

## Chapter 8

### **YIZO YIZO: SOWING DEBATE, REAPING CONTROVERSY**

#### **Introduction**

*Yizo Yizo* 1-2 (1999, 2001), the 13 part pluri-awarded television series was flighted on SABC television between 1999 and 2001.<sup>1</sup> It was a multimedia educational project of the Department of Education, with a mandate to stimulate debate about the conditions of education in South African townships (*Yizo Yizo* 1 fact sheet cited in Andersson 2004: 2). Therefore, the orchestration of debate was at the very heart of the making of the series. The Department also launched *Yizo Yizo* to influence the views and conduct of particular segmented groups, primarily the black youth, their teachers and parents. As a result, *Yizo Yizo* addresses a range of social, moral, economic and professional problems as well as relations ostensibly at play in township schools. It treats the problem of violence in the townships in an overt and gritty manner, a strategy projected towards drawing attention to educational problems, and stimulating debates on them. The chapter explores critically the making, circulation and public life of *Yizo Yizo* 1-2 (1999, 2001), in order to reflect on the significance of orchestration on its publicness, and on the public critical potency of television series. It also examines how the series related to contemporary engagements of blackness.

#### **Yizo Yizo 1 (Synopsis)**

Set in a fictitious township school, Supatsela High, the story charts the progress, demise and resurgence of the school's youth and teachers as they grapple with the violence unleashed by a school drop-out (Chester), their sponsor (Bra Gibb) and school-going friend (Papa Action).<sup>2</sup> The violence includes rape, extortion and emotional harassment. The story follows the imposition of autocratic order under the leadership of its principal, Mr.

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<sup>1</sup> *Yizo Yizo* is township slang for 'this is it'. While there was a third sequel in 2004, this chapter will only focus on the first two series for economy of space, *Yizo Yizo 1 and 2* sufficiently serve my purposes.

<sup>2</sup> *Supatsela* is a Sotho-Tswana word which means 'show the way'.

Mthembu. Mthembu later resigns after beating up a pupil badly. His colleague Ken Mokwena takes over as acting principal. It is under Mokwena's leadership that the school descends into anarchy in the form of drug dealing, vandalism and violent disorder. The arrival of Grace Letsatsi, a motivated young female teacher turns the school around and for the first time, the parents, the school governing body, and the Student Representative Council work together to bring back order to the school. The hooligans attempt to reclaim the school but they fail as the community takes charge and ensures they are arrested.

### **Yizo Yizo 2 (Synopsis)**

A Yizo Yizo fact sheet (2002) describes the second series as the story of an ordinary school overcoming extraordinary obstacles. The series begins at the start of the new school year. The main characters are now in matric. The violence that engulfed the school the previous year has been contained. Basic security and order have been established but the problems are not over. This series celebrates the courage and determination of a school community in overcoming obstacles in the way of the provision of good education. They learn that the best resources are not buildings and money, but people. *Yizo Yizo 2* is about ordinary people's struggle to learn, play, change, read, love, dream and find their place in the world (*Yizo Yizo* fact sheet (2002) cited in Andersson 2004: 3).

While it is a television series, *Yizo Yizo* satisfies a key methodological attribute of film, which is the capacity to organize objects and their relations, and to constitute their ontological statuses through cinematic conventions. In addition, cinematic aesthetics significantly underwrite *Yizo Yizo*. The series differs from the preceding films in several respects, which makes the discussion of its making and public life compelling. Firstly, its circulation through television distinguishes *Yizo Yizo* from films that are made for exhibition in the cinema. Due to its distinction as a television production, *Yizo Yizo* forms part of the electronic media, characterised and underwritten by media practices. *Yizo Yizo* differs from the preceding films in another respect; it is a multi-themed engagement of post-apartheid social relations. The drama series treats many themes ranging from sexual,

emotional and structural violence as well as sexuality, the brutalisation of black youth and education-related ones such as teacher conduct, corporal punishment and the structural inequalities in the provision of education resulting from apartheid. It also provokes reflection on black identity from the perspectives of sexuality, a hitherto rare theme in South African black-centred screen media. In terms of addressing the social deviance of black youth, the producers located the series firmly within the tradition of black-centred films such as *Come Back, Africa, Mapantsula*, and *Fools* which also addressed *lumpen* elements on the margins of black communities. Lastly, as a product of the partnership between the post-apartheid state and the national broadcaster, both of whom encourage public deliberation in an open and democratic manner, *Yizo Yizo* was made and circulated in a context wholly different from the disavowed public spheres of the 1950s to 1980s.

Unlike the films in the preceding chapters, *Yizo Yizo* was accompanied by an intensive and deliberate orchestration of debate. This raises the question of the kinds of public engagements that such orchestration may stimulate. Precisely because of its objective to encourage debate, *Yizo Yizo* presents a suitable case study for reflecting further on the status of film within the post-apartheid public sphere in general, and on the nuances of the orchestration of debate through television drama series in particular. I understand debate, which the SABC and filmmakers do not explain, as an interactive genre in which protagonists strive to prove the validity of their opinions on particular issues, against those of their adversaries, usually without consensus as an end. Yet, the anticipation of a positive impact on the primary viewers' attitudes around educational problems in the township schools is instructive as to the SABC and filmmakers' understanding of debate. It signals expectations of consensus among the viewers, about how best to resolve the problems the series raises.

Showing on prime time (evening) television, *Yizo Yizo* was primarily projected for reception in the intimate familial space of the home. Yet it had a linked apparatus of materials available outside the home. The series' projection as family viewing and the

availability of linked materials is singularly important. This projection is indicative of the producers' objective to make the familial space the centre of the national debates they sought to launch around the issues the series raised. That a significant part of these debates was intended to address familial issues also informs the filmmakers' strategy of targeting the space of the family as a primary site.

Commentators have drawn attention to the importance of *Yizo Yizo* in generating public debates around the issues it raised. They have also hailed, overtly or subtly, the import of these debates for democracy. The relation of *Yizo Yizo* to democracy and democratic citizenship is most manifest in the work of cultural critic and author Clive Barnett. Barnett considers *Yizo Yizo* in the light of the role of public service broadcasting in supporting citizenship (2004: 254). Against the background of contemporary debates around mediated deliberation, media citizenship, and globalization, as well as South Africa's transition to democracy, Barnett argues that *Yizo Yizo*, as a form of popular culture, was an innovative approach to educational broadcasting 'that drew upon multiple, and increasingly globalised cultural literacies of citizens' (2004: 264). The value of its innovation, Barnett demonstrates, lay in the acknowledgement by media policymakers of the 'capacities of ordinary people to participate as active citizens in mediated deliberation over public issues' (Barnett 2004: 254).<sup>3</sup> Barnett observes that through *Yizo Yizo*, the SABC and its partners have contributed to the generation of a participatory culture of discussion and criticism (Barnett 2004: 265). This observation proposes that democracy is a foundational premise of the publicness constituted by *Yizo Yizo*.

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<sup>3</sup> He also sees the series as an instance of Nancy Fraser's concept of 'weak public sphere', and ascribes to it a broad understanding of deliberation that is not 'narrowly cognitive and rational but also affective'. See Barnett C., (2004). *Yizo Yizo: Citizenship Commodification and Popular Culture in South Africa. Media, Culture and Society*, 26 (2) 251-271. Fraser makes a distinction between 'weak' and 'strong publics'. In Fraser's typology, 'strong publics' are effectively sovereign parliaments, their 'discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making'. By 'weak publics' she means 'publics whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion-formation and does not also encompass decision making'. See Fraser N., (1990). *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy, Social Text*, 25/26, 109-142, (74-75).

On the other hand, film scholar René Smith highlights what she sees as the generic dilemma of *Yizo Yizo*, that is, of the merits and demerits of its combination of the education and entertainment models (edutainment). Focusing on *Yizo Yizo1*, Smith considers the nature of the success of the series, asking whether audience ratings (AR's) determined it, or 'on its ability to educate South African audiences on the conditions of township schooling' (Smith 2001, *Preface*). Smith focuses on what she calls 'representations of *real life*' in the series, and interrogates representations of violence and gender in it. For Smith, *Yizo Yizo1* represents violent images both to 'reflect reality' and as 'a stylistic device' to accentuate its dramatic nature (Smith 2001: 45). For Smith (2001: 38) however, at the same time as the series represents 'the real', it commodifies violence. According to Smith (2001: 39), the series 'does not address violent actions with the intention of promoting a sense of social responsibility or social democracy, which an educational drama should and can impart'.

Alert to Barnett's observations and Smith's demonstration of the series' generic problematic, this chapter explores the making, circulation and public life of *Yizo Yizo* in order to understand better the status of film in public deliberation. Yet, the chapter differs from Barnett and Smith's approaches to *Yizo Yizo* and conclusions about precisely how it generated critical public engagements. In confining themselves to the close reading of the series and appreciating the democratic ethos underlying its orchestration of debate, Smith and Barnett respectively, did not attempt to grasp the full extent of the public critical status of *Yizo Yizo*.

The chapter looks closely at the ways in which the series attempted intensively to orchestrate debate around educational issues. Drawing on what it argues is the series' destabilization of the ostensible distinction between the 'private' and public spaces of debate, the chapter discusses the implications of this orchestration for the publicness of *Yizo Yizo*. Through a discussion of the public engagements of *Yizo Yizo*, the chapter argues that the series generated relatively little debate in the media, about the issues it intended

to raise, such as conditions of township schools and possibilities of effective interventions. Instead, it shows that the dominant discussions in the media around the series were mostly morally driven, and about what television series should or should not do. However, the series also generated discussions around black identity, a theme that fell out of its educational mandate. These outcomes point towards the limits of orchestration in public engagements around television series in particular and film in general, and in the way that such engagements may exceed the orchestration effort, and provide a window on the critical potency of television series and film. They also show the importance of the circulation of secondary texts and the role of media commentators and academics in mediating public engagements. Thus, in order to understand the public critical role of television series, it is not sufficient to look at the apparatus of orchestration and the series' strategies and reception. The fullest extent of its public critical role only becomes clear through the appreciation of its pathways of circulation, and those of its secondary texts. The chapter advances its arguments with the full understanding that media tend to be sensational in their reportage and engagements of issues, and may therefore compromise the substance of the issues at hand. Yet, the tendency to be sensational does not absolve the media from playing an important role in the public sphere.

### **Making of *Yizo Yizo***

*Yizo Yizo* is a product of a campaign by the national Department of Education called Culture of Learning and Teaching, Teaching and Service (COLTS). It was part of the Department's strategies of addressing problems besetting township schools. These were identified as low morale and ill discipline among teachers and learners, lack of community support, lack of essential teaching and learning resources, as well as poor leadership. In addressing these problems, the Department and SABC's Education division, commissioned research in schools, the outcomes of which would be used to develop a drama script, leading to an educational television drama.

The series was aimed at a very well-defined audience of high school and out of school youth. Its objective was to encourage a culture of learning, teaching, and service in schools and the creation of awareness about problems in learning and teaching in township schools. It was also charged with the development of positive role models, as well as 'modelling a process of restoration in a typical South African school serving urban black South African community' (South African Consulate General, New York, 2007).<sup>4</sup>

The Education Department and SABC Education commissioned an independent film company, *Laduma Film Factory*, (later renamed *The Bomb*) to do the series. Over a three-month period, the research team, including five writers, consulted with students, teachers, and principals in township schools around Johannesburg. To serve the tenets of its *Tirisano* campaign, whose aim was to encourage community involvement in schools and to promote better management of schools, the Department slightly altered *Yizo Yizo2*'s mandate (Andersson 2004: 3). Interestingly, in the wake of complaints that *Yizo Yizo1* was too short to resolve the problems it posed, the length of *Yizo Yizo2* was increased from 30 minutes to one hour.

Three people were key in the production of *Yizo Yizo*, namely Desiree Markgraaff, Angus Gibson, and Teboho Mahlatsi. Markgraaff is a producer and executive director of *The Bomb* productions. Gibson is a former member of Free Filmmakers, an anti-apartheid collective of left-wing filmmakers. Among others, he directed the documentary *Soweto: A History* (1992), commissioned by the Wits University History Workshop. He also directed *Seven Up South Africa* (1992), and *Fourteen Up South Africa* (1998) documentaries, which dealt with young people's experiences of the transition from the apartheid to the post-apartheid period. The serial documentary filmed protagonists when they were seven years old and later when they were 14 year olds.

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<sup>4</sup> See South African Consulate General, New York, 2007, *Report on Education in South Africa*. Available from: <<http://www/southafrica-newyork.net/consulate/education.htm>> [Accessed 2 February 2007]

The youngest of the filmmakers, Teboho Mahlatsi, belongs to the new wave of post-apartheid black directors. Trained at Afrika Cultural Centre in Newtown, Johannesburg, Mahlatsi's educational background includes the fields of film and African literature. Prior to *Yizo Yizo*, he directed a short film, *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning* (1999), an award winning short film (Silver Lion, Venice Film Festival 1999, M-Net All-African Film Awards 2000) about a young township killer seeking redemption. He facilitated part of a documentary series for SABC television called *Ghetto Diaries* (1996), in which non-filmmakers in some South African townships were encouraged to film their own stories. Filmmaker, Barry Berk was a guest director on *Yizo Yizo. Gazlam* (2002) and *Zero Tolerance* (2002), both SABC television series are among the works Berk wrote and directed. Angus Gibson and Teboho Mahlatsi directed the first series, while Mahlatsi and Barry Berk directed the sequel.

### **Orchestration of Debate**

The circulation of *Yizo Yizo* on primetime television constitutes the primary site through which the filmmakers, the Department of Education and the SABC sought to orchestrate debate on the issues the series raised. *Yizo Yizo1* and *2* were circulated on SABC television's youth-oriented SABC 1, between 3 February 1999 and March 2001. This circulation guaranteed the series a large national reach. *Yizo Yizo* was shown on primetime television once every week. Thus, its circulation was marked by a punctual temporal rhythm. The effect of this tendency in the circulation of *Yizo Yizo* lay in adapting a primarily familial time and space to a space and time of the reflexive circulation of discourse- that is of a public. Warner (2002: 95), alerts us to the fact that punctuality cultivates an ongoing discursive relation at every scheduled broadcast of televisual series.

The punctuality and also spatiality (typically though not exclusively the familial home) of its circulation, meant that *Yizo Yizo's* publicness was primarily based on destabilizing the 'private-ness' of familial gatherings. This was meant to occur through representations that were by any measure, not in keeping with the familial premises of primetime television.



Once destabilized, these hitherto 'private' gatherings would form distinct publics organized by the discursive space of the series, that is, of the issues that were meant to be of immediate significance to parents, children and teachers. The familial home is made all the more important by the fact that, 'most viewers watched *Yizo Yizo* at home, and often in family groups' (Gultig 2002: 6, 75).<sup>5</sup> However, even those public spaces outside the familial space in which *Yizo Yizo* was viewed were destabilized. This destabilization was constituted by the series' address which was alien to the conventional norms of primetime television and thus, a variation in publics was called into being.

It would seem however, that the impetus of punctuality was not a sufficient condition for conjuring up publics hence the need for the filmmakers' creativity with regard to genre. As a result, *Yizo Yizo* interlaced its punctuality with cross-generic strategies which are atypical of primetime television. Of these, the combination of its educational format with overt depiction of criminal and sexual encounters and use of vulgar language stand out. These strategies transgressed primetime televisual conventions, which are based on moral protection of children from nudity, explicit sexual content and gross violence. The filmmakers adopted these strategies because they believed that their young audiences were sophisticated in terms of being visually literate and did not wish to patronize them (Gibson 2002 cited in Andersson 2004: 48). Therefore, the filmmakers' compulsion to realism was based on their projection of their audiences: 'I felt that any kind of whitewash or creation of wish fulfilment, rather than a real world would create a distance between the producers and the audience. To reach the audience we had to get the world absolutely right' (Gibson 2002 cited in Andersson 2004: 48). The transgression suggests that through *Yizo Yizo*, the filmmakers' attempts to cause debate or orchestration were predicated on shock tactics calculated to grab the attention of parents and children. Thus, the intersection of primetime circulation, with cross-generic aesthetics atypical of it, and adaptation of familial time underwrote the filmmakers' orchestration of deliberation.

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<sup>5</sup> All references to Gultig are in the present author's personal copy of his Research Report.

In addition to the circulation and generic choices of *Yizo Yizo*, the filmmakers', the Department of Education and the SABC deployed an extensive multimedia strategy. This included the distribution of a full-colour *Yizo Yizo* magazine, release of a soundtrack Compact Disc, supplements in the press on the educational issues raised by the series, as well as radio talk shows (*Metro FM*) the day after each week's episode (Barnett 2004: 260).<sup>6</sup> Supplementary television programmes preceded the showing of *Yizo Yizo1* on SABC. The first film was a documentary in which two schools were compared. One was incompetent and the other was organized and representative of the ethic of the culture of learning (Smith 2001: 11). The second programme was a trailer of *Yizo Yizo1*.

During the making of *Yizo Yizo1* and *Yizo Yizo2*, half a million youth booklets (described as magazines in The Bomb's document 6/3/4) were distributed throughout the country. The magazine is built around the characters and stories of the television series and is aimed at encouraging youth to read [presumably youth who watched and loved *Yizo Yizo* would be encouraged to read print media dealing with the same topic] (Andersson 2004: 312).<sup>7</sup>

Given the nature of the media through which the extra-materials were organized, this strategy was not geared to a mere inculcation of messages, and popularization of the series. The radio-talks shows as well as the formats of the press supplements, which posed questions for the youth, meant that the producers took advantage of the interactive options that a multi-media strategy availed. The interrogation and resolution of issues was meant to be realized through these interactions:

One of the reasons for the importance of developing this multi-media strategy in support of educational broadcasting is that patterns of media consumption in South Africa are not uniformly based in the home. Radio talk shows, magazines, and newspapers have been identified as important mediums through which a broad and dispersed public 'conversation' around topics aired on television can be stimulated and maintained (Barnett 2004: 257).

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<sup>6</sup> *Metro FM* is SABC's youth-oriented commercial radio station.

<sup>7</sup> The square brackets appear in the original quote.

This strategy was also in keeping with the SABC's adoption in 1998 of a strategic plan called *school educational broadcasting services*. Authored by the South African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE) on behalf of the SABC, this plan refers to 'the full range of broadcast and non-broadcast media services that might support educational objectives regardless of when and where they are offered and accessed' (Barnett 2004: 256-7). The plan was informed by the need 'to move away from overtly pedagogical programming formats to allow for more active learning and learner-centred approaches' (Barnett 2004: 257). The multi-media strategy points towards the filmmakers' employment of paratextual devices.

The projection of debate across the printery, aural and televisual paratexts invited a dialogue-driven publicness with the objective of enriching the viewers' critical engagements of the series. Thus, the paratextual regime of *Yizo Yizo* sought to broaden the perspectives through which the series could be deliberated on. However, the generous use of paratexts also suggests the filmmakers' strategy to offset possible 'mis-readings' and to lessen the impact of *Yizo Yizo's* generic transgressions of its educative objective. To the extent that the series was charged with the objective to educate, its orchestration of public debate was limited to educational issues. It is precisely because of the mediation resulting from the media that Barnett views its strategies in terms of the generation of a public sphere based on mediated deliberation (Barnett 2004: 262). In this public sphere, various forms of mass media are used 'to distribute symbolic resources with the intention of generating innumerable, dispersed dialogues about issues of broad public concern' (Barnett 2004: 262).

Over and above the paratextual regime and the series itself, *Yizo Yizo's* emphasis on audience research formed part of its orchestration of deliberation. The pre-production stages of each series were characterized by audience research in which the question of how the series should proceed was highlighted. While the research constitutes mediation effected through its questionnaire-style methodology, it is nonetheless a form of

orchestration. This is because the research considered these opinions with the objective of animating an ongoing interaction between producers and viewers. The opinions were ultimately built into subsequent series.

Andersson provides a useful entry into the phenomenon of the interaction between producers and viewers of *Yizo Yizo*. Through a triangular approach, in which producers' understandings of their work, textual analysis of *Yizo Yizo* and 'readings' of audience responses to the series, are carried out, Andersson attempts a nuanced and extra-textual understanding of the production of meaning in *Yizo Yizo*, and its relation to apartheid and post-apartheid memory. The producers, actors and audiences add to what Andersson calls a 'producerly' text (Andersson 2004: 6). Thus, in their reading of the texts, Andersson's audiences become producers, and through taking into account the audiences' likes and dislikes, producers become recipients (Andersson 2004: 11). The interaction reverses the traditional model of television series in which texts are simply projected to imagined audiences and not to real people. Thus, it widens the deliberative space and adds an air of authenticity to the series itself, one that takes into account, the real issues on the ground. We thus have an account of how the filmmakers, SABC and the Department of Education sought to prompt public debate through *Yizo Yizo*, its paratextual regime and research processes. In considering the import of this orchestration, I now turn to the public life of the series.

### **Take-Up**

*Yizo Yizo* was celebrated both locally and internationally. The various ways in which it was acknowledged, particularly its acceptance by many international festivals as a film in the cinematic sense, indicates its transgression of a strictly educational television drama genre.<sup>8</sup> The amalgamation in *Yizo Yizo* of soap opera and cinematic elements within a plot

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<sup>8</sup> *Yizo Yizo* forms part of the African Films and Video collection at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Locally the libraries of the universities of the Witwatersrand, Cape Town and South Africa, also keep copies for student and staff engagement. *Memorable TV*, a website that archives what it regards as the most

that is both educative and highly dramatic, explain the numerous awards it has received both locally and across the globe.<sup>9</sup> For his directing work, the ANC Youth League honoured Mahlatsi, and President Thabo Mbeki awarded him the Tribute Entertainment Achiever Award. In addition, the Sundance Film Festival's organisers selected Mahlatsi for participation in the Festivals' 2003 Screen Writer's Lab workshop. While *Yizo Yizo's* composition may already be hybridised, the various ways in which it was taken up disturbs the rigidity with which televisual and cinematic genres are normally identified.

Contrary to its celebration all over the world and in South Africa, *Yizo Yizo* also proved to be highly contested locally. Not long after *Yizo Yizo1* appeared on SABC television, it was caught up in controversy as the local press published complaints and commentaries on its gritty violence, graphic sex and uncouth language. In the press, the engagement of *Yizo Yizo1* and *2* was chiefly defined by a division between those who opposed and those who welcomed its unrestrained approaches in representing scenes of violence, sex and its use of foul language on prime time television. I will begin by summarizing the arguments of commentators who found the series to be in bad taste or worse, noting their discomfort with its 'bare-all' approach.

The ANC Women's League called for its banning, echoing widespread public discomfort with *Yizo Yizo*. In an unprecedented move, the then ANC member of Parliament Lulu

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memorable television classics, has archived it. See *World Television Classics: Mission Eureka to Yizo Yizo*, <http://www.memorabletv.com/worldtwo.htm> [Accessed 12 April 2006]. Other places where it was shown include the Australian SBS (Special Broadcast Services) Television in early 2002 and again in March and April 2004. However, it occupied the late night slots. *Yizo Yizo1 and 2* were invited to the Flanders International Film Festival-Ghent, in Belgium in October 2002, and the New York African Film Festival in the same year. *Yizo Yizo2* was invited to the International Film Festival, Rotterdam in 2002. The second series was also shown at a film festival in Basel, Switzerland in August and September of 2004. In September 2002, some episodes of *Yizo Yizo* (episodes 1 to 4) were shown in Benin as part of the International Cooperation and Peace event.

<sup>9</sup> Some of the awards for *Yizo Yizo1* include the 1999 Japan International Prize for Educational TV (Hosa Bunker Foundation as well as the Governor of Tokyo Prize) and the 1999 19<sup>th</sup> Annual AVANTI Awards (Africa) for best drama series, best director, best actress, best supporting actor, and best supporting actress. *Yizo Yizo2* won among others, the Cinema Tout Ecran Award (Switzerland) for best international television series, the Governor of Tokyo Prize at the 28<sup>th</sup> Japan NHK Awards 2002, Duku Duku Awards for best Television Programme and 2002 RITV Award for Episode 5.

Xingwana also used a Parliamentary session to call for its banning (*The Star* 2001, March 15).<sup>10</sup> A Film and Publications Board presentation before the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee of Home Affairs, on the classification of *Yizo Yizo* followed her challenge.<sup>11</sup> Xingwana repeated the calls for *Yizo Yizo*'s banning on the *Tim Modise* show, the SABC radio news and current affairs radio channel- a session of which was especially dedicated to *Yizo Yizo* (SAFM 2001, 19 March). Mahlatsi also took part in the debate. The focus on *Yizo Yizo* in the programme signals its national currency. This currency stemmed from the attention it drew from Parliament and a variety of public fora.

Other commentators expressed frustration about the generic make up of *Yizo Yizo*. On the *Tim Modise Show* debate for example, journalist Nomavenda Mathiyane suggested that the stylistics and strategies of representations in *Yizo Yizo* made its genre imprecise. She could not understand 'whether it was a documentary or a movie'. The issue of its genre also had a bearing on its educative potential. Mathiyane, for instance, found problematic the dilatory tendency of the drama in arriving at the resolution of the problems it raised, which in her view, made room for the glamorization of criminality.<sup>12</sup> The point of glamorization of criminality echoed *City Press* 'Women's Corner' columnist Mmabatho Ramagoshi's anxieties over the series' possible production of criminal copycats (*City Press*, 2001, 25 March).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Mike Siluma of the *Sowetan* patently suggested censorship, and branded as 'naïve in the extreme' opposition to any kind of censorship. The *Sowetan* (March 15, 2001) reported that it was inundated with calls from 'disgusted and disgraced' viewers who wanted the series banned, censored or moved from the prime time to a late night slot. The arguments over its withdrawal were also raised on SABC television. See *Yizo Yizo Speak Out Debate*, 2000. Television program, SABC2, Johannesburg, 20 March.

<sup>11</sup> For the full minutes of the discussion, see Home Affairs Portfolio Committee, 2001. *Film and Publications Board on Classification of 'Yizo Yizo'*. 28 March. Available from: <http://www.queensu.ca/samp/migdocs/Documents/Minutes/280301.htm> [accessed 15 April 2008].

<sup>12</sup> One Clifford Mlati expressed a similar view. He also suggested that there should not have been a break between *Yizo Yizo1* and *Yizo Yizo2*. See Mlati's views in Thembisile Makgalemele's article: Gangs Derail Education, *Saturday Star*, March 2001. Consider also Andersson's uneasiness about the gap between the violence undertaken by Papa Action and Chester in *Yizo Yizo1*, and the closure in *Yizo Yizo2*. She writes that 'it is questionable that even a regular viewer would find closure between actions, consequences, and repentance scenes', Andersson F.B., 2004. *Intertextuality and Memory in Yizo Yizo*. Thesis (Ph.D.). University of the Witwatersrand, 218.

<sup>13</sup> Incidentally, reports of copycat behavior by some youth appeared in the press. The *Sunday Times*' Sibusiso Bhubezi noted the violent incidents at two Gauteng schools. The incidents were apparently similar to those

The use of foul language in *Yizo Yizo* inspired engagements of aesthetics and black identity. *Sowetan* columnist, Mike Siluma, asked whether the use of foul language meant that television could get through to the black community only by using sensation and foul language (*Sowetan*, 1999, 23 April). Siluma suggested that if the drama was targeted at 'the white community', it would not have continued. Critic and columnist for the *Sunday Independent* Xolela Mangcu's take on *Yizo Yizo* also drew attention to its representation of black identity (*Sunday Independent*, 2001, 8 April).

He anchored his discussion on social pathology as an organizing motif in the series' representations of black identity, which he viewed as a continuation of the portrayal of black identity in colonial and other literature and texts. He also portrayed the directorial vision of *Yizo Yizo* as analogous to that of Quentin Tarantino, the United States-based filmmaker. Against Tarantino's penchant for making violent films, Mangcu impatiently asked, 'when are we going to have our own Stephen Spielberg'? Mangcu hoped for a directorial vision which would portray 'the rich tapestry of our cultural history', of which he intimated the US director, Spielberg, was an example.

In the *Tim Modise Show*, JJ from Pietersburg argued that *Yizo Yizo* was not educational at all and that it was racist. In his view, the absence of Indians and whites in the prison scene contradicted the discourse of non-racialism in South Africa and indicated that jails were filled with black people, which according to him was not factual. Xingwana also foregrounded the argument that *Yizo Yizo* was racist because 'it implied that African children were murderers'. JJ and Xingwana's arguments surface concerns over visual representations of black identity. They reiterate Siluma and Mangcu's arguments against the use of foul language and the televisual focus on social pathologies among black people respectively.

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in *Yizo Yizo*. (21, February 1999) See also a report by McKeed Kotlolo of a gang rape incident in Lesley Township near Secunda. The delinquent group called itself *Yizo Yizo*, see *Sowetan*, 1999. 27 April. For reports on other incidents, see Siluma M., 1999. *Sowetan* 23 April, and Andersson, *Memory*, 293.

Another wave of public commentaries on the series focused on Episode 4 of *Yizo Yizo 2*, especially the prison sodomy scene. In the scene, an older prisoner coerces a newly arrived prisoner, Chester, into homosexual sex. Author and journalist, Fred Khumalo dedicated the *Feature* column of the weekly *City Press* to the episode. He itemized the sodomy scene and three others in the episode, which he found overwhelming and distasteful in their depiction of violence and sex: the murder of a prisoner, the explicit sex between a teenager (Thiza) and a woman, as well as the suicide attempt by Hazel.<sup>14</sup>

So far, the arguments against *Yizo Yizo* demonstrate widely shared anxieties about the putative conditions in which the series was viewed, that is its showing on primetime television and primarily in a familial space. The arguments are also about the series' approaches. These engagements are an indication of the social proximity of the series to its projected publics. Largely, black South Africans commented or deliberated in the press, electronic media and in Parliament. Moreover, the anxieties expressed were more indicative of the implications of the series' representations of violence and vulgarity for public understandings of black life, than they were about the series' constructions of educational issues. Implicitly therefore, blackness was an overriding concern in the engagements of the series. Because its aesthetic choices were based on realist, often overtly violent interpretations of social and educational problems, *Yizo Yizo* made possible a publicness that was defined in significantly binary terms. Protagonists either agreed or disagreed on the appropriateness of using television to address educational problems in the manner that the series did. That these engagements mostly played out in the media also suggests that the media extensively constructed the debates around the series in a controversial light.

A notable anxiety about the circulation of *Yizo Yizo* relates to the question of black identity. The argument by Saint Molakeng that *Yizo Yizo* was predicated on the assumption

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<sup>14</sup> See also the *Sowetan*, 2001. Letters section, 22 March.



that only through foul language and the focus on social pathologies among blacks, was the attention of black viewers secured, is a good example in this regard. However, the fact that the attention to the series' representations, and to black identity fell outside the educative remit of *Yizo Yizo*, means that public engagements of *Yizo Yizo* exceeded its orchestration of deliberation.

The arguments against the series by concerned Parliamentarians, politicians, commentators and viewers found its antithesis in the comments that highlighted the importance of the series and that supported its continued broadcasting. In the *Tim Modise Show*, Mathiyane opposed the call for banning or censorship in the light of South Africa's recent history of censorship. Support for this view was overwhelming as many press reports showed.<sup>15</sup> For instance, journalist Nontsikelelo Moya felt that the violence represented in *Yizo Yizo* was reflective of the reality of life in the townships and for that reason justified the showing of *Yizo Yizo* (*The Star*, 1999, 9 March).<sup>16</sup> Moya argued that *Yizo Yizo* was not a catalyst of youth fascination with gangsterism.<sup>17</sup> He concluded, 'those who think *Yizo Yizo* pushes an anarchist agenda must be as ignorant as those who say they did not know about apartheid at its peak'.<sup>18</sup> *Sowetan's* Saint Molakeng criticized views against the showing of the prison sodomy scene, in *Yizo Yizo2* (2001, 23 March). Molakeng interpreted the condemnation of the scene as reflective of some of the irate viewers' 'spurious' claims to morality.

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<sup>15</sup> According to the *Sunday Independent* and Plus 94 Harris Poll (an international opinion polls company) research, the majority of *Yizo Yizo* viewers supported its graphic scenes of sexual abuse or violence. See *Sunday Independent*, 2001. 25 March.

<sup>16</sup> Manale, National Media Secretary of the ANC also warned against cancelling the series and suggested that instead, readers should consider 'ways through which the issues addressed by the series' become everyone's business', *Sowetan Sunday World* 2001. 25 March.

<sup>17</sup> For similar arguments, see *Glued to the Screen* 1999. *Sowetan*, 24 February, also *Artistic Yizo Yizo is a Winner*, 2001. 28 March, and *Face up To the Ugly Truth*, *Sowetan* 2001. 22 March. Freedom of Expression Institute's Education Programmes officer Ms. Mamasobathe Noko contended that the prison rape scene was not exaggerated and that rape was a reality in prison. For this observation, see *Sowetan*, 2001. 15 March. Wits University academic Dr. Clive Glaser argued that *Yizo Yizo*, as part of the media, partly shaped the 'style' of youth and did not make them violent, and that reasons for youth violence could be found elsewhere. See his letter in *Sowetan*, 1999. 13 May.

<sup>18</sup> For this line of thinking, see also Saint Molakeng, *Sowetan* 2001. 23 March.

The circulation of the controversy around *Yizo Yizo* is instructive. Whatever the focus of the individual newspapers, or talk shows, the concerns and arguments went across various media and consequently created a wide space for 'dialogue'. Even then, the debates took place across various genres such as columns, articles and featured articles, and letters to the editor. This generic spread signals the inclusiveness of the 'dialogue'. Professionals, politicians, and ordinary people who were non-experts in screen media engaged in 'dialogue' with experts such as Teboho Mahlatsi.

The sites in which public engagements of *Yizo Yizo* were mobilized were varied. The interaction between Parliamentarians, professionals, television viewers, radio listeners and newspaper readers, registers a publicness that collapses the boundaries of official (Parliament) and unofficial spaces of engagement (media). The *Sowetan*, *Sowetan Sunday World* and *City Press*, are mostly targeted at lower to middle- income black South Africans while the *Sunday Independent*, and the *Star* largely targeted the affluent and highly educated readership. The English language *Tim Modise Show* was also co-extensive with the profiles of the *Sunday Independent* and the *Star*. The commentators were themselves diverse: Mangcu was a critical commentator in the popular press. Khumalo, Ramagoshi, Mathiyane, Siluma and Modise were all media commentators. A further category comprised of the many people who wrote letters to the *Sowetan*, the *Star* and the *Sowetan Sunday World*, callers to radio shows and television viewers. Academic commentators also complemented the public of *Yizo Yizo*. Though largely black, the publicness of *Yizo Yizo* is intergenerational, interclass and it avails a variety of views for debate and deliberation.

Through its manner of representations, and the strategies of causing debate around it such as talk shows, the series opened a platform for commentary on the limits of televisual representations. Yet, this also demonstrates the unstable status of filmic images in public debates. In addition to orchestration, this instability stems from the role of media

commentators. Through their mediation of opinions around *Yizo Yizo*, media commentators played a crucial role in 'shaping' the nature of debate around the series.

The controversy around *Yizo Yizo* cannot be divorced from the series' bold transgressions of the family oriented content of primetime television. This controversy shows that *Yizo Yizo* drew attention to itself, over and above its attempt to transform primetime television into a space of public debate on educational issues. At least insofar as the media is concerned, the success of *Yizo Yizo* in stimulating public engagements was significantly defined by moral anxieties over what is supposed to be represented on primetime television, and on representations of real life. Therefore, the anxieties are constitutive of a publicness that was considerably defined in ways other than those intended by the orchestration. Instead, it is a publicness attuned to the question of the legitimacy of televisual representations, particularly representations of blackness. It points towards the limits of orchestration in determining the public discursive space, as well as the role of media commentators in the mediation of the debates about *Yizo Yizo*.

Understanding the publicness of *Yizo Yizo* must also take into cognizance the dynamics of debates in the familial spaces of viewership. The methodological challenge of accessing familial spaces means that such an analysis can only be undertaken with difficulty. However, the SABC-commissioned evaluative reports are helpful in this regard. The findings in the reports were that viewing of the series, especially *Yizo Yizo 2*, occurred in harmonious familial settings, in which parents seldom prohibited children from watching (Gultig 2002: 6-7). Locating his observations within what he calls, 'international research' trends, media researcher, John Gultig, observes that this signalled 'the possibilities of conversation- and an increase in the "horizontal diffusion" of messages' (Gultig 2002: 7). According to the CASE (Community Agency for Social Enquiry) and SAIDE report:

both series generated high levels of discussion amongst the learners. Almost all (90%) of the learners surveyed claimed to have discussed issues arising from *Yizo Yizo 2* with their friends. The levels of discussion

are even higher among regular viewers (CASE and SAIDE Research Report 2002: 92).

Therefore, while there was dialogue among learners, intergenerational dialogue did not reach the level that the SABC and the filmmakers anticipated. For example, 'communication between parents and children on issues related to sex is lacking' (CASE and SAIDE Research Report: 2002: 261). Gultig also argued that, 'there is little evidence from the evaluations that *Yizo Yizo* had improved dialogue or even the possibilities of dialogue, between learners and teachers, or schools and communities' (Gultig 2002: 9). Importantly, the research reports are indicative of spaces other than the media, where debate about the issues the series raised took place. Even as the reports point to the limits of the debates, the controversy of the series, especially among adults, constituted a significant part of the series' publicness in the media.

### ***Commentary on Commentaries***

The deliberative focus on the series was widened to journalistic interventions in which public furore over *Yizo Yizo* was given another spin. In her analysis of responses to the sodomy scene in *Yizo Yizo2*, journalist Shado Mbatha, draws attention to the silence of commentators on what she considers to be violent scenes in the series (*Sunday Independent*, 2001, 18 March). She regards as problematic the lack of acknowledgement by viewers of the murder of a prisoner in episode four of *Yizo Yizo2*, and of the rapes of Hazel and Dudu. Mbatha argues that South Africans did not demand an inquiry into prison deaths and only found heterosexual sex between the youths problematic when graphically presented and not 'because of its societal consequences'. According to Mbatha, the scene of sex between two prisoners does not show coercion, humiliation, brutality and resistance, all defining features of a rape. Mbatha states that the outrage against the sodomy scene suggests that South Africans are homophobic 'despite our constitution' (*Sunday Independent* 2001, 18 March). Mbatha's observations mark a shift from the largely morally driven controversy typifying the publicness of *Yizo Yizo*.

In a riposte to Mbatha, Xolela Mangcu proposed that the prison scene was homophobic in nature. For him the scene is designed to play to a 'homophobic gallery' and it 'cynically exploited homosexuality as a cultural weapon in the battle against crime'.<sup>19</sup> Further, in a terse analysis of the debates around *Yizo Yizo*, Mangcu articulates his frustration at the apparent progressivism of commentaries around *Yizo Yizo* while they were actually 'voyeuristic'. By this, Mangcu seems to mean that the commentaries actually focused on representations of sexuality in the series, and gave impetus to the sexual stereotype of black people (*Sunday Independent*, 2001, 8 April). Such tendencies, Mangcu argues, are resistant to a critical appreciation of *Yizo Yizo*. In his view, *Yizo Yizo* is equally implicated in that it continues the legacy of making 'the black community the target of the voyeuristic gaze', which represents 'the black body as a symbol of sexual virility'. Despite arguments among others, by Smith, that *Yizo Yizo* is not only about pathology Mangcu argues that pathology is a dominant motif in the series. In his view, the absence of programmes that focus on the pathologies of the white community reflect badly on South African television culture.

The dialogue between Mbatha and Mangcu takes me to another level, the assumptions underlying representations and public interpretations of violence and homosexuality. While this dialogue was coterminous with the arguments over the series' propriety, they were largely meta-critical in scope, offering a critique of the criticism, assumptions and elisions of critical public engagements of *Yizo Yizo*. These criticisms fall outside the moral codes underwriting the controversy around *Yizo Yizo*. They were also hardly in accord with the deliberative mandate of the Department of Education, the SABC and the filmmakers. Mangcu and Mbatha's observations were not the only ones in circulation. Graeme Simpson, executive director of the Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in Johannesburg also took a swipe at the debates around *Yizo Yizo*, particularly at the

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<sup>19</sup>Eric Myeni, author and media personality, also thought the scene was homophobic because the director did not consider its impact on 'someone who enjoyed being sodomised' and that it assumed that the entire society was heterosexual (Tim Modise Show, 2001. *SAFM*, Radio program, 19 March).

televised *Yizo Yizo Speakout* debate (2001, 20 March). He felt that the debate revolved around 'insignificant issues' such as whether the show reflected reality or not, and secondly, whether it should be taken off air or not (*Sunday Independent*, 2001, 1 April). In Simpson's view, the real issues should have been about the success or the lack of it, in the drama's potential or intended educational impact, and ways of measuring it. Simpson's commentary points to the discrepancy in the public engagements of the series, between the media and other spaces. It is indicative of the remoteness of the media from the objectives underwriting the series.

The above comments constitute a particular tendency in *Yizo Yizo's* publicness which is the inclination to analyze public reactions to the series, and the assumptions behind them. For example, the concern with the public perceptions of black sexuality underwrites Mangcu's critical commentary. This tendency also focuses on the assumptions driving government institutions, the public broadcaster, and the filmmakers' choices. Collectively, these analyses demonstrate the widening of *Yizo Yizo's* publicness beyond the intended focus on youths, parents and teachers. The tendency to make observations about commentaries in the media is subtly at play in the many arguments over *Yizo Yizo's* appropriateness for showing sex and violence. However, in this instance, the tendency to critique overrides the simple moral impulse behind the media controversy over *Yizo Yizo*.

Both the concerns about the representation of black South Africans and the critics' focus on the debate around *Yizo Yizo* exceed the intent behind the orchestration. In raising new concerns, these debates show that the controversy, and not orchestration, had a cumulative effect well beyond the educational mandate of the series. Therefore, the predication of the active orchestration of debate on the circulation of the series on primetime television, and extra materials, ceases to be the only foundation upon which public engagements on *Yizo Yizo* are built. It gives way to unexpected debates of issues other than the ones intended by the series' orchestration.

The exchanges between producers, writers and commentators also define the publicness of *Yizo Yizo*. In these debates, Mahlatsi and other officials clarified the objective of the series - but also took into consideration certain criticisms. In the wake of the controversy about *Yizo Yizo1* for example, Mahlatsi acknowledged the criticism levelled at the lack of urgency to resolving problems in the first series, and argued that it was precisely because of it, that the second series presented criminals in a harsher light. However, Mahlatsi countered suggestions for subtle approaches in the drama. For him, the creative vision behind *Yizo Yizo* eschews ambiguity and instead embraces a more direct approach. According to Mahlatsi, conveying the messages of the drama and discouraging misinterpretation informed the strategy behind *Yizo Yizo*.

Yet, the consideration of criticisms to the point of changing certain approaches of the series is significant. It shows that the publicness of *Yizo Yizo* was defined by an ongoing pattern of engagement that empowered its viewers and public. Thus, the ethos of mediated debate also informed the mediating object itself. It must be borne in mind however, that Mahlatsi stressed the changing representations of criminals and not of the entire approach of the series.

### **Conclusions**

The circulation of *Yizo Yizo* on primetime public television was followed by extensive public debates across the press, electronic media and even parliament. These engagements took on a multi-generic form ranging from letters to the editor, talk shows, and newspaper columns. They evince levels of interaction between protagonists in which comments made prompted responses, thereby bringing into being a national 'dialogue' around the series. Even newspaper columns that were normally 'reserved' for discussions of national politics became spaces for public engagement of *Yizo Yizo*. Interestingly, the press also included significant commentary by black non-professional callers to radio, television viewers and newspaper readers, an unprecedented tendency in the history of South African public service broadcasting. The public life of *Yizo Yizo* registers the conditions of the post-

apartheid public sphere, in a manner that illuminates its valorisation of active debate through popular cultural forms.

However, the nature of television series as a cultural form in the public sphere was questioned. *Yizo Yizo* became a site and object of public engagements which were indicative of the dilemma of the capacity of television series and by allusion, of film to represent as closely as possible, the world inhabited by its projected publics. Its circulation on prime time television, in spite of its generic choices, threw into sharp relief the legitimacy of screen-based media (television and film) as platforms for debate and deliberation. However, the media also made possible the destabilization of the educative objective of the series. They focused on the conflict about the suitability of the series in addressing educational problems in the manner that it did, and consequently constructed the debates in a controversial light.

Commentators infrequently focused on the matter of black identity in the discussions around *Yizo Yizo*. This may appear to indicate that as an issue of discourse, black identity did not have the urgency that it used to have prior to the advent of the new dispensation. Yet, implicitly the controversy around the series shows that the anxieties with representations of black images remained strong. Thus, the circulation of discourse around *Yizo Yizo* exceeded the aims of the SABC, the Department of Education and the filmmakers. This indicates that the tendency to debate in the public life of the series was not tied to the control of the institutions and of the filmmakers. It was also the result of interventions by academics and media commentators. By privileging the anti-social aspects amongst the black youth as the window through which to draw attention to the perceived educational and social shortcomings in township schools, *Yizo Yizo* unwittingly stimulated the public deliberations on blackness and aesthetics. Whatever the specific focus of television series and films, the manner in which they represent black social experiences remains a decisive arbiter of public engagements of blackness. These deliberations mark post-apartheid black-centred television and film as terrains of



discursive struggles over blackness, notwithstanding the social and political gains against colonial and apartheid discourses on blackness.

In conclusion, the attention to the public life of the series shows that the understanding of the public critical potency of film requires more than a focus on the intra-textual organization of the text itself, or its implications for democracy. Considering the full extent of the public lives of films enables us to understand better their critical potency. In the case of *Yizo Yizo*, the fact that debates tended to focus on the television series' representations of sex, violence and the rampant corruption in township schools, is a tendency that reflected unfavourably on the status of television and film in public debate. Even then, the series' animation of debates about issues other than those intended by its educational objectives, sidesteps its orchestration of debate.

The status of *Yizo Yizo* in critical public engagements was intricate. However, it was largely defined by controversy. In conjunction with the media, which played a role in the series' publicness, *Yizo Yizo's* realist aesthetics rendered precarious its public critical potency. Consequently, its capacity to set in motion engagements of issues relevant to its mandate was compromised by the uneven discussion of precisely these issues. The precariousness of *Yizo Yizo's* critical potency suggests that the relation of film to the public sphere cannot be delinked from the ways in which the televisual signs are harnessed in the service of democratic ideals. It compels us to reflect seriously on precisely the meanings and implications of the public critical role of television and film. Lest we conflate the intentions of filmmakers with the lives of the films or television series themselves, we ought not to take for granted the public critical status of these cultural forms.