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Voicing the archive: documentary filmmaking and the political archive in South Africa

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2014-06-30
http://hdl.handle.net10539/14836

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ABSTRACT

This research, which includes a thesis and a documentary film, focuses on the construction of a historical non-fiction film on anti-apartheid student protests at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg from 1957 to 1987. The restrictive censorship legislation at the time hampered the local distribution of the recorded footage and affected news reports on the nature of protests and protesters. The project sets out to situate these events within aspects of the historical and political context of the country, university, existing archive, individual and collective memory, the problematic of producing documentary films, the performative nature of protest action, the recording of testimonies and the production process. The research provides a framework for recording the interviews, collecting archival footage and photographs, and for constructing the narrative for the film. The thesis also considers the need for a "biographical" index for the construction process in order to rid the archive of subjective and political bias in an attempt to illuminate archiving processes such as the production of a historical documentary film. The project will show that although theoretical claims regarding the nature of truth in non-fiction filmmaking are fraught and open-ended, the collective memories of the participants, combined with relevant stock footage, can become a respectful collusion of voices.