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Locating Blackness: The ‘Township Aesthetic’ and representations of black identity in contemporary South African Cinema

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CHAPTER 2
THE CINEMATIC TOWNSHIP

This chapter firstly considers the political context and ideological framework through which the South African township was developed. For the purposes of this paper the historiography of South Africa's largest township – Soweto[1] – is investigated to consider its implications for cinematic representations of the 'township space'. After careful consideration of the historiography of the 'township space' in South Africa, this chapter addresses the manner in which the township is re-read in a post apartheid context. I argue that in contemporary South Africa the 'township space' has become mythologised and fetishised in the imaginary and in the representations of South African filmmakers. This chapter also provides a theoretical background to the notions of 'space' and 'place', contextualising my reading of the 'township space' as an 'alternate geography of modernity' (Shields, 1991). In this chapter I argue that there appears to be a 'township aesthetic' in representations of this space in contemporary South African cinema.

The 'township space' was developed on the peripheries of major South African cities as a means of controlling the influx of rural Africans into the urban areas. The urban (city) areas were envisioned as 'whites only' areas, with the black body allowed to enter the urban area only to serve the needs of the white master (Lemon, 1976). The 'township space' was constructed as a space of 'otherness' that perpetuated the 'otherness' and deviancy of *black identity*. The 'township space' became a contested space, associated with contaminated black bodies, violence, poverty and criminality. This space was constructed and represented through the media as a space of danger, especially for the white minority in South Africa.

[1] SOWETO is the acronym for 'South Western Townships'.

It should be noted that from the township's earliest development, this space was a liminal[2] space, a threshold space[3] developed as a port into major cities. The hybridity of the 'township space' lies in its position as an 'alternate geography of modernity'. The 'township space' developed as a peripheral space and was never allowed to be fully modern (as represented in the city space), nor was it allowed to be fully rural (as represented by the rural landscape). The township became a hybrid space in that its position in relation to modernity could never be realised totally. The South African townships represented an alternate geography of modernity or more succinctly represented the 'underside of Johannesburg's modernity'. The 'township space' suited the project of the Afrikaner Nationalist government as it cast black identity into a territory that suggested that this was the only negotiable space for the psyche of the black person. This myth was perpetuated repeatedly through the construction of the city space as contaminated and alienating for the black man. The township became a landscape of poverty and constituted the 'other modernity – or the underside of Johannesburg's modernity' (Mbembe & Nuttall, 2004: 364). However it should also be noted that the hybridity of the 'township space', more especially in its contemporary readings, is also a function of the movement of *bodies* between the township space and the urban (city) space.

Although space in South Africa was determined through Afrikaner Nationalist separatist ideologies that constructed boundaries between blacks and whites, the dreams for whiter cities could never be fully realised because cities relied on the cheap labour of the Africans that inhabited the township space. The townships also lacked many basic amenities that were often found in the urban areas and access to these amenities was only through the black body travelling to the city space. There has always been a dichotomous relationship between the centre

[2] I evoke liminality according to postcolonial theory. Liminality suggests in-betweenness. According to Bhabha, in the liminal space there is the production rather than the perpetuation of cultural meaning (Trewick, 2003). Liminality and in-betweeneness also evoke the necessity for hybridity within this space. According to Bhabha the in-between space is where the potential exists for resistance.

[3]In postcolonial theory the threshold space is also related to the liminal space. As a threshold space, the 'township space' is in-between the rural and urban spaces. As a threshold space the township is neither rural nor urban. The township space also positions the articulation of black identity within this space as neither rural nor urban, but in-between. The threshold space also suggests hybridity and also offers a site of resistance for those who inhabit this space.

(city) and the peripheral (township) space. The boundaries between the urban and the township spaces were always porous, and the interaction between moving from the urban to the city space was essential for the production of 'the cities many identities' (Mbembe & Nuttall, 2004: 357). More attention needs to be given to the:

> Imbrication of city and township and, in spite of unequal social relations, to township dwellers' practices and imaginations of citiness or the place of the township in the making of the city's many identities. This is despite the fact that people then and now perpetually moved between the city and the township either to make a living or to access forms of urban life that the township did not provide (Mbembe & Nuttall, 2004:357).

In post-apartheid South Africa there appears to be a recuperation and sanitisation of the cultural and historical memory of the 'township space'. Increasingly there is the recognition that movement between the township space and the city space also reflects the desire to access social and cultural life that the city fails to provide. The legacy of the 'township space' has shifted from being a contested space to being a fetishised space. As a fetish the meaning of the township challenges the 'otherness' of a space that is inhabited by the majority of South Africa's population. I argue that the 'township space' has become fetishised in the post-apartheid context. This is discussed later in this chapter.

Historical/Political Context

In order to understand the manner in which the 'township space' was developed as an 'alternate geography of modernity' and the processes through which the township became a space of hybridity and 'otherness', it is essential to analyse the political and ideological context through which this space was created. The history of the people of South Africa cannot be divorced from the history of geographic separation that determined the livelihood of black South Africans.

Rural Africans have been moving towards the urban areas from as early as 1900 because of land dispossession and the opportunities within the gold mines in Johannesburg. Initially the influx of rural people into the urban areas was not a problem and many poor people of all races lived in what was known as the 'inner city slums'. However this lifestyle offended the segregationist ideology of those in power and separate residential areas was to be obtained for African people. In 1930 residential land south-west of Johannesburg was obtained by the government to develop an African residential area. The area was known as Orlando East and quickly became associated with 'loneliness and exile'. Those in power echoed the sentiment that:

> The native should only be allowed to enter urban areas, which are essentially the White man's creation, when he is willing to enter and minister to the needs of the White man, and should depart therefrom when he ceases so to minister (excerpt from the Report of the Stallard (Transvaal Local Government) Commission of 1922, quoted in Lemon, 1976: 70).

In 1933 the Slum Clearance Act was passed and African residents of Johannesburg's slum areas were given six months to move to Orlando. Failure to do so was met with forced relocations. With World War II there was a rapid growth of industries accompanied with more employment opportunities. This saw an influx of Africans from rural areas. By 1944 Orlando had become overcrowded due to the governments neglect for housing development in the area. This led to residents taking action into their own hands and building their own shelters. Squatter communities began to mushroom in Soweto at an alarming rate. The squatter camps called for more decisive action from the government who decided to develop new townships around Orlando. With the advent of apartheid Sophiatown was destroyed and residents were moved into Meadowlands (Bonner, 1998).

Apartheid has been described as a policy of "good neighbourliness" (Bonner, 1998) and by the 1950's racial segregation was enforced by the nationalist

government. Laws were entrenched to keep the African population from the urban areas by enforcing all African people to carry an identity document that became known as the 'pass'. In 1950 Bantu education was instilled in all African schools which gave children only basic education and manual labour. Amongst African youth there was almost no possibility of proceeding to high-school as the government refused to build them in the townships. In 1954 Verwoed divided the African population into separate areas according to ethnicity. He was under the impression that dividing the African population would result in easier control. In 1955 Verwoed instructed authorities to construct single sex hostels in the township. This led to increased levels of crime, abuse and family instability. The hostels were also mostly occupied by Zulu migrant workers. Immediately there arose a tension between the rural (hostel) and urban Africans. The 1960's are remembered by the Sharpville shootings which resulted in a State of Emergency and was characterised by the government stifling any resistance groups that arose in the townships (Bonner, 1998).

In the 1960's and beginning of the 1970's apartheid was at its height. This era was also characterised by the rise of tsotsi gangs who were highly territorial. The youth began to challenge racial stereotypes, which gave momentum to the Black Consciousness Movements. A turning point in the history of South Africa was June 16th of 1976 when the youth organised a peaceful protest against Afrikaans being taught in African schools. The end result was the massacre of about 500 African youth and children. After 1976, the state encouraged the development of a new black middle class to appease the minds of the Africans. Life improved for some, but remained the same for the majority of the population. The 1980's was also characterised by a new consciousness giving voice to the injustices of the apartheid state. In February 1990 Nelson Mandela was released from prison and political organisations were unbanned. Influx control laws were abolished which once again changed the landscape of the township. Large numbers of African people flooded into Soweto and because of the lack of housing, squatter camps mushroomed all around Soweto. The growing number of squatters added to the massive unemployment crisis in Soweto (Bonner, 1998). The unbanning of political parties also saw the

mobilisation of the ANC (African Nationalist Congress) and the IFP (Inkata Freedom Party) in the township. This brought back historical conflicts within the township population and was a period of great violence in the township.

Being cognisant of the historical and political context through which Soweto – South Africa's largest township - developed emphasises the manner in which space and place carry many connotations and overdetermined expectations. Space and place are no longer perceived as static, one-dimensional, fixed and immobilised. What must be considered in any theorisation of space and place is the relationship between different factors (social, political, economical) that gives a specific space or place a specific character (Massey, 1994). Space and place are both socially and culturally constructed and the spatial organisation of society is central to the production or construction of the social (Massey, 1994). Taking these factors into consideration the spatial can be defined as constructed out of the interrelationship between multiple social relations 'across all spatial scales'. The social relationships that are referred to here include the global reach of 'finance and telecommunications', the effects and reach of national political powers, and the social relationships between people in towns, settlements, households and the workplace (Massey, 1994). Given the above definition of space, place can be defined as the expression of the particular set of social relations which interact at a given or particular location. The 'township space' bears testimony to the processes through which space can be demarcated according to political and economic means. The 'township space' was developed through a political ideology whose effects across the South African landscape are still felt today. The manner in which the 'township space' was demarcated clearly indicated the manner in which social relationships between South Africans of different skin colours were determined and expected to relate, communicate and identify with each other. The strict demarcation of the township resulted in the stereotyping of black identity that has permeated many fissures of South African society. The stereotyping of black identity resulted in 'othering' of blackness and the experience of being black. The cinematic representation of the 'township space' considers the manner in which these different social relations interact to define a particular place as a particular type. One of the most obvious indicators of this in cinema is the contrast between the

city and the township spaces. In *Wooden Camera* the city is represented as ordered, modern and luxurious in comparison to the disorder, chaos, pre-modern landscape of the township. This is clearly indicated through Madiba's friendship with the white girl Estelle. Estelle is from Constantia[4] and her rich lifestyle is contrasted sharply against Madiba's which is one of daily survival. In chapter four this is explored further.

The 'township space' was developed as a space of 'otherness' through a complex interplay of national political power (Afrikaner Nationalist Ideologies), social fear of the black body, and on the privilege and superiority of the white race. Through the interrelationship of these different factors, the Afrikaner Nationalist government set out to create 'whites only' spaces and 'blacks only' spaces. This spatial demarcation attributed specific characteristics to certain places and spaces, and constructed the manner in which space determined the lives of South Africans. The 'township space' was constructed as a space of 'otherness' developed to house the 'undifferentiated bodies' of black South Africans. Although the township was developed to cast the African body into a time warp of backwardness, timelessness and lack of civility, it must be recognised that the 'township space' is a modern invention. This space can be defined as an *alternate geography of modernity*. One of the characteristics of modernity is that is it concerned with the "harsh law of spacing" (Clarke, 1997: 3). The modernist project is based on Western rationalism (Mbembe, 2001) and is obsessed with smoothing away "all traces of the ambivalence that characterised earlier modes of life" (Clarke, 1997: 3).

Places and spaces have always been separated according to Western[5] rationale of what constituted the 'civilised' and the 'uncivilised'. The categorisation of

[4] Constantia is a suburb of Cape Town. There is a contrast between the white suburbs (like Constantia) and a black suburb (like the 'township space'). This difference of geography and space is important as it is constructed visually different in the film *Wooden Camera*. To each suburb is designated a particular 'place-image' that conveys distinct and different 'place-myths' that are associated with whiteness and blackness respectively. This argument and analysis is developed further in chapter four.

[5] Anthropology, environmental studies and urban studies have also given pre-eminence to the study of spaces and places, as there is increasing recognition that places are 'politicised, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions' (Rodman, 2003:205).

spaces according to this logic has been the basis on which Africa has been constructed as 'the Dark Continent' (Brantlinger, 1988). The myth of the Dark Continent is based on a dichotomous relationship between Africa and the West:

> …the link between modernity, rationalism, and Westernism was seen as more than merely contingent; it was seen as constitutive of all three, so that it is precisely this interlinking that is the "distinctive feature of the West", [that] distinguishes it from the rest of the world (Mbembe, 2001:10).

Africa and African societies have long been defined as irrational, primitive, uncivilised and pre-modern. Africa and African societies are continuously constructed as being "radically other, as all that the West is not" (Mbembe, 2001: 11).

The Afrikaner Nationalist politics was responsible for the development of South Africa's largest township – Soweto. The 'township space' was designed to be a geographically insulated zone that was constructed to contain black people. The geographic separation of spaces and places is an attempt to fix the meanings of particular spaces, and to enclose them either by defending them or constructing them as deviant (alternate) spaces, and in the process restrict and monitor entry and exit of the space. The danger of fixing the identity of places within clearly demarcated boundaries is that the spaces or places become characterised by 'singular', 'fixed' and 'static' identities. Such enclosed spaces and places become defined through their relationship with 'other' legitimate spaces. It is important to note that through Afrikaner Nationalism, the negative 'place-images' that were (and still are) constructed of the township were based on stereotyping this space. This is important as the fixity of this space and black identity (which is discussed in detail in chapter three and four) is about the

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Anthropologists are increasingly recognising that 'place' is as complex as 'voice' and "the problem of voice ('speaking for' and 'speaking to') may intersect with the problem of place ('speaking from' and 'speaking to')" (Appadurai quoted in Rodman, 2003:205). Anthropologists have also recognised that spaces should not be read in terms of essentialised Western creations, but that places are socially constructed and that the 'multiple meanings places hold for their inhabitants at particular times needs to be understood apart from their creation as locales of ethnology' (Rodman, 2003:205).

stereotyping of the 'other'. This has resulted in a 'fixed' identity being superimposed upon the township space and this 'fixed' and stereotyped identity appears to be re-invented in post-apartheid South African cinema.

The 'township space' became a machine that constructed and mobilised stereotypes of 'othering'. During apartheid, the township space was subject to high levels of surveillance and monitoring. Many remember the township as a space 'paraded by the army with their big war cars and guns' (Mbembe, Dlamini & Khunou 2004:502). During the struggle, tall steel township lights called Appollos were installed that transformed the darkness of the township at night into 'daylight'. This was important for state surveillance (Mbembe, Dlamini & Khunou, 2004). For Foucault, the ordering of space into different spheres of existence that is defined and distinct is the basis for ideological frameworks to operate. Social spacialisation is an essential component of understanding everyday life and is used to create and ground social forms and institutions. The distinction of the geographic landscape of South Africa into separate and distinct spaces of existence for black and white people became an important element of the apartheid discourse for grounding 'hegemonic systems of ideology and practice'. Foucault's emphasis is less on the political and the economic but rather on the "consciousness of a particular group". Foucault is interested in 'conceptions of space [that are] part and parcel of notions of reality' (quoted in Shields, 1991: 38-39). For Foucault:

> The conventions whereby one separates the real from the unreal, the natural from the supernatural, the reasonable from the insane are expressed through the spatial logic of inclusion and exclusion (Foucault quoted in Shields, 1991: 39).

Modern technologies of discipline and power are based on spatial control and differentiation. More importantly discipline and surveillance of individuals in a space requires specific enclosures of a space. Enclosing individuals in a space is premised on producing fixed and docile bodies. "The human body enters a special machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it,

allocating to each person a place, and to each place a person" (Shields, 1991: 40).

The division of places and spaces into clearly demarcated territories or zones is the result of culturally constructed:

> Perceptions and prejudices, images of places and regions, and to establish performative codes which relate practices and modes of social interaction to appropriate settings (Shields, 1991: 46).

Spaces are clearly demarcated as appropriate or inappropriate, legitimate or illegitimate. Spaces are also clearly demarcated according to race, class and creed and often, different social spaces will have a different set of images, languages and behaviourisms associated with them. Social spatialisation plays a significant role in the way people live their lives on a daily basis, the manner in which decisions are made and the manner through which policy actions are rationalised and legitimised (Shields, 1991). Social spatialisations can be political, economical (including class) or cultural and occurs throughout most societies in the world. It is through such spatialisations that people define themselves and others and create notions of belongingness or otherness. In South Africa Afrikaner Nationalist ideologies were the bases through which space and place was frantically divided between legitimate and illegitimate, black spaces and white spaces and 'safe areas' and 'unsafe areas' usually characterised by black spaces.

Social spatialisation gives rise to spatial metaphors that become part of everyday talk. Spatial metaphors are used by people on a daily basis to create and voice their opinions about certain places and spaces and the people who inhabit them. It is important to note that connotations and metaphors associated with certain spaces and places can be historically traced and often spaces still carry with them traces of a past that have evolved with time. These images of places or 'place-images' come about through:

> Over-simplification (i.e. reduction to one trait), stereotyping (amplification of one or more traits) and labelling (where a place

> is deemed to be of a certain nature). Places and spaces are hypostatised from the world of real space relations to the symbolic realm of cultural significations (Shield, 1991: 47).

Traces of the metaphors and connotations associated with places are often found on popular cultural artefacts like advertising, postcards, song lyrics and settings of novels. It should be noted that these images connected with certain spaces and places may even become associated with its essential character (Shields, 1991). More importantly people organise their lives around spatial routines and spatial divisions. The ideological process of special divisions is undermined by the internalisation of special divisions with a specific region. People identify with, associate with and, in the process, are placed within and according to "their … affiliation with their place of origin" (Shields, 1991: 48).

According to the French philosopher Lefebvre, a modern Western understanding of 'space' is that it is a materially produced form. "Social space as a *form* is a '*concrete abstraction*' of its contents and its production by *society*" (Shields, 1991: 51). Lefebvre is interested in analysing the manner cultural notions and practices of space are produced. Spacial practices (individual routines to the types of zones that are created) are responsible for (re)producing space as 'human space' (Shields, 1991). Human space implies the articulation of different types of spaces through the lived experiences, practices and behaviourisms of people who occupy a particular space. Over time these lived experiences and behaviours – these special practices – become "concretised in the build environment and sedimented in the landscape" (Shields, 1991:53). Particular spaces become the *mise-en-scene* where appropriate activities and behaviours become ritualised. It is important to recognise that practices, activities and behaviourisms articulate the multiple possibilities of any given space. (Re)production of space through (re)presentations are important to 'forms of knowledge' and 'claims of truth' that establish the manner in which space is perceived, ordered and ideologically structured.

I would like to suggest that the (re)production of space works on two levels. The first level is through the ordering of space into different zones or spheres of

existence. This is usually through an ideological framework that recognises the importance of structuring geographical space into different zones for the control, monitoring and surveillance of populations. Although Foucault is not wholly concerned with the political or economic consciousness of groups of people, he is aware of the implications of geographical separation and how power functions to separate people. The second manner through which space becomes realised as a particular type of place, and this is often linked to the first point, is through the activities, behaviours, and practices that concretise notions of particular spaces. Particular spaces also become realised through the connotations, expectations and 'claims of truth' that are attached to particular spaces. Through the *mise-en-scene* of space, social actors take on a significant role in realising the type of space they occupy. Behaviours, attitudes and activities of social actors within particular spaces concretise the identity not only of the social actor but also of the space. In chapter four, I deconstruct the manner in which the behaviours of the main characters in *Wooden Camera* and *Tsotsi* are responsible for the identity that a place assumes and how it comes to be labelled.

Lefebvre's method of analysing the manner in which cultural notion's and practice's of space produces a discourse relating to 'space' that is important for this analysis of space. The 'township space' was not just mobilised and consciousised as a black space, it was also thrown into perpetual otherness by constructing myths and media representations of this space as a space of danger, violence, contamination, disease and death. Not only was the 'township space' constructed as a space of otherness, more importantly, the apartheid project was based on casting the inhabitants (or social actors) within this space as perpetually 'other'. The black body, confined within a 'black space' was controlled and monitored constantly. Within South Africa, the construction of space and the mobilisation of a spatial discourse that was based on zoning and creating different spheres of existence for the different race groups, defined the types of lives and privileges people had access to and were allowed to enjoy. The poverty, inhumane treatment and political struggles endured and experienced by township dwellers had become synonymous with the type of people who lived there. The myths and connotations associated with the

'township space' resulted in the freezing and concretisation of the myths of this space as a space characterised by criminality, violence, dirt, poverty and danger.

The development of the 'township space' through Afrikaner nationalist ideologies, as a space of 'otherness', should not be read as 'fixed' or 'frozen'[6]. The 'township space' was developed to control the rapid urbanisation of black South Africans and its earliest characteristic was the constant flow of black bodies from the 'rural space' to the 'township space'. The constant influx and movement of bodies between the 'township space' and other spaces of 'black existence' (rural and city (urban) spaces), meant that there was a constant exchange of ideas, practices, opinions, cultures and belief systems. The 'township space' became a place of convergence and it was within this space that black South Africans found their sense of belonging. I suggest that instead of reading and perceiving the township space as 'fixed' or 'frozen', this space should be read as a hybrid space, a space of liminality and in-betweenness. The township is experienced as hybrid and liminal from an 'insider's point-of-view'. For the 'outsider' the township will always be perceived as 'fixed' through the perceptions of people who are not from this space. As I analyse in this report, the hybridity of the township space is also a function of the presence of the 'rural within the urban'. In the manner in which I define the 'township space' as embodying colonial or apartheid hybridity, it is important to note that the construction of the 'township space' was premised on notions of cultural purity (Loomba, 1998) and maintaining the *status quo* of the Afrikaner Nationalist government. Within South Africa space was employed strategically not only to separate the population according to skin colour, but also to construct and 'fix' identities of 'otherness'.

The history of the 'township' is political and reflects even today the separatist ideology of the Nationalist government. Many older residents of townships have a love-hate relationship with this geographical space. The socio-political

[6] It is important to note that the 'fixing' of the identities in the township was an apartheid function but also fixed by whites (and 'outsiders'). For blacks living in the townships, this space is never fixed. For people who inhabit places/spaces it is constantly fluid. In this sense it is important to note that 'fixity' is about stereotyping the 'Other'.

conditions of this area, characterised by decades of violence, crime, murder, degradation, emasculation, dehumanisation, decay and death, is nothing to love. Yet the relationship developed in this area, the memories and the connections to this space is much loved and revered by its inhabitants. After the democratisation there is an apparent shift in how the township space is perceived in contemporary South Africa. The 'township space' has become a means of reconnecting with one's culture, and there appears to be a fetishisation of this space. This space has become mythical and associated with certain nostalgia[7]. Through cinematic representations of the township space there is memory[8] and mythmaking[9] about the township that subsumes its political memory. Places have always being associated with a sense of belongingness and people have always developed intense relationships with places as places become important spaces which articulate identities. Both place and space are deeply imbricated with notions of identity and belongingness. Displaced communities and societies, who often feel disorientated, often establish rather passionate relationships with spaces by locating their sense of their identities firmly within certain spaces. This has become evident in the discourse surrounding the 'township space'. In the South African context this space has become a means of locating and representing an *authentic black identity*. This discourse on black identity exemplifies the extent to which spaces are intertwined with identities and also grounded in a sense of belongingness.

[7] According to Oxford English Dictionary 'nostalgia' is defined as 'homesickness…; regretful or wishful memory of an earlier time; sentimental yearning for (some period of) the past'. It appears as though the fetishisation of the township space is linked to the 'sentimental yearning' for this space as a home, a space that brought people together and a space that connected people with their roots, cultural heritage and traditions.

[8] The memory evoked refers to the political memory of this space, as the 'township space' was characterised by violence during apartheid, violence generated by resistance to an oppressive government. This brings to mind the Soweto Riots of 1976 and the Sharpeville Massacres of 1960. Many filmmakers also evoke the memory of the 'township space' as a means of connecting with black audiences by suggesting that authentic black identity is located within this space.

[9]The mythologizing of the 'township space' cinematically refers to the notion that an authentic blackness is located within this space and only accessible in this space. Such narrative's about the township suggests that this space has been embedded with extra meaning and 'special powers'. Later on in this report I argue that the township has become fetishised in the popular imagination of South Africans.

Re-reading the 'Township space' in Post-apartheid South Africa

In post-apartheid South Africa, how does one read the space of the township? With the dismantling of the apartheid system and the advent of democracy, there has been a sanitisation and sanctification of the township space. It cannot be denied that even during those dark years of apartheid a vibrant township culture developed that still resonates strongly with black urban culture in South Africa today. This rich black urban culture was reflected through clothing styles (that were also strongly related to gang affiliations), township music (kwaito) and other artists. It even reflected the influences of the American culture on African youth as early as the 1950's in the informal settlement – Sophiatown (Mistry, 2001). Even today, the township remains linked to the city and the movement of bodies between these spaces still characterises its existence. However the township space is no longer a 'port into the cities'. The township space has become a home where families have anchored their roots and is associated with cultural identity and a sense of belongingness. The democratisation of space has meant that the use of space and the meanings of spaces have changed. Spaces now reflect the rich urban culture and the potential for redefining spaces according to the logic of those that use it. More importantly the township space is also strongly linked with the rural space. However the 'township space' is now more strongly associated with notions of belongingness and cultural identity than the rural space. The distinction between the rural and the township spaces is also increasingly becoming hazy as the strict boundaries that separated these spaces during apartheid have now been dismantled. Lindsey Bremner reminds us that:

> In Soweto, people still cook with firewood, whereas in rural mud-plastered huts, electric stoves are used; chickens are slaughtered on the pavements of central-city suburbs, while a rural chief drives the latest BMW (Bremner, 2004: 23).

Through the technologies of modernity, the rural space is also increasingly becoming a hybrid space. Yet the 'township space' resists any categorisation and emphasises that:

> There is simply no urban alternative to the rural space, but rather complex configurations of lived space, neither rural nor urban (Bremner, 2004: 23).

This calls for the celebration of the hybridity of the 'township space'. This hybridity carries with it the seeds to re-imagine this space as a post-apartheid (colonial) space pregnant with opportunities and bursting with potential to define the post-apartheid landscape.

The boundaries of the city space that were once clearly demarcated and monitored through the laws and ideological framework of the apartheid government are now porous, and the movement of bodies between different spaces is an everyday occurrence in post-apartheid South Africa. Post-apartheid spaces (the urban space, the township space and the rural space) are increasingly characterised by boundaries that are permeable and which allow easier movement of the black body. Today geographic spacing is not based on racial identity, but on socio-economic status. Many of South Africa's black elite have migrated to the Northern suburbs in Johannesburg (like Sandton, Randburg, Midrand). Lindsay Bremner has described Midrand as a 'contradictory city', where one's socio-economic status has replaced the colour of ones skin. However Bremner also notes that these black people who live in the more affluent South African suburbs, still maintain strong and close 'relationships with the culture of township life' (Bremner quoted in Mbembe, 2004: 359). For many black South Africans, the township will always remain home, a place that brings people together:

> However, whether you like it or not, the township remains home. You go back every weekend to attend a funeral, a stokvel, a graduation party, or a twenty-first birthday party. This is where your circle of friends originates. People come back from different

> suburbs every weekend. You also have cases where people move out for, say, six months, and because they are not used to life in surburbia, they move back to the township. You might work in the suburbs…. but at the end of the day … you go back to the township (Mbembe, et al, 2004: 506).

The township space, once imagined as a space of 'otherness' and a prohibited for many, has now evolved into one of the country's most fetishised spaces. Although the township will be 'deeply embedded in the nation's social imaginary and political consciousness' (Mbembe, et al, 2004:499), contemporary meanings and readings of this space have shifted dramatically for all South Africans. The 'township space' characterised by homogenisation of black identity and black culture during the apartheid years, has evolved into a space or "site of multiple identities, moving into many directions all at once" (Bremner, 2004:155).

The 'Township Space' as a 'Fetish Object'

In postcolonial theory 'fetishism' is used in a broader and much looser context than in psychoanalytic and commodity fetishism terms. In Freudian (psychoanalytic) terms, a fetish occurs 'when an inanimate object or part of the body becomes the focus of arousal in preference to a person' (Gamman & Makinen, 1994:37). According to Freud and psychoanalysis, the term 'fetish' refers to the displacement of desire (sexual) onto an object. The object could be inanimate like shoes, leather or animate like an individual's body parts (like feet, hands, the nose, etc). The fetishism of the commodity is not just limited to the attribution of magical or mythical qualities to an inanimate object, but more importantly there is a displacement of the value from the people who produce objects to the objects themselves (Gamman & Makinen, 1994). In Marxist terms, the value of an object 'hides' the real social relations (Gammon & Makinen, 1994:28). Fetishism carries connotations of 'over-value' and 'displacement' and was often mobilised as an essential means of distinguishing between the 'rational and irrational, civilised and primitive, normal and

abnormal' (based on human behaviour) and between 'natural and unnatural' (Ades, 1995:67). The fetish was employed as a means of signalling error, 'excess, difference and deviation' (Ades, 1995:67).

Surrealists have also assimilated the term 'fetish' within their discourse (Ades, 1995). For the surrealist, the 'fetish' object could also be an inanimate or an animate object but more importantly they recognise and emphasise that fetishism is proof of the intimate connection between the mind and the body (Ades, 1995:71). Imagination was seen as the key ingredient to realising fetishism and the fetish object took on an 'independent value' (Ades, 1995:71). For Surrealists, the power of the fetish object is realised through an event 'which invested a *material object* or body-part with special power'. The fetish also has the 'ordering power' to bring together various disparate and previously heterogeneous elements together to form one 'novel identity'. The fetish object is also endowed with a certain value, and often the 'displacement, reversal or overestimation of value' becomes the clearest and most consistent feature of the fetish object (Ades, 1995:72).

The recent and contemporary interest and re-imaginings of the 'township space' from a space of marginality to its current fascination suggests that the 'township space' be read as a fetishised space. As I have mentioned earlier, in postcolonial theory the term 'fetish' is not useful in a Freudian, psycho-sexual definition of the word and we do need a more suited explanation of the fetish in order to explain the fetishisation of the 'township space'. I would like to suggest that we assimilate the broader and looser definition of the term 'fetish' as employed by the Surrealists.

Firstly the 'township space' is an inanimate object that has been invested with 'special powers', a unique South African identity and occupies a pivotal position in the imaginations of South Africans. The 'special power' that I refer to is derived from the history and political significance of the township, but more importantly this space has come to be identified with the cultural identities of millions of black South Africans. The 'township space' is reminiscent of forced removals and the displacement of millions of black South Africans. Yet this

space became ‘home’ to millions. The ‘powers’ of the ‘township space’ are embedded in the memory of the township as a space of belongingness and a place to call home. Although the township is still characterised by a lack of basic amenities and poverty, unemployment and increased level of crime, the power of this space in the unconscious minds of black South Africans is cause for such great unity and heightened memory of this space. The ‘township space’ is invested with the identities of millions of black South Africans, and is a testament to the powers of space and place in connecting people with their cultures and identities. This is a resonant paradox, as the ‘township space’ - developed on the fringes of major cities and constructed and treated as a space of ‘otherness’ – was developed as a liminal space, a place of in-between, one that was developed to control South Africa’s African populations. Although the township was constructed as a space of otherness and viewed by the outside (or white world) as a world of otherness, this was not so for the millions of African men, women and children who lived there. Within this space of ‘otherness’ families came together, cultural roots and notions of identity were firmly anchored, creating this space as a space of belongingness for millions of South Africans. The ‘township space’ became a space of togetherness, of belongingness and most importantly a home for millions of South Africans.

As a ‘fetish object’, cinematic representations of the ‘township space’ have homogenised and fixed the identities of not only the geographical space, but also of its inhabitants. Although the ‘township space’ is characterised by being a hybrid space, the visual aesthetics of the ‘Cinematic Township’ have subsumed the heterogeneous-ness of this space to one of the ‘shanty town’ or ‘informal settlement’. This representation neglects to consider the different topography of the township landscape reflected through a major class and socio-economic difference. The visual representations of the ‘Cinematic Township’ have become fixed, yet the hybridity of this space appears to be emphasised. The articulation of the ‘township space’ as an aesthetisised space characterised by saturated colours constructed alongside decay, poverty, violence and death, overrides the violent history and socio-economic conditions of its inhabitants. The ‘township space’ read as a ‘fetish object’ has the power of fixing this space, endowing it with a new identity. There appears to be a preoccupation with the

form of the township space which is more often than not represented in the singular.

Reading the township as a 'fetish object', the value placed on the construction of the 'township space' as an essential trope of blackness and as the only means of accessing an authentic black identity is overestimated in the imagination of South Africans. A common trope of fetishism is the displacement of 'desire' onto an object. With the 'township space' there appears to be a displacement of the historical and political memory of this space onto the visual representations of this space. I argue that as a fetish object, the political and historical memory of the 'township space' has been subsumed by the visual aesthetisisation of this space. As a cinematic trope of blackness, this space has become an essentialised mode of representing black identity. The visual aesthetisisation of this space speaks to the fetishisation of the 'township space' in the popular imaginations of South Africans.

The 'township space' is no longer a sealed-off geographic location but has now become open to the gaze of the 'other'[10] (whites, elite blacks and other South African's who are not from the townships). The recuperation of the cultural and historical value of the 'township space' speaks to its sanitisation and attempts to recuperate its position (or memory) within the South African popular imagination.

The Township Aesthetic

[10] The 'other' refers to whites, elite blacks and other South Africans who are not associated with the township space. In post-apartheid South Africa, the township has become assessable to all South Africans and more importantly, the township appears to be recreating its fetishism to the people who live there.

For a long time, artists[11] (fine artists, painters, filmmakers and more recently interior designers) have drawn inspiration from the 'township space'. This space, characterised by: a) the rich colour of material used daily to construct informal dwellings, b) blending of the rural with the urban and the subsequent hybridity of this space, and c) the culture (from music to fashion) that emanates and resonates strongly throughout the South African landscape has been a source of artistic inspiration that claims and identifies with a certain South Africanness locally and more recently globally. The 'township space' as a liminal space 'holds the seeds of cultural creativity that generate new models, symbols, and paradigms' (Spariosu quoted in Trewick, 2003: 5).

Attention has been given to the 'township aesthetic' in fine art especially in relation to Township Art. Township Art refers to the 'category of paintings and graphics in urban black art that emerged on the South African art scene in the late 1950's and 1960's'. Aesthetisisation of the township space in its cinematic representations has many similarities with that of 'Township Art' from the 1950's and 1960's.

Verstraete (1989) has identified that all Township Art has very similar and specific iconography. To him, the iconography of Township Art was identified as encompassing the daily life in the township, its people, their activities and the township landscape (Verstraete, 1989: 155). Vertraete notes that the predominant style of Township Art was very expressionistic:

> Characterised by distortion, aggressive linear emphasis and harsh colours which not only indicates a strong emotional involvement on the part of the artist but ensures maximum visual impact and a corresponding emotional response on the part of the spectator (Verstraete, 1989: 156).

[11] Artists referred to here include Andrew Motjuoadi who is famous for his hyperrealist pencil drawings of urban life in Mamelodi, Eli Kobeli famous for his surrealist watercolours, David Mogano famous for his primitive paintings (Verstraete, 1989:157). More recently filmmakers like Teboho Mahlatsi, Gavin Hood, Ntshaveni Wa Luruli, etc. appear to draw strongly from the 'township space'.

The deconstruction of Township Art within the public and academic domains were problematic as it was based on the assumption that the predominant themes were significant for black South Africans, as it represented their search for identity in the realities of a daily life, determined by political domination. It was emphasised that Township Art was figurative and it is through 'the human situation that the realities of urban life are manifested' (Verstraete, 1989: 155). Township Art was believed to reflect the existential encounter between the inner reality of the self and the reality of the external world.

One such Township Artist whose work was thought to reflect the black man's encounter with modernity was Mslaba Zwelidumile Mxgaji also know as Dumile. He was referred to as the father of Township Art and acclaimed as one of the best examples of an artist who used the expressionistic style. Most township artists were from the rural areas, and were forced to live in the 'township spaces' when they arrived in the major cities. Many artists from the rural areas had to deal with the dilemmas of adapting to township life and the harsh realities of urban life for the black body during apartheid:

> The black man is trapped between two traditions and two heritages: although he is confronted with rootlessness and anomie in the urban environment, the inevitable process of Westernisation is rarely reversed (Verstraete, 1989: 158).

On this basis it was assumed that Township Artist's avoided 'pictoral naturalism' for an 'expressive distortion' as a vehicle for conveying their feelings of loss, displacement and dislocation in the townships.

It cannot be denied that artists were trying to come to terms with, and deal with issues of belonging in an urban society as they often found themselves confused, alienated and anxious in a society totally foreign to them. With the relocation to townships, accompanied with the physical effects of poverty, crime and violence and the psychological effects of alienation, disorientation and having been uprooted from tradition and culture, artists where inclined to reflect this anxiety through their art. Gerard Sekoto, whose scenes of Sophiatown and District 6

became the prototype for later township artists, described his work as trying to give a picture of life, showing the profundity of the people (Verstraete, 1989: 154).

The township artist, Dumile, has been described like other expressionists who "met reality head-on and his innate response was an emotional one given visual form through his art" (Verstraete, 1989:159). In Township Art, a recurring theme is man's existential loneliness, because his society is no longer coherent and he is alienated from his fellow man. One of Dumile's works, called the *Stricken Household,* has been described as:

> Shocking and horrifying evocation of squalor and death. The township landscape is likened to a concentration camp, with the corpses and dying figures strewn and scattered like rubbish in the wasteland around their shack which leans haphazardly as if struck by some holocaust (Verstraete, 1989:161).

I would like to problematise the manner in which Township Art is deconstructed as most theorists assume a Eurocentric position. The expressionistic mode of representation (saturated colours, experimental style, distorted figures) has been read as an internal crisis that the black man encounters when faced with de-familiarity of the urban (city) landscape. Such critics of Township Art conflate the artistic expression of the black artist with the collective experiences of the black people. The underlying intonation is that the black body is unable to negotiate modernity and the crisis occurring at that time (assumed to be reflected through their art) within the black population is a direct result of their inability to negotiate the effects of Westernisation on their culture and society. In the process, the black body is reinscribed as an 'other', lesser being who should be confined to the pre-historic world of the 'Dark Continent'.

More recently (in post-apartheid South Africa) a 'township aesthetic' is being commodified by packaging (or re-packaging) the township space as a lifestyle choice in Home Interior decoration. The recent celebration of the 'township space' as a lifestyle choice speaks to the ambiguous position that the township

inhabits in relation to modernity. The 'township space' can never claim total modernity as it constantly traverses the urban and rural spaces. Hence the township space will always be remembered as 'an alternate geography of modernity'. Instead in this moment of celebrating the hybridity of this space, the township has become a commodified (and aesthetic) lifestyle for those who long for an alternate mode of modernity. In the process artists and 'lifestyle junkies' are able to claim a certain South Africanness, as the 'township aesthetic' appears to be a current trend in representing the authentic South African experience. These (re)presentations of the 'township space' as a certain kind of South African aesthetic are seemingly dangerous as they flatten and one-dimensionalise this space:

> Shack settlements may be spaces of exclusion, of poverty and neglect for the authorities. But they are still part of the city, part of the creative potential of modern urban life. They are places where people build everyday lives, imagine and re-imagine themselves, and make homes from which they go out to negotiate – and change – city spaces (Robinson, 1998: 164).

Towards a 'Cinematic Township'

Contemporary South African cinema and television frequently employ the 'township space' as a central location. Films like *Tsotsi, The Wooden Camera, Max and Mona* and television series like *Yizo Yizo, Gazlam and Tsha Tsha* have recreated the 'township space' as a cinematic trope of blackness. In popular cultural forms (like cinema, television, advertising, postcards, music videos), not only has the 'township space' become synonymous with an *authentic black identity*, the glorification and nostalgia associated with this space reflects its fetishisation.

It is important to note that South African television and film has homogenised the 'township space' in terms of its visual representations. The norm in cinema and television is to conflate the varied landscape of the township, and the

different human experiences of the 'township space', with one associated with the 'shanty town' or 'shack dwellings'. Although the homogenisation of the 'township space' has resulted in a somewhat 'fixed'[12] representation of this space, the 'cinematic township' is actually one characterised by ambiguity and hybidity. The hybridity of the township is reflected through the rural life in an urban space. A Eurocentric reading of this would attribute this to the 'backwardness of the African subject' and its inability to negotiate modernity. However, the 'township space' reflects the unique experiences of the black body within a post-apartheid city. This space represents the potential for recreating a post-apartheid modernity, and the manner people negotiate and reimagine spaces that were once racially divided and constructed through an otherness of the black body. This space represents the potential for recreating a post-apartheid modernity by renegotiating and re-imagining a space that was once racially divided and constructed through an otherness of the black identity.

Wooden Camera is located in a Cape Town township called Khayaletsha while *Tsotsi* is located in the Johannesburg township called Soweto. Although the two townships are geographically located at opposite ends of South Africa, both are hybridised and fixed in similar ways. The first similarity between these two townships is that they are situated on the fringes of the major cities – Johannesburg and Cape Town. The routes into the cities are either by train, taxi's, cars or by foot. These townships are represented as spaces that are occupied by the black body. Yet this very black body works within the city space and has to travel daily between the township space (the home) and the city space (place of employment). The township is represented as a port into the city. The cinematic representations of Khayelitsha and Soweto have conflated and homogenised the township experience as one characterised by the 'shanty' or 'shack' dwellings. Both township spaces are constructed as dirty, overpopulated and inhabited by predominantly unemployed blacks. Shacks are built from corrugated metal sheets, wooden planks and plastic sheets for windows. Both 'township spaces' are represented as hybrid and liminal through their strong association with the rural space. One of the strongest rural reminders in an urban

[12] Fixed in the sense that representations of the 'township space' are similar and conflated with only one type of township experience.

space is the presence of farm animals (usually goats and chickens and the occasional cows) in the 'township space'. In *Tsotsi*, another element of rurality is the central water supply where the 'township women' gather in the mornings and evenings. Although this is commonly associated with the rural areas, it also speaks to the lack of basic services in the township areas.

Although in both films the black body constantly travels between the 'township space' and the urban (city) space, the two films negotiate modernity differently. In *Wooden Camera* the black body is never allowed to inhabit the modern experience fully, as the otherness of the 'township space' and the black body within this space is constantly foregrounded and positioned as animalistic, uncivilised and backward. One scene that resonates strongly is the scene when Estelle views one of Madiba's tapes in her home. This is the scene that Madiba shot of his father in a drunken stupor, urinating on himself. Estelle's laughter and comments infantilises Madiba's father, and in the process this teenage girl is able to foreground the otherness of the black man by deconstructing him in the comfort and insulation of her suburban home. Another scene that foregrounds the otherness of the black experience is the scene when Estelle travels into the 'township space' seeking Madiba. She stops next to an informal take-away, selling animal oval (heads, legs, intestines, etc). Estelle's reactions to this food are edited into a montage highlighting the different animal parts. By juxtaposing Estelle's reactions with the different animal body parts, the filmmaker foregrounds the 'otherness' of this black space and black body. In highlighting the otherness of black identity in this scene, the film clearly positions this 'otherness' from an 'outsider's point-of-view'. Estelle does not belong within the 'township space' and the 'place-image' of these scenes reiterate 'place-myths' that are associated with this space from an outsiders point of view.

Tsotsi negotiates modernity differently. The hybridity of the 'township space' in this film is not only reflected through its liminal position between the rural and the urban, but also through the markers of capitalist modernity. Although the film locates black identity and black experience within the township space the film represents blackness as inhabiting and negotiating the signs and symbols of (an African) modernity. Tsotsi is constructed as a fashion conscious gang leader,

who displays his particular affiliation through the types of clothes he wears. The young woman who feeds Tsotsi's baby also claims a modern identity through her attire. She represents the hybrid African fashion industry emerging in South Africa that assimilates Western and African designs to produce a 'fusion' style that is able to compete in international markets. In this way, the black body is also able to negotiate modernity through the privileges it can enjoy through capital. *Tsotsi* is more about claiming a certain South Africanness or South African aesthetic based on the assimilation of ideas and styles. Yet the film problematically locates an authentic black identity within the 'township space'.

One common (and seemingly fixed) feature of the 'Cinematic Township' is its articulation of black masculinity. Within this space black masculinity has been relegated to the terrain of otherness through the portrayal of the black (male) body as deviant, characterised by violence, criminality, violent gang cultures, drugs and misogyny. This stereotypical representation of the black identity, which is a fixed cinematic representation, appears to be refracted through a colonising camera. In both films (*Tsotsi* and *Wooden Camera*) teenage masculine black identity is represented as a danger to society and themselves. Sipho and Tsotsi both carry guns which they use to intimidate and murder with. The black bodies are also portrayed as being dependant on drugs and the sex trade (in *Wooden Camera*) for their livelihood. In both films Sipho and Tsotsi are portrayed as stealing from the rich. Tsotsi's anger appears to be directed at the burgeoning black middle class, whereas Sipho uses the power of his gun to intimidate white folk in the park. Sipho is constructed as a destructive force who cannot distinguish between good and evil. He ends up killing one of the other black homeless boys. Tsotsi is able to distinguish between the good and the bad, and saves the baby's father from being murdered. However, in both films black identity and the authentic black experience is inscribed with violence that perpetuates the 'otherness' of black masculinity.

The 'project of the cinematic township' has homogenised the aesthetics of this space as one associated with saturated colours that are at once appealing and seductive. The disorder of shanty towns, the use of organic and inorganic building materials (wood, paper, corrugated irons sheets and plastic) the chaotic

underdevelopment of this space are all familiar visual modes of representation that South African cinema and television subscribes to. I suggest that these visual codes and conventions of the 'township space' have evolved into a cinematic aesthetic that South African cinema and television is being defined by. The various objects (signs and symbols) that comprises the *mise-en-scene* of the 'township space' have become markers of Africanness, and (re)presentations of the township have become a means through which filmmakers are able to claim an experience of South Africanness. This visual aesthetic has evolved into a 'township aesthetic'.

South African television and film certainly subscribes to a 'township aesthetic' that appropriates tropes and characteristics identifiable in Township Art and other representations (postcards, coffee-table books and Home décor lifestyle books) of the township. It is important to reiterate that the space of the township is a political construct, and has come to occupy a pivotal role in the popular imagination of all South Africans, whether they are black or white. However there appears to be a fetishisation and nostalgia around the township space, expressed through films like *Hijack Stories, Wooden Camera and Tsotsi*. In this thesis I argue that the fetishisation and the aesthetisisation of the township space after 1994 in South African cinema and television have subverted the townships political memory of struggle and survival. The aesthetisisation of the township space in contemporary South African cinema is linked to the commodification of poverty through the representation of the township as a site of decay and death, and it is not uncommon for filmmakers to add dead animals, bleeding bodies and scattered rubbish to the *mise-en-scene* (Verstraete, 1989). *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning* by Teboho Mahlatsi, *Tsotsi, Yizo Yizo* and *Wooden Camera* to name a few, are films which capitalise on human suffering, death, poverty and decay. *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning* has a scene of a death dog lying on a township road. Both *Portrait* and *Tsotsi* have characters in wheelchairs, which have also become recurrent symbols of the township aesthetic. All the abovementioned films conflate the experiences of the township with the squatter camp and all are recognisable through their crowded streets, shack houses, dirty environment and almost primitive way of life.

The opening up of the South African film and television industry to the national and international markets and audiences has resulted in the 'capitalisation of black suffering and hardship by adopting primitive expressionistic township 'style'' (Verstraete, 1989:168). The use of strong colours, the distortion of characters (often portrayed through their criminal, violent almost hyper-masculine behaviour), the portrayal of township life, township people and the township landscape are all familiar tropes that one becomes accustomed to when viewing South African television and film. Cinematic representations of the 'township space' in contemporary South African cinema are ideologically loaded representations that have resulted in the re-inscription of an otherness onto the black identity and culture. This cinematic representation (which I refer to as the 'Cinematic Township') is important when considering how filmmakers represent and construct the 'Cinematic Township' within a post-apartheid landscape. Are the 'expressionistic' styles of South African filmmakers reflecting the 'existential encounter' experienced by blacks when they encounter the realities of township life? Or are South African filmmakers simply pursuing an aesthetic representation where the form is more important than the content[13]?

In chapter three I analyse the construction of Black masculinity, especially within the South African context. I argue that the 'otherness' of black identity has been constructed through centuries of colonisation of the black body. I also argue that the cinematic representation of black identity in contemporary South African cinema draws from a universal sign system of image creation that has relegated black identity to one of deviancy, criminality and decay. Chapter three is concerned with analysing the articulation of black identity within the 'township space'.

[13] I have suggested that the current mode of representing the township space in post-apartheid cinema has resulted in a 'township aesthetic' that is identifiable in television and film. This aesthetic appears to emphasize the form of the township (which I have referred to as the Cinematic Township) through its visuality at the expense of the content (specifically referring to the articulation of black identity within the 'Cinematic Township').