

Unseeing Constructed Imagery:

Recognizing the Destabilization of Deviances within Black South African Storylines in Telenovelas; A Manifesto for Revolutionizing the South African Cinemascape.

By

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To my Mother, Father & Brother, I love you, always.

We've done it! Next step is PhD (I promise).

All my love,
Wandi.

Abstract

The gaze and the voice are important for thinkers working alternatively and thinking independently from Hollywood (Diawara, 2010 in Mxokozeli, 2021: 61).

Unseeing Constructed Imagery: Recognizing the Destabilization of Deviances within Black South African Storylines in Telenovelas; A Manifesto for Revolutionizing the South African Cinemascape.

In this study, I examine how Black South African telenovelas contribute to the propagation of distorted images that reinforce myths about Black South Africans. I also explore the potential for creating telenovelas that deviate from this trend by opening up to ‘everyday’ narratives. This study proposes that there is no monolithic Black existence, it advocates for expanding the regime of representation and a platforming of deviant or alternative Blackness. Through the methodology of narrative theory (Barthes, 1974; Todorov, 1971), representation (Hall, 1997), and postcolonial theory (hooks, 1992; Hall, 1997) I carried out an analysis of telenovelas within the South African Cinemascape (Ebrahim, 2018; Masilela, 2000; Selekane, 2019; Antonov 2022). Latent to the accumulative purpose of building an argument for theatricality (Ukala, 2001; Dlhomo, 1977; Popat & Palmer, 2005; Elam, 2002; Weber, 2004) and queering methodologies (McDonald, 1999).

A short film was produced, as a presentation for the inception of a possible solution to the problem of destabilizing Black South African storylines. The film, as a form knowledge production, engages with a manifesto that advocates for deviance and loving Blackness. In the film produced, the aim is to expand an avenue for Black South African narratives that are deviant, holistic, everyday, magical, and authentic to permeate the South African Cinemascape.

In conclusion, the study proposes that embracing a manifesto centred on rebellion, deviance, queering methodologies, and theatricality could offer a pathway for visible progress in producing narratives aimed at middle-class Black people in South Africa, while maintaining profitability. This approach invites reflection on how such methodologies could inspire change, without necessarily requiring universal adoption, but rather encouraging diverse, impactful contributions to the South African Cinemascape.

Prologue

Unseeing Constructed Imagery: Recognizing the Destabilization of Deviances within Black South African Storylines in Telenovelas; A Manifesto for Revolutionizing the South African Cinemascape.

As a South African artist I work with narratives that have the capacity to:

- Foster conversation between those who engaged with the work.
- Stimulate critical thinking by presenting diverse viewpoints.
- Inspire introspection and self-reflection in the viewer.
- Catalyze a shift in the mindset of those who engage with it, creating a ripple effect that influences the societies and communities they belong to.

I am a multifaceted artist who has the capacity to work across various roles which has led to my work being inherently interdisciplinary, blending film and theatre.

The conception of my research is rooted in a personal discomfort and disagreement with the content portrayed in South African soap operas and telenovelas. What began as a dislike for the storytelling approach and the narratives themselves evolved into a realization that the diverse, ‘everyday’ experiences of Black South Africans were largely absent. When such representations do appear, they often seem to reinforce negative or include harmful imagery.

The praxis of this study draws from my *know-how*¹ in theatre to foster an interdisciplinary dialogue between the two mediums of film and theatre. In tracing the historicity of my research, I believe it is important to note that I, as a researcher, hold the conviction that content produced by artists -in any discipline - has the capacity to profoundly impact communities, shape their behavior, and even influence their capacity to dream. Drawing from my theatre background, I see theatre as a powerful tool for intervention, capable of translating creative ideas from process to product, ultimately shaping the representation of Black life within the South African context.

1 Nelson’s (2013:38) ‘Practice as research in the arts: principles, protocols, pedagogies, resistances’ outlines Practice as Research (PaR) as rooted in three ideas: ‘know-how’ (embodied knowledge from lived experience), ‘know- what’ (awareness of what works or not) and ‘know-that’ (critical distance for objective reflection).

My Manifesto

“to love Blackness is dangerous in a white supremacist culture” (hooks 1992: 9)

To choose love, there must be an advocacy for a healthy model of agency and self-actualization, one that acknowledges that when Black people truly love themselves, not in a selfish or narcissistic way, they are best equipped to love others (hooks, 2001: 50). The philosophy of love, in this context, creates a space and a platform for Black people to embrace and celebrate Blackness, while, more importantly, providing a space for everyone to love Blackness.

To become a radical and progressive Black filmmaker in contemporary South Africa, one must lead with passion, passion rooted in love! For when one loves and is deeply passionate about something, the treatment and representation that follow are bound to be positive and transformative. It is time we reimaged what Black life looks like on the greener side of things. It is time we realise the immense power we hold in a country where television viewing culture is so influential and wield that power with responsibility. No more violent, essentialised, and destructive images! No more artists bowing to colonial capitalist corporations that exploit Black minds and souls for profit! Blackness will cease to be a commodity but instead be an authentic valid reality that everyone will respect and love! We refuse to be cast and marginalised into the metaphysical waysides of life.

We push for a progressive Black South African Cinemascope that “entertains, challenges and shows us new images” (hooks 2001: 54)!

The time has come for us to recognise the necessity of reimagining and reframing Black people and the narratives surrounding them – this is not just an artistic endeavour, but an act of revolution! As film and television makers we must make a firm commitment to disruption! This disruption lies in what we look at, how we look at it, what we create, how we create it, and why we create it. All these questions align with queering methodologies, which stand to challenge dominant ideologies and practices. This process of questioning should lead to the creation of art that embodies these core values, prioritizing authenticity, intentionality, and a deep sense of purpose at its helm.

“Action! Rhythm! Emotion! Gesture! Imitation! Desires! That is what drama was before it developed into an institution for propaganda, the propagation of ideas, or for commercialized entertainment” (Dhlomo 1977: 3)

“Unless we transform images of Blackness, of Black people, our ways of looking and our ways of being seen, we cannot make radical interventions that will fundamentally alter our situation.” (hooks 1992: 7)!

My manifesto challenges the state, the importation of colonial imagery and the commodification of Blackness while questioning the ‘powers that be’ and their monopoly over image production. It calls for the embrace a radical Black subjectivity, one that breaks the monolithic Black experience and rejects the idea that all Black stories much be told in the same way. Through a Decolonial Vision, we seek to cultivate a critical consciousness in ourselves and all those who engage with our art (hooks, 1992). Theatricality, in its true form, exists in plurality. It has the power to shift and transform beyond its traditional confines.

It is this ability of theatricality to transport audiences, to blur the spatio-temporal lines and invite the viewer to vicariously participate in the narrative, that we must embrace. We aim to create a space where the audience is not only passive observers but active participants in the unfolding of the story. By integrating decolonial visions and reimagined narratives, we seek to enter the audience's subconscious, jolting them out of the colonial intoxication that has long shaped their perceptions, and guiding them towards a deep appreciation for authentic, holistic representations.

We must reclaim our narratives. We must be intentional about the stories we tell, the images we create, and the impact they have on the communities we serve. The time for passive consumption is over—this is a call for radical, conscious, and transformative filmmaking.

Let us break the cycle of violent, commodified, and essentialized portrayals of Blackness. Let us create art that honors the depth, complexity, and brilliance of Black life. Let us embrace theatricality, queering methodologies, and decolonial vision as tools for disruption and liberation.

To every filmmaker, artist, and storyteller—our responsibility is clear. We must challenge the structures that dictate our images, disrupt the narratives that confine us, and reimagine a world where Blackness is represented in all its fullness, agency, and beauty.

This is more than art. This is revolution. **Will you be part of it?**

Chapter 1: Introduction, Context and Scope of Research.

Context: The South African Cinemascape²

South Africa's Cinemascape (Ebrahim, 2018) has long been shaped by a stark Black-and-white dichotomy imposed by Apartheid - one that has been difficult to shift despite efforts to build a cohesive National Cinema (Antonov, 2022, para, 16). Within this evolving landscape, distinct cinematic identities have emerged, including:

1. Bubblegum movies, influenced by Nollywood and characterized by their accessible, high-energy storytelling.
2. Lokshin Bioskop, low-budget, made-for-television films that cater to local audiences.
3. eKasi Stories, narratives rooted in township life and culture.

These genres have been pivotal in shaping South Africa's Cinemascape and its evolving aesthetic (Ebrahim, 2018:205). However, South Africa holds significant potential for growth, one that is neither rooted in Third Cinema, with its specific implications, nor Western (Hollywood) Cinema (Antonov, 2022: para, 5). This growth is particularly crucial in the current landscape, where streaming platforms have become the dominant mode of consuming televisual content. With increased access to global and local markets, South African cinema has a unique opportunity to expand its reach, amplify authentic storytelling, and provide broader representation for its diverse demographics (Antonov, 2022: para, 11). Antonov (2022: para, 12) highlights the need to free South Africa's Cinemascape from the "tyranny of story". This calls for a creative landscape where filmmakers have the freedom to explore everyday narratives without constraint.

Masilela (2003) provides essential context for understanding the political history behind South Africa's Cinemascape, shedding light on the opaque inner workings of the industry. Masilela's (2003) delineation suggests that the white hegemonic powers of Apartheid, who controlled media during that era, still have lingering impact today. Masilela's (2003) exploration of the various movements, which were responses to Apartheid laws, helps clarify the ideologies that resistance bore. While these movements are valuable, they do not align with the aims of my research. These writings, however, helped me define my stance and build towards the creation

² Ebrahim (2018) refers to the South African Film & Television landscape as the *Cinemascape* - and highlights the ongoing concern regarding the relationship between cinema and the nation-state. This concept will be further explored in Chapter 2.

of my own manifesto – an initiative to spark a movement within the South African Cinemascape.

Through engaging with the works of Masilela (2003), Ebrahim (2018) and Antonov (2022), I have come to understand that my goal is neither the erasure nor complete destruction of the old, nor is it the establishment of an African hegemony, National Cinema or hyper focus on a particular aspect. Instead, I advocate for expanding South Africa's regime of representation, to one that embraces a holistic, 'everyday' aesthetic. I aim to achieve this by deviating from and disrupting the traditional filmic medium through the intervention of theatre. I suggest that certain elements of theatre will contribute to the development of a South African Cinemascape Language and Aesthetic, rooted in holistic, engaging, and entertaining everyday stories.

Third Cinema contextualizes the political nature of my research, acknowledging that my work inherently challenges systems and hegemonies that have maintained certain structures of power and dominance. Third Cinema aligns with the spirit of the manifesto I have created, which aims to ensure that the relationship viewers in South Africa have with their screens is one that encourages discussion and critical engagement. This understanding of Third Cinema alongside Queer Methodologies, serve as 'all access cards' enabling me to introduce Theatricality as a mode of disruption that begins to address the needs outlined in my manifesto. Meaning that Queer Methodologies as an ideology becomes a modality that serves as a hinge point that connects the two disciplines of theatre (theatricality) and film.

Analysing the South African Cinemascape, I found that the highest-rated television shows as of June 2022 were *Uzalo* (6,103,846 viewers), *Scandal* (5,152,960 viewers), and *Generations: The Legacy* (4,959,896 viewers) (YoMzansi, 14 July 2022). These shows air on SABC 1 and eTV, both free-to-air broadcasters, making them widely accessible to anyone with an aerial. In contrast, Multichoice-produced TV shows cater primarily to South Africa's middle-class audience. Their most popular telenovelas in June 2022 were *Gomora* (1,127,879 viewers), *The Queen* (752,806 viewers), and *The River* (703,778 viewers) (Broadcast Research Council of South Africa, 2016). This data highlights that DSTV (Multichoice) has significantly lower viewership than SABC, which can be attributed to demographic and economic factors. Additionally, the most-watched programs predominantly fall under the Drama, Telenovela, and

Soap Opera formats, with SABC maintaining a stronghold on Soap Operas and Multichoice focusing on shorter-form Telenovelas through platforms like Showmax and Mzansi Magic³.

In contextualizing my research, I examined the relationship between state-owned and private broadcasters and their influence on the South African Cinemascope. A clear distinction emerges between private and state-funded institutions, as their differing mandates ultimately shape their operations and audience reach

It is significant to note that MultiChoice, a major broadcasting company, was founded by NASPERS in 1985 and remains under its ownership. NASPERS, a multinational media company and one of the world's largest technology investors, also owns Media24 and has stakes in various international media and tech companies (News24, 2019; Antonov, 2022). Since before South Africa's transition to democracy, NASPERS has controlled most of the country's media distribution channels and platforms. This raises critical questions about the content and narrative tropes being produced—whether they serve a commercial agenda by catering to specific demographics with a particular calibre of storytelling. At this point I question if the capitalism upon which the multinational company thrives is directly linked to the manner in which the content is packaged i.e. Could commercialising and creating harmful imagery (in relation to black audiences) in the narratives aired by MultiChoice be directly linked to the desire of the institution to gain views which in turn yields more money ?

In 1986, NASPERS partnered with other South African publishing companies to launch the pay-TV service M-Net. The platform quickly gained success, and through its subsidiaries, MultiChoice and M-Web, M-Net expanded its operations both in South Africa and internationally throughout the 1990s (Staff Writer, 2017). Documents collected by Open Secrets revealed how NASPERS financially supported the National Party during apartheid, with the National Party holding 74,000 shares in the company in 1984. This historical connection raises concerns about how legacy power structures influence contemporary media ownership and content production in South Africa. NASPERS remains a dominant force in the country's media industry, wholly owning Media24, Takealot, and NASPERS Foundry (Staff Writer, 2017).

In 2003, NASPERS took full ownership of M-Net and its subsidiaries MultiChoice and M-Web, integrating their operations across Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. More

³ Please see Appendix A which lists the most popular Multichoice shows from 2022-2024.

recently, in April 2024, Canal+ acquired over 40% of MultiChoice and is expected to take full ownership by April 2025 (Crouth, 2024). This shift in ownership could further impact the direction of content creation and representation. With this historical context in mind, could MultiChoice—given its corporate lineage—be perpetuating a colonial regime of representation in its portrayal of Black life? To what extent do its programming choices reflect a broader agenda shaped by its financial and political ties, past and present?

In the South African Film and TV industry, the approach to content creation, the audience, and the context in which it is produced are heavily influenced by funding and broadcasting houses. Lala Tuku, the Head of Local Productions at SABC, highlighted the broadcaster's core ethos in a call for proposals issued in August 2022. She emphasized the importance of creating content that is not only locally and globally competitive but also aligned with public broadcasting values. The broadcaster aims to partner with the production industry, developing new content and expanding the reach of local productions. As Tuku stated:

Local Productions are on a mission to reinvigorate public broadcasting. We want to ensure that we ***remain relevant*** to our citizens through acquisitions of television productions that are: ***creatively inspired; cost effective; locally and globally competitive*** and carry a public broadcasting ethos. We want to be a key partner to our production industry in developing new content for our platforms as well as creating partnerships with other platforms to develop the reach of our local content. We remain committed to the growth of public sphere broadcasting that will ***entertain, educate, and inspire!*** (emphasis added).

Thus far, clear evidence shows the influence that broadcasters and funders have on the content produced as each has its own distinct ways of operating, even if there is a desire to be revolutionary (Phalakatshela, 2022, para 5). What is also clear is that the SABC has a nation-building agenda, which may have either a positive or negative impact on the kinds of narratives and representations the broadcaster creates and airs. Perhaps, to produce a certain type of content or create a 'national cinema' or 'proudly South African' identity, the industry has fallen into creating conventions that are easy to produce, but difficult to evolve from. I propose that the commercial and capitalist aspects of television may be contributing to a harmful representation of Black life. This commercial logic often drives the creation of narratives designed to 'sell,' driven by demand. Moreover, broadcasters and production houses may have become prisoners to market trends and demands, thereby fostering a sense of cultural imperialism. The consequences of this dynamic warrant further exploration.

The central concern of my research involves the narratives that pertain to Black people on television. Through my own viewership and analysis of these narratives, I have observed that

the most popular stories, such as those listed in Appendix A, often portray a version of life that seems unrealistic, inauthentic, and far removed from a truth that encompasses the multiplicity of Black identity and existence. I contend that there is a conspicuous absence of 'the everyday,' a concept that has been explored in various scholarly works. The specific study upon which my definition is based will be examined in greater detail later.

This has led to me to identify recurring narratives that include:

1. Stereotyped characters
2. Sexualized portrayal of bodies
3. Depictions of violence
4. Themes of lovelessness or fleeting experiences of love and joy.

These elements are evident in numerous shows, such as *Gomora*, *The Queen*, *The River*, and *Uzalo*, among others (see Appendix A).

South Africa is a country with 12 official languages, and within this diversity, there exists a vast array of Black South African experiences, ways of life, and expressions of identity, including gender and self-presentation. I, thus, contend that these varied experiences can provide a rich source of engaging and entertaining television content, moving beyond the stereotypical narratives that focus on crime, drugs, and violence.

Television has the power to influence the way people think and sometimes even how they behave. Given this, it remains unclear why creatives within the cinematic landscape have not yet explored the wide array of themes and experiences that characterize everyday life—beyond the conventional focus on crime narratives. One core ideology with which I align, drawn from Third Cinema, is the belief that television "has the power to foster debate" (Prasad, 2020). Consequently, reimagining Black South African storylines through the inclusion of everyday narratives should serve to provoke dialogue, rather than simply conforming to conventional, passive viewing. This call for a shift from a consumable television format suggests incorporating theatre as a potential creative avenue for introducing more dynamic, engaging content.

Deviance & The Everyday

The term 'deviant', in its denotative sense refers to the concept of 'being different from' or 'going against the norm'. In the context of this study, deviance, speaks to the act of challenging the conventional norms of television production, pushing boundaries to break away from the

status quo. The goal is to open new ways of seeing and being seen—creating, representing, and ultimately consuming narratives, especially those related to everyday Black life. This notion of deviance is framed within the framework of Queering methodologies, which are both investigative and interventionist in nature, drawing on an epistemological approach. Deviance, through the application of queering methodologies, facilitates the inclusion of theatricality, which in turn allows for the revelation of the everyday. The concept of the ‘everyday’ has been extensively explored by scholars over the centuries, with significant contributions from theorists such as Henri Lefebvre. As Bou (2015: 173) argues:

Everyday life can be represented as something utterly routinized, static and unresponsive, but at the same time provides pungent insight, startling dynamism and ceaseless creativity. Everyday life integrates a form of depth' reflexivity, which is related to the ability of human beings to adapt to new situations and surviving life challenges. At the same time, daily life implies mammoth cross-cultural and historical situation of unpredictability.

It is, therefore, pivotal that by highlighting the everyday as it pertains to Black people, there is an amplification of all aspects Black life, enabling the championing of humanity, hope and love. This process of amplification resonates deeply with the idea of the ‘everyday,’ which encompasses both the cyclical patterns of existence—nights and days, seasons and harvests, hunger and satisfaction—as well as the repetitive gestures of work and consumption. As Lefebvre and Levich (1987: 10) assert:

The everyday implies on the one hand cycles, nights and days, seasons and harvests, activity and rest, hunger and satisfaction, desire and its fulfilment, life and death, and it implies on the other hand, the repetitive gestures of work and consumption. In modern life, the repetitive gestures tend to mask and to crush the cycles. ‘The everyday’, imposes its monotony. It is the invariable constant of the variations it envelops. The days follow one after another and resemble one another, and yet-here lies the contradiction at the heart of everydayness-everything changes. But the change is programmed: obsolescence is planned. Production anticipates reproduction, production produces change in such a way as to superimpose the impression of speed onto that of monotony. Some people cry out against the acceleration of time, others cry out against stagnation. They're both right.

This direction is inspired by Antonov’s (2022: para 15) argument that the South African Cinemascape needs to “step out of mimicry into its own hallucinations, bringing them to the screen, play audio-visual manifestations of our own delirium. Which lets us dictate the parameters of our own culture”. Antonov (2022: para 15) further suggests, “let’s play in abstraction and surrealism, sink into the weird *theatricality* of life shown on screen and escape to fantasy”. This study seeks to demonstrate that the deviance inherent in the reality of the everyday aligns with theatricality, which I propose as a tool for transcending stereotypical

narratives and characters. *Theatricality*, a term that will be explicated in the second chapter, offers a creative means to break free from conventional representations and present a more nuanced, dynamic portrayal of Black life.

The Research

My research explores alternative sites of resistance to the conventions of the current South African Cinemascape, envisioning it as a hub for content creation that fosters holistic, loving and deviant representations while maintaining economic viability. Specifically, it proposes that the integration of deviance - through queering methodologies - and everyday narratives within commercial platforms could serve as a catalyst for reimagining how Black individuals, families, and communities are represented. This shift has the potential to influence the broader narrative landscape of South African television.

A notable example of this approach is *Isthunzi* (2017), a telenovela on Mzansi Magic and Showmax, which embodies deviance within the everyday while offering a reimagined storytelling framework. The series disrupts conventional portrayals through its depiction of multidimensional characters and the absence of reductive stereotypes. It presents reality from an authentic and non-exaggerated perspective, resisting colonial mimicry. This production achieves its distinctiveness, in part, through the strategic use of *theatricality*. The depiction of an affluent Black family, for instance, does not necessitate the inclusion of crime; instead, their lived experiences can be explored through narratives that embrace elements of deviance in ways that reflect the complexities of everyday life. Given its alignment with the themes of my research, *Isthunzi* (2017) will serve as my primary case study.

Representation and Theatre

A level of idealism is essential—one that mirrors the heightened awareness of reality and the systems that govern it, as embodied in theatre. Theatre demands an acute consciousness of both the reality being represented on stage and the audience's own physical and metaphysical reality. This awareness is shaped by *spatio-temporal co-presence*, the unique dynamic that frames the interaction between the audience and the performance. The challenge lies in finding ways to embed this theatrical consciousness within televisual storytelling, ensuring that it evokes a similar depth of engagement and awareness.

There is a pressing need for broader forms of representation—ones that reimagine Black South African lives and narratives while expanding the range of genres explored. *Isthunzi* (2017) exemplifies this approach, seamlessly integrating theatricality into its televisual storytelling.

My research employs the insertion of *theatricality* and queering methodologies as a catalyst for ushering in an era where loving Blackness, and representing Blackness through this lens, becomes the norm. This shift disrupts the monolithic and essentialized depictions rooted in colonial and apartheid-era imagery, making space for a more expansive and nuanced spectrum of Black representation. I position this as a foundational step toward generating a multitude of solutions for more inclusive and transformative storytelling.

Broader Scope & positionality

In the South African Cinemascope, telenovelas have become a staple, attracting a specific demographic of viewers, myself included. For this study, I have chosen to focus on the Showmax streaming platform, rather than eVOD, DSTV Stream or Netflix, as Showmax is a rapidly growing platform that appears to be a trailblazer in the creation of South African telenovelas. Its popularity and reach make it a notable and relevant case for my study. Showmax is targeted at South Africa's Black middle-to-lower-class demographic aligning with the audience I am particularly interested in examining. Audience analytics reveal that 79% of Showmax's viewers are Black African, with a gender distribution of 51.63% male and 48.73% female, primarily within the 25–34 age range (Andani Africa, 2024). Furthermore, 37% of audiences who consume televisual content on the platform earn between R0–R5000 (Andani Africa, 2024).

Showmax engages with this demographic both narratively and in terms of representation, making it a pertinent site of analysis for my research. However, I acknowledge its limitations—particularly its accessibility, which is shaped by commercial and consumer-driven factors. As a prominent public platform under the MultiChoice umbrella, Showmax occupies a dominant space in the local streaming landscape. Showmax has become a prominent public platform (as part of the broadcaster MultiChoice). It is now one of the fastest-growing SVoD streaming services in South Africa, with a 92% growth rate from a distributor's standpoint and a 53.8% buy-in rate from the audience's perspective (Andani Africa, 2024). I will critique Showmax from this standpoint because it has taken up a significant space in the South African media landscape.

I suggest that Showmax does not necessarily draw from real-life experiences but instead relies on caricature, tropes, and marketable templates, much like any commercial streaming platform. This is not the issue. The concern lies in the consequences: the psychological impact on viewers, the role models it presents, and the broader implications for representation in South African media.

Problem statement

This study will analyze specific telenovelas to highlight the lack of deviant content within the South African Cinemascope, revealing how this absence reflects the power dynamics between state-owned and privately owned organizations. The core issue lies in the dominance of mainstream storytelling within this prevalent medium, which fails to engage with everyday narratives that are reflective of diverse, real-life experiences. This gap is further exacerbated by industry trends that prioritize commercially viable content over narratives that contribute to societal well-being or growth. Additionally, statistics from the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) on the number of films and TV shows produced each year could underscore the industry's tendency to create content that does not challenge the status quo or promote meaningful cultural representation.

Mxokozeli (2021: 23) argues that the representation of post-apartheid, neoliberal ideologies in South African soap operas mirrors the Co-Option policy implemented during Apartheid. This Co-option Policy strategically incorporated select Black individuals into political, economic, and cultural systems, while maintaining white dominance. This limited participation was designed to give the illusion of inclusion but ultimately reinforced the status quo and suppressed meaningful change. In a similar vein, the contemporary media landscape may reflect this legacy by prioritizing commercially viable content that aligns with dominant ideologies, rather than promoting narratives that challenge the status quo or offer authentic, diverse representations.

This observation underscores the argument of this study, which will analyze specific telenovelas to examine the absence of deviant content within the South African Cinemascope. This absence reveals the entrenched power dynamics between state-owned and privately owned media organizations. The core issue highlighted by this study is the dominance of mainstream storytelling within this influential medium, which fails to reflect the everyday realities of diverse, real-life experiences. This gap is further compounded by industry trends that prioritize

commercially viable content over narratives that foster societal well-being or cultural growth. Furthermore, statistical data from the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) on the annual production of films and TV shows can serve to emphasize the industry's tendency to produce content that does not challenge the status quo or offer meaningful cultural representation.

Research Question

In exploring the potential for reimagining Black storytelling in the South African Cinemascape, this study aims to address the following key questions:

1. Can the introduction of deviance into the telenovela format revolutionize Black storytelling within the South African Cinemascape?
2. How can a truthful and holistic representation of Black life be created in a way that remains commercially viable?
3. What strategies can be employed to ensure such representations are positioned effectively to resonate with the target audience?

Research Aims

This study aims to explore the possibility of revolutionizing Black storytelling within the South African Cinemascape by introducing deviant narratives into the telenovela format. By doing so, it seeks to challenge the current regime of representation and propose a new direction for content creation that reflects a holistic and truthful representation of Black life.

This study seeks to expand South Africa's current regime of representation by advocating for a more holistic portrayal of Black life, grounded in an everyday aesthetic. The goal is to challenge the conventions that have shaped the existing South African Cinemascape. This will be achieved by introducing deviant narratives and disrupting the traditional filmic medium through the integration of theatrical elements.

By drawing on the unique aspects of theatre as a medium, I aim to contribute to the development of a distinct South African Cinemascape language and aesthetic—one that is rooted in authentic, engaging, and entertaining everyday stories. Through this approach, the research intends to offer a fresh perspective on representation while remaining commercially viable and appealing to the audience.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is analytical, incorporating both case study analysis and theoretical frameworks, which in turn inform the artistic creative practice (Practice-as-Research or PaR (Nelson 2013)) “PaR involves a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry” (Nelson 2013:8). The process I undertook in this study is structured in the following stages:

1. Analysis
2. Extraction
3. Building/Constructing
4. Making creative work
5. Discussion

The key components of my methodology include the following:

1. Content Analysis: The primary content under investigation is that produced on MultiChoice's online streaming platform, Showmax. I will engage in a comprehensive viewing of a diverse selection of shows, documenting my personal autoethnographic responses to the material. This approach treats artistic content as a form of research, allowing for the extraction of insights through direct engagement. Here, my analysis will centralize on narrative theory, representation, and decolonial theory within the South African Cinemascape, ultimately building towards my argument for theatricality and queering methodologies.
2. Creative Work Production: A central aspect of the methodology involves the creation of a creative work that serves as a practical exploration of the viability and potential impact of the manifesto and deviant narratives. This creative production will test the feasibility of introducing deviance as an intervention in contemporary South African media.
3. Cinematic Works as Embodied Knowledge: The analysis will draw on cinematic works as sources of embodied knowledge, examining how these representations contribute to or challenge existing narrative conventions within the South African Cinemascape.

4. Formalized Knowledge: Finally, academic texts and theoretical frameworks will be used to contextualize and frame the findings of my research, grounding the creative practice within established scholarly discourse.

The theoretical frameworks and theorists I engage with provide the language needed to analyse the case studies that support my argument regarding the representation of Black South Africans in television narratives. This study methodology is multifaceted, as the insights drawn from my theoretical engagement and case study analysis inform my creative project, an exploratory iteration of a potential solution to the problem I have identified.

To address the issues outlined in my objectives, I employ various methodologies. My research is qualitative in nature, as it involves unpacking the narratives of each telenovela and analyzing the characters within their respective story worlds. Additionally, I incorporate the reflections and experiences of collaborators involved in the practical component of my project, particularly in the process of making the film *All the Colours in One* (2024). These collaborators contribute to both the creative work and the research process itself.

A central component of my methodology is the use of queering methodologies, which are grounded in deviance. This allows me to introduce theatricality into the televisual medium, offering a new lens through which to explore storytelling. By engaging with queering methodologies, I can also incorporate scholarship from critical race theory, which helps identify and critique the colonial gaze and imagery that still permeates the media landscape. Queering methodologies are integral to both the analytical and creative aspects of my praxis, providing valuable tools for analysis and guidelines for creative production.

In terms of research philosophy, I draw on Collins' (2010) framework, which outlines three canons: Epistemology, Ontology, and Axiology. My research aligns predominantly with an Axiological philosophy, which is concerned with ideas of right and wrong/value judgments (Collins 2010). I also borrow from Epistemological principles, which are concerned with the theory of knowledge, particularly how one comes to understand the world through engagement with perspectives beyond one's own mind, and how knowledge shapes and frames worldviews. This combination allows me to examine the calibre and impact of the content being studied. Therefore, my methodology can be framed as both qualitative and axiological.

The primary focus of my research will be the Showmax streaming platform, where I will analyze a range of TV shows, including *Isthunzi* (2016)—an example of what I consider deviant or reimagined narratives. This show serves as a starting point for the type of content I

would like to see more of within the South African Cinemascape. Through my analysis, I will explore the notion of ‘imperialism’ in narrative construction and consider how theatricality, my manifesto, and representations of Black life intersect with or challenge televisual storytelling. In doing so, I aim to push against the ‘national’ agenda of South African cinema and television, which, I believe, could be seen as revolutionary.

To navigate the relationship between the theory I engage with and the practical component of my work, I frame my research within a Practice-led methodology. ‘Practice-based’ research is a broad term that refers to research focused on artistic practices, while ‘Practice-led’ research emphasizes the interconnection between theory and practice (praxis), forging a unique methodology (Borgdorff, 2006: 7).

The praxis of my research is rooted in the interplay between theory, practice, and reflection on that practice. I draw on Nelson’s (2013) *Practice as Research in the Arts* to further clarify my research process. Nelson (2013: 9) underscores the importance of ‘doing’ as an integral part of knowledge creation, alongside theoretical inquiry. This aligns with the concept of praxis, where theoretical understanding informs creative practice, and vice versa. Nelson (2013: 33) also describes Practice as Research (PaR) as research in which the practice itself serves as a key method of inquiry and as substantial evidence within the context of arts research.

Formulating structure and tools of analysis

Through my engagement with existing literature, I have endeavoured to frame and contextualize the research questions that underpin my study. This process has been instrumental in deepening my understanding of the specific issues at the heart of my research. Moving forward, I will delineate a series of primary and secondary theoretical frameworks that have significantly shaped my arguments and serve as analytical tools. These frameworks provide the necessary language to critically assess the prevailing representations within the South African Cinemascape, while also elucidating the ideologies that inform the solutions I propose. Notably, the dissertation by Mxokozeli (2021) has been a crucial resource in the development of my own analytical model, facilitating the articulation of my research design. Additionally, Selekané's (2019) exploration of local content and the emergence of the ‘ghetto fabulous’ rhetoric further enriches my analytical approach, reinforcing my concerns regarding the pervasiveness of stereotypical narratives in South African television.

Mxokozeli's (2021) dissertation, *Popular African Language Art Literatures: Cinematic Perceptions on Black African Middle-Classness in South African Television Series – A Myth or Reality?* offers a critical examination of soap operas as sites of negotiation and construction of Black African middle-class identities in post-apartheid South Africa. Central to Mxokozeli's (2021: 11) analysis is the argument that these soap opera narratives perpetuate representations of Black middle-class identity that are incongruent with the ideals of African Renaissance. These representations are deeply embedded in neoliberal ideologies and bear the vestiges of apartheid-era racialized representation. Mxokozeli (2021:19) observes that the portrayal of the Black middle class in contemporary soap operas reflects the Co-option policy of the apartheid era. This era sought to construct mainstream Black identities by emphasizing visible patterns of consumption among the Black middle class (Posel, 2010 as cited in Mxokozeli 2021:19). This policy, while ostensibly aimed at integrating Black South Africans into the socio-economic mainstream, created "distorted images [that] carry ideologies which reinforce myths" (Mxokozeli 2021: 23) a notion that underpins my critique of representation. This critique forms a foundational aspect of my research, guiding my resistance to these ideologies and shaping the categorization, or rather the framing, of potential solutions, which are articulated in the form of a manifesto, within the context of Third Cinema. Tomaselli (1989) argues that South African audiences have become acclimated to these distorted portrayals, rendering them normalised. Similarly, Strauss (1968) highlights the difficulty of recognizing the functional role of myths when one is embedded within them, underscoring the necessity of critically engaging with these myths to unveil their structural impact.

Mxokozeli (2021) examines television series as texts that are both consumed and interpreted by the Black South African middle class. Through a critical analysis of soap opera narratives, Mxokozeli interrogates their role in constructing and representing Black South African middle-class identity. The study argues that these portrayals do not align with the liberal ideals associated with the African Renaissance⁴—ideals that seek to transcend racialized modes of representation rooted in apartheid-era ideologies.

⁴ African Renaissance speaks to the "revitalization of African culture, the regeneration of African innate creativity, the rise of Pan-Africanism, and the restoration of Africa's glory" which can be attained by solutions provided by Africans (for Africans) (Adejumo-Ayibiowu 358:2025).

The key research questions Mxokozeli (2021) poses include:

- How do soap operas function as reflections of Black South African middle-class social life?
- How do soap opera narratives contribute to the ways in which the Black African middle class is imagined?

Mxokozeli's (2021) dissertation is situated within the fields of media studies and linguistics. This is particularly relevant to my research which lies at the intersection of Film, Television & Theatre. My engagement with this dissertation will focus on extracting theoretical insights that facilitate the analysis of soap opera texts, which I will then apply to my own methodological framework. The theoretical perspectives and references within Mxokozeli's (2021) study will serve as a foundation for deepening and strengthening my research.

Marx (2007, as cited in Mxokozeli 2021: 57) asserts that if narratives are understood as carriers of meaning that have been systematically constructed, then television can be seen as a medium that communicates ideologies capable of influencing viewers. This statement aligns with my perspective on the influential role of television and art to shape audience perceptions. Through the process of subjective consumption, meaning is created and internalized, either consciously or subconsciously.

Black film theory and Third Cinema, as discussed in Mxokozeli (2021), function as discourses that challenge Hollywood's dominant narratives. Diawara (2010, as cited in Mxokozeli 2021: 61) emphasizes the importance of reclaiming both gaze and voice for scholars and filmmakers working outside Hollywood's ideological framework.

To analyse soap opera narratives, Mxokozeli (2021) adopts visual analysis as the primary methodological approach. Visual analysis is "the key to understanding how images have been formed" (Banks, 2001, as cited in Mxokozeli, 2021: 65). Mxokozeli (2021) notes that one's ability to interpret images is shaped by personal knowledge and experience. The study further argues that visual analysis is not only concerned with the production of images but also with how they are consumed. In this framework, images and visual art function as texts to be read and interpreted by audiences.

The research is situated within a social constructionist paradigm, which posits that "society and circumstances in the world are not inadvertent (accidental) but are constructed therefore, the reality is constructed through mutual interpretations relative to cultural contexts" (Mxokozeli

2021: 67). Textual analysis of visual works, therefore, allows for an exploration of how meaning is produced in popular culture. This approach necessitates an understanding of the historical and political contexts in which visual texts are created, as well as their impact on the representation of the Black South African middle class.

To conduct the analysis, Mxokozeli (2021) employs a combination of semiology; the study of signs and symbols; and semiotics; the study of how sign systems operate and produce meaning. The research methodology consists of the following analytical components:

- Character analysis
- Narrative analysis
- Semiotic analysis
- Episode analysis
- Thematic analysis

The analytical process includes:

- Watch all selected content and taking detailed notes
- Analysing the notes by examining specific episodes as signifiers of the entire seasons and their narrative arcs
- Providing synopses of key shots and interpreting their significance

While I draw from Mxokozeli's (2021) model, I acknowledge that fully adopting this method would position my research within media studies rather than film and television studies. Whereas my research is an intersection and an overlap between film, television, theatre and media studies.

Therefore, my analysis will focus on:

1. Examining the narrative and its representation of Blackness
2. Identifying tropes and their connections to colonial imagery
3. Exploring queering methodologies as a means for theatrical expression

This approach will help establish patterns and themes, ultimately addressing the core research question: "What do these telenovelas reveal about Black South African middle-class identity?" (Mxokozeli 2021: 70). To investigate this, I will conduct a visual and textual analysis of key episodes from selected telenovelas, choosing those that best encapsulate my research inquiry.

Mxokozeli (2021) contextualizes each analysed visual text by exploring its historical, political, and ideological background. Additionally, the research draws comparisons between the representation of Blackness in South African soap operas and depictions of Black people in global cinema—such as Argentinian, African American, and French film industries. In so doing, I draw attention to the historicity of representation of the black body on a global scale thus highlighting the potency behind the need for my manifesto as a modality.

Similarly, my study will analyse how Black South African protagonists are portrayed in telenovelas, with attention to the narratives, ideologies, and representational strategies they embody. However, before engaging in this analysis, I will first review scholarly perspectives on similar media representations.

Mxokozeli's (2021) dissertation has helped me articulate a structured process for my own analysis. Beyond its methodological insights, the study has provided further evidence supporting my concerns regarding representation, the Black body, and the historical legacy of colonization and apartheid in shaping (mis)representations of Blackness.

In the case studies analysed by Mxokozeli (2021), the dominant myth centres on the negative representation of the Black South African middle class. My study will extend this line of inquiry by critically examining the depiction of Blackness in contemporary telenovelas, considering both their ideological underpinnings and the broader socio-historical context in which they are produced.

From autoethnography to collaborative ethnography

Autobiography is a process in which the researcher "retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011: 275) related to a specific subject, without having directly lived through them. During this process, I may consult texts, articles, and interviews to aid in recalling particular experiences. This can lead to the discovery of epiphanies that may also become part of the narrative (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011:275).

In contrast, ethnography allows the researcher to study a culture, its practices, beliefs, and customs, providing outsiders with an insider's perspective. The researcher becomes a participant-observer, witnessing and engaging with the culture firsthand, and may also interview cultural members. "However, in addition to telling about experiences, autoethnographers often are required by social science publishing conventions to analyse these experience (Ellis, Adams & Brochner 2011: 276)".

Autoethnographers draw upon personal experience to illustrate aspects of cultural experience, thereby making the characteristics of a culture accessible to both insiders and outsiders. Achieving this may require comparing and contrasting personal experiences with existing research (Ronai, 1995, 1996), conducting interviews with cultural members (Foster, 2006; Marvasti, 2006; Tillmann Healy, 2001), and/or examining relevant cultural artifacts (Boylorn, 2008; Denzin, 2006, in Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011: 276).

Autoethnography is inherently reflexive, positioning the researcher within the study, meaning the author is both the subject and the researcher (Coffey, 2002, as cited in Lapadat, 2017). In conducting my analysis of case studies, I fully embraced the methodology of autoethnography. However, upon involving collaborators in the filmmaking process, from pre- to post-production, I recognized that their autoethnographic responses to the process of implementing the research manifesto would enhance the validity of the study. This collaborative input would also address potential ethical gaps, providing a degree of distance for me as the researcher, and allowing the findings to transcend my personal perspective. This distance facilitates the broader engagement of other artists, enabling them to interact with and interpret the results of this study.

Incorporating the accounts and feedback of my collaborators—crew and cast—adds depth to the data and allows for a more comprehensive analysis when evaluating the impact of the research manifesto in practice. This process helps us move closer to answering the central question: *Is it possible to revolutionise or change the way Black South African storylines are depicted in the South African Cinemascope through the introduction of deviance?*

For instance, in Lapadat's article titled "*Ethics in Autoethnography and Collaborative Autoethnography*," a methodological approach that aligns with my methodology is highlighted (Lapadat 2017). Davies and Gannon (2006:592), who worked with and against memory work, developed the research strategy of "collective biography". This strategy involved a group of researchers working together on a specific topic and drawing on their own relevant memories. Through the shared work of telling, listening, and writing, they gradually moved beyond clichés and typical interpretations of the subject matter, resulting in written memories become "an embodied sense of what happened" (Davies & Gannon, 2006: 3).

It is the inclusion of collaborators that enables me to gather a diverse set of responses, moving away from confirmation bias toward a more eclectic understanding of how the manifesto either succeeded or failed in production. This diversity not only enriches the current study but also

opens a broader discourse for future researcher-artists interested in carrying the manifesto forward.

The qualitative methodologies I am engaging in are autoethnography and collaborative ethnography. The autoethnography I employ unfolds throughout the research process, from the analysis of case studies to reflecting on insights and discoveries arising from the production process, as well as the feedback from the collaborators. Collaborative ethnography comes into play as I integrate the perspectives and feedback from these collaborators, ensuring a more comprehensive and diverse understanding of the research findings.

The various modalities of ethnography I engage with include autobiography, narrative ethnography, reflexive interviews/reflexive ethnography. Narrative ethnography represents the intersection of text analysis and the study of cultural groups through the lens of the ethnographer, ultimately forming a narrative (Tedlock, 1991, as cited in Ellis, Adams & Brochner, 2011). I employ this approach by synthesizing data from interviews, my autoethnographic reflections on the process of conducting the practical component, and the results of my case study analysis. This allows me to create a comprehensive understanding of the research's impact. Together, these elements provide a nuanced perspective, enabling both insiders and outsiders to engage with and gain a deeper understanding of the research.

The reflexivity of the interviews I conducted provides a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of the collaborators involved in the practical component. This reflexive approach also allows me, as the researcher, to explore the moral dimensions of the study, particularly given my strong beliefs about the transformative impact of storytelling on those who engage with it. Understanding the effect on the hearts and minds of the collaborators is essential, as it strengthens the argument I am positing. Contributions such as "personal motivations for doing a project, knowledge of the topics discussed, etc." (Ellis, 2004, as cited in Ellis, Adams & Brochner 2011: 278) are integral to this aspect of ethnography enriching the narrative constructed by the research. Ultimately, my methodological approach to ethnography and autoethnography is both collaborative and reflexive. Through gathering responses at every stage of the research process, the study itself is strengthened and validated.

Queering methodologies

McDonald (2017: 130) defines queer theory as "a broad, interdisciplinary body of thought that disrupts taken-for-granted assumptions about the world by subjecting all knowledge about

social life to critical interrogation”. Queer theory embraces a commitment to disrupting binaries, deconstructing categories, and critiquing normalizing processes that constrain agency and repress difference (Butler, 2004; Jagose, 1996; Parker, 2002; Warner, 1999; Wiegman and Wilson, 2005, as cited in McDonald 2017).

The lens of queer theory provides a non-hegemonic, non-foundationalist approach to knowledge, asserting that knowledge is inseparable from human perception and engagement. It challenges the notion of objective truth, emphasizing that knowledge cannot exist outside of these subjective experiences. As such, queer theory “examines the ways in which knowledge claims are related to values, power, and politics (Amis & Silk, 2008 in McDonald 2017: 132)”. Queer theory acknowledges that knowledge is “contextual and co-constructed” (McDonald 2017: 132). It enables the disruption of conventional norms and dominant approaches, allowing for the “challenge [of] widely accepted grand narratives” (McDonald 2017: 132).

A key theorist in Queer Theory is Judith Butler, who argues that societal categories such as “man” and “woman” are not inherent but socially constructed. She suggests that these categories exist only because they are repeatedly performed or enacted, and their seeming stability is the result of gendered acts becoming ritualized and normalized over time (Butler, 1990: 131). I draw a parallel between this process and the establishment of tropes within the South African Cinemascope in the decades since democracy. These tropes have become unquestioned norms, monumentalized as ‘the way things should be represented’. By adopting a queer lens, I aim to resist, challenge, and interrogate this trend.

In line with Butler's (1990) argument that gender is fluid and must be “disrupted and resisted through subversive performance”:132), I argue that the representation of Blackness, Black identity, and Black bodies should similarly be challenged through subversive performance. My approach seeks to resist the conventional narratives that dominate the South African Cinemascope, using theatricality to disrupt how Black people are portrayed. Additionally, I introduce the concept of deviance; resisting established tropes and narrative structures; through the insertion of reimagined stories that offer alternative perspectives.

The question at the heart of my research, in relation to Queer Theory, becomes: What are the binaries within the South African Cinemascope, and how am I engaging in disruption and subversion to challenge these binaries while opening up new discourse? The binaries I identify are the tropes and norms that dominate the Cinemascope, and the methods I use to challenge

them are Deviance and Theatricality, both of which embrace an interdisciplinary approach. The discourse I advocate for is the broader, more nuanced representation of Black people, beyond the colonial and fetishised tropes that often define them. As Sedgwick (2008: 22, as cited in McDonald, 2017: 32) suggests, “people are different from each other,” and the key to embracing this difference lies in bell hooks' concept of love, which serves as the narrative baseline for my creative work (short film). Like Sedgwick (1990), I also recognize that the forging of group identity often plays a crucial role in advancing political action.

Key methodologies applied in Queer Theory (Browne & Nash, 2010; Parker, 2002; Rumens, 2016, as cited in McDonald 2017: 134)

1. Deconstructing identity categories and social constructs without reifying them
2. Disrupting binaries and resist grand narratives
3. Questioning normative practices and openly challenging dominant approaches
4. Opening up taken-for-granted assumptions

In my practical component, I aim to apply all four key methodologies through the construction, representation, and framing of characters and the narrative. The narrative itself focused on familial love that is not tainted by violence or stereotypical tropes. The execution of the short film (please see Appendix B) already challenges the normative approach to filmmaking as I queer the process by ensuring the presence of theatricality. This approach deviates from the norm prevalent in the South African Cinemascope, presenting a narrative executed in an interdisciplinary manner.

The key to implementing queer methodologies lies in celebrating difference and “queerness”, adopting an anti-categorical approach to diversity and critiquing (hetero)normative practices, as Queer theory is anti-normative and anti-categorical (Browne & Nash, 2010; McCann, 2016, as cited in McDonald, 2017: 135). Queer methodologies direct attention to deviant cases, particularly in relation to my research on deviance.

Put differently, queering seeks to “make strange [...] what is considered known, familiar, and commonplace” (Seidman, 1997: xi, as cited in McDonald, 2017: 134). The concepts and methodologies within queer theory will serve as guiding principles throughout the theoretical and practical aspects of my methodology. The key methodologies identified will be integral to

my engagement with theory, case studies, and creative work. By embracing queering methodologies and applying them to my practical component and case studies, I recognize the importance of contextualizing the notion of representation within the South African Cinemascape, considering both its global and local history and impact.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework & Engagement

Post-Colonial and Critical Race Theory

Cinema from within

In Mattera's PhD dissertation, *Cinema from Within* (2020), he expands on the representation of Blackness in cinema, arguing that any theoretical or practical engagement with Black cinema must consider the intersection of race, class, and gender (Mattera, 2020: 4). He highlights the historical role of colonization and apartheid in shaping a racialised system of representation, pointing to the consistent use of violence and rape as key signifiers in the portrayal of Black men and women, particularly in European and White South African cinema. This argument resonates with my own observations of recurring tropes in many Black South African television narratives, which often reinforce these negative, stereotypical representations.

Mattera's (2020: 19) historical account reveals that apartheid "served as the template upon which the narrative tropes of Black people were constructed" in South African cinema. He underscores that, despite the country's transition to democracy, the lingering effects of colonial objectification continue to influence how Black people are depicted onscreen. As he states, "since the first recorded images in colonial cinema, violence has been a key feature that has characterized Black men on screen". This is evident in both early films like *De Voortrekkers* and more contemporary works, such as the Oscar-winning film *Tsotsi*. The persistence of these representations suggests "we may have underestimated the powerful, lingering effect of colonial objectification" (Mattera, 2020: 20).

Stuart Hall, in his paper *Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation*, asserts that "we cannot and should not, for a moment underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative re-discovery" (Hall, 1997, as cited in Mattera, 2020: 32). This perspective aligns with my argument that reframing and reimagining Black people and their narratives is essential. It is not merely necessary; it is revolutionary. The act of challenging these dominant representations is critical to dismantling the colonial framework that still defines much of South African cinema.

South African cinema, which has historically set the precedent for Black representation, was shaped by colonialism, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and apartheid. These periods ensured that Black people were depicted in ways that benefitted Western ideologies (Mattera, 2020: 16). This legacy persists today, particularly in the global influence of corporations like Netflix,

which, despite their investment in the South African Cinemascope, often perpetuate Westernized depictions of Black South African narratives. These narratives, while produced in South Africa, are filtered through a lens that mirrors Western values and experiences, rather than authentically reflecting the lived realities of South African communities.

Mattera (2020: 100) argues that creative practitioners must interrogate “more deeply the issues of identity/identification and representation as an integral part of their filmmaking process”. My research and creative praxis aim to engage with this notion by questioning and deconstructing the imagery constructed around Black people in cinema. This approach challenges the conventional narratives and suggests alternative ways of representing Blackness that resist colonial tropes. Additionally, Mattera (2020: 100) highlights the value of exploring the space between documentary genres and fiction, encouraging filmmakers to use this space to foster new dialogues within the medium. This in-between space is central to my interdisciplinary approach, where the blending of theatricality and film provides a platform for authentic and nuanced discussions about Black identity. By merging the technicalities of South African theatre with the screen, my work aims to create a space that authentically engages viewers with Black identity and lived experiences, offering a much-needed departure from reductive or stereotypical representations.

A conversation with bell hooks

In bell hooks', *The Oppositional Gaze* and *Salvation: Black People and Love*, I encountered transformative questions and ideologies that have significantly shaped my understanding of the revolutionary act of "loving Blackness." These texts have been central to deepening my engagement with the complexities of Black identity and the political dimensions of love in the struggle for liberation.

hooks (1992) emphasizes the necessity of adopting a revolutionary attitude in challenging the entrenched systems of representation within mass media. She highlights the significance of examining the historical roots of racism and how it has solidified concepts of whiteness and white supremacy, which ultimately feed into the white male gaze. hooks argues that it is crucial to confront and acknowledge the harm inflicted upon *The Other*—particularly Black bodies—and to work towards restoring Black people to a position of dignity and humanity.

hooks (1992) introduces the concept of *Decolonial Vision* as a foundation for reimagining and reconstructing representations of Blackness. She contends that film, like all visual media, is a

construction of images meant to be consumed. According to hooks (1992: 1), "when opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of Black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy". This pervasive reinforcement of white supremacy through imagery means that Black people are constantly exposed to and consuming representations that uphold these power structures (hooks, 1992).

Up to this point in my dissertation, I believe I have sufficiently explored and provided a detailed account of the historicity of colonial imagery, both globally and within the South African context. What resonates deeply with me at this juncture is hooks' notion of *Decolonial Vision*, which focuses on dismantling hegemonic ways of seeing and embracing reimagined, rethought representations of Blackness. This concept strengthens my argument and serves as a central pillar in shaping my manifesto.

"Images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves" (Pratibha Parmar, as cited in hooks, 1992: 5). This quote underscores the significant role that images play in shaping how both others perceive us and how we perceive ourselves. hooks (1992: 5-6) further states, "most Black folks do not want to think critically about why they can sit in the darkness of theatres and find pleasure in images that cruelly mock and ridicule Blackness". The emphasis that hooks (1992) places on the socio-political impact of images resonates deeply with me and forms one of the core motivations behind my research and manifesto.

As a Black South African creative, it is essential to acknowledge the profound power that images hold in shaping narratives. The way Black South African stories are represented can have long-lasting effects on public perception. In a world where the psycho-spiritual and cultural undermining of Blackness remains a pervasive issue, I seek to disrupt these harmful conventions through a deliberate use of deviancy, theatricality, queering methodologies, authenticity, and love—as a form of resistance and healing. These tools, when employed consciously, can act as a "vaccine" to combat the damaging effects of negative representations, challenging the dominant narratives and offering new, empowering ways to engage with Blackness.

hooks (1992) proposes that Black people, shaped by the history of colonialism, slavery, apartheid, and other forms of oppression, have come to hold images of themselves that are deeply hateful and damaging to their very being. This internalization of negative self-images could explain why certain narrative tropes, particularly those found in popular South African television shows, continue to resonate with audiences despite being problematic, essentialist, and harmful. hooks (1992: 6) argues that Black people have internalized racism so deeply in their subconscious minds that they find pleasure in representations or images that speak to their death and destruction. This notion prompts me to question why shows like *The Queen*, *The River*, or *The Wife*—which portray Black identities in relation to crime—are so popular, even though these narratives often communicate a fatalistic view of Black families and communities, one that associates them with inevitable death and destruction.

hooks (1992: 7) asserts, “unless we transform images of Blackness, of Black people, our ways of looking and our ways of being seen, we cannot make radical interventions that will fundamentally alter our situation”. I firmly agree with this statement, which aligns with my own commitment to challenging the way Black South African narratives are constructed and represented within the South African Cinemascope. By reimagining the images of Blackness and shifting the frameworks through which these images are viewed, I propose that we can make a profound impact on how Black identities are perceived, moving away from narratives that reinforce destruction toward stories that offer healing, transformation, and empowerment.

hooks (1992) explores the concept of the ‘commodification of Blackness’ which is deeply intertwined with cultural appropriation and the damaging colonial imagery that has historically defined Black identity. hooks (1992) purports that part of the solution to reclaiming Blackness and transforming its representation lies in love a powerful act of resistance in a white supremacist culture. She asserts that “to love Blackness is dangerous in a white supremacist culture” (hooks, 1992: 9) because within such a system, “loving Blackness” is rarely a political stance that is reflected in everyday life” (hooks, 1992: 10).

This notion of a ‘racialised regime of representation,’ built on the commodification of Blackness through the colonial gaze, can be challenged by embracing and ‘loving’ Blackness. This love becomes an act of reclamation—an attempt to redefine Black identity on Black terms, rather than through the lens of white supremacy. hooks (1992) and Hall (1989) both emphasize that reclaiming Blackness, particularly through loving it, disrupts and resists the ongoing cycles of objectification and commodification. This reclamation is essential in confronting the

colonial narratives that have long sought to define Blackness in reductive and dehumanizing ways. By reimagining Blackness through love, we shift the power of representation back to Black people, enabling them to control and redefine their own image.

In her explication of the commodification of Blackness, I find a sense of validation in knowing that my perspectives on the stereotypical nature of Black representation are both valid and real. The racialized regime of representation perpetuates a stereotype that allows Blackness to be 'consumed' as a commodity—an object, a fleeting experience that lacks true value. This culture of commodification and consumption of the Black body is pervasive in the South African Cinemascope, where entertainment often contrasts sharply with the lived realities of violence, pain, and systemic oppression faced by the Black population.

It raises the critical question: are we, as Black people, consuming our own identity in a way that perpetuates these stereotypes? Are we so disillusioned that we demand to see ourselves represented in these narrow, harmful ways? And if so, by reinforcing these portrayals, are we inadvertently sustaining a racialised regime of representation that limits our humanity and possibilities? If the answer is yes, it begs the question of the long-term effects of this continued consumption.

Thus far, hooks (1992) provides valuable terminology and frameworks for analysing the representation of Black bodies in mass media. In her call for Black people to love themselves, she references Audre Lorde, highlighting that when Black people fail to recognize one another's diverse experiences, it allows systems of domination, like sexism and racism, to shape how we regard each other (Lorde in hooks 1992: 43). hooks (1992) introduces the idea of radical Black subjectivity, advocating for a rejection of monolithic representations of Blackness and recognizing the diversity of lived experiences within the Black community. She emphasizes the importance of opposing oppression without falling into essentialist narratives that erase this diversity. Additionally, hooks (1992) critiques harmful portrayals of Black men, women, and families, recognizing them as expressions of hatred and destruction, and calls for the dismantling of these representations in favour of more empowering, nuanced depictions of Black life.

The *self-sacrificing Black woman* is an image that society idealises, and mass media reifies despite its recognition as unhelpful and counterproductive. This archetype persists as the only "good" representation of Black women, despite its damaging effects. As hooks (2001: 39)

states, “many females who sacrifice everything are rageful and bitter”. We must resist the perpetuation of both the selfish diva and sacrificial martyr images, as neither reflects true expressions of love (hooks, 2001: 41). None of these are expressions of love. In her analysis of Black men, hooks (2001: 42) observes that “young Black males don a mask of hardness to avoid acknowledging emotional vulnerability” (Jay 1962 as cited in hooks, 2001:42). The central issue hooks (1992; 2001) and I share with the mass media is its portrayal of the idea that “Black people are not loving that our lives are so fraught with violence and aggression that we have no time to love” – or experience authentic livelihoods outside of violence and ill (hooks 2001: 43).

hooks (2001: 46) states that “mass media tends to ignore the diversity of Black experience. The worst aspects of Black life are fictionalised in television and in cinema so as to reproduce race and class stereotypes”. She emphasizes that material wealth does not determine the depth or complexity of a Black person's lived experience—whether wealthy, middle class, or poor, Black individuals navigate a multiplicity of realities. This aligns with my perspective, particularly in hooks’ (2001: 47) assertion that Black families in mass media “are always and only depicted as dysfunctional. Spaces where love is absent and foolish behaviour reigns supreme”.

hooks (2001: 48) maintains that “by focusing solely on situations of lovelessness in Black life, whether fictive or real, the mass media participate in creating and sustaining environments of emotional deprivation in Black life”. She suggests that we ought to embrace a “progressive cinema... [that]... entertains, challenges and shows us new images” (hooks, 2001: 54). Additionally, hooks (2001: 53) asserts, “if love is not present in our imaginations, it will not be there in our lives”. Just as colonizers once imagined racial difference as a justification for oppression, we too have the power to reimagine and reconstruct our reality.

We must create conditions where Black people can love Blackness, but more importantly, a space where everyone is encouraged to love Blackness (hooks, 2001). When Black people, especially the poor, are demoralized and treated as though they have no right to exist due to their lack of material wealth, the resulting shame, depression, and despair often lead to various forms of addiction. However, assuming that drugs and violence consume a community simply because of poverty is a misguided notion. “One can be poor and still be self-loving” (hooks, 2001: 69), and poverty itself does not inherently produce low self-esteem or self-hatred (hooks,

2001: 70). Ultimately, “none of us can be self-loving if our presence is not recognised and valued” (hooks, 2001: 84).

Building on this understanding of Blackness, colonial imagery, and mass media, I turn to concepts of African theatre, immersivity, and storytelling as tools to reframe critical relationships in creative practice. These include the relationship between creatives and the work they produce, the work itself and its broader semantic field (semiology), the ways in which audiences engage with and interpret these works, and ultimately, the impact of these interactions. By examining these dynamics, I aim to develop a practical response that bridges theoretical discourse with artistic intervention, using performance and narrative as a means of reclamation and resistance.

Identifying Tropes

This study examines the dominant patterns and tropes in South African telenovelas, advocating for a departure from reductive and stereotypical portrayals of Black life. By critiquing narratives that reinforce harmful stereotypes and proposing a framework rooted in love, queering methodologies, and theatricality, the study seeks to inspire dialogue on reimagining Black South African storytelling. Grounded in critical theory, historical analysis, and interdisciplinary methodologies, the research challenges dominant representations and advocates for more inclusive and transformative storytelling practices in South African film and television. My engagement with Sele Kane (2019) and Mxokozeli (2021) has not only validated my perspectives on the South African Cinemascape but has also deepened my understanding of film studies. Their work has provided me with the language and methodology to critically engage with my selected case studies, offering concrete evidence of the tropes I have identified—stereotypical characters whose portrayals echo colonial imagery.

Through the process of my research, I engaged in a critical act of ‘seeing’ and then ‘unseeing’ specific South African telenovelas, allowing me to identify recurring patterns and categorize them into distinct tropes. These include:

1. **MAFIA/CRIME FAMILY** narratives: *The Queen* (2016-2023), *The Wife* (2021-2022) and *The River* (2018-2024).
2. **COMING-OF-AGE** stories: *Adulthood* (2023), *Isthembiso* (2017-2020) and *Isthunzi* (2016).

3. **FOLKLORE-inspired** narratives: *Blood Psalms* (2022), *The Herd* (2019), *Ifalakhe* (2019).

Across these telenovelas, I observed recurring themes, including:

1. Stereotyped characters
2. Hyper-sexualized bodies
3. Pervasive violence
4. Lovelessness
5. Familial strife driven by power hunger

I contend that Black existence extends far beyond the tropes, patterns and recycled narratives that dominate the South African Cinemascope. This realization fuels both my frustration and concern because sustained exposure to these limiting portrayals inevitably shapes perceptions, after all, "you become what you eat." Therefore, the reimagining of Black South African storylines should foster debate, inviting viewers to question, reflect, and envision narratives that honour the full depth and diversity of Black lived experiences.

My research explores alternative sites of resistance that break free from the capitalist logic of mass-produced content. I propose the insertion of deviance and disruption through three key tenets of my manifesto: love, queering methodologies (as a vehicle for transformation), and theatricality. These principles serve as a foundation for reimagining representations of Black individuals, families, and communities; challenging dominant narratives and reshaping the South African Cinemascope. By fostering more expansive and diverse storytelling, this approach has the potential to revolutionize the industry, enriching the televisual "diet" of audiences and broadening their engagement with authentic, multifaceted Black experiences.

Theatricality as Medium

Weber (2004) introduces the notion of 'theatricality as medium', providing valuable terminologies and analytical tools that shape my engagement with the case studies and framing my creative response. Weber (2004) problematizes the increasing dominance of electronic media, arguing that theatre remains indispensable due to its immediacy, physical presence, and visualizing effects. He highlights how television, privileging sight over other senses, fosters control and distance—something theatre inherently disrupts.

Theatre shares its etymological roots with theory, both deriving from the Greek *thea*, meaning a place from which to observe or see (Weber, 2004: 3). Although television engages more than just the sense of sight, it predominantly privileges visual perception over other senses such as hearing. Weber (2004) argues that this privileging arises from a desire for control and distance—dynamics that theatre inherently challenges. Theatricality thus asserts itself as a potent medium, distinguished by its immediacy, physical presence, and capacity to visualize. Building on this concept, I further incorporate insights from African theatre and related approaches to strengthen the case for theatricality in contemporary storytelling.

Theatricality & Immersive storytelling

My exploration of the intersection between film and theatre stemmed from a deep discomfort with the disparities in narrative and representation between the two mediums. In South African theatre, portrayals of Black life often carry a sense of authenticity, holistic representation, and a grounding in everyday experience. This rootedness not only enriches the storytelling but also fosters meaningful dialogue and holds the potential to incite social change.

I frame my thinking within an ontological moralistic idealism, embracing the belief that art is not only a reflection of society but also a tool for confrontation, critique, and social change—at the very least, a platform for conversation and engagement. This perspective forms the foundation of my argument for the prominence of holistic, authentic, and everyday narratives within the South African film and television landscape.

Building my argument requires contextualising and elucidating the relationship between theatre and the televisual, highlighting their similarities, differences, and areas where the televisual can borrow from theatre to enhance narrative approaches ultimately influencing representation. This borrowing from theatre, viewed as a form of deviance from televisual conventions, forms the foundation of the solution I am advocating for. I establish this connection through queering methodologies, which, being epistemological in nature, embrace a questioning modality. The culmination of my argument is expressed in my explorative practical component and manifesto, representing a praxis that links theory, execution and reflexivity.

Theatricality: A Framework

Examining theatricality involves a range of scholars who have extensively explored various genres of theatre and the socio-cultural contexts that shape them. I engage with scholars like Sam Ukala (2001), H.I.E Dhlomo (1977), Weber (2004), Popat and Palmer (2005), Elam (2002), Dlamini and Dube (2021). As I build the framework of theatricality several key concepts emerge, such as:

Weber (2004)

- Immediacy
- Physical presence
- Visualising effects
- Place of seeing

Dhlomo (1977)

- Spirituality and belief
- Not propaganda and commercialization
- Sympathetic magic (like produces like)
 - Ethos of making
- Participation and African oral tradition
 - Entertainment and social engagement
- Drama as social art

Popat & Palmer (2005); Elam (2002); Dlamini & Dube (2021)

- Breaking the 4th wall
- Play - an explorative mode of working, being able to intersect whatever is needed to tell the story
- Digital media and theatre

- The frame as a tool for:
 - Conventions
 - Tacit agreement
 - Complicity

Ukala (2001)

- Immersive storytelling
- Laws of African storytelling
 - Spatio-temporal co-presence
- Theatricality and the screen
 - Queering methodologies (McDonald 1999).

Drama and the African

Dhlomo (1977: 3), in his article titled '*Drama and the African*' makes the statement:

Action! Rhythm! Emotion! Gesture! Imitation! Desires! That is what drama was before it developed into an institution for propaganda, the propagation of ideas, or for commercialized entertainment. Action, rhythm, and the other histrionic qualities are not foreign to the African - neither is drama. Indeed, there is no race in the world which did not have some kind of tribal dramatic representation.

Dhlomo (1977) further emphasizes that African drama emerged from a blend of religious and magical ritual, rhythmic dances, and song – essentially a form of sympathetic magic. He highlights the connection between drama and spirituality, noting that African societies understood the transformative power of drama, whether in theatre or film, to influence and even change life. The principle of sympathetic magic, where like produces like, led African drama practitioners to be deliberate in creating representations that reflected their desired realities. This awareness of the power of representation is central to my research, as it underscores how society is shaped by the images and narratives that saturate the media.

Another important aspect of drama (theatre) that Dhlomo (1997: 4) highlights is the participatory nature of storytelling, where the audience is not merely passive but actively engaged in the narrative unfolding before them. In this framework, the audience is not just observing but is cast as a co-participant in the performance. This blurs the line between the

performer and the audience, making the theatrical experience a shared event rather than one solely for entertainment.

Dhlomo (1997) emphasizes that drama, particularly in African society, is inherently communal. He asserts that “drama is a social art” (1997: 6) and that “Bantu society is social and communistic. Drama is the *reconstruction, recreation, and reproduction* of the great experiences of a people, and it helps them to **live more abundantly**” (emphasis added) (1997: 6). This reconstruction, recreation, reproduction of narratives is crucial when considering the need for reimagined and alternative representations in the South African Cinemascope, especially in formats like telenovelas. Dhlomo’s (1977) argument reinforces the idea that drama and cinema are “gradually taking a leading part in the formation of character, ideas, and ideas. Drama like school is a great educating agency” (Dhlomo 1977: 6). Given this, it becomes vital to prioritize the vitality of Black people’s identities, communities, and psyches in storytelling. Through these reimagined narratives, drama and film can play a significant role in reshaping the cultural landscape and contributing to social change, offering a richer, more inclusive portrayal of Black existence.

Dhlomo, in reflecting on how traditional African drama was created, observes that “Nothing was done for commercial profit. Acting was social, religious, magical, obligatory” (Dhlomo 1977: 5). This notion is crucial in understanding the roots of African drama, which was deeply tied to communal and spiritual functions, rather than driven by profit or individual gain. Despite the transition from traditional to modern times—where capitalism and individualism dominate—Dhlomo’s writings remain significant in reminding us of the historical foundation that Black Africans come from. This foundation, steeped in communal and holistic practices, played a central role in the health, prosperity, and cohesion of African societies.

Considering Dhlomo’s reflections, I propose that the key elements of African drama can offer important insights for redefining theatricality in the context of South African storytelling, particularly in Black South African narratives. The core elements that I am incorporating into my definition of theatricality, and my broader manifesto, are:

1. The participatory nature of the audience (joint performance): Where the audience is not passive but is involved in the story, creating a shared experience between the performers and the viewers.

2. The impact of storytelling in shaping society (as a spiritual practice): Drama and storytelling were not merely forms of entertainment; they were seen as powerful tools for spiritual engagement and societal reflection.
3. The driving force being a duty to cultivate a way of life that benefits the people: The purpose of drama was to nurture and guide the community, shaping their behaviours, values, and understanding of the world in a positive, collective manner.

Theatricality, in my definition, speaks to a system of crafting stories that emerge from everyday, real life. It involves a framework of representation and utilizes devices like joint performance to create a space for engagement. The goal is to spark conversation, incite meaningful change, or maintain the holistic vitality of the people who engage with these narratives. By reinterpreting and honouring these elements of African drama, I hope to offer a new lens for Black South African storytelling that emphasizes collective empowerment and societal transformation.

Representational Theatre, The Everyday & Film

Realism in its essence, emerged as a response to the atrocities of World War I and II, reflecting the West's growing disillusionment with the world in the wake of these traumatic events. Originally a movement in the 18th century, realism found its footing in the late 19th century as a theatrical movement (Trumbull, 2009). This shift towards realism in theatre was grounded in the direct observation of human behaviour, which meant embracing contemporary settings and time periods. Realism sought to portray the struggles, dilemmas, and complex emotions of everyday people, rather than the nobility or upper classes traditionally represented in earlier theatrical forms. The central tenets of realism focused on:

1. Depicting everyday life: This often meant shedding light on the working class, the poor, and other marginalized groups, rather than romanticizing the lives of the elite.
2. A consciousness of life in its true form: Realism aimed to reflect the hope, struggle, and resilience found in the everyday experiences of ordinary people, often focusing on individuals trapped in social constraints or seemingly hopeless situations.

While I acknowledge the historical significance of realism in shaping modern theatre, I draw on its core characteristics to inform my definition and framework of theatricality. However, I also challenge and subvert certain aspects of realism in favour of a more African-centred approach to theatre and immersive storytelling. For instance, while realism emphasizes

psychological depth and social constraints, I advocate for the integration of communal and spiritual dimensions, as seen in African drama. In doing so, I aim to create a theatrical experience that is not merely reflective of everyday life but also deeply immersive and participatory, grounded in the lived realities and transformative potential of Black South African narratives. This allows for a richer, more complex engagement with the human condition, one that embraces the nuances of everyday life while drawing from African theatre's emphasis on collective experience and the power of storytelling to enact social change.

According to Trumbull (2009), the genre of realism in theatre, employs several defining devices:

1. An attempt to recreate life as it is: Realism strives to depict life without embellishments, focusing on the raw, unaltered aspects of human existence.
2. Direct observation: Realist theatre often creates a voyeuristic experience for the audience, where a clear separation exists between the actors and the viewers. This is symbolized by the 'fourth wall,' which forms a boundary between the action on stage and the audience's engagement.
 - a. The 'box set' is one of the signature devices used in realism, where three physical walls are constructed on stage, and the fourth, imaginary wall faces the audience, reinforcing the separation.
3. Deliberately ordinary settings: Realist plays typically feature bland, mundane settings—often intentionally simple and reflective of the 'everyday' life of ordinary people.
4. Naturalistic dialogue: In realism, dialogue is grounded in everyday speech, without heightened emotion or artificial theatrical flourish, capturing the authentic rhythm of human interaction.
5. Psychologically driven plots: The central focus in realist theatre is often on the interior lives of characters—motivations, emotions, and interpersonal dynamics—rather than the external plot or action. Characters' psychological states take precedence.
6. Overcoming obstacles: The protagonist typically faces personal or social challenges and strives to rise above them, which forms the backbone of the plot.

7. Believable characters: Realist theatre aims to present characters that resemble real-life individuals—characters that the audience can recognize and identify with.
8. Authentic costumes: Costumes are designed to reflect the reality of the characters' lives, ensuring they match the everyday experiences being portrayed.
9. Accessibility and relatability: Realist plays gained popularity for their relatability, as the audience could easily connect with the situations and characters, seeing their own lives mirrored on stage.

There is thus a strong connection between the conventions of realism and ‘the everyday,’ particularly in its focus on representing the common, mundane aspects of human life. Building on this framework, my aspiration is to represent ‘everyday’ Black people in a way that resonates with Black audiences, encouraging a collective consciousness that recognizes the value of positive, holistic, and authentic portrayals. Through this process, I hope to foster a shift in the South African Cinemascope—moving away from harmful stereotypes and reductive imagery and ushering in an era of more meaningful, empowering narratives. By portraying Black life in its richness and complexity, I envision a cinematic environment where these representations become more prevalent, ultimately contributing to a greater cultural shift towards more responsible, inclusive, and transformative storytelling.

There are elements of realism that I intend to integrate to my concept of theatricality, while also subverting certain aspects of realism to better align with my vision. One such aspect is the concept of ‘the fourth wall’, which immersive storytelling (as it pertains to theatre within a black African modality) naturally subverts due to its emphasis on joint performance (Ukala 2001 & Dhlomo 1977). Theatricality embraces this subversion and translates it into the televisual realm by engaging the screen with empathy and other devices. By doing so, it casts the viewer as an active participant, creating a dynamic relationship between the performer and the audience. Theatricality, therefore, facilitates an immersive experience by positioning the audience “into the world through point of view” (Dlamini & Dube, 2021: 5).

One may question how a mere shift in point of view can accomplish this, and that leads me to my next concept: Play. According to Sita Popat and Scott Palmer (2005), the term ‘Play’ refers to the process through which knowledge and understanding are formed through interaction, ultimately leading to a ‘synthesized creativity.’ This notion of synthesized creativity is one that

theatricality wholeheartedly embraces as the vehicle for exploration between theatre and the televisual, providing a creative space for experimentation and innovative storytelling.

Popat and Palmer (2005) delve into how technology and the digital realm can intersect with the performer through collaboration, facilitating the development of a shared language that creates a "third space" for artistic expression. As Dlamini and Dube (2021: 7) note, "through 'Play', a language for collaborative storytelling is formed, presenting the story as a synthesized creativity - one that serves neither to hinder nor overshadow the other elements involved". Essentially, when the story is the ultimate focus for the audience - immersive and impactful - the medium through which it is conveyed becomes secondary. Technology, particularly in film and television, is seen as a medium that expands the potential for performer-driven artmaking and theatre-making. Theatricality, in this context, advocates for a third space of possibilities - one that allows for the full expression of the Black body in all its complexities and forms.

The concept of '**the frame**' is crucial when exploring the potential of theatricality within televisual storytelling as a digital medium. It is an essential mechanism that shapes the relationship between the actors and the audience. 'The Frame' creates a structure for engagement, facilitating what is known as '**tacit agreement**'. This agreement is fundamental in making sense of any artistic work. In live theatre, the theatrical frame emerges through the *transactional conventions* between performer and spectator, where both parties are conscious of the roles they play (Elam, 2002). Theatricality, in embracing African theatre conventions, uses the frame as a tool to foster active participation and joint performance. This immersive approach encourages viewers to critically engage with the narratives presented, making them active participants in the storytelling process.

Immersion plays a key role in achieving tacit agreement, as discussed by Complicite (2020). The term 'immersion' comes from the Latin verb *immergeré*, meaning 'the plunging or submersion of a body or object into a liquid'. Immersion metaphorically refers to becoming fully engrossed or enveloped in a situation (Kolesch, 2019: 4). In an interview for the Complicite (2020) YouTube page, theatre maker Simon McBurney emphasizes that while theatre can be produced for the screen, a significant challenge for theatre makers lies in the desensitization that screens create. This study aims to reinfuse a sense of life and liveliness into televisual storytelling by challenging the desensitization caused by the fourth wall of the screen. It seeks to critically examine and disrupt the narratives and representations within storylines that address Black South African experiences.

Immersive Storytelling

Drawing parallels between theatrical and televisual storytelling, my research explores the concept of immersive experiences by deconstructing the traditional fourth wall. By examining the participatory nature of drama and incorporating Ukala's (2001) laws of joint performance and creativity, the research aims to actively engage audiences in the narratives, fostering a responsive and interactive relationship with the story.

The connection between theatricality and the screen is facilitated through queering methodologies, which I employ as a key device to achieve an interdisciplinary approach. Rooted in queer theory, queering methodologies (McDonald, 1999) challenge conventional assumptions and disrupt normative frameworks. By embracing this ethos of deconstruction, disruption, and open inquiry, I create space for the integration of theatricality into filmic practice.

In the Western construction of theatre, particularly within realism, the fourth wall exists as a dividing barrier that separates the audience from the action on stage. This invisible barrier, which isolates the viewer from the performance, can be likened to the screen or frame in televisual storytelling. When we watch television or visit the cinema, a clear distance exists between the viewer and the narrative unfolding before them.

The type of theatre I am interested in is immersive, which inherently requires breaking this fourth wall. These immersive practices, rooted in African theatre traditions, draw from Ukala's (2001) writings on the politics of aesthetics. One of the key concepts I will focus on is Ukala's (2001) second law, the 'Law of Joint Performance'. This law highlights the audience's ability to co-perform within the narrative - responding to the action, singing along, asking questions, and thereby transforming the audience's role from passive observers to active participants. Through this shift, the audience becomes complicit in the unfolding story, moving beyond mere consumption into meaningful engagement.

It is this joint performance that fosters a relationship between the audience and the actors, bringing them into the same spatio-temporal co-presence within the world of the story. Translating this concept into a screen-based medium is complex and multifaceted, and in my reflection on the practical component of this study, I will delineate the translations and parallels I encountered.

The third law, the law of creativity, free enactment and responsibility (Ukala 2001: 36), addresses the role of the creator in shaping the story. This concept is directly linked to various aspects of televisual storytelling, including writing, direction, lighting, and production. These three terms prescribe that the creator must:

1. Provide a fresh interpretation or reimagining of the story, ensuring its contemporary relevance
2. Determine when to fully engage the audience in joint performance and when to withhold this interaction
3. Responsibly and holistically represent the narrative, balancing creativity with ethical considerations.

Laws four and five focus on the dialectic relationship between the audience and the play they are engaging with. These laws emphasise granting the audience the agency to evaluate and question what they see, allowing them the freedom to expressively respond to the narrative (Ukala, 2001: 38). Through my engagement with theatricality, I am able to draw meaningful parallels between the screen and the stage, which helps me explore and challenge cinematic conventions in innovative ways.

Isthunzi (2017): A primary case study

I have selected this case study to illustrate an example of the deviance I am hypothesizing within the South African Cinemascope. Telenovelas like *Ifalakhe* (2019) and *The Herd* (2019) (although fewer in number) employ elements of theatricality, to varying extents. These examples highlight South Africa's potential to explore certain modes of storytelling, though there is a need for more consistent application. These commercially viable shows succeed in maintaining the integrity of holistic, engaging, and didactic storytelling. I firmly believe that art should serve a purpose, with the ultimate goal being the message, commentary, or reflection that it offers society for critical discussion and change.

Isthunzi (2017) is included as a primary case study in my research because it exemplifies the potential calibre of storytelling within the South African Cinemascope. This telenovela takes the audience on an emotional journey of hope, heartbreak, and love, centred around the lives of its main characters: Winnie, Tishiwe, Noxolo, and Londiwe. For my research, I will analyse key episodes from season one, to explore the show's use of theatricality and its incorporation of queer methodologies, which I argue are central to its success.

Narratively, *Isthunzi* (2017) follows a linear structure, with each episode unfolding in chronological order. There are no time jumps, except for occasional flashbacks to the past and dream-like sequences. The story centres on the lives of four Black women, highlighting their daily experiences and struggles. The common thread that ties them together is their shared journey to the same high school, where they eventually form a close-knit friendship, calling themselves "ninjas."

The treatment of *Isthunzi* (2017) is driven by the essence of its narrative, with every element of the show being purposeful, from its script to its score, grading, costumes, editing, and the use of theatricality. The first four episodes serve as introductions to the four female protagonists, showcasing their daily lives, struggles, and aspirations. Each episode is framed by an overarching narrative question, voiced by the main character, Winnie Bhengu. This question is posed within the first ten minutes, the setup, of each episode, followed by the title of the telenovela.

Each episode of *Isthunzi* (2017) begins and ends with a voice-over. For instance, in Episode one, the opening shot establishes the Alexandra Township, followed by medium shots that track the protagonist's footsteps. Before the title of the show appears, we hear: "*This is a place of shadows. Everyone is a shadow of who they could be*". This moment sets the tone for the narrative events that unfold, with the audience watching the episode through the lens of this narrative question, engaging meaningfully rather than simply for entertainment. The episode concludes with: "*In the end, everyone leaves you except your shadow. It's always at your back, a constant friend, seducing you into being swallowed*". The use of voice-over to open and close each episode mirrors Ukala's (2001) first law; the Law of Opening; and his final law; the Law of Closing. These laws theatrically set the scene and resonate with African oral traditions, where a narrator - typically an elder - guides the story. In *Isthunzi*, Winnie assumes this role as our narrator, guiding us through the world of the story with thematic reflections and questions that frame each episode.

Winnie Bhengu transitions from living with her brother, Malibongwe, who works as a security guard in Alexandra, commonly known as Alex, to being forcefully relocated to Phel'umoya to live with her grandmother, MaBhengu. Malibongwe takes this drastic step because he believes Winnie has gone astray, embracing the "blesser" lifestyle; engaging in sexual favours for wealthy older men to attain the lifestyle she desires. Episode two provides context for this shift, opening with a voice-over that says, "Phel'umoya: it means to tire out, to lose all hope, lose all

energy”. This voice-over is followed by an establishing shot of Winnie’s new high school in the area, where we are introduced to the other protagonists.

Thus far, I would like to highlight the telenovela's effective use of an original South African score. After researching various sounds, I discovered the music of Marylin Nokwe, whose songs are featured throughout the first season. I am emphasizing this aspect because I suggest that incorporating authentic South African artistry into creative works within our Cinemascope helps build a stronger connection and appreciation for local content among the audience.

This telenovela’s protagonists are all outcasts within their shared community. Winnie is portrayed as a rebellious, promiscuous girl, often stigmatized as demon possessed. Londiwe became pregnant at a young age and must juggle work and school. Tishiwe is labeled a witch because of her mother’s spiritual gifts, and she too inherits these gifts, while also coming from a violent household that led to her parents' divorce. Noxolo, a highly intelligent young girl, suffers in silence after being repeatedly raped by her stepfather, Bab’Matthews, who is a respected figure in Phel’umoya. This telenovela uses each character (and their backstory) to set up the harmful stereotypes that a typical black middle class South African audience is used to, then challenges/subverts them. More specifically, *Isthunzi* (2017), challenges the myths and stereotypes surrounding Black girls and women, exposing the realities behind these labels and providing depth to their stories in each episode.

An example of how the show challenges these myths is in the relationship between Winnie and her grandmother, MaBhengu - a strict, militant war veteran and devout prayer woman. MaBhengu, eventually comes to realize that Winnie was never truly demon-possessed or rebellious as she had believed. Instead, Winnie had been pursuing a dream of one day finding her prince charming, Lebone Mbuela, and escaping the cycle of poverty in which she had grown up.

The depiction of the day-to-day lives of each protagonist aligns with the queer lens that this telenovela employs. It de-glamorizes and un-romanticizes Black pain, family feuds, and the broader representation of Black people and communities. Rather than conforming to what is typically considered palatable, the show presents these issues in an authentic, uncensored manner. By exposing both the good and the darker sides of Black life, it also highlights the potential for healing, overcoming adversity, and dreaming again. In doing so, the telenovela opens up discourse around Black life, creating space for a diverse range of representations of Black bodies and their stories.

Isthunzi (2017) employs theatricality by integrating production elements that encourage the viewer's active participation in the narrative. The show does not merely present information in a passive, escapist manner but instead engages the audience directly. Through its use of voice-over, *Isthunzi* (2017) acknowledges the audience's presence, inviting them to shift from their physical space and time to the world of the story. This immersive experience extends beyond the episode itself, encouraging the viewer to reflect critically and inquire about their own lives in relation to their communities. Given that the target audience consists primarily of young Black girls, and by extension, Black families, it resonates with viewers watching in prime time, connecting them with their own lives, families, and communities.

The telenovela embraces theatricality by incorporating several of Ukala's (2001) laws. Each episode opens and closes with a narrative question or commentary, aligning with the law of opening (law 1) and the law of closing (law 8). Additionally, the show embraces a folklore inspired style, referencing cautionary tales about community, appropriate behaviour for young girls, and the treatment of elders, further reinforcing these two laws. Moreover, by positioning the audience to critically engage with the characters' actions and draw their own conclusions, the telenovela adheres to the fourth law, which emphasizes the audience's role in interpreting the narrative based on personal evaluation.

Isthunzi (2017) also employs theatricality using recognizable songs. In theatre, familiar music is often used to encourage audience participation, inviting them to sing along and become part of the scene. Similarly, the telenovela's use of well-known songs fosters engagement, aligning with Ukala's (2001) third law of joint-performance, which asserts that the audience is not merely a spectator but an active participant in the storytelling process. This engagement extends beyond the screen, granting viewers agency in how they interpret and respond to the narrative in their own lives.

Song and voice-over are not the only elements that contribute to *Isthunzi*'s (2017) theatricality - the entire world of the story is constructed with a heightened sense of performance. In the African theatre I have engaged with, recognizable figures, myths, and archetypes are often employed to draw the audience in, allowing them to engage vicariously through characters they relate to. This deepens immersion, ensuring that the narrative's impact lingers long after the show ends.

Speaking from personal experience, having watched *Isthunzi* (2017) when it first aired and now revisiting it as a primary case study, I find that the show provokes profound questions about

gender roles, toxic family dynamics within Black communities, and intergenerational miscommunication.

The show also employs grading to heighten its thematic arguments. For instance, during the harrowing rape scene between Winnie and Mandla; a mechanic she attempted to use for financial gain; the visual tone shifts to a sepia-like, drained colour scheme, amplifying the scene's lifelessness. The use of strobe lighting intensifies the chaos and trauma. For the first time, the sound is stripped away, leaving only Winnie's agonizing screams, forcing the viewer to confront the raw horror of the moment without the cushion of a score.

Additionally, *Isthunzi* (2017) uses juxtaposition in editing to underscore key thematic concerns. One striking example is a sex scene between Londiwe and Duke; the father of her child; intercut with a memory of her past relationship with Anele, a trans man. This contrast not only highlights the oppression she endures in her marriage but also challenges heteronormativity, revealing that true love existed in what was deemed a "taboo" relationship with Anele, whereas her marriage to Duke has been defined by abuse.

Isthunzi (2017) concludes with a powerful voice-over:

We can't control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond. I'm a ninja - what doesn't kill me makes me stronger. Maybe I'm being strengthened for a destiny I can't see yet. One day, my ninjas and I will get our 'happily ever afters'. Until then, we need to hold on to each other and be brave, no matter what happens. Never underestimate the power of a girl.

This closing monologue encapsulates the series' core message: resilience in the face of adversity. *Isthunzi* (2017) stands as a compelling example of how the implementation of a queer lens and theatricality—through intentional storytelling—encourages viewers to interrogate societal normativity. More than just a critique, the show delivers a message of hope, illustrating the capacity of Black people to overcome hardship through perseverance, community, and self-love. This ideal aligns with hooks' (2001) philosophy, which emphasizes the transformative power of loving Blackness.

Ultimately *Isthunzi* (2017) positions the audience as active participants through its use of theatricality and in so doing, it creates a heightened level of engagement for the audience to then receive the reimaged everyday black stories (achieved through queering methodologies) and develop a love for blackness.

Chapter 4: Analysis of Televisual Texts

All the narratives examine in this study are Afrocentric, centering the lived experiences of Black South African people - whether in futuristic, contemporary or historical settings. Many of the narratives rely on stereotypes, rigid gender roles, and predictable linear storylines.

I acknowledge that the case studies analysed sit within the telenovela, series and soap opera format and not cinema. I believe these formats are distinct, in the same breath I believe these formats are porous in that they are interconnected and borrow from one another. As such my analysis of each of these forms of television aids in building my argument for the Cinemascope of South Africa is validated.

I am centralizing my research in television withing the Cinemascope and would like to see the approach I am taking be applied to various disciplines/forms including Cinema.

The tone of writing in this section deliberately fluctuates between academic and conversational as part of my embracement of queering methodologies and decolonial vision as outlined in my manifesto. The use of rhetorical questions has more to do with my reflections and thought process as analyses were made and less to do with adding to my research questions.

However, *Isthunzi* (2017) stands apart by embracing a queer approach to storytelling, challenging conventional narrative structures through its themes, character arcs, and unique use of narrative devices.

This section will primarily engage in textual, narrative, and visual analyses, identifying recurring tropes and stereotypes across telenovelas. It will also make a case for the use of theatricality as a form of narrative deviance and queering methodologies as tools to disrupt these trends and reshape the South African cinematic landscape

Isthunzi (2017) achieves a level of authenticity that immerses the viewer in a way akin to the liveness and immediacy of theatre. This intersection - between the desire to subvert dominant televisual narratives and the visceral, unfiltered engagement of theatre - forms the foundation of my methodology. I aim to create a televisual work that explores and extends this dialogue, pushing the boundaries of narrative convention in South African screen storytelling.

The Folklore Trope: Blood Psalms and Ifalakh

Blood Psalms (2022)

Blood Psalms is a historical fantasy epic set in Ancient Africa 11 000 years before the 21st Century (Adams, 2022) and opens with a war between two clans, the Ku'ua and the Akachi. The conflict ends when the son of the Akachi king kills the Ku'ua king and declares an end to the war. The narrative then advances 18 years, revealing the origins of the world according to the gods and the formation of the two clans.

At the heart of the story is a prophecy introduced at the beginning of the season. The Sanusi, a revered emissary and seer, foretells that a servant within the Ku'ua palace will give birth to a child destined to bring about the end times while simultaneously serving as the clan's saviour. The prophecy also decrees that this woman will be martyred immediately after childbirth, ushering in an era of darkness. Ultimately, the end times will signal the second coming of the god Heka, one of the divine beings who shaped the universe.

This telenovela exemplifies the 'multidimensional spatial representation' characteristic of folklore-based narratives (Selekane, 2019). Set within futuristic yet ancient African kingdoms, *Blood Psalms* transcends contemporary capitalist frameworks, immersing viewers in a world that interweaves mythology, spirituality, and tradition. Its narrative structure foregrounds ideologies centred on community, ancestral reverence, and cyclical time, reinforcing the enduring significance of African cosmology in storytelling.

Blood Psalms embodies an Afrofuturistic aesthetic, blending elements of African tradition with speculative storytelling. The series incorporates multiple African languages alongside a constructed language unique to its world, reinforcing its immersive, culturally rooted narrative. Set in a dystopian landscape where Black African communities exist within their ethnic kingdoms, the story centres on the preservation of tradition, spiritual practices, and ancestral land.

At its core, the series suggests that spiritual practice is fundamental to African ontology, positioning generational inheritance - both material and metaphysical - as the most valuable legacy one can pass down. This thematic focus aligns with Dhlomo's (1997) definition of

storytelling, wherein narratives prioritize the representation of a world in which values, traditions, and spirituality remain central. This places the audience in the position to appreciate and celebrate blackness.

Despite its Afrofuturistic ambitions, *Blood Psalms* reinforces stereotypical portrayals of Black men and women. The series perpetuates rigid gender roles, emphasizing their cultural significance in ways that ultimately uphold male dominance. Within this framework, men are depicted as conquerors and victors, while women's roles are largely defined by their service to these figures.

Ifalakhe (2019)

The telenovela opens with a dramatic scene where two brothers engage in a physical fight in the rain. Just as they are about to collide, the narrative shifts 21 years into the past, setting the stage for the conflict between them. The story unfolds against a backdrop of a war between two kingdoms, the Okuhle and the Khanya, over ownership of land. The war ended when Khombindlela killed the king of the Khanya kingdom, forcing its people into hiding. Ibanathi, the late king's wife, vows to avenge her husband's death and reclaim his body.

Meanwhile, King Khombindlela of the Okuhle kingdom prays to the gods for a son from his first wife. Driven by rivalry, his second wife secretly seeks the help of a traditional healer, Nkanyamba, to induce labour three months early. According to prophecy, the second-born son is destined to be killed, as he will one day rise at 21 and murder his father. To prevent this fate, Khombindlela consults the Okuhle kingdom's healer to forge a blood bond between his newborn sons—ensuring that whatever happens to Ifalakhe, the firstborn, will also happen to Busani, the second-born, binding their fates together.

Determined to secure her son's future, the second wife conceals the truth about Busani's birth order. However, it is foretold that he will one day bring darkness upon the Okuhle kingdom. In a desperate bid for power, she strikes a deal with Ncuka, Khombindlela's banished brother, promising to make him regent if he helps her place Busani on the throne.

A recurring theme in this telenovela is the saying "*Ingabe iyozala nkomoni*" which translates to "*what will become of this?*" - a question that underscores the unfolding of fate and the consequences of each character's choices. The narrative explores the prophecies given by the gods and the characters' relentless attempts to either correct past wrongs or bend destiny to

their will. It portrays a world where rigid gender roles remain deeply entrenched, shaping societal structures, while the pursuit of land and power emerges as the ultimate ambition.

Although *Ifalakhe* embraces the use of a ‘greater narrative question’ similar to the narrative questioning seen in *Isthunzi*, it engages with theatricality through the trope of African *folklore*, which is rooted in African oral traditions and storytelling methods. This, however, does not exempt the telenovela from depicting a world where men are the sole heroes capable of conquering quests. *Ifalakhe*, much like *Blood Psalms* presents a world preoccupied with the dominion of women, where women’s roles remain restricted to bearing children and supporting their male counterparts in their territorial ambitions. These portrayals perpetuate the notion that women exist primarily to fulfil reproductive and supportive roles.

Such portrayals give rise to Black male phallocentrism, which in popular mainstream media often represents women as immoral, irrational and incapable of contributing meaningfully to important conversations. This phenomenon stifles both Black men and Black women, leaving little room for critical discussion on broader issues such as the rejection of homosexuality in Black communities (hooks, 1992). As a result this places the audience in a position to receive such ideologies and perpetuate them. This representation is similarly evident in other shows like *The Wife*.

The Mafia Family Trope: The Wife and The River

The Wife (2022)

The Wife is set in Johannesburg, specifically in areas like the CBD taxi rank district, Auckland Park, and Braamfontein. The story follows the lives of a eight brothers who own a taxi business, although much of their income comes from heists carried around the city. At the heart of the narrative is the journey of each of the Zulu brothers as they find wives and build their families.

The audience is introduced to the Zulu brothers through a typical day in their lives, as they prepare for yet another heist. The first potential love story emerges through Mahlomu, a journalist working for a newspaper. She is currently investigating the Zulu family and the series of heists they have orchestrated. The Zulu family holds significant influence over the South African Police Service (SAPS), allowing them to escape any legal repercussions when they are caught. The brothers are orphans, having lost their parents in a fire caused by a mob led by Dlakadla, who now does business with the Zulu family.

The narrative in season one delves into Mahlomu's transition from an investigative journalist to a wife within the Zulu family, with her love story with Mqhele Zulu being central to the plot. Mqhele's intense and relentless pursuit of Mahlomu leads her to leave behind her six-year relationship Sandile, a doctor. Mahlomu is in favour of the passionate and "bad boy" allure of Mqhele. His territorial nature and clear intention to marry her, a commitment that aligns with his identity as a traditional Zulu man, ultimately win her over. Despite her parents' disapproval, Mahlomu is drawn to the idea of fulfilling her desire for marriage, and she eventually embraces this new chapter in her life with Mqhele. This storyline explores themes of love, tradition, and the complexities of familial expectations within the context of modern relationships.

Mahlomu, uncovers the truth behind the Zulu family's illicit dealings and eventually learns the shocking truth about Mqhele and his brothers - not just taxi owners, but deeply embedded in criminal activities. However, her allegiance to the Zulu family forces her into silence. The journey to their marriage is fraught with challenges, as Mqhele carries unresolved trauma from witnessing the deaths of his parents and growing up in a household devoid of nurturing or emotional healing. His unresolved issues manifest in the way he handles the ongoing taxi war between his family, the Zulus, and their rivals, the Majolas, over control of taxi routes. In moments of distress, Mqhele resorts to violent and abusive behavior, often using sex as a means of asserting control or physically harming Mahlomu. He justifies his actions by claiming he needs to protect her and maintain control over her, believing that material gifts can ease the tension or "make things right" after his violent outbursts. His relationship with Mahlomu becomes a disturbing display of his animalistic, territorial instincts⁵, where his sense of power and dominance overrides any sense of respect or mutual care. This dynamic highlights the toxic, destructive patterns that arise from unaddressed trauma and societal pressures, further complicating the power imbalances in their relationship.

The Wife can be viewed as a modern-day version of *Blood Psalms* due to the similar narrative structure that centres on the fight for land and territorial control. In *Blood Psalms*, the conflict revolves around ancient kingdoms battling over land and resources, a dynamic that closely mirrors the Zulu brothers' quest for power and dominion over the Johannesburg district and its taxi routes in *The Wife*.

⁵ I use the term, 'animalistic' to highlight the problematic portrayal of black men within this telenovela. Mqhele alongside his brothers are portrayed as ruthless and violent men who uphold a 'survival of the fittest' mentality and stop at nothing to get what they desire i.e. Killing to protect/maintain ownership.

Upon initial analysis of the telenovela, one notes the heightened depiction of a 'war zone,' which I liken to the tribal wars between men and kingdoms over issues like land, resources, etc. In this case, that 'age-old' trope has been modernized, with the battle shifting to ownership of taxi routes, women, and money. This allows me to focus specifically on the use of gender stereotypes: Black men are portrayed as ruthless, violent, animalistic, incapable of sustaining love, abusive, and hot-headed, while Black women are depicted as submissive, silent, mother-like or mammy-like, helpless, and naïve victims who are 'entrapped' by the families they marry into. This representation mirrors colonial imagery and archaic, oppressive patriarchal conventions that perpetuate cycles of abuse in many South African homes. One cannot help but ask: "In a country like South Africa, where tribalism and gender roles continue to enforce oppressive cultural norms, why wouldn't Showmax take the opportunity to comment on these issues in a way that encourages critical engagement? If 'entertainment rules' above all else - because we need views that translate into profit - what kind of oppressive, harmful, and dangerous stereotypes are we creating?". I cannot emphasize enough that telenovelas like the wife place the audience in a position of almost celebrating these destructive representations, viewership stats alone show that audiences were deeply engaged. With this emphasis comes a great concern.

The stereotypes addressed by this show through representation

Black men, regardless of ethnicity, are portrayed as violent and animalistic, bound to abuse any woman they marry or encounter. They are territorial, yet they only commit to romantic relationships when it serves their interests - typically when a child is involved, and they value family building. Black men are depicted as stubborn, emotionally and mentally stunted individuals.

These stereotypes are reflected in each of the Zulu brothers, particularly in Season one through Mqhele and his brother Mnqoba. Mnqoba, for example, partially married his baby mama, Mandisa, because she was pregnant. He loves her, but not enough to properly marry her; instead, he expects her to be loyal to his family and fulfill the role of a wife (Makoti), participating in their Shisanyama business and criminal activities. The Zulu brothers exemplify what Hall describes as the "Bad Buck" stereotype, as each of them fits the description of "over-sexed, violent, rage-filled renegades who lust over (white) flesh" (Hall, 1997: 10). The male characters in *The Wife* (2022) do not lust over white flesh however they are portrayed as

oversexualized, violent and rage filled men who lust over money, ownership of territory and building their idea of family to hand over to their offspring.

Further stereotypes perpetuated in the show include the idea that Black women are prizes to be won by men who choose them, marry them, and impregnate them, after which they are expected to serve as wives to the family they marry into. This is a stereotype is often presented as something admirable and desirable, a narrative many young Black women, including myself, are taught to aspire to. It fosters the belief that Black women (and women in general) exist solely to be chosen by men and serve them in whatever way the man and his family deem fit.

While the show attempts to address critical issues like gender-based violence (GBV) and crime, these themes are often overshadowed by the commercialized nature of the telenovela. The casting of attractive actors, with an emphasis on their physical appearance, shifts the focus from meaningful engagement with the story to the consumption of the show for its visual appeal. This commercialized approach detracts from the potential for deeper discussions and critical engagement with the important social issues at hand.

Both *The Wife* (2022) and *Blood Psalms* (2022) embody what bell hooks (1992: 94) refers to as "fierce phallocentrism," an ideology where a man's identity is defined by his possession of a penis, not by his ability to nurture or provide for a home. This worldview is rooted in the ownership of women and reinforces patriarchal norms. Fierce phallocentrism not only harms women but also men, fostering internecine conflict among Black men as a byproduct of this ideology. Although both telenovelas include queer representation, they fail to create space for critical and reflective discourse. This lack of depth is unsurprising, as the main narratives and characters themselves offer little room for genuine engagement, let alone holistic and authentic representation.

The River (2018)

This Soap Opera introduces us to Lindiwe Dlamini-Dikana, the owner of Khanyisa Diamonds in Cullinan Pretoria. She lives with her two children, Mbali and Andile, in Silverlakes, Pretoria East. Andile, a chemical engineer at the mine, keeps a girlfriend to please his parents, harbouring a secret for fear of rejection. Lindiwe is married to Zwelibanzi Dikana, the commissioner of the SAPS, who is unaware of his wife's criminal activities, including her involvement in murder.

Mam Florence's son, Happy, is in a secret love affair with Andile. Mam Florence, who works as a housekeeper in the Dikana household, lives with Happy in Refilwe, a nearby township to the Khanyisa Mine. Lindiwe has connections within the police force, with several officers on her payroll, and is aided by her right-hand man, Zolani, her nephew who spent time in jail. The plot thickens when Mr. Mokoena, one of the mineworkers, discovers a diamond at a time when Khanyisa Mine is running dry. He demands a share in the business and a wage increase for the miners. Lindiwe, protecting her interests, kills him to maintain control.

Tumelo, the daughter of Mr. Mokoena, embarks on a mission to uncover the truth about her father's death. She learns from Happy, who, covered in blood, reveals that Lindiwe is the one responsible. Tumelo then seeks employment at Khanyisa Diamonds as part of her investigation, leveraging the fact that Zolani is attracted to her to gain access to the Dikana household.

At the beginning of this soap opera, there is an evident representation of everyday characters, yet these characters are confined to predictable, cyclical⁶ narrative structures. This leads to shallow character arcs and, ultimately, a desensitized audience consuming harmful and repetitive imagery. The telenovela's reliance on cyclical storytelling perpetuates harmful stereotypes and creates monolithic representations of Black prosperity, community, and family, which are entrapping.

The catalyst of this narrative is the mineworker who saved Khanyisa Diamonds, only to be killed by Lindiwe Dikana for control over the diamond and the mine. The storyline unfolds linearly, making the ensuing events predictable, despite each episode ending on a cliffhanger. The entire series thereafter becomes a struggle for power, money and ownership and is expressed differently through each character.

This predictability leads the audience to focus more on how the events unfold rather than the events themselves. Lindiwe Dikana, known on the streets as Madlabantu (the woman who eats people), embodies the extreme lengths to which power-hungry individuals will go to attain and maintain power. She also represents the darker side of success—an aspect that people often see from the outside but rarely suspect could be so corrupt or brutal.

⁶ Cyclical in the sense that throughout the entire series each character becomes a victim of Lindiwe Dikana's schemes (in her conquest for total domination of the mining industry and opulent wealth) or they fall part of the plan in hopes to make it out of the poverty they live in.

This narrative and its representation suggest that successful Black individuals achieve their affluence through crime in order to provide for their families. Lindiwe Dikana, an astute businesswoman, builds her life and success on a foundation of crime. Throughout the series, Lindiwe never reaches a point where the ruthless nature of her actions has limitations or boundaries. While she may experience moments of humility - such as when her funds are taken from her or she temporarily loses her family - she never truly learns from these experiences. By the end of the sixth season, she remains the same ruthless criminal she was at the start.

The problem with this kind of representation is that it reinforces the stereotype that Black affluence is intrinsically linked to crime and violence. It suggests that Black people are incapable of exercising reason when presented with opportunities to grow, and it portrays homes founded on secrecy, deception, public image, and lovelessness as the norm. It implies that violence, lovelessness, and toxicity are self-fulfilling prophecies within Black communities—a cycle that cannot be broken.

This narrative also perpetuates the stereotype of deception within Black families, as Lindiwe Dikana hides her criminal activities from her entire family, except her nephew.

Ultimately, by the end of the entire series (*The River*, Season 7, 2023), viewers realize that there is no end to the greed and ruthlessness of its lead character, Lindiwe Dikana. Through observation, it is noted that Showmax is perpetuating a narrative that Black people are incapable of love that leads to change. Which alludes to a disregard for the well-being of the communities engaging with these telenovelas. Seemingly a capitalist agenda to take their money and rob their souls and minds, leaving them spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically bereft of any hope for change (in their own realities), because "no one ever changes".

This narrative has the potential to deviate from this harmful norm by embracing Ukala's (2001) third, fourth, and fifth laws. Ukala's (2001) framework emphasizes that creators of African drama must consider the impact of their work, creating responsibly. Additionally, it advocates for offering the audience an opportunity to critically analyse the content through immersive engagement, allowing them to respond in their own way. Breaking free from the cyclical, predictable narrative structure would encourage viewers to engage more consciously, fostering a more authentic and thoughtful response.

The Coming-of-age Trope: *Adulting* (2023)

Adulting is a coming-of-age drama series that follows the lives of four young men navigating the transition to adulthood, focusing on their experiences in the world of work, entrepreneurship, family, marriage, and fun. The series centres on the process of becoming an adult, or "adulting," rather than traditional school life.

The story revolves around four main characters: Eric, Bonga, Vuyani, and Mpho, each with their own unique journey into adulthood. Despite their differences, they come together through their shared bond of friendship. The show opens with a sex scene between Bonga and a woman, followed by a congratulatory call about his business success. Bonga is portrayed as a successful businessman who prioritizes his career over love or settling down.

Next, we meet Eric, who is shown leaving prison and heading to a house to collect personal items, including a gun. Vuyani, introduced shortly after, is seen in a luxurious mansion engaging with an older woman. Following a shopping spree with his sugar mama, Vuyani heads to a club called Konka, where he meets Mpho and Eric. Bonga arrives last, driving a brand-new Mercedes Benz Brabus.

At the end of the night, Bonga drops off each of his friends, and we are then introduced to Mpho's story. As Mpho is dropped off at home, his wife comes out to greet Bonga and the woman Mpho had slept with the previous night (this is shown beforehand after the night at Konka). In a tense exchange, the woman introduces herself to Mpho's wife as Vuyani's girlfriend.

The first season of *Adulting* delves into how each of these men navigates the challenges of adulthood while struggling to shed their past habits. Their primary goal is to "become men," yet their childish behaviors often get the best of them. Each storyline revolves around their quest for a better life, but they continually face obstacles as they try to grow.

Bonga, for example, encounters a woman who pushes him to confront parts of himself he'd rather keep hidden. Vuyani, grappling with his age, fears losing his status as a "boy toy" to his sugar mama and the powerful men around her. Mpho, feeling stifled by the responsibilities of being a husband and father, battles a desire to stay young and desirable. Meanwhile, Eric, fresh out of prison, finds himself in a bitter custody battle with the mother of his child, who took their daughter and left him due to his criminal lifestyle. Despite his recent release, Eric is drawn back into his old ways, adding further tension to his already complicated life.

The creators of this series missed a valuable opportunity to open up deeper, more nuanced narratives about Black men in South Africa. Rather than creating a platform for men to feel seen, critically evaluate their actions, engage in meaningful conversations, and grow, Showmax chose to centre the narrative on entertainment-driven elements - sex, partying, a reluctance to mature, toxic behaviours, and predictable patterns. This focus limits the potential for real dialogue or self-reflection.

One might wonder why Showmax couldn't have explored a more deviant approach, where character arcs were fully developed and portrayed through a less conventional lens. There is a pressing need for holistic, everyday representations of Black men that encourage discussions about ingrained assumptions, deconstruct normative practices, and challenge oversimplified binaries. These portrayals should not just mirror the surface but dive deeper into the "why" and "what led to this," sparking reflection and critical examination (McDonald, 2017).

I argue that if queering methodologies were employed, it would evoke a sense of consciousness like the experience of watching a live theatre production. Showmax could take this further by incorporating the immersive and joint-performance aspects of theatricality (Ukala, 2001; Dhlomo, 1997)⁷, encouraging the audience to engage more critically. The impact of this approach could lead to a reflective moment on the Black men in South Africa, shaped by the communities that raised or abandoned them. Furthermore, it could give agency to Black men today, offering them a representation that resonates with them while prompting critical reflection on their behaviour and roles.

Although multiple storylines unfold within each episode, they all progress in a linear sequence, making the development of each narrative predictable for the audience. Each character serves as the hero of their own storyline, facing challenges they must overcome. By the end of the first season, these characters oscillate between the fourth and fifth stages of Todorov's (1971) narrative structure, continuously striving to repair the disruption to the world they once knew and restore equilibrium, balance, and order.

This narrative is undeniably commercial, as it seems to prioritize the physiques and looks of the actors to attract viewership. The second indicator of this commercial treatment is the heavy presence of explicit sex scenes in each episode. While it's likely that men desire and engage in

⁷ This could look like engaging in narrative questions at the start or end of each episode that get the audience to think and reflect on what they've seen. This would break the 4th wall, snapping the audience out of consuming and into engagement.

sex far more often than depicted, the show ensures that 3-5 explicit sex scenes are featured per episode, seemingly for shock value to heighten viewership. This approach contributes to the fetishization of Black masculinity (Hall, 1997). The telenovela also highlights a fierce phallocentrism alongside toxic masculinity, depicting men who appear trapped within a culture that both defines and destroys them. They consistently conform to societal expectations and what grants them social currency and acceptance, all at the expense of their mental health and personal growth.

While my analysis may be shaped by a critical lens, I cannot speak for how the audience reads this text. However, this particular telenovela perpetuates the aforementioned issues i.e. Fetishization of black masculinity, in the minds of the audience. The telenovela's heavy reliance on "commercial baiting" clutters its potential for offering meaningful insights. Instead of promoting critical discussion or engagement, the show confronts viewers with imagery designed to provoke a visceral response. Had the production embraced "theatricality", from representation to execution, it might have fostered a more intentional awareness of its impact on the audience. This would have encouraged a deeper reflection on where this narrative fits within the broader discourse around the coming-of-age experiences of Black men in South Africa, potentially offering a more nuanced exploration rather than reducing it to mere entertainment.

It appears that, at every turn, something is lacking or falling short regarding the representation and portrayal of Black people in the media. At one point, the issue is the reinforcement of oppressive gender roles and stereotypes; at another, it's the shallowness of character development and predictability. Yet another issue lies in leaving the "fourth wall" up, allowing audiences to mindlessly consume content. Each of these challenges rooted in the legacy of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism. Thus far, I have highlighted the following dominant issues within the Cinemascape:

1. Cyclical narratives that result in shallow character arcs and ultimately predictable storylines.
2. Monolithic representation of Black people, where diversity and complexity are sidelined.
3. The colonial gaze and the pervasive influence of capitalism, especially in the age of streaming platforms.

4. Entertainment and capitalist gain driving the content more than a genuine desire to create representations that prioritize the health and well-being of communities.

In the context of "you are what you eat," media, in all its forms, shapes society and reflects its values. As such, the way in which we consume television, film, and other forms of media directly impacts the societal landscape. Given this, there is a significant opportunity within telenovelas to borrow from concepts like deviance, the everyday, theatricality, and 'loving Blackness'. By doing so, we could create a culture of *Black body positivity*, a movement that challenges current, harmful representations and fosters a healthier, more progressive visual diet for audiences. This would not only reflect more authentic and diverse Black experiences but would also encourage positive, inclusive change within society.

Chapter 5: Manifesto, Creative Component, Application of Theory

Practical Component

Through my research, I have confirmed the validity of the questions I initially raised. There is indeed a significant issue within the South African Cinemascope concerning the narratives and storylines created for Black South African audiences. The pervasive use of stereotypes recycled or shallow narratives, and ultimately destructive, violent representations are flooding the Cinemascope. In response to this, my Short Film serves as a space where I actively carry out my proposed solution. In this process, I have not only produced and directed the project but also collaborated with other young creatives to bring this vision to life.

Titled *All the Colours in One*, my film is an exploratory iteration of the intersection of film, theatricality, and queering methodologies. With my manifesto as the heart that drives this production, I aim for this work to act as a catalyst for change. It is my hope that those who engage with my paper and the film will be inspired to join a new wave or movement of filmmaking and television production, one that prioritizes authentic, diverse, and meaningful representations. This movement, in turn, will benefit the audiences who are at the centre of these narratives.

My Manifesto

“to love Blackness is dangerous in a white supremacist culture” (hooks 1992: 9)

To choose love, there must be an advocacy for a healthy model of agency and self-actualization, one that acknowledges that when Black people truly love themselves, not in a selfish or narcissistic way, they are best equipped to love others (hooks, 2001: 50). The philosophy of love, in this context, creates a space and a platform for Black people to embrace and celebrate Blackness, while, more importantly, providing a space for everyone to love Blackness.

To become a radical and progressive Black filmmaker in contemporary South Africa, one must lead with passion, passion rooted in love! For when one loves and is deeply passionate about something, the treatment and representation that follow are bound to be positive and transformative. It is time we reimaged what Black life looks like on the greener side of things. It is time we realise the immense power we hold in a country where television viewing culture is so influential and wield that power with responsibility. No more violent, essentialised, and destructive images! No more artists bowing to colonial capitalist corporations that exploit

Black minds and souls for profit! Blackness will cease to be a commodity but instead be an authentic valid reality that everyone will respect and love! We refuse to be cast and marginalised into the metaphysical waysides of life.

We push for a progressive Black South African Cinemascope that “entertains, challenges and shows us new images” (hooks 2001: 54)!

The time has come for us to recognise the necessity of reimagining and reframing Black people and the narratives surrounding them – this is not just an artistic endeavour, but an act of revolution! As film and television makers we must make a firm commitment to disruption! This disruption lies in what we look at, how we look at it, what we create, how we create it, and why we create it. All these questions align with queering methodologies, which stand to challenge dominant ideologies and practices. This process of questioning should lead to the creation of art that embodies these core values, prioritizing authenticity, intentionality, and a deep sense of purpose at its helm.

“Action! Rhythm! Emotion! Gesture! Imitation! Desires! That is what drama was before it developed into an institution for propaganda, the propagation of ideas, or for commercialized entertainment” (Dhlomo 1977: 3)

“Unless we transform images of Blackness, of Black people, our ways of looking and our ways of being seen, we cannot make radical interventions that will fundamentally alter our situation.” (hooks 1992: 7)!

My manifesto challenges the state, the importation of colonial imagery and the commodification of Blackness while questioning the ‘powers that be’ and their monopoly over image production. It calls for the embrace a radical Black subjectivity, one that breaks the monolithic Black experience and rejects the idea that all Black stories must be told in the same way. Through a Decolonial Vision, we seek to cultivate a critical consciousness in ourselves and all those who engage with our art (hooks, 1992). Theatricality, in its true form, exists in plurality. It has the power to shift and transform beyond its traditional confines.

It is this ability of theatricality to transport audiences, to blur the spatio-temporal lines and invite the viewer to vicariously participate in the narrative, that we must embrace. We aim to create a space where the audience is not only passive observers but active participants in the unfolding of the story. By integrating decolonial visions and reimagined narratives, we seek to enter the audience's subconscious, jolting them out of the colonial intoxication that has long

shaped their perceptions, and guiding them towards a deep appreciation for authentic, holistic representations.

We must reclaim our narratives. We must be intentional about the stories we tell, the images we create, and the impact they have on the communities we serve. The time for passive consumption is over—this is a call for radical, conscious, and transformative filmmaking.

Let us break the cycle of violent, commodified, and essentialized portrayals of Blackness. Let us create art that honors the depth, complexity, and brilliance of Black life. Let us embrace theatricality, queering methodologies, and decolonial vision as tools for disruption and liberation.

To every filmmaker, artist, and storyteller—our responsibility is clear. We must challenge the structures that dictate our images, disrupt the narratives that confine us, and reimagine a world where Blackness is represented in all its fullness, agency, and beauty.

This is more than art. This is revolution. **Will you be part of it?**

****** At this stage, I invite you to explore the documentary-style interview reflections from myself and key available members of the cast and crew. This supplementary material, accessible via the Google Drive folder linked in Appendix B, offers a visceral, firsthand account of the practical component—providing deeper insight into the creative process and the lived experiences that shaped this work.

Chapter 6: Reflection, Discussion & Findings

Film Synopsis

This is a love story between a young boy, Langalibalele, and his grandmother, Adelaide. Set in Mofolo Central, a vibrant cultural within the melting pot that is Soweto, the narrative unfolds

against the backdrop of a rich, yet challenging reality. After losing both his parents in a tragic car accident, Langa is taken in by his grandmother, who dedicates herself to ensuring he never feels disadvantaged. As the years pass and her health declines, their roles reverse (Myeni, 2024).

Through an immersive journey, the film employs sound, grading, and imagery in a theatrical way, drawing the audience into the evolving shades of their love story.

“And in the moments where you feel like life no longer has colours to experience, hold on to the people and the memories that remind you that a life well lived has all the colours in one.”

- Adelaide

Building on the theoretical frameworks I have engaged with, the case studies I have analysed, and the influence of the telenovela format that underpins my research, I have observed these ideas manifest in various ways throughout the pre- to post-production phases of my short film. In this section, I will explore the challenges encountered, the connections forged between different mediums, and the ways in which I translated the concept of theatricality onto the screen.

Production Process

Pre-production

I shared my manifesto and a brief overview of my research with everyone involved in the film, ensuring they were equipped with the knowledge to operate within the framework it outlined. This approach fostered a deeper understanding of the film’s intentions and the broader vision driving its creation.

The liberating nature of queering methodologies opened new avenues for theatricality, expanding the possibilities of what South African filmmakers can create.

Production

To effectively engage my cast and crew at their level of understanding, I drew connections between theatre and film, ensuring that my vision was clearly communicated. For instance, I linked my understanding of representational theatre—its theatrical framing and mechanics—to the language of film, translating the concept of the stage onto the screen.

To further enhance immersion, I explored the technique of ‘breaking the fourth wall,’ deliberately disrupting conventional storytelling to draw the audience deeper into the experience.

While queering methodologies offer a liberating approach to filmmaking, the constraints of time had a significant impact on how each scene was approached on set. The rigid, capitalist nature of the filmmaking industry - its structured timelines and systematic workflow - meant that what initially began as a fluid, exploratory process of discovering theatricality quickly became a race against time and access to locations.

However, this challenge underscores the urgent need to rethink and shift traditional filmmaking practices. There must be space for the essence of a narrative to emerge organically, allowing for moments of discovery and creative freedom. I recognise that this challenges the conventional process-to-product model of television production, but my experience has confirmed that strict adherence to deadlines often results in narratives being stripped down to their bare bones, reducing them to skeletal storylines accompanied by formulaic ‘entertaining’ shots.

There were moments when I had to fight for scenes to be shot, knowing that they were vital to preserving the integrity of my vision. Fortunately, in post-production, I was able to uphold that vision, and in the final cut, I believe it came through.

Post-production

This stage of filmmaking is where direction and vision converge to shape the final cut, distilling the essence of the story into its most compelling form. I quickly realized that even the most beautifully captured shots and sequences must ultimately serve the narrative—if they do not align with the vision, they must go.

Being deeply involved in the editing process - grading, sound design, scoring (including creating and recording vocals), subtitling, and more - I became acutely aware of missed opportunities on set to experiment with unconventional or subversive shots. However, this reflection only deepened my appreciation for the groundwork I had laid in translating my manifesto to the cast and crew. Their understanding of and engagement with its principles became evident in the way the material was captured and, later, refined in post-production.

Accessible via the Google Drive folder linked in Appendix B, are appendices that provide further insight into the production experience - both my own and that of my collaborators -

highlighting how the research scope, the manifesto's principles, and each team member's expertise informed and shaped the final work.

Praxis – a reflexive conversation

The concept of the screen as a theatre stage

Just as the stage is a space of boundless possibilities, where entire worlds can be created and transformed, so too is the screen. Understanding the screen as a stage allowed me to make more intentional creative choices, refining my approach in alignment with the principles of theatricality I had identified. One such principle is spatio-temporal co-presence, which accelerates audience immersion by collapsing the perceived boundaries between the viewer and the world of the story.

Black South African theatre and storytelling practices, immersivity and the conventions of the screen

When discussing the laws of performance (Ukala 2001), the concept of spatio-temporal co-presence found its translation through the deliberate challenge of filmic conventions. In creating the storyboard, I ensured that both the camera work and the actor direction allowed the audience to feel seen and, more importantly, as part of the story.

Specific shots were designed to foster a relationship between objects or bodies within the space, creating an experience where the audience feels as though they are physically present within the narrative, for example, when Langa arrives home he is immediately confronted by the box of keepsakes his grandmother kept. There is a constant back and forth of him looking at the box, the box 'looking' back at him; this creates the idea that the box has life so much so that it affects Langa. This acts as a foreshadowing of his grappling with his memories and time spent with his grandmother (this action occurs as the film progresses).

During production, the Cinematographer and I built a language of theatricality when it came to how the shots were framed. This meant that the subject matter to camera relationship was treated in a manner that reflected relationship and intimacy i.e. when Langa enters the house and the box of memories is the first thing that confronts him. The shots are translated to a back and forth, the Langa looks at the box, the box then looks back at him and those shots are then repeated. Another scene when he is about to open the box of memories the POV shots between Langa and the box establish the box as less of an inanimate object and more of a character that has the ability to affect him.

This decision was made to draw the viewer in, ensuring the audience feels directly involved in the story. By blurring the traditional boundaries of the screen (like in the aforementioned example), we aimed to "break the fourth wall," allowing the audience to feel like an active participant in the unfolding narrative, thereby reinforcing the immersive nature of the film⁸.

Queering methodologies - 'Deconstructing', 'resisting', 'questioning' and 'opening up'

Challenging filmmaking conventions stemmed from deconstructing the necessity of adhering to them, even in instances where such choices might not have made immediate sense to a crew accustomed to the norms of the medium. On set and in post-production, we departed from several traditional practices. For example, POV shots were not solely used to indicate who was speaking to whom or to clarify their relationship; instead, they were employed to establish a connection between Langa and the box of keepsakes that his late grandmother had carefully preserved over the years.

As I engaged with my crew and cast through this unconventional approach, I witnessed a noticeable shift in their comfort and sense of freedom. The ideas they contributed were more creative, and, more importantly, their approach to serving the story became intentionally focused. They moved from being mere cogs in a larger machine—people who simply did their job and left—to becoming active collaborators who felt a deeper sense of agency.

Representation and the everyday

Langa experiences a range of emotions - love, anger, regret, sadness, and grief - in a way that does not reduce him, Nomkhosi, or his grandmother to caricatures of violence or lovelessness.

Langa is portrayed as a young man whose humanity shines through, and alongside his grandmother and Nomkhosi, he is depicted as a complex individual. The potential love interest between Langa and Nomkhosi is not sexualized; rather, their connection is presented in a way that reflects their emotional depth and genuine affection. In my view, the narrative remains engaging and entertaining while allowing space for reflection and learning. The immersive, raw, and holistic nature of the representation invites the audience to engage with the story on a deeper level. By shifting from passive consumption to active engagement, the audience is

⁸ Another example is cited when Langa opens the box of keepsakes, the framing of his POV looking into the box and the POV of the box 'looking' up at him (as he reaches for the first object – the party hat) breaks the 4th wall causing the audience to feel much closer to the action.

encouraged to reflect critically on the narrative. This shift can lead to debates, foster conversation, and, ultimately, leave a lasting impact on the hearts and minds of those who experience it.

The narrative itself reflects 'the everyday' in a manner that challenges the stereotypes typically associated with Black families and individuals. By focusing on the journey of a young Black man navigating grief, the film highlights the vulnerability that Black men often face. By zooming in on the nuances of everyday life, the film presents an alternative modality of Black existence that opens up new possibilities for how Black life can be imagined and represented. Through this lens, my film portrays Black life with love, breaking free from the confines of a monolithic Black experience (hooks, 2001).

In reflecting on the outcome of my research, I conclude that theatricality can indeed transcend the boundaries of the stage and live through the screen. If time had permitted, I would have taken greater risks in capturing the story on set, exploring more play and experimentation without losing the essence of the narrative. The use of theatricality, a loving portrayal of Blackness (or any subject), and queering methodologies offer a level of intentionality, heart, and freshness to televisual storytelling.

One of the key insights I gained from discussions with my crew highlights how various aspects of the production contributed to the immersive experience. My sound supervisor emphasized his approach of using the "texture of natural sound" as a means of grounding the audience in the world of the story, enhancing its immersivity. In conversation with my cinematographer, he spoke about "allowing the camera to breathe," which, in his words, created a deeper sense of presence, pulling the audience closer into the moment.

In shaping the narrative, I intentionally chose to include choral voices and minimal sound elements, such as the piano, to highlight pivotal scenes and leave space for silence, allowing these moments to breathe. The reasoning behind this choice was to evoke a real-time experience where the audience feels fully immersed in a unified setting. By stripping down these layers, I sought to create an atmosphere where the essence of the story, its emotions, and its nuances could resonate with the audience in a more authentic and unfiltered way.

According to Ukala (2001), the use of a narrator who guides the audience through the story can be a powerful tool for creating intrigue and engagement. In my film, Gogo's voice serves as this guiding narrator, but her role is not immediately clear. Instead, the narrator's presence

unfolds gradually, allowing the audience to engage with the story at a deeper level. The intention behind this was to spark curiosity and encourage viewers to pay close attention to the unfolding narrative. By using techniques such as slow reveals, strategic use of silence, pacing, and allowing moments to "breathe," the audience is invited to be an active participant in deciphering the meaning of the story, rather than passively consuming it.

Through these elements, the film encourages the audience to adopt Langa's perspective, immersing them in his world and inviting them to ask themselves, "What do you feel, see, and hear?" The recognizable imagery and music create a sense of familiarity, which brings the viewer closer to Langa's journey, urging them to connect emotionally and intellectually with the narrative.

The film closes in the same way it opens, with the narrator's voice. This poetic return to Gogo's voice encapsulates the themes of loss and life, providing closure while also emphasizing that the audience has been on a journey of shared experience. The final moments of the story reveal a full narrative arc, one that the audience has been present for and, in a sense, "inside of," as the story unfolded.

In essence, the research I have conducted represents a deliberate grappling with resistance to the normative practices governing the representation of Black bodies in the South African cinematographic landscape. This process involved a thorough analysis, questioning, and critique of various case studies, particularly those that have been widely accepted by South African audiences in the realm of Telenovelas and even Soap Operas. Through this work, I embarked on a journey of queering the South African Cinemascape, which in turn allowed me to employ interdisciplinary approaches and alternative understandings when shaping the storylines. Ultimately, this approach enabled me to shift the representation of Black life in South African Telenovelas, offering a more nuanced, authentic portrayal that disrupts the conventional narratives often perpetuated in mainstream media.

Chapter 7: Critique & Conclusion

In my experience from pre- to post-production, I have come to realize just how challenging it is to truly push the boundaries. What began as an impassioned quest for change soon encountered the reality of time constraints and the pressure to create an aesthetically pleasing film. I acknowledge that there were many more boundaries that could have been pushed. As it stands, the theatricality and essence of the manifesto found expression in the crew's hearts and minds - their awareness, intentionality, approach, and treatment of the story. This manifested in a more understated manner on screen.

Perhaps, had I had more time to explore, the integration of theatricality and the screen would have been more overt, allowing for a deeper and more expansive engagement with the concepts. Maybe this is what the South African Cinemascope requires to bring the effect outlined in my manifesto to life. The understated nature of what was achieved is not a reflection of failure, but rather an indication of the need to dedicate more time to practice, experiment, and play. Only then could we explore this intersection in a way that fosters the emergence of a solidified structure and framework for future work.

If Showmax were to produce this Telenovela, I contend that they would not have taken the stripped-down approach that I embraced. They would likely have found ways to inject the narrative with artifice, predictability, and entertainment-driven elements designed primarily for consumption. The lead character would not have had the opportunity to develop a fully three-dimensional arc, resultantly, the narrative - had it been adapted into a telenovela - would not have aimed to immerse the viewer or engaged them critically.

I am aware that my research has only begun to spark a discourse, one that I urge all who engage with it to continue. The manifesto I have formulated carries a life of its own by being shared with the public, my personal network (via social media and conversationally) and at future screenings and discussions (conference/film festival format). Thankfully, that work has begun in the process of making the work (with the creatives involved), having the work premier at the Africa Rising International Film Festival (December 2024) where a post screening discussion was held, sharing the paper at the CARA conference (July 2024), placing the film in the festival circuit and lastly hosting a conference/screening discussion & possibly present it again at a conference of my own hosting.

There is significant room for exploration, experimentation, and deviance within our Cinemascape. Our rich cultures offer a plethora of perspectives, and I argue that there is space for a new movement in storytelling - one that prioritizes vitality within communities while remaining engaging and entertaining. As I mentioned earlier, this represents the genesis of one solution, and I encourage anyone who resonates with this work to approach it as a collective effort. Together, we can remedy the issue of representation and narratives within our Cinemascape, offering a broader, more inclusive vision for storytelling.

****** At this stage, I invite you to explore the documentary-style interview reflections from myself and key available members of the cast and crew. This supplementary material, accessible via the Google Drive folder linked in Appendix B, offers a visceral, firsthand account of the practical component—providing deeper insight into the creative process and the lived experiences that shaped this work.

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