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# If This Be a City

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**A research report submitted by the Wits School of Arts, Film and Television Department, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Film and Television.**

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# Abstract

This paper is a reflexive analysis of the process of making the short experimental film entitled *If this be a city*, which forms part of the practical component of the Masters in Film and Television. The formal, conceptual and aesthetic choices offered in the analysis of the film aim to explore alternative possibilities of analyzing representations of Joburg.

I have positioned my filmic practice as one of the multi entry points to epistemologies that are concerned with the representation of Joburg discursively. *If this be a city* is an audio visual enquiry framed around theoretical concerns articulated in the literature about the critical interrogation of urban spaces in general, and Joburg in particular. The film operates as an evaluation of the prevailing theoretical body of work by accentuating the disparities between the theoretical frameworks and the everyday spatial practices of experiencing the city.

## Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of Masters of Arts in Film and Television in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, nor has it been prepared with the assistance of any other body or organization or person outside of the University of the Witwatersrand.

Nduka Mntambo

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------30 ---------- day of ----------July---------- 2009

## Acknowledgement

Dedicated to my life partner Cobi Labuscagne without whom this journey of writing, thinking and imaging Joburg would have been less beautiful.

Many thanks to my supervisor, Professor Jyoti Mistry for her vigorous artistic and theoretical mentorship.

# Introduction

*If this be a city* is a short experimental film conceived and produced as part of my Masters in Film and Television. The project in its conceptual and theoretical construction is concerned with the analysis and representations of Joburg as a post-apartheid city. I am interested in exploring through the medium of film with its attendant characteristics of framing, authorial subject positioning, aesthetic choices, character and narrative devices, the urban discourses around the representation of Joburg for the past decade in South Africa. The film gestures towards critical discursive moments that have characterized scholarship about the city. Furthermore the filmmaking process of *If this be a city* attempts to insinuate itself into the discursive moments, while simultaneously exploring possibilities of other modes of representation that may not always be complementary of the canonized conversations.

Central to the enquiry is the question of what possible tools of representation are available to a young student filmmaker living and working in the city. What strategies can be employed in reading the post-apartheid city considering the weight of ideological and epistemological paradigms that have been pervasive in the project of representing Joburg? Does one simply situate one's practice within the rubric of canonized academic practices such as urban studies in order to understand the multiplicity of experiences and subjectivities that characterize present day Joburg? Will the reading of policy-oriented discourse which grapples with the post-apartheid city, employing the language of official spatial formulations, urban planning, demographic shifts, social and economic movements and developmentalism, prove to be appropriate in my project of trying to understand this nascent African city?

Can one take refuge in the episteme that confronts the notion of the city using the exploratory dialect of conjecture, philosophy and experientiality? What will the practices of other contemporary South African writers and artists tell us about the representation of Joburg? My film project and this reflective essay attempt to illuminate the dissonances and ellipses between the canonized theoretical paradigms and my own experiences and observations of the city refracted through the lens of analytical, historical and theoretical positions of the city in general and on the city of Joburg exclusively.

If anything, the film *If this be a city* can be described as a series of small vignettes or fragments that aim to provoke, agitate, question and converse with the salient moments of scholarship about our city in the past decade. This paper proceeds by engaging in a close analysis of *If this be a city*, as one of the multiple entry points to the theories and artistic practices around the representations of Joburg. Each element of the film extrapolated will hopefully gesture and dialogue with theoretical concerns and propositions found in the discourse and in various artistic practices representing the experience of Joburg.

*If this be a city* chronicles the relationship between two young men (Tsepo wa Mamatu and Tshepiso Konopi) set in a high-rise apartment in downtown Joburg. An exploration of their relationship is haunted by images of desire, manias, memories, longing, violence, unconsummated sexual acts and a pervasive sense of *ennui*. The layering of the film works to reflect the characters struggles between the immediate physical positioning within the cityscape and their psychic and existential experience of Joburg. The film is structured in "experiential" vignettes composed of moments of interaction between the lead characters and imagined and real transactions with the city and its inhabitants. The quotidian moments in

the film are inflected with intertextual references from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972) and found footage of early Joburg gold mining. The construction of the film attempts to capture the difficult convergence between the city's violent history and its present. Its aspirational qualities of being a global city are coupled with burgeoning cosmopolitanism, echoed in the character's needs to interact with the myriad of subjectivities that permeate the condition of living in Joburg.

On a formal level, I employ a violent and uneasy triangulation of text, image and sound to accentuate the visceral pulse of Joburg. The film's construction relies heavily on anti-narrative techniques and hyper realistic filmic devices such as the juxterpositioning of disparate images to elicit a jarring emotional response and the use of extra-diegetic sounds to inject a heightened experience of the *mis-en-scene*.

The aural elements of the film are pivotal because to experience Joburg is to be inundated with a cacophony of different African and European languages. Furthermore, the city resonates with the incessant honking of minibus taxis, the clicking and shuffling shoes on the pavement, the flapping sounds of Joburg's coy pigeons, the eclectic mix of music from corner stores and silent screams of someone being mugged and murdered in the streets. These sounds contend for space with the text and images of *If this be the city.*

*If this be a city* is a result of the reading and thinking of key theoretical texts that have influenced my conceptual and aesthetic choices. I intend to bring into relief these texts in relation to my film.

In order to offer a historical background about the policy challenges that plagued post apartheid Joburg, I investigate the work of Pieterse (2004). The official dissolution of apartheid in 1994 and the extension of rights and a greater sense of belonging for the majority of black people within the fold of the city, promised an ideal image of Joburg. Pieterse charts five key reasons (this will be briefly explained later) that have frustrated the realization of developmental policies. The exploration of Pieterse's factors offers this study a realistic picture of the post-apartheid Joburg and a useful analytical vantage point.

In the second instance, I discuss the text written by Jennifer Robinson (2002) in which she argues against the tendency to think of cities as either global or developmental, with the latter including mega cities. Central to her argument is that neither perspective captures the current situation of post-apartheid Joburg. Her work advises scholars and policymakers to think of the city as 'ordinary'. My practice reflected in *If this be the city* brings into relief the tension between the global and developmental perspective and considers the ellipses inherent in these perspectives.

AbdouMaliq Simone (2007) writes about extending the notion of infrastructure to encompass people living in the city, offers interesting insight into my film practice. Simone (2007: 68) posits that a "specific economy of perception and collaborative practice is constituted through a capacity of individual actors to circulate across and become familiar with the broad range of spatial, residential, economic, and transactional positions." This text speaks to alternative strategies of experiencing the city which is central to my reading and writing of Joburg as reflected in the conceptual, thematic and aesthetic construction of *If this be a City.*

I am also interested in investigating a set of concepts suggested by Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttal (2004), specifically their description of contemporary Joburg as a metropolis. I will consider how ideas such as superfluity, self-stylization and the notion of the Afropolis are interrogated and extrapolated in my film practice.

My process draws from spatial theories such as Michel Foucault's idea of the panoptic and Michel de Certeau's conception of everyday spatial practices in which the act of walking creates a narrative identity. I will also discuss Walter Benjamin's insights on the figure of the *flaneur*. These three key concepts offer analytical tools to reflect not simply on my own cinematic practice but present an opportunity to integrate examples of representations that explore experiences of Joburg cinematically or through a literary form. These examples comprise of *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* (2005) a film by Khalo Matabane and a novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) by Phaswana Mpe.

## Fragment One: Gesturing to the past

The screen is black as night, a disembodied voice fills it; the tone of the voice is suppliant yet carries a tinge of accusation:

Voice

> The most discouraging thing about you is this inability to care. I am not asking for much in way of handshakes or welcoming embraces. You know, it seems as if this relationship of ours can only be seen from my vantage point.

We then see a restless man (Tsepo wa Mamatu) seated in a high-rise flat; he seems to be waiting for someone to arrive. Later in the film we will learn that this is the voice of lead character's *doppelganger* (Tshepiso Konopi), a figure that articulates what the lead character is unable to say. It is through this voice that the pervasive *ennui* is captured over the course of the film. This notion of ennui speaks to a sense of urban alienation that plagues the characters of *If this be a city.*

On a second level the words speaks of failed dreams and promises that characterise the post-apartheid Joburg. The official dissolution of apartheid in 1994, promised South Africa a new beginning in which all its citizens would be granted civil, political, and social rights and a truly multiracial and democratic society would emerge. The question of space and its restriction was pivotal to apartheid, as Koloane and Powell (1995: 265) assert: "apartheid was a politics of space, if you look at the 1913 and 1936 Land Acts they were all about space, and much of the apartheid legislation was about denying people the right to move. It's about

space, restricting space". This register of space has been a source of much interest in the writing of post-apartheid Joburg.

Lefebvre (1992: 54) posits that:

> A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses. A social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space.

Joburg presents itself as a fertile space to test and explore the above-mentioned quote by Lefebvre; it lends itself as an ideal platform to engage with the critical questions of this essay and by extension the film. Robinson (2002:169) phrases these questions lucidly when she asks if the new post-apartheid society is producing new spaces. To what extend are the visions for remaking apartheid space productive of difference? To what extent has Lefebvre's 'representational space' been the source of new types of spaces?

In order to engage with these questions one has to chart a brief historical outline, marked and characterized by the official dissolution of apartheid in 1994 and the extension of rights and a greater sense of belonging for the majority of black people within the fold of the city. The waning of the golden promise of the world class cosmopolitan city in the wake and cold reality of the flight of capital to the affluent northern suburbs of Johannesburg , the stubbornly high unemployment, the lack of housing, the influx of foreign African residents seem to characterize the post-apartheid city. In order to understand the persistence of the

apartheid city despite the institutional and official dismantling of the apartheid structure, one has to examine policy related literatures.

In this instance the work of Pieterse (2004:1) is worth elaborating as it provides a good backdrop in order to understand the policy challenges faced in Joburg Pieterse (2004: 1) sketches five key reasons why it has been so difficult to shift the patterns of fragmentation and inequality in our cities.

Pieterse cites the question of institutional overload during a time when local government structures were perpetually being made and remade as the legislative timetable moved local government from the pre-interim (1994-1995/1996), to the interim (1996-2000), and permanent phases (post 2000) of existence as one of the key contributing factors. He argues that it was unrealistic to expect that the municipalities that had inherited organizational turmoil and conflict would be able to formulate, monitor and refine the multi- dimensional policy objectives given that the policy objectives were politically contentious.

The second reason, according to Pieterse, can be located in the failure of the national and provincial governments to conceive sectorial policy initiatives (e.g. transport, housing, primary health care, economic development), in consultation with the municipalities who needed to implement them on the ground level. The formulation of these policies without active and direct participation of local government has led to contradictory national demands that the municipalities had to negotiate.

The third reason involves the question of political pressures to achieve numerical targets in line with the service delivery commitment elaborated in the government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). Many observers routinely point out that the fixation on numerical targets – most famously, 1 million houses in five years – shaped the priorities and imperatives of municipal government whilst they reorganized, effectively skewing multidimensional transformation objectives towards the exigencies of delivery of physical infrastructures.

Pieterse argues that the net effects were to reinforce and exacerbate the spatial form of the apartheid city, because the only affordable land that was amenable to large-scale, private sector-driven construction requires economies of scale that were on the periphery of cities.

The fourth factor lies in the lack of understanding and engagement with urban economic processes and actors, in which private property development interventions aimed at middle-class enterprises were almost without exception located in white suburbs at the expense of central business districts and nascent black owned areas. Pieterse posits that these patterns of flows of investment capital reinforce the economic marginalization of the working class and the poor. This in turn tends to exacerbate racial segregation and urban fragmentation due to the acute race-class coincidence in South Africa.

The final reason is related to the factor which Pieterse terms 'transgressive urban politics', in which key government policies dealing with the pursuit of integrated urban development are premised on a consensual model of politics. The policy formulation processes are simplistically based on an assumption that diverse stakeholders will be able to find agreement

through deliberation on the necessity of making cities that are "spatially and socio-economically integrated, [and] free of racial and gender discrimination and segregation" Pieterse argues that transformative urban policies must produce outcomes that involve a diminution in power and behavioural change by the powerful so that subaltern classes in the city can gain access to more resources and opportunities to enhance their life worlds and aspirations. Implicit in these five key challenges, is an attempt to understand the factors that frustrates the vision of a 'world class African city'[1] that Joburg can become.

Jennifer Robinson (2003) argues that it is in this very vision wherein the problem lies. Central to her polemic against urban studies discourse is the notion that Joburg's future is entwined in two of the most powerful discourses and sets of practices shaping cities. The idea of being a global city and the urgent requirement to improve living conditions for the poor are respectively the parameters of the world city hypothesis and understandings of developmental specialists.

These parameters draw very deeply from the understanding that a global/world city hypothesis is modelled from the achievements and form of cities in advanced Western economies and the developmental approach highlights and engages with cities from the poorest countries of the world. Robinson (2003: 260) cautions against this easy hypothesis citing two consequences of this urban discourse. Firstly this kind of discourse considers non-Western cities to be in need of major interventions fashioned to catch up with the normative Western city form. The possibility of considering these non-Western city forms as an opportunity for reframing the notion of city and cityness is seldom explored. Secondly the

[1] Joburg: a world class African city: Is a tagline that is coined by mayoral administration of Joburg - http://www.joburg.org.za/

division sets up a hierarchy of cities that deploys a regulating fiction about what makes a successful city, encouraging cities of all kinds to undertake costly and often destructive investment to attain the highest status as a global or world city.

As an antidote to this hierarchical and divisive category in urban discourse, Robinson (2003: 277) suggests that we need to see a city like Joburg as neither a possible global city nor a mega city but understand it as an 'ordinary city'. She argues that moving away from the divided approach of cities, where some are interpreted as structurally irrelevant and others as globally powerful, to one where all (ordinary) cities are understood as complex, diverse and contested environments for living, necessitates change in how urban theory policymaking is done.

It is this understanding of seeing the city as 'ordinary' that my film uses the frame of an ordinary man held captive by *ennui* in his city flat. It is not important for the viewer to know if Tsepo is the owner of the flat, or how many people he shares the space with; what kind of a job he holds, how he navigates the city, or what his financial and societal position is. Neither the markers of the developing city nor the aspirational tropes of a global city burden the film. The narrative structure does not ask the lead character to attain any goal; there are no inciting incidences, point of no return and denouements in this film. Instead we are presented with mostly extra-diegetic disparate fragments of images, texts and sounds speaking to the visceral experience of the lead characters. The extra- diegetic strategies are used to privilege the creative interactions that the characters enjoy in the treatment of the city. I am interested in employing filmic language as an intervention that is full of possibilities outside the canonized parameters of urban discourse. An extra- diegetic film language that operates within the

realm of raptures, ellipses and interesting juxtapositions render the idea and the experiences of the city, not as whole but rather as a city characterized by diverse and intersecting fragments.

When describing the experience of the city in this fragmentary nature, the notion of a homogenized, holistic and a totalizing experience of the city is not simply challenged but subverted. Such a position makes it possible for the experience of a city to be inscribed with subjectivity and related both to Benjamin's *flaneur* and de Certeau's ideas of walking in the city, which I will address in detail later in this analysis.

## Fragment Two:  Tsepo's Dreams

We see a man seated inside an apartment; he is seen from the vantage point of his balcony window. The camera tentatively moves in, trying to enter the space. The hum of the city pervades the apartment. The man is restless and shuffles in his chair. The camera comes closer to his face, the image becomes still and a small screen like a television set is inserted into the frame. In this image we see hands of two black men playing a game; their intimacy in play is laden with laughter and small gestures of familiarity. The man in his stillness watches these images and appears unmoved. The image shows hands playing with a Rubik's cube; these images flicker to signify that they are thoughts/memories that are trying to form.

Scrolling text emerges from the borders of the frame, moving across the screen. The text is comprised of  fragments from Italo Calvino text, *Invisible City* (1972). My film draws creative influence from Calvino's text as it renders the idea of a city as series of allusions, memories, fleeting desires and signs to be deciphered. This text in my film moves across the screen similar to the manner in which traffic moves along grids through the city. The textual movements are chaotic and subjected to collusions with images and sounds within the *mis-en- scene.*

The screen splits in two; we see stock footage of black labourers cueing in the Joburg mine shafts, this is juxtaposed with an image depicting the savage butchering of an ox. (Appendix

2 & 3). The images are inter-cut with shots of the Gautrain [2]excavation currently taking place in the present in Joburg. In this instance the audience is asked to draw parallels between the signs of Joburg's history (and its signifiers of capital and consumption) and the present day construction of the Gautrain. Both instances are characterized by black labour sent to the bowels of the earth in order for the city's aspirations to be realized. This recurring sequence in the film draws on Achille Mbembe's notion of *superfluity*. Mbembe (2008: 38) defines the notion as:

> Superfluity does not refer only to the aesthetics of surfaces and qualities, and how such an aesthetic is premised on the capacity of things to hypnotize, overexcite, or paralyze the senses. To my mind, superfluity refers to the dialectics of indispensability and expandability of labour and life, people and things. It refers to the obfuscation of any exchange or use of value that labour might have, and to the emptying of any meaning that might be attached to the act of measurement or qualification itself, insofar as numerical representation is as much a fact as it is a form of fantasy.

Mbembe draws on Marxist notion of commodity in which "superfluity pertains to the sphere of satisfactions and enjoyments, to the world of gratifications and fleeting pleasures" Mbembe relates this commodity culture with the obfuscation of the black subject (migrant labour culture). The construction sequence in my film aims to crystallize and speak to the obfuscation of the black subject, but also reflects on how a post-apartheid black subject is able to find expression outside the historical and radicalized paradigms. Consider how the lead character's desires are able to navigate and circumvent race and gender, desire is produced from access and availability.

[2] South Africa first rapid rail link in Gauteng, construction started in 2007 to be completed in 2010. The rail connects Joburg with Tshwane, Sandton and O R Tambo International Airport.

This sequence brings into relief a number of theoretical and artistic considerations of my project. It foregrounds in both the figurative and literal sense the kind of lens that is under my employ as a filmmaker. Mine is an imaginative vantage point as reflected in Robinson (1998: 165) when she asserts that it is in the image of a dream that perhaps there is potential for new spaces to emerge beyond the other post apartheid space:

> Just as 'third-world cities have been seen through the lens of developmentalism, South Africa has been seen through the lens of apartheid- as sites of domination through spatial segregation and racism. Writers on cities in poor and post-colonial countries are increasingly drawn to consider the creative urbanity of these places and the people who live in them. South African cities would surely provide a rich field for this approach. As AbdouMaliq Simone notes 'Even though it is difficult for a man, woman, child to imagine, reflect, conceive, or create on an empty stomach, empty stomachs do not terminate the existence of the imagination. The question will continue to be how these endeavours of the imagination can be incorporated into a national and institutional life as aspects of a coherent cultural project. It is these cultural resources and creative enterprises, which transform city space, as much as- or perhaps even more than – political struggle and institutional reform. The imagination, then, is a crucial part of (re) making city spaces. Does this have theoretical purchase? What does it mean for (re) planning cities?

In this quote Robinson (1998: 165) moves the discourse from the official lens of developmentalism to the city subject's everyday activities, in which subjects are witness to other forms of spatiality through their bodies and their movements, as well as their imaginations.

She argues that the body, the unconscious and our inner worlds clearly play an important role in the production of the meaning of space, and its potential transformation. Lefebvre himself mentions the dream as one aspect of representational space, which he characterizes as 'alive: it speaks', and as "essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic"

The characters in *If this be a city,* seem to be unburdened by the external bread and butter issues of living in the developing third world city. Their concerns and afflictions are centred on existential and emotional matters plaguing their experience of the urban space. Narratively, it is neither the physiological nor the needs of safety that motivate Tsepo's character but the struggle with questions of self- actualization. This is reflected in his wrestling with memory, urban alienation and manias. The viewer is invited to look inward into the psychosis of the characters instead of simply looking at the external factors impacting on the characters.

This mode of reading the city's spatiality is taken further in AbdouMaliq Simone text, in which the bodies and activities of Joburg city dwellers are investigated. Simone (2007: 68) posits:

> I wish to extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people's activities in the city. African cities are characterized by incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of the residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used. The intersections, particularly in the last two decades, have depended on the ability of the residence to engage in a complex combination of objects, spaces, people and practices. The conjunctions become an infrastructure – a platform providing for and producing life in the city…a specific economy of perception and collaborative practices is constituted through a capacity of individual actors to circulate across and become familiar with the broad range of spatial, residential, economic, and transactional positions.

Simone's (2007: 71) concept of 'people as infrastructure' describes a tentative and often precarious process of remaking the inner city, especially now that the policies and economies that once moored it to the surrounding city have mostly worn away. He argues that in many

respects, the inner city has been “let go” and forced to reweave its connections with the larger world by making the most of its limited means.

An exemplification of this notion can be seen in the manner in which the idea of “belonging” is reconceived in terms other than those of the logic of group or territorial representation. Simone posits that the idea of people as infrastructure indicates inner city resident’s needs to generate concrete acts and contexts of social collaboration inscribed with multiple identities rather than overseeing and enforcing modulated transactions among discrete population groups. This interaction with multiple identities is captured in the imagined and real myriad of lovers and strangers that permeate the lead characters memories in my film.

The analysis of the construction of the characters inhabiting the narrative of *If This be the city* offers multiple entry points in reading the post-apartheid Joburg. It brings into relief the tensions inherent between theoretical conceptual ideas in my creative practice.

## Fragment Three: To walk or not to walk / To watch or not to watch

We see images of the cityscape from the distant vantage point of Tsepo's binoculars from the safety and height of a high-rise apartment balcony. (Appendix 1) The images begin as proverbial flickering city lights at night, and as the character look closer at the cityscape, they metamorphosizes into a disquieting psychedelic barrage of moving images of the city. The city's bridges, roads and electric pylons speed through his mind colliding with sounds of strained strings resulting in the character's panic attack as he looks at a street below. At this moment we wonder if he is contemplating to jump off the building into the streets. Our character seems incapable of entering the city and can only experience it from above.

Yet the idea of walking the city as an entry point in theoretical explorations of the city has held a high purchase in both the academic discourse and artistic practices. This essay and my film practice dialogues with the theoretical concepts advanced by Benjamin and De Certeau. Perhaps a brief charting of these arguments might bring light to how the lead character chooses to interact with the city. I am interested in analyzing Tsepo's character interaction with the city, using three conceptual registers namely the idea of the "panopticon", the practice of walking the city and finally speak to the notion of the *flaneur*. The analysis will also consider how these concepts can be applied to other works that serve as a relief to my own film. The examples in question are *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* (2005) a film by Khalo Matabane and a novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) by Phaswana Mpe.

De Certeau (1984: 92) is interested in what happens to the spectator's perception of the urban environment when lifted to its very zenith, perhaps from the summit of the World Trade Centre in New York. Does one read a different text of the city devoid of many differences and the nervousness of the traffic below? De Certeau (1984: 93) posits that it is the exaltation of the scopic and the Gnostic that creates the fiction of knowledge that is related to the lust of the viewpoint and nothing more. Tsepo's character in the film is seen towering from his panoptic vantage point in which he is able to observe the city from above, conveying the sentiment of invisible omniscience. His interaction with the city is a predominantly scopic vision of the city, which is mediated through his binoculars connoting a clear sense of distance. The character seems to be obsessed with the idea of surveillance as we also see him watching images of himself and his *doppelganger* on a television screen. We see overexposed images of a recording device (camera time codes) showing a figure that looks like the lead character, in an act of self-imaging. We never see the characters interacting with the city in a non-mediated fashion. Using the trope of the voyeur – god-like omniscient character. I aim to engage with the theoretical frameworks that analyze the city from a scopic, removed or surveillance position. A city planner, a cartographer or an academic researcher who paints a picture of the city from above and creates a fiction or fictive narrative whose condition of possibility as de Certeau posits 'is an oblivion and the misunderstanding of spatial practices' may exemplify this position.

Secondly de Certeau describes ordinary practitioners of the city who live "down below', below the threshold at which visibility begins. Both the practitioners (Matabane and Mpe) seem to discursively operate as ordinary practitioners of the city who live and write their text from below. Matabane and Mpe's texts seem to me a result of what De Certeau describes as

"urban texts that they write without realizing, creating intertwining paths characterized by a certain blindness, which can be understood as fragments of trajectories and alterations of space." These alterations of spaces that are characterized by a certain form of 'blindness' are explicit in the narrative, characterisation and plotting in the film, *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* (2006)

The film, *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* (2006) is a daring feature film about Joburg in which both fictional and documentary conventions are combined to tell the story of a writer Keneloe (Tony Kgoroge) wandering in the streets of Johannesburg, looking for a Somali woman that he encounters one Sunday afternoon in the city park. In his forlorn search for Fatima, he encounters 'real' people whose stories of displacement become the narrative thread of the film. The city setting in this film ceases to be just the backdrop in which the drama of the characters unfold, but becomes an exploration of the streets of Hillbrow, Yeoville and Mayfair. Each of these suburbs attains the status of characters themselves.

In the first scene of the film we meet the protagonist Keneloe finding refuge in an inner Joburg city park. Armed with his wooden bench, which he carries around his shoulders like a proverbial cross and the novel *Links* (2005) by Somali writer Nuruddin Farah in his hand, Keneloe seems to be lost in his world. The character casts the figure of a writer trying to make sense of the world and his city. The leisurely walk and stay in the park provide the character who is a writer with the space to read and write his tale of self-dramatization.

David Bunn (2007: 158) intimates that the idea of a inner city park as supplement is a crucial one: if the city is a place of housing and work, crossed by instrumentalzing and disciplinary functions, then the park enables a kind of excess, a kind of writing, self dramatization, and contact that has nothing to do with survival. Although this postulation is useful in theorizing about the spatiality of Matabane's film, the inner city parks in Joburg are not totally divorced from survival. Walking the parks of the inner city one is confronted with people engaging in activities such as makeshift hair salons, photographic studios, peddlers of fake DVD's and other forms of financial survival. This becomes an invigorated use of the inner city park.

In a compelling sequence we see Keneloe reading a passage from Nuruddin Farah's *Links* in which the writer describes the wanton violence that characterizes Somalia in which young men play games, randomly shooting at strangers. Keneloe re- enacts the scene, which is treated by the filmmaker in sombre monochrome, we see the leisurely green Sunday afternoon park transforms into a sinister stage in which Keneloe performs his homicidal fantasies. So invested to the idea of writing and dreaming in the city, Kenoloe rejects an invitation to come home (reality) from a female character played by Sthandiwe Msomi (Tony Kgoroge's real wife).

A chance encounter one Sunday afternoon with the Somalian lady Fatima at the park becomes what in filmic parlance is called an inciting incident, which propels the narrative to a different direction. In this instance, Fatima tells her tale of grief as a Somali immigrant, recounting the trauma she has endured in the conflict back home. Without the emotive music and reaction shots that characterize dramatic fictional narratives, the camera stays on

Fatima's face and captures the tears, frustrations and silences of her tale. Kenoloe's interaction with Fatima recasts the easily articulated antagonistic relationship between South African inner city residents and African immigrants.

It is this idea of belonging and becoming that makes *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* a political project that enhances the sense of belonging in the city. After the interaction with Fatima, Keneloe goes back to the park the next Sunday looking for Fatima. In his search for Fatima he traverses the inner city streets of Joburg, meeting and interviewing immigrants from the Congo, Uganda, Ethiopia, Senegal, and Zimbabwe about their sense of belonging in the city. Their testimony of improvised life style, searching for peace, yearning for home and the daily travails are captured in Matabane's sympathetic camera. The characterization of the lead character in this film (Keneloe) gestures very strongly to Benjamin's notion of the *flaneur*, which Nuttal (2004: 741) describes as:

> Benjamin's figure of the flaneur (the aesthetic bohemian, drifting through the city like a film director) invites us to read the city from its street-level intimations, to encounter the city as lived complexity, to seek alternative narratives and maps based on wandering. He used the term transitivity to grasp the city as a place of intermingling and improvisation, resulting from its porosity to the past as well as varied spatial influences. Benjamin was also overwhelmed by the city's theatricality, its passion for improvisation, and its ironies.

Matabane uses this trope successfully as an entry point to his narrative. It is through Kenoloe's forays into the inner city streets that alternative narratives and geographic maps in Joburg are crystallized. Elizabeth Wilson (1995: 61) posits that the proliferations of public places of pleasure and interest have created a new kind of a public person characterised by

leisure and wandering: the *flaneur,* a key figure in critical literature of modernity and urbanitisation. This character is the archetypal occupant and observer of public sphere in rapidly growing cities.

Nuttal (2004) brings interesting insight when she speaks of city texts in relation to the literature of Phaswana Mpe. Nuttal (2004: 743) demonstrates that the novel through its characterization of urbanity is able to offer us an inventory of the city, comprising a path along the streets, both tracking and breaching historical constructions of city space.

The novel maps different itineraries of the city, as demonstrated in the first chapter of the book entitled *Hillbrow: The Map.* In Mpe's vibrant prose, streets are marked with 'incidents', speaking to the spatial experiential interaction with the city. This mapping of the streetscape becomes a very tensile form of enunciation and through it we can begin to read the city in an alternative way. Mpe's writing of the city captures, according to Nuttal (2004: 743) a revised inventory of the city, comprising a path along its streets, and breaching historical constructions of the city space.

> Then you arrived in Hillbrow, Refentse, to witness it for yourself: and come up with your own story, if you could. You came to be a witness, because your cousin, with whom you are going to stay until you found student accommodation at the university, stayed in Hillbrow, although not exactly in the centre of the action. For he did not stay in the main streets, Pretoria and Kotze, nor in the somewhat notorious Esslen, all which run parallel to each other. No! He did not even stay in the most notorious Quartz Street-joining the three at right angles which is what people often mean when they say: There is Hillbrow for you!

In Afropolis: From Johannesburg, Mbembe and Nuttal (2007) undertake a drive through the city, in which Joburg and it leakages and texts are read from the vantage of a moving car:

> It is an environment studded with texts. Road signs, billboards, newsprint, magazines covers, the stream of global and local city signs, of Johannesburg representation. A city of surfaces, shining shifting, superficial, sensational and singular. Alive, on the move, and at times as ugly as sin. It is also a city with an underneath, a city build on the extraction of gold. Beneath the surface of the city lies a system that was based on the rigidly hierarchical racial division of labour, an original violence.

Mbembe's and Nuttal's (2007: 282) reading of the city postulates Joburg as an intricate entanglement of éclat and sombreness, lightness and darkness, a great generator of cruelty and pain and of novelty. Emotional investment in the modernity of city life betrays the oversimplified history of segregation. Diverse, and sometimes shared, meanings of life move falteringly beyond the strictures of an apartheid imagination.

It is in the plethora of images or texts that Johannesburg opens itself as loci of reading and forging the idea of a metropolis. Mbembe and Nuttal (2007: 286) argue that these images, texts and post-architectural spaces tell us something about the life of the metropolis, or at least of the racial city as it transforms into a metropolitan form. The texts reveal deep investments in the idea of urban living. They are screens across which flickering desires track: traces that reveal only indistinctly the record of urban living.

Mbembe and Nuttal (2008: 4) argue that a new way of writing African cities should be premised on the registers of uncertainty, spectrality and informality. This way of writing theory is in contrast with the early urban studies focusing on labour migration, legal change,

informal social networks and the established approaches to urbanization. They posit that ways of seeing and reading the contemporary African cities is still dominated by the meta-narrative of urbanization, modernization, and crises.

Central to Mbembe and Nuttal's (2004: 348) argument is the idea that African cities are continually read as a sign, which is fraught, because it ends up epitomizing the intractable, the mute, the abject, or the otherworldly. The sign is so overstrained in this imagining that it becomes impossible to throw open the full spectrum of meanings and implications that other human places and other human experiences enjoy, provoke, and inhabit.

Mbembe and Nuttal posit that in order to undercut what they term as imperial paradigms, we need to look at the frontiers of commonality and the potential of *sameness-as-worldliness.* Central to this idea is that scholarship about Africa (and its cities) should be deprovincialized. The second strategy is to take seriously that African cities have been and still are the space of flows, flux and translocation, meaning that it is not the space that is always 'produced ' but it circulates and is constantly in motion. In the project of re- reading and re-writing the city, the writers suggest that we should look at critical pedagogies that defamiliarise the commonsense registers and identify the city (metropolis) as the site of this re-imagining. This project of de-familiarisation is premised on the idea of redeeming the imagining of an African Metropolis from the meta-narratives of urbanisation, modernization and crises, which is very prescriptive, as it understands the city as a problem to be solved.

Michael Watts (2005) takes issue with “vigorous and imaginative’ scholarship espoused by Mbembe and Nuttal about the ‘elusive metropolis’. Watts (2005: 188) argues that Mbembe seems to wish not to be encumbered by the worn out pretext of miseralibilism, hence “superfluity” is that which is located beyond the sphere of poverty and necessity. Watts argues that Mbembe’s form of analysis of privileging Johannesburg as a site of ‘desire, fantasy and imagination’ operates by repressing sites such as Hillbrow and Berea whose reading may lead us to different conception of the African metropolis. Watts (2005: 187) argues that Mbembe’s notion of “superfluity” is conceptually underdeveloped to be much utility, and often the contours and pathologies of metropolitan psychic life are weakly anchored in empirical data.

My film *If this be a city* is interested in exploring the ‘contours and pathologies of metropolitan psychic life’ as a way of challenging the notion of using empirical data when analyzing the city.

In *If this be a city*, contours and pathologies of metropolitan psychic life are reflected in memories, fantasies and longing that plague the lead character. In the middle part of the film, we see him trying to block out the invading images. The screen transforms into a sensual crimson, we hear sounds of two people making love, and we see a face of a beautiful black woman wistfully looking outside her apartment balcony. The image is overlaid with degraded monochrome images of a man and woman-having sex while Calvino texts move across the frame. The voice of Tsepo’s *doppelganger* anchors the images:

> Diseased orifices that I probe in search of your innocence I name and shame you now, your ravenous pleasure that I labour to wash off my body, lets return to you excess, your fiefdom that you wear in our sleeves, lets return to your monuments and perhaps we will find something to capture with our eyes wide shut, a glimpse of moment when your indifference is compromised

The frame splits into two, we see a face of the *doppelganger* inter-cut with the images of an ox being decapitated and his voice is more agitated:

> Can it be said that you are elusive; I find the phrase ingenious if you ask me.

We cut into a split screen consisting of a coy beautiful white female juxtaposed with greenish hued shots of Tsepo's character. The voice over continues:

> There were times when I found your diffidence alluring. You seemed at times to be a provocative sibling with our late games of forced kisses and violent laughter; we shared baths of Highveld drops and mock blonde sunsets.

The sequence climaxes with the violent sped up images of the white woman infused with jarring extra- diegetic sounds. The filmic treatment of the sequence is characterized by a dense overlaying of provocative text, sound, image rendered in various split screens. The language of *If this be a city* is characterized by extensive mixing of visual and aural media. These techniques are designed to bring attention to the process of construction and highlight the fragmented contours of the character's experience of the city.

The film representational strategies offered in my film tries to capture what Catherine Russell (1999: 20) describes as lingering dualities of now and then, centre and periphery, us and

them, he and she, which persists within post-modern cultural forms, as does the utopian aspiration of radical praxis.

# Conclusion

> All films made about the city (Johannesburg) to date have confined themselves to rendering it supposed apocalyptic proportions, as if ordinary lives did not exists in its metropolitan culture. (Mbembe & Nuttal 2004: 366)

*If this be a city* is invested in the notion of rendering Joburg using the register of the ordinary. The arguments by Jennifer Robinson that militates against the tendency to think of cities as either global or developing, with the latter including mega-cities were instructive in anchoring the notion of understanding post-apartheid Joburg as ordinary. The formal, conceptual and aesthetic choices offered in my film aim to explore alternative possibilities of analyzing the experience and the representations of Joburg.

I have positioned my filmic practice as one of multi entry points to epistemologies that are concerned with the representation of Joburg discursively. *If this be a city* is an audio visual enquiry framed around theoretical concerns articulated in the literature about the construction and experience of urban spaces in general and examines Joburg in particular. The film operates as an evaluation of the prevailing theoretical body of work by accentuating the disparities between the theoretical frameworks and the everyday spatial practices of experiencing the city. The canonized theoretical paradigms such as Michel Foucault's panoptical understanding of space, Michel de Certeau conception of everyday spatial practices and Walter Benjamin insights on the figure of the *flaneur*, were brought into relief in the analysis of the case studies and my own cinematic practice.

Achille Mbembe's (2004: 404) postulation that Joburg as a metropolis is neither a static nor finite form, but rather as always a site of excess, of hysteria, uncertainty and informality proved to be helpful to my practice. These sets of concepts were integrated and interrogated in the framing devices explored in the film's construction. The triangulation of extra- diegetic text, images and sound challenges and subverts the notion of the homogenized, holistic and totalizing representations of Joburg.

## Appendix.



Appendix 1: *If this be a city*



Appendix 2: *If this be a city*



Appendix 3: *If this be a city*

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