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# 'Suddenly the film scene is becoming our scene'! the making and public lives of black-centred films in South Africa (1959-2001)

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## *CHAPTER 4*

# 'SUDDENLY THE FILM SCENE IS BECOMING OUR SCENE'! ENGAGEMENTS OF BLACKNESS IN THE MAKING AND PUBLIC LIFE OF *u'Deliwe* (1975)

In this chapter, I ask how *u'Deliwe* related to public discourses on blackness at its inception and early circulation. *u'Deliwe* is a film adaptation of a popular 1964 Radio Bantu serial of the same name.[1] Radio Bantu was a radio station targeting a black South African listenership, which was set up to implement apartheid ideology (Gunner 2005: 161-9).[2] Emerging in a context of important changes in South African film history, when the world of filmmaking gradually opened to black artists, *u'Deliwe*, the chapter shows, signalled a turning point in black South Africans' experiences of cinema. Yet, as a product of Heyns Films, a production company later exposed as a front for the state Department of Information, scholars have read *u'Deliwe* along with other films aimed at urban black audiences, largely in relation to the question of whether they fulfilled apartheid propaganda. In the process, they have lost sight of its possible critical effects as a circulating text. I suggest that this approach is premised on a monolithic and fixed idea of apartheid ideology, which is oblivious of its historical internal rifts and contestations. In the so-called 'crisis years' of apartheid, there were some Afrikaner ideologues (*verligtes*) who were advocating racial integration and the abolition of petty apartheid. And there were others (*verkramptes*) who sought to maintain ethnic separation, bantustanism, and the containment of black South Africans in rural traditionalism.[3] I propose that this contestation constituted an opening which made possible public engagements of *u'Deliwe*

[1] Reportedly, the serial had a listenership of five hundred thousand a month (*Drum* July 1974: 24).

[2] According to Gunner, the radio serial *u'Deliwe*, is 'the first serial drama listed in the Johannesburg SABC sound archives holdings'. Gunner pointed out that its popularity may have influenced another drama made in the same year called *Khumbula u'Deliwe,* which ran for 59 episodes. See Gunner L., 2000. Wrestling with the Present, Beckoning the Past: Contemporary Zulu Radio Drama, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 26. No2. Special Issue, Popular Culture and Democracy, 223-237.

[3] See Giliomee H., 1979. Afrikaner Politics: How the System Works in Adam H., (Ed.). *The Rise and Crisis of Afrikaner Power*, David Phillip: Claremont, 217-218.



WISER

that exceeded any apartheid propaganda, especially with regard to black identity. I argue that in spite of its derivation from a state-related institution, *u'Deliwe* harboured a critical value that subverted any objective of co-opting blackness in the service of apartheid propaganda.

**Film Synopsis**

The narration by the veteran Radio Bantu broadcaster, K.E. Masinga inaugurates the story of a young girl called Deliwe. Through the narrator's voice-over, we learn that Deliwe's father passed away and is survived by Deliwe and her mother. Thereafter her sickly mother passes away and a local teacher, Mgathi and his wife adopt her. They reluctantly decide to send Deliwe to Johannesburg to stay with her uncle. In an unfortunate twist of circumstances, she fails to meet him. However, the opportune offer of accommodation by a benevolent stranger, Reverend Makhathini, reverses her misfortunes. An ill-fated agreement to take a walk around the township with Jack, a young thug, disturbs Deliwe's harmonious stay at the Makhathini's.

Embarrassed and overwhelmed by boredom, Deliwe steals out of the Reverend's house for a domestic job. She befriends two local girls and begins an affair with a young man George. Shortly afterwards, she finds fame in the world of mail-order fashion and beauty pageants. At the height of her success, Deliwe finally meets her uncle Mabaso. However, Mabaso's conservative airs do not accommodate Deliwe's blossoming career. In one of his occasional rages, Mabaso forcibly takes Deliwe away from a film set. Consumed by rage, he drives his car recklessly and it rolls over, instantly killing himself and injuring Deliwe. In the final scene, Deliwe reconciles with George, the Reverend Makhathini and his wife. She returns to stay at their residence. The narrator, in voice-over, ends the film on the note of Deliwe and George's matrimony.

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**Form in *u'Deliwe***

Structured in the mode of classic narrative realism, the plot of *u'Deliwe* borrows heavily from established Hollywood conventions. In classic narrative realism, the construction of film narrative is governed by the verisimilitude of its fictional world and a coherent, linear movement of its plot from a state of imbalance towards an inevitable resolution (Cook 1985: 212, 242). The compulsion of the realist text towards resolution underlies its tendency to avoid contradictions. Instead, the realist text builds a 'hierarchy amongst its discourses and this hierarchy is defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth' (Easthope 1993: 54). If we accept this brief exposition of classic narrative realism and its deployment in *u'Deliwe*, it follows that the film is driven by a progression towards a 'governing truth'. In light of the film's emergence from within the state apparatuses, such 'truth' would appear on the surface to be consistent with apartheid ideology.

That the narrative of *u'Deliwe* unfolded against the backdrop of an increasingly reformist apartheid state, without any direct reference to it, has given easy ammunition to readings that ascribe to it the role of serving state propaganda. The film's association with the state Department of Information corroborated this ascription. However, where *u'Deliwe*'s relations with the state apparatus is assumed to serve a propagandist purpose as these readings do, the need for appreciating its relations to contemporary and ongoing public engagements of blackness falls away. This can lead to the assumption of the film's lack of critical value. The few brief studies on the 70's to mid-80's films aimed at black audiences (Keyan Tomaselli 1980, 1989, Hariett Gavshon 1983, Gairoonisa Paleker 2005), *u'Deliwe* included, do not reflect on the discursive intricacies in these films' relations to blackness. Instead, they have treated blackness in relation to the films as if it was not a problematic, only framing it in terms of a fixed and seamless subjection to an unchanging apartheid. A more nuanced reading of the films' relations to public engagements is in order. Such a more nuanced reading can be productively grounded in the theoretical recognition of *u'Deliwe* as a text subject to various interpretations and contestations that change over time.

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*u'Deliwe*'s circulation and the circumstances of its production, which saw for the first time in the history of film in South Africa, the installation of a black filmmaker in the position of director, foregrounds the extent of its consistency with apartheid propaganda. As part of the slew of the 70's and 80's films covertly financed by the state through the Department of Information and Heyns productions, it was exclusively circulated at black venues. Thus, *u'Deliwe'*s making and context of circulation constitute dimensions other than its form and assumed 'messages'. These dimensions compound the role of form and purported messages in the films' publicness. Its genesis and circulation invite the question of how *u'Deliwe* related to debates on blackness, primarily in the 1970s and beyond.

## Context and Discursive Currents

*u'Deliwe* was produced and circulated during one of the most trying periods in the history of apartheid when fissures began to emerge in its hegemony. The historian Hermann Giliomee made the observation that from 1974 to 1979, what he calls a 'watershed period' in Nationalist politics, a tendency among the *verligte* Nationalists emerged in which separate development was no longer seen as a goal of Nationalist Party politics, but its instrument. According to him, 'the term '*verlig'* is related to those Nationalists who emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s…. and advocated greater white unity and 'harmonious' 'race' relations through mixed sport and the abolition of petty apartheid measures…. *Verkramptes* during the same period championed undiluted Afrikaner domination and racial exclusiveness'.[4] The emergence of rifts within the National Party exposed the instability of grand apartheid, and importantly, the poverty of the notions of 'race' on which it was based. The rifts marked a momentous shift in the apartheid discourse on blackness. While at the inception of apartheid, its ideologues advanced the line of thinking that black people were not adaptive to the urban areas, in the 70's apartheid discourse grudgingly admitted the permanence of blacks in the urban areas. The

[4] See Giliomee H., 1979. *Rise and Crisis*, 217-218. See also Henry K., 1991. *Power, Pride and Prejudice: The Years of Nationalist Rule in South Africa*, Jonathan Ball Publishers: Johannesburg.



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effect of this change was the recognition of class as an influential dialectic in the social status of urbanised blacks. This is because the social and economic dimensions of urbanised life necessarily entailed relations of class. Thus, while 'race' was still a powerful category of identity in apartheid discourse, class compounded its significance. The shifts in apartheid discourse constitute a discursive context that any reflections on *u'Deliwe* ought to acknowledge, the better to locate the challenges to its engagements on black identity.

Outside the internal political relations of the National Party, a counter discourse to apartheid in the form of Black Consciousness emerged from the ranks of the black educated stratum. In a pioneering thesis on black theatre in South Africa, Steadman argued that, 'Black Consciousness had created an opposing hegemony and for the first time since racism had been institutionalized under Verwoerd; it became apparent that white survival depended on accommodating the urban blacks, even at the expense of eroding apartheid' (Steadman 1985: 339). Steadman further argued that 'after 1976 complacent white supremacy came to an end'. However, *Black Review* traces the influence of Black Consciousness back by at least a year,

> By the end of 1975 Black Consciousness had become an undeniable force in the black man's quest for an identity and his need for a national consciousness. Black Consciousness was at this time found to be existing in historical perspective and could only be evaluated from within that perspective. The tags had been dropped as far as the blacks were concerned. As a result many social and cultural groups had come to accept Black Consciousness as a way of life (*Black Review* 1975: Chapter 6)[5]

Black Community Programmes (BCP), Durban, which was a major organization within the Black Consciousness Movement, published *Black Review* as an annual publication. The publication was intended as a 'survey of contemporary events and trends in the black community'. *Drum* magazine was another platform where some of the debates around

[5] See also Digital Imaging South Africa, <"http://disa.nu.ac.za"> accessed 2005, 3, 22.



WitsETD

blackness took place.[6] The more radical of the debates on blackness in *Drum* are exemplified by its columnist Jackie Heyns' questioning of black identity. He argued:

> To be or not to be black is our dilemma. [….] Can it be that we were too hasty, seeking a quick and easy alternative without giving thought to the fact that we are dealing with people and not seeking a new name for a group of "things"? (*Drum* September, 1972: 53)

Concerns such as Heyns' show that in spite of the 'opposing hegemony' of Black Consciousness (BC) philosophy, engagements with blackness were varied and did not always iterate BC philosophy, and even questioned it. Thus, *u'Deliwe* entered a deliberative sphere marked by diverse perspectives on blackness. Contra state reformism, which also increasingly acknowledged class, the Black Consciousness Movement evolved a sophisticated multi-class discourse of identity and political consciousness among the black oppressed.

Despite emerging at the same time as Black Consciousness became politically influential, the conceptualization and making of *u'Deliwe* evinces no obvious concerns with it. Nor does the film engage apartheid as a sphere of relations that largely governed black people's lives. Its lack of overt political engagement notwithstanding, *u'Deliwe'*s focus on township life is noteworthy. By turning its lens on the township social terrain, the film intimates the relative autonomy of black urban social relations from those of apartheid political relations. What then is the preoccupation of *u'Deliwe*? Moreover, of what consequence was this preoccupation to public engagements on blackness in the seventies?

*u'Deliwe* is concerned with the tension between the moral strictures of family and the freedom that urban social life promises, especially for young women. The film appears to lament the increasing distance between family and the freedom of the individual which is

[6] By 1975, the magazine had a circulation of 50, 000 copies. Swift K., 1991. A Retrospective Look at *Drum* Magazine in the 1970s, *Rhodes Journalism Review*, 2/1: 35-42: (39).



WitsETD

characteristic of urban life. It seems to pose for itself the question of how best to apprehend the myriad choices that urban life avails to the individual, without compromising the ostensible sanctity of the family. The film's setting and distance from overt engagements with historical issues surrounding urban black life in South Africa, almost immediately mark it as apolitical and shorn of critical significance. On the contrary, the surfacing in *u'Deliwe* of relations of gender, age and class among black people easily exposes the inadequacies in this line of thinking. Insofar as they surface conflicts of interests against the backdrop of black urban experiences in South Africa, these relations are ultimately political in content. The manner in which these social relations relate to black people's actual experiences and various ideas about their encounters with the urban, determines *u'Deliwe'*s role in contemporary engagements of black identity. Thus, even without overtly engaging organised politics, *u'Deliwe*'s focus on social relations among black people harbours a tendency to address the problematic of black identity at various levels, including age, class and gender.

In itself, the narrative pursuit of stable family life engages the dynamics around the very idea of a black urban family in an apartheid context. Its patriarchal assumptions and middle class values regardless, a stable family life is a particular social experience that the gamut of prohibitive apartheid legislation significantly denied black people. The film's evincing of the black middle class family as ideal, though broached through a gendered discourse, brings a particular dimension of black urban experiences to any reflections on critical engagements on blackness. Even at the level of gender relations and class itself, the film projects social relations that throw into harsh relief its role in the engagements of black identity in the 1970s. Ever mindful of the charges of propaganda against the film, and the intricate issues around class, gender and family in the film's focus on black experiences of the city, I turn to the making of the film and progressively ask how *u'Deliwe* related to engagements on blackness.

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### *The Making of u'Deliwe*

First-time director Simon Sabela, who also stars in it, directed *u'Deliwe*. Heyns Films, a white film company with more than cordial relations with the state, as I will show in the course of the chapter, produced *u'Deliwe* and other films that were aimed at black audiences. At the time of directing *u'Deliwe*, Sabela was an actor in major international films shot in South Africa. Among others, he had acted in *Gold* (1974), *Zulu* (1964), *One Step to Hell* (1967), *Diamond Walkers* (1965) and *Sanders of the River* (1963). Most notably, he was assigned the part of Mandela in a West German film called *Rivonia Trial* (1966), a dramatized biography of Nelson Mandela (Deane 1978: 161). The film was never shown in South Africa. After *u'Deliwe*, Sabela directed a number of films for Heyns that were also distributed in black venues. These were *Inkedama* (1975) (about a mistreated orphan in the rural Transkei who becomes a medical doctor), which had already been seen by 100 000 people within three months of its release. Others were *Ikati Elimnyama* (1975), (about the double life of a township businessman), *Ngwanaka/Mntanami* (1976), (a love story within feuding taxi owning families and gangsterism) (*Drum* 8 February 1976: 28). These films featured all-black casts and were characterized by exclusive 'black' social settings. While black filmmakers directed quite a number of films aimed at blacks, white-controlled production companies produced these films. According to Tomaselli (1989: 59), 'there were only two sources of finance for films aimed at blacks'. There was the Bantu Investment Corporation which 'as state body promoting economic apartheid through economic aid aimed 'to stimulate a Bantu film industry of their own'.[7] There was also what Tomaselli (1989: 59) called 'secret' money provided by the Department of Information to Heyns Films.

[7] The Bantu Investment Corporation Act No. 34 of 1959 was passed to constitute a Corporation the purpose of which was to promote and encourage industrial and other undertakings and to act as a development, financial and investment institution among Bantu persons in the Bantu areas, and to provide for other incidental matters. See Aluka Digital Library at: <http://www.aluka.org/action/showMetadata > (accessed 15 November 2007).



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In late 1978, after making *u'Deliwe*, the press exposed Heyns Films as a front for the Department of Information.[8] Undoubtedly then, the state or at least a part of it, was the real producer and financier of *u'Deliwe* and other films aimed at black audiences. Tomaselli observes that an anthropologist Mrs. Van Zyl Alberts, 'vetted' most of the Heyns Films. According to Tomaselli (1989: 57), Van Zyl Alberts was primarily concerned with their '"ethnological" accuracy in terms of the ideology of separate development'. Incidentally, Van Zyl Alberts was the script-coordinator for *u'Deliwe*. The covert involvement of the state in the production of these films suggests that they were conceived as instruments of state propaganda. This propaganda, which was revealed in the Muldergate scandal, was aimed at influencing, in terms of a positive image, local and international opinion about the apartheid government.

For Sabela, *u'Deliwe* and other films made by Heyns, were meant to be 'simple family entertainment' (*Drum* 8 February 1976: 28). Sabela implies that the black family constitutes the primary public and preferred viewer of the films. Such a reading, he suggests, ought not to be guided by assumptions in the viewer of complexities in the film. Rather, it must see in the films, 'innocent family leisure' with no inkling whatsoever of its implications for society. His statement also appears to evoke the intimacy of family against the publicness of normally unrelated, unfamiliar viewers. Simple family entertainment appears suited to the propaganda efforts of the Department of Information because of its potential to draw public attention away from national politics.

However, the embattled status of black families in apartheid South Africa destabilizes the denial of the complexity underwriting his projection of the film's audience. Sabela obliquely draws attention to the status of the black family in relation to the film's actual circulation and the constitution of its publicness. Read in relation to the actual circulation

[8] According to Giliomee, 'between 1973 and 1978 the cabinet allocated R64, 000, 000 in secret funds to the Department of Information in order to counter "the so-called total onslaught on South Africa"'. Giliomee, *Rise and Crisis*, 207. For the so-called 'Information Scandal or Muldergate', see also *Sunday Times* 1978, 8 October, 1978, 12 November, *Rand Daily Mail*, 1978, 13, 26 December, *Sunday Express* 1979, 10 June. I am indebted to Harriet Gavshon's work for the press references.



WitsETD

of the film, Sabela's statement surfaces the layered constitution of the film's publicness, and of the role of the black family in it. Constrained by the vicissitudes of urban living, yet given free textual scope in *u'Deliwe*, the black family is a trope of the limits and possibilities of public discourse during apartheid. The representation of the black family in film ultimately constitutes its movement from the intimacy of the conjugal space to the new publicity of the cinema.

Whatever its ideological usefulness to the state, the production of *u'Deliwe* was symptomatic of the changing patterns in the intellectual or work relations between black artists and the white film establishment, as well as the attitude of the state to these relations. It heralded a significant development, and that is, the participation of black artists as filmmakers. Thus, the emergence of *u'Deliwe* points to a guarded capitulation by the state and the film industry, to black aspirations for determining the cultural and social destiny of black people. It also shows a sophisticated form of state appropriation of film, which seemed to be guided by attempts at co-opting black filmmakers into the apartheid hegemony, in order to legitimize it. Such appropriation is a clear indication of the acceptance by the state and white producers of the challenges posed by the political sophistication of urban blacks, '....I believe that the increased level of black buying power, the increased level of sophistication that has subsequently come through a middle class system will inevitably cause the films to improve because of increased awareness' (Hay in Tomaselli 1989: 77).[9]

## Films Aimed At Black Audiences: Simply Propaganda?

Given its imbrication in the state and state-related institutional spaces, *u'Deliw*e would appear on the surface to be simply a vehicle for apartheid propaganda. Indeed, the few commentators on films aimed at black audiences have argued with some variations, that

[9] For Ndebele, the political sophistication of urban blacks posed a threat to the apartheid state, and was one motivation behind the policy of Bantustans. See Ndebele N., 1972, Black Development, in Biko S., (Ed) *Black Viewpoint*, 17-18.



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these films were made for propaganda purposes. In the wake of the exposure of the Department of Information scandal, in 1980 film scholar Harriett Gavshon undertook research into the levels of state interventions in the films aimed at black audiences. Her aim was to explore how through 'relative consistency in their content', and procedures of production, these films were in keeping with apartheid hegemony. Gavshon (1983: 15) identified these films as 'back to homelands' films which she observed were mostly shown in rural areas, in contrast to 'fantasy' or 'conditional' urban films which are shown in urban areas. Admittedly, Gavshon did not set out to include all genres of films made for black audiences. Yet 'urban' films of the period were replete with the rhetorical tendencies consistent with Gavshon's schema of 'back to homelands' films. According to Gavshon (1983: 16-17), such films were marked by gaps or *structuring absences*: the near absence of whites, marked absence of poverty, political issues and the rural/urban dichotomy. Gavshon argued further that 'the mere image of whites would have the result of drawing correspondences between that fabricated world (of the films) and the historical reality of the spectator, and corrode the illusion of the logicality of the narrative' (1983: 17). In arguing that the subsidy films are marked by the absence of politics, Gavshon obviously has in mind national politics. In so doing, she commits the error of denying the narrative diegesis of the films any political content outside of national politics. Even the observation that the films are marked by the absence of poverty is unsustainable because films like *u'Deliwe* do show poverty as a limiting condition.

For Gavshon (1983: 14), not only were films aimed at black audiences reflective of state propaganda, but they also showed the ideological collusion between the state, and white filmmakers who formed part of the ruling classes, as well as the profit motive of industry. She argued that these collusions only took place at the level of distribution, and the bureaucracy of censorship. In addition, she suggested that 'as part of the ruling classes, the producers not only reproduce those ideas that are necessary for the reproduction of these classes but are an expression of its cohesion' (1983: 16). Gavshon's work sheds light into aspects of the films' imbrication within the state ideological machinery and industrial



WiSETD

motives. However, she argued against the inevitability of the films' ideological effects: 'apartheid has never nor will ever be able to incorporate the majority of South Africans into its ideological framework…' (1983: 13). This is a significant observation because it acknowledges the limits of film as a propaganda tool. However, without analytical attention to their relations with contemporary debates, the discursive terrain of the films remains wedded to their function as propaganda tools.

Another reading has emerged latterly, which iterates the observation that films aimed at black audiences were made for propaganda purposes. Film scholar Gairoonisa Paleker (2005) locates *u'Deliwe* exclusively within the state's homelands policy. For Paleker (2005: 3), '*uDeliwe* is a moral tale of what befalls those who forget their station in life and overreach their ambitions as Deliwe did in her search for fame, wealth and easy life'. No doubt, this may be so, if we remain on the level of narrative only; but narrative is bound to be limited by other aspects of the film such as the personal success of Deliwe and its resonance with black social aspirations. Framing her discussion within the context of the ideology of separate homelands, Paleker sought to examine the extent to which such films were 'deployed to create specific African ethnic identities'. In this schema, she read what she saw as the urban-rural dichotomy in *u'Deliwe* as being reflective of the ideological alienation of Africans from the city. Paleker found the rural-urban dichotomy in *u'Deliwe* in keeping with the ideology of separate development. Social scientist Ted Matsetela equally held the view that most of the films aimed at black audiences

> ….are subtle custodians of the 'back to the country' move envisaged in homeland policy. Like the government, these pictures continuously stress that city life is foreign to the black way of life: "the urban setting is not your home; you belong in the homelands" (Matsetela cited in Tomaselli 1989: 72).

Although Paleker's discussion captured the relation of *u'Deliwe* to the state's designs on black people, it did not reflect on the dynamics of this relation. Nor did Paleker note the generic differences between the films aimed at black people, and the possibility thereof,

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of their different constructions of black identity. Tomaselli's brief but important contrasting of *u'Deliwe* with other films aimed at a black viewership is a compelling rebuttal of this homogenization of films aimed at black audiences. Tomaselli (1989: 72) conceded that *u'Deliwe* did not conform to the 'back to homelands' films. He argued that 'despite the state's attempts at indoctrination, most of the films made by Sabela are more adventurous and accurate than those found in the back to homelands category' (1989: 72). Tomaselli does not demonstrate the significance of this accuracy. Thus, in spite of its 'accuracy', the film, in Tomaselli's reading, ultimately serves the objectives of the state and of capital. For him the films' function as propaganda tools is also reinforced by the sources of their themes, namely the popular magazines,

> The popular culture reflected in these kinds of films is not from an organic class experience or cooperation, but through media reconstructions of it. These reconstructions inevitably reinforce the dominant ideology of racial capitalism....the choice of print media, however, automatically skews perceptions, for they are the propaganda vehicles of capital. The more liberal of them perform the socialising task of preparing the new black class to form an alliance with their homelands compatriots (Tomaselli 1989: 66-67).

The fault line in this thinking is in its lack of consideration of the fact that texts are not reducible to their authors' intentions, but are ever subject to engagements that stem from the intricate social and political relations of which they are a part. Such engagements may not necessarily lead to a particular desired outcome. Rather, they are likely to give birth to varied ways of understanding social and political relations, the outcome of which may make possible new strategies of relating to power in all its forms. Tomaselli makes a rather easy correlation between capitalism and popular culture. Conceptually, this assumption denies popular culture a space for reflection and self-fashioning outside of the dictates of capital. There are aspects in the making and public life of *u'Deliwe* which destabilize readings that reduce its role to propaganda. Of these, I note its differences from the radio serial, the direction by a black filmmaker and the participation of black celebrities in it, as well as the ambiguities at play in its narrative.

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### *Unmaking or Re-making of the Radio Soap*

Analysis of the film against the radio soap opera explodes readings that append it solely to the politics of apartheid and racial capitalism. Though this chapter is not about adaptation, *u'Deliwe*'s derivation from a radio soap calls for a brief discussion of the similarities and differences with its eponymous text. The discussion must surface the intra-textual specificities of *u'Deliwe* to put into proper perspective the subsequent discussion of its critical status. The film and the serial largely follow a similar plot. They also share a tendency to contrast explicitly the country and the city. In the first episode of the radio drama, Deliwe's guardians warn her about Johannesburg. Theirs is a grim picture of the city: full of criminals, poverty and populated by un-Christian and unproductive youth. The earlier scenes of the film are also characterized by an equal contempt for the city. After pleas from his wife, Mgathi reluctantly allows Deliwe to leave for Johannesburg but firmly instructs her to return to the country. In both texts, the admonitions against the city are reinforced when Deliwe nearly falls prey to township hoodlums who attempt to rape her, and when she falls on hard times. Her return to the Reverend Makhathini's house, entrenches the moral inclinations of both texts.

However, the most notable difference between the two texts is in their endings. In the last scene of the radio drama, Deliwe, on the train to Estunjini, declares that she is leaving 'Johannesburg and its evil ways'. The film, on the contrary, ends with Deliwe staying in the township, ready for a new Christian marital life with George. Though it also depicts negative aspects of the city, the film does not attribute Deliwe's problems to the 'nature' of city life in the same way as the radio drama does. In resolving the narrative of *u'Deliwe* by returning her to Soweto and not Estunjini, the film disavows the ending of the radio drama, in which it is suggested, that the return to the countryside is the solution to Deliwe's problems.

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## The Black Urban Imaginary Revisited: *u'Deliwe* as Film

It is worth reminding ourselves that the context in which the initial circulation of *u'Deliwe* occurs was defined by a realignment of relations between the state and capital, and it was therefore fecund with contestations that have a bearing on black identity. In 1975, on the matter of state restrictions on the movement and residential rights of black people, the Transvaal Chamber of Commerce challenged the state with some far-reaching recommendations. One of the proposals by the Chamber was that the state needed 'to recognize urban blacks as permanent urban dwellers since industry needs the blacks on a permanent basis' (*Black Review* 1975: Chapter 6).[10] The state's capitulation to these challenges guided its reforms, which allowed black people to be permanent residents in the urban areas. Steadman (1985: 340) argued that the state modified the apartheid system because of the obvious 'permanence of the urban blacks'.[11] The drive towards reform manifested contradictions in the historically stable relations between the state and capital. It exemplified the new challenges faced by the state that could no longer sustain grand apartheid in the form of strict application of restrictive residential and labour laws. Although the state reforms signalled the first steps towards the attainment of limited rights for black people, it was however, still peppered with conditions that created new contradictions in the social and political sphere of South Africa.

The reformist rethinking in the apartheid state occurred at the time of the making and circulation of the film. Thus, the new Deliwe belonged to the urban space at the same time as the country and the state's ideology were going through social and political convulsions. Given the conflicting objectives of the state and capital, these convulsions evinced the destabilization of the apartheid imaginary of black identity in terms of a perpetual rural traditionalism. Thus, the new Deliwe's stay in the city and her negotiation of its challenges decreases the burden of the rural space from any engagements of the film. Her shifting

[10] See also Davies R. H., 1979. Capital Restructuring and Modification of Racial Division of Labour in South Africa, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15, 2.

[11] See also Giliomee H., 1982. *The Parting of the Ways: South African Politics 1976-1982*, Cape Town: David Phillip, X.



WiSER

class position constructed in terms of the rise and fall in her social status is significant. Not only does it draw attention to class as a significant marker of urban black identity, but also invites considerations of the instability of middle class positions for urban blacks. The resonance between the shifts in Deliwe's class position and the actual instability in black people's middle class positions, calls into question the certainty of the argument that the film serves as propaganda. It is in the light of the ambiguity wrought in the shifts in Deliwe's class position and social status that the film's ending opened up an opportunity for black contestations of the urban public space. It allowed for the constructions of black identity that are grounded within the sphere of social and political action that an urban setting was likely to inspire.

In addition to the film's significant ending, the production dynamics in which a black filmmaker directed *u'Deliwe* at a time when black filmmakers were not allowed principal roles in film production is notable. However, Tomaselli (1980: 5, 1989: 67) has observed that Sabela's white employers chose the scripts for him. Thus, in Tomaselli's observations, Sabela's white colleagues determined the content of his films at the primary level of their conceptualisation. Implied in this observation is that Sabela's films were not in conflict with the interests of his employers. Although it points to a highly likely state of inequality, this observation is not an adequate account of the relations of production in the making of Sabela's films. A brief examination of Sabela's work conditions in Heyns Films illumines part of the complexities Tomaselli ignores. For instance, Sabela (in Deane D. 1978: 162), argued that although his white colleagues chose the scripts for him, their choices were 'often inappropriate'- a statement that Tomaselli summarily dismisses (1989: 68). While Sabela does not explain the inappropriateness in his white colleagues' choices, it can be surmised that the interpretations of the scripts did not entirely lie with them.

Though Tomaselli recognizes that Sabela enjoyed a modicum of creative autonomy, through translation of the scripts, he stops short of seeing in this, a marginal but significant scope for independent interpretation. Sabela's command of the African cultural



WitsETD

codes and his colleagues' choices of the script defined the division of labour in the production of the film. It can be safely intimated that through his mastery of the Zulu language and familiarity with township culture, Sabela negotiated the contradictions of his and township residents' aspirations against the authority of his white colleagues. This is borne out by Gavshon's observation (1983: 15) that one of the production conditions of films aimed at black audiences is 'the extensive use of interpreters on set'. Thus, the relations of production in the making of the film, and Sabela's awareness of the cultural limitations of his colleagues, logically throw into disarray the supposed singleness of the vision of *u'Deliwe*.

As a celebrity, Sabela was marked as a modern African by virtue of being a film star. His international casting as the outlawed heroic Mandela, a cultural role outside of apartheid framing, also signalled his modernity. All these gave *u'Deliwe* its distinctiveness, as being more than yet another apartheid film. That Heyns Films wanted a black director, and more specifically Sabela, intimates on the one hand, its pursuit of township 'cultural authenticity', which under the circumstances, only a black filmmaker would muster. However, that the company also appropriated Sabela's local cultural credibility and currency is not far off the mark. Against the diet of Hollywood fare, *u'Deliwe*, a film with a local background and a local black celebrity of international standing, motivated the possibility of the accessibility of the cinematic image for black viewers.[12]

The participation of Cynthia Shange, then a popular beauty queen added colour and modern glamour to the profile of the film. Shange took the principal part of Deliwe in the film. She had won the Miss Africa South in 1972, two years before the making of *u'Deliwe*. Miss Africa South was restricted to black women while Miss South Africa was exclusive to white South Africans. Thus, the part of Deliwe dovetailed with Shange's real-life career and the racial framing of beauty pageants in South Africa. In a recent interview, Shange has referred to the resonance between Deliwe with her real life:

[12] Consider also Sabela's participation in other Heyns titles such as *Ikati e'limyama* (1975).



WitsETD

> When I was cast for the role of Deliwe, I had never acted before. But I think the role was tailormade for me. It reflected my life. Deliwe was a beauty queen who had swept the boards way back in Natal and continued the trend when she hit Johannesburg. I was also a beauty queen from Natal who hit the big time there before continuing my career in Johannesburg. The only difference is that Deliwe went off the rails and became a big headache but I was focused (Shange in *Sowetan* Timeout Supplement, 20, 02, 2009).

Shange's assumption of the role of Deliwe gave the film a measure of immediacy to the cultural politics of 'race' in South Africa. Because Shange's iconicity negated the domestication of young women, which the film seemed to encourage, she brought to *u'Deliwe* a popular currency, which was also tinged with a degree of political significance. The cultural horizon against which Shange participated was one in which local black female actors did not assume central roles in films. Her assumption of the lead role in the film stood out and extended as it did this, the transgressive-ness of *u'Deliwe*. Importantly, her participation resonated with debates on black female subjectivity, and a patriarchal anxiety over it. One particular debate took place between Gibson Kente, the renowned playwright and 'Black Sister under the Wig', a reader of *Drum* magazine. Kente criticized fashion-conscious girls and those who took a drink (*Drum,* 8 June 1975). The reader asked, 'Why in this world are we girls always criticised? Nobody seems to agree with everything we do…. Mr. Kente says that we believe more in outside appearance, I don't agree. You will find that there is more under the wig than outside. I, like my fellow sisters like fashion but can also go to town on Black Consciousness' (*Drum*, 22 June 1975). Thus, Shange's participation resonated with black female desire, which was increasingly pitted in the public debate against patriarchal discourses that arguments like Kente's represented.

Kente's argument echoes Black Consciousness thinking as exemplified by its principal exponent, 'the way they make up and so on, which tends to be a negation of their true state and in a sense a running from their colour; they use lightening creams, they use straightening devices for their hair and so on' (Biko in More 2008: 61).[13] Importantly,

[13] The African male elites' disdain for African women's use of cosmetics has a historical lineage going as far back as the 1930s. According to a recent study, 'most *Bantu World* writers disapproved of black women



WiSER

female desire makes apparent divergent views in engagements on blackness. Thus, against the radical overtones of Black Consciousness informed as they were by a masculine sensibility, *u'Deliwe* drew attention to gender as an important theme in debates on black identity.[14] The consequence of this was to destabilize the masculinist assumptions of black identity that were to be founded in the Black Consciousness philosophy.

The participation of Shange and Sabela gave content to the understandings of modernity for the film's viewers and its public. Such understandings were not simply in keeping with state hegemony, but actually allowed imaginations of black identity over and above hegemonic interests. It is through the power of such mediations, that we can see *u'Deliwe*'s ambiguities at play. The involvement of black talent in the making of the film also brings in cultural sensibilities, which enhance the ability of the film to surface every-day political logic. This makes *u'Deliwe* analogous to Jameson's analysis of commercial film, which he argues, contains

> Political content of everyday life, the political logic which is already inherent in the raw material with which the filmmaker must work: such political logic will then not manifest itself as an overt political message, nor will it transform the film into an unambiguous political statement. But it will certainly make for the emergence of profound formal contradictions to which the public cannot not be sensitive, whether or not it yet possesses the conceptual instruments to understand what those contradictions might be (Jameson 1977: 846).

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wearing cosmetics' (Thomas 2006: 477). For instance, R.R.R. Dhlomo, 'celebrated black women's educational and professional achievements, and advocated compassionate marriages. When it came to black women wearing make-up, however, Dhlomo found nothing redeemable' (2006: 477). Thomas's argument that cosmetic use was one of the most contentious issues surrounding the black modern woman because it drew attention to the phenotypic dimensions of racial distinctions, resonates with the rationale behind some Black Consciousness adherents' antipathy towards cosmetics. See Thomas L. M., 2006. The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa, *Journal of African History*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 460-490.

[14] Commenting on her experiences within Black Consciousness, a former activist Mamphele Ramphele points to the silence on gender in Black Consciousness organisations. According to her, 'gender as a political issue was not raised at all….there is no evidence to suggest that the BWF (Black Women's Federation) was concerned with the special problems women experienced as a result of sexism both in the private and public spheres' (Ramphele cited in Mangena 2008: 255). However, in a revisionist move, Oshadi Mangena has recently argued that 'while gender was not an organising principle of the Black Consciousness Movement', the movement 'tacitly endorsed gender concerns' (Mangena 2008: 255).



WITS ETD

Jameson acknowledges rightly the fact that- regardless of its 'intentions', commercial film is always already 'burdened' with significations that are ultimately politically important for its audience. *u'Deliwe* surfaces referents (the segregated landscape of the city, the allure and glamour of a black female socialite) that were open to associations and memories by viewers other than those intended by producers. These relations and associations were not inimical to the stimulation of apprehensions, however tenuous, of the racial injustices typical of apartheid urban modernity, and possibly their transcendence. Thus, caught up in its attributes as a 'medium of modernity', and its positioning as a purveyor of the antinomies of modernity embodied in the apartheid system, *u'Deliwe* is indicative of the limits that film can place on ideological manoeuvres of political organs such as the state. It is precisely because of the political dynamics at play in black people's 'experience' of the city that such constructions were necessitated. While the modernity presented in *u'Deliwe* is congruent with the changing apartheid vision, which by 1975 admitted that blacks may be urban, this does not necessarily support any argument predicated on a neat correspondence between public sentiment and state designs. The manner in which public engagement of this urbanity occurred is ultimately important in the film's enhancement of critical engagements on black identity. In further considering the film's relations to discourses of blackness, I now turn to the film's circulation.

### *Circulation*

According to Alan Girney, producer of *u'Deliwe,* the film opened in Umlazi in Durban. It was made into four major languages English, Xhosa, South Sotho and North Sotho (Private correspondence, 01, Feb 2006).[15] *u'Deliwe* advertisements, which sometimes featured posters, ran through the pages of *World* newspaper between 9, April 1975 as part of a triple bill from April 11, 14, 17 and 21 until 1, May 1975. All the advertisements were for *Eyethu* Cinema in Soweto. It appeared that whenever there was more than one film on the programme, *u'Deliwe* would be the main attraction. This is evident in the triple bill of April

[15] The validity of this claim by Girney remains in question as the only copy of *u' Deliwe* in circulation is in Zulu.



WiSETD

21, 1975, which was dubbed 'Second Great Week' featuring 'All-Black films made in South Africa': which also showed *Dingaka* (1964) and *Cry*, *the Beloved Country* (1951). According to Gavshon (1980: 15), 'most of the producers initiated their own distribution, although there are also small privately owned hiring companies. Because of the lack of cinema facilities, they are shown in church and school halls. The films are also hired by black entrepreneurs, Administration Boards, mining companies and organizations such as Inkatha'.

The showing of *u'Deliwe* in venues patronized by black people was in line with the directives of the Publication Board to make the film exclusively available for black viewers. Film censorship laws were amended in 1974, and cancelled 'race' as the basis for censorship (Tomaselli 1989: 16). However, Tomaselli (1989: 16) stated that the laws retained the 'showing of films to persons in a particular category… or at a specific place'.[16] Coupled with the use of African languages with no subtitles, the circulation of *u'Deliwe* was patterned along the lines of apartheid's racial logic and linguistic strictures.

The narrative space of the film strictly corresponded to the geography of the film's circulation. For example, a scene in which a reluctant Deliwe goes to the cinema with the hoodlum Jack illustrates the intimations of the horizons of the film's circulation. As they alight from a car of one of Jack's outlaw friends, the camera slowly tilts upwards, revealing the name 'Eyethu' emblazoned above the cinema entrance. To all intents therefore, the 'producerly text', provided a spatial template for the projected audience's intimation of its world, and produced the viewer as an urban African.[17] By 'producerly text' is meant how the producers constructed and understood the film (Andersson 2004: 15). The circulation of *u'Deliwe* in accordance with the designs of the state was reinforced by the economy of film distribution. Proprietors of cinemas and cinematic apparatuses had significant control

[16] Racial discrimination prevailed at least two years after the amendments. In 1976, cinema owners were still obligated to apply for permits to show films to blacks. See Tlholoe J., and Heyns J., and Padayachee M., 1976. Open Entertainment to All Races, *Drum*, June.

[17] *Eyethu*, the only cinema in Soweto then, served one million inhabitants. (Gavshon, *Levels of Intervention,* 20).



WitsETD

over the viewing of the films. This was due to the considerable inaccessibility of visual technology other than the cinema in South Africa.

### *Charting the Thresholds of u'Deliwe*

In the summer of 1974, *Drum* published an article, which celebrated a new development in the South African film industry in which black artists were beginning to work as senior creative artists (*Drum*: 1974, 22 October). An article appearing in the magazine that dealt with black involvement in local film was unprecedented. In the 70's, *Drum*'s attention to film was usually in relation to Hollywood films playing in the local black circuit. These reviews mostly focused on storylines and the films' entertainment value. The article highlighted the import of this new development against the historical background of their limitations as major actors in South African made films. It then gauged the success of black involvement in film through the achievements of artists like Corney Mabaso, Simon Sabela and Mandla Sibiya. 'Suddenly the film scene is becoming our scene …' the article began. This self- referential documentation of black involvement in films suggests that the few blacks in the industry were representative of the magazine's affirmation of blackness. Significantly, it celebrates their sense of ownership of the means of producing films. It also heightens 'race' as a decisive factor in the cinematic conditions of production. Therefore, the fact that the films were directed by black filmmakers was a notable aspect of its publicness. In this way, *Drum* argued that in spite of their problems, the slew of films produced in the 1970s and aimed at black people allowed for black participation in film.

Yet Mabaso, like Sabela, did not see himself as a scriptwriter and director but as an apprentice. The article ends by differentiating *u'Deliwe* and *Maxhosa* (1975), a Xhosa version of Shakespeare's Macbeth*,* in terms of language, setting and market. It states that '*u'Deliwe* is township life as we know it, dialogue in Zulu and is intended for the South African market'. *Maxhosa,* on the other hand, featured an all black cast in Xhosa dress, used English dialogue and was intended for the international market. The confident assertion of the consistency of the film with township life suggests that the writer

accepted that *u'Deliwe* was reflective of black life. The article accepted as authentic the film's representations of township life. In addition, the stress on language seems to be a marker of import in the film's rendering of 'authentic black life'.

*Drum*, it appears, invested *u'Deliwe* with significance. The accent on authenticity takes reflection away from the narrative of the film. Yet, it locates the film's import in its capacity for facilitating the pleasure of identification. Accordingly, the film's realistic 'mapping' of the quotidian: township landscape, language and character traits, established a common horizon of experiences for its audience. This experience, *Drum* suggested, was located in the contiguity of the profilmic world, with its historical referents. Consequently, the textual relaying of the film by the magazine, authenticated and celebrated *u'Deliwe*'s mediation of black experiences of modernity.

A poster for *u'Deliwe* appeared as part of an advertisement for the film in the Arts section of *The World* newspaper of May 1, 1975. The centrepiece of the advertisement features the profiles of Deliwe (Cynthia Shange) and Reverend Makhathini (Simon Sabela). Deliwe's profile advances in the forefront. In the background, Reverend Makhathini, with a priestly collar around his neck, and eyes bespeaking parental concern, stares at Deliwe admonishingly. A halo surrounds the Reverend's head, attaching saintly attributes to him. Although the object of her gaze is not clear, Deliwe is also reflective as she looks off the frame into the middle distance. The moral conscience invested in the profile of the Reverend seems to suggest a tension in moral judgment between himself and the young woman. While he appears to be a figure of saintly surveillance, Deliwe- the object of his moral admonitions- looks ahead and appears to contemplate a future free of his surveillance. Though the Reverend seems to recede behind the future-bound youth, the authority of his religious wisdom is kept intact by the halo. In this moral scheme, Deliwe's future remains a question for the viewer's consideration, but most fundamentally a problem for religious patriarchy.

WitsETD

The religious or moral tone in which the poster is organized represents the 'producerly' intent for the reading of the film. It serves as a rhetorical strategy for cultivating, in the audience, a broadly Christian approach to the film. This is congruent with the film's Christian leitmotif, which underwrites its melodramatic tone, and the narrative devices of intermittent hymns and prayers. Yet, the deep-seated anxiety in the Reverend's admonishing stare at Deliwe sharply puts across the uncertainty of his authority over her. Through a subtle but suggestive arrangement of power relations between the Reverend and Deliwe, the poster invites reflections on the justification and durability of masculine articulations of black female subjectivity. Thus, through its epitext, *u'Deliwe* inserted black female subjectivity as a discourse through which the dominant masculine definitional authority over black identity was implicitly disrupted.

Further, the recourse to the solemn authority of religion- contends, in the same poster, with the promise of secularized virtues: success, entertainment and love. The caption above the poster reads: *Umdlalo ono thando nesasasa!!!-* (a story full of love and success). Below the poster, another caption reads: *Umdlalo u'Deliwe owawukhishwe emdyeni abase-msakazweni manje osuwenzwe isithombe esiqavile se-bioscope* (The story of *u'Deliwe* taken from the radio and is now a well-known film). In bold: *u-Simon Mabunu Sabela no-Cynthia Shange kanye nabanye abomdabu abangopheta kweze zithombe umqondisi lapha u-simon mabunu sabela* (Simon Sabela and Cynthia Shange as well as professionals in the film industry).

The references to Shange and Sabela, both icons of popular culture in their own right, concretize the poster's claims to success, love and entertainment. Rhetorically addressed to the viewer as an individual with desires, these qualities deflate the weighty solemnity of the visuals. Thus, at the same time as it entrenches a moral universe for the film, as an epitext, the poster also deploys written text to lure the viewer to the aspirations and pleasures associated with modern life. This is indicative of the dual compulsion of cinema to entertain if only to engage critically the absorbed viewer. However, the attribution of

WitsETD

value to either the visual or the written text depends on the viewer of the poster. The epitextual projection of *u'Deliwe* expands its horizons as a text, and therefore its intervention in public life. This expansion means that people who might not have seen the film, including the viewers of the poster, constituted part of its public life.

### *Instituting 'Black Films' in Drum*

In the 1970s what would have earlier been regarded as subversive films, produced and directed by African Americans, hit the 'black circuit'. This in itself showed the changing patterns of censorship. Prior to this development, films like Mario Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweet Baaaadddd Ass-Song* (1971) were not allowed in black venues. A review article in *Drum* addressed itself to some of the debates around these films (1974, 22 July: 19). A brief examination of this review helps frame the magazine's subsequent attention to *u'Deliwe*. Reflecting on an earlier article that anticipated black involvement in film, the article, tellingly entitled *Split on Black Films*, circulated debates about African American films. The films cited were Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback Baadassss Song*, *Shaft*, *Sounder* (1972), *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), *Buck and the Preacher* (1972) and *Brother John* (1971). In the major caption of the article, the reader is introduced to the debate:

> The new wave of black films from the United States has sparked out a big debate in that country and in South Africa. The controversy has been more intense within the black community itself. *Drum* takes a searching look at the scene and presents a selection of comments from a number of prominent blacks involved or concerned about the black films of today and tomorrow (*Drum* 22 July 1974: 19).

Responding to optimistic observations about representations of black identity in a 1972 *Drum* article, the article posed the question of whether black actors were featured in 'intelligent roles' (*Drum* 22 July, 1974: 17). The article acknowledged the views of artists in the film industry especially in what it designated as the 'black community'. The films' morality was questioned and their explicit visualization of sexual encounters commented on. An unnamed critic characterized the films as having 'profane street language and

WISETD

almost ritual violence' (*Drum* 22 July, 1974: 19). The same critic decried the 'fixing of whites as villains or fools or both' in films like *Sweet Sweetback Baadassss Song*. On the contrary, *Sounder* garnered glowing reviews. One of these reviews described the film as 'reaching out and touching the common thread of humanity' (*Drum* 22 July, 1974: 19).

Another issue covered by the debates was the concern with the sincerity of the films to positive portrayals of black people. Some critics featured in the article felt that some of the films, 'exploited frustrations, anger and hope of blacks – notably among young people in need of black heroes- by portraying criminals as romantic figures and women as little more than sexual toys'. These films, the critics continued: 'provided mundane competencies like swiftness at using pistols and fists as solutions, especially if the problem is White' (*Drum* 22 July, 1974: 19). The films were also seen as being constrained by the persistent financial patronage of white studios and were therefore viewed as rewrites of white stories. Cecily Tyson an actor in *Sounder* opined that the question of blacks supporting 'black films' was a more crucial factor.

> I don't put those films down because they helped open the door. My concern is that we should not be given only one type of film. Give us some people with some character, some truth, and some history. […] our whole black heritage is that of struggle, pride and dignity (*Drum* 22 July, 1974: 19).

*Drum* also ran a series of observations by African American artists under the caption *Blacks look at Black movies*. In one of those observations, Gordon Parks, director of *Shaft* argued that the black youth supported *Shaft* because he was a salutary hero for them. Julius Griffin, President of the Hollywood Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People felt that the films were offering a diet of violence, murder, drugs and rape- while failing to give positive images of blacks. Jim Brown, an actor and former sportsman urged filmmakers to pursue what he called the American Dream- by approaching film as a business, making good films and dropping 'race' consciousness in the categorization of film. Actor and singer Lena Horne reckoned that she was 'yet to see

WiSETD

the definitive black movie'. Interestingly, Roy Innis, national director of the Congress of Racial Equality argued against the loss of 'psychic energies' of black youth to film 'instead of participating in meaningful political action'.

*Drum* assumed a critical identification with the above commentaries on 'black' films from the United States.[18] Their circulation in the black circuit since 1971, grounds these films within the sphere of 'black film culture' in South Africa. The attention to the representation of black identity, violence, issues of control of the cinematic means of production mirrors the challenges faced by black filmmakers in South Africa. Such challenges demonstrate the many claims to black identity, from the moral to the strategic perspectives. Some of these challenges reside in the tension between cinema as a site of engaging black identity, and the assumptions of its incongruity with 'meaningful political action'.

The magazine's reiteration of these debates within the context of a changing film culture in South Africa constituted it as an important platform for engaging black-centred films in South Africa. In giving a glimpse of arguments around black- centred films in 70's South Africa, *Drum* asserted the importance of film in the reconstruction of black identity that supplanted its colonial and apartheid imaginaries. Interestingly, this reconstruction draws important links between black identity in the United States and in South Africa. The magazine invited its readers to inhabit, through black-centred films, a global and decidedly politically resonant space on which to imagine their blackness. In the light of *Drum*'s own reconstruction of blackness in terms that eschewed its apartheid disavowal from urban modern life, the following section explores *Drum*'s take up of *u'Deliwe*. I would like to recall Steadman's observation on theatre. He shows that theatre productions at this time were the site of oppositional ideologies. Nevertheless, *Drum*, the major framing text for *u'Deliwe*, through reference to African American films worked to instate film as a site of

[18] In a brief study of *Ikati e'limyama*, Maingard makes an interesting comparison between its conventions and those of Shaft- indicating as she does this, the influence of the emergent African American aesthetic on the directorial vision of Sabela. See Maingard, *National Cinema*, 130.



WiSETD

black public discursivity, and doing so in a way that was inevitably already potentially cosmopolitan.

### *Take up of u'Deliwe in Drum*

*u'Deliwe* was popular with its township audiences. *Drum* reported that by the end of November 1975, 400 000 people had seen the film and that more were still seeing it (1976, 8 February: 28).[19] Tomaselli later wrote that two million viewers had seen the film throughout the early 80's (1989: 63). The high popularity of the film was phenomenal even by today's standards. The film's popularity can be partly ascribed to the popularity of Shange and Sabela. Further, if a study by *The Golden City Post* on films with traditional themes goes, *u'Deliwe*, it can be argued, owed its popular success to its destabilization of these themes. According to the newspaper:

> Blacks don't want traditional themes anymore. They don't like to see where they came from. (sic) They know where they are going to. (sic) They see so much ghetto life they live in it they don't want to really see it. (sic) Part of the reasons for their preferences is because of the degrading ways in which blacks have been portrayed on film (*The Post* cited in Tomaselli 1989: 68).

Some of the views expressed in the black press corroborate the above findings by *The Golden City Post*. In *The World* newspaper for instance, one reader, Jacob Dube, argued for the inclusion of black people in film production. The reader's letter is informed by a Black Consciousness sensibility:

> As a filmgoer, I always get annoyed when seeing only whites on advertisements and films. This does harm to my people who want to improve their standards. They never see their own who are successful. Instead examples come through people who breed fear, and deny them equality. These films are not educative and breed inferiority (Dube, *The World*, Feb 19, 1975).

[19]The Black Consciousness leader, Lybon Mabasa, remembers a full *Eyethu*, three or four times a week with audiences coming to watch *u'Deliwe* (Personal Correspondence 2008, 28 August).



WISER

On another level, the film's popularity stemmed from the viewers' identification with it. The intersection of setting, language, actors and familiar sounds of Jazz formed a cinematic tapestry that resonates with their 'life-world'. Therefore, the aspirational aspect found in the confluence between the use of film, then a gradually accessible technology for black people, and the participation of local black celebrities was influential. In addition, the fact that in spite of the passing of a whole decade since the broadcasting of the radio drama, the resurgence in film of the story familiar to most radio listeners was a welcome development for the urbanized audience. More so, the story resonated with ordinary concerns about the black urban family in apartheid South Africa. If *u'Deliwe* posited a narrative that was congruent with changing, unstable and contested apartheid policies, it also chimed with concerns about the social instabilities around the black family. Subject to myriad restrictions, the black family was caught up between two struggles: one familial, intimate and political, and the other political and collective.

Attention to Sabela's work came out again in a February 1976 edition of *Drum* which hailed his accomplishments as a black director in the film industry. Entitled *Five-Film Simon Finds Lots of Talent*, it was an overview of Sabela's work since *u'Deliwe*. The main caption acknowledged primarily that Sabela's success came after fifteen years as an actor working with both local and international directors. In the article, Sabela reiterated his apprenticeship: 'I'm still learning. It will be a long time before I can say I know…' (*Drum* 8 February, 1976). He hailed the acting talent that he believed the films displayed, 'one thing that I have been able to prove in this short stint as director is that blacks have a wealth of acting talent' (*Drum* 8 February, 1976).

The angles of the articles show that the film fell squarely within *Drum*'s understanding of the social and cultural aspirations of black people. The interviews of Sabela in the magazine were silent on the ideological strategies and implications of the film. However, the presence of the interviews highlights the significance of films aimed at black people in the magazine's notion of what ought to constitute black identity. Sabela commended the

WitsETD

use of African languages because they presented fewer constraints for actors: 'the problem with most black actors doing English is that they concentrate on remembering the dialogue and their acting stops being natural' (*Drum* 8 February, 1976). Interestingly, Sabela's commentaries were directed at the constraints in the institutional space of film in South Africa. Thus, the use of isiZulu was one step towards the reconfiguration of the institutional arrangements of the industry. The advantage in this gesture seemed to be that it would remove hurdles towards creative expression of black actors in film, expose their yet unseen talents, and allow for a wide range of acting styles.

However, the argument for the use of African languages in films aimed at black people had its contradictions. Ray Msengana an actor in one of Sabela's films, *Inkedama* which uses the Nguni language testified to this challenge: 'We have actually been attacked by many people who say we are propagating separate development by producing films in the blacks' languages and we cannot have any strong argument against this' (cited in *Black Review* 1975-1976: 196).[20] Msengana submitted an interesting solution to the challenge: 'The answer is in producing films with black background in English so that all blacks including Coloureds and Indians can participate together and improve the potential of the industry' (cited in *Black Review* 1975-1976: 196).

This questioning of African languages as a medium of communication in the films intimates public critical alertness to their possible cooption by the dominant apartheid ideology. It also signals the aspirations of certain sections of urban black cultural workers towards an inclusive cultural and racial sense of blackness. This sense of blackness is consistent with the inclusive understanding of blackness in Black Consciousness, which cuts across 'racial' and 'ethnic' sections of the black population, stressing a commonality based on the experience of discrimination and oppression. At this critical level, the relation of *u'Deliwe* to public engagements of black identity seems to have been constituted within

[20] See also *Daily Dispatch* of 1976, 8 August.



WISETD

the triad of language, 'race' and political vision in ways that went against Verwordean interpretations.

However, the contradiction between making films in African languages and adopting English as a *lingua franca* for countering apartheid divisions, suggests that films aimed at black people were a locus of the challenges posed by apartheid for the constructions of blackness itself. The many African languages, which were not necessarily equally intelligible to all black people, characterized black urban modernity in South Africa. Held between the linguistic challenges of performance, and alertness to the cultural-political implications of the filmic use of African languages, the public critical status of *u'Deliwe* resides in its textured register of the modern manifestations of black identity. Through the contestations over language, black-centred film constituted a terrain of struggle for black cultural autonomy.

**Take-up of *u'Deliwe* in Black Consciousness**

The film's production and its circulation in venues frequented by black people coincided with the rise of debates around blackness and whiteness. Black theatre was one site in which this was happening. According to Steadman (1985: 350), prior to '76, 'a radical social consciousness significantly affected black theatre'. He details the development of black theatre before and after 1976, demonstrating its political context and changing patterns after 1976. Steadman (1985: 339) argues that black theatre reflected the social consciousness of its authors and that it played a significant role in the radicalization of black cultural workers. In the 70's, genres such as poetry formed part of social gatherings including funerals, and rallies and they therefore reached large audiences. However, in comparative terms theatre, poetry reached relatively smaller audiences than film which reached vast audiences. The rise and proliferation of radical black theatre, and indeed verse that either subscribed to the ideology of Black Consciousness or was informed by it, characterized the period. This is explained by the fact that unlike film, which needs huge

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capital and technical expertise, theatre and literary genres such as poetry do not. As a result, these genres were accessible to political activists while film was largely inaccessible.

According to Tiyani Lybon Mabasa, co-founder of the Black Consciousness Movement and current President of the Socialist Party of Azania, the Black Consciousness Movement welcomed *u'Deliwe*. He submitted that 'although there was no depth to them, movies such as *u'Deliwe* were okay for their time' (Personal Correspondence, 2008, 28 August). Mabasa also observed that black people were used to films which were made from the perspective of white filmmakers, and as such *u'Deliwe* was in the eyes of black people, a refreshing film because it was different.[21] In addition, Mabasa notes the importance of *u'Deliwe* in terms of its linguistic shift from English to Zulu, a tendency that in his view, appealed to black people's cultural sensibilities. Mabasa's comments are indicative of the film's oblique but constructive relations with blackness *a la* Black Consciousness philosophy. It is important that *u'Deliwe* conveyed a cinematic optimism for black modernity, regardless of its level of engagement with the politically charged debates about blackness in the 1970s. Therefore, in its relations with Black Consciousness philosophy, the film harboured a latent but potentially forceful space for engagement with blackness as articulated by the Black Consciousness movement. Not only does this show the possible critical status of subsidy films, but also the conditions within which its critical potency may be enhanced.

## Spaces of Engagements

In terms of spaces of engagements available to black people, *Drum* is in relation to film, evidently dominant. In its foregrounding of the journalistic tendency that was geared towards the social status of blacks, and representation of black identity on film, it played a

[21] Incidentally, Terry Tselane, Chief Executive Officer of the Gauteng Film Office, recently confessed that of all films that he watched as a young boy, *u'Deliwe* left a lasting impression on him. Interestingly, his interviewer noted the irony of Tselane's embrace of *u'Deliwe* because it was "an apartheid creation". See the interview online at:
< http://www.gautengfilm.org.za/live/content.php > (accessed August 29 2008).



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significant role. Other than *Drum*, the Black Consciousness forum in the form of *Black Review* also proved to be an important space of engagement for blacks. It was a more politically oriented space than *Drum*. This made possible, the engagement of subsidy films or films made for blacks, from decidedly politicized perspectives. Such perspectives spoke directly to the social and political implications of films to the anti-apartheid struggle. However, through the example of *u'Deliwe*, it is evident that whatever engagements of black-centred films took place within such spaces; these were not significantly in relation to organizational programmes. They were however, characterized by preoccupations with the meaning of blackness in the context of anti-apartheid politics. Judging by its popularity, the relative lack of textual treatment of *u'Deliwe* in the 1970s did not mean that it did not have a rich public life. The paucity of the non-textual sources in the 70's and 80's suggests that the extent and nature of the public life of the film remains an open question. However, it also signals that the limits of the film's publicness are attributable to the political configuration of apartheid.

### *Conclusions*

My discussion has surfaced critical engagements at play in the publicness of *u'Deliwe*. It has shown at various levels, the critical impulse in the publicness of the film in the seventies and eighties. Works by expert protagonists, directly or indirectly- Gavshon, and Tomaselli and more recently Paleker- engaged with its ideological implications. Yet many people embraced the film, disrupting as they did this, the assumption in the readings that the film was mere propaganda. The film's popularity, which was made possible by the iconic statuses of Sabela and Shange, and its visual and aural reconstruction of black urban experiences, suggests that it succeeded in eliciting black people's identification with it. It is possible to read in this identification a modicum of popular but critical regard of the film, in particular its importance for the social imagination of black urban identity as politically charged. In this regard, the popular press in the form of *Drum* magazine played a big role in adapting the film as a meaningful object to the social and political struggle for the definitional authority over blackness. The publicness of the film also constitutes critical



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engagements at the epitextual level. The poster of *u'Deliwe* instituted visual provocations with regard to the relations between black female subjectivity and gendered, particularly masculine, articulations of black identity.

The example of *u'Deliwe* shows that films aimed at black audiences that emerged from state propaganda machinery can effect forms of critical engagements that focus on their significance as meaningful articles and not on their demerits as state ideological tools. Importantly, the cultural and political context of its circulation, appropriation and engagement, in which the exclusion of black people from cinematic culture was routine, also made possible the film's importance in public discourses on blackness at the time. Accordingly, the film related to blackness in terms of lending a cinematic license to its modernity, a calculated move by the apartheid propaganda apparatus, but one that was not necessarily within its control. This made possible ever more public critical apprehensions of blackness, in relation not only to the state, but also to gender, and generational divides. Thus, its significance occurred not only at the level of its disruption of Verwoerdian-inspired notions of blackness as rural, but also in making possible, continuous engagement of the very modernity its producers wished to instate for black people.

However, both the textual reach of the film and its capacity to animate engagements was limited by the social, political and economic context in which it was circulating. Its contribution to public ideas was at best surfaced by the social consciousness underwriting part of the popular[22] black press during apartheid. At the same time, the popularity of the

[22]My use of the concept of the popular is derived from Hall's work. He embeds the 'popular' historically within traditions of working class struggle and social positioning. 'Popular culture' according to this thinking, is the ground on which meanings and their transformations are worked. It is a process that relates to the production of culture within a stratified society. These practices evade, resist, turn and appropriate mechanisms of power. However, these efforts are far from homogenous. They are necessarily contradictory, slippery and fragmented because of the ever-present contingencies of social positioning. See Hall S., 1981. Notes on Deconstructing the Popular In *People's History and Socialist Theory*, London: Routledge. 221-239. See also Fiske J., 1990. Popular Narrative and Commercial Television, *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture and Media Studies,* No. 23. (May) 133-147.



WiSER

film and the relative disregard of it by contemporary scholars and the popular press such as *Drum*, institute a telling ambiguity about its 'agency' in public life. Therefore, the extent to which it was engaged as an instance of the constitution of black identity in the popular press signals a limited but meaningful relation of the film to the discourses of blackness in the 1970s.

Evidently, and in contrast to *Come Back, Africa*, the film's publicness was solicited by state actors in collaboration with black cultural icons. On one level, this shows that by the 1970s the public role of film in public engagements was characterized by the inclusion and not exclusion of black publics. Even in these circumstances, which admitted that blacks were modern and could work as senior filmmakers, the state or its cultural agencies organized these publics around the idea of cinema or film as a form of moral instruction regarding black urbanity. Yet, the example of *u'Deliwe* shows that the visual credibility of black images on film screens, coupled with black South Africans' experiential burdens of apartheid, disrupted, and even destabilized any 'policeable' notion of black cinematic publicness. It is precisely because of this combination of factors that early black-centred films were able to effect critical apprehensions of black modernity against the state's tutelage, however benevolent it may have claimed to be.

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