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

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Abstract

This report is concerned with analysing the cinematic representations of the 'township space' and its articulation of black masculinity in two post apartheid South African films – *Wooden Camera* directed by Ntshaveni Wa Luruli and *Tsotsi* directed by Gavin Hood. I argue that the 'township space' has become a fetishised cinematic trope in post-apartheid South African filmmaking. Cinematic representation's of the space of the township articulates the performance of black identity associated with criminality, excessive violence and deviancy relegating the black experience to one of 'otherness'. In this report I argue that the 'Cinematic Township' predetermines a black identity that appears to be shot through a colonial lens, or from an 'outsider's point-of-view'. This space developed on the fringes of major cities was developed - through Afrikaner Nationalist Ideologies - as a 'port' into major cities. The township was constructed through a process of 'othering' and is often represented as the manageable part of modernity for 'black identity'. Cinematically there appears to be a 'fixing' or 'freezing' of an authentic black experience within the 'township space' that essentialises black identity and the black experience. Apart from analysing the cinematic representations of the 'township space' and the manner in which space determines sexuality and identity, this report speaks to issues of representation and who can claim the rights to representation in post-apartheid South Africa (Thiong'o, 2000 and Axel, 1999). The South African filmmaking landscape is unique because of the interesting mix of 'white' and 'black' filmmakers. This raises questions about 'Racialised Africanness' and what are the implications for 'African whiteness'? These are important issues in relation to the South African post-apartheid body politic and the role of the filmmaker in post-apartheid South African cinema. In this paper I suggest that the cinematic township is representative of the fetishisation of the 'township space' in the imagination and representations of post-apartheid filmmakers. The 'township space' has transcended its political memory and appears to be invested with nostalgia and myth-making.