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The Representation of Black Queer Masculinities on YouTube in the Film *Out of This World*

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Abstract

This article is an explorative study of the documentary film *Out of This World* (2017), which captures the narratives and experiences of queer individuals in Johannesburg, South Africa, through a series of snapshots. Guided by activist and host Mykki Blanco, the film explores queer creative cultures in post-apartheid South Africa using YouTube as a platform. It exposes the lived realities of queer voices often silenced and marginalised, bringing visibility to stories of urban CBD and township queer experiences. The film navigates the experiences of the "born-free" generation within the queer community, as they grapple with continued marginalisation. Utilising social media, the film exemplifies self-fashioned queer visualities in post-apartheid South Africa, enabling visibility and belonging for some queer individuals. The film employs YouTube as a visual media to understand how black queer people forge spaces of visibility, countering historical oppression and erasure. The article serves to explore and discuss how black queer masculinities are represented on YouTube in the film *Out of This World*. The article will employ Grant Andrews's concept of "mirror" and "mirroring," utilising visual media to foster recognition and identity in the post-apartheid context. The project uses qualitative visual content analysis to unpack the complex social and cultural dynamics represented in these texts, and the analysis demonstrates how these visual texts are themselves sites of resistance and of imagining and claiming "liveable lives" that the transgressive vulnerabilities allow for.

Keywords: black queer representation; queer film; space; visibility; vulnerability; sexuality; South African film; resistance

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Introduction

The documentary film *Out of This World* (2017) comprises a series of snapshots (shorts) depicting the experiences and lived realities of queer people in Johannesburg, South Africa. The film follows acclaimed activist, producer, and host Mykki Blanco, as he explores the queer creative cultures in the post-apartheid South African setting by using the platform YouTube. The film shares lived realities of queer people in spaces where queer voices are usually silenced, marginalised, and erased. Queer people in both townships and urban geographies in Africa, particularly South Africa, have battled for belonging, visibility, and freedom due to accounts of attempted erasures and repudiations (see Livermon 2012, 2014; Visser 2008a, 2013). Spaces such as Soweto have undermined with disgust the (hyper)visibility[1] and realities of queer people. This is particularly true of black queer identities in townships, whose subjection to social violence is conjoined to social, memorable geographies in place (Moodie 1988). By extension, black queer people in South Africa have faced significant historical obstacles during the apartheid era, which were directly linked to the establishment of white-dominated territories and spaces. Hence, the film serves a salient role of visibilising and (hyper)visibilising the true stories of queer people in urban central business district (CBD) spaces in Johannesburg, but also shows the complexities around queer experiences in parts of the townships around Johannesburg.

Johannesburg city and township spaces such as Soweto have been sites of perpetuating sexual violence and homophobia against queer people during apartheid, dynamics which linger to this day (see Livermon 2012, 2014; Skeggs 1999; Visser 2008a, 2008b). "Visibility" was important in the daily practices of oppression during apartheid; violence and discrimination during apartheid were enacted through the use of photography and video to expose queer people's sexual performativities, which were considered "abnormal" and "immoral" by the white heterosexist apartheid government (see Macharia 2011; Matebeni 2013). This parallels Jacqueline Marx's assertion that "[v]isibility is a critical aspect of disciplinary power because it is a mechanism for surveillance and the policing of bahaviour" (2014, 31). In the era of apartheid, cameras assumed a paradoxical role, shaping the uncertainties, precarious circumstances, and invisibilities encountered by queer individuals. Concurrently, the camera altered modes

[1] The article uses the concept of (hyper)visibility by Ryland (2013) to refer to the "scrutiny based on perceived difference, which is usually (mis)interpreted as deviance." Wilkins-Yel, Hyman, and Zounlome (2019, 52) assert that "[s]uch perceptions of 'otherness' or difference increases the likelihood of being scrutinised, surveilled, isolated, and marginalized by the dominant group." This parallels Gqola's (2006, 83–84) argument that "[h]ypervisibility is the primary regime through which queer bodies are looked at, violated, and contained." Thus, hypervisibility embodies potential risk of invisibilising queer people by remapping and pronouncing conversations of harm, discrimination, queerphobia, and violence as curled primarily to queer bodies, while simultaneously forging gaps to create queerly political power that is used to confront and assert multidimensional modes of visibilities for queer people.

of expression, fostering the emergence of queer visibilities and sparking endemic resistance.

Queer people were hypervisibilised through the use of the camera during apartheid in order to shame, police, and invisibilise their performativities and sexualities. The camera thus was once the site of oppression and harassment, but now can also be a site of forms of liberation. The dynamics of this visual representation, however, must be scrutinised for its ability to reinscribe othering and oppression. The use of the camera enforced what Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) describe as a model of "intersectional (in)visibility,"[2] highlighting that queer men, both in the apartheid era and the post-apartheid period, faced multiple layers of oppression, exclusion, subordination, and discrimination based on both their race and gender.

Thus, during apartheid the camera represented the experiences of various queer subjects within various racialised groups. It is evident that racial groups experience freedom, representation, and belonging in different ways. For instance, the struggles of being queer and black were grounded in a double-outsider status: a black queer subject experiences the complications of fighting for subjectivity in black cultural communities that continue to police and marginalise black queer subjects, and the fights against the dominant white regime that oppressed black people and that oppressed all queer subjects (see Reid 2010; Visser 2013). However, for white queer subjects, queerness was often viewed as the sole struggle to visibility and belonging in their social spaces, and the issue of race was not a significant discourse towards acquiring freedom, visibility, and belonging (see Matebeni 2013; Reid 2010; Visser 2013).

To reinforce the earlier assertion, queer narratives, especially black queer narratives, were/are rarely represented in the mainstream media, and a lot of mainstream queer representation is still framed and produced by heterosexual people who do not share the same experiences as queer people, and thus might speak for queer people instead of allowing them to speak for themselves. Expanding on Andrews's observation, only after the formal end of apartheid have several South African films delved into the portrayal of queer white men within conservative societal contexts, particularly emphasising Afrikaans-speaking gay men. These cinematic works have depicted the persistence of rigid heteropatriarchal norms within white Afrikaner culture, where homosexuality remains a frequently stigmatised subject (Andrews 2019, 52–53). Andrews states that

[2] Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach's (2008, 381) model of "intersectional invisibility" refers to "the general failure to fully recognise people with intersecting identities as members of their constituent groups." This suggests that individuals with multiple subordinate identities, such as ethnic minority queer people, confront challenges related to misrepresentation, marginalisation, and disempowerment. The model specifically delves into how individuals at the intersections of multiple identities experience oppression differently compared to those with a single disadvantaged identity. For example, queer people of colour, holding two or more subordinate identities, do not fit the conventional representations of queer individuals (commonly perceived as white) or people of colour (typically perceived as men). Consequently, they frequently encounter intersectional invisibility (Kerrie et al. 2019, 52).

these conservative Afrikaans films serve as a reflection of the prevailing societal attitudes towards queer identities post-apartheid (Andrews 2019, 52–53). In the context of black cultural spaces, it seems that there was a noticeable absence of freedom for the visual production of black queer films due to how black queer bodies were and are marked as what Livermon (2012, 299) would refer to as "the constitutive outside of blackness," where black queer bodies are labelled as un-African or against cultural values. Thus, the idea of black queer subjectivity within such spaces becomes difficult to imagine and perform as it is outside the dominant heteronormativity.

Imma (2017, 64) argues that "[d]espite the commodifying, disciplinary, and singularizing matrices of visibility [projected by dominant heteronormatives], when black queers in South Africa take up space on their own terms—whether in the pages of a newspaper or in the streets—new architectures of citizenship and subjectivity beyond the regulative violence of heteronormativity become possible." This suggests an inherent entitlement to alternative modes of subjectivities, validated through various forms of visual media. The camera, alongside other alternative visual media such as YouTube, operates on the cusp of heterotopia and liminality.[3] Juhasz (2008) claims that YouTube enables people with access to technology to express themselves in whichever way they want, suggesting that YouTube can challenge misrepresentation in the mainstream media, which might be linked to certain forms of oppression against queer people. Wendy Chun (2006, 2) asserts that YouTube works to "free the flow of information, reinvigorating free speech," supporting Andrews's (2021) argument that YouTube offers marginalised people alternative spaces for recognition and celebration of their lives and identities. Hence, it can be argued that YouTube has become an essential social media platform to challenge hegemonic cultural normative spaces, such as the mainstream media that has frequently depicted queer people in stereotypical ways and pathologised same-sex sexualities. Andrews (2021, 84) claims that "YouTube has provided a platform for many queer [people] in South Africa to find audiences and represent queer lives via a public medium," which suggests the construction of heterotopic spaces that enable visibility of multiple, diverse identities.

This framework describes what the film *Out of This World* (2017) accomplishes, namely, visibilising diverse post-apartheid queer identities in ways that validate, affirm, and give space for the self-expression of these identities. The film explores how the

[3] By liminal and heterotopic, I refer to theories of Lacan that have been linked to queer experiences in South Africa by Grant Andrews (2018, 2021a). Liminality in this project is used to refer to "queer people's state of in-betweenness within society, both present and excluded, as well as [referring to] the abstract spaces outside of space where queer individuals can find a sense of freedom and demonstrate their queer desires which, based on cultural attitudes and mores, ought not to exist" (2018, 54). Heterotopic spaces refer to spaces that are created by queer people to resist spaces that have been marginalising, and instead create spaces that can be used for purposes of visibility and belonging. Andrews (2021a, 87) explains that heterotopic spaces are "real spaces that challenge the assumptions of social power hierarchies, and that exist as spaces-outside-of-space where boundary crossing and fluid boundaries are key features, and can include visual media that reflect the 'real.'"

"born-free"[4] generation within the queer community understands and performs their identities in spaces that continue to marginalise queer people. Furthermore, the film is an example of self-fashioned queer visualities using social media in post-apartheid South Africa, a space that allows some queer people to assert visibility and belonging in their communities.

The film explores how marginalised queer people perform transgressive vulnerability[5] to disrupt the heterosexism and cisgenderism in their environments. Queer people on YouTube often describe vulnerability in offline spaces, but use the online alternative space to form supportive communities and to challenge their positions as marginal and vulnerable (Andrews 2021). Ellapen (2007, 113–114) claims that "despite South Africa's many, multiracial, economically diverse and heterogenous townships, […] township space(s) have been employed as the central location [for] representing black identity and culture," and thus townships can serve a dual purpose of both oppressing black queer people and acting as an arena where queer people represent and navigate their identities through public performativities and through visual media (Ellapen 2007).

With the film *Out of This World* depicting both urban and townships experiences, it can demonstrate forms of belonging and home for queer people in diverse public spaces. The film can provide liminal and heterotopic spaces to queer people in order to visualise their narratives and lived realities. Other queer people can access these shared, and in many ways *public* visual spaces, and the film can confront assumptions of townships as rigidly "heterosexual" spaces as well as challenging the public erasure of queer people. This creates what Jenkins (2009) refers to as "participatory culture," a transnational space that embraces multiple identities and actors who can take part in media production and public culture, where there is much more agency for queer people to represent their

4 The "born-free" generation is a youth population in South Africa that was born into the ostensibly free and racially undivided post-apartheid context after the fall of institutionalised apartheid that marginalised black people (Mpongo 2016).

5 Vulnerability can be defined as individuals being weak and susceptible to harm and as a lack of power. Queer people are often framed as vulnerable in public discourse. However, the article aims to engage with the multiple and complex facets of the concept, which, at one point, may indicate a lack of power and exposure to harm. Simultaneously, vulnerability is imagined as a form of resistance and transgressive engagement with dominant systems from the perspective of marginal voices. Butler (2014) claims that vulnerabilities can be thought about as the birthplace of resistance; this is what Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay (2016) refer to as vulnerability as a condition that can lead to objective ontological claims for acquiring visibility, freedom, and space for liveable lives. Additionally, vulnerability itself can be queered, and become a powerful critical tool to analyse and disrupt systems of power through a queer conception. This form of vulnerability becomes transgressive as it disrupts the assumed position of the vulnerable party as powerless and *acted-upon,* and instead situates the gaze, and forms of power and resistance, within the state of being vulnerable and "outsider." Thus, the article employs the concept "transgressive vulnerability" (vulnerability as resistance) as a critical lens to explore visual forms of representing queer subjects within heteropatriarchal power structures. This suggests what Barnard's (2005) notion of queerness and hooks's (2003) notion of the oppositional gaze refer to, namely how purported "outsiders" can access power within their marginalised positions.

identities and lives. Hence, Andrews (2021, 84) argues that YouTube "potentially has a democratised function, allowing for the free flow of ideas and information worldwide in ways where diverse voices find self-expression and a sense of belonging."

Reddy, Potgieter, and Mkhize (2007) note that being queer in Africa involves being regulated by a "heterosexual matrix," suggesting that compulsory heterosexuality is present in most spaces, and queer performativities are policed (see Butler 1999[6]). However, the film *Out of This World* presents queer epistemologies voiced by queer people who exist in diverse spaces, subverting ideologies of compulsory heterosexuality and challenging the framing of queer people as simplistically "vulnerable" and "un-African."

Reddy, Potgieter, and Mkhize (2007, 230–234) assert that "African queer sexualities should not be reduced to the representation of symptoms of suffering, mourning and despair, [but it is significant to recognise that] pleasure, celebration, and affirmation, as well as the positive expression of erotic desire, prevail despite ongoing pathologising, marginalisation and persecution." The authors suggest that representing queer people as purely subject to risk of violence and homophobia, which is characteristic of dominant representations of black queer vulnerabilities in mainstream media, does not tell the full story. The element of "erotic desire" might position queer people as vulnerable, as this desire is the root of persecution, but this can also be represented positively and be liberatory for queer people. This echoes Matebeni's (2013) and Gqola's (2011) discussion of the hypervisibility of hate crimes against queer bodies becoming almost definitive for queer South Africans in the public imaginary. Gqola (2011, 623) employs Muholi's photographic work in her argument about hypervisibility, asserting that "Muholi's work is less about making Black lesbians visible than it is about engaging with the regimes that have used these women's hypervisibility as a way to violate them." Thus, the hypervisibility of queer people as vulnerable to harm might in fact constitute an erasure of diverse queer experiences, and might be a form of violence in itself. While this vulnerability might be an ontological condition of black queer South Africans, it does not need to define queer epistemologies, and vulnerability itself might allow queer people to challenge limiting representations when it is used as a way to claim space and belonging.

In exploring the film *Out of This World*, this article will consider Andrews's (2021) idea of "mirroring,"[7] a reference to Lacan's theory of the mirror stage as a form of

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6 This article employs Butler's (2004, 7–8) concept of "liveable lives" to articulate a positive definition of black queer identities and their representation in (public) spaces. In contemplating these liveable lives, I explore potential and progressive ways to envision them as legitimate, recognisable, and belonging within spaces designated for heteropatriarchy. Furthermore, I imagine liveable lives as achievable for black queer individuals, especially in the context of South Africa, by considering modes of transgressiveness that centre black queer lives as equally significant as their counterparts, whether in terms of racial status or gender and sexuality.

7 Andrews (2021a, 7) affirms that "mirror" creates forms of accessibility to queer people who find it difficult to embrace their identities as a result of the heterosexist offline spaces to be able to embrace

recognition of an "other" as self. The idea of mirroring offers an alternative lens in the post-apartheid period to create space for queer narratives and queer belonging. Visual media becomes a platform to surface and archive the histories and lived realities of queer people, where they can visibilise themselves as belonging in public spaces. This is also demonstrated in the film *Out of This World*, where Blanco (2017) uses YouTube to visibilise the narratives of queer people who have been marginalised and creates alternative space where queer people are able to express and navigate their identities.

Visualising Violence against Queer People in South Africa

Retief (1993) offers an important insight into how South African queer people were represented in film during the apartheid era. Retief (1993) claims in the article "Under Priscilla's Eyes" that the camera, through photograph and video, served as a tool to police and marginalise queer people, and led to government services such as the police force and the general public raiding queer spaces, particularly the Johannesburg raids during apartheid, and persecuting queer people through the camera lens. Retief (1993, 20) asserts that "historical accounts from the period reveal how during raids of queer bars, nightclubs, bathhouses, cruising spots, private residences and other queer friendly spaces, police officers armed with cameras would line people up against the wall and snap pictures of as many faces as possible." Through raids, queer people found in spaces created to enjoy leisure time and to have more freedom to embrace their queer identities were detained and were photographed in order to be exposed in mainstream media as queer (Müller 2019). Through surveillance and raiding, queer people experienced restrictions within public spaces for fear of being "exposed" as gay, which made it impossible for them to be open (visible) as queer or to feel a sense of belonging.

This persecution of queer people by state organs and society in general in public spaces still continues in post-apartheid South Africa, and continues to have a complex relationship with the camera and public display. For instance, in the Soweto Pride March in September 2010, two occurrences were reported of queer women being victimised by police services. One police officer apprehended a lesbian woman named Maki in a van and drove around the area for hours, whilst using derogatory anti-lesbian terms against her (Amnesty International 2013). In addition, seven lesbians were arrested in a fast-food restaurant and were victimised in police custody in 2009 after the LGBTQIA+ Pride in Soweto, and one of the victims reported the incident on live television (Amnesty International 2013).

In a raid by police officers a year later, a lesbian woman was attacked with pepper spray because of a noise complaint laid against her. The police officer involved lined up the woman and the other people in her house against a wall, and 11 people were abused in custody (Amnesty International 2013). Despite public reporting on this persecution in media and on television, similar attacks continue to happen, and visibility of violence

and celebrate their identities. In this case, film creates a similar form of alternative space. Many queer subjects have used film to inhabit spaces where they are discursively constructed as not "fitting."

does not seem to eradicate this everyday occurrence in South Africa. This implies that the media functions as a tool for surveillance, fostering distrust and violence against queer individuals. The camera, as a component of media, has consistently played a role in policing the (hyper)visibility and stigmatisation of queer individuals in post-apartheid settings, driven by the "inspected gaze" perpetuated by those harbouring queerphobic sentiments. Building upon Foucault's (1980, 158) Panopticon model, described as a system of disciplinary power subjecting individuals to constant classification and surveillance by both others and themselves, it becomes apparent how media, including photography, contribute to this dynamic. For example, Zanele Muholi's photographic series *Faces and Phases* (2006),[8] created during the post-apartheid era, encountered significant backlash and homophobic remarks. The series boldly addressed issues such as heterosexism, "corrective rape," and the marginalisation of black queer individuals. Muholi and Goldsmid (2010) assert that these acts of violence are fuelled by paradoxical pseudo-punishment and control tactics, intricately interwoven with religious discourses of "love." Queerphobic individuals direct these tactics towards queer people, particularly in spaces ideologically framed as incompatible with their identities.

Reid (2013, 24) explains that "homosexuality and public scandal have been linked through dramatic court cases, some of which date back to sodomy trials, which took place in the Cape in the seventeenth century, and both the 1930s and 1960s saw courtroom dramas and sensationalist media coverage on homosexuality." Queer visibility has thus often been linked to public shaming of queer people into "closeted" existences. This is demonstrated in scenes in the film *Simon & I* (Ditsie and Newman 2002) where queer people experienced hostile treatment in Johannesburg CBD spaces during protests and even Pride marches, for visibly occupying public spaces that were heteronormative, since homosexuality is both assumed to be a symptom of "moral decay" and a threat to the "natural" order of things (Reid 2013).

City spaces have become much safer for queer people in recent years, and Blanco's film represents Johannesburg as a space where many black queer people come to feel a greater sense of belonging. An important theme in the film is the idea of "home," and how queer people are often made to feel out of place in rural or township spaces and need to escape these "homes" in order to feel a greater sense of belonging in cities. Fela Gucci, one of the members of the duo FAKA[9] that is featured in the film, explains how

8 In 2006, Muholi initiated her *Faces and Phases* endeavour, an ambitious collection comprising approximately three hundred bold and unmistakably powerful portraits of lesbians. These portraits are captured against either plain or patterned backgrounds, and they are frequently showcased in tightly organised grids. The *Faces and Phases* project is the focal point of a comprehensive book released by Steidl last autumn, representing a significant milestone in Muholi's dedication to addressing the invisibility of black queer individuals. Muholi's artwork has achieved global recognition, and she is set to have her inaugural large-scale museum exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.

9 There are multiple queer participants featured in Blanco's film. FAKA is a music and visual performance group comprised of two queer activists, Fela Gucci and Desire Marea. The group works with design and kwaito music to present disruptive queer performances. Rich Mnisi is a creative

language is an important component of making queer people feel that they do not belong. Fela Gucci explains that he was constantly called *stabane* by men in his community while growing up, which translates as "intersex" from isiZulu but is used as an offensive term for gay or gender-nonconforming men in South Africa. Mykki Blanco echoes these feelings of unbelonging in communities that should offer a sense of home, as he left his rural town in North Carolina in the United States to run away to New York city: "When I was 16 years old, I run away to New York City with a dream of being more than my small rural town in North Carolina would allow" (Blanco 2017).

This story of Blanco's migration from rural to city space creates transnational connections between queer people's experiences of "home." For black queer people like those represented in *Out of This World*, "home" is a paradox, as they are reminded through language like *stabane* that they are unwelcome in hypermasculine, heterosexist spaces, often even in their own families. Running away from home becomes an act of seeking greater freedom, safety, and visibility, and finding liveable lives. However, while the city is shown to offer a greater sense of "home" for queer people, there is also a deliberate return to township spaces to *queer* these spaces, to challenge dominant ideologies and to be visibly gender-nonconforming in order to transform unwelcoming spaces through visual performativities.

The interaction of space and identity is significant in the visual representations in the film. In one scene, the couple Nkulsey and Bradley are shown on a tall building's rooftop and in their private bedroom in Johannesburg. The couple embrace as they look over the city, with high-rise buildings in the distance. This scene symbolises the freedom that the city offers them to be in an open relationship, but also calls into question their sense of belonging in the city. The moment of intimacy on the rooftop is still out of the view of others in Johannesburg. The couple also describe moments of discrimination that they suffered, which highlights lingering unease for queer people in post-apartheid South African spaces.

apparel designer whose work is to create a form of queer representation through commodity culture. The clothing he designs employs a rich and colourful look that is often associated with femininity, and he often shows these designs in spaces like Soweto. Zanele Muholi is a photographer and visual activist whose work is concerned with body politics, in particular related to black queer lesbian bodies. Muholi's work is dedicated to increasing the visibility of black queer lesbian lives. Nkulsey is a psychology student, model, and activist. Bradley is a dancer and Nkulsey's partner. Glow is a transgender activist who uses her platform to discuss sex, gender politics, and health care.

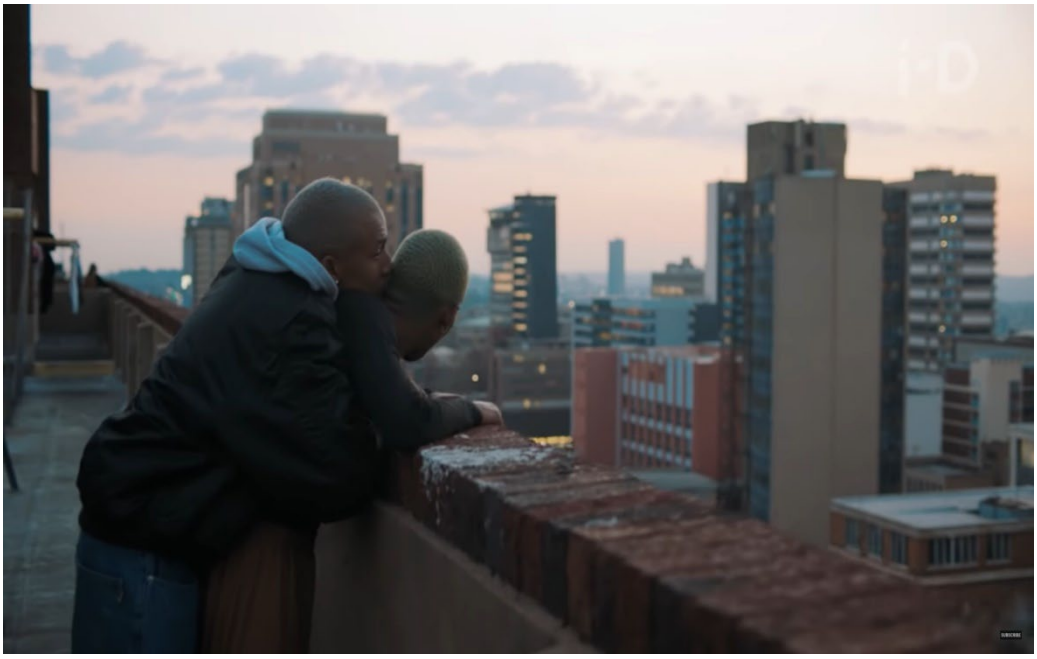

Figure 1: Bradley Kgotlelelo (left) and Nkulsey Masemola (right) on a rooftop in Johannesburg (Blanco 2017)

Elements of violence and discrimination are also demonstrated in one of the scenes during the Walk of Visibility at Zoo Lake and in Johannesburg CBD. The Zoo Lake spaces seem to enable a kind of "safe space" for queer people to increase their public visibility in predominantly white middle-class areas, again linking permissibility of same-sex sexualities with white spaces. However, within the multicultural Johannesburg CBD, there were visible reactions of shock and hostility towards the Walk of Visibility in the film. These dynamics seem to construct spaces marked as "white" as more accepting of queer people, even black queer people, in South Africa today.



Figure 2: Mikki Blanco (left) and singer Umlilo (right) during a Fem Walk (Walk of Visibility) at Zoo Lake, Johannesburg (Blanco 2017)

This backlash directed towards the visibility and recognition of queer people locates sexual and gender minorities as "outsiders" who are excluded from public spaces. This is shown in the film when queer people create alternative spaces such as clubs, bars, and heterotopic visual spaces through social media and films to find a sense of belonging. For instance, Blanco and FAKA are shown performing in a club at an event called "Canti Power" as a way to visibilise their identities and create affirming spaces for queer people. Fela Gucci from FAKA critiques the "failure of the democratic transition" in the film, suggesting that despite discourses of the "Rainbow Nation," most public spaces are still unsafe for queer people. This highlights that queer visibility is persistently shaped by distinct forms of intersectionality even within spaces presumed to be "safe" and "livable." In these environments, black queer South Africans remain more susceptible to vulnerability arising from queerphobic violence compared to their white counterparts. Interestingly, even gay clubs are shown to be heteronormative and exclude "feminine" performativity in male bodies. Fela Gucci explains:

> The gay clubs here [in Johannesburg] are very heteronormative; fem bodies in these spaces are policed and shamed a lot. […] [And] [t]here is a lot of hate crime that have happened here [Spruitview, Katlehong], and no one is held accountable. (Blanco 2017)

The documentary shows that queer people find it challenging to locate leisure spaces or spaces where they can be themselves, and the scene of Blanco and FAKA performing in the club demonstrates a *queering* of this space that is meant to offer belonging for queer people. The concept of transgressive vulnerability gives this scene added resonance, particularly because of how queer people inhabit spaces whilst aware of the

danger and violence that come with existing as "different" in South Africa. Fela Gucci demonstrates how policing and shame, elements found in broader society, are even present in ostensibly "queer-friendly" spaces, and how "fem" bodies face added scrutiny and exclusion even in so-called safe spaces. Visser (2008) claims that spaces are a significant part in the formation of identity and in most cases, heteronormativity still pervades spaces that might claim to be accepting of queer people; in effect, safe access to spaces is contingent on the appearance of being straight and cisgender, regardless of erotic desire. Performativity in these spaces thus also needs to be queered or disrupted.



Figure 3: Mykki Blanco and FAKA performing publicly in Spruitview, Katlehong (Blanco 2017)

In the film, queer people employ a commodity culture in heteronormative spaces, especially bars, clubs, and public streets. This can be seen as parodic of restrictive gender performativity, as queer individuals dress in skirts and wear beards, feminine hairstyles, and makeup in public spaces, disrupting binary gender norms.[10] This is shown in one of the scenes where Mykki Blanco and the group FAKA pose as they are filmed in Spruitview, Katlehong, wearing flowing feminine fabric around their lower

[10] Butler explains that all gender performances are parodic, but Butler warns that "[p]arody by itself is not subversive" (quoted in Salih 2007, 58), and she questions which performances can contribute to the destabilisation of gender and sex, and where those performances take place. In this context, the performances in the film can be read as subversive/resistant parody practice as they aim to disrupt and confront the heteronormative spaces through queer performativity.

bodies. The performance subverts the invisibility and erasure of queer experiences in the area where many queer people have been attacked and killed. The Fem Walk in the city is another example of queer bodies asserting their visibility and belonging in spaces where they might be invisibilised. This deliberate walking in spaces marked by homophobia, hate, and violence in predominantly black communities, such as the Johannesburg CBD and Soweto, is a form of resistance through transgressive vulnerability.

Reid (2013, 2–4) claims that queer males are "associated with femininity," suggesting that this intersects with forms of vulnerability that feminine-presenting individuals face. Therefore, the strategy of displaying queer bodies in feminine apparel both interpellates this vulnerability but also transgresses the "shame" or exclusion that is often associated with non-normative gender expression, as these queer individuals are proud and visible in public spaces. In addition, the Rich Mnisi fashion showcase in the streets of Soweto and the transgender woman Luke Van Der Burg who took Blanco to asylums in Johannesburg CBD whilst wearing feminine clothing, makeup, and hair, embody transgression in hostile spaces. Recording these through the camera and disseminating these films on YouTube is a way of using the camera, which once was oppressive to queer people, in ways that are now validating and offer recognition.

The camera might still create vulnerability for queer people even if used for documenting queer experiences, as they continue to face "fear of repercussions, thereby perpetuating the invisibility of the queer community" (Müller 2019, 5). This is illustrated in the film *Simon & I*, where Beverley Ditsie asserts that after she was seen advocating for queer rights on mainstream television, people in her community spaces were openly hostile towards her, and a group of 20 men attempted to invade her home in order to "discipline" her. These visual performativities are thus risky and place queer people as vulnerable, even as they lead to greater visibility.

Blanco's film is also a way of creating space for diverse queer people to be visible and affirmed. With the launch of YouTube in 2005, queer people could curate, record, edit, and upload their own stories, rather than merely being subjects in visualities created within heteronormative systems, or by actors and filmmakers who do not share their lived experiences. The emergence of YouTube and other visual social media like Instagram, used widely by South African queer activists and artists, opened possibilities for broader recognition of queer voices, and gave queer people platforms for displaying disruptive images in ways that are much more accessible to broad audiences. The online space functions as a public space for queer visualities to take shape and for queer people to see their experiences mirrored. Queer individuals such as the dancer Bradley and the designer Rich Mnisi, who grew up in spaces like Soweto and Alexandra, can disrupt heteronormativity in these spaces through visual performances, and authentically tell their stories through Blanco's film. Online spaces for queer people living in oppressive geographical spaces can allow them to express their identities, share their stories, and also see others who have similar experiences, enabling Jenkins's (2009) notion of

participatory culture. Andrews (2021, 86) claims that "YouTube offers greater anonymity, and the possibility of expansion beyond offline networks makes it a powerful space for many questioning or closeted queer individuals." This suggests that YouTube as a heterotopic space functions like a "mirror" that reflects what is often invisibilised or persecuted in offline spaces.

Film and visual media also offer an examination of how black queer people reconfigure the space of the city for their own purposes (Müller 2019), finding usable spaces in their environments (Livermon 2012). This is highlighted in a scene in Blanco's film where the participant Bradley, a dancer, explains that his life as a queer person in Alexandra township has always been marked by experiences of homophobic remarks and violence:

> I was bullied a lot because of being feminine and whatnot, so, and also for being a dancer, cause it's like, "What are you doing in the hood [Alexandra]?" (Blanco 2017)

In this scene, Bradley highlights the intersectionality of his experiences, and shows how his identity and gender expression were impacted by the space he existed in. The idea of limiting gender diversity in heterosexist spaces is central to colonial logics,[11] which were enforced to sustain power for one group by policing and marginalising others (Macharia 2011; Msibi 2011). Bradley asserts in the film that "[i]t is hard to show affection because you do not know how people will react in a certain environment," and Glow also claims that "[t]here is not many safe spaces, I do not like, I think it is nice to have a place where you feel like you do not necessary have to have people coming at you sideways" (Blanco 2017). Both participants suggest that black queer people find it difficult to be visible and feel like they belong, and that they feel surveilled and persecuted in public spaces. However, speaking about these experiences on film is a way of challenging their exclusion. Bradley and Nkulsey display forms of transgressive vulnerability through the public demonstration of their non-normative gender expression and openness about their relationship, and they can express themselves through dance and fashion.

FAKA has also worked to challenge gender norms through their live music performances and strong online presence on Twitter, blogs, and YouTube (Disemelo 2019; Malcomes 2019). FAKA's "widely available public and online performance of Black, queer desire, pleasure and rationality arguably serve to challenge sexual and gender binarism as well as racialised expectations of queerness, contributing to a 'queer archive'" (Disemelo 2019, 221).

In addition, Shefer (2019, 425) proposes that

[11] Colonial logics are rigid social norms conferred upon a particular group of people with purposes to sustain forms of power for one group by policing and marginalising others (see Macharia 2019; Msibi 2011).

> FAKA's performances also gesture to the imperative to "normalize" non-conforming gender and sexual practices and raced stereotypes in order to challenge the continued subjugation of and violences against queer people of colour. Such performances disrupt heteronormativity while also calling into question cultural essentializing discourses such as that of the un-Africanness of gay, lesbian, trans and queer desire and practice.

It can be argued that forms of appropriation and re-appropriation (using heteronormative spaces to make visible the experiences or narratives of queer people) are significant for the self-making of black queer subjects in cities and townships, in the sense that the appropriation creates a platform to (re)claim public space. Moreover, the idea of appropriation also enables the formation of alternative spaces, in the sense that queer people use online spaces to negotiate their identities.



Figure 4: Rich Mnisi carrying his fashion collection in the streets of Soweto

Rich Mnisi, FAKA, and queer people who engaged in the Walk of Visibility in Johannesburg CBD appropriated heterosexist public spaces to make visible their narratives and identities. Mnisi displayed his clothing through a fashion show in Soweto. This demonstrates resistance and transgression in the face of vulnerability, as queer people in such spaces claim agency in order to demonstrate their presence and belonging in these spaces. Furthermore, FAKA and Blanco also illustrated resistant performativity during their visit in Katlehong in Spruitview, where the clothes they wore confront heteronormativity. Importantly, these visual and performative demonstrations disrupt the myth of black African identity as homogenous. Queer subjects appropriate public space in order to confront heteronormative ideologies.

Dlamini (in Mbembe, Dlamini, and Khunou 2004, 240) explains that "cities and townships are spaces of motion," referring to cities and townships as conducive spaces that enable change and development that can be used to challenge social ideals and norms. However, Dlamini (in Mbembe, Dlamini, and Khunou 2004) suggests that cities and township also exist beyond the idea of place and can be understood as a state of mind. For instance, Soweto has come to be seen as a dynamic space for black queer people that affords opportunities for social gatherings and expression to queer subjects. Thus, Soweto becomes a space for the merging of black queer identities into a specifically black spatiality (Livermon 2012). In one scene, Rich Mnisi identifies Soweto as a significant space to visibilise queer narratives, stating: "Growing up in spaces like [Soweto] … love is real" and "[t]here is great support and great teamwork" (Blanco 2017). The positive reception to Mnisi's fashion show demonstrated in the film shows that the simplistic view of queer people as vulnerable in township spaces can be challenged through transgressive performativities. This process of "homonormalising" spaces is significant. Muholi does similar work in her photographic collection *Faces and Phases* and her documentary films like *Difficult Love* (Muholi and Goldsmid 2010), in which she and other lesbian women visibly inhabit township spaces in order to surface queer narratives that are often invisibilised.

Soweto becomes a place for re-imagining ideologies around black identities. This is a significant shift from earlier spatialities and the ideological ordering of spaces. Visser (2013) claims that during the apartheid period, spaces available for queer performativity were largely located in white neighbourhoods, which include Hillbrow and Melville in Johannesburg and Green Point and Sea Point in Cape Town. Neighbouring spaces were occupied by queer men of various racial and class categories (Visser 2013) who often had little access to these more openly "queer" spaces, and public black spaces were often oppressive to queer identities. This implies that little or no space was available for black queer individuals to experience forms of visibility and freedom. Visser (2013, 269–272) explains, "[h]istorically, black South Africans had no claim to urban spaces until the late 1980s, which makes the notion of a gay neighbourhood in the past problematic and place specific." This implies that even to black queer men, white neighbourhood spaces became difficult to access because of the race and class identity politics that operated in South Africa (Visser 2013).

However, claiming space and reappropriating public space has transformed spaces like Soweto into not simply spaces with "gay pockets," but rather spaces where queer people assert their belonging through public performativities, and the unique queer culture of Soweto has allowed for the emergence of spatially defined black queer identities and the understanding of Soweto as a reappropriated *queer* space for artists and activists such as those in Blanco's film. Livermon (2014, 512) explains that "[p]ost-apartheid South Africa has seen the emergence of a vibrant, visible, and vocal black queer community. The emergence of this community, however, has not been without contestation." Spaces that remained largely exclusive and oppressive have become the very spaces that allowed queer people to form new black queer cultures and to assert

unique forms of belonging in post-apartheid South Africa, like the unique Johannesburg drag culture and fem queer visual culture embodied by groups like FAKA. The camera, through films like Blanco's, adds to this black queer spatiality through heterotopic spaces of community engagement, rewriting the story of spaces like Soweto. Additionally, the camera has recovered and reactivated "subjugated knowledge" in queer spatiality that is bringing to light knowledge otherwise deemed invalid because it does not conform to scientific discourse (Foucault 1980). These alternative spaces have contributed to a range of contemporary black queer narratives and offered black queer people a chance to share their stories in their own voices.

Conclusion

The article has explored the documentary film *Out of This World* (2017), which serves as a powerful testament to the resilience, visibility, and self-expression of queer individuals in Johannesburg, South Africa. The film *Out of This World* has courageously explored how the urban and township spaces have continued to shape queer lives. These spaces, once sites of oppression, have now transformed into arenas where queer individuals assert their identities, confront heterosexism, and navigate their existence through visual storytelling. Additionally, the film's exploration of vulnerability further underscores its significance. Queer individuals are not defined solely by their struggles; their narratives are enriched by pleasure, celebration, and affirmation. By challenging the dominant representation of queer vulnerability as solely a narrative of suffering, the film showcases the multiplicity of queer experiences. As the film traverses diverse experiences and identities, it constructs a participatory culture, where marginalised voices refuse to be silenced. Ultimately, *Out of This World* offers a mirror for queer individuals, reflecting their authentic selves back to them in a world that has often denied their existence. Through visual media, it dismantles the chains of erasure, allowing queer narratives to carve out a rightful place in public spaces. Just as *Out of This World* embodies a transformative force for queer visibility, it also becomes a testament to the broader potential of visual media. In a world where storytelling remains a powerful tool for liberation, the film demonstrates the capacity to shatter oppressive norms, reclaim narratives, and forge a path towards true inclusion and belonging.

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