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Close-Up: South African Cinema

Traversing the Cinemascape of Contemporary South Africa: A Peripatetic Journey[1]

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Abstract

This article offers a series of observations, reflections, descriptions and opinions as stopping points on a tour of the multifaceted cinemascape of South Africa. It addresses how discourses of cinema in South Africa conflate the development of a distinctive South African cinema with the development of a robust film industry—concealing the structural barriers to entry, the development of indigenous aesthetics, and domestic audience development. It maps the emergence of several nodes of film production and consumption for non-cinema platforms as well as several subnational "mini-industries" characterized by ethnolinguistic markers of appeal. The author warns that the sole use of a national cinema lens to look at cinema in South Africa blinds us to both the politics of identity in postapartheid South Africa as well as the variety of film-related activities that constitute film culture, arguing that film scholars would be better served by adopting a polycentric approach when attempting to map the cinemascape in contemporary South Africa.

Christian Metz once argued that what is referred to globally as cinema "is in reality, a vast and complex sociocultural phenomenon, a sort of *total social fact*"[2] (italics in original). Metz goes on to characterize "cinema" thus:

> It includes, as is well known, important economic and financial elements. It is … a "multidimensional" phenomenon which, if taken as a whole, does not lend itself to any rigorous and unified study, but only to a heteroclite collection of observations involving multiple and diverse points of view.[3]

It is this sense of the term cinema that shapes my discussion here; cinema is approached as a nonhierarchical and "heteroclite collection" of observations, reflections, descriptions and opinions as stopping points on a tour of the multifaceted cinemascape of South Africa. I use the portmanteau term

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cinemascape to describe the terrain (landscape) of film-related activities and concerns (cinema) to encompass the ways in which films navigate the structures and pathways of society and the infrastructures of film production, distribution, exhibition and consumption. It includes the ways in which a society thinks and talks about films and their perceived functions, including the production of film criticism and film scholarship, and how audiences are imagined by filmmakers and film exhibitors and marketers. It also includes the myriad ways in which audiences consume and talk about films, and how corporate and commercial imperatives intersect with government policies and regulations with regard to film industries and film consumption.

It is inevitable that in the process of wandering through a cinemascape one will privilege certain locations and geographies of production, consumption and discourse over others. The cinemascape is too diverse even to identify, much less sojourn at, all possible stops, or to do so for equally long. What this discussion offers is the peripatetic journey of a cinematic scholar-tourist. I linger at some points and cast a quick glance at others, but all are worthy of an extended stay.

A National Cinema or a Film Industry?

The first stopover on this tour is a reflection on the discourses around the concept, existence and development of cinema in South Africa. I wish to focus here on two features of such discourses, circulating within sometimes separate, sometimes interlocking, spheres: firstly, within the discourses of scholarship, concerns about the development of a national cinema and, secondly, the frequent conflation of South African cinema with the South African film industry within journalistic and trade discourses. Both risk blinding us to the plethora of film-related activities that occupy various sites within our relatively small film market, skewing our perspectives on what constitutes cinema and film culture in South Africa.

Discourses by filmmakers as well as film scholars and critics regarding cinema in South Africa are over-determined by the overarching framework of national cinema. Both in terms of filmmaking and film scholarship, there is an ongoing concern with the relationship between cinema and the nation or the nation-state.[4] This nationcentric perspective has been both understandable and productive in the immediate postapartheid period as the country began developing a new identity as a democratic nation. It continues to elicit questions and discussion about the use of cinema to promote a sense of national identity, the need for a "national cinema" (and what would constitute the proper criteria for such a thing), the role of the nation-state in supporting and developing film production, distribution,

exhibition, audience development, etc., and whether state institutions, policies and regulations that affect cinema encourage or hinder the emergence of a distinctive South African cinematic aesthetic.

Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen distinguish between two understandings of cinema: cinema as an industry and cinema as "a cluster of cultural strategies."[5] The concept of a national cinema, I would argue, is underpinned by political and economic agendas, which mobilize cultural elements as markers of national distinctiveness. As such, the pursuit of a national cinema can become a useful means of celebrating both the unity and diversity of local filmmaking. However, as in some other national contexts, and especially in the case of English-speaking countries struggling in the shadow of Hollywood hegemony both within and beyond their own borders, the response by nation-states is to marshal a discourse of national cinema encouraging the identification of a series of markers of national identity intended to create a national brand. Such visual and aural markers of distinctiveness include discourses of authenticity, erasures of intra-national differences, exoticization, and invocations of a coherent and mythological past, free of contradictions. In a *Sunday Times* opinion piece, film critic Barry Ronge argued that our films need to proclaim their South African identity, citing the example of *Yesterday* (dir. Darrell Roodt, 2004), as the kind of film that "screams" its South Africanness.

Although various filmmakers have gone on to make a number of films that have distinctively South African settings or themes, the most prolific and commercially successful South African filmmaker has undoubtedly been Leon Schuster. Despite its box office popularity, Leon Schuster's corpus is rarely included in scholarly discussions despite "screaming" the South Africanness of the films. As blogger, Daniel Harris notes[6]:

> Every two years, to the dismay of the rest of the film industry, Leon Schuster's comedies out-gross (no pun intended) most of the Hollywood films released in the same year. In 2010, *Schuks Tshabalala's Guide to S.A.* grossed $5,148, 841 (R41 Million). *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse* was a distant second with $3,744,343.

Despite his popularity and his now considerable corpus, the work of Schuster (whose 2012 film *Mad Buddies* became the first South African film to be acquired by Disney's Touchstone Pictures) has received very little scholarly attention, except for Tsepo Mamatu's *Laughing at Blackness* (2010). Mamatu explores images of blackness in two of Schuster's films, arguing that demeaning blackness in the interests of commercial viability follows a tradition in South African cinema established by apartheid-era filmmaker Jamie Uys, whose *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980) was an international success. Melissa Steyn's analysis of Schuster's *Panic Mechanic* (1996) argues that the

film reflects the deep sense of disorientation of white South Africans to the political transformation of the country upon the dissolution of apartheid. She observes that its "in-your-face" candid camera format performs a therapeutic function allowing (white) South Africans to laugh at themselves to relieve the stress of their profound panic about black majority rule.

The NFVF: Our Cinematic Highway?

For some filmmakers in South Africa, successful filmmaking means subscribing to the "Schuster formula." For others, the establishment of the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) should offer filmmakers the freedom and opportunities to experiment, and to develop a diversity of styles and genres in order to reach different segments of the film audience. The NFVF has supported the development and production of hundreds of feature films and documentaries since its establishment, conducted research on audience development, provides scholarships for film production training and education, and offers screenwriting workshop programs. However, for many years, the NFVF has been subjected to criticism for its highly prescriptive film-funding model. Such criticisms are now finally being recognized. At the 2017 Durban International Film Festival, the Foundation's CEO, Zama Mkosi, observed that "we can't ignore the recent criticism of our funding model," going on to announce a series of roadshows to engage in "a two-way conversation" with local filmmakers.[7]

For many filmmakers, the NFVF's scriptwriting models are also too rigid and formulaic. Some commentators have accused the Foundation's SEDIBA screenwriting program of having "scuppered creativity in cinema in South Africa."[8] There is no doubt that narrowly conceptualized models of funding and screenwriting imported from other film industries (and especially Hollywood) limit the possibilities of South African filmmakers developing fresh new textual and marketing strategies through innovation and experimentation. Inevitable failures, but also possible successes, are necessary if South Africa wishes to develop a distinctive cinematic identity or, in the interest of diversity, several cinematic identities).

In the quest for a distinctive brand image, we need to be careful that we do not fall into the trap of prescribing a set of criteria that results in the establishment of the filmic equivalent of an SABS standard, one necessary to obtain a stamp of "national quality." The framing of discourses within a national cinema paradigm runs the risk of imposing constraints on the institutional potential of cinema in South Africa—a country whose filmmakers, as noted later in this paper, may choose to target subcultures and subnational communities within the country. Additionally, South Africa can pride itself

as a magnet for filmmakers from many parts of the world, but especially from Africa, and some of the films they make do not fall neatly into a national category.[9] Filmmaking in South African should be approached as a practice that expresses the creativity and experiences of South Africans in all our diversity, which includes our participation in, and exposure to, all kinds of social, cultural, and media products originating beyond our shores, as well as the film-related production and consumption practices of non-nationals living within our borders.

Linked to a preoccupation with the national is the conflation of South African cinema with the South African film industry. While we can conclude that the formal film industry in South Africa is robust, it is difficult to ascertain whether various governmental structures have any clearly articulated policy regarding the development of South African cinema, by which I mean the development of aesthetics that are distinctively South African.[10] The website of the NFVF is useful for prospective filmmakers, production companies, etc., but clearly privileges the development of the industry with little attention paid to the question of developing a South African cinema, a cinema which I argue should embrace a diversity of perspectives, genres and thematic concerns. Discourses of cinema in South Africa are preoccupied with developing the industry, and perhaps assume that a "uniquely South African cinema" will simply emerge out of a successful film industry. Barnard and Tuomi point out that "film is not only an economic activity, but also an expression of cultural identity." Such a distinction, while useful, does not capture the complex and complicated ways in which the economic and cultural aspects of filmmaking are always enmeshed, regardless of whether the framework within which it operates falls under First, Second, or Third Cinema. In other words, acknowledging that the film industry in South Africa has matured does not allow us to conclude that we now have something called a South African cinema; the latter does not constitute a necessary outcome of the former.

More than two decades after the birth of South Africa as a democratic nation, the time has come to depart from a nationcentric approach. Film scholars would be better served by adopting a polycentric approach when attempting to map the cinemascape in contemporary South Africa.[11] The sole use of a national cinema lens to look at cinema in South Africa today blinds us to the variety of film-related activities that have sprung up in many parts of our cinematic landscape. Instead, it directs our attention to things such as national cinema attendance figures and trends, or to box office receipts, or to whether a particular film reflects the diversity of South Africa, the role and/or policies of the NFVF, and so on. This means that we then fail to notice how films and film-related products and activities occupy circuits outside the mainstream channels of production and consumption.

As a result, national cinema-centered discourses despair at the challenges faced by those wishing to expand the South African cinema-going audience. In doing so, they ignore, or remaining only marginally aware of, the fact that film consumption flourishes in numerous non-cinema outlets—from long-distance buses and taxis, to small hairdressing outlets specializing in time-consuming services such as braiding, extensions, and straightening, or on the numerous television channels available to those with subscription satellite services.

In his book on informal film distribution, Ramon Lobato begins his discussion by asking, "Where is contemporary cinema located, and how is it accessed?" He goes on to argue that when looking at cinema in a global context, "formal theatrical exhibition is no longer the epicentre of cinema culture."[12] Thus, the next stop in this journey aims to track down film audiences.

The Search for Audiences: DVDs vs. Big Screen

How can South African filmmakers compete with Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood? A study by the NFVF aimed at understanding the attitudes of students and young people (the sixteen to twenty age group) to viewing local films, as well as film consumption trends among this age group in general, noted that a majority of youth audiences watched films on DVD, including low-budget, locally produced films which are produced for straight-to-DVD release. These included films such as the *Madluphuthu* (dir. Sello Twala), and *Bhuti Madlisa* (dir. Sello Twala) films.[13] Another study commissioned by the Foundation states, somewhat patronizingly, that declining cinema attendance "has been exacerbated by the relative growth in home DVD and piracy markets and the proliferation of inferior products that the audience accepts as good quality."[14] Anecdotal evidence—and much audience research still needs to be done in the South Africa context—suggests that audiences are frequently quite aware that the technical quality of many of the films they watch on DVD is inferior, often even making jokes about visible microphones, poor sound quality and unstable or poor framing.

That the lack of high production values does not deter potential audiences if other factors—such as the ease and low cost of access, and/or stories that resonate because of their acknowledgement of specific audiences and their cultural competencies—are not deterrents is evidenced in the emergence of several different streams of straight-to-DVD filmmaking practices. These include low-budget films made in Venda, township comedies such as those produced by Sello "Chicco" Twala, horror films produced in IsiZulu, and Kumaran Naidu's films that deal with Indian South African themes and settings.

The market share for South African film was only 6 percent in 2015–2016, and only five local films grossed over R5 million.[15] In addition to the low profile of South African films on the country's cinema screens, there is a virtually complete absence of films from the most prolific film industry in Africa, Nigeria's Nollywood. Such figures run the risk of being interpreted as a failure by Nollywood to penetrate the South African market, but actually reflect the fact that Nollywood's video-film industry simply sidesteps the grip of the oligopoly that controls the formal film distribution/exhibition sector in South Africa. Nollywood films are abundant in the big urban centers such as Johannesburg with its sizable population of African immigrants, who first introduced the films to South African audiences. The films and, to a lesser extent video films from other African countries such as Ghana, are available at many internet cafes, small supermarkets, pavement kiosks, flea markets and hair salons. They are also screened on several channels on subscription television services.

Sho't Left!: Low-Budget Video Films

The success of the Nollywood model has generated several low-budget film production initiatives across the continent, and South Africa is no exception. These initiatives exist within a non-formal/part-formal/informal economy of film production, circulation and consumption that includes a messy, piracy-ridden circuit of filmic entertainment.[16] They are integrated to varying degrees with those that operate within established or formal film-related institutions. One example of this is what the Gauteng Film Commission has labeled "Twalawood."[17]

In the early 2000s the already successful musician and music producer Sello "Chicco" Twala was inspired by the popularity of Nollywood films among South Africa's urban and township residents to produce his own low-budget comedy video films. Stating in an interview that he wanted to make films in local languages, such as isiXhosa, SePedi, and isiZulu, and that he wanted "to compete with the Nigerian market."[18]

Twala's films *Moruti wa Tsotsi* and the *Madluphutu* series were quite successful, and with each additional film his distribution outlets have increased. Thus, a marketing strategy that utilized South Africa's ubiquitous street vendors—from whom one can buy anything from sweets to sunglasses, DVDs to pineapples—soon expanded to more formal retail outlets such as Reliable Music or Jet Stores. Twala's films have subsequently been shown on television, with English subtitles, reflecting the more diverse audience that television generates.

A decade later Twala's production company, the Sello Twala Movie Company, is producing films funded by the NFVF, the GFC (Gauteng

Film Commission) and the IDC (Industrial Development Corporation) "in line with GFC's priority of promoting appreciation of local content in indigenous languages."[19] Thus, Twala's films productions have traversed the boundaries of market/Market by, in many ways, maintaining its status in both.[20]

Similarly, amateur filmmakers identified what they saw as a need for films in the TshiVenda language that reflected the VhaVenda ethnic group and their culture. Although the SABC screens a television soap opera, *Muvhango*, that is set in both Venda (in the Limpopo Province) and Johannesburg, the desire to see films about their own lives motivated the emergence of low-budget filmmaking, in TshiVenda. Now labelled Vendawood, the films are made for release straight to DVD. In 2005, Khathutshelo Mamphodo released his first film, *Tshovhilingana*, a comedy about the trials of a polygamous man who is unemployed. Mamphodo made numerous sequels using the same characters, while IT consultant, Tshidino Ndou, is a labelled a "weekend filmmaker" because he works in Pretoria, "but every weekend he sets off for his home village Tshakhuma to work on his latest film."[21]

While such "grassroots film production" activities are often celebrated for their entrepreneurial creativity and presumed democratization of film/video production, the phenomenon has also elicited caveats about the lack of critical distance between producer and consumer. Mistry and Ellapen argue:

> The omission of a critical distance between the audiences and filmmakers-producers … suggest[s] reasons for the lack of reflexivity in content that arises from the dissolution of the more formal (institutional) relationship between content, producers, and consumers … [and] perpetuate meanings and cultural constructs that do not necessarily enable a political agenda for social change.[22]

This caveat pits two notions of the relationship between cinema and democracy against each other. The first approaches film as a tool for mobilizing political consciousness in the interest of advancing democracy (essentially Third Cinema). In the other, the democratic project is one of access to production and acknowledgment of the tastes and preferences of those audiences that feel marginalized by more mainstream films. This latter category of audience exercises its democratic right not to watch the films that they perceive as not catering to their needs. Such needs may be linguistic, practical (ease of consumption, i.e., watching in their own preferred spaces rather than travelling to cinemas), and/or financial (cinema attendance is too expensive for large swathes of the population). Nor do they take for granted the elitist

notion that filmmakers know best what should be the political concerns of their audiences.

Returning Home: The Big Screen on the Small Screen

The other major medium of film access and consumption for most people in South Africa is television broadcasting. Television channels in South Africa remain a key source of film exposure for many South Africans. For those who can afford it, the subscription-based satellite networks, such as DSTV, provide several "bouquets" and channels that screen not only Hollywood and South African films but also Bollywood, Nollywood and other African films.

Bubblegum Movies and Lokshin Bioskop

The emergence of what has come to be known as "Bubblegum Movies" may have had its roots in Nollywood's video films that abound in all parts of South Africa's urban areas, townships and on dedicated pay-TV channels such as Africa Magic, Mzansi Magic and Mzansi Wethu. Bubblegum movies are homegrown, low-budget films that focus on contemporary black South African life. A rich mine of potential stories, life for South Africa's majority black population is replete with fascinating stories, or interesting perspectives on seemingly ordinary stories. The term Bubblegum Movies has been adopted by the television channel Mzansi Magic as a brand, which it describes as "original, self-contained and highly entertaining stories inspired by the realities and living conditions of ordinary black South Africans."[23] The channel's commissioning brief specifies its requirements for the brand: a strong comedy element; set in urban or periurban areas; local settings but universal themes; targeted to a family/youth audience (aged twenty-five to thirty-five years) in the upper and lower middle class (LSM 4–6) with a language ratio of 35 percent English and 65 percent African indigenous languages. While some sectors of the industry resist this low-budget, populist model, it appears to be thriving in various incarnations within the South African cinemascape.

"Lokshin Bioskop" is a series of locally made low-budget feature films screened on Mzansi Magic, a channel on the DSTV subscription service, while "eKasi Stories" airs on the free channel, eTV. The films focus on local township stories and have established an audience despite their small budgets and low production values.[24] The notion of an "imperfect cinema"—as espoused by Julio García Espinosa in his provocative theoretical essay, "Por un cine imperfecto"—argued against the dangers of attempting to imitate the elaborate production values of the First World's mainstream cinemas.[25]

García Espinosa's essay represented a political stance in support of the use of cinema as a weapon for social and cultural transformation.

Some would argue that the kinds of stories encountered in the Lokshin Bioskop series are more suited to soap operas—focusing as they often do on interpersonal relationships, intrigues, the use of witchcraft or *muti*, greed, corruption, polygamy, adultery, and similar themes, and are in fact not the kind of cinema Espinosa had in mind. Nevertheless, the series has given aspiring filmmakers an opportunity to hone their filmmaking skills and to develop an audience for local films, while also providing employment to young drama and screenwriting graduates. Some of these films have developed enough of an audience to inspire filmmakers to extend the films into series, such as comedian David Kau's *Taxi Ride*.[26] The films also deal with themes and concerns that are relevant to many South Africans, such as polygamy (*The Right*), stokvels (*The Society*) and loan sharks (*Mamu and Ngema*), and are in indigenous languages with English subtitles.

An increasing trend within the country, especially among the under-thirties, is "cord cutting": the downloading of online films and television shows from various sources on the Internet, both legal and illegal, in preference to watching them on television sets. This development has not been studied or documented despite anecdotal evidence that this form of consumption is on the rise; it constitutes a worthy area of further scholarship.

Across the Indian Ocean: Bollywood and Indian South African filmmaking

I have discussed elsewhere the mainstreaming of Bollywood in South Africa, and the key role played by the public broadcaster, the SABC, in this process when it began broadcasting Bollywood and other Indian films in 2004.[27] One aspect of Bollywood that it may be useful to reflect upon in the South African context is the cinephilia of Indian audiences so frequently commented upon by scholars of Bollywood, or of Indian cinema more generally.[28] Priya Jaikumar, for example, cites this Indian cinephilia as one of the reasons why "Hollywood's transnational muscle remains unable to dislodge India's film industry on its home turf."[29] Bollywood remains largely true to its underpinnings in Indian aesthetics (especially the *navarasas*), which valorize emotion and spectacle—most noticeably through song-and-dance sequences, but also through glamorous costumes, exotic foreign and domestic locations, and stars' bodies, male and female. Perhaps, South African films will develop a distinctive "flava" once filmmakers have struck a chord in their local audiences rather than pandering to the tastes of international elites—but at the

same time we need to embrace our location within global circuits of cultural and economic production. To quote Mahatma Gandhi:

> I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.[30]

Also visible within our cinemascape are the beginnings of a South African Indian filmmaking practice, some of which is influenced by Bollywood. The first film focusing on South African Indian characters was Kumaran Naidu's domestic drama, *Broken Promises* (2005), and its sequels, *Broken Promises 2* (2007) and *Broken Promises 3* (2011). He has also directed and produced, through his production company, Vollywood Films, *Run for Your Life* (2007) and its sequel *The Revenge of Bush Knife Bobby* (2009), and a horror film entitled *The House Knows* (2011), among others.[31] As with Sello Twala, Naidu's filmmaking and distribution practices are shaped by the exigencies of convenience and opportunity, rather than by adherence to what is considered acceptable, or a respect for the formal opportunities offered by the Market. As such, both filmmakers cross the boundaries of formal and informal business practices with an ease that has become the trademark of this mode of production.

Naidu's films are located within contemporary urban Indian South African locales, but show promoter Pinky Mothie's forays into film production reflect more of a Bollywood influence. Her first production, with her daughter as screenwriter and her son in the starring role, was *Hip Hop 2 Bollywood* (2007). Shot in Durban and Mumbai, the film tells the tale of a South African Indian dancer/student from Durban who travels to Mumbai where he falls in love.[32] Mothie's second production was *Bollywood Campus* (2009). The cast is entirely South African and the dialogue is in English and Hindi.[33]

Husband-and-wife team Naresh Veeran (director) and Raeesa Mohamed (writer, actress) released the romantic comedy *For Better, for Worse* in 2010. The film showcases the city of Durban and its large South African Indian community. Masood Boomgard's horror spoof *Attack of the Indian Werewolf* was also released in 2010. In recent years several films have also been produced by non–South African filmmakers about Indian nationals in South Africa (dir. Brad Glass, *Florida Road*, 2009) or about South African Indian-African relations (dir. Avie Luthra, *Lucky*, 2011), or by South African non-Indian filmmakers about Indians in South Africa (dir. Craig Freimond, *Material*, 2012).

Stories acknowledging, or set against, the history of indentured Indian labor in South Africa are a surprisingly neglected aspect of South African

Indian filmmaking. Other than the documentary *African Indian Odyssey* (dir. Hina Saiyada, 2010), which marked the 150th anniversary of the arrival of indentured Indian laborers in South Africa, the only other film exploring this significant aspect of Indian South African history is the fictional feature film *White Gold* (dir. Jayan Moodley, 2010). *White Gold* charts the journey of a group of young Indian men lured to South Africa by the false promises of British colonialists only to be confronted by the harsh reality of indentured labor. Fast-forward 150 years to a new, postapartheid (and third) wave of immigration from the Indian subcontinent to Jordache A. Ellapen's *cane/cain* (2011). This short film makes the sugarcane that engulfed the lives of the indentured laborers an integral symbol of the encounter between the now fourth-, fifth- and sixth-generation settled/indigenous Indian South African and the new Indian/Pakistani immigrant to South Africa.[34] Courting controversy in depicting homosexual intimacy between two men who are virtual strangers, the film utilizes sugarcane to link their differential histories of migration.

Na die movies toe: Afrikaans-Language Films

The popularity of Leon Schuster's films in South Africa has spawned a series of comedies, including many low-budget Afrikaans-language films, such as *Poena Is Koning* (dir. Willie Esterhuizen, 2007), *Bakgat!* (dir. Henk Pretorius, 2008) and *Bakgat II!* (dir. Henk Pretorius, 2010), *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat* (dir. Willie Esterhuizen, 2008), *Karate Kallie* (dir. Wimpie van der Merwe,, 2009), *Stoute Boudjies* (dir. Willie Esterhuizen, 2010), and *Ek Joke Net* (dir. Stefan Nieuwoudt, 2011). Their box office success, according to Worsdale, "has angered many traditionalists who argue that these movies, like Leon Schuster's comedies, are neglecting the tradition of Afrikaans art films that flourished in the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s."[35] However, in 1998 Katinka Heyns's *Paljas* received very positive reviews. This tradition of more artistic approaches to cinema appears to have seen a recent revival, with the release of films such as *Die Wonderwerker* / *The Miracle Worker* (dir. Katinka Heyns, 2012), *Skoonheid* / *Beauty* (dir. Oliver Hermanus, 2011), *Jakhalsdans* /*Jackal Dance* (dir. Darrell Roodt, 2010), *Verraaiers* / *Traitors* (dir. Paul Eilers, 2013), *Die Laaste Tango* / *The Last Tango* (dir. Deon Meyer, 2013), and *Dis Ek, Anna* / *It's Me, Anna* (dir. Sara Blecher, 2015). Among these are films that are poignant, sometimes brooding, sometimes shocking—films that are willing to expose the dark underbelly of lives masked by Afrikaner conservatism, or which revisit historical figures and events. Some, such as *Triomf* / *Triumph* (dir. Michael Raeburn, 2008) and *Skoonheid* / *Beauty*, rupture the veneer of sexual conservatism within the Afrikaans community, dealing with incest

and homosexuality "on the down low." *Paljas*, *Fanie se Trein*, *Jakhalsdans*, and *Die Laaste Tango* are set in the Karoo; the latter two are adaptations of stories by writer Deon Meyer. Released to mixed reviews, the films are clearly not produced with an eye on potential international appeal.

Together with films such as Sara Blecher's *Dis Ek, Anna*, they reveal a serious, contemplative strand of filmmaking within Afrikaans cinema in what one film reviewer has described as an "antidote to the romping romcom that the Afrikaans industry so heartily embraces all the way to the box office."[36] Both the commercial success of Afrikaans-language films and the preponderance of comedies is reflected in the 2015 top ten South African films at the box office.[37] The top seven were Afrikaans language films, which included three dramas on the very different subjects of farm murders, a missing journalist, and sexual abuse and revenge (as in *Dis Ek, Anna*), as well as four comedies: three romcom/teen comedies and, predictably, Leon Schuster's *Schuks! Pay Back the Money*, which topped the local box office in 2015. Afrikaans-language films appear to remain a profitable segment of the box office circuit for local films due to the substantial support they continue to receive from Afrikaans-speaking audiences and their robust cinema-going culture.

Conclusion

Although the criticisms against the NFVF suggest that what is crowded out by the NFVF's risk-aversion policy is a tradition of serious, political and artistic filmmaking that may attract only a small, cine-literate or intellectual audience, a number of well-crafted films dealing with topics of relevance have been financed, at least in part, by the NFVF. They include films such as *Izulu Lami / My Secret Sky* (dir. Madoda Ncayiyana, 2008), *Otelo Burning* (dir. Sara Blecher, 2011), *Elelwani* (dir. Ntshaveni wa Luruli, 2012), and more recently, *Inxeba / The Wound* (dir.John Trengove, 2017). Comedies such as *Keeping Up with the Kandasamys* (dir. Jayan Moodley, 2017) and romance dramas/comedies *Happiness Is a Four-Letter Word* (dir. Thabang Moleya, 2016), *Vir Altyd / For Always* (dir. Jaco Smit, 2016), and *Mrs Right Guy* (dir. Adze Ugah, 2016) were also produced by the NFVF.

Despite the controversy it has generated, *Inxeba / The Wound* has been selected by the NFVF as South Africa's submission to the 2018 Academy Awards (Oscars) in the category of Best Foreign Language Film. Condemnations by, among others, traditional leaders resulted from the film's narrative revolving around male homosexual relationships and conflicts, and especially due to its setting in a traditional Xhosa initiation school. Other films that have addressed the disturbing connections between sexuality and violence include

Skoonheid / *Beauty*, *Noem My Skollie* / *Call Me Thief* (dir. Daryne Joshua, 2016) and the first film to be "banned" in postapartheid South Africa, *Of Good Report* (dir. Jahmil X. T. Qubeka, 2013). Slated to open the 2013 Durban International Film Festival, the film was refused classification by the Film and Publications Board (FPB) for its inclusion of a scene depicting a sexual encounter between a high school teacher and one of his sixteen-year-old pupils. Although par for the course under the apartheid regime, the banning of a film after 1994 came as a shock to festival viewers, and generated outrage and immediate condemnation of the FPB. Intended to draw attention to a rampant social problem in South Africa, the film was subsequently reclassified and permitted screening at the festival just prior to its closing.

As in most parts of the world, high-quality, serious filmmaking that appeals only to a narrow demographic exists side-by-side with films produced for broad entertainment-oriented appeal, so it is disturbing to note the condescension displayed toward South African audiences by some filmmakers, such as Oliver Hermanus. Hermanus has been quoted as referring to the South African audience (as if there is *one* such thing) as "kind of Down Syndrome."[38]

However, the popular appeal of low-budget, slapstick comedies in the South African filmic landscape does requires analysis. Perhaps their appeal is driven by what Njabulo Ndebele meant when he stated in a keynote address in London in 1984 that "everything in South Africa has been mind-bogglingly spectacular." Although he was not speaking specifically about films, one cannot help but wonder whether much of South African cinema—dismissed by some as silly, crude, vulgar and escapist—is "spectacular" in the sense that Ndebele describes when he states (of South African literature):

> The spectacular documents; it indicts implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge. It is the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness. Nothing beyond this can be expected of it.[39]

In watching some of the low-budget films, it becomes quite apparent that too few reflect an attempt to use the film medium in any but the most instrumentalist manner to roll out a series of plot events; in other words, there is still very little evidence of experimentation with the medium itself, or of nuanced characterizations, or moral ambiguity. Nevertheless, while the argument that the popular "small" films targeted to specific ethnolinguistic audiences, as well as the bubblegum movies and township comedies, encourage

political passivity has some validity, it does presuppose that more serious films succeed in "decolonizing the mind" and/or driving citizen-audiences to political action—a questionable assumption. Premised on frequently uncritical presumptions about how films are consumed, they rely on long-discredited notions of direct media effects. Audience research may help provide insights into how highly localized filmic texts are received and how different audiences engage with their themes, representations and narratives. Research into "soap talk" and the social contexts of viewing media texts may help shed light on the ways in which viewers engage in condemnations and celebrations of characters' actions, or in derision or appreciation of special effects, simultaneous acceptance and mocking of poor technical quality or acting, and social and genre plausibility.

Film scholars should, I argue, also revisit the functions served by the inclusion of supernatural elements such as the use of *muti*, or stories about *tokoloshes*, rather than engage in easy condemnations that reflect a rather elitist perception of the audiences of such films as dupes or easily fobbed off with poor-quality films. However, we cannot also simply retreat into an uncritical valorization of video films as heralding a new era of democratization in film production and consumption. The phenomenon, in terms of practices of production and consumption, as well as analysis of the films, requires further research for insights into this aspect of our film culture as sites of popular cultural expression.

We also need to be wary of imposing a Third Cinema framework of expectations on what is unabashedly a First Cinema, thereby demanding of a low-budget filmmaking practice, openly driven by commercial imperatives, the noble (but not necessarily desired by the participants) goal of using the medium of film as a tool in the struggle for social justice and democracy. Paradoxically, an insistence on a Third Cinema agenda for films is itself undemocratic. It asks filmmakers to adhere to preexisting and narrowly defined criteria for their filmmaking practices instead of allowing a diversity of stylistic, thematic and ideological concerns to emerge of their own accord. It also asks of their audiences that their pleasures should only emerge from forms of consumption that others deem acceptable *for* them. Low-budget video films may not explicitly undertake political/postcolonial/postapartheid projects such as revisioning colonialist histories or nation-building, but embedded in their narratives are traces of their histories from their own perspectives, and their cosmologies—sometimes engaged with a degree of self-reflexivity and even parody.

The excursions undertaken within the South African cinemascape have identified a number of "fields of power, energy, and struggle."[40] Not all of these have been discussed because of space and time constraints, and some have been mentioned only briefly. These include the production,

distribution and exhibition of short films and documentaries, the provincial film commissions, audience development initiatives including township cinemas and digital exhibition, art-house and independent film exhibition, film festivals and festival culture, the diplomatic initiatives of foreign embassies and the use of films as soft power, animation, women in film production, religious films, and film scholarship and training, among others. These and other omissions do not constitute any judgments regarding their importance, only a pragmatic decision to limit the scope of this discussion; all are worthy of further scholarship.

A polycentric lens has been utilized as a more productive approach to "ways of seeing" than a nation-focused approach, helping us understand the multiplicity of developments relating to cinema and film culture in South Africa. The perspective such a polycentric approach gives us of the South African cinemascape suggests that we have much to be encouraged by, while also acknowledging there are spaces that some filmmakers are still struggling to carve out. Filmmakers who are attempting to develop new aesthetic frameworks that permit the telling of stories without recourse to easily digestible and familiar conventions are indeed fighting a difficult battle to develop audiences for their films. Nevertheless, despite the many challenges and pessimistic commentaries that persist in our discourses about cinema in South Africa, the cinemascape that appears in view is a multifaceted one, sometimes conflicted, but also dynamic and vibrant. In terms of our film production, we are still faced with myriad contradictions, which sometimes generate a productive confusion, but such contradictions have also begun to shape a cinemascape that is as diverse as the country's landscape. Focusing only on specific aspects of this cinemascape may elicit despair or hope; developing a polycentric lens, however, suggests that a measure of optimism is not unwarranted.

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Notes

1. I thank the anonymous reviewer who described an earlier version of this article as "peripatetic" for inspiring this title. I also thank Thomas Riest for his assistance in

tracking down hard-to-find production information for many of the films mentioned in this article.

2. Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema*, trans. D. J. Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 9.

3. Ibid.

4. Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela, eds. *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003); Jacqueline Maingard, *South African National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Astrid Treffry-Goatley, "The Representation and Mediation of a National Identity in the Production of Post-Apartheid South African Cinema" (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 2010).

5. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen, *Theorising National Cinema* (London: BFI, 2006), 2.

6. Unfortunately, this blog is no longer accessible.

7. See Sydney Morweng, "NFVF to Revisit Their Funding Model," *Soweto Life*, July 18, 2017. http://sowetolifemag.co.za/nfvf-to-revisit-their-funding-model/.

8. See Roger Young, "A car chase too far: What SA film can't learn from Hollywood," *Mail & Guardian*, May 24, 2013.

9. For example, Akin Omotoso's *God Is African* (2003) is directed by a Nigerian-born filmmaker living in South Africa; the film deals with the interactions of Nigerian student activists at a South African university. Considered quintessentially South African, *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (dir. Jamie Uys, 1980) is actually set in Botswana. To which country does Jean Pierre Bekolo's *Aristotle's Plot*—which stars several well-known South African actors—belong?

10. I use "formal" here in accordance with Ramon Lobato's definition of "formality" as those elements of "industries [which] are regulated, measured, and governed by state and corporate institutions." He describes the informal domain as that which "operates outside this sphere, or in partial articulation with it … informal film commerce is, in a very important sense, a global norm rather than an exception or deviation" (2).

11. My understanding of polycentrism is informed by Shohat and Stam's use of the term "polycentric" to mean a perspective in which the emphasis "is not on spatial or primary points of origin, but on fields of power, energy, and struggle." Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 48. It should be noted, however, that Shohat and Stam were speaking of polycentric multiculturalism rather than film-related activities and discourses.

12. Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.

13. NFVF—National Film & Video Foundation, *Audience Development Research Report*, March 2010, http://nfvf.co.za/sites/default/files/docs/audience_development_research_report.pdf.

14. NFVF—National Film & Video Foundation, *10 Years Review of the South African Film and Video Industry*, 2010, http://www.nfvf.co.za/sites/default/files/10_years_review_170mm_x_145mm.pdf.

15. See NFVF—National Film & Video Foundation, *Annual Report 2015*.

16. Ster-Kinekor and Nu Metro dominate the distribution/exhibition sector.

17. See Gauteng Film Commission. March 2009. "Stepping into Chicco's World," http://www.gautengfilm.org.za/news/news-archive/2009/march-2009/393-stepping-into-chiccos-world.

18. Ibid.

19. See Gauteng Film Commission, GFC's second quarter film projects, 28 September 2012, http://www.gautengfilm.org.za/news/news-archive/2012/sep-2012/1032-gfcs-second-quarter-film-projects.

20. Jyoti Mistry and Jordache A. Ellapen, "Nollywood's Transportability: The Politics and Economics of Video Films as Cultural Products," *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry*, ed. Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013). Mistry and Ellapen offer a clear dichotomy with regard to distribution in which "Market" refers to the formal circuits of distribution, and "market" to those circuits in which copyright and formal trading structures are often subverted or circumvented.

21. See "Vendawood Shaking Up SA's Film Industry," *The Witness*, April 26, 2009. 'http://www.witness.co.za/index.php?showcontent&global%5B_id%5D=22149'global%5B_id%5D=22149.

22. Mistry and Ellapen, "Nollywood's Transportability," 48.

23. Refer to Mzansi Magic. 2012. *Bubblegum Features* (Commissioning Brief). http://www.mnetcorporate.co.za/ContentImages/MNetCorporate/Documents/PDF/Bubblegum%20Movies%20(25%20Stand-Alone%20Movies).pdf. Accessed 11 May 2013.

24. The terms "lokshin" and "kasi" are colloquial terms referring to the black townships created during the apartheid era; both terms are derived from the apartheid-era reference to the townships as "the location" or "lokasie" (in Afrikaans).

25. Julio García Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema," in *Twenty-Five Years of the New Latin American Cinema*, ed., Michael Chanan (London: BFI Books, 1983).

26. Munya Vomo, "Lokshin Bioskop Gamble Pays Off," *IOL Tonight*, February 4, 2013, http://www.iol.co.za/tonight/tv-radio/lokshin-bioskop-gamble-pays-off-1.1463635.

27. Haseenah Ebrahim, "From 'Ghetto' to Mainstream: Bollywood in South Africa," *scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*, 13, no. 2 (2008): 63–76.

28. See Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions* (London: British Film Institute, 2002); and Priya Jaikumar, "Bollywood Spectaculars," *World Literature Today* 77, nos. 3–4 (2003): 24–30. India has several regional film industries of which Bollywood is just one, albeit hegemonic within the context of Indian cinemas. "Bollywood" as used here refers to the popular Hindi-language cinema based in Mumbai.

29. Jaikumar, "Bollywood Spectaculars," 1.

30. Mahatma Gandhi, (*Young India*, 1-6-1921, p. 170) Mahatma Gandhi, Young India, June 1, 1921. From the series, *Great Ideas of Eastern Man*. The quote can be found at https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/i-do-not-want-my-house-be-walled-all-sides-and-my-windows-be-stuffed-i-want-culture-all.

31. See Z. Vadi, "*The House Knows*—Local Movie," *Looklocal Lenasia*, 2011, http://www.looklocal.co.za/looklocal/content/en/lenasia/lenasia-news-general?oid=4868699&sn=Detail&pid=1171268&The-House-Knows---local-movie.

32. See D. Thangavelo, "Word's Out: Hip Hop's Going Bangra," *IOLTechnology.co.za*, January 11, 2007, http://www.ioltechnology.co.za/article_page.php?iArticleId=3621243.

33. Suren Pillay, "SA Show Promoter's Second Bollywood Film Set to Hit Screen," *The Times*, March 22, 2009.

34. I am referring here to the first wave as the initial arrival of some Indians to the Cape as slaves from 1684 to 1838, the second wave as the better-known arrival of Indians as indentured laborers or as free/passenger Indians from 1860 to 1914, and the third wave as the post-apartheid immigration of South Asians to South Africa.

35. Andrew Worsdale, "Hanswors, Humour & the Highveld," *Gauteng Film Commission South Africa* (2009), http://www.gautengfilm.org.za/news/news-archive/2009/october-2009/576-hansworshumor-a-the-highveld.

36. Charl Blignaut, "Dis ek, Anna," *Channel 24*, October 27, 2015, http://www.channel24.co.za/Movies/Reviews/Dis-ek-Anna-20151015.

37. See NFVF–National Film & Video Foundation. *Annual Report 2015*. Johannesburg: NFVF.

38. Roger Young, "The Audience Is Down Syndrome," *Mahala*, 2011, http://www.mahala.co.za/culture/the-audience-is-down-syndrome.

39. Njabulo Ndebele, "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa," in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006), 41.

40. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 48.