Quest for Love*<sup>6</sup> for, 'at least broadening Third World images available to us on commercial film' (*Weekly Mail Supplement*, 1988). The two films, Burger continued, 'gained an authentic voice by being South African unlike, say, the local international films made here....'<sup>7</sup>

Burger concluded that *Mapantsula* did not 'stop short of showing the black as a political activist' and gave an 'extended image of being black'. Burger also commended the last scene 'when the hero refuses to sign a false affidavit', as holding the essence of its political merit. He was impelled however, to remind his readers that this 'image was often seen through white eyes'. That the review flowed from the festival signals the festival's centrality in the public engagements of the film. Through the festival, the press and readers of the media also formed a significant part of the film's publics. Interestingly,

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<sup>6</sup> *Quest for Love*. 1988, directed by Helena Noguera, is according to film scholar, Martin Botha (2007: 68), 'the first South African made film dealing with lesbianism and inter-racial sex'. See Botha M., 2007. *Marginal Lives and Painful Pasts: South African Cinema After Apartheid*, Parklands: Genugtig! Publishers, 68.

<sup>7</sup> Many commentators on the film share this view of authenticity. For example, the leftist magazine *New Internationalist*, contrasts the film against the less authentic 'flawed but well intentioned' *Cry Freedom* and *A World Apart*. The magazine commended *Mapantsula* for filling the need to 'dramatize the lives of black rather than white South Africans'. This online review is available from:

<<http://www.newint.org/issue192/reviews.htm>> (Accessed 6 Jan 2005). This review also appears in *New Internationalist*: Ed: Baird V., February 1989, 30. For a different take on the question of *Mapantsula* and authenticity, see Achmat Dangor, 'Foreword' in Schmitz and Mogotlane, *The Book*, 9-11.

Burger's observations correspond to the filmmakers' objective of constructing an autonomous and possibly authentic film culture that resisted Hollywood conventions. However, his appraisal of black identity in *Mapantsula* was not always fervently endorsed, as the debate between Zuma and Mzamo, and a subsequent report by the *New Nation* indicate. According to the report, *Mapantsula* elicited mixed responses at the festival.

The *New Nation* was a radical alternative anti-apartheid newspaper. Edited by the journalist, Zwelakhe Sisulu, son of Walter Sisulu, ANC leader who was incarcerated with Nelson Mandela on Robben Island, the newspaper was aligned to the exiled ANC. Judging by the *New Nation's* review of the 1990 installation of the *Weekly Mail* Festival, the manner and extent to which it enabled engagements of issues through local films is debatable. Without imposing a retrospective analysis on an earlier historical event, it might prove useful briefly to digress to the review as it sheds light into part of the context of *Mapantsula's* circulation in South Africa.

Arguing that the 1990 chapter of the festival was poorly attended, the newspaper questioned the demographics and interests of the attendees. According to the *New Nation*, the festival attracted 'white, liberal intellectuals' whom it argued, ignored local films and watched foreign films instead. 'This is not a people's festival as the people were quite plainly not there. For whatever reason. (sic) It was very difficult to distinguish between the latest South African product from the rest. There was no sense of festival or showbiz' (*New Nation* 1990: 21-7 September). The newspaper overtly questioned the publicness of the festival in terms that signal the import of local films for a national project. The fact that it argued that such a project would not be realisable within a designated quarter of the South African population, suggests that increasingly, film became an important asset in the public imaginations of a representative democratic polity. But even more telling in the newspaper's analysis, is its denial of a critical atmosphere at the festival. 'You could not meet the director or the cast. There was no critical debate around the latest batch of South African films, something South African film

and video makers sorely need to partake in' (*New Nation* 1990: 21-7 September). If this analysis casts aspersions on the festival, it also allows us to see in the film's context of circulation, a vigorous struggle to make local film a centre of a future national public intellectual life. The frustration of the unnamed writer at not being able to meet the cast and crew, easily comes through as an act of claiming access to film in the comprehensive sense of a form that ought to be engaged. It is simply, a claim to publicness through the cinema. Remarkably, the value of a public sphere around film pervades the review,

The quality of most of South African films leaves much to be desired. In this era of critical cultural debate, it is not enough to be merely oppositional to the state; one has to make good films and videos. And there was very little of that. It seems as if the South African film makers are the servants of foreign television stations. The true test of the South African films will not be the *Weekly Mail* Film Festival. Surely, as cinema is a mass based culture, or should be given the cost involved, the true test of South African cinema will be when it leaves the prison of the festival and is judged by the people (*New Nation* 1990: 21-7 September).

Describing the festival in penitentiary terms is an extremely provocative manner in which to delegitimize it as a space of encountering film. Pursuing the argument that cinema is a mass based form, this review suggests that film can only play its role outside 'intellectual circles' and within broader 'communal spaces'. Theoretically, this argument is faulty because publics are not necessarily synonymous with masses. Nonetheless, the context in which it was written, which was not only anti-apartheid but also marred by black people's troubled access to cultural centres such as the Market Theatre where the festival was underway, necessitated a critical consideration of the conditions under which the films' publics were to be formed. Indeed, these conditions also imply kinds of circulation that facilitate greater access to film other than the model of the *Weekly Mail* Festival represent, 'A Namibian Film Festival has just finished. Three video vans showed about 20 films to about 20 000 people throughout Namibia, all in one week. All this at the cost of R10 000. (sic) The *Weekly Mail* showed 104 films to about 5000 people over two weeks at the cost of over R180 000' (*New Nation* 1990: 21-7 September). The implication in the

*New Nation* review is that black people had begun to make claims on film as a form through which to define their agency and identity.

However, this claim and its premises demonstrates an active engagement not only with the festival per se, but with emerging tendencies in South African public intellectual life, such as Ndebele and later, novelist and critic, Achmat Dangor's argument for works of art that are not simply oppositional. That the newspaper assigned to film, the role that Ndebele and Dangor envisioned for all art, is a significant testimony to the public critical potency of black-centred films in the emergent post-repressive South Africa.

In response to *Mapantsula*, an unnamed commentator in the *New Nation* found the plot 'especially when it depicts the lead character as a petty thief, to be yet another "Jim Comes Jo'burg' cliché"' (*New Nation* 1988, 20-6, October). This is a reference to the character of Jim in *Jim Comes to Jo'Burg* (aka *African Jim*). The parallels with *African Jim* indicate that the lowly character of Panic was interpreted in this instance as an iteration of an old problem in South African film culture. This is a particularly telling response because Jim's supposed resurrection in Panic appeared to be out of step with 'progressive' political and social imaginations of black identity. However, the commentator ignored the political narrative unfolding in parallel to the gangster one in the film.

The narrow focus on Panic's outlaw dimension signals the discomfort in the commentator's interpretations of the construction of black identity in the film. The argument namely, that *Mapantsula* was made at the expense of the sufferings of black South Africans, harboured anxieties about film in general, particularly in relation to its meaningfulness to their current political struggles. While the argument of the response underplays the potential progressiveness of the film, it highlights the fact that the strategies of the film as a whole did not dictate the critical engagements it engendered. Like the debate between Zuma and Mzamo, the *New Nation* report points out the ambivalence towards Panic.

Reflecting on *Mapantsula* in 1991, poet, writer and ANC cultural activist Mongane Serote expressed similar anxieties about Panic. The sympathy with Panic and the fear of dealing with him inform Serote's reflections about the film. For Serote, Panic posed a problem in the envisioned new South Africa that he believed the film represented. He wrote, 'Panic's skills as an underworld person makes one wonder how a future society will protect itself against his fearlessness' (Mongane in Schmitz and Mogotlane 1991: 7). For Serote, the experience of watching the film was likely to raise the following question: 'What will cave under Panic's weight...the individuals...the society...the men...the women?' According to Serote, Panic's potential for unbridled violence could very well negate the revolutionary spirit that his other half embodies.

While others viewed Panic solely in relation to the anti-apartheid struggle, Serote's take is futuristic. Far from being out of joint with the times, these prophetic comments demonstrate the historical transcendence of the class and social dilemma that Panic posed, a dilemma that was prescient in the light of the high rates of violent crime in post-apartheid South Africa. Again in Serote's comments, we can see emerge, Panic's refusal to be resolved. This calls attention to the limits of nationalist political discourse in coming to terms with the mobilization of *lumpen* agency. Whereas the film intervened in public deliberations on class contradictions, it also calls attention to the limits of such a discourse. This is another instance of the critical potency of film, a capacity to stand apart from normative modes of engagement, the better to engage their limits and possibilities, and to prompt commentators to engage with these modes. More so, such engagements take place in texts far removed from direct experience of film.

Serote's reflected on the film in the preface to *Mapantsula: the Book*, which came out in 1991, almost at the same time as the film returned to South Africa for a much wider release. *Mapantsula: The Book* contained the script of the film and a transcript of the interview with the director and writer. It was a collaboration of anti-apartheid writers,

published by a non-racial national organization of writers aligned to the UDF, the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW).

In the introduction to the publication, filmmaker Jeremy Nathan and playwright Matthew Krouse wrote that the publication was made to inform readers, both local and international, about a film industry subservient to a racist ideology and the interests of capital (Schmitz and Mogotlane 1991: 15). It was also meant to demystify the process of making a film for people studying film and its related fields. In addition, it was intended to encourage writers to delve into their lives and look for images that represent their real life experiences. More importantly, the publication sought to contribute to spaces of public engagement around film (Schmitz and Mogotlane 1991: 15). This was part of COSAW's identification with the need to 'create our own indigenous cinema' (Schmitz and Mogotlane 1991: 16).

The book was an unprecedented intellectual effort by artists and activists and it was meant to encourage, in the upcoming young writers, a film idiom and approach rooted in the struggles and experiences of ordinary people. The radical African American filmmaker, Spike Lee provided commentary on the blurb of the book: 'Its about time a feature film has come out of South Africa from a black perspective, *Mapantsula* does just that....' (Lee in Schmitz and Mogotlane 1991). The book served to enhance the legitimacy of the film as being a voice of 'anti-Hollywood and antiapartheid' culture. Through the book, therefore, the film became a focal point of debates over film culture, its place in the political terrain, the screenplay of the film and the film itself, and about black identity.

The comments constitute the book's paratexts. Moreover, the book exemplifies an innovation in the film's publicness, one in which the film's credentials were not just vaunted, but also resonated with the space of critical engagements constituted by COSAW. In their appropriation and promotion of the film, the writers called into question, the pitting of the written word and its assumed high values, against suspicions of

vulgarism in film. Therefore, the necessity of founding an oppositional public sphere meant that the normative modes of the public sphere, *qua* Habermas, were troubled in favour of a combination of technologies of representation.

## Conclusions

Through charting the film's inception, production, its initial circulation and publicness, the chapter has shown that *Mapantsula* was engaged in various ways, beyond the bounds of the cinema and cinematic spectatorship. Its publicness is variously defined by critical engagements within organic political spheres; mediation of struggles within the status quo in the 'outlaw' spheres of the prison and exile; as well as the appropriation of *Mapantsula* in the film festival sphere.

The filmmaker's search for political legitimacy through ANC and PAC authorization pointed to the projection of the film to the underground and exiled anti-apartheid political public. However, realization of this publicness was broached in several ways. Like *Come Back, Africa* the publicness of *Mapantsula* was significantly defined through the problem of censorship. Because of censorship, the status of *Mapantsula* as an anti-apartheid film obliged engagement by the ANC and the broad grassroots political movements authorized its anti-apartheid credentials. Therefore, the historical relation of black-centred films to their publics can be determined by the complex interface between censorship and its public perceptions in relation to particular films. Further, part of its publicness generated a critical confluence between cinema and politics.

The film's formal strategies, defined chiefly by the use of the gangster genre also informed its publicness. While the gangster genre served the strategy of getting past film censors, as part of the film's Third Cinema backdrop which were driven by revolutionary objectives, it destabilized moral and political certitudes about revolutionary consciousness in the anti-apartheid context. In this way, it proved to be a difficult challenge for contemporary anti-apartheid heroic visions. Importantly, the anti-apartheid political public sphere partook in

the enhancement of the film's public critical potency because protagonists and observers of the political struggle were invited to reflect on its significance for these politics. This is a significant instance of the relation between film and the public sphere outside the physical space of the cinema.

In addition to the political public sphere of the anti-apartheid movement, *COSAW* and the *Weekly Mail* festival related *Mapantsula* to national preoccupations with the emergent discourses such as 'people's culture'. This entered *Mapantsula* directly within contemporary discourses, and availed its discursive projections to actual political challenges of the status quo. Thus, through various events and initiatives that formed part of the film's public life in the latter years of apartheid, *Mapantsula* instances the extent and manner in which later black-centred films relate to their publics. The significance of these relations is evidenced by the capacity of the film to give content to the anti-apartheid struggle and black identity. However, it was largely through these events, which enhanced its public critical potency, that *Mapantsula* was able to animate critical public engagements.

Contra Kluge, generation of a film's publicness involves more than the aesthetic strategies of film or practices. The context, in which film is engaged, actually, either partakes in the explosion of the certitudes invested in the film, or subjects them to more immediate questions. It is in the light of these shifting registers in a film's journey that its publicness and critical potency are illumined. While the differing contexts in which *Mapantsula* was shown are important, a thorough understanding of how film relates to the public sphere ought to eclipse these contexts and appreciate its multiple discursive effects.

All the debates and engagements of the film form part of the public critical potency of film. This notion enables reflections that transcend the conventional postulating of the relations between film and the public sphere, simply in terms of contradiction or congruence between film and its publics. Rather, in tandem with Warner's concept of

public, it allows illumination of the depth in a film's production of publics. In *Mapantsula*, it is evident that this depth lies in the connection between the form, and contexts of the film's circulation. In the context of unequal and unstable access to cinema such as in South Africa, *Mapantsula* shows us that with the circulation of images across time and space, and increasingly diverse visual technologies, film can stem the tide against access to the public spheres. Yet, it is the effect of its critical potency that renders film a useful catalyst in the making of reflexive publics, the ideal type of democratic politics.

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