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Black Writings: The Modal Mixtape Sampling and Remixing the Ethos of South African Poor Theatre with the Film Medium

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Black Writings: The Modal Mixtape

Sampling and Remixing the Ethos of South African Poor Theatre with the Film Medium.



Film to be accessed via Google Drive Link:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wj1325SLg4DCnfeTHgVz36-dZBawXkC3/view?usp=sharing

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Film and Television) in the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand

DECLARATION

I hereby declare the following:

I am aware that plagiarism (the use of someone else's work without their permission and/or without acknowledging the original source) is wrong.

I confirm that ALL the work submitted for assessment for the above course is my own unaided work except where I have explicitly indicated otherwise.

I have followed the required conventions in referencing the thoughts and ideas of others.

I understand that the University of the Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is a belief that this is not my own unaided work or that I have failed to acknowledge the source of the ideas or words in my writing.

Signature: Date: 22 March 2022



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1. Prologue

Preface

Let's imagine I'm standing in a record store aisle, with all these nostalgic "records" of film and theatre that I'm too young and perhaps too black to be drawn to, but still somehow feel connected to. Not only that, but I can't shake the feeling that these records have informed me as a South African and could form new work in a strong way.

I'm trying to make a "song", a cohesive language for my practice as a filmmaker, with an underpinning interest, ethos and an understanding of South African Poor Theatre. In my hand I have a Grotowski "record", called *Towards Poor Theatre* (1976), that is the main sample for my track. I'm also "digging through crates", looking at the *Theatre of the Oppressed* by Augasto Boal (1974) and other theories of theatre in film, to mix together to make the song.

I've been listening to tracks by Athol Fugard and Barney Simon, as sources of inspiration. As Pharrell Williams describes chords as "coordinates pointing us to emotion" (2019) , I have begun to think that maybe plays such Woza Albert (1971) and Sizwe Banzi is Dead (1972) and their recordings for BBC (1982 and 1983) can serve as chords and indicators to the direction for my filmic practice.

Although you might not find a section entitled “methodology” in this paper, what you will find is that it is underpinned by practice based research methodologies, in the interest of Walter Mignolo’s epistemology disobedience. In this paper, I employ DJ Lyneé Denise’s concept of The DJ Scholarship (2013) as a research methodology, which sees the paralleling between the roles of the research to those of a DJ, borrowing ideas and re-contextualising them . I sample theatre concepts, ideas and theories to mix and remix them and eventually form my own knowledge around my filmic practice. This notion of deejaying also exists in the research question itself, as it seeks to attempt a blending of two artistic disciplines. It is further carried in the way I approach film and storytelling, through the editing process, cutting, scratching, loop and rewinding for further indentation.

This research further makes use of auto-ethnographic methods for meaning making and epistemic disobedience. These methods are employed through personal anecdotes and reflexivity as additive interrogators and informers to the research exploration. This research project also makes use of the personal, in the research film as a means to explore therapeutic processes for film as well as an exploration of the personal as a political enquiry. Auto-Ethnography functions in the crux of this research, it is an inquiry of the self, as a black “born free” South African and my relationship with Poor and ProtestTheatre as an inherited artistic voice.

As I stand in the middle of this record-store of theoretical frameworks and literature, I am also analysing the “records” which pick and sample. I am studying them and thinking about what they represent and what they indicate about me and the ethos of my filmmaking practice in a traumatised, post-apartheid South Africa . So let’s get to mixing.

What is Black Writings

> Grotowski's soul belongs in Africa, he was born in the wrong place, never went to Africa. But his work speaks to the body, it demands, it tortures and sacrifices. South Africa always had artistic resource problems, but Grotowski's work spoke to our souls and it merged with African storytelling, mainly because of the work that Mbongeni Ngema, Percy Mtwa and Barney Simon in 1981 did on Woza Albert. (Prince Lamla, 8: 2013)

Black Writings is an experimental research project that seeks to propose a sampling of the ethos of South African Poor Theatre as well as its formal elements in the making of narrative and documentary films. This research has two main components. The first is to analyse and interrogate Poor Theatre as a framework, as well as make a case for its formal intersection with my filmic practice and its potential significance for the language of South African cinema and socio-political discourse. The other element of this research is a film that aims to test the claims of the essay as well as inform the findings of the research at various points.

In the process of inquiry, I aim to delve into the introduction, adaptation and ultimate impact of Poor Theatre in South Africa in the 1960s. I am interested in exploring these ideas with the intention to make a case for the prevalent and layered impact that Poor Theatre has had on Protest Theatre and political discourse in South Africa from the 1960s to the 1990s.

In its enquiry, Black Writings serves to develop a process in making a new film. This film, entitled *Little Lamb*, seeks to take on formal elements rooted in the ethos of Poor Theatre through direct address, minimalistic settings as well as the use of self, personal archive and the body as the primary storytelling tool.

Black Writings is a research project primarily rooted in the understanding of arts-based research which McNiff defines as a method of inquiry that uses elements of creative art therapy experiences, including the making of art as ways of understanding the significance of what we do within our practice (1998: 13). In this dissertation, the reflection on the methods, process and results of making a film all form a great part in the inquiry of intersection between Poor Theatre and filmmaking.

Arts based research falls under the lexicon of practice based research as it seeks to present a flexible relationship between the practical and the theoretical. Through the execution of the project and exploring the method, I present interests in the exploration of the functions and definitions of the practical, practice and praxis as it serves knowledge creation.

Patricia Leavy describes arts based research as a transdisciplinary approach to knowledge building that combines tenets of the creative arts in research contexts (Leavy, 2009). I resonate with this definition and categorisation because it aims to sum up and define the fulcrum of arts based research and is not too focused on discerning it with other definitions

in its lexicon. It merely aims to explore the idea as an umbrella term for various research methods that employ the creative arts.

This umbrella definition is also relevant to my research process as the creative process is used in various points of this research. It serves as an entry point for the research in that the interest in the subject itself is a result of my prior work and that my practice serves as a reference point for the questions of this research. The theoretical explorations and the answers have then also been applied in the creation of a new project. Essentially, the answers to this research have also been transposed to the making of new work and the development of new practical ethos.

In its employment of Arts Based Research, this paper specifically employs the DJ Scholarship as a research methodology that exists in the formal elements of this essay as well as those of the film. This methodology of interrogational, experimental research methodologies is in the interest of achieving artistic outcomes of Epistemic and Disciplinary disobedience.

I am particularly interested in the notion of the self and the personal archive serving as an entry point for knowledge creation. This is an interest that is derived and aims to align with Walter Mignolo's concept of "Epistemic Disobedience" which seeks to remove research work and the creation of knowledge from a voice of god or a zero point (Mignolo, 2009).

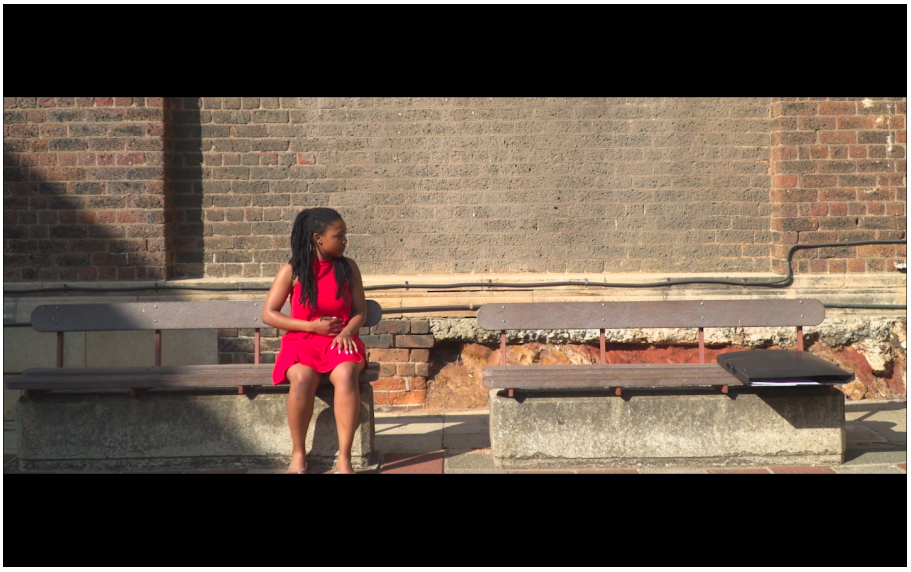
The concept rather seeks to propose a way of knowledge consumption and creation that is not stripped from the consumers or creators personal perspective and experience.

This is all in the interest of decolonising methods of research and seek to disrupt and challenge science, ontology and epistemology (Exo, 2014: 6). The process entails questioning the theory of justified belief or opinion and what validates the process of knowledge creation. This questioning underpins the functions of the personal archive employed throughout the process of dissertation as well as the practice of making the film.

The ideas of decolonial research methods are further supported in the specific material explored as well as the research concept itself. In addition, through the interdisciplinary nature of this research concept I am interested in cultivating an interrogational approach to the disciplines in which I work and question cultural philosophies that are deeply embedded in theatre and film. This is an idea which can be deduced from Lewis Gordon's explorations of Disciplinary Disobedience as he further explains that "such a route is still susceptible to decadence so long as it fails to bring reality into focus. But doing that raises questions of purpose. It raises considerations that may need to be addressed in spite of what disciplinary dictates" (Gordon, 2011: 99).

To sum it all up in more direct terms Black Writings is approached from the perspective of a maker of films. It makes use of my prior work in its inquiry, namely my previous films, *Sikelela Tapes* and *An Empty Canvas*, which bred the language of minimalistic

mise-en-scene and costume with the language of documentary. It takes on a somewhat scientific approach in that it uses the reflections of the process of making and the practical in order to form knowledge. It then further takes that formed theory and incorporates it in the process of making something new.



Still from *An Empty Canvas* (Alex Sono, 2019)

Accessed at:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RiODxOHhCXxx1eMBa8fPWhHrYO0-65xT/view

The History of Black Writing

The title Black Writings is inspired by a documentary film that I made, of the same title, while partaking in an exchange programme in Sweden. The performative documentary film saw me play an inverted idea of an 18th century colonial explorer, as I reflect on my experience travelling outside of South Africa for the first time. The political inversion was

the idea of me as an African explorer in the north of Europe on a mission to document my experience, the metropolitan landscapes and the Swedish “native”.

In executing the telling of this story, the film employs formal elements of South African Poor Theatre, namely direct address, minimalistic setting and the body enacting multiple characters, objects and ideas. It is made up of two main elements, an onstage theatrical retelling and performance, reflecting on a robbery that took place on my first night and the experiences that followed. The second element is the insert shots and scenes that revisit the areas in which the story takes place.

This film was initially a result of trying to create amidst the restrictions and conditions bred by the COVID 19 global pandemic but it soon became an attempt to enhance, as well as bring to life the concepts of the story through a therapeutic physical practice, the act of enacting the story in addition simply showing and telling.



Still from *Black Writing* (Alex Sono, 2020)

Accessed at: https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=vTLEwcw3Zt0

Subsequently, the film was formalised as a one man play in a theatre, intercut with on location B- roll reflecting on real accounts and experiences while living in Gothenburg. The film particularly focused on the ordeal of being a victim of a robbery and facing the trauma that followed. This was through a direct address one man play.

The process began to birth a theoretical interest in the analysis of Poor Theatre, its introduction in South Africa, what it entails as well what it stands for culturally. It further inspired experiments aimed at playing with the elements of Poor Theatre, fiction, and documentary. The experiments were interested in the juxtaposition of the respective treatments of blocking, reenactment and address in each of the formats.

It was through the meshing of the approaches to storytelling that I developed a strong interest in what could be further accomplished through this praxis. A praxis beyond simply filming theatre or adapting theatre plays to conventional narrative film nor vice-versa, but rather a much more interrogative and experimental approach to the formal storytelling elements of Poor Theatre and their functions and how they can affect the film medium. This experimentation was also interested in what it means to embody an art form that is deeply synonymous with Protest Theatre and Black Consciousness.

The title and concept of the film are a direct play on J.M Coetzee's *White Writing* (1988), a collection of seven essays which Cotzee reads, in the interest of coming to terms with South African literature and to present the various endeavours of white writers to understand the landscape of South Africa. My denotation of White Writing as a concept is that which also understands the idea of the "white paper" as an authoritative piece of literature that is intended to inform. Through the lens of Epistemic Disobedience, it looks at the idea of whiteness and its connotations of authority as determinant of knowledge in society, The title of this project is that which exists as a remix of this concept of white authoritative knowledge. It presents a confident claim of blackness as an intellectual idea, in an act of writing black and writing back, through an artistic and epistemic practice.

J. M. Coetzee dissects the (sometimes hidden or omitted) social, political, racial, cultural and geographical themes in the prose and poetry of white South-African writings before

World War II. In this dissection Coetzee addresses " the great intellectual schemas through which South Africa has been 'thought' by Europe" (Coetzee, 1990:706).

I would also like to add that, in this process of dissecting these texts and their themes, Coetzee's white, male subjectivity is also on the table. His analysis is mirrored by that of the self as a white South African. Black Writing not only works to subvert and play with the ideas that lie in the colonial texts that Coetzee presents. However, it also embarks on a self-reflexive journey of inquiry that deals with race and space.

This self-reflexive practice and inquiry also parallels the ideas that Growowksi posits, that involve a physical investment in the interest of knowledge creation and consumption. Therefore, Black Writing as remix, not only mirrors Coetzee's practice of re-reading with intention to draw specific themes and systems of information, however posits the writing back from a personal and critically, self evaluative stance. In addition to this, I further seek to be physically invested in enquiring rather than just clinically observant.

The idea of *Black Writings* is also intended to carry the ethos underpinning this research and the interest of my praxis as a writer and filmmaker. It serves to represent the idea of rewriting history and knowledge from the explicit intention of black perspective. It seeks to present an unlearning of colonial, Eurocentric ideals of knowledge creation and meaning making.

This black perspective that informs my work is that which understands the concept of blackness through ideas of Frantz Fanon. These are ideas that engage with being a black person, trapped in the reality of feeling and being subhuman in a white dominated, hegemonic society, which Fanon refers to as a zone of nonbeing (Fanon, 1968:2).

My practice is in the interest of presenting black consciousness, a state of interrogating blackness as more than just a subhuman body, but rather as a being with a “conscious” mind. Black Consciousness ”seeks to demonstrate the lie that black is an aberration from the "normal" which is white. It is a manifestation of a new realisation that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate the white man, blacks are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black” (Biko,1987:49).

The reflection of my black subjectivity in my research and creative work serves as an acknowledgment of the absolute desire and constant, existential work towards whiteness, a desire to be seen and to see the self as human. It plays with those complexities in the relationship between whiteness and blackness. Essentially, making my practice is a Fanonian practice of self inquiry and awareness, that looks at work with a full understanding of not only my blackness but also an awareness of my desires to be accepted as an artist in hegemonic society. It is through this awareness and an underpinning exploration of the mostly subconscious desire to be seen in whiteness (humanness) that questions of self-reflexive, political dialectics through a creative mode can be proposed.

With this reflection of subjectivity my work further aims to upset that unconscious dynamic of blackness and desire for humanness through the gaze of whiteness. It aims to subvert these ideas of desire, towards finding my own subject position in which the claiming of my black subjectivity does not undermine me .

> An omelette cannot be unscrambled. Not even the one prepared in the crucible of 19th century sordid European design. - No Serenity Here (Keorapetse Kgositsile, 2009).

2. Understanding Theatre as a Theoretical Framework

Theatre is everywhere and Everything is Theatre

Before one can truly understand the impact that the introduction of Poor theatre had on South African cultural expressions of performative storytelling, it is important to understand the climate of theatre before the influences of the West, colonialism and those of Brecht and Grotowski in the 1950s. For the sake of this research it is also paramount that I set out to clarify my definition and understanding of what theatre is. This understanding of what truly constitutes theatre serves to support the claims and argument made by this research as well the framework in which it operates.

Rebecca Schneider describes the theatre as an idea that exists everywhere. From the rituals of government to the courtroom, from sporting arenas to the theatre of war (2014: 6). It is through this understanding that one can deduce that theatre has and can take place within a spectrum of performance and can be connected to rituals as much as it is to storytelling. Schneider also highlights that theatre dates back thousands of years and that it is no longer enough to limit our attention to Western dramatic literature canon.

As one thinks of theatre in the context of storytelling , defining and discerning the function of acting becomes imperative to the definition of theatre. Martin Barhan simply defines acting as "the impulse to make belief" (1995:4). However when thinking and making meaning through an African context as well as Schneider's understanding of theatre, it can be argued that acting isn't always focused on "making belief" or "living truthfully under imaginary circumstance" as Sanford Meisner defines it. Acting can function as a means of storytelling that goes beyond believability and particularly in Poor Theatre as a means to present as opposed to represent.

It is when realising that theatre is everywhere that one begins to realise that it isn't a genre nor a storytelling medium but rather a mode that can carry story, rituals and events exist in creating a sense of environment. Through the process of investigating what theatre is, I've also come to perceive the process of making films and this dissertation in theatrical terms. It has become a part of my process to always become aware that in order for one to make a

film or pursue a process of knowledge creation, they have to play specific roles in various moments.

As a black South African writing in English, the fourth language that I only learned when I started school, this assumption of a "character" in order to create and validate the knowledge I present is quite prevalent to me. There are a set of deliberate linguistic choices at work as I write my dissertation as well as create and perform in films.

The intention of this research as I have already begun pointing out is to make the notions of theatrics apparent in not only the final presentation of my films but also the process of creating films and telling stories. This intention of theatrically performative dissertation also applies to my research work. In summation I will offer an example by breaking the fourth wall for a moment…

> As you, the reader, engage with this paper, remember that it isn't only a piece of literature but rather think of it as a theatrical work of meaning making in relation to developing an authentically South African mode of filmmaking.

(he takes a beat and returns to character)

It's called a Play for a Reason

In my experience as an actor in South Africa, I've also come to realise that there are more deliberate reasons for the word "play" and its synonymy with theatre. I can recall many directors giving notes such as "Alex this is a play, we need to play". This, alluding to the

idea the only way to get to a true, authentic telling of the story and to inhabit a character is through exploring in a playful manner. The play is not only a word to merely signify a production or partaking in one as a specific character but it is also essential as a verb to the ethos of theatrical practice.

It is therefore important that the actor, writer, director and all people involved in the process of theatrical rituals, even the audience member, be mindful of a process that involves playing. This process should be carefree and should rely on the idea of what comes instinctively rather than what is expected from a script or in the outcomes of the relationship between the audience and the producers.

In the interest of this research goal, I'd like to think of the process of filmmaking in decolonial terms. The hybridisation of film and theatre allows for the breaking of western hierarchy between the elements of conventional cinema. These elements include script, directing, the technical elements as they relate to the subject and representation. One of the main aspects of this research is that it aims to make use of theatre's notion of "play" as a tool to negotiate my relationship with film and its politics. This, as mentioned earlier, entails perceiving the process of research and reflection as a theatrical practice.

Through synthesising ideas to define theatre, I have been able to perceive it as a framework that enables an interrogation of the power of the script iver the performance or the making of films in general. In addition, I have set out to "play" with the hierarchy of a set in the

process of making my films, negotiating my role as a director and the relationship I have with my collaborators.

In approaching this research I have also come to grapple with the concept of the director as a hierarchical figure over performers, as well as the power that the camera has over its "subjects". Through playing, new relationships between these facets could possibly be discovered, including an opportunity to attempt to break the hierarchy and distance between the performer and the audience member. I use the process of making Little Lamb with borrowed ideas from South African Poor Theatre as a way to seek out knowledge about the triangular relationship between the director, performer/subject and the audience.

This essay plays with artistic disciplines in interests of epistemic disobedience as a theoretical framework. It plays with concepts and ideas in the attempt to posit the idea of a new South African cinema that embodies the ethos of the South African theatre of the sixties. This act of playing carries through to the film in which I present playing with raw footage through the edit as an attempt to create both implicit and explicit commentary on aspects of the story as well as the medium of film. These intentions represent a reflection of the process as a primary concern for my research practice through filmmaking.

Augusto Boal even goes to lengths of describing the human being as theatre (1979: 10). This idea points to similar aspects and aims with Poor Theatre, such as Grotowski's intention to encourage self-penetration as a method for creating theatre and telling stories, as well as an

outcome for the audience. Throughout the dissertation, I explore this concept and that of personal archives, propagating it as one that doesn't only come from deep reflexive thinking but also subconsciously, through playing. One also thinks of playing as an act synonymous with children and that it can bring the adult closer to their inner child and perhaps present them with traumatic experience and subconscious knowledge, that can be beneficial input and output for storytelling practices.

This understanding of play as it relates to theatre, serves an integral part of forming my understanding of film and developing the approach that carries this research process. I aim to posit film as an encounter and further enhance the resonance of encounter by making films with a theatrical ethos, rooted in playing in order to encourage stories from a nuanced personal archive .

Grotowski and his "Poor Theatre"

Poor Theatre is a method of theatre and performance that was developed from the process of "experimental theatre" founded and introduced by Jerzy Grotowski who called his theatre "the laboratory" to denote concentrated and consistent experimentation as being at the root of the theatre-making process. The Polish theatre practitioner was interested in the "ripening of actors" and seeking to define what is distinctively theatre. The quest was initiated and began with Grotowski's studies under Stanislavsky, exploring his "systematic renewal of the methods observation, and the dialectic relationship to his earlier work" (1976: 16).

The idea of Poor Theatre can be simply defined as a performance style that strives to rid itself from the excesses of theatre, such as lavish costumes and detailed sets. When speaking on Poor Theatre, Grotowski claims to struggle to describe it. However he does allude to some of the attempts and functions of Poor Theatre in *Towards Poor Theatre* (1976). Grotowski offers this explanation through some sort of manifesto for the movement, in which he states: “We are seeking to define what is distinctively theatre, what separates this activity from other categories of performance and spectacle.” (Grotowski, 1976: 15).

This alludes to the deconstructive nature of Poor Theatre which strips down the staging of the set, as well as costumes. This to mainly focus the audience on the performance. It is also to the centre body as a device that carries out the ideas that each of those striped elements would serve. This means that the actor's body serves a singled out representation of the imagined setting and costume. Grotowski’s notable influences throughout his career and primarily in developing poor theatre as a concept include Bertolt Brecht and Konstantin Stanislavski.

Typically, in film the term adaptation refers to the idea of taking a story or concept from one form, for example a book or theatre play and creating a film out of it. However this research uses the term ”adaptation” to refer to South African theatre makers pulling the mere stylistic form of Poor Theatre from Poland and applying it to uniquely South African stories.

The core of the theatre is an encounter (Grotowtski, 1976:56). It is an encounter between the actor and the audience member but it is also an encounter of the producer who is confronted with the actor. Through the actor's self revelation, the producer is also pushed to self revelation. Theatre is also an encounter between the producer, the actor and the text. This research makes use of this idea as a framework for understanding the process of making films as well as analysing them.

3. The Introduction Of Poor Theatre in South Africa

An understanding of popular South African theatre before Poor Theatre

When describing the essence of South African theatre, what would be ideal is to emphasise the vibrant colours, narration, songs and dance of the San, Zulu and Sotho etc. However the history of the country is far more complicated and tragic. The true elements of authentic South African theatre and performance or what could be defined as indigenous storytelling and performance forms were quickly ignored by settlers, despite the fact that they represented a vibrant and fundamental performance tradition among the majority of the people (Fletcher, 1994: 7).

This would prove to have a deep impact in the culture of South African arts and storytelling, as Dutch settlers aimed to emphasise their dominance. This saw all the vibrant aspects of South African indigenous storytelling and performance erased from “official” accounts of theatre in the dominant discourse. As Jill Fletcher describes it, for over three centuries South Africa has allowed itself to succumb to what is known as the “cultural cringe” (1994: 7).

This is the notion that in order to be truly deemed as successful in the arts one would have to be recognised in Europe or legitimised by Western culture. As much as this is true for South African actors, musicians and filmmakers in the year 2022, this has always been the case in the aftermath of colonialism. I would also argue that the desire for artists to be legitimised by the West is an additional factor in the erasure of indigenous cultural elements and performance styles in the art world.

During the Anglo-Boer war 1899-1902 English Theatre had been busy, its main focus at this time was to entertain troops and colonists. Afrikaans remained dormant in those years as the Afrikaaners were more focused on winning the war, as Fletcher describes (1994:137). Much like the new nation, Afrikaans theatre would come to awaken after the war. Debating societies were becoming more popular amongst the Afrikaans in small towns around Cape Town. This resulted in monthly meetings taking place on the Thursday nearest to the full moon. The debating societies brought together people who had never mixed before, making new friendships.

These meetings would later serve as a platform for the birth of Afrikaans theatre. As the topics of the debates became more vast, so did the itinerary of the meetings. Recitations and songs had become part of the entertainment of the evenings. This naturally developed into play reading and productions as a part of the evenings. As all the meetings were held in Dutch and no English was allowed, complaints began to rumble amongst members as it was difficult to find appropriate Dutch material to share at the meeting. This however did not cause any deterrence in the meetings as they continued to become social and cultural

activities as their popularity grew nationwide. Through their polarity and strict Dutch rules, debating societies pushed for a new wave of writers.

This new wave was interested in the growth of Afrikaans and convincing Afrikaners that Afrikaans language was natural and that it was their natural language. Fletcher makes sense of the ambiguity of this statement by placing it against the education system that forced Dutch on Afrikaners. Preller was convinced that theatre could be used to serve the cause, he insisted that Afrikaans theatre plays should be works of art and not an “abstract performance of passion" (Fletcher, 1994: 137).

Shortly after on the 9th of March in 1907 the “Afrikaans-Hollandse Toneelvereniging” would present their first production of two short plays entitled *Meneer s’n Jas and Stortbuit.* Thereafter Afrikaans theatre continued to spread all over the country from Cape Town to Pretoria and eventually creating theatrical and cultural societies in Bloemfontein and Stellenbosh. The wishes of General Smuts and Preller as well as those of the new wave of Afrikaans theatre practitioners had come true. Afrikaans was not only solidified as a language but also as a culture and theatre space had formed, what i would argue is its own Shakespeare equivalents through names like Paul de Groot and Hendrik Hanekom.

By the 1930s a new culture of black consciousness had been brewing and had become more palpable through theatre amongst English speaking South Africans. This type of theatre had never been known before; naturalistic, social protest, the theatre which showed people the

times in which they were living. It had moved away from the pretty and was more concerned with relevance. This was the backdrop of the childhoods and upbringings of innovators such as Barney Simon and Athol Fugard into the world of theatre.

This idea of the construction of an Afrikaans nation should be read with a notion of scepticism, that acknowledges the much more complex intentions of this project. One must be mindful of the narrative of Afrikaans as a supposed "pure" Christian-originating linguistic culture. Instead, it is important that the questions relating to the connection and erasure of its creole, "coloured" and islamic origins.

Barney Simon, Athol Fugard and The introduction of Poor Theatre in South Africa.

The introduction of Poor theatre may have also come into fruition and resonance with South African theatre makers as it interceded the introduction of Workshop Theatre in South Africa. This is said to be introduced by Barney Simon upon his return to South Africa in 1961. Barney Simon's work and contribution towards the shift in South Africa is monumental and can be traced in canonical works such as *Woza Albert* (1971).

In addition to his experimental and ultimately innovative approach to theatre making in South Africa, the great impact of Barney Simon can perhaps be attributed to the time in which he emerged into the arts and theatre scene in South Africa. Barney Simon was born in 1934, a time where many in South Africa were coming to realise the potential of creative arts and culture to define identity (Hutchison, 2003: 4).

As Yvette Hutchison states, the best way to evaluate Barney Simon's reputation and the significance of his contribution to South Africa's cultural and socio-political history, is to begin by contextualising his work within the wider framework of modern South African history (2003: 4).

As a way to respond to the repressive conditions under which black South Africans were living, both urban middle class black South African and white liberals began to see the potential urban cultural forms in the 1920s (Hutchison, 2003: 5). This also included the development of the Bantu Men's Society, which was aimed at encouraging creativity and defining African identity outside of the slavish conditions of the mining industry that was rife in Johannesburg. It also broke away from European definitions of what culture and sophistication were, without embodying artificial notions of African identity as a mere response to the repressive cultural state.

One can begin to assess the impact of Barney Simon from the 1950s to the 1970s. Between this time, more multi racial theatres became the popular alternatives in the midst of state funded art councils. These were organised by white people and were aimed at educating black performers who supported the cause against growing white Afrikaner nationalism and its hegemony.

After several years studying in England and working a backstage job at Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in London's East End at the Theatre Royal, Stratford. Barney Simon

returned to South Africa, after having suffered an illness in 1961. He returned with a newly informed approach and interest in experimenting with Brecht texts and Peter Brooks ideas.

A year prior, the organisation, Union Artists was established with the intent to train and promote black performers who were willing to collaborate with white financiers and artists. (Hutchison, 2003: 4). In 1961, with the help of Ian Bernhardt, Barney Simon went on to form the Phoenix Players. In addition to working as an editor and copywriter in the day, he helped at The Rehearsal Room at Dorkay House in the evenings. This is where he would meet Athol Fugard, helping him with *The Blood Kno*t and directing Fugard in *Krapp's Last Tape* (Beckett) and the first production of Fugard's *Hello and Goodbye*.

This was also two years before Athol Fugard would return to Port Elizabeth to collaborate with black artists in expanding the workshop style of theatre making, by exploring other theories and texts and developing genres of theatre.

Fugard had been involved in an amateur group called the Serpent Players since 1963. The group of actors had their first play in a former snake pit in the zoo which resulted in their name. The Serpent Players was composed of ten members, all from the black township of New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, performing to all-black audiences (Fuchs, 1984: 71). The group was mainly interested in relating to their audience as opposed to the difficult tasks of adapting Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1913) and Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948) to a semi illiterate audience. So they began improvising plays based on their shared experiences and

significant events in the community. Two of the members of the Port Elizabeth's Serpents Players that began to contribute as authors during the time of the repositioning of the group's plays, as well as Athol Fugard's new authorship were the now celebrated Winston Ntshona and John Kani.

One of the plays that began to epitomise these experiments is *The Coat* (1966) which was based on someone that the actors knew that had been arrested and sentenced to five years in prison for belonging to a banned organisation and had asked his friends to pass over his coat with a set of instructions. The play was formalised as a sixty minute scene that imagined how the coat was handed off to his wife and her reactions. *The Coat* was part of similar experiments which Fugard referred to as "two dimensional and improvisation at the shallowest level." (Fuchs, 1984: 71). This was Fugard's reflection on the experiments seven years later. By this time he had encountered Grotowski.

Following, their series of experiments including *The Three Port Elizabeth Plays* composed of *The Blood Knot (1961), Hello and Goodbye* (1965) and *Boesman and Lena* (1969) which were successfully filmed and published. Athol Fugard introduced *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* (1972) and *The Island* (1973). The plays were clear examples of the extent to which Fugard had been drawn to Grotowski. The two plays were formalised as two handers with minimal settings carried by monologues and solely driven on the actors' abilities and immersion into the story. *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* is mainly stylised by monologues between two characters and various implicit moments in which the speeches address the audience. Furthermore the play only had one set change. This would see John Kani and Winston Ntshona win the award for Best Lead Actor in a Play at the 1975 TONY Awards.

It was not only the international reception of South African Poor theatre that made it popular but also how it resonated with audiences at home in South Africa. Soon more and more theatre plays packaged through Grotowski's theories were delivered to South African audiences. The spirit of the movement had actualised many concepts of the township and other black communities.

Another play that grossed international success similar to the level of *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* was the now ever timeless *Woza Albert* (1976), devised by Barney Simon, Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema. The Play much like Fugard and Simon's previous work saw only two actors portray multiple characters as they engage with large political questions and isms, in this play the question being "What would happen if Morena (Jesus Christ) were to come down to South Africa?"

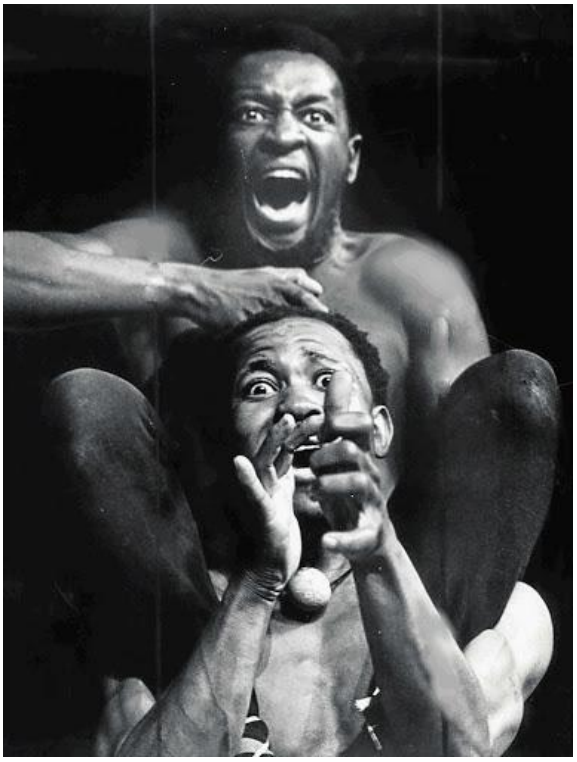
One significant aspect that can be noted about the success of the South African style of Poor Theatre is that it functioned beyond Fletcher's earlier mentioned definition of the 'cultural cringe'. Although the plays were subject to Western praise, they did not actively seek that. As they merely borrowed from specific global theories, they were not interested in living up to the standards of Büchner's, Grotowski or Brecht but were rather in the interest of relating to black South African audiences and appeasing their standards of story.

Furthermore, this new movement of storytellers, writers and performers were not so interested in creating a figure that paralleled the success of Shakespeare. The movement had denounced the hierarchy of plays, in which the script or the director had absolute power

over the process of theatre making. Instead the movement proposed the collaboration between actors, directors and writers as the new key to telling authentic South African stories. One can further argue that as South African Poor Theatre showed interest in stories for and about black people that this was the first time that a movement of theatre catered to the majority of South Africans as opposed to one cultural group. It blended languages in its functions and was produced in spaces where people of different races engaged about the issues of the country.

It can also be added that isolation of the performers body into the extreme “trance state” in Poor Theatre also enables the spiritual and religious into the world of theatre. Thus seeing the adoption of Poor Theatre enabling the interrogation and reimagining of politics through biblical concepts. In Chapter 5 of this paper, I further explore the relationship between South African spirituality and politics as a reason for the success of Poor Theatre in South Africa. I also explore it as a possible entry point for the hybridisation of film and Poor Theatre.

It can be further argued that the term “poor” in Poor Theatre, carries a slightly heavier weight and meaning in South Africa, it doesn't only signify the stripping away of theatre from the lavish sets and costumes. It however also presents making theatre accessible to underprivileged makers and audiences. Theatre in South Africa also focuses on the stories and spirits of the poor and politically deprived in South Africa.



Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema in *Woza Albert* (Barney Simon, 1971)

4. What was Film In South Africa

This section samples Ntongela Masilela's article in *Jump Cut* (1991) entitled *Come Back Africa and South African film history*, in order to form an understanding of South Africa cinema and establish an aspect of it that distinguishes it from other cinemas of the world. It takes the article and aims to advance the surveying of South African film by building on Masilela's trace of its history. In the article Masilela makes the case that in South Africa, economics is directly determinant of the evolution, structure, and ideological complications of the country's cinema (Masilela, 1991). In this section whilst adding that *Come Back Africa* serves as a precursor to a uniquely hybridised and theatrical film, its form and dialectics consciousness.

South Africa has always been in tune with film from the earliest conceptions of the technology. It was only four decades after the discovery of diamonds and gold in Kimberly, in the 1860s that the first film was shown in South Africa. The first film was shown on Monday the 11th of May 1896 (Masilela, 1991). By 1909 films were being shown regularly in South Africa, all over the country. In the mining compounds the film audiences were made up of two groups, black men lured and inducted in the peasantry of mining and white agricultural being introduced, inducted and becoming proletarians of the mining industry. (Masilela, 1991)

Previously the miners had relied on musical hall arts for entertainment but the introduction of film had completely changed that. The mining revolution in Africa led to the outbreak of an imperialist war all over the continent. This included the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1901 in South Africa which was in the interests of British imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism. This resulted in persistent and prevalent propaganda throughout the African continent in culture and arts in, this was specifically growing throughout the culture in South Africa during and after the war (Masilela, 1991).

This Anglo-Boer war, much like it did with theatre, also factored in the kind of films that were shown and made. This resulted in specific propaganda films produced by British major production companies namely British Mutoscope and Biograph Co., R.W. Paul, and the Warwick Trading Company. Various other companies such as Pathé, Gaumont, Gibbons, Edison and others were at the centre of this propaganda warfare. Two kinds of films were made during this time, “raw documentary” films and staged propaganda (Masilela, 1991).

As Ntongela Masilela (1991) mentions, the trend of propagandistic contents at the centre of filmmaking was at the detriment of building a film culture in South Africa. As it was concerned with iconography it can be argued that only recently has filmmaking been considered an art form in South Africa. This is because the film had always been seen as an iconographic battleground which hosted a continuation of the war between English imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism.

My deduction is that historically the culture of South Africa is one characterised by lies and falsehoods as opposed to authentic and nuanced representations. In addition it can also be deduced that these films were interested in persuading people of specific ideas, of their personhood in relation to the country, rather than representing truth and honesty about the state of the country. As it worked to present Afrikaner nationalists in the interest of a white state, it also worked to portray blacks as evil, demonic and as subhuman.

From the moment of its conception, apartheid has always had a restricting effect on arts, culture and more specifically on film in South Africa. Masilela also describes the "national culture" of the early 1900s as one of mediocrity. This is because in these several years no films had emerged to depart from white supremist cinema (Masilela, 1991).

One the most popular examples are films as such could be seen in the first feature film produced in South Africa. This was the 1916 film *De Voortrekkers/Winning Continent*. The film consisted of lots of technical and conceptual parallels to the D.W Griffith's film *Birth of Nation* which had just come out the year before. This, perhaps a result of the film being directed by an American filmmaker, Harold Shaw as well as the fact that South African film pulled influences from American film in the aim to spread nationalist propaganda.

This was also a result of the fact that although D.W Griffith's film was subject to lots of praise amongst white supremacists, it embodied the innovation and to some extent the invention of a cinematic language and grammar to the rest of the world. It should however

be emphasised that Harold Shaw and more so South African film was mainly interested in and inspired by the iconography of Birth of Nation, so much so that it would last for a little over four decades after *De Voortrekkers*.

The introduction of the Apartheid system in 1948 also resulted in a shift in the arts and cinema. The segregation of the country also meant the cinema and the arts would be separated for "different" public spheres. This meant that parallel to Afrikaans language cinema there would be an introduction of Apartheid Black cinema. Apartheid Black Cinema was made completely by white South African directors, camera men and on the basis of the dominant ideology of apartheid and was fed to the black public sphere. As time went by it expanded from the mining compounds to urban areas and Bantustans (Homelands). While the production side was controlled by whites most of the films were made in Zulu and casted black actors. The films had the subtle aim of demobilising blacks people in relation to their culture, the history of the country as well as an imagination of their political abilities. Masilela uses this point further emphasise how the apartheid has subjected South African cinema to conceptual mediocrity (1991).

Parrallel to the making of Black Apartheid films, Afrikaans language films were still a trend. Masilela quotes Tomaselli in understanding the structure of this movement of films. Tomaselli describes the film as depending on the dialectic of insider vs outsider (10). According to Tomaselli the fact that gold mining was completely controlled by British imperial insterest against Afrikaner nationalist interest, this resulted xenophobic themes

pervading in films. These xenophobic themes later moved from Afrikaans whites versus British whites to whites versus Black South Africans.

Therefore a tradition of conscious and subconscious othering can be traced in the early years of cinema in South Africa. This can be seen in the fact that from the moment of its conception, the films were always interested in reproducing character tropes and narrative archetypes from American cinema. In addition to this, it was the aforementioned British companies that produced the iconography and the idea of South Africa. The lack of nuance and accurate representation was further intensified by the fact that the cinema of the majority of South Africans, black South Africans was solely produced and controlled by the white minority.

Come Back Africa - A Framework for South African Cinema.

As there were theatre writers that wanted to break down the literary structure of South Africa, there were also filmmakers who weren't satisfied with the non-diverse landscape and inaccurate representations of cinema. Across the country writers and artists were interested in making work that would contrast the dominant Afrikaans and black apartheid films. One of the first true culminations of this strong budding movement, I would argue, was captured in the spirit of single film.

This, a film which Ntongela Masilela (1991) also describes as an early conception or idea of a truly South African cinema, *Come Back Africa* (1959). The film was shot in secret and was soon banned in 1955 and perhaps this large attempt to silence it in the wave of political censorship highlighted its importance in the country. That importance rang even more true when the film had its first official premier in 1988 in our troubled country.

Whats interesting about Come Back Africa is that although it serves a template for what South African cinema could be in contrast to Black Apartheid cinema and Afrikaans it shares a similar structural aspect to the dominant forms of cinema at that time. The film was made by Lionel Rogosin, a U.S Jewish filmmaker. Masilela also highlights this idea by saying that “one wishes that this film was directed by Lionel Ngakane" (1991).

So what makes Come Back Africa such an encompassing, accurate and well nuanced portrayal of South Africa and its artistic language? One of the main reasons can be seen in the form of the film as it poetically mixes documentary and fiction. Pulling influences from Flaherty’s documentary traditions as well as a lyrical form of documentary that would later inform the work of Santiago Alvarez (Masilela, 1991).

Another aspect that makes this film such a standout work of art in South African history is that it serves as a last snapshot of the literary renaissance of South Africa before its destruction in Sharpeville in 1960 (Masilela, 1991). The film presents artistic anti-apartheid

icons such as Bloke Modisane, Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi and Mariam Makeba. Perhaps one of the significant elements that contribute to the success of this film is that the script was not only a conception of Rogosins thoughts on South Africa but the script was co-written by a black South African writer, the now acclaimed author, Lewis Nkosi.

Nkosi would later write a review of the film after its premiere. In this review he offers an idea that seems to be integral to developing an ethos for South Africa cinema. From his review one can deduce the sense that: because South Africa has alway been in tune with the technology of filmmaking, the interest should be in showing the world that we can compete on its plane but rather sampling techniques and the technology to tell complex and authentically South African stories.

> "The film is not great by any standard. There are too many technical weaknesses in the development of the story. However, with all these faults, the story emerges as a powerful document of social truth such as no other producer's camera has unfolded in this country" - Lewis Nkosi (1959).

Interestingly, the film also serves as an early example of the merging of the South African culture of literature and theatre, with music and film. One could argue that seeing prolific figures of theatre such as Can Themba on film served as seeing a piece of South African theatre on film and that these very early conceptions point to the hybrid relationship that South African cinema has with other artistic disciplines. This hybrity is not unique to South Africa but it did have a unique power over the specific political and cultural context.

Adding on to its aims to portray a historic reality of South Africa on film, the film employs language as a tool. The film incorporates three languages that were at the centre of the cultural experience. isiZulu was mainly spoken by miners in the compound, Afrikaans spoken by the Policemen arresting the blacks and English spoken by African intellectuals in the shebeens and businessmen. Masilela highlights the significance of the uses of these languages and its role in the larger scope of the film and its message.

This serves as a way to speak on the deep, political structure of our country. It can be argued that the linguistic elements of the film further paint the socio-economic state of the country when coupled with its iconography. The film opens with a scene of the mining compound to which the miners are coming. It is through this one begins to understand that much like in the development of theatre and that film the mining revolution played is at the centre of the South African historical experience.

When reflecting on Come Back Africa, its elements and Lewis Nkosi's review one can draw conclusions to the political potential of South African film if one thinks carefully about the formal elements and also when it exists beyond the technology of filmmaking. It is rather focused on telling isolated, nuanced and very specific stories in the interest of highlighting larger political issues. It does so through interdisciplinary means, merging fact and fiction as well as borrowing from other artistic and literary disciplines. This however doesn't mean that there is no care for the technical aspects of filmmaking but rather that it shouldn't be placed before story and its relation to nuance and representation.



“Sing Something Mariam” - Still from Come Back Africa (Lionel Ngakane, 1959)

5. Grotowski with a Camera: Exploring The Elements of Poor Theatre when Making Films

Little Lamb

In the process of supporting my research and exploring its plausibility, I worked to revise a semi autobiographical script, entitled *Sacrifice* (2019), then adapt and produce it as a hybridised Poor Theatrical film. The film is approached with the understanding of Poor Theatre and its formal element and negotiates them with those of cinema in hopes to make a film with a unique narrative and formal language. The aim of making this film was to test the theories I began to develop in the early stages of this Masters research and work to form new ideas and counter ideas to reflect on, in this paper.

This process of making the adaptation of *Sacrifice*, entitled *Little Lamb*, was in the interest of developing a creative process rooted in that of Athol Fugard and the Serpent Players. This is the process that sees new work being devised from personal experiences and the personal experiences somehow becoming anecdotes to strong nuanced commentary to political dissatisfaction.

More importantly the decision to adapt an already existing script was to present and posit the idea of Poor Theatrical filmmaking as a modal approach to cinema and filmmaking, as opposed to a genre. The practice of this research is not so much rooted in the way a story is written or interested in producing a specific feeling. It is however rooted in how the director treats the text, subject, their apparatus and the medium in relation to text.

Sacrifice is a story that chronicles a reimagining of a weekend spent with one of my uncles and witnessing the slaughtering of a goat for the first time. The film explores the idea of initiation and negotiates black fragile masculinity and tradition. Through this exploration, I explore the weekend as my first abrupt confrontations with masculinity.

Little Lamb is still centred on the same story as *Sacrifice*, however it explores broader political themes through a completely different format. The film sees me alone in an empty theatre space, reeling and reenacting the story of the weekend at Uncle Thomas' house. This

is intercut with scenes at my actual house and frames from my neighbourhood that function as contextualise before bringing the story back to the theatrical encounter.

In addition to the body and voice being the primary tool for the telling of the story. The film makes use of the camera and the edit as a performative tool to convey the story that facilitates an encounter with the audience, the performer as well the filmmaker. The film also makes use of Grotowski's spiritual self-penetration techniques and improvisation to present an authentic experience and retelling.

In the process of making the film, I've come to formulate thoughts about process and techniques to hybridise my frameworks of theatre and South African cinema. I've also evaluated the various aspects of the relationship between Poor Theatre and cinema's privileges and limitations, which I explore in this paper.

Von Trier & Abloh - Deconstructing Artistic Medium

When thinking of theatre and its form influencing that of film, a reference that comes to my mind for many, is the Lars Von Trier film *Dogville* (2003). Although not the first film to ever do this, this film continues to be considered as one of the canonical examples of the innovation of film form that borrows from a theatrical idea of storytelling and presentation.

The film does this by completely stripping away the excesses of setting and instead its entirety takes place in a black marked out theatre space. When interviewed about the film

Lars von Trier said that the absence of setting forces the spectators to invent the town for themselves. As a result, the ‘cinematic’ emerges from a kind of ‘in-between’ space (Laine, 2006).

The tale of Dogville is set in a theatrically imagined small town in the Rocky Mountains during the 1930s. With its minimal set, sparse lighting, painted street and building names, absent building walls and doors, it clearly presents itself as a ‘Brechtian’ theatrical space transposed into film (Robert Sinnerbrink, 2007).

I have come to realise that this idea of stripping away the excesses of an artwork is one that forces clear identification through labelling, emphasising and isolating specific aspects that matter to the story. As a filmmaker and researcher with interests in hip-hop culture this particular layer of deconstructionism drew me to other projects in music and design that share the same idea of deconstructing, stripping excesses and labelling aspects of a medium.



Still from *Dogville* (Lars Von Trier, 2003)

The idea of Dogville as a film stripping away its elements to just performance and singular props as a way to isolate the story, comment on the art form as well offer autonomy to its audience is one that is significant. It mirrors what Poor Theatre aims to achieve from theatrical rituals. One could analyse a design project, entitled The Ten (2017) by inter-disciplinary artist Virgil Abloh and Nike, as order to understand these aims of decontonstructing an artwork in order to achieve more from it, and further involve an audience

From as early as the conception of his professional design career, Virgil Abloh's mission has always been to blur the lines between streetwear and high end fashion, and on a larger scale blurring the lines and drawing the parallels between Hip-Hop and high art. This mission is one the proved successfully accomplished as it propelled him the position as Head Designer

of the Men's Wear Division At Louis Vuitton. This even a bigger deal when considering that he was the first African and first black man to achieve this position and that this success was achieved through all his various ventures in Hip-Hop and through his streetwear brand, Off-White. Throughout his illustrious career, decorated with accolades as well as collaborations that validated his mission and vision of portraying Hip-Hop culture as high art, one of his most praised and perhaps most innovative projects is 2017 collaboration with Nike, entitled, *The Ten*.

The Ten sees Virgil redesign and reimagine the ten most iconic Nike sneakers in history. The approach he chose was a particularly groundbreaking one as he took on the inspiration of Duchamp and the readymade. The Nike collaboration saw him dismantle and deconstruct the ten shoes, some with ripped out fold to expose the layers of fabric that make up the shoes and some with the skeleton of the shoe on the exterior. All of the shoes had panels emphasised in some way and further highlighted by quotations and labels such as "logo" and "air" as well as stamps with some manufacturing details and an orange factory strap.

Virgil Abloh's *The Ten* was a "limited drop", meaning that only a limited number of the sneakers were released at high retail prices. Despite this, the project was an attempt to democratise good design and create accessibility to good art and quality design. This was to be achieved by the deconstruction of "the icon", that being the iconic nike shoes as well as the icon figures and ideas around them, such as the superstar basketball icon Michael Jordan. In addition to deconstructing the icon, Virgil would then present his findings by

really opening up the process and highlighting all the various elements that make up the shoes. (“The Ten Collection”)

The project was inspired by the fact that Virgil had sent shoe designs to Nike whilst in high school and had received rejection letters from the company, informing him that they do not accept designs from the public. He further expresses that *The Ten* serves as a nod to his younger self and for all the aspiring designers and sneaker enthusiasts and that the project was dedicated to giving them knowledge and a new access to the shoes and ideas that they have iconised. Showing the process so that a whole generation is exposed to the work and can do it. (“The Ten Collection”). From looking at some of the posters and the aerial shots of the Dogville setting, one can begin to draw specific design parallels or perhaps a similar design language that functions through labels and quotations.



Still from *Dogville* (Lars Von Trier, 2003)



The Ten (Virgil Abloh, 2017)

Virgil Abloh's other projects embody this thinking in different formats and disciplines. As the same thinking of deconstruction was applied in various mediums, new commentaries have been added about the genres, as well as the mediums and even the industries in which they exist. In 2010 Virgil Abloh collaborated with musician, Kanye West, designing the album art for the artists sixth LP, *Yeezus* (2013). After studying and questioning numerous designs based on a sculpture by the artist George Condo, the final piece of the artwork was a blank CD case with a red sticker on it. The artwork served to comment on the medium of the CD coming to end. (Abloh, 2019)



Yeezus (Kanye West, 2013) cover art.

Examples like this, that function across different artistic disciplines, from film to design to music offer a notion that can be deduced about deconstructionism as an approach to making. The notion of framework which I have deduced that on a certain level, Poor Theatre can function as a deconstructive language, much like Abloh's language of design. It works to break down and label all of the definitive elements and of theta which it believes to be the performer, the audience member and the ritual in between and nothing else.

In this sense, approaching filmmaking means that the film and the thinking behind it should carry the sentiments of deconstructing the medium as a way to reconstruct. In addition, the sentiments to reconstruct the film medium through an African perspective should be thought of as a political act, with the interest to disobey western rules around how specific formal elements should be considered and more so what their functions are. This political process of formal epistemic and disciplinary disobedience, alluded to through the process of this

research should also be considered as an entry point to the defining a language for my filmic practice.

The DJ Scholarship, The Literary Canon, Archiving and Epistemic Disobedience.

The word “sample” is carefully chosen as a descriptor for this research process. It is intended to connote the idea of sampling in the origins of Hip-Hop music. In the 1970s, the developing years of Hip-Hop, DJs would make use of samples from disco music, in order to create new music. This wasn't so much a stylistic choice but more so a response to economic disparity and the lack of instruments to produce new natural sounds.

Lynee Denise describes sampling as a useful device for decoding cultural information (2019:62). It can be argued that sampling resurges more than just artworks but also their history, context and most instances, alternative canons of music. The ideas of DJ Lynee Denise function even deeper this research in that on various levels is inspired by and even embodies the DJ Scholarship.

“DJ Scholarship” is a term coined by Denise in 2013 to describe a mix-mode of research practice, both performative and subversive in its ability to shape and define social experience (Denise, 2019: 64). The idea is aimed at moving the role of the DJ from that of a mere party provocateur to an archivist and information specialist. The role of the DJ is one that requires more than playing the music but it requires assessment, collection, organisation and providing access to music that see fit to influence generations of people.

One can begin to draw parallels between these responsibilities to those of a researcher. Research work requires the assessment and collection of data, compiling, curating and presenting it based on what we see is impactful to our field of interest.

I think that qualitative research also requires a How this relates to qualitative research and more so, this research projects is that in addition to the experimental process, a huge part of it is made up of scouring of libraries to find interesting pieces literature with interesting “instrumental “ theories definitions and case studies to sample in the formulation my own form of literature and art.

To some degree, Grotowski plays the role of a drum pattern that sets the groove and the tempo of this research. From that, the frameworks of Augusto Boal such as Invisible Theatre and Legislative Theatre serve melodies and basslines. All these elements are being dialled up and down, scratched and mixed from different turntables. Through the mixer of this research project to produce one cohesive tune that serves a precursor to an authentically South African genre.

My practice resembles the DJ Scholarship because central to the idea of the DJ Scholarship is the goal to achieve erasure resistance (Denise, 2019: 64). The DJ Scholarship is not only interested in drawing parallels between the DJ and the academic scholar or research, but in a

larger scale it is interested in disrupting the canon. On one level, it seeks to disrupt the idea of what academic work can look like and the terrains in which it can exist .

On a another level, it is interested in removing the idea of the male heterosexual as an example of the DJ. This methodological framework is one that functions as a tool to posit feminist literature. It sees DJ Lyneè Denis purposefully engage with pieces of music made by women artists, such as *Aretha Franklin's The Queen of Soul's Greatest Hits* (1998), exploring her musicality, context and the album's impact on music years later .

The other way in which the DJ Scholarship posits feminist ideas is probably the most prevalent and impactful in DJ Lynee Denise's work. This achieved by a lot of her work being deeply tied to her subjectivity as a way to further remove the heterosexual male from the archetypal DJ or researcher. It does this by overtly exploring music and other the material she chooses to study in relation to her gender and sexuality.

From this, one can begin to observe the influences of Walter Mignolo's Epistemic Disobedience in the interests to disrupt the literary canon and insert new nuanced perspectives into knowledge creation. Thus removing research from a zero point, or voice of god, as a conveyer of knowledge. This understanding allows me to source a personal archive in the making of my film. It allows the space for natural impulses and experience to curate the elements that inform my artistic practice . It also provides the space for frameworks

from around the world to be perceived by my African eye and contextualised for my context.

This DJ Scholarship as a framework exists in different ways and it allows for DJ Lynee Denise and others that employ its methodology an opportunity to explore various facets of personal archives. This can be through a thorough reflection on the subjective relationship to the music one analyses and studies. It can see the DJ recall their personal encounter with the music and the qualitative researcher theirs to the literature and case studies.

This then also brings forward the importance of considering selection. One of the first things that the researcher should remember is that another name given to DJ is "Selector". The assumption of the role of the DJ in my practice has led me to think of different words and notations in the lexicon of deejaying. The exploration of the Selector as an identity of the DJ leads to the acknowledgement that all research incorporates a process of data selection. Furthermore, this acknowledgement has led me to the importance of being explicit in that in some moments of my research the process of selecting can sometimes be selective. Therefore, it is important for me to reflect on the criteria for the material and data which I select.

In this research process I have been more open to accepting that I am, in fact, selecting theories and that the idea of sampling serves not only as a definition for the formal practice of the film, but also as a meta analogy of this research project and my role as a director and

researcher. Not only am I studying and referencing but to some extent I am carefully selecting elements of each framework in order to feed into the narrative that I am creating. In reflection on the criteria for what I have selected, I have deduced that my selection is based on a criteria of care. That everything that I select is based on what I care for in film and in my underpinning political subjectivity.

As a black "born-free" South African artist, dissatisfied with the state of democracy, post-apartheid. South African protest art and literature, made in the perspectives of black South Africans, symbolises a deep aspect of what has afforded me my livelihood. It also signifies a template for artistic and political voice. Other variations of this criteria of care show up throughout my research, in aspects such as my humour as a mode for carrying my political voice. Mainly how this humour and element of play persists in the film and some aspects of this research. The choice to speak through aso makes the choice to compromise certain aspects of Grotowski's philosophies of rigorous discipline being an integral part of his practice.

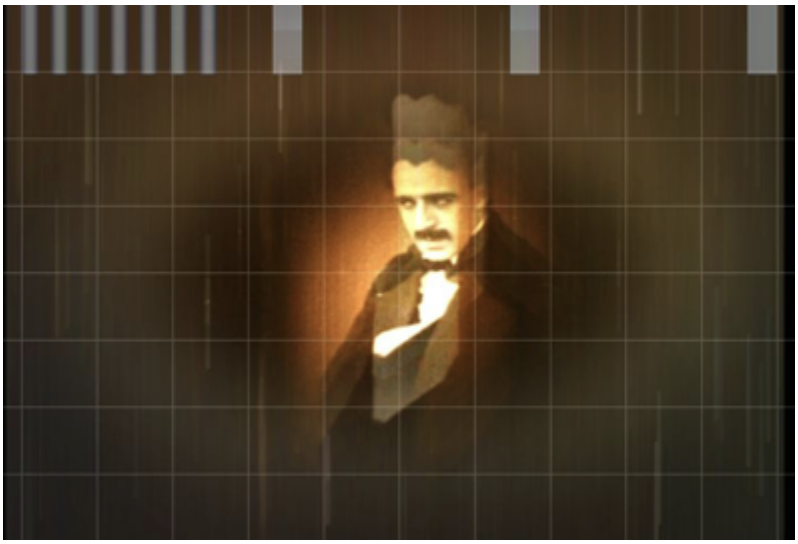
Deejaying The Film

> "Hybridity and interdisciplinarity are the code words for total creative flux. I want to feel like a fish in the ocean of information." - Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky (2015)

The DJ Scholarship is also an integral informant to the way I have been editing my films and the film made for this research. Examples such as DJ Spooky's *Rebirth of a Nation*

represent the strong impact that DJ Scholarship and other frameworks in its lexicon can achieve in political epistemic discourse.

DJ Spooky's *Rebirth of a Nation* is a film project that remixes D.W. Griffith's infamous film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The original film was based on a novel and theatre play by Thomas Dixon entitled *The Clansman* (1905). Essentially what DJ Spooky does is apply DJ techniques to cinema in a way that parallels, deconstructs and remixes the original. DJ Spooky re-cuts, re-scores and reimagines the controversial, *The Birth of a Nation.* Although canonical as an innovator of the film medium and its possibilities, it is also extremely racist and problematic. So why would a DJ spooky black artist remix such a film? In his own words: "A remix of a film as deeply important and problematic as *The Birth of a Nation* reminds us, in the era of Trayvon Martin and Ferguson, that many of these issues still linger with us at every level." (DJ Spooky, 2015)



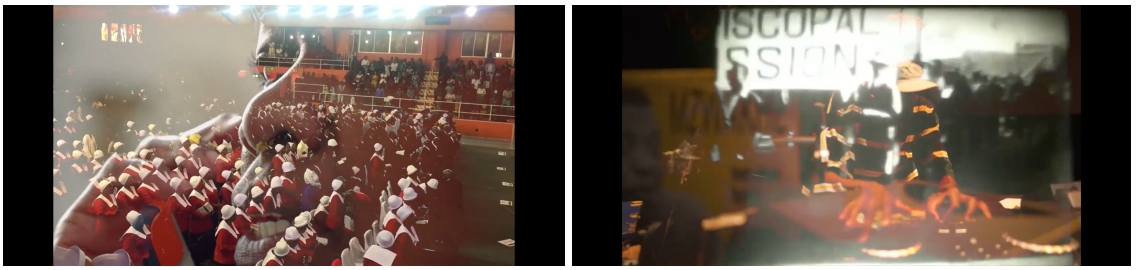
Still from *Rebirth of a Nation* (DJ Spooky, 2007)

As mentioned, the idea of deejaying does not only apply to the mixing of different theories, frameworks and methodologies in order to create my own groove of dissertation. This framework also exists in the way I make and treat my films. Deejaying as an approach to making has existed in my practice for many different functions as a stylistic and methodological element. In some projects deejaying has existed as a direct meta-textual element in that the film takes on the form of a remix based on the concept of the film.

In my film *Sikelela Tapes* (2020), the story follows a radio DJ who tasks himself with remixing the South African national anthem, as a way of critiquing the state of the nation and how far removed it is from what it's intended to represent. These ideas of remixing something so that it represents something else, not only had to be spoken about through the film but also had to be felt in its form.

In addition the film was made by five directors as part of an experimental documentary class. The film being made by so many people, all with equal creative control, already subjected the film to five different treatments, despite having a concise theme and concept. The edit of the film saw the employment of various editing practices inspired by deejaying to mitigate the meshing of five separate creative voices. Some of these techniques included overlapping contrasting images to suggest new one, in the same way a DJ would play two records on different turntables in the attempt to create a new sound or song. This can also include found images and videos put over the shot material. In a way this technique functions in a manner similar to collage and also makes use of fading and dissolving frames to propose a mix. All these techniques not only served as a mitigating methodology for

perspectives and archives in *Sikelela Tapes* but also proved effective with the story of DJ Enoch remixing *Nkosi Sikelela*.



“You Cannot Remix a Prayer” - Stills from Sikelela Tapes (Alex Sono, 2020)

Accessed at : https://youtu.be/3inxpv5b1Lk

However it is not always when deejaying as a form feeds into the conceptual element of a film that it is effective. Sometimes the DJ approach to editing can exist in a complete contrast to the story or concept of the film and be as or even more effective. *Rebirth of a Nation* perfectly exemplifies this as it takes on a hip-hop approach through the lens of an African American, scratching and re-contextualising a racist white supremacist piece work from the early 1900s. Knowing this affords me the confidence to sample, re-contextualise and remix the theories of Grotowski and Boal and apply them in the backdrop of a young, traumatised and faced paced, digital, metropolitan African perspective.

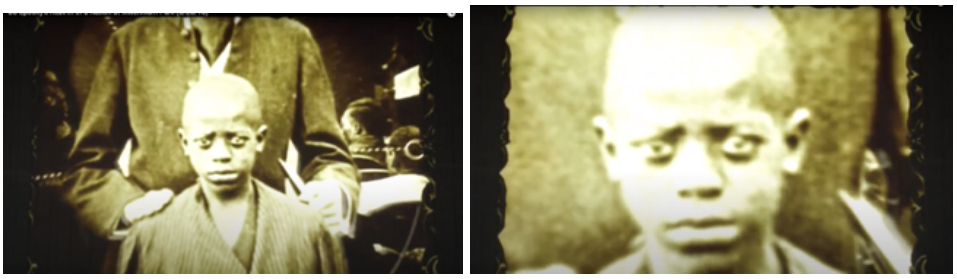
Some of DJ Spooky’s techniques include the scratch and drawing on the frames to point certain aspects of. These drawings can also serve as a form of vandalising offensive and

oppressive imagery such as that of the Klu Klux Klan or other racist figures in *The Birth of a Nation*.



Still from *Rebirth of a Nation* (DJ Spooky, 2007)

Another way in which DJ Spooky uses the image to point out and emphasise aspects of a frame is through cropping. Throughout the film, DJ Spooky crops frames in order to quite literally bring black characters and aspects of black culture to the foreground of the film.



Stills from *Rebirth of a Nation* (DJ Spooky, 2007)

Amongst these techniques, the one that has resonated with me and my filmmaking language is that of rewind, repetition and looping. The technique of playing back something and replaying it, can exist in relation to different variables of a film. In the case of *Rebirth of a Nation,* the technique is used to repeat and emphasise offensive acts. The repetition presents

the audience with violent acts and imagery that may have been overlooked or processed on a surface level in Birth of a Nation.

In other forms the repetition technique can help point out a crucial or impactful moment in a story. It can represent and further drive home the turning point in a character or the environment. This can occur even in subtle ways, like the double take. An example of this can be seen, when Mookie throws the garbage can at Sal's Pizzeria in Spike Lee's, *Do The Right Thing* (1989). The trash can is seen hitting the glass window twice, once from the outside and again from the inside of the store. One can argue that this double take works to represent a moment when Mookie finally stands with the community instead of the establishment that pays him.

Moments before this happens, Mookie gets into an argument with Sal about getting paid more money, which ends with Mookie's request being rejected. This follows the various portrayals of racial tensions of the city that the film works to explore. The film also shows the economic, social and structural inequalities of Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood. There are even halts throughout the film, slow-paced scenes that further tell the audience the theme of the film. Like when Mookie asks Sal why he doesn't like black people but has pictures of black celebrities on the wall.

Moments like this exist throughout the whole film, and present various ways in which race runs the neighbourhood, be it gentrification, police brutality or Sal's mistreatment of

customers and Mookie as his employee. This further paints Mookie's state of mind and what leads him to making the decision to destroy the pizzeria. Shortly after his argument with Sal, Mookie is caught between two choices: does he stay and protect the pizzeria from the riots or does he stand with the community to fight against Sal and the racism that rules them? Mookie is tipped over by Radio Raheem being choked to death which reads like prophecy of the murder of George Floyd in 2020 or maybe just a reflection that police killings, of this particular fashion and injustices have always been the status quo in the United States. Radio Raheem preaches to Mookie, earlier in the film as he shows him the rings on each hand telling to choose between Love and Hate.

This then begs the question, did Mookies "do the right thing"? After picking up the trash can and walking across the street to Sal's, Mookie screams the word "HATE" before throwing the trash can, claiming that ultimately hate wins, it won against Radio Raheem and has won against the community. It can also symbolise that Mookie now believes that only hate can trump the racial inequality that is taking over the community.

It can be argued that this moment of hate's triumph over the neighbourhood is not only presented by the contextualising that the film spends most of its running time doing, but in this scene it is further articulated in the small moment of the double take. The repeating of that very moment when the trash can hits the window marks that moment as just a little more. It allows the audience a little more time to process the incident and its impact on Mookie, on Sal and on the whole neighbourhood.

Watching something over and over again can make one consider what would happen if that event didn't occur? What would be the impact, if there is any? What would happen if Mookie simply chose to walk away from the riot, go home to his girlfriend and come back to work the next day? Now look at what happened. All of these questions are able to arise because the repetition enables a real process of that moment and more importantly emphasises it so that we know what it stands for, or at least the fact that it stands for something.

On some levels the repetition technique, even in its simple existence in a double take can work to solidify certain acts as carrying an impact, even longer after than the moment itself. To some extent it creates a "wow that is happening moment". It offers more time to really process the impact of the moment, whether it be how hard the trash can hit the window, or the magnitude of an explosion in a Michael Bay action film. This even in the echoes of something that a character is saying.

The repetition technique isn't only limited in emphasising moments and their lasting impacts on characters but it can also work with words and statements, in a way it can further emphasise that certain words and beliefs exist with a character long after they hear them.



HATE!- Stills from *Do The Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989)

And maybe it could be said that slow-motion offers the same feeling of being in the moment for longer but really if you think about it, the difference between slow-motion and repetition is that slow-motion is a technique that generates anticipation to a moment while the other keeps taking you back to that moment of impact.

Repetition can also function as a strong device to achieve humourous effects and satire, if something repeats for long enough it can be read as funny. The repetition device can allow the filmmaker to play as a child, copying another person on screen and playing back the things they say in order to ridicule them and what they stand for.

An example of this tool used in this way can be found in a scene from one of my documentary films *The Revolutionary Act* (2018). The film explores the backlash that John Trengrove's, *Inxeba* (2017) being rated R because it represented gay men in the context of a Xhosa initial school. *The Revolutionary Act* was interested in using this event as an entry point to questioning homosexuality and how African traditions work to erase it.

With a topic so heavy and sensitive one does not want find themselves spending too much time showing oppressive political, traditional and religious figures and their grave homophobic expressions and stances. However, at the same time it was important to use the film to paint a picture of the prevalent homophobia in mainstream media and politics on the continent.

These concerns resulted in a response formalised by a remix of these homophobic speeches, in a way in which the film can show what has been said about the topic and by whom, but simultaneously express a strong disagreement. The repetition technique as a tool for mocking can be seen in a scene in the film in which a piece of archival footage of former Zimbabwean president, Robert Mugabe "highly rejecting" support for the LGBTQ community by saying on behalf of all of Africa "We are not Gay". This appears in a rhythmically cut sequence of speeches by pastors and politicians which then halts for Mugabe's speech, after he says his sentences we rewind and replay the last claim, "We Are Not Gays" four times, further emphasising the ridiculousness of a such a broad abstract statement.

I would also make a case that seeing this part of his speech repeated a few times functions to say "yes you heard that correctly, yes this really happened". Not only does it function on the level of hearing what he said but the audience member gets to watch that moment again and sit in it more. Through this, one starts to see the fact that Mugabe doesn't even flinch as he says this, you also have the time, after looking at him to see the big United Nations Logo

behind him. All these elements exist through repetition and function to make an event more ridiculous and also present a figure and his statements as ridiculous.

The Mask

The notion of emphasising and extenuating certain aspects of an art work like Virgil does on the deconstructed shoes is also prevalent amongst the elements of Poor Theatre. Growotwski speaks of the actor composing "an organic mask by means of his facial muscles" (Grotowski, 1968: 77) h e speaks of this when reflecting on one of his most famous plays, Arkopolis and what may the reason for each character wears the same grimace throughout the play. It is in order to push the actor to the extreme in using their body as a tool for communication and a spiritual retelling.

The idea of the mask exists in multiple ways in Poor Theatre and is used to address various stripped elements. Other examples of the mask include the actor multiplying themselves to play different characters and different moments of a character in the story. I've found that these ideas of the mask can also exist when making films with a Poor Theatrical approach and that this process of mask making isn't only limited to the performer but also the filmmaker.

I have found, through my process of making *Little Lamb,* that sampling the ethos of Poor Theatre puts the filmmaker in the position of the performer to some extent and that it requires them to perform, articulate and encourage the encounter as a performer would in a play. The theatre and the film are the stage for the performer but the screen is really the stage for the filmmaker. As it enables the director so many different tools and narrative devices, therefore the world building and the language of a film work to display the filmmaker's thoughts and relationship with a text or story.In understanding this, it can be said that the sampling of Poor Theatre is not only limited to filming on a theatre stage, performing in a specific style and talking about politics. It is an attempt to make the film do the work of theatre and also an attempt to push two disciplines to do more or even different work than they each would on their own.

This is what makes a good mix. When a hip-hop producer choses to sample a song and their intention is to "flip" that sample in order to make their hip-hop song. When they aren't just recreating the song in the confines of new drum sounds or patterns. It is when they dissect the functionalities of that song, break up its parts and appropriate them in a way they see fit in a song.

Therefore the filmmaker is expected to create masks for what they have stripped away, at times the filmmaker strips away elements in order to force the creation of masks. One can even think of these limitations in the same way as Lars Von Trier pushes his filmmaking by setting obstructions for the films he makes.

The DJ Scholarship approach to editing has become a tool that lends access to various ways of making masks. Similar to how Poor Theatre pushes the actor to the extremes of storytelling with their bodies, through mask making, it can do the same for the filmmaker. The DJ Scholarship approach enables and encourages the filmmaker to push the medium of film in relation to the frame and the screen itself to the extreme in retelling the story.

Throughout my filmmaking practice, I have made use of the repetition techniques in a way to create overarching themes. To drill ideas or words said to a character in a way that places that character in a vulnerable state. This usually exists in my presentation of parental characters, as a way to portray them and their statements and commands as overarching facets to a character.

I think that the best way to understand a character's beliefs and actions can be through hearing and understanding what their parents say to them. I also think that rewinding and looping these statements can function as a cloak that the character wears in the encounters that they have. This cloak is particularly important in a Poor Theatrical film approach and medium that is devoid of external elements, like clothes and props to remind the audience of the kind of person the character is. In this way the repetition technique functions as a kind of metaphorical mask, a mask similar to that created by the actor in Grotowksi’s methods that compensates for the characters wearing the same grimace or not having excesses to further paint them.

The Camera as the Audience and a Character

This process of researching and sampling Poor theatre for filmmaking has led me to other experimental methods, most of which can be seen as making masks to compensate for stripped excesses and other techniques that present the potential to be a little more than that. A central enquiry to the exploration of intersection was that of the camera. I am curious as to what the camera can represent when put in a theatre space, what role it plays in telling the story on behalf of the director and also how the story is told by the performer.

Firstly the camera functions as an immediate audience member, particularly in this mode of telling a story. On a conventional fiction film set, the camera functions as a silent observer, it's never acknowledged by those on screen and the goal is that the audience forgets about in their suspension of disbelief and be fully engulfed in the story and its world.

The sampling of South African Poor Theatre includes borrowing of the Brechtian techniques of direct address and breaking of the fourth wall and applying them to the camera as the performer would to the audience in a theatre.

Brecht introduced different techniques to keep the viewer at an emotional distance. According to Brecht, this made the viewer less emotionally attached to the characters, therefore enabling a more reflective and politically engaged mode of viewing. One way in which Brecht achieved this is telling the full narrative before the theatre show even started,

so viewers were less occupied with how the play was going to end, and were made conscious of the construction of theatre. Other ways of highlighting the construction are for example letting the players speak directly to the public, breaking the fourth wall, and the director calling instruction while the play is still going. Brecht exposes the construction of theatre to disable emotional attachment from the viewer with the characters, which Brecht sees as manipulation. With his alienation effects, or distancing effects, Brecht aimed to demonstrate the audience with seamless, witty, and skilful self-critique. These are all elements that were considered when applying the elements of Poor Theatre into the making of my film.

Little Lamb makes use of direct address with Brechtian intentions to alienate the audience, it works to create an overt layer of deconstructivism. The acknowledgement of the camera constantly reminds the audience that this is constructed. It can be argued that this constant reminder of construction puts the audience in position to decide fact and what is fiction. It further claims the film as a presentation instead of a representation that seeks to be accurate.

This idea of the audience being presented with choices is one that is prevalent throughout the whole film. It is epitomised in the second last scene of the film in which I speak about the slaughtering of “Sparky” the goat. In the climax of the scene and perhaps the climax of the film I enact my uncle, handing me the knife to make an incision and get involved with the slaughtering, with the repetition of the words: “it's your time to grow”.



“It’s your time to grow “- Still from *Little Lamb* (2022)

This is not the only aspect that does this work. The placing of cameras in autonomous positions exists through the film, in subtle ways, through the camera work. In order to create an encounter between the character and the audience, the character should treat the camera as a character. This theatrical sample encourages the character to establish and enact a relationship of some sort, between them and the camera. This relationship should be one that goes beyond the character only moving in front of the passive and quiet camera. Instead, it sees the performer being able to move with and around the character. Through this, the camera is stripped of its power and the subject is empowered with confidence to authentically tell the story in a way that enables them to open up, spiritually and reflectively.

By talking to and engaging with the camera in this way, the performer essentially pulls the audience member from their seat and invites them on to the stage. The audience member is then afforded new angles to the story and implicated as a decisive part of the story’s

direction. Sometimes the audience member can be implicated in the role of an integral character in the story in that way, implicating them in the character's decisions.

This is the case in the Sink or Swim scene in *Little Lamb* when I play Cousin Rhulani, waking up Alex to a low angled camera as if waking it up. Through this composition, the viewer is directly presented with the proposition to go swim after being confronted by direct address, close ups shots of Thandi exclaiming "you can not swim" repeatedly. This is all intended to place the viewer in a feeling of agony and uncertainty about what will happen, it instead places them in a position of discomfort of a decision that is about to be made.



"You can't swim?"- Still from *Little Lamb* (Alex Sono, 2022)

BBC recordings of Woza Albert and Sizwe Banzi is Dead from the 1980s serve as clear examples to this implication of camera in a theatrical telling of a story. These recordings were primarily made because the plays couldn't travel as a result of apartheid bans. As the plays relied on moments of direct address in their messages, the renditions of these plays for

screen sees the performers do interesting things in relation to the camera, providing it with a sense of agency.

As Buntu (played by John Kani) takes a picture of Robert (played by Winston Ntshona), the audience doesn't merely watch them taking pictures and then seeing him read out the postcard the following scene. Instead the camera is further implicating in the action of the story. In the scene, the camera stops being an invisible and silent device, observing the two men and becomes just a little more. The film cuts to the pictures that were taken, as if the camera has become that which was taking the picture, therefore it is now implicated as a prop to the crime that is being committed.

This scene is also particularly significant as it shows the audience the postcard that Robert sends to his wife, Nomawethu, as he explains that he will now take on the identity of a deceased Sizwe Banzi, in order to stay in and work in the city for longer. This imagery accompanied by Winston Ntshona's voice, further places us inside the postcard, as if we the audience are Nomawethu being confronted with the letter.



"Dear Nomawethu"- Still from Sizwe Banzi is Dead (BBC, 1974)

In *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* we see Winston Ntshona walk directly to the camera in the last scene of the play, as a drunk Robert, pleading to the camera and the audience "am I not a man like you?" as he almost strips naked to use his anatomy as the last tool to prove his humanness and worth. Moments like this display the actor's cognisance of the camera as they would have for the audience of a theatre play. It works to remind the audience that the situations of the characters are intended to converse, question and plead with the audience.



Am I not a man? Stills from *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* (BBC, 1983)

The 1982 BBC taping of Woza Albert does more work to implicate the camera in the story and give it and the audience moral responsibility. This is evident from the very first scene of the film in which Mbongeni and Percy are young men at the market street chasing the vans of white men, as they beg for work.

The camera jerks and moves in a back and forth motion from a slightly high angle, we see Percy makes engine sounds. This suggests that the camera is the van and the audience is

sitting in the van listening to and watching them prove their worth and loyalty and are met with the choice to hire them or not. The van eventually drives and the title cards for the film begin to roll.



One Bassie? Still from Woza Albert (BBC, 1982)

In a later scene the camera does this again, this time placing the audience and the audience in the position of Morena, at Coronation bricks. It moves around as Percy and Mbongeni guide Morena around showing Him their working conditions and offering him chips with "lots of vinegar". This scene is particularly impactful, as it quite literally places the camera and the audience in a position of God, turning and shifting the main question of the play to the audience. In this scene the play moves from asking the audience what they would do or asking if Morena were to come back to South Africa. Instead, by placing the audience in the position it asks them the question "what would you do if you were Morena returning to South Africa?".



Chips for Morena. Still from *Woza Albert* (BBC, 1982)

Camera as a Spiritual Mentor

My inquiry is also interested in the use of the camera as a way to further encourage a sense of self-penetration and reflexivity. Through my role as the director and performer in *Little Lamb*, it has become clearer that the camera itself can have power over behavioural habits. One can imagine specific outcomes for the performances in the film, however the camera may reap results completely to those imagined.

In the spirit of encouraging a workshopped and devised approach to the process of the film, some of the scenes in the film were not written and instead were improvised in front of the camera. Words and themes would be proposed to the crew and ideas of what should be in front of the camera would be pitched.

Other forms of self-penetration involved simply keeping the camera on and performing lines and actions in as many ways as possible or repeating thematic phrases in as many different ways possible. I could say that this is rooted in the understanding of art based research. It is in ways an open-ended approach to filmmaking, that sees the filmmaker allowing the story, character and context to lead, rather than shaping the proposition from the start.

The Trance Nature of Poor Theatre and South African Spiritualism and Politics

It is quite apparent that certain elements of the mode of Poor Theatre and its aims are well in alignment with the interests of developing a religious discipline. This can be seen as one of the reasons Poor theatre works in our country, because it allows the existence of spirituality in stories that are personal and political, through not only the text as well as the body. It can further be argued that South Africa's synonymy with spirituality further decorates and in most instances even elevates the practice of Poor Theatre.

Spirituality and religion have always been an integral element of the identity of South Africa, they are essential to the way we form understanding of travesty and rejoice. One could even say they are essential to the way we fight and the way we heal. Archbishop Desmond Tutu is a huge signifier of these claims. His prominence in our country, through his activism is a result of the Spiritualism of Black Consciousness and that of South Africans.

This may also have a lot to do with the colonial history of Christianity in South Africa. Therefore, it makes all politics and religion and religion political. South Africa's spiritual identity is also rooted in indigenous cultures, practices and understanding that existed centuries before colonialism and continue to exist and inform the ethos of South Africa. A great example of this can be seen in a statement made by Gary Baines' in *The Rainbow Nation* (1998) in which he makes the case that the idea of the rainbow nation is one that goes beyond describing the multiracialism and multiculturalism in our country. Instead it is one that is reflective of the various paralleling understandings of the rainbow in South African indigenous cultures. He supports this claim with the notion that in the Xhosa culture the rainbow signifies a promising future (1998: 1). This is also important in addition to the fact that the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a Xhosa cleric is also said to have coined the term "rainbow nation".

And yes, maybe the idea of a religious figure rising to prominence as a political activist isn't new or unique to South Africa but it can be argued that South African political, religious figures are even more iconised in the country because of the very nature of its political language. These two ideas are so synonymous that the first half of the South African national anthem is a prayer that was initially written by Enoch Sontonga for the Methodist church.

Nkosi Sikelel iAfrika…

(God Bless Africa)

The changing of Nkosi Sikelela to our national anthem was not the only form of religious based healing imposed on the country in the end of apartheid. An argument can be made when thinking of the Truth and Reconciliation Council that it was also a spiritual form of addressing the political state of the country. In addition to coining the term “rainbow nation” as a descriptor for the new identity of South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was also the chairperson of a The Truth and Reconciliation Commission from its conception in 1995. The TRC was a programme that was aimed at dealing with the human rights violations of apartheid from 1960 - 1994. (Wilson, 2001:1).

In the interests of rallying up members of the general public the Truth and Reconciliation Commision was also broadcast as a series on national television. In my honours dissertation I made the argument that the TRC was an early cursor of the potential of television, it made television makers and audiences realise the power and the possibilities of film mediums in steering the conversation and imagining a new South Africa.

Perhaps the prominence of Grotowski’s school of thought in South African anti-apartheid theatre is attributed to the spiritual identity of South African politics. The theme and premise of *Woza Albert* 1981 exemplifies this notion. The play is riddled with Christian themed metaphors through songs and dialogue. The second coming of Morena (Jesus Christ) is used as an inciting incident for all the vignettes and different character as the explain what they would happen or what they would ask for if Morena returned.This coexisting identity of spiritual is one that aligns with the that which makes Poor Theatre.



Still From *Woza Albert* (2018) - Photo by Lauge Sorensen

iYammeza iNkosi Yethu

ithi Mathambo hlanganani, iyavusa amaQhawe ithu

-Woza Albert 1981

In his manifesto for Poor Theatre, Grotowski states that “everything is concentrated on the “ripening” of the actor which is expressed by tension, tension toward the extreme, by a complete stripping down, by the laying bare of one’s own intimacy” (1976, 16). This not only refers to laying in the extreme of the physical, as it is the primary device in this style of performance. It however, also refers to using the bareness of the stage and the isolation of the body to extremely tap into the emotion and the spiritual. Grotowski also mentions “this, we consider the personal and scenic technique of the actor as the core of theatre art.” This

can be deduced to emphasise that Poor Theatre is a technique of the trance, in which “one must give oneself totally in one’s deepest intimacy”. (Grotowski, 1976, 38)

This notion of personal intimacy and the trance state of the performer is also deeply intertwined with that of self-penetration. Much like various African cultural practices of storytelling and meaning making, Growtowski’s methods are also rooted in the belief that truth and messages are passed down in the subconscious. The practice of self-penetration does not only involve the performer but it is also intended to encourage a sense of self-penetration in the audience member. It is interested in the spectator “who has genuine spiritual needs and who really wishes, through confrontation with the performance, to analyse himself. (Grotowski, 1976: 40).

6. But What Would Grotowski Say?: A Mix of Antagonistic Samples

In creating my remix, certain aspects have been cherry-picked from various streams of knowledge and frameworks, some in the same lexicon as Grotowski and Poor Theatre and others from completely different forms of theatre. As a result, there have been remainders in the sampling of Grotowski in my film mix, as well as somewhat uncomfortable tensions between the ideas I am formulating and those prescribed by Grotowski.

My findings have not always led me to the beneficial aspects of hybridising film and theatre. There are also limitations and perhaps, disadvantages that have to be considered in this experiment, namely around the boundaries between the audience and performer. These limitations particularly become more apparent when one thinks of the screen as a wall between the audience and the story in addition to the performer.

The film takes away the sharing of real time that a live performance would offer. Essentially, the audience of a film isn't experiencing my performance as it happens but rather a recording that took place on the day of filming. This further deprives the audience from an engagement with the story that directly involves them. It should also be considered that as much as the performer or the storyteller can imagine the audience of my film. They cannot see the audience as they tell the story.

Does the “trance” translate on screen?

> “Blessed are those who persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” - Woza Albert (Barney Simon, 1971)

Some of the windows to benefits of hybridisation are a lot more open than others in this process of research. Spiritual themes can be easily translated and even emphasised through the medium of film. Little Lamb makes use of cutaways to a church in my neighbourhood as I liken the phrases said by teachers in high school as religious rules, to serve as a contextual layer of the character, the setting of the story and ultimately the states of the story.

ALEX

“I’ve prescribed the bible of “’This is not a Kasi and this is not a Shebeen!’ Often preached by the pastors of former model C schools” - *Excerpt from Little Lamb (2022)*

As Little Lamb explores me witnessing the slaughtering of a goat as a metaphor for an abrupt introduction to manhood and what is expected of a man in an African cultural context. Not only that, but the film and its formal elements are interested in explicitly exploring ideas of manhood through the perspective of a post-colonial African subject. Therefore the subject matter of the script is carefully chosen to interact with the mode of theatrical storytelling.

In the instance of my research film, the presence of the goat functions as an overarching symbol of spiritualism. From the moment it is established that this is a story set in a specific

neighbourhood in Spruitview, South Africa, the significance of the goat is further established. This allows for a set up before slaughtering is mentioned in the climax of the film. One can also begin to understand that this slaughtering is for a specific spiritual ritual.

In African cultural contexts the slaughtering of goats and other animals symbolises sacrifice as a way to call out, communicate and connect with the ancestors. In the film it functions in the same way but it also is used to symbolise the sacrifice that Alex (me) makes in order to adjust to the conditions of the trip and assimilate with his cousins and uncle on the weekend away. It is also meant to symbolise the subconscious sacrifice of innocence and authentic self as he begins to interact with manhood.

These thematic elements that underpin the film are further elevated when considering the form of Poor Theatre and trance performance that the film takes. The trance is reflected in the long takes of improvised performance scenes of me playing the character of Malume Thomas and his never seen political uncle, Sacky Madi whom I often talk about as a template for real manhood throughout the film.

It can be said that this research film functions as a recording of a spiritual ritual. This ritual is one of play as a form reconnecting with the inner child and engaging with childhood trauma. Furthermore this ritual not only includes the embodying but also a recalling of an ancestor, in the case of the film my uncle.

Amidst these conceptual aspects of spiritualism being able to exist in film through Poor theatre, other questions have arisen when exploring spirituality and the trance in film. Much like when considering other aspects of this research, the main question relates to the screen and its limitations. Is there a way that Grotowski's engaging mode of storytelling can be as engaging through film? How does a filmmaker facilitate a spiritual encounter between the performer, performance and the audience?

Perhaps some of the answers to these questions lie in other forms of hybridisation, such as theatre productions that make use of screens as backdrops or projections serving as lighting or scenic elements. Perhaps thinking about where the film is screened can compensate for the lack of real- time engagement between a subject in a film and the audience and offer a more immersive encounter of a film. Screening at a church or other religious venues or sites enables a film to have a more immersing spiritual essence. Screening at a political site offers a more political tone to the experience of a film.

This idea is one that can prove successful, as it resembles other branches of new theatre movements of the 1960s directly inherited from Growtowski's experiments, such as environmental theatre, in its aims to heighten audience awareness and abolishing the distinction between audiences and the actor's space (Britannica, 2009). However the real question, here is does this result in a self-perpetuating experience for the performer, the filmmaker and the audience as Poor Theatre?

The answer to those questions is most-likely “no ". The religious space or site does not provide the sense of freedom that a theatre does in the world of Grotowski or that which the Poor-Theatrical cinema should. Screening a film at a religious site may result in the overt or sublime censoring of the film and therefore eliminating the “tension with the extreme" which Poor Theatre encourages. In addition, even with these other forms of hybridisation, the question of the role of the film is still prevalent. Is the film even doing any immersive work on its own or is it merely a prop to a curated space.

I think that the real answer to trying to make Poor-Theatrical cinema as immersive as Poor Theatre shouldn’t only exist in forms of hybridisation that make the film an additive or secondary element. Maybe the advancement of technologies like VR and holographs might present opportunities to make the immersive nature of Poor Theatre in film.

Still I believe that the potential of the frame should still be considered and explored to its fullest and the best way to achieve this is not only through the final product but the process as well. The trance and self-penetration may not always translate to an audience member through film and the screen does limit engagement between performer and audience.

However there are still windows for a process that embodies the ethos of poor theatre. The screen can still represent the work of self-penetrative stories. This can be achieved through a process of filmmaking that mirrors devised and workshop in which actors and the

filmmaker are encouraged to dig within themselves, their childhood through improvisation and writing. This may also be an even more interactive relationship between the performer and the filmmaker as well as a relationship with the crew. This interactive ethos and approach to the final product breaks the hierarchy on a film set through storytelling processes and through the film the same way Grotowski's methods the hierarchy of the theatre. This could even affect the conceptual quality of a film.

South Africa's political identity is defined through spiritual practices and beliefs. As a result, South African storytelling often takes the form of spiritual practice. This is also the case for Poor Theatre as it relies on "self-penetration" and the trance. This similarity in ethos not only cements the reason for poor theatre's prominence in South African theatre but also why the ethos of Poor theatre should continue to be explored in other storytelling forms.

There is no "discipline" in play

In Towards Poor Theatre, Grotowski emphasises the idea of discipline as an integral part of his method.He speaks of discipline almost as a way to manage the extremes of the body and spiritual levels of penetration that the performer can go to. This curiosity about managing the trance questions such as "how do you combine spontaneity and formal discipline?" (Grotowski, 1976: 39)

The trance state as a tool of Grotowski's methods is rooted in a religiosity in the attempt to purify theatre, the actor, the performer the encounter. These underpinning religious rules prescribed to the performer can be seen as discouraging of play. As playing cannot be not be managed, the moment it is, it becomes something less than a spontaneous and free act.

Little Lamb incorporates an employing of an epistemic disobedience, that sees the spiritual disciplinary elements compromised in order for playing to persist and lead the. This results in a filmic product that is rooted in a set of rules but rather in an ethos.

Theatre Should be Devoid of Technology

Poor theatre was formed during the emergence of the television set as a technology. In the sixties, television was becoming more accessible to the household, thus making the theatre less popular and more of a novel art form. Television was beginning to shift culture and become the main source of information, trends and culture.

One of Grotowski's main intentions for Poor Theatre was that it would bring audiences back to the theatre by returning the theatre to its essence. As film became prominent and now in the household, Grotowski felt that it had to be further removed for technology and focus on theatre, one everything that film can not offer. This existed on the level of removing theatre from excesses and creating it in its purest level.

This quest for purity existed on a level related to the notion of content. Because television

was interested in dictating culture and what was new and modern, Grotowski aimed to tell stories that went back to folklore and myth. Poor Theatre is also interested in offering television and film on a formal level in that it embodies traditional practices and events, rooted in spiritual reflections from both the performer and the audience. In a way it could be said that Grotowski is anti-media and works to involve in the ideas of dismantling the spectacle.

When reflecting on the intentions of Poor Theatre to steer away from technology one begins to notice that merging it with film is quite an antithetical process, and that there are tensions involving the medium itself and the ethos of Poor Theatre. However there is no denying that a lot can be earned from Poor Theatre and its socio and psycho-spiritual intentions.

I would argue that these intentions, when considered in relation to a completely different discipline, offer a unique reflexivity that isn't explored enough in the realm of film production. I would also speculate that spiritual input isn't a common consideration in a film set. This brings me to a curiosity concerning the possible relationship between the film product and self-penetrative, spiritual practices and encounters in the production process.

What happens if the director embraces a self-penetrative approach, through one of Grotowski's exercises or meditative process and harnesses that, in the way they direct or chose to write the scene on set? What happens if the director undergoes this process with the performer, if they reflect on the text together? Do all of these elements affect the artwork in any way?

I am curious as to what the documenting of this process and its results might look like and this research serves as an attempt to explore that. All of these considerations and questions about the process through the intersection of disciplines offer a new insight about the medium, seeking to gain a new spiritual layer from the process.

Epilogue

I have presented an interrogational definition and understanding of theatre, as well as a critically informed study of Poor Theatre, its elements and its intentions. Through the DJ Scholarship as a methodology of epistemic disobedience, I have been able to sample and remix the theatrical frameworks of Grotowski with the medium of filmmaking, in order to posit my own modal approach and process of making films.

I have positioned my filmic practice as an epistemological entry point to questions related to South African cinema. I have theorised a possible entry point to developing a practice that involves looking back at formal and cultural aspects of Poor Theatre as a way to make films. *Little Lamb* not only serves as an exploration of Poor Theatre within a frame, but it also works to think about the constructs of film and its process as theatrical and aims to present the process as so. Furthermore the exploration of DJ Spooky's *Rebirth of a Nation* has offered audio-visual tools that facilitate the hybridisation of disciplines in both my literary and filmic forms of knowledge creation.

Poor Theatrical cinema, the sampling of Poor Theatre as an ethos to inform film, proves viable as a mode to create nuanced emotional and spiritual stories, especially in post-apartheid South Africa. Furthermore the approach presents reflexivity and responsibility in relation to the text, the filmmaker, the actor and the audience. This modal approach further presents possibilities for documentary filmmaking, in the interest of personal archive as a political entry point, furthermore, offering a theatrical and filmic process as a means to achieve therapeutic goals.

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