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

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CHAPTER 3

Migrants, 'Intellectual *Tsotsis*',[1] and a Conniving Foreigner: *Come Back, Africa* (1959) and the Challenges of Cinematic Publicness

Synopsis

Come Back, Africa opens with a still image of a seemingly disused building. There is no sound as the camera pans from high angle shots, showing a montage of high-rise buildings. After a shift to an unconnected part of the city, the doorway of a slum house, the camera segues to a morning scene of the hustle and bustle of Johannesburg. Here, unsophisticated and bewildered African migrants walk down the street, their *Induna* (headman) in the lead. A close up of one of the men, Zacharia Mgabi, reveals his confusion as he lifts up his eyes to examine the towering buildings around him. He marches sombrely with his fellow migrants. A legend appears against these visuals:

> This film was made secretly in order to portray the true conditions of life in South Africa today. There are no professional actors in this drama of the fate of a man and his country. This is the story of Zacharia one of the thousands of Africans forced off the land by the regime and to the gold mines.

The migrants are now in the outskirts of the city. They walk towards a mineshaft which appears ahead. In a mine hostel scene, Zacharia speaks for the first time with a fellow worker. We learn of his famine-induced migration to the mine and of the false promises of good pay as a worker. However, Zacharia realizes that a litany of prohibitive laws stands in his way to find better work in the city. When eventually he finds a job, it is as a domestic

[1] This description is a self-reflexive coinage of 50's *Drum* journalists, in particular Can Themba, whose fear and admiration of the *tsotsis'* (township petty criminals) ingenious subversion of apartheid, put their ethics to the test. Lewis Nkosi, in an obituary for Can Themba, describes him as 'the supreme intellectual *tsotsi*… raising hell in the neighbourhood'. See Nkosi L., 1985. Obituary, *Themba Can, The Will to Die*. London: Heinemann, x. The ascription has also gained currency in contemporary texts about the Sophiatown School of journalism. See for example, Fenwick M., 1996. 'Tough Guy, eh!': The Gangster-Figure in *Drum*, *Journal of Southern African Studies,* Vol. 22. No4. (Dec), 617-632.

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servant for Mrs. Myrtle, a shrewish white employer. After some misunderstandings, the employer wastes no time in firing Zacharia. Vinah, his wife and his children join Zacharia at his rented shack in Sophiatown. Moving from one menial job to another, Zacharia goes through a series of dismissals. Street scenes of musical jumbles by penny whistle-blowing kids, Bapedi drummers, a Methodist church revival, a wedding and urchins running about punctuate his trials. Transitional scenes of morning rushes at the train stations in the city also capture the viewer's eye. Zacharia makes friends with an elderly servant who introduces him to the Sophiatown shebeen scene. His encounter with a local *tsotsi,* Marumu (*sic*)[2], becomes the subject of a shebeen discourse among the suburb's literati-Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane and their companion Morris Letsoalo. One fateful night, the police swoop on Vinah and Zacharia while they sleep in the backyard of Vinah's workplace. They arrest Zacharia. While Zacharia is in prison, Marumu goes to his shack and attempts to harass Vinah sexually. When she resists, he kills her by asphyxiation. Back at his shack, Zacharia is lost for words when he discovers the lifeless body of his wife. The film ends with Zacharia banging on the table in a rage.

Introduction

Come Back, Africa- by American independent filmmaker Lionel Rogosin (1924-2000), made in collaboration with the Sophiatown intellectuals Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane and Can Themba, is a slice of black urban life in 50's Sophiatown and the greater Johannesburg. Its documentary and dramatic visualizations of an emergent apartheid city, increasingly hostile to black social and political claims on the urban space, were anomalous with film culture in this period. Under the circumstances, the collaborative authorship of the film by an American filmmaker and black intellectuals was also extraordinarily unusual. *Come Back, Africa* was not circulated in South Africa at the time of its release. It was practically banned and only re-emerged much later. As an anti-apartheid film, its local circulation would have been germane to the public engagements of apartheid that unfolded at the

[2] The spelling of the Sotho-Tswana name in the film as 'Marumu' is incorrect. The correct spelling is 'Marumo' but I have retained the film's spelling to avoid confusion.

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time of its making. This is made sharper by the fact that 'anything that addresses a public is meant to undergo circulation' (Warner 2002: 91). Therefore, the lack of circulation of the film in South Africa is provocative. It invites the examination of the nature of the film's publicness.

Through *Come Back, Africa*, this chapter draws attention to the publicness of black-centred films produced in repressive conditions that do not allow for their circulation within national boundaries. The objective is to nuance our understanding of cinematic publicness from the perspective of black-centred films produced in repressive circumstances. Ultimately, the chapter tests the public critical role of film through the example of this early black-centred film, the making and initial circulation of which took place in conditions that were unfavourable for the stimulation of public critical engagements.

The critical significance of *Come Back, Africa* is an enduring theme in South African cinema studies. These studies, in particular Masilela (1991) and Maingard's (2007), reflect on the film's import in forging a sense of national cinema in South Africa. This chapter adds to these important works by exploring the making and public life of *Come Back, Africa* both to document its public critical record, but importantly, also to examine its circumstances of non-circulation or erratic circulation and how these relate to its publicness. It asks how in the limited and policed circumstances of its production, prohibition and eventual release, *Come Back, Africa* related to the historical discourses around its main theme, that is, black urban life under apartheid. To this end, the chapter explores the making and public life of *Come Back, Africa*.

Made at the height of apartheid, *Come Back, Africa* engaged the social implications of this system, especially the phenomenon of migrant labour system and pass laws. At the close of the 1950s, Africans were thoroughly urbanized but were subjected to the demeaning migrant labour system and the pass laws. However, the state and capital were at variance

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with regard to the migrant labour system (Barber 1999: 142). While capital saw in the permanence of Africans in the urban areas, a steady flow of labour, the state under Verwoerd maintained the hardline policy of residential separation along racial lines. Asked by the Orange Free State mining oligarchs to house 'a higher proportion of African families on their mines', Verwoerd reportedly argued that 'migratory labour is the best system, not only did the government support it, there is also good reason to believe that the Bantu people prefer it' (cited in Barber 1999: 142). Even so, Verwoerd was not prepared to industrialize the 'native reserves'. In the thinking of the Tomlinson Commission, such a move would have reduced the flow of Africans to the urban areas. However, Verwoerd maintained that industrialization was not in keeping with the competencies of the natives and that it would lead to racial integration; and ultimately undermine the fundamentals of apartheid (Barber 1999: 142-143). This chapter considers the relations between the film and the critical public engagements of African experiences of urbanisation during the early apartheid order. These relations also show how *Come Back, Africa* related to apartheid discourse on blackness.

Emerging from a Hidden Lens: The Making of *Come Back, Africa*

Come Back, Africa is a product of its chief maker, New York-born Lionel Rogosin's dream of making of an epic trilogy on racialism in the United States, South Africa and Asia. It also stems from his campaign against what he saw as the post-war reawakening of fascism in South Africa's emergent apartheid state (Davis 1996: 57). Prior to *Come Back, Africa*, Rogosin made *On the Bowery* (1956), an Oscar nominated and award winning film about alcoholism among working class people in New York's skid row.[3] Rogosin's focus on the social conditions of lumpens is an enduring theme in his works.[4] The vision of *On the Bowery* was co-extensive with a later initiative, the avant-garde American independent

[3] Skid row or skid road is a run-down or dilapidated urban area with a large population of impoverished abusers of alcohol and, often, other drugs. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skid_row> (accessed 03, June 2008).

[4]Rogosin later made films about the black experiences in the United States, namely: *Black Roots* (1970), *Black Fantasy* (1972), and *Woodcutters of the Deep South* (1973). See Rogosin L., 2004., (Ed) Davis P,. *Come Back Africa: Lionel Rogosin*, *A Man Possessed*, Johannesburg STE, 12.

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filmmakers' adoption in 1960 of the *New American Cinema Group Manifesto*. The objective of the manifesto, of which Rogosin was signatory, was to find alternative ways of distributing avant-garde films.

According to the film historian Kenneth Hey (1980: 61), 'the idea of a film dealing with apartheid South Africa developed during conversations between Walter White, secretary of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), Alan Paton author of *Cry, the Beloved Country* and Rogosin'. It is remarkable that the vision of *Come Back, Africa* related to *Cry, the Beloved Country*, a work by a globally influential writer.[5] This speaks to the transnational publicness of *Cry, the Beloved Country* and even strongly to its influence as an anti-apartheid text of note.[6] How the relation between the two texts occurred will be discussed in due course.

In making *Come Back, Africa*, Rogosin also aimed at conscientizing white people about the horrors the apartheid system imposed on Africans (Rogosin 2004: 65). Thus, he imagined a white viewership for the film. Because the circulation of the film in South Africa was not likely, it follows that these viewers were transnational. Accordingly, at the same time as the film focused on black experiences of apartheid, it was projected towards 'white consciences', and therefore white publics. While this might appear to iterate, perhaps unintentionally, the legacy of black people as the racially-othered objects of cinema and cinematic discourse, their dominance of *Come Back, Africa*'s frame subverted this otherness.

Importantly, Rogosin wanted to show apartheid's horrors through the eyes of black South Africans themselves, an unconventional tendency in South African film culture at that

[5] Interestingly, at the time of making *Come Back, Africa*, the first film adaptation of *Cry*, *the Beloved Country* had already been made a few years earlier in 1951. A second adaptation came out in 1995. A musical play adaptation, *Lost in the Stars* was also made in 1949.

[6] For a useful discussion of Paton's influence as a spokesperson for South Africa in America, see Cowling L., 2005. The Beloved South African: Alan Paton in America, *Scrutiny2*, 10.2.

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time.[7] This was important because it constituted an attempt at according black people the status of being publics, at a time when their publicness was discouraged by the apartheid state. That Rogosin's cinematic bias was for the urban blacks is also revealing in this regard. This is because he believed that 'the essential struggle of races took place in urban South Africa not in the rural- which was also changing' (Rogosin 2004: 44). Therefore, his bias towards the city was in keeping with his interest in the relations between the state, industry and the increasingly politicized and urbanized Africans. Rogosin's efforts were projected towards a publicity of the cinema, which provided an avenue for black people's contestations of the urban space. Through the example of *Come Back, Africa* then, it is possible to propose that black people's experiences of urban life played a significant role in the relation of early black-centred films to discourses on blackness.

Yet, Rogosin did not want to make a film about political leadership or leaders and certainly did not want to make 'a pure polemic on political terms about the wrongs and injustices of apartheid' (Rogosin 2004: 34). Rather, he sought 'a communication of human spirit so that the people on the other side of the barrier could feel emotionally what Africa really is and not what their particular mentality had created for them- the stereotype image' (Rogosin 2004: 34). The refusal to focus on black political leaders distinguished the film from the sphere of organized politics and allowed it a certain measure of critical autonomy. Its refusal to focus on political leaders also made *Come Back, Africa* a watershed radical black-centred film. This is because later films such as *Mapantsula* and *Fools* replicated, with some variations, its emphasis on the critical independence of cinema from organized politics.

In brief, Rogosin made *Come Back, Africa* with a strong intention to challenge the political and economic status quo in South Africa, in order to inform struggles against post-war fascism in general and, apartheid in particular. As I will show later, Rogosin projected a transnational social space charged with critical public engagements of apartheid, against

[7] See Davis, *Jungles*: 50.

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the backcloth of thitherto largely suppressed black perspectives. Imagining the scene of its engagement in this manner signals that Rogosin was set on a collision course with the apartheid state. On another level, the anticipated transnational circulation of the film stood squarely against global commercial cinema trends. In countering ideological stereotypes from the perspectives of black South Africans, *Come Back, Africa* did not only differ from the conventional cinematic representations of Africans anywhere, but it was poised to challenge these trends as well.

Alert to the risks involved in the attempts at making part of his envisioned trilogy on racialism in apartheid South Africa, Rogosin resorted to subterfuge. He entered the country under the pre-text of being a tourist and misinformed the South African authorities that he was making a musical travelogue on the country.[8] Rogosin eventually shot *Come Back, Africa* around Johannesburg and in Sophiatown in the late 50's, the twilight years of this vibrant and legendary multi-class and multi-ethnic community.[9] A skeletal crew from Israel and Europe and a few sympathetic acquaintances assisted him. In-between the shooting, the most politically explosive footage was spirited out of the country lest the authorities discovered and confiscated it.

In terms of casting, Rogosin selected characters that would represent themselves in the film (Rogosin 2004: 51). In casting whites, Rogosin 'worked with mostly progressive white South Africans. But they were so aware, so familiar with the brutalizing aspects of black and white life in South Africa…' (Nkosi in Davis 1996: 51). Quite signally, Rogosin also collaborated with the Sophiatown literati. While Modisane and Nkosi co-wrote the script, they also appeared in the film alongside Themba. Critics are agreed on the importance of Rogosin's collaboration with the African intellectuals. Commenting on this collaboration, Davis observes:

[8] For the full account, see Rogosin, *A Man Possessed.*

[9] One of the Sophiatown scenes in the film evokes its besieged state at the time of the film's making. The camera reveals graffiti on one of the walls: Hands off Western Areas.

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> Drawing on the intimate experience of Modisane, Themba and Nkosi of township life, Rogosin gave us the first, and probably the greatest, depiction of the confrontation between unskilled labour and industrial society, the breakdown of traditional values, and the trauma of apartheid (Rogosin 2004: 10).

The literati's fortuitous involvement in *Come Back, Africa* gave them a space and opportunity to give content to the cinematic imagination of urban black identity. In addition to its challenge of the racial complacency of the cinema in the 50's, Rogosin's collaboration with the intellectuals is significant in that it extended African challenges of the apartheid state. The extension took place in terms of effecting a 'shift' from literary practice, arguably significant for engaging issues affecting black South Africans, to the cinematic. Lewis Nkosi's testimony of his involvement in the film is revealing in this regard.

> For an African who is accustomed to seeing films that present a stereotyped image of Africa- an Africa where every American or European tourist stands a fair chance of being cooked and served as a choice steak for an evening meal to a bunch of "Native Savages", working with film producer Lionel Rogosin was a rare and unforgettable experience, full of exciting moments (Nkosi in *Fighting Talk*: February 1960: 12).

A close reading of this statement carries the substance of an entire people's troubled encounter with cinema in the 50's. Against the dominant and alienating staple of the colonial lens, Nkosi's account places *Come Back, Africa* firmly in the forefront of Africans' 'new' experience of film. While this 'new' experience is captured through the pen of an African collaborator in the film, it is a pointer towards the critical status of *Come Back, Africa* in the cinematic imagination of African identity at the time. However, this experience was unavailable to most Africans because they were not allowed to see it, the result of the problem of circulation at the heart of the film's public life.

During their collaboration with Rogosin, Modisane, Nkosi and Themba wrote creatively and for the press, work which they carried out under the hostile watch of the state. Nkosi worked for the *Golden City Post*, a weekly tabloid, which, between 1955 and 1971, had various regional editions aimed at racially defined readerships (Les Switzer and Donna

Switzer 1979: 115). Its Southern Transvaal edition was aimed at an urbanized African readership. *The Golden-City Post* was founded and published by one Jim Bailey, whose father, Abe Bailey, was a mining magnate. According to the Switzers, *The Golden-City Post* was popular, politically neutral and its tabloid style captured a multi-racial readership throughout Southern Africa. 'If anything, *Post* was more sensational than *Drum…*but on the whole its news coverage was relevant and reliable' (Switzer and Switzer 1979: 115).

Themba and Modisane worked for *Drum* magazine, as associate editor, and staff journalist respectively. *Drum* is a South African consumer magazine aimed mainly at a black readership. Over the years, it has evinced a political outlook and an overtly anti-racist and anti-apartheid stance. It started in 1951 as a government-initiated magazine for Africans called *African Drum*. In its formative years, the magazine had a tribal slant and was noted for its 'anthropological studies of the language and culture of rural blacks, and the serialised publication of Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*' (Fenwick 1996: 617). The *African Drum*'s tribal angle culminated in the rejection of its first editions by the African readership it was targeting (Fenwick 1996: 617). Jim Bailey ultimately owned *African Drum* and changed it to a modern investigative magazine called *Drum* that explored the social lives of black South Africans (Fenwick 1996: 617). Anthony Sampson, the new editor of *Drum,* provided a telling explanation for this change, 'while we were preaching folk tales and culture, they (Africans) were clamouring to be let into the Western world' (Sampson in Fenwick 1996: 617). Nkosi bears testimony to the importance of *Drum* for the urbanized blacks: 'it wasn't so much a magazine as it was a symbol of the new African cut adrift from the tribal reserve- urbanized, eager, fast-talking and brash' (Nkosi 1965: 10). Further, 'by the end of the fifties *Drum* and *Post* had become widely accepted as the most authoritative newspapers on the life of black South Africans' (Nkosi 1965: 30). Nkosi's claim signals that the black writers' collaboration with Rogosin sought to produce an authoritative cinematic engagement of black experiences of urban life. The making of the film remarkably evinces the role of black intellectuals in the public life of the time. This role, it appears, was to challenge official constructions of blackness and offer oppositional

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or counter-imaginations of black identity. An outstanding feature of the re-constructions was the heightening of black urbanness, a direct contradiction of the apartheid imaginary of blackness.

The audacity with which *Come Back, Africa* was made, was coterminous with the investigative and highly politicized journalism of the writers, itself constantly subject to state harassment.[10] It follows then, that the writers' consistent address of black publics, coincided with and were extended by Rogosin's equally arduous desire to register black perspectives in the cinema. Interestingly, this prefigured a subtle dialogic relation between the black press and *Come Back, Africa*.[11] The significance of this relation lay in its potential to accord cinematic publicity to the social and political anxieties in the outlawed black public of *Drum* and *Golden City Post*. However, the black press was not the only site through which the filmmakers sought to make black publics visible. According to Nkosi, their research for the script of the film involved people of different classes and educational backgrounds:

> Whether the group consisted of ordinary workers or a number of articulate intellectuals, in that single moment of excited conversation, these people fumbled around with words that revealed an inner experience of which we had not been aware. We used these recorded conversations as rough guidance as to how to shape the ultimate movie story…..they talked the movie into being (1960: 13).

Anchored in surreptitious critical exchanges that valorised deliberation, the anticipated film was projected towards a publicness founded on the critical arraignment of apartheid and of industrial exploitation from black perspectives. These exchanges found their way into the film, especially through the celebrated shebeen scene. Importantly, the fact that

[10] About the adventurous nature of 'black journalism' in the '*Drum* era', see Nkosi, *Home and Exile*: 12. Through its focus on the life of one of the *Drum* writers, Henry Nxumalo, the film, *Drum* (2005), by Zola Maseko, also gives a glimpse of the dangers of political journalism in the period.

[11] The tendency to base black-centred films on the popular black press was well and alive in this era. It can also be found in Zonk! (1950) a film based on a variety show and a magazine for black readership called *Zonk: People's Pictorial*. About *Zonk*, see Maingard, *National Cinema*, 91.

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Come Back, Africa was made with the knowledge of a few people, is an indication of the near-impossibility of certain black-centred films' garnering of publics in South Africa.

So far, the chapter has drawn attention to the difficulties that the filmmakers faced in the attempt to make the film. Thus, at the level of its making, the would-be film was subject to restrictions arising from the political hostility of the emergent apartheid state. At the same time, the significance of the film's cinematic publicness lay precisely in its capacity for calling black publics into being, which were however, rendered absent by state hostility. Because of this hostility which significantly denied blacks publicness, the local cinematic publicness of *Come Back, Africa* would have appeared unfeasible. In the section that follows, which deals with form, I show how the filmmakers applied themselves to the challenges of *Come Back, Africa*'s anticipated lack of publicness, and the systematic exclusion of blacks from the public sphere in South Africa in particular. I discuss the form of the film and demonstrate its critical aspirations, as well as its multifaceted textuality.

A Cinematic 'Ghetto Salon'[12] in Search of a Public: Form in *Come Back, Africa*

Influenced by the Italian neo-realist filmmaker Vittorio De-Sica and documentary filmmaker and ethnographer Robert Flaherty, Rogosin made *Come Back*, *Africa* in a neo-realist fashion. The use of non-actors, on location shooting that 'captures' authentically the social context of its subjects, and an impulse towards an imperfect cinematography, are some of the elements that typify the neo-realist tendency in *Come Back, Africa*. The film combines a realist documentary style and fictional dramatic recreation, partly dialogue-driven, and sometimes soundless visuals in a simple plot. Four strategic manoeuvres are discernible that unite the film's form: the paratextual, narrative, realist documentary, and lastly, the overtly intellectual stylistic.

[12] I use the notion of a 'ghetto salon' as a variation of the French *salon*, which Habermas described as an institution of the public sphere in 17th century France.

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In its paratextual manoeuvre, *Come Back, Africa* deploys the peritextual device of written captions at the very beginning of its narrative. At this point, we learn that it was filmed secretly and that it used non-professional actors. This establishes the film's co-extensiveness with the circumstances of its production, and the historical world it depicts. Interestingly, the captions appeal to the viewers' sense of aesthetic judgment and historical consciousness. These declarations mean that the film dropped its guard as a constructed text. The peritext of *Come Back, Africa* almost denies its 'film-ness', that is, it destabilizes its ontology as film and privileges its historical context and political content. In locating the film firmly within its historical circumstances, the disclaimers establish a discursive space in which reflection on the film can take place without strict recourse to its formal status as film. Yet, it is the formal stylistics that draws the viewer to the context of the film, and attempts to orchestrate public reflection on the limits and implications of a space in which creative expression is ruthlessly policed. This is indicative of Rogosin's alertness to the problems of the film's publicness. Therefore, at the level of the paratextual manoeuvre, *Come Back, Africa* guides the viewer to the historical problems that informs its making, over and above the film itself. Whether they are its transnational post-war public, or a later transnational and local public that incorporates democratic South Africa, *Come Back, Africa* forces a historical consciousness in the viewers. Significantly, this consciousness laid the grounds for public critical engagements sensitive to the film's historical limitations and possibilities.

The narrative manoeuvre is anchored in the plot. Here, Zacharia's trials in the cheap labour market, and attempts to find a decent life in the slums, identify the humiliation of apartheid at a personal level. His tribulations are representative of the black migrants in the city. Importantly, it also narrows the divide between the migrant characters, who play themselves and their actual experiences, which they replicate in the film. This is in keeping with Rogosin's bias for realism: 'My aim was to express realism in a dramatic and poetic manner, to abstract then humanize, or better still synthesize' (Davis 1996: 51). In his

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commentary on the making of Zacharia's last scene, Modisane gives an idea of the force of the film's realism:

> …the script called for him to breakdown mentally, and in a rage of hysteria, to smash up whatever his temper directed him to. The crack-up of the character and the man were so closely linked that we were horrified to be in the presence of the destruction of a man. It was a nightmare which we could not stop or turn our faces from, and when Lionel did assume the presence of mind to shout 'cut' we were sick. The scene had come- for us- too close to the real thing and for Zacharia it was the real thing, it was in his face (Modisane 1963: 283).

Though tangential to the plot, Marumo's victimization of Vinah complements the narrative manoeuvre and adds an important element to the film's engagement of social violence in the city, the gender perspective. Incorporated towards the end of the film, the scene in which Marumo attempts to rape Vinah, and eventually murders her, suggests that part of the city's social violence was gendered. *Come Back, Africa* invited as it did this, its public's consideration of the problematic of gender and violent crime in the apartheid city.

It is the narrative's concern with what happens to ordinary migrants and more importantly, its proximity to their social reality, that brings it closer to the documentary manoeuvre. The documentary manoeuvre, which is more concerned with historical documentation of the apartheid city, is at play in the depiction of the city in a soundless and shifting montage of high angle shots. The shots punctuate the empty and distant coldness of the city, the very edifice of an alienating capitalist modernity. This soundless montage intersects with the plot at intervals. Maingard observes that this constitutes the film's recurrent flashes of the Brechtian device: 'alienating us as audience from the images, enforcing a critical sensibility' (Maingard 2007: 113). The documentary manoeuvre is at play in the mine scenes in which the audience is invited to bear witness to the conditions of black migrants in South Africa's mines. It is further used in the subsequent street scenes of Sophiatown and occasionally in Johannesburg. In these scenes, the camera interferes minimally with its subjects but retains control of the historical 'documentation' of the urban milieu within and against which black identity is engaged.

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The camera's differential treatment of the city and the ghettoized *Sophiatown* is instructive as to the film's depiction of black identity and modernity. When migrants appear in the city, they walk its streets in files of regimented labour- a journey to the city's outskirts where they mine its gold in deplorable conditions. Permanently transient, black workers' morning rushes off the trains is a compelling visual testament of their total subservience to the authority of the labour clock. However, in Sophiatown, life is punctuated with vivacity that is both promising and deadly. The musicality of street performers and Sunday weddings mingle in a carefree cacophony. In this scenario, violent crime is not far. Criminality and violence are subject to discussion within the film itself and form part of the intellectual manoeuvre chiefly represented by the shebeen scene.

In the shebeen scene, which Rogosin regarded as the climax of the film, *Come Back, Africa* evinces an explicitly intellectual approach. The scene unfolds towards the plot's denouement, at which point the viewer is sufficiently aware of the trials of the protagonist. This allows for a dialogue on the themes of criminality, violence, 'race' and public engagement itself. Can Themba, appearing as himself, tackles these subjects by giving context to the violence represented in Marumu- Zacharia's nemesis. He is joined by Modisane, Nkosi and Morris all of whom also appear as themselves.[13] Because the conversation in the shebeen scene is semi-directed, the scene, like the narrative manoeuvre above, breaks the boundaries between its audience and the intellectuals- whose arguments 'write' them into the public spaces in which the film would eventually circulate. This 'writing' is broached through critical views of 'literary liberalism'[14] in South Africa, acerbic engagements of what Nkosi and Modisane felt were the paternalistic treatment of black identity in Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. In the film, Nkosi argues:

[13] About the uneasy relationship between the *tsotsis* and the Sophiatown intellectuals, as well as the latter's identification with the former, see Modisane W, B., 1986, (1963). *Blame Me on History*, AD Donker: Johannesburg, 67.

[14] I coined 'literary liberalism' as shorthand for the manifestation of liberal thought in South African literature.

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> Well, I'm telling you, the liberal just doesn't want a grown up African. He wants the African he can sort of patronize, pat on his head and tell him that "with just a little bit of luck, someday you'll be a grown-up man, fully civilized". He wants the African from the country, from his natural environment, unspoilt (cited in Balseiro 2003: 93).

Interestingly Nkosi later reported that:

> *Cry the Beloved Country* was as important for South Africa as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was important for the United States. For the first time the international community was really alerted to the plight of black South Africans. Yet, at the same time the black community itself, especially the intellectuals had reservations about *Cry the Beloved Country* because of what they thought was its paternalistic tone (Nkosi in Davis 1994).[15]

If Nkosi's comments are anything to go by, *Come Back, Africa*, through its intellectual manoeuvre, created a cinematic space for the surfacing of critical engagements of black identity in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, which were already current in South Africa of the 50's. If this institutes a relationship between the cinema and history in which engagements freely flowed between the two sites, it also demonstrates the intellectuals' critical challenge of the influence of *Cry, the Beloved Country* on Rogosin. This signals that the dialogic relationship among its makers, guided the engagements of black identity in the film, which also created a space for the critical public engagements of black identity elsewhere. Evidently, *Come Back, Africa* exemplifies a critical tendency in early black-centred films' relation with liberal discourses on black identity. This relation was particularly predicated on the black intellectuals' view that liberalism infantilized black people by denying them agency in modernity. However, the intellectuals' deliberation on blackness bristled with an assured masculinity, which assumed a gender-neutral conception of blackness. Their deliberations were oblivious to the gender dynamic, to the effect that they painted, perhaps unwittingly, a masculine-inclined picture of blackness.

Interestingly, in the shebeen scene, Themba expresses his belief in the transformative power of 'getting at each other' through 'talk', and therefore makes rational debate or public engagement a problem of the film:

[15] See also Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 4-8.

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> I'd like to get people to get at each other. If I could get my worst enemy over a bottle of beer, maybe we could get at each other. It's not just a question of getting at each other. It's a question of understanding each other, living in the same world.[16]

Its militant tone regardless, Themba's words profoundly instances the objective of Habermas' concept of communicative rationality, which is to achieve through rational communication, the best possible ethical standards and conditions of critique. The exchanges in the scene are demonstrative of the cinema's capacity to widen, in casual but critical moments of exchanges between characters, profound reflection on the challenges presented by modernity and its antinomies. At the same time as this is reflective of the intellectuals' modern aspirations, it is also illustrative of the film's staging of its critical role.

If the film occasionally alienates the audience in the documentary manoeuvre to enforce critical appreciation, it also invites, through intellectual exchanges of its characters, publics, primarily 50's to 60's publics, to be involved in its engagements. The scene is powerful as a strategic element of the film's 'thresholds' in that, by 'capturing' the conversation, it accords cinematic publicity to the 'ghetto salon' status of the shebeen. The virtue in this publicity does not only lie in rendering the 'ghetto salon' visible, but also in inviting public debates beyond the 'salon' itself. The 'salon's ghetto status is constitutive of the film's self-reflexivity, that is its focus on itself as a space for public engagement, but one that is rendered clandestine by the state's 'criminalization' of rational critical debate. Therefore, the shebeen scene summarizes the preceding scenes and renders it an important 'threshold' of the film.

The combination of various film strategies in *Come Back, Africa* underwrites its self-reflexivity. Accordingly, documentary visualization of black encounters with the city and

[16] Themba's penchant for rational debate was as cinematic as it was historical. Nkosi drew attention to this tendency by Themba: 'In the shebeen it was always talk, talk, talk…..' "All I want", Can challenged, "all I am suing Stridjom for is a chance to sit down with him over a glass of brandy and talk to him man to man. I reckon I have a few things to tell him. It may very well be that after the umpteenth drink, even with the lowest intelligence, a man may see reason!'" See Nkosi, *Home and Exile,* 21.

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explicit commentary flank its narrative. The mix of documentary visualization and commentary occasions intra-textual reflections designed to enhance *Come Back, Africa*'s public critical potency. The combination of documentary visualisation and commentary achieves intra-textual reflection by adding to the film's narrative, a deliberative window that encourages public engagements of black identity, modernity, violence, racism and rational-critical deliberation. These strategies also set up, through the shebeen scene, or what I have called 'ghetto salon', a template for public reflection.

The film's mix of documentary realism with neo-realist fiction aesthetics enhances *Come Back, Africa*'s critical engagement with Africans' encounters with industrial modernity. *Come Back, Africa* does not only mediate these encounters but also invites in a manifestly intellectual manner, intra-textual critical engagements on them. Through this approach, which truncates the distance between its textuality and history, the film makes itself a space for concrete historical causes. *Come Back, Africa* offers a rare glimpse outside literature, of the discourses on blackness among the rapidly modernizing and modernized Africans. As an infinitely circulating visual object, it also extends the discursive space for public engagements.

Form in *Come Back, Africa*, which is unique and engaging, constitutes the film's alertness to the challenges pertaining to its role as a space for public critical engagement. Being a product of clandestine efforts, the film's form evinces attempts at exceeding its lack of public visibility and engagements, which it strongly encourages. It is precisely because of the anticipated lack of its publicness that *Come Back, Africa*'s stylistic strategies became significant for encouraging critical public engagement of issues that were marginal to cinematic culture at that time. So far, we have learnt of the film's intra-textual staging of its own publicness. Yet, the effects of the attempts at garnering visibility and critical public engagements are best tested against the film's actual circulation.

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Transnational Publicness: The First Phase

Due to the political circumstances in South Africa, *Come Back, Africa* could not be possibly shown here. Yet, even circulating the film outside South Africa proved difficult for Rogosin. He could not secure an opening in New York in 1959 because of the high exhibition charges and the large backlog of films waiting to be shown (Rogosin 2004: 126). Nor were the film's aesthetics and subject matter in keeping with the conventions and conservatisms of the larger commercialized circuit. For instance, in Manhattan, 'though several exhibitors liked the picture, they had no theatre for it' (*Time* 25, April 1960). At the same time, the apartheid government 'embarked on a massive campaign of vilification, tarring Rogosin with the communist brush. This accusation and the spirit of the times made it impossible for Rogosin to find an American distributor' (Rogosin 2004: 12).[17]

With its transnational circulation tarred by the South African state propaganda, an action that ironically made the state a protagonist in the film's public life, the publicness of *Come Back, Africa* was mired in controversy. This implies that the South African state hitched *Come Back, Africa* onto the ongoing Cold War hostilities, to the extent that the film's focus on the black-experience of apartheid did not get the airing it sought.

The European run of *Come Back, Africa* took place at the Venice film festival in the summer of 1959 (Elinor Rogosin in Rogosin 2004: 130). However, it was exhibited out of competition ostensibly because many large-budget American films were already admitted at the festival (Rogosin 2004: 124). This did not stop the film from winning the Italian Critics Award. Interestingly, some of the critics in Italy called into question the festival organizers' decision to disallow *Come Back, Africa* from the festival competition. In spite of its critical success, *Come Back, Africa* was not widely distributed in Italy and the rest of Europe. However, the film's Italian run secured distribution contracts in a limited number

[17] Elinor Rogosin, Lionel's wife later wrote of a brush with the political establishment in the United States. Although she did not elaborate on it, she noted that back in New York, a man from the State Department visited their home (Ellie Rogosin in Rogosin, *A Man Possessed*: 130).

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of venues in France and London (Rogosin 2004: 125). *Come Back, Africa* entered North America through the Vancouver Film Festival in 1959. At the festival, the Canadian Federation of Film Societies gave *Come Back, Africa* an award for 'the film showing the most significant advance in content, means of expression and technique'. This happened in spite of Rogosin's reservations about the film's formal astuteness.

Predisposed towards critical engagement through cinema, and failing to register the help of major cinemas in that regard, Rogosin resorted to independent exhibition through his newly-bought Bleecker Street Cinema, Greenwich Village, New York which has been called, in retrospect, 'a kind of university of film' (Robert Downey in Rogosin 2004: 144). Rogosin, who came from a wealthy Jewish background, bought the cinema with the aim of showing *Come Back, Africa*. The opening of the Bleecker Street Cinema was an attempt at a cinematic public sphere, which was fertile for what Negt and Kluge call 'autonomous organization of experience'. Interestingly, the cinema became a haven for avant-garde film culture until 1974 when Rogosin sold it. Rogosin also organised 'private' screenings in New York, which were attended by dignitaries including Eleanor Roosevelt, first lady of the United States from 1933-1945.

Remarkably, the film's opening in Bleecker Street on April 4, 1960, took place only two weeks after the Sharpeville massacre, almost coinciding with a significant event in the history of apartheid South Africa. This prompted Davis to argue that since the massacre was 'captured on film, and appeared in newsreels across the world… no one could claim that *Come Back, Africa* was an exaggeration' (Rogosin 2004: 12). The unintended timing of the film's release in New York, favoured Rogosin's objective of drawing international attention to apartheid South Africa. Thus, by taking advantage of the unfolding events in South Africa, Rogosin orchestrated a cinematic transnational sphere around apartheid, a mere 12 years after its official promulgation.

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Come Back, Africa won important awards including a selection by *Chevalier de la Barre* in Paris, as 'Most Worthy Picture of 1960' and another by the influential *Time* as one of the 'Ten Best Pictures of 1960'. However, these accolades were accompanied by critical reviews. The New York based and major US weekly newsmagazine *Time* acknowledged the timeliness of the film, and interestingly called it a 'remarkable piece of cinema journalism', ascribing a journalistic functionality to it. The newsmagazine praised *Come Back, Africa* for its incisive exposure of black experiences in South Africa: 'Rogosin's camera looks deep into the private nightmare and social desperation of a man and a people' (April 25 1960). This depth notwithstanding, *Time* argued that Rogosin's depiction of poverty, violence and white racism was restrained: 'Dramatically, the end of the film is false, but statistically it is true, rape and murder are commonplace in South Africa's slums. Indeed, Director Rogosin's reading of the facts is conservative. He is scrupulously fair to the whites, and the camera leans over backward to avoid some of the more unpleasant aspects of life in the Johannesburg slums: the open sewers and the unchecked disease' (25, April 1960). This argument is in keeping with *Time*'s categorization of *Come Back, Africa* as 'cinema journalism' which makes the film both a reportage and a creative cinematic intervention. The argument by *Time* that the film was conservative demonstrates the newsmagazine's highly involved engagement of Rogosin's South Africa. A bold assertion of socio-political conditions in South Africa underwrites the review, a tendency that provoked scrutiny of the film and, importantly of South Africa by the newsmagazine's readership. The review rendered contestable the film's representation of social and political facts in the country, and guided the public deliberation on the film to the morass of black lumpen life and the bigotry of white South Africa.

Film reviewer of the *New York Post* Winsten Archer recommended *Come Back, Africa*: 'If you want to see and understand South Africa, there is no better way than this picture of Johannesburg: the bitterness of the whites, the growing anger of the Negroes and the horrors of the shelters and tin shacks of Sophiatown...extraordinary timeliness' (*New York Post*, 1960). Acknowledgements of the film's timeliness easily lent authority to the film in

the ongoing political drama of South Africa. Equally, Bosley Crowther, film reviewer of the mainstream *New York Times*, recognised the film's timeliness: 'This is a timely picture, although it was filmed last year. What it lacks in dramatic structure, it makes up in pictorial urgency' (Crowther 5, April 1960). Not unlike the *Times'* review, Crowther felt that 'the helplessness and frustration that the average African native must feel in the face of the social dilemmas that exist in South Africa today are put forth in clumsy, stagy fashion but with a certain amount of raw vitality in Lionel Rogosin's documentary drama, Come Back, Africa' (Crowther 5, April 1960). Jesse Zunser, newspaper editor and reviewer of the New York magazine *Cue*, billed as a guide to weekly events in the city, also commended the film thus: 'Highest Recommendation! Extraordinary film, powerfully dramatic, brilliantly photographed, splendidly played against the background of explosive South Africa' (*Cue Magazine*, 1960).

One intriguing aspect in the US media regarding *Come Back, Africa* is what the *New York TImes* film reviewer Paul Becxley argued was the ambivalence of the press towards the film. Becxley made his comments in the *Herald Tribune*, the international edition of the *New York Times*. According to him, *Come Back, Africa* was 'a lucid expression of a modern tragedy even if the front pages had not lifted it into an area of special significance' (cited in Rogosin 2004: 145). According to Becxley, this ambivalence found expression in the attention that critics paid to the artistic elements of the film and less to its social and political concerns. This is borne out by the New York-based leftwing newspaper, *The Village Voice*'s challenge of this tendency. Reflecting in retrospect, film historian Hey, observed that

> the underground weekly criticized writers who wasted time and valuable column space contemplating the relative merits of the artistic elements of the film and who should have exploited the available space to denigrate the evil system which the film exposed (Hey 1980: 63).

The *Voice*'s activist intervention suggests a debate on the political value of *Come Back, Africa* and its implications for the American public. It is decisive in its assumption, namely

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that the reviewers' role was to advance *Come Back, Africa*'s anti-apartheid agenda. Therefore, as part of *Come Back, Africa*'s New York publics, the *Village Voice* orchestrated its publicness by summoning an engaged transnational public against apartheid. The *Village Voice*'s own position as an underground weekly guided its publicising of the film's difficult circulation and the media's ambivalence towards it. For the weekly, the media's ambivalence towards *Come Back, Africa* was a high point in the film's significance for New Yorkers. The *Voice*'s suggestion which, Hey called 'sarcastic', of how *Come Back, Africa* might have lessened the antipathy of journalists towards the film and attracted substantial audiences in the US, is a notable indication of the challenges in the film's transnational circulation:

> Come Back, Africa, (title taken from an African love song) is a film of pure fiction which will rock you away from your daily realities. Here is a movie which shows Africa in all its exotic beauty (have you chosen the place for your next vacation?); thrilling lion-hunting cradle of Jazz, the country of love, adventure, and slumbering beauty! Bring your sweet heart with you! (in Hey 1980, 63).

The Village Voice read in what it saw as *Come Back, Africa* 's poor following, the result of the US journalists' pre-mediated sympathy with the colonial imagery of Africa and blackness, which the film disavowed. Hey sadly pointed out that 'despite admonition, the public refused to see Rogosin's film, and it gathered little popular following….' (Hey 1980: 63). Quite manifestly, the film's lack of popularity in the United States means that Rogosin's attempt at internationalizing an anti-apartheid spirit did not succeed as much as he had hoped. The film was caught up within the contradictions of global capitalist modernity- in which its capacity to animate critical public engagements was compromised by a largely indifferent transnational cinema circuit and audience. Evidently, as a film dealing with explosive social and political questions that implicate the complicity of Western capital in the super-exploitation of apartheid lumpens, the status of *Come Back, Africa* in the transnational Western public sphere was fraught with ambivalence. But that this ambivalence became subject to scrutiny by alternative media in New York is noteworthy. Thus, *Come Back, Africa*'s entrance into the New York public sphere set in motion a critical self-reflection within its publics about media commitment to addressing

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injustice in other countries and in New York itself. This is as much a question about the transnational commitment to fighting global injustice as it is about metropolitan media practice itself.

Even more remarkable is the fact that the New York media carried reviews of *Come Back, Africa* against the South African state's attempts at silencing the film's publicity. The effect of the reviews was to cast aspersions on white South Africa's international image, and to privilege black South Africans' perspectives on apartheid. Ultimately, colonial and apartheid imaginaries of back identity were discredited in a transnational public sphere. In the United States itself, the reviews opened a space for national debate on racial relations, which at the time fairly echoed those in South Africa. *Come Back, Africa* also garnered noteworthy media attention outside the United States. A review in the London-based *Daily Worker* instances this attention.

The People's Press Printing Society, a readers' cooperative, published the *Daily Worker* (*The Morning Star* since 1966), formerly the organ of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Therefore, workers and leftists who were engaged in its running constituted the newspaper's immediate readership. Nina Hibbin, the British socialist film critic of the *Daily Worker*'s review of *Come Back, Africa* resonated with the political concerns of this readership. The circulation of the review put *Come Back, Africa* at the centre of the *Daily Worker*'s immediate political preoccupations. Hibbin confessed that the film was:

> The most damning indictment of apartheid and the pass system that I have ever seen...in a climate of almost unbearable anger and frustration, it beats the question, which, though unspoken, must be in the mind of everyone who sees it: How long are we going to allow these appalling conditions to exist? (In Rogosin 2004: 145).

Hibbin's appeal for the involvement of the *Daily Worker*'s readers in the unfolding drama of apartheid, denies them the status of mere onlookers, and constitutes the *Daily Worker*'s readers as protagonists in the anti-apartheid fight. Ultimately, in the *Daily Worker*, we can glean the critical effect of the film's invitation of engaged transnational

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publics. Other reviews opened a space for reflection on white supremacy. For instance, when he saw it at the Venice film festival, journalist Anthony Carthew noted:

> I have just seen a film that makes me ashamed of belonging to a race which can oppress and terrorize people of other colours…I recommend any white South Africans who read this to look up the word humanity in a dictionary (*London Daily Herald*, 1959, 4 September)

In Carthew's comments, Rogosin's objective of conscientizing white people about apartheid struck a significant nerve. However, the transnational location of Carthew meant that his comments were lost to many white South Africans who, if they applied themselves to his challenges, could have formed a significant part of the film's publics. The critical significance of Carthew's comments lay in their challenge of white supremacy.

With the above reviews and showings at festival venues, the publicness of *Come Back, Africa*, which included both expert and non-expert commentators, slanted towards the film's political import and formal approach. The reviews and awards constituted and enhanced the publicness of the film by giving space to the discussions of the political situation in South Africa. Even if the showing of the film was confined to festival circuits, the media reviews ensured that it enjoyed wide publicity. This in turn, made possible the engagement of the film beyond the readers of the newspapers. The incongruity between *Come Back, Africa*'s lack of wide exhibition in commercial cinemas, and accolades from influential institutions is remarkably telling as regards to its publicness. A sphere of critical engagements that are nonetheless independent of the established cinematic networks marks its transnational publicness.

Interestingly, the role of the media in *Come Back, Africa*'s publicness extended to the film's paratexts- its posters. Some of the reviews found a way into one of the film's New York posters. In the poster for *Come Back, Africa*'s exhibition at *The New* Yorker, another independent theatre in New York, press reviews occupy the better part of the poster's background. An edited version of the *Time Magazine* review resurfaced: 'a timely and

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remarkable piece of cinema'. 'Extraordinary timeliness!' cried an edited version of The *New York Post* review. From the *New York Daily News*, the poster borrowed: 'the volatility of the racial situation in South Africa has again conspired to make Rogosin's film topical'. *Cue Magazine*'s recommendation of *Come Back, Africa* also found a place on the poster: 'extraordinary film…splendidly played against the background of South Africa'. In the poster, the sole visual is a side profile of a pensive Zacharia Mgabi. The profile appears in the foreground and occupies a third of the poster space. It appears then that the immediate function of the press reviews, as they appeared on the poster, was to give an idea of the issues behind the man's contemplative mood. Importantly, the use of the reviews also echoed the film's concerns with the South African situation, which the Sharpeville massacre had catapulted into the United States public imagination. The bias in the reviews is notably directed at the timeliness of the film, a decisive choice in the projection of the film's role in the United States public sphere. This role, the poster strongly suggests, was of a cinematic window and mediation into the unfolding events in both South Africa and the United States. *Come Back, Africa*, it appears, was as much germane to Sharpeville as it was to the Civil Rights Movement.

Beyond the Media

With its showing in marginal venues such as the *Bleecker Street* and *The New Yorker*, *Come Back, Africa* entered what can be called an oppositional and transnational public sphere of avant-garde film thought and practice. This is borne by the take-up of the film by some film scholars and practitioners. Rogosin's affinity with the New-American Cinema eased the film's entry into the United States avant-garde film scene. Although very critical of the film's aesthetics, especially its dramatized parts, film scholars Roger Sandall and Cecile Starr formed part of the American avant-garde film thought and practice. They expressed their thoughts in *Film Quarterly*, the academic film journal based at the University of California, Berkeley. Thus, its academic setting had roots in the west coast film industry. Amongst other preoccupations, the journal is dedicated to in-depth discussion of avant-

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garde film culture. The journal's academic nature signals its readership of academics and film enthusiasts.

Sandall and Starr commended *Come Back, Africa* for what they called its 'documentary comment', that is its visual documentation of the squalor of Sophiatown, the exploitation of miners, the 'impersonality of the city towers' and 'the vigor of Negro ceremony, dance, and song...' (1960: 59). They also lauded 'the film's experimental use of conversational dialogue', which they thought would be 'the preoccupation of film-makers in the coming decade' (1960: 60). This accent on filmmakers' interest bears testimony to *Come Back, Africa*'s signal status in the United States avant-garde film culture. However, Sandall and Starr questioned the film's use, though occasional, of Hollywood conventions. For them, the scene in which Zacharia kisses Vinah is 'made in Hollywood's standard images of passion' (1960: 59). They contended that in its dramatization of Zacharia's life, *Come Back, Africa* is weakened both as film and as argument (1960: 59). In describing the film's dramatizations and Zacharia's character, Sandall and Starr use words such as 'banal', 'shallow' and 'melodramatic'. For the two thinkers, these led the film to miss the essence of apartheid life:

> From Zacharia's dismissal for incompetence through the gratuitous death of his wife, the film barely touches the unique aspects of apartheid life.[18] The pass system, the effect of Groups Areas Act, the curfew, the Negro hostility to liberal whites, all find expression in talk alone….Here we see a group of Negroes engaged in a prolonged discussion of race, politics, art, and the rest of life as they see it. Although many important points are touched upon, the remote and rambling naïvetés in which they are smothered give a portrait of the South African Negro leadership which does disservice to hundreds of men now shut in Verwoerd's jails (1960: 59).

The film is here discussed both as a document of revolutionary possibilities and with regard to its aesthetic make-up. The two thinkers saw the dramatic bits as being underlined by a statement of political challenge. Therefore, their celebration of the documentary manoeuvre in the film is a logical outcome of their expectations of the

[18] See also Hey K., 1980. Come Back Africa (1959), Another Look, *Film and History*: 61-66.

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political task of the film: to forcefully depict life under apartheid and to question it. With regard to the shebeen scene, Sandall and Starr directly criticize the Sophiatown intellectuals' embrace of rational debate.[19] Rather, they celebrate as forceful and eloquent, 'the prophetic closing image of Zacharia's pounding rage' (1960: 59). Sandall and Starr were not alone in pondering the validity of rational debate. Nkosi's retrospective reflection on the shebeen scene also shows that the idealism of the rational-critical engagement of apartheid quickly fizzled in the wake of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, which occurred several months after the film was made (Nkosi in Davis 1994).[20] In its entrance into the transnational public sphere, however marginal, *Come Back, Africa* encountered reflections on the merits and demerits of rational-critical debate. It appears that this took place in relation to questions around the best political cause of action against increasingly violent colonial regimes in the Third World. The fact that the film was shown in 1960, at the beginning of a decade of revolutionary movements and political independence in Africa, burdened its publicness with questions around strategic responses to colonialism. The unfolding wave of decolonisation also informed part of the intellectual preoccupations in the United States. The Indiana University-based journal *Africa Today* was one platform in which intellectual engagement of the wave of African independence took place.

Theatre producer, playwright and film critic, Robert Nemiroff, reviewed *Come Back, Africa* in *Africa Today*. The journal is publicized as 'one of the leading journals for the study of Africa' and as being 'in the forefront of publishing Africanist, reform-minded research'.[21] Thus, the readership of the journal is easily academics and Africanist activists across the United States universities and elsewhere. The readers' encounter with the review makes *Come Back, Africa*, a significant vehicle in their engagements about Africa. Remarkably, the review is alive to the film's import to the preoccupations of the journal's readers:

[19] According to Davis, journalist Bosley Crowther also had a problem with the shebeen scene: '…its not only verbose but stagy and stuffy in tone'. See *The New York Times*, 5 April 1960.
[20] See also Balseiro and Masilela, *To Change Reels*: 111.
[21] See ‹http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/africa_today/› (accessed: 28, September 2008).

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'Never, to our knowledge has a more searching or true film come out of Africa. No student of Africa or cinema will want to miss it' (Nemiroff 1960: 8). Among other factors for its significance to students of Africa and cinema, is what Nemiroff argues is the film's illustration of the contradictions of modernity.

'Come Back, Africa is a primary document of what "civilised" barbarism actually looks like in the 20th century' (Nemiroff 1960: 8). The manifest contradiction in the phrase 'civilised barbarism' calls into question the claims to civilization in the 20th century. Notably, Nemiroff eschews the film's immediate context of South Africa, and instead emphasises its global applicability. His observations suggest that *Come Back, Africa* gave impetus to deliberations on the contradictions of modernity not only in South Africa but also transnationally. Considering the context in which he made these observations, his thinking hints at the film's resonance with the social and political injustices in the United States, which gave impetus to the civil rights movement then under way. While he accepted that the film was not a 'great motion picture', Nemiroff argued that the complex representation of both the whites and blacks in *Come Back, Africa* underscores its sophistication:

> Particularly incisive is his dissection of the white community- probed with telling understatement to reveal that grotesque perversion of personality which oppression has wrought in the soul of the oppressor: its overweaning pride, its utter loss of sensitivity, the self-imposed tension, fear, suspicion which surround and stifle it. It is a pitiful and awesome and unnatural thing to look into the faces of ordinary people who truly believe they are a Master race, yet this is what Rogosin achieves (Nemiroff 1960: 8).

Thus, Nemiroff finds in the film, an intimate portrayal of the nature of racial oppression, and its toll on white people. Importantly, his portrayal makes *Come Back, Africa* an engaging and highly instructive film, the critical value of which derives from the manner in which it dramatizes white supremacy. Though Nemiroff does not address the white supremacist tendencies in the United States specifically, his argument made way for the scrutiny of precisely these tendencies in the country's racial relations. Of the film's

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depiction of the black community, Nemiroff finds a transcendence of victimhood and perceptiveness:

> Come Back, Africa is no mere recital of despair, a naturalistic tale of victims. Scattered throughout are marvellous moments of warmth, humor and humanity.....Nothing is oversimplified here, neither the complexity of the differing reactions to oppression, nor the many shapes oppression takes: confused, militant, sly, witty, self-denigrating, brutalised, conscious, and immensely sophisticated (Nemiroff 1960: 8).

In considering the film's complex approach towards the representation of Africans, Nemiroff alludes to the subject of the depiction of black identity in the cinema in general. Nemiroff's argument suggests that this subject was worth considering by the readership of *Africa Today*. Against this background, it is possible to intimate that in the context of American cinema, *Come Back, Africa* had critical value for the readers' deliberations on African American cinematic experiences in the 1960s. These experiences were significantly typified by the marginalisation of African Americans in the US cinema. Under these circumstances, the film's complex approach was beneficial for debates on the representation of African Americans in US films.

We have seen thus far, the initial circulation and publicness of *Come Back, Africa* in Europe and the United States. As a black-centred film that sought to institute a cinematic public sphere around apartheid, it is increasingly becoming clear that the film had an uneasy relationship with Western commercial cinematic culture. Rogosin's struggle to find a space of exhibiting the film is indicative of this relationship. The profit motives of mainstream cinema, and the interests of political organs that the film engaged, like the South African state, played no less a role in the film's difficult transnational circulation and publicness. Notwithstanding its lack of showing in the established cinema circuit, and vilification by the state, a wealth of engagements around the film took place across various platforms in North America and in Europe. Ranging from deliberations by the *Daily Worker*'s engaged readership, to the Africanist intellectuals, the film carved an alternate space for the engagements of the social and political discourses in the transnational settings

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themselves. Interestingly, it also opened a space for the reflection of modernity and its contradictions. American scholars and critics actually lay the ground for the film's public critical potency, which provided the basis for its accumulating archival value. That such attention occurred in spite of the film's failure to register interest from mainstream cinema, illustrates the value of the experts' role in the film's orchestration.

Transnational Publicness: The Second Phase

Rogosin rereleased *Come Back, Africa* in New York in 1979. I categorise this rerelease as the second phase in *Come Back, Africa*'s circulation. According to Hey, 'Rogosin rereleased his film, partially because guerrilla warfare once again focused world attention on Rhodesian and South African apartheids (sic) and partially because he needed funding for a film project on the Navajo Indians' (Hey 1980: 63). That Rogosin released the film to coincide with a renewed focus on the political tensions in Southern Africa shows once again, his conviction of the film's potentially critical role in the engagement of the unfolding political situation in the region. Quoting Rob Baker of the *Soho Weekly News*, Hey observed that on its rerelease, critics noted the film's continued relevance, 'the passage of twenty years has sadly enough done little to lessen the impact of the message' (Baker in Hey 1980: 63). According to Hey, business journalist and film critic Udayan Gupta also observed that the documentary sections of the film showed that by the late 70's, the political situation in South Africa remained the same as it was in the 60's (in Hey 1980: 64).[22] Interestingly, Gupta made the latter observation alongside *The Last Grave at Dimbaza*, which was also in circulation in New York. Hey paraphrases him thus:

> The accuracy of Rogosin's "bleak and frightening visions of South Africa" has been returned to the screen in the form of Nana Mahomo's Last Grave at Dimbaza (1975). Taken together, Gupta concluded, these two films on South Africa proved that nothing had changed (in Hey 1980: 64).

[22] See also Gupta U., 1978. *Amsterdam (New York) News*, 3 June.

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However, Gupta felt that, 'though the film remains topical even today, since little has changed in South Africa…viewing it in 1978 one's reactions are mixed …' (in Hey 1980: 64). Gupta made his comments in the form of a preview for the weekly newspaper *New York Amsterdam News*, a leading African American newspaper in New York. The newspaper is noted for its long history of support for the Civil Rights movement. Prominent African American activists such as W.E.B. Du Bois and the radical Malcolm X have at different times served as columnists for the newspaper.[23] The appearance of the preview in a newspaper that is predominantly read by black people means that *Come Back, Africa* entered a predominantly black public sphere of New York. The film's resonance with *Amsterdam News*'s focus on issues that affected black people easily poses the question of the kinds of engagements of blackness that took place in the transnational public or publics of the film, especially among black New Yorkers.

If Sandall and Starr rendered the significance of the shebeen scene ambiguous, at this point, one reading of black identity in the film reiterated their ambivalence towards the Sophiatown literati.[24] Gupta painted a bleak picture of the film's representations of black identity: '.... in his effort to show a more social side of blacks…. Rogosin succeeded only in reinforcing a stereotype of Blacks as lazy, hard-drinking types who love to sing and dance…. the film lacks dramatic tension, with most of its situations being predictable and unconvincing' (in Hey 1980: 64). Thus, *Come Back, Africa* increasingly became subject to interpretations of blackness that were contrary to its filmmakers' avowed wish to reverse its apartheid and colonial imaginaries. Gupta seems to have found it difficult to accept dynamic representations that show blacks as having contradictory qualities. His reading indicates that in spite of their acclaimed 'progressiveness', some early black-centred films faced the difficulty of re-imagining blackness against its stereotypical assumptions. Unless they reconstructed black identity through upright figures, who unambiguously constitute the perceived high ideals of human conduct, depictions of blackness in black-centred films

[23] See ‹http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios/newbios/nwsppr/amsterdam/amstrdm.html› (accessed 21, May 2009).
[24] Hey, *Another Look*, 63.

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was likely to be called into question. Yet, Gupta's negation of the film's representation of black people hints at a deep-seated anxiety about the cinematic depiction of black images in the United States itself. At the heart of Gupta's anxiety is an illustration of the fact that the film's portrayal of the ambiguities and contradictions in black South Africans' experiences guides its capacity to enable forms of engagement which are in themselves, indicative of 'difficult matters and ambiguities of the present' (Hamilton and Modisane 2007: 100). Thus, by depicting blacks either as subject to industrial super-exploitation and state violence, or as free thinking and acting social beings, whether as migrant workers, singers, dancers, and writers, *Come Back, Africa* 'entertains ambiguity,.... and invites the critical engagement that ensued' (Hamilton and Modisane 2007: 104).

Gupta's silence on aspects of the film's representations of blacks as modern agents negotiating challenges of industrial modernity, as either marginalised intellectuals, or lumpen proletariat, is also lost to Hey. In a slightly different vein, Hey saw the film in terms of what he called 'the "infantilism" of blacks...which appears repeatedly throughout the story..' (Hey 1980: 64). To illustrate his point, he draws a number of examples from the film, including one in which Zacharia's employer rebukes him like he was a child: 'The wife screams and scolds calling the young black man a "savage", while the husband pleads for patience because the native was not educated like the whites' (Hey 1980: 64).

Film and History in which Hey discussed *Come Back, Africa* is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of film and its relation to history. Its mandate is to advance the objectives of its conveners, the Historical Film Committee, which are to

> further the use of film sources in teaching and research, to disseminate information about film and film use to historians and other social scientists, to work for an effective system of film preservation so that scholars may have ready access to film archives, and to organize periodic conferences and seminars dealing with film ‹http://www.uwosh.edu/filmandhistory/about/index.php› (Accessed 19 December, 2008).

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Clearly then, its appropriation within American historical studies constitutes the second phase of *Come Back, Africa*. This registers a new role in the film's publicness, the effect of which was to make it a reference point for historical studies, and consecration[25] within the United States intellectual archive. According to Hey, 'an historian taking "another look" at the film will conclude that Rogosin worked with his material under the same assumption which marked the concentration theories of Bruno Bettelheim and slave histories of Stanley Heskins' (1980: 64). In so arguing, Hey marks his interpretive distance from the film from the context of its inception and initial circulation. Locating himself firmly in the context of the film's later circulation, Hey observes that the film's initial context was characterised by the popularity of theories of 'infantilism' hence his reference to Bettelheim and Heskins.[26] He suggests that in making *Come Back, Africa*, Rogosin relied on theories of 'infantilism'. Except for the examples from the film which show black people being treated like children, Hey does not explain to his reader what these theories are. Nor does he avail the similarities the thinkers ostensibly share with Rogosin's work. Yet, Hey's comparison of *Come Back, Africa* to what are effectively theoretical works on slavery and the holocaust, occasions its evolved relation with the scholarly 'field.' In this relation, analyses of the film become a site of public engagement which not only looks at the film as

[25] I use the term 'consecration' to refer to the scholars' authorial conferment of status on the film. Formulated by Bourdieu as a part of his Field Theory, the term originally referred to the conferment of legitimacy on an individual, by an established figure in a particular field of work. See Bourdieu P., 1983. The Field of Cultural Production, or: the Economic World Reversed. *Poetics* 12(4-5): 311-356. See also Bourdieu P., 1981. The Specificity of the Scientific Field, in Lemert, C., (Ed). *French Sociology Rupture and Renewal since 1968.* New York: Columbia University Press: 257-292.

[26] Bettelheim was a psychoanalyst and Nazi holocaust survivor whose writings were motivated by and informed by his experiences in Nazi war camps. The aspect of his work to which Hey alludes concerns his theory that in response to their experiences in the camps, some Jewish prisoners underwent 'a regression to infantile behaviour'. For more information, see for example, Fleck C, and Muller A., 1997. Bruno Bettelheim and the Concentration Camps, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 33, (1) Winter, 1-37. Elkins is a novelist, essayist and historian. His *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959) closely represents Hey's reference to Elkins' discussion of 'infantilism'. The book is a comparative historical work on the institution of slavery in the United States and Latin America, but considers other contexts that instance the exercise of absolute power. According to one of its reviewers, Henry Simms, in Elkins' book, 'the slavery system of the United States and the concentration camps in Germany are represented as analogous in portraying the "infantilising tendencies of absolute power". See Simms, H, H., 1960. Review of Elkins' *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 329, No. 1, 201. See also Elkins S., 1959. *Slavery*: *A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

film, but as a text with particular theoretical lineages. In this manner, *Come Back, Africa* attains archival value for being part of a particular historical and intellectual 'moment', the lessons of which lend critical valence to subsequent historical challenges.

For Hey, the film is best understood in terms of 'the clash between contradictory cultures' (1980: 64). 'With a flawed sense of social interaction, and an imprecise study of the tribal-technological conflict, Rogosin's film falls quite short of an adequate documentary study of South African apartheid' (1980: 65). To make his argument for the understanding of the film's context in terms of a cultural clash, Hey draws from African literature,

> On the point of cultural interaction, the film offers a look at Africa long after the white invasion, described in Chinua Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart (1959). In Achebe's trenchant look at pre-invasion customs in Africa, the tribal world-view is shattered when white missionaries invade the traditional sanctuary: the world becomes unexplainable when the tribe's spiritual explanations, heretofore accepted, are replaced by the "reality" of western terminology. In Rogosin's film, blacks are alienated from white society, because they move between two irreconcilable world-views (Hey 1980: 65).

Hey's discussion is replete with assumptions of black identity that owe their logic to the colonial and apartheid mindset of the absolute binary between Africans and Europeans, the pre-modern and the modern. In this schema, Africans' encounter with industrial modernity is shorn of all social and political experiences characteristic of urban life. According to Hey, Africans do not belong to the city as their culture contradicts that of Europeans whose claim to the city is a supposed given. The silence on the migrant system, its connection to grand apartheid and the engagements of the literary intellectuals, convey a picture of a transnational public sphere that refuses to admit black people as equal interlocutors but as mere species of anthropological curiosity. At the same time, Hey's attention to the film also reveals a grudging acceptance of its import in the United States public sphere, especially with regard to African American experiences.

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To resolve what he sees as the problem of the film's inadequacy, Hey further suggests that any study of *Come Back, Africa* must be undertaken through the theory of 'infantilism', and alongside the books *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), as well as films like *Nothing But a Man* (1964) and lastly *Battle of Algiers* (1965). Hey's comparison of *Come Back, Africa* to *Nothing But a Man* is striking. I shall quote it at length:

> In fact Nothing But a Man and Come Back, Africa have much in common, even though the later film studied racism in the American South. Like Zacharia, Duff Anderson (played by Ivan Dixon) exists in an unreasonable world where jobs are given to docile workers while "troublemakers" are forced to move "up North". Zacharia learns of his new atmosphere in the "shebeen" discussion concerning politics; the music is tribal. For Duff, saloons and pool halls serve the same purpose; the music is Motown popular. Rogosin's documentary footage of Sophiatown is matched in the new film with actual footage of Birmingham slums. The major difference between the two films involve the possibilities for change (Hey 1980: 65).

Significant in Hey's textual comparison is its highlighting of a marked dialogic tendency between *Come Back, Africa* and other texts from the United States and elsewhere. His comparative discussion, one purpose of which was the provocation and address of the prevailing domestic issues around black experiences of the films, set *Come Back, Africa* within a thoroughly American context. Therefore, notwithstanding his lack of confidence in *Come Back, Africa*'s critical authority as a single text, Hey's consideration of the film reveals the film's notable presence as a site of reflection in the United States public sphere. As part of the scholarly fraternity of history and of film, Hey anchored *Come Back, Africa*'s role within the scholarly domain. Yet, the potential of spawning other sites of public reflection remained.

Hey's discussion of the film instances the accumulating publicness of *Come Back, Africa* across time. Having entered the early public sphere of metropolitan United States, the film now circulated in a changed American public sphere, without the immediacy and urgency of early apartheid politics. The accumulating publicness of the film is discernible in Hey's reference to his historical and contemporary interlocutors such as the *Village Voice*, Gupta

and Baker. Through his contemporaries, Hey situated *Come Back, Africa* firmly within the seventies. In this way, the film proved fitting for the discussion of prevailing issues in the United States particularly around blackness. While the concerns about its artistic elements remained, it had become an archival piece traceable to a past context, which moreover, provoked reflection about contemporary African American cinematic images. This is highlighted in Hey's conclusion about the film's suitability to understand African encounters with modernity alongside such books as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, as well as the films *Nothing But a Man* and *Battle of Algiers*.

That Hey proposed what he considered a proper reading of the film against a range of texts noted for their engagement of the colonial and post-slavery encounters evolves an entirely new interpretation and take up of the film. This take up is marked by a bias to words, scholarly rigour and the resonance of the film with contemporary social and political challenges. Consequently, *Come Back, Africa* no longer served as an activist intervention against apartheid, it now assumed the task of facilitating social theories through which to understand blackness and modernity. Importantly, *Come Back, Africa* was now a textual conduit alongside other genres such as novels and biographies through which a comprehensive engagement of the contemporary United States public sphere would take place. Hey's lack of sympathy with *Come Back, Africa*'s competence as an adequate text through for engaging black people's experiences notwithstanding, his discussion delivers the film into the fold of contemporary scholarship and the contemporary political public sphere of the United States. At the same time as it disavows the film's adequacy and questions its observations on blackness, Hey's discussion constitutes a canonisation of the film within the scholarly domain. His discussion enhanced the film's public critical potency.

In brief, the consideration of *Come Back, Africa* by Gupta, Hey and Baker's discussions point to the film's ongoing public life and the significance thereof, of its sustained intervention in transnational public deliberation. If Hey and Gupta's treatments of the film

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are anything to go by, the second phase in the film's transnational circulation instances a particular shift in the film's public life. This is a shift from a publicness significantly characterised by appropriation and deliberation on the film's engagement of political injustices, to its representation of black identity, and theorization of black cultural identity. While Baker admitted that the film had continuing relevance, Gupta and Hey's discussions largely detract from Rogosin's projection of critical engagements of developments in Southern Africa. This is indicative of the film's proneness to unanticipated reflections on the subject of its focus. Therefore, by the late seventies, the film had become a platform for issues other than those it was originally projected to address. This tendency constitutes the dynamism of *Come Back, Africa* as a text that harbours public critical potency within the shifting contexts of its circulation.

Local Publicness

On its release in Venice and later Greenwich Village, New York, the film attracted the attention of the mainstream press in South Africa. The views expressed in these newspapers reveal the extent of *Come Back*, *Africa*'s aberration in that country. Davis reproduced some of these stinging reviews in his 1996 work: *In Darkest Hollywood*. In the first one, he resuscitated Julian Neale of the English language *Rand Daily Mail*:

> One of the greatest hoaxes in cinema history has just been unveiled in New York- and South Africans are not going to like it at all. But it is doubtful if they will ever see this film, *Come Back, Africa* which has been described as the most appalling 'document of 1959'….*Come Back, Africa* is a high powered, emotionally charged attack on South African race relations. It is bitter, biased and cynical (In Davis 1996: 57).[27]

Clearly then, the *Rand Daily Mail* denied *Come Back, Africa* any claim to rational sophistication and instead, reduced it to bias and emotional outbursts. The bias charge was re-circulated in another mainstream English language newspaper, the *Sunday Times*. In a review titled 'Ace liar hoaxed South African police while making film, now uses it to besmirch union abroad' (Davis 1996: 58), the newspaper protested:

[27] See also Neale, 1959. South Africa through a Distorted Lens, *Rand Daily Mail,* 12 August.

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> While squalid scenes of shanty-town Sophiatown are shown with its forced mass movings,[28] there is nothing to be seen of Meadowlands, where the people were later housed. There are only stark misery, domineering policemen, and debauched, pathetic shebeen scenes, with nothing of the laughter and smiles of street corner kwela players…. (In Davis 1996: 58).[29]

It is noticeable that the above responses to *Come Back, Africa* were based on a similar understanding of the film. Thus, the mainstream press was concerned with the political comment of the film and its implications for capital and the apartheid state. While they form part of the film's public, these newspapers, particularly the *Rand Daily Mail* assumed in their reviews, that their readers formed a distinct and recognizable public: South Africans. Notably, both newspapers' primary readership was English-speaking and affluent white South Africans. Yet, the ascription of 'South African-ness' to their public suggests that the newspapers also put forth the tendency to dislike the film in spite of not seeing it, as a defining element of this public. This suggests that the press marshalled a nationalistic identity and the sharing of similar opinions as categories of judgment against an effectively virtual text. The assertion of a public that shares a national identity, and holds similar views about a text, is exclusionary.[30]

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[28] Noting that there were no visuals of the removal in *Come Back, Africa*, Davis observed that the review shows inattentiveness to the film. To add to David's observation, it may very well have been that the reviewer did not see the film- and only associated its setting in *Sophiatown* to the removals. If that was the case, it shows the fact that films do not have to be watched in order to animate public engagements.

[29] The view that *Come Back, Africa* was biased was also replicated internationally. Leftist activist and writer Rex Winsbury reported this tendency in the London-based leftist journal *New Left Review*: 'Some saw it as an opportune propaganda document whose message was, and was intended to be political. Others…said primly there must be a counsel for defense as well as the counsel for prosecution' (Winsbury, 1960. Come Back, Africa, *New Left Review*, July-August). This reference is available online from: <http//newleftreview.org> (accessed 2007, 26 March).

[30] The deployment of a national identity was obviously problematic because South Africa's racist apartheid policy excluded blacks from public life. This assumption of a national identity is in keeping with the state's views about the film, which were also given space in the *Rand Daily Mail*. In the wake of what Davis calls 'a uniformly bad press' (from the state's perspective) in international circles, 'the South African government officials suggested that Rogosin was trying to introduce 'a form of sensationalism' into the apartheid question. The director was smeared with a communist brush….' See Davis, *Jungles*, 56. For the original entry, see the *Rand Daily Mail*, 1959. 8 June.

Black people, who were hardly likely to endorse state policy, were kept out of the public the newspapers wished to call into being. This tendency to exclude can be gleaned from the press' implicit privileging of state-imposed modernisation projects- exemplified by the new housing development of Meadowlands. That this modernisation was not in keeping with the aspirations and class interests of the majority of urbanized blacks, particularly those who were resident in Sophiatown, is tenable. Therefore, the newspapers' inclination for asserting opinions and carving out their public is suggestive of a publicness defined by a containment and not encouragement of public debate.

The *Sunday Times* and the *Rand Daily Mail* constitute a refusal to recognize, let alone accept Themba's invitation in the film, to rational-critical debate. Since the film was not circulated in South Africa, and yet attracted mainstream press attention, *Come Back, Africa* had become a virtual text. This means that as a material object, the film became secondary in the generation of its publicness. In their desperation to counter the film, the newspapers attempted to contain the publicness of *Come Back, Africa* along racial and class lines. Yet, they rendered *Come Back, Africa*'s publics unpredictable and infinite. This is simply because the newspapers made possible the generation of other virtual scenes of encounter with the film. Consequently, their negation of the film did not go far as they prompted a significant response from a co-writer of the film.

Writing in a locally based leftist monthly journal, *Fighting Talk*, Nkosi took critical note of the newspapers' comments. *Fighting Talk* began life as an anti-Nazi newspaper in 1942 as a mouthpiece for the Homefront League of the Springbok Legion, a servicemen's association founded in 1941. At the time of Nkosi's writing, it was the 'organ of the Congress Alliance until the organization was banned in 1963' (Switzer and Switzer 1979: 83-84). Against what he called 'ill-informed criticism of the film in local newspapers', Nkosi reminded his readers that,

> The film sets out to tell the story of what happens to a man when he leaves the reserves for the big city! It does not pretend to be a

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> documentary on the housing problem in the Union nor was the producer obliged to vindicate the Government (Nkosi February 1960: 13).[31]

In response to the mainstream press' charge of exaggeration in the film, Nkosi questioned whether it was 'still possible to exaggerate about such a grossly misgoverned, misinformed and misdirected country' (1960: 13). It can be justifiably argued that as co-maker of the film, Nkosi set out to endorse it. However, at the same time as he commended the narrative of *Come Back, Africa* as 'a powerful document of social truth', Nkosi was critical of its aesthetics: 'the film is not great by any standard. There are too many technical weaknesses in the development of the story', (1960: 13). Nkosi was also well aware of the challenge filmmakers working in the formative years of apartheid faced, regarding the relation between genre and social truthfulness, particularly at the level of narrative.

> In South Africa a film producer has to watch out, first and foremost against the temptation to overlay his picture. The material lends itself so readily to the kind of propaganda that tends to defeat the very purpose of the film, not so much because he distorts the truth, but because there is too much of it! I mean truth that is **social fact** rather than aesthetic (1960: 13).

This observation shows cogently the difficulty for *Come Back, Africa*, of striking a balance between historical truth and 'propaganda'. In registering his experiences and thoughts on the film to *Fighting Talk,* Nkosi closed whatever remained of its secrecy and rendered it public. His riposte constitutes a notable tendency in which a film *artiste* avails the film's aspirations for publicness. That Nkosi wrote at all is interesting because he transformed himself from an interlocutor in the film, into its public textual function, that is, into a textual agency of its circulation. A 'public textual function' is associated with a particular film not only at the level of production, but also at the level of public engagement. As the film's public textual function, Nkosi has kept alive the texture of the film's production circumstances and made the critical projections of the film part of its extended public life. He exploded the neatness with which the state sought to silence black publics. Through

[31] Winsbury also wrote against the charges that the film was biased, which he argued- South African authorities assumed that 'Rogosin was a one man fact-finding committee who unfortunately forgot the other side'. See Winsbury, R., 1960. *Come Back, Africa* review, *New Left Review*, July-August.

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Nkosi, *Come Back, Africa* gained a foothold that was critical for its publicness in South Africa and that allowed it to undermine the restrictions on its circulation. Nkosi's role in the film's circulation points to the strategic import of film crews in the enhancement of the publicness of films produced in repressed conditions.

Nkosi's use of *Fighting Talk* is instructive. As its title suggest, the journal enabled prospects of challenging the state and capital through a militant, but rational approach. Through *Come Back, Africa*, these prospects were not only encouraged but also given a critical perspective by Nkosi. That his review touched on aspects of the difficulties of making the film signals his protestations against the status of public engagements in South Africa. Nkosi's review brought the film closer to the political and discursive heat of 60's South Africa. It invited a critical appreciation of a text, which though it was not available to the readership of *Fighting Talk*, was presented as key to the engagements of the apartheid system. It can be surmised therefore, that *Come Back, Africa* left a public critical imprint germane to the readership of *Fighting Talk*. This generated a significant space of discourse for a readership that was already grappling with the political challenges of apartheid.

The *Rand Daily Mail* and *Sunday Times* reviews, and Nkosi's riposte, bring to life a public discursive atmosphere around the film in South Africa, which however was stunted by the mainstream press' lack of acknowledgement of Nkosi. The shortcomings of the *Rand Daily Mail* and *Sunday Times*' engagements around the film notwithstanding, *Come Back, Africa* evinces the fact that the public discursive 'ripples' around a film do not depend exclusively on its local circulation, but may stem entirely from its transnational circulation and publicness.

The film's public, 'that social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse' (Warner 2002: 90), was hereby self-creating through other genres, newspapers and a journal, within a scene of circulation other than that of the film itself. Therefore, if the circulation of texts remains important to their publicness, this is not constituted merely

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through concrete encounters with them. This is a point that Warner repeatedly makes and that the film powerfully demonstrates. This tendency eloquently surfaces the shortcomings of Hansen's privileging of audiences in the public sphere provided by the cinema. Thus, the 'cinematic public sphere' to use her phrase, is not restricted to the structural conditions of the cinema, but to the complex relations between the protagonists the texts imagine or call into being, and the conditions in which texts may or may not be circulated. So far, the protagonists and scholars who were called into being by *Come Back, Africa* were primarily white journalists in South Africa, journalists and scholars outside the country, as well as local black commentators who were also participants in the film.

Come Back, Africa transgressed its non-circulation in South Africa by entering through secondary texts, the public engagements on black life under apartheid in that country. Thus, the film also illustrates Warner's point that 'the concatenation of texts through time creates publics' (Warner 2002: 90). However, the novelty of *Come Back, Africa* is in drawing attention to the relation between transnational circulation and publicness and the local non-circulation of texts. In this scenario, the cinematic publicness of *Come Back, Africa* was constituted chiefly through its transnational circulation and the local circulation of the texts it generated. It is the distinction of *Come Back, Africa* that it animated critical public engagements in a country where it had no circulation. This occurred due to local anxieties about the political implications of its transnational circulation for South Africa, and because of its explicit provocation of local publics. Consequently, in tandem with local discursive and political relations, transnational circulation and transnational publicness, *Come Back, Africa* undermined its local non-circulation. It did this by provoking a social space of discourse in which publics considered the merits and demerits of its intervention.

Thus far, we have taken cognizance of the problems *Come Back, Africa* encountered in terms of circulation, both in South Africa and outside. Notable in these public forays of the film, is the concerted efforts by the apartheid state to prevent its circulation, and the main international cinema circuits' acquiescence or 'subtle' collusion in these efforts. Yet, this

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marginalization only affirmed its critical autonomy and authenticity, and in terms of its publicness, shows the limits and possibilities that black-centred films faced in their attempts to animate public critical reflections.

The South African press and government's efforts notwithstanding, *Come Back, Africa* effected important engagements about African identity and the condition of modernity. Through the examples of the critical public engagements of *Come Back, Africa* in South Africa, it is possible to argue that the publicness of early black-centred films is defined not just by the significant absence of black publics, but concerted efforts from marginal spaces to make that absence visible. In so doing, black-centred films made possible engagements of this absence. The public life of *Come Back, Africa* also inaugurated black- centred films' occasioning of film as a site for public deliberation.

Conclusions

The public life of *Come Back, Africa* throws into harsh relief the deliberations on black experiences of industrial modernity in early apartheid. Broadly, these deliberations occasion perspectives about the film's relation to public discourses on blackness. Gupta and Hey's discussions exemplify the first perspective, which raises the problem of the representation of blackness in the film. Though the arguments by Gupta and Hey are not similar, they share common weaknesses: they are both silent on the agency of black people within modern settings and effectively 'others' blackness. Contra Gupta and Hey, Nkosi draws attention to the agency of black people by raising issue with colonial representation of black identity which fixed black people in the pre-history of modernity. However, such deliberations are not without their limits. The lack of consideration of gender as an important variable in the engagement of blackness is an example of a limit in the deliberations in *Come Back, Africa*'s early public life. That the film occasioned discussions around black people's experience of the apartheid city while making room for arguments that sustained colonial imaginaries of blackness is notable. Not only does it point to the indeterminacy of public engagements of the film's representations of black

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identity, and its ambiguities, but it also registers the shifts in the film's public critical potency. By indeterminacy, I mean that it made possible heterogeneous interpretations of blackness, and did not enhance critical engagements in a neat and unproblematic manner. The salience of black identity and agency in *Come Back, Africa* endures with differing accents in the different 'moments' of its public life. If the first phase focused on black identity in relation to apartheid, the second phase highlighted its import in relation to the transnational preoccupations with African, African American identity, and modernity. Thus, in conjuring up public deliberations around the injustices of the migrant labour system, which in itself challenged the apartheid disavowal of black participation in industrial modernity, *Come Back, Africa* also exposed the extension of colonial imaginaries of blackness in the transnational public sphere.

With all its limits, *Come Back, Africa* evinces tendencies through which it is possible to draw some conclusions about its publicness as an early black-centred film with certain critical ambitions. The film shows that the erratic and circumscribed circumstances of circulation are actually constitutive of a particular kind of publicness. *Come Back, Africa* addressed a public that was outlawed, and therefore could not be, and in so doing, constituted a public in the conditions of its own absence. Projected to a public that significantly includes local Africans, its failure to circulate in South Africa meant that its actual publics were exclusively transnational. Consequently, the absence of black publics underwrote its publicness. The film's lack of local circulation posed a problem that has made possible the adoption of a form that is indicative of its addressing of its black publics in their absence.

Further, *Come Back, Africa* reveals that transnational circulation can stimulate engagements back home. This tactic proves to be important in calling into being publics in the conditions of their absence. However, the significance of this tendency must be measured against the substance of the minimal engagements that constitute its publicness locally. Nkosi embodied a textual function that enhanced the film's publicness through a

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critical engagement of its aesthetics, and of its cultural and political significance. The mainstream press did not.

Against the restrictions on its circulation, the tendencies in the publicness of *Come Back, Africa* show that the possibilities of critical public engagements through cinema, may lie not just in transnational circulation, but also in how its transnational publicness relates to local politics. The film's closeness to the issues around apartheid and black life and its form, conspired with historical events such as the Sharpeville massacre, to enhance its publicness in ways that resonated in South Africa. The mainstream press in South Africa recognized the importance of these engagements for local political relations, hence their response. Therefore, films, which are made in repressive circumstances, can be secondary in the generation of their publicness; that is films about important issues can cause debate in their absence.

Come Back, Africa evinces publicness that was oriented to the critical engagements of early apartheid and capital. It follows then that the test for its public critical potency lay in its calling into being, and stimulating publics that critically engaged with the question of apartheid. Under the circumstances in which it was made and circulated, the film shows that its public critical potency lay in making visible the absence of black publics, thereby creating the possibility of new kinds of publics. That this was poised to challenge apartheid's vision of black South Africans as tribal and pre-modern- denying them the status of being publics, constitutes the public critical potency of *Come Back, Africa*. However, the public life of *Come Back, Africa* also illustrates the shifting significance of early black-centred films as the second phase of its transnational circulation attests. Here, the film was no longer only about apartheid, but it was taken up in relation to issues of wider African and African American encounters with slavery, colonialism and post-slavery racism.

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The early public life of *Come Back, Africa* is significantly indicative of the publicness of films produced in extremely repressive conditions. As much as this publicness was important insofar as its challenge of apartheid and colonial imaginaries of blackness was concerned, its confinement to marginal transnational and local spaces of critical engagement suggests that it was compromised. Arising from the particularities of the public life of *Come Back, Africa* is the question of how films produced in conditions that are not strictly synonymous with its own, garner publicness. What might this publicness look like and what is its significance? The chapter that follows raises these questions in relation to *u'Deliwe*, a film that was produced in the '70s when the National Party's internal rifts threatened the survival of apartheid. *u'Deliwe* is significantly different from *Come Back, Africa* in terms of content, genre, and conditions of production and circulation.

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