

ABSTRACT

Through an examination of the making and public lives of a selection of apartheid and post-apartheid black-centred films in South Africa: *Come Back, Africa* (1959), *u'Deliwe* (1975), *Mapantsula* (1988), and *Fools* (1997), their contexts of production, circulation, appropriation and engagement, I investigate the role of film in the public life of ideas. While my focus is chiefly on film, I introduce a brief comparator with the television series *Yizo Yizo* (1999-2001), where I deploy the same methodology. To this end, I ask how these films relate to ongoing contemporary discourses about black identity. To explain the making and extended public lives of the films, I combine elements of public sphere theory, literary theory and film analysis to develop a theoretical model that treats film as a circulating text open to appropriation and engagement over time. The results indicate that in ways that shifted throughout the films' public lives, their genres, modes of circulation as well as contexts of their appropriation, mediate the manner and extent of their relations to critical public engagements of black identity. I argue that through the combination of its nature as a modern form and its specific generic attributes, with the conditions and circumstances of its circulation and engagement, film stimulates critical public engagements of certain types. Film achieves what I have called public critical potency, when its content directly or otherwise, resonates with contemporary social and political struggles. Through its public critical potency, which is the capacity of film to stimulate critical public engagements, film demonstrates its importance in the public life of ideas. However, film also has the potential to fail in that respect. As a result, the margin between its success and potential for failure to achieve public critical potency, makes precarious, the role and status of film in the public life of ideas. In examining film as a circulating text over time, the thesis challenges approaches that investigate the public sphere of film solely in terms of genre and cinematic spectatorship. In the process, it has engaged the concepts of 'film' and 'public' within film studies in a way that recognizes its wide reach and extensive role in the public sphere. In the final analysis, the thesis is instructive with regard to the ways in which film may or may not

relate to the public sphere in repressive and post-repressive societies in particular, and in modernity in general.

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