

https://dspace.org/

The colonising laughter in Mr Bones and Sweet and short

Mamatu, Tsepo

2008-05-26T09:25:11Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/4885

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

THE COLONISING LAUGHTER IN *MR.BONES* AND *SWEET AND SHORT*

TSEPO MAMATU

KGAFELA OA MAGOGODI

supervisor

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Wits University, Johannesburg, 2006

ABSTRACT

This research explores the element of the colonial laughter in Leon Schuster's projects, *Mr.Bones* and *Sweet and Short*. I engage with the theories of progressive black scholars in discussing the way Schuster represents black people in these projects. I conclude by probing what the possibilities are in as far as rupturing the paradigms of negative imaging that Schuster, and those that support the idea of white supremacy through their projects, seek/s to normalise.

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation/thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of the Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

TSEPO MAMATU

15 February 2006

Dedication

We live for those who love us

For those who love us true

For the heaven that smiles above us and awaits our spirits

For the cause that lacks resistance

For the future in the distance

And the good we must do!

Yem-yem, sopitsho zibhentsil’intyatyambo.

Mandixhole ngamaxhesha onke, ndizothin otherwise?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title page……pg1

Abstract…… pg 2

Declaration…… pg3

Acknowledgement…… pg4

Table of contents……pg5

Introduction……pg6-14

Chapter 1: White Laughter: Cinemythology of the Dark Continent (pg15-25)

Chapter 2: Strategies of Containment: The Colonising Laughter in *Sweet and Short* (pg26-42)

Chapter 3: Zooluology in *Mr.Bones* and *Sweet and Short* (pg43-56)

Chapter 4: What is the Alternative? (pg57-72)

Conclusion: (pg73-79)

Bibliography: (pg80-83)

Filmography: (pg84-85)

An Introduction:

SOME NOTES ON THE COLONISING LAUGHTER

The aim of this paper is to interrogate Leon Schuster's comic representation of black people in *Sweet and Short* (1993) and *Mr.Bones* (2001), two of his films which are the focus of this study. This study examines critically the ways in which the filmmaker's imagination of black people draws ridiculing laughter. The source of this laughter, one argues, is drawn from a long tradition of colonial literature and its curious ways of imaging blackness. Additionally, this filmmaker's mode of representation, is informed by a template of Euro-centrism and, by extension, Apartheid thinking.

Schuster's work, when looked at closely, appears to be in dialogue with that of his predecessor Apartheid filmmaker Jamie Uys. It was the latter who made the project of demeaning black difference a commercially viable enterprise in this country, and Schuster only seems content in assimilating and consolidating this ancestry. To this end, Schuster uses comedy to conceal his motives, that is, to negatively define black people through laughter.

The idea of seeking to define black people through laughter has been a pre-occupation of the West since the Eighteenth Century. The public display of Sara Baartman as a grotesque figure of sexual aberration in the Nineteenth Century by the English bears testimony to the celebrated idea of Africans as strange bodies to be laughed at. Consistently, the West assumed it had naming and dismissive powers purely because it configured itself as “mind”.

The Western world has claimed that this “mind”, enabled it to access ideas that led to civilization and by extension “enlightenment”. Consequently, the Western imaginary believed that any other nation that did not celebrate civilization like it did, was backward and needed to be rescued. At the core of such ideas was the notion of white supremacy. Molefi Asante defines it as the “Western truimphalism that reduces other people to the margins” (1999: viii).

The colonizing laughter then serves two purposes. One is to further entrench the view that the “uncivilized” should be left to the margins since they come from the Dark Continent. This view is justified by the Hegelian argument that “there is nothing remotely humanized in the Negro character…” (Hegel, 1992:18). Secondly, this laughter also seeks to tame the black subject by curtailing the potential threat it could pose to a white society. The domino effect of these properties is the affirmation of white supremacist’s belief that they are superior to black people, an idea that Schuster strives to execute in his films.

By reducing blackness to the comic, Schuster revives a legacy that was firmly planted by the likes of D.W. Griffiths. His text, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is regarded by the dominant worldview, as the first film to openly discredit blackness in a modern society. The project told the story of the Old South, the Civil War, the Reconstruction period and the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan.

In telling the story of the Cameron's, a white family living quaintly with their satisfied slaves, we see how the proposed freedom of slaves threatens the livelihood and order of a white world. The film minimizes the plight of the slaves by suggesting that the "rights" they are fighting for are too sophisticated for them. This is illustrated through the comic inefficiency of the newly elected black congressmen. The behavior of these adult men in meetings is figured alongside the imaginary of childlike mannerisms.

These mannerisms advocated the impulse of black people as the deviant in the way they emphasised the "difference between belongingness and otherness", (Hall in Donald and Rattansi, 1992:255). The likes of Jamie Uys were to continue from the seed that Griffith's planted. From texts such as *The Condemned Are Happy* (1950), *Dingaka* (1964) and *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980), Uys seemed to uphold notions of blackness as was defined by colonial visual literature. If Uys sought to uphold values that underpinned the representation of blackness against a colonial template, Schuster then was pre-occupied with re-imagining the same values through the rubric of laughter.

Uys to Schuster: Dark Continent and White Laughter

The common thread that seems to run through the narratives of these filmmakers affirms the view that they depart from the same ideological point of view. Uys is most famous/infamous for his cinematic work under the rule of apartheid.

The documentary film *The Condemned are Happy*, made in 1950, was a testament by Uys that sought to give currency to the principles of Apartheid. In the film, a black migrant family is shown as living happily in a town where the government has built houses for them. This family, the film suggests, was plucked out of the misery of their slums into the "comfort" of their new homes. Uys justified his film thus:

> What I was saying in *The Condemned are Happy* is that these slums developed because the black man had to adapt to the industrialised society. He couldn't make a living in the bush or the veld anymore, he had to stream to the city because of drought and so on. And there was no housing and so these terrible slums evolved (Uys in Davis, 1996: 61).

Implicit in Uys comments are notions that betray his colonial mindset. This is the mindset that was to trickle through his movies, later to be assimilated and entrenched by Schuster. The logic that the industrialised (read civilised) world of the white man was beyond the comprehension of the black man is troubling. Uys would like us to believe that there was

no way the black man would survive in the urban wizardry that civilisation had created, hence he would have to adapt. Secondly in his quest to adapt, he would have to give up his ways of the bush. Uys, in concert with other Euro-centric institutions like Hollywood imagine black people as “helpless and childlike within adult bodies, fixed at the primitive stage of development” (Kaplan, 1997: 80).

Sweet and Short plays on the template of blackness as being a burden of whiteness. In the film, released in 1993, a black character named Short, sits on the grass hoping that someone would give him a watch. As he lies begging to whoever would listen, a white character named Sweet, appears in the form of a genie and throws him a watch. Short jumps in excitement and runs after Sweet, proclaiming his gratitude and shouting after him, “my genie, my genie”, or if you would like, “my master, my master”.

When Schuster denies Short a narrative journey that would entail him “earning” his watch, he effectively insists on the idea of black people as being a worrisome dependent of whiteness. *The Condemned are Happy* also articulates this view when white authorities move black tenants from their slums into their new homes. Furthermore, *Mr. Bones,* released in 2001, also plays on the idea of the white race as the savior of black people. In the film, a white sangoma decides to help the king of the Kuvuki tribe to find his long lost heir. In essence, the continuity of the tribe is entrusted in white hands.

The idea of black dependence easily becomes a marker the more often it is repeated. As a marker it grows into a signifier that denotes an aspect of a people. The power of this

signifying practice is not lost on the South African advertising world. For this world, the black market is one that is symbolised by poverty, lack of sophistication and comic stupidity.

Paul Gilroy argues:

> Accepting that skin 'colour', however meaningless we know it to be, has a strictly limited basis in biology, opens up the possibility of engaging with theories of signification which can highlight the elasticity and emptiness of racial signifiers as well as the ideological work which has to be done in order to turn them into signifiers of 'race' …(Gilroy in Barker, 1999:61).

Gilroy argues that these constructions have nothing to do with a "race", but are forcibly ascribed to it by dominant systems of representations. As mentioned earlier, such constructions are important as they determine power relations in world economies.

Uys continued with his visual insistence that black lives were not affected by the laws of the apartheid state. In actual fact not only did he deny the immediate suffering of the black people, he also sanctioned myths that were perpetuated about them. His feature film *Dingaka* released in 1965 bears testimony to this. In the film, black lives are unaffected by apartheid as they are characterised by song and dance.

Dingaka opens with a choreographed stick fight against the backdrop of cheering women suggesting that in this part of town, squabbles are still settled by traditional means. In this sense, what is traditional is conflated with the idea of that which is backward.

The illusion of blackness as living in a picturesque world is further echoed by Shuster's *Mr. Bones.* The opening scene in Shuster's *Mr. Bones,* frames the villagers as living in a time frame that is "allochronic," or as living in another time, mired in an incapacitating "tradition" that is seen as modernity's antithesis" (Stam R,2003:19). The opening frame depicts villagers playing with wild animals, women drawing water and men sitting, watching the world go by as they chew cud.

The scene is an index whose frame of reference calls to mind the romanticisation of the continent by colonial writers such as Isak Dinesen and Kuki Gallmann. The latter describes her first sights of the continent thus:

> The yellow grass and the first acacias on the way from
> the airport. A gazelle, perhaps an impala grazing in the
> long strange grass. The African faces of smiling porters;
> women in bright cloths balancing baskets on their heads… (1991:21).

This nostalgic framing of Africa or a part of the continent as if it's a preface that anticipates the coming of the settlers is problematic. It evokes a land that is pure, whose people offer an opportunity for Western explorers to test their speculative theories on

humanity and perchance become famous. What Wole Sonyika calls the "resuscitated splendors of the past" (1993:138-9) is nothing more than an attempt by the filmmaker to present Africans in their "docile" stage. The stage which according to Dinesen preserved them:

> Within their own element…In accordance with nature, like the tall extinct volcano of Logonot that rises above the Rift Valley, the broad mimosa trees along the rivers, the elephant and the giraffe- small figures in an immense scenery" (Dinesen, 1937: 26).

These sentiments that Dinesen and her ilk joyfully express are rebuked by Edward Said. The "splendors of the past" do not exist for Said because he documents that such imagery is ahistorical and only concerned more with the metaphysics of essences than any other ascertainable historical realities (1993:278). These ahistorical images that come from "a schizophrenic daydream of an eden" (Walcott in Crow and Banfield, 1996: 10) disarm white people of their fear for/of blackness.

Uys and Schuster viewed aspects of black culture as interchangeable, with no regard for accuracy so long as they served their projects. The base of such thinking harks to the days of colonialism, where the cinema apparatus worked as a tool that entrenched Africa as harboring that which was "threatening, unfamiliar and mysterious" (Dalamba,2000: 38). In the diegesis of *Mr. Bones* and *Dingaka*, which co-incidentally mean the same thing, black people, are framed as superstitious, mirthful and homogenous. The entertainment

factor emerges from the suggestion that aspects of black culture are on one level a part of the modern times, yet they are also caught up in the past tense. The modern or what signifies it, is to be found in the Western idea of what civilization is. *Dingaka* and *Mr Bones* then, pardons colonialists for bringing civilization to Africa as it intervened by exorcising "demonic darkness or barbarism, represented by cannibalism and slavery" (Brantlinger in Gates:1986: 194).

This introduction served to highlight the representation values of Schuster and how he borrows from Apartheid filmmaker Jamie Uys. I also introduced ideas of the colonial laughter as being the template against which Schuster imagines black people. In the next chapter, I will entrench my claims against Schuster as being a colonial filmmaker through an interrogation of his text, *Mr. Bones*.

Chapter One:

White Laughter: Cinemythology of the Dark Continent

This chapter discusses Schuster's films as a carrier of the kind of white laughter which is founded on the cinemythology of the Dark Continent. Black characters in Schuster's films are, by and large, comic subjects whose laughableness is informed by the ways in which they are portrayed as "the intermediary between chimpanzees and the Hottentots" (Darwin in Gould, 1985:36).

Cinemythology is the idea of the cinema as a carrier of myths about Africa. This Euro-centric idea insists on the African continent as a jungle where animals roam and groups of people live in tribes and speak unfathomable languages. In the logic of this mythology, these tribes are cannibals that "live in huts that resemble nests and lairs" (Fanon in Shohat and Stam, 1994:137). By resurrecting this idea, Schuster embarks on a new wave of neo-colonialism. The idea of the Dark Continent and white laughter are inseparable and when harmonized, affirms the repository that whiteness celebrates about Africa. In grounding this statement, I will interrogate the choices around aspects of black culture and its representation in *Mr. Bones*.

The film tells of a white baby who grows up amongst the Kuvuki tribe and later becomes their future sangoma. This 'tarzanisque" arc of the narrative alludes to the power of white supremacy. In *Tarzan, the Ape Man* (1932), a white orphan is raised by chimpanzees, and

grows up to become the king of the jungle, insinuating that up until his arrival, the jungle was in need of a king, while the unsophisticated local population would prove to be unsophisticated candidates. Significantly, although Tarzan grows up in the jungle, it seems that he has the genetic make up to rule over it because of his whiteness.

King Kong (1933) tells the story of a white crew that stumbles upon a monster that terrorizes the local people. The generosity of the crew demands that the monster be trapped, if only to save the indigenous people from its terror. Similarly, *Dingaka* (1964) illustrates the effectiveness of a white justices system at the expense of a black one. Stuart Hall writes: "In these spaces blacks have typically been the objects, but rarely the subjects, of the practices of representation" (1997:252). Such practices are informed by the refusal of the West to acknowledge the presence of black people and to view their social condition as perpetually static.

bell hooks writes that one of the marks of oppression was that black people were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility, so that they would be less threatening and so make better servants, (1992:35). *Mr. Bones* expresses this mantle of invisibility by representing blackness as a tribe. The blurb on the video cover reads thus:

> The king of the fictitious Kavuki tribe is ageing and does not
> have a male heir to take over his throne. Enter a white sangoma,
> Mr.Bones who has been living with the tribe since childhood and
> who has learnt the art of divining the future by reading bones (*Mr. Bones*: 2001).

The marking of a people as a tribe is problematic as it insists on rendering a group of people faceless and without a voice. Essentially, the tribe is treated as awkward in relation to the white world. It is this awkwardness that Schuster draws amusement for his audience.

The idea of a tribe is a colonial construction, which Albert Memmi claims it exhibits "the mark of the plural" (1965:151). This mark, denies the prospect of individualism. This is part of the discourse of exclusion or depersonalization, which in turn informs "naming" based on difference. Spivak writes that the other is often represented as the exotic, the anthropological or as the folkloric (Spivak in Donald and Rattansi, 1992:255). These classification practices betray the power on which they are predicated on, in this case, that of white supremacy.

In *Mr. Bones* for example, the villagers are represented as the exotic and the anthropological and thus denied the "certainty of oneself" (Fanon, 1986: 216) in that when they speak, we only hear a mumble, in clear contrast to the character of the outsider Mr. Bones. Therefore, the subjectivities of the individuals are conflated, denying them the agency of becoming subjects. hooks writes that "only a subject has the capacity to see" (1992:168), therefore this tribe is rendered an "object of spectacle for the Western voyeuristic gaze"(Stam and Spence, 1983: 6) or if you will, a laughing gaze.

The imaging of the villagers in *Mr. Bones* dates back to the days when cinema was used to empower the discourse of the imperial imaginary. Images of half-naked natives, mumbling and relegated to the background of the frame, affirms the African continent as a third world where its inhabitants are not just robbed of their "particularity" to use Naipaul's term, but also harbor "a marked predilection for the past" (Naipaul in Vaughan, 1960:94).

Hall writes:

> Not only is Fanon's Negro caught, transfixed, emptied
> and exploded in the fetishistic and stereotypical dialectics
> of the "look" from the place of the Other: but he/she becomes-
> has no other self than-this self as othered (1996: 17-18).

These "othered" villagers in *Mr. Bones* are located within a jungle. In this way, Schuster reinvents the topography of *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a film by Uys. In both films, the landscape is littered with dangerous animals. The entertainment factor comes from the confrontations with these animals and how the heroic protagonist manages against all odds, to outwit them so that people can be saved. What Davis calls the "travelogue film" (1996:82) is in fact a show reel of how unsafe yet so simple the African continent is.

There are parallels in the opening sequence of the above mentioned films. They both start with a depiction of the respective tribes living harmoniously with nature, and enjoying the simpler things in life. That is until a foreign intrusion disrupts their apparent peace. In

The Gods, it is a coke can, a symbol of civilization, while in the latter; it is a white baby, unbeknown to them, their savior.

The narrative similarities continue further than the first scene. Xi, the leader of the tribe in *The Gods*, decides to go on a trek to find the owner of the coke can since it threatens the stability and perhaps future existence of the San. On the other hand, the white baby in *Mr. Bones* grows up to be sent on a mission by the king of the Kuvuki tribe, to find a lost heir that must fill in his shoes, so that the continuity of the tribe is assured.

The narrative of *Mr.Bones* depicts the black sangoma of the Kuvuki tribe as being unable to show signs of competency. This is revealed when he fails to read the message of the bones that he throws. In contrast, a young Mr. Bones interrupts and with confidence, gives the king a thorough explanation.

The idea of a white character explaining the configuration of black symbols such as traditional bones and what they could mean, denotes a troubling aspect of Euro-centrism, that is "the appropriation of the cultural and material production of non-Europeans while denying both their achievements and its appropriation" (Shohat and Stam, 1994:2-3). The chief of the Kuvuki is so impressed by the young Mr. Bones that he decides to make him the sangoma of the village.

As the new sangoma, Mr. Bones goes on a mission, in search of the lost heir of the Kuvuki. This mission sees him confronting wild animals. What is important to note is

how he seems to have a relationship with them, in contrast to the “natives”, who either run away scared or tremble in comical fear. It is tempting to question the dynamics of this power play, that is, the reason why Mr. Bones has an authoritarian relationship with the animals and not vice versa. A possible answer lies in the need to emphasise whiteness as an agent that is fearless and unperturbed by the “Dark Continent with its mystery, fever, heat, a vast jungle in which you could lose half of America” (James Gordon Bennett in Davis: 1996:82).

The rescue mission of Mr. Bones can be read against the same template that informed the “civilizing” discourse of nineteenth century colonialists. The “inhospitable vegetation” would not prove to be a deterrent in their quest to save and free human lives from their bondage. In this instance, the Kuvuki tribe needs to be assured that they will be emancipated from the bondage of an uncertain future, and in a true white supremacist rhetoric, who else but a white male to the rescue?

The insistence of imaging Africa as land filled with wildlife broods perception of its people as harboring animal like tendencies. This point is underscored by the animal skin that the king wears. This idea ties with the fact that he has eighteen wives and so affirms his prowess, which is equated with that of an animal. In the scene where he appears with his wives, they are all holding the children that he fathered. He berates them for failing to bear him a son. It would seem that for this chief, marriage simply revolves around male birth. This preoccupation with male progeny shadows the conventional reason why a

couple would get married. That is, to build a relationship informed by the discourse of love and it's making.

However, the chief, as a black male, is seemingly denied the ability to love, in stark contrast to images of white males that the world has been raised on since the early days of cinema. This particular choice concerning narrative suggests that there is nothing humane about the chief. He is a raw beast, only interested in procreation, which is the sole reason animals mate. Such depictions should be deplored for they continue to lend credence to notions mooted in the nineteenth century of blackness as "…representing the natural man in all his wildness" (James Snead in Cornel West et al, 216:1990).

The element of the "natural man in all his wildness" is further carried by the subtext of the greetings of the Kuvuki tribe. The greetings intimate that one must "attack like a buck that is cornered with its young by a predator". Shohat and Stam declare that for Fanon, the colonizing discourse always resorts to "the bestiary"… (1994: 137). The "bestiary" is made very clear by the greeting, which suggests that when in danger, one should make an instinctual choice, as opposed to a logical one. The idea behind the greeting as well as the representation of the chief seems to privilege the body over mind.

What emerges from this establishment of insisting people as bodies and not minds is the trope of infantilization. This is the idea that seeks to profess Africans as perpetual children. When the chief realizes that he will not have a male child, he threatens his

followers, letting them know that he is going to kill himself. Renan, describes it as “the everlasting infancy of non-perfectable races” (1891: 153).

This trait of “everlasting infancy” is well demonstrated by the king’s declaration, discounting the fact that as a chief, his job is to provide leadership. However, who would not doubt the leadership qualities of a king who in the face of a possible challenge decides that suicide will be his solution?

The Africa that exists in the imagination of whiteness does not have to be as close to reality as possible, even if it is prostituted as such. Uys and Schuster validate this point in numerous instances in their projects. In *The Gods*, Uys manipulates the lifestyle of the San people in order to serve his own fantasy. He depicts them as hunters of wild animals and gatherers of plants.

This romantic and idealized life he penciled for the San was in stark contrast to what anthropologists had documented at the time. Davis quotes ethnographer John Marshall thus: “There was no more hunting-and-gathering. Everybody in fact was rounded up and lived in a slum, in a rural slum around the shining houses of the white officials…” (1996: 89).

Furthermore the villagers in *Dingaka* are dressed in colours that are borrowed from various black cultures, in this way, their identity is constituted on the mythical notion of

all Africans being of Zulu origin, notwithstanding the fact that they speak Swahili within the same diegesis. An unnamed black spectator is quoted thus by Davis:

> *Dingaka* has certain mistakes that we feel ought to be corrected before it is sent overseas. We would like to know which tribal customs this film is based because Ntuku's wife and children wear Xhosa costumes but Ntuku himself is in a Basotho blanket. The warriors and the girls are in Zulu costumes. The same with the vernacular in the film- they seem to be from all different dialects. Perhaps Mr.Uys can explain to us. (*The Star*, 18 June 1965).

Schuster continues unabashedly with the representation values of Uys. He invents a language for the tribe of the Kuvuki. They speak a concoction of Isizulu, Sesotho and Sepedi. The language comes across as not say, a harmonization of these languages, but as a crude rendition of what whiteness perhaps hears when blackness speaks. In his quest to make up the Kuvuki language, Schuster bastardises these fore mentioned languages.

This Kuvuki language, in its crude form, marks the tribe and others who speak it, as if they just begun to learn how to speak, not unlike the way an infant struggles with his earlier sentences. However, when they shift to another language such as English, the contrast suggests that they have grown up from their earlier stage of darkness, indeed enlightenment is now upon them.

It hardly comes as a surprise for Fanon noted that whiteness would only accept one so long as he had mastery of the white language (1986: 18). In this regard, only a Western language is recognized and respected as such, anything else outside the Western imaginary is gibberish.

Schuster's discourse of trashing blackness and its culture is further validated by his choice to use a wedding song as an index of a farewell. When Mr. Bones leaves the village in search of the lost son, the villagers burst into song, *Umangihaba Nawe.* This is a wedding song that tells of a bridegroom's excitement at finding a soul mate like Thuli. It has nothing to do with the context within which it finds itself in the film.

The inclusion of this wedding song displays both Schuster's ignorance and arrogance. The ignorance stems from not being able to distinguish between different cultural signifiers of those being represented. The arrogance justifies the ignorance as history has documented before, that white supremacists believe that they can mishandle foreign cultural appendages at their whim.

This notion deeply entrenches the values of white supremacy, and paints Schuster as being willing to articulate and defend this discourse. He demonstrates this assertion by his refusal to challenge or critique the frame of representing blackness against this re-colonizing template. He becomes its defendant, when he dismisses any cries of outrage against his projects as merely trying to make South Africans laugh at themselves.

However, it is hard to find any humour in his discourse of otherising Africans and their culture. Barry Ronge, a famed South African critic, pardons Schuster's representations. He suggests that this filmmaker's projects are precisely what the man in the street needs (*Sunday Times*, 25April: 2004). The point that this critic misses is that these representations are founded on an ideology that sought to deny the humanity of Africans by insisting on representing them amongst other things, as comical objects.

The locus of the humour of *Mr. Bones* is the belittling of Africans through the trope of the colonizing discourse. This trope imagines itself in various ways, of which two have been the point of discussion in earlier pages. The genealogy of this humour can be traced from the paintings of 20th century colonialists. Pieterse terms it the "westernization humour" (1992: 97). He adds that the main feature of such humour is contempt as it only serves to stigmatize. For this reason, it is important to resist these images, to denounce Ronge's statements as delusional, for the man in the street should not be subjected to the construction of blackness as backward and infantile.

Darryl Accone avails reasons to the motivation behind Schuster's projects by dismissing him thus in the *Mail and Guardian:* "As the Tony Leon of South African film, he plays unabashedly to the disgruntled and disaffected, the constituency discombobulated by change" (23April, 2004). In this way, the pain of being white in the new South Africa for the likes of Schuster and perhaps Ronge, can be eased/erased by the filmmaker's return to the past where blackness can still be imagined and laughed as "inferior to the white man in the endowment both of body and of mind" (Thomas Jefferson in Gould, 1981: 32).

CHAPTER TWO:

STRATEGIES OF CONTAINMENT AND THE COLONISING LAUGHTER IN *SWEET AND SHORT*

When Schuster declares that his films are made for entertainment, he suggests that they are an escapist fare. The aesthetics of his productions are in line with the classic narrative formula of Hollywood films. Therefore, his escapist material has to re-emphasise the tales this institution seeks to normalize. Further than that, he has to portray the worldview that Hollywood retools, which is that of the white male as the restorer of stability. For example, when the king of the Kuvuki declares that he will kill himself if his heir is not found, a sense of disability looms for the tribe. Stability is only restored when Mr. Bones returns with the heir.

For a non-critical spectator, there is nothing untoward about a white male on a mission to save the future of a tribe. Haile Gerima however, rebukes this internalization that seeks to affirm western hegemonic values of representation. He invites spectators to not merely absorb what they see, but to critique it by becoming activists (1989:67).

The classical Hollywood narrative often excludes black spectators. This I want to argue is in the way the average Hollywood narrative denies the presence of black characters. Not only are black characters denied, but if their lived experience does become the focus of a

film, dominant tropes will often seek to demean it by allowing a white subjectivity to hijack it. For Hayden White,

> Certain narrative master tropes shape our conception of history; historical discourses consists of the provision of a plot structure for a sequence of events so that their nature as a comprehensible process is revealed by their figuration as a story of a particular kind (1978: 58).

What is of interest to this study is the way tropes can be manipulated towards the fulfillment of specific discourses. The subjectivity of a narrative can influence if not assert how a story is received, and towards the achievement of what goal. If we depart from Anderson's notion of a community as imagined and shaped by instruments of multi-media systems such as newspapers, novels and so on (1983: 15), we begin to understand the power of the cinema as a creator. Its powers lie in its ability "to reflect upon microcosms of historical process, and in presenting templates through which history can be written and national identity figured" (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 102).

The dominant Hollywood narrative works in a similar fashion as it employs tropes that insist on sub-ordinating black images, a process Guerrero terms "strategies of containment" (Guerrero in Diawara, 1992: 237). What this process yields is a continuation and an affirmation of the norms that a white patriarchal society would like to insist upon. This is the visual insistence that fails to acknowledge how Hollywood

narratives privilege whiteness as a signifier of heroism while the rest only exist to support this heroism.

I will now introduce the ways in which *Sweet and Short* contains the presence of blackness by positing it amongst other things as the "neo-minstrelsy" (Miller, 1987:140-41). The inscription of blackness in this way echoes the framing template of early Hollywood films. This practice is akin to visual re-colonisation.

Sweet and Short is a buddy film that pits white and black in the same world, yet depicts and treats them differently. The terms of this friendship are founded on principles of dependence while the narrative is predicated on a Manichean template. This Manichean trajectory permeates the structure of the film in such a way that good conquers evil or white triumphs over black. The premise of the film situates the character of Sweet as the quintessential father figure of authority. This figure is partnered with a black male named Short. Their friendship is borne from the lack/luck of the other. The narrative insinuates that Short lacks a cohesive family structure and that, because of this or as a result of it, he is poor. On the other hand, Sweet has a stable family structure and is well off.

The stability in the life of Sweet is characterised by the awards he wins at work, and the faithful domestic servant that takes care of his household. In actual fact, the film opens with an awards ceremony celebrating the achievements of Sweet. The ceremony is a testament to the history of this character. However, the first time we are introduced to Short, he is lying on the grass, praying for a watch.

Within seconds into the narrative, spectators have been guided to identify with Sweet as a psychologically rounded figure of authority, while Short is summarised as a mere cardboard character. The positioning of these two characters invites a "natural" domination. In this way, it becomes clear that the attributes the white male has been afforded by the narrative will be used to consolidate the idea of Sweet as merciful and kind. The insistence of whiteness as a "giver" and blackness as a "receiver" supports a Manichean worldview of race, where "everyday routine structures and common sense values" (Gramsci in Gitlin, 1994:517) are used to serve the project of racial inequality.

This project, which affirms the principles of white supremacy, is at the expense of blackness. The scene, in which Sweet offers Short a watch, is founded on a homogenous impulse that is in dialogue with institutions such as Hollywood. It unfolds in the following manner.

(1) Short looks through the window of a watch shop.

(2) Short lies in the grass, despondent that he will not get the watch that he longs for.

(3) Short mutters to himself, praying that someone will give him a watch/Sweet listens in the foreground.

(4) Sweet decides to play a trick on Short, pretends that he is a genie.

(5) Short pleads with the genie to give him a watch.

(6) Sweet, shot in low angle throws him a watch, Short runs after him in utter excitement/ indebtedness exclaiming my genie/ my genie.

The non- critical spectator would read this sequence of events as harmless, and indeed regard Short with sympathy while applauding Sweet for his act of mercy. However, as a critical spectator, the first impulse is to note that Short is unable to read beyond the trickery of Sweet. This failure can be read alongside anecdotes of how Africans sold their land with a piece of mirror to white imperialists, betraying their so-called naivety.

The second impulse is that the "watch" that he is being offered is an invitation into a foreign (white) world, one in which Short would have to prove his worth. The manner in which Short as a figure of blackness is constituted thus far, serves to "naturalize white privilege as the invisible but sovereign "norm" (Guerrero, 1993:5). The character of Short further naturalizes the role of Sweet as a provider by running after him, as if in him, he has found his long lost master.

The tradition of representing whiteness as a father figure to the black subject emerges from the dominant systems of story-telling. These systems insist on subjugating the black subject by locating it outside of the centre of the frame. In this way, whiteness takes the centre position.

Yearwood, commenting on this practice of signification notes that spectator pleasure is centered on the acquisition of the black body through symbolic domination and control. He notes that this process involves (a) the constitution of the spectator in relation to the film and (b) the specific presentation of the black body within the narrative diegesis.

He further observes that cinematic language then, produces a structure of seeing within which the black body is the object of the look (Yearwood in Guerrero, 1990: 43).

Guerrero advances the argument by suggesting that even though the likes of Laura Mulvey commented that the dominant cinema positions the female body as the sexual object of "the look" for the visual pleasure of the male spectator, it can also be contested that the same cinema, constructs and positions the black image for the look of the "norm", for the visual and narrative pleasure of the white spectator-consumer (1993:125).

Departing from this premise, Short and other black characters in the narrative are configured as the objects of white spectator desire. Indeed, Short insists on befriending Sweet, suggesting that on his part, he acknowledges him as his "emancipator". After Short receives a watch from Sweet, he runs after him, proclaiming "my genie, my genie". By inferring the qualities of a genie, a mythical creation alongside the lines of the god fairy mother to Sweet, he is in fact declaring him his substitute father or to use Bogle's term his "massa" (1998:7). In this way, Short's decision to run after him seems to be informed by his desire to please.

Part of the grammar of containing the black subject on screen is through stereotyping. For hooks; "stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation…They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening" (1992:38).

Short then is constituted in a manner that endears him to white spectators. In this way his task is to let Sweet know that “me work hard, me never lie, me never steal” (Fanon, 1967: 34-35). The configuration of the black subject matter in this way privileges the presence of Sweet as an index of whiteness, ready to serve in a fatherly role for/of blackness.

This signifying practice is so widespread in the dominant media that it has inscribed itself as a norm. Richard Attenborough’s *Cry Freedom* (1987) typifies this malady. The film was supposed to deal with the teachings of the black conscious stalwart, Steve Biko. However, it ended up using the death of Biko to resurrect the liberal impulse of his white friend Woods. In this way, the film displaces the teachings and presence of this black figure. The critical mind of Biko becomes tamed by the rise of Woods who, in defiance of the regime of the day, goes on a warpath, in trying to understand the circumstances relating to the death of his friend.

Davis describes it thus: “A white hero displaces a black one, and triumphs where the black one, by dying, signally failed. It perpetuates the image of the African as a victim, someone whose fate is in the hands of others” (1996:105). This transferal of one’s fate into the hands of others is typified well in *Sweet and Short*. When Sweet decides to speak on behalf of a group of black characters who were confronted by a racist farmer, he validates the Sesotho phrase that goes: “Lekgowa ke sethlare sa motho e motsho”.

Loosely translated, it means that the white man is the medicine of the black man. The suggestion that black characters lack the mental capacity to speak out against racism, a

malady that they are confronted with in their daily-lived experience infers their acceptance of it. Their silence therefore legitimizes this practice of oppression. Moreover, this silence is a symbol of their deracination; consequently it bears no threat to whiteness. For Guerrero, these characters are "utilitarian commodities. They stand silently fanning or waiting on the master class, with no thoughts or articulations of their own, their actions and lines coming entirely in response to white commands" (1993:24).

SHORT: THE DEDICATED TOM

Bogle notes that the history of the tom comes from a long line of socially acceptable Good Negro characters. He notes the genealogy of this stereotype from *For Massa's Sake* (1911*)*, a film that told the story of a former slave who was so attached to his erstwhile master that he decided to sell himself back into slavery to help the master through a period of financial difficulties (1998:7).

When Sweet suffers a concussion and is hospitalized, Short takes it upon himself to rescue him from the hospital. As he goes about planning and executing his escape, his other role as a clown or entertainer begins to take shape. He speaks in an amusing inflection, has a funny swagger and becomes embroiled in a series of comic errors. His comic inflection is a result of him being placed in a foreign society, where black nurses speak in a seemingly unnatural language, English.

This discomfort is elaborated when a nurse gives an account to a reporter of how Short helped Sweet to escape. In her struggle with English, she uses onomatopoeic sounds to

make up for the adjectives that she does not know. Equally so, when Short and the same nurse converse, they sound uncomfortable to listen to, because the narrative wants to insist that this is their "natural language". This insistence however, is at odds with their execution of the language. Diawara notes that white narratives insist on depicting blacks as playing by the rules of white society and losing (1993:211).

In this white diegesis, Short is figured as, "the harmless pickaninn- a little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting" (Bogle, 1998:7).The narrative suggests that Short's gratitude towards Sweet is the reason why he is ultimately contained or brought under control/custody of Sweet.

In the same way that the dominant tropes of cinema have conspired to present blackness with an element of criminality to it, there is a sense in which the role of Short serves to testify that this element can be negated by placing him under the eye of an authoritarian figure (read white).

By extension, one easily remembers anecdotes of black males confessing how the ballet/violin classes they been taking, taught by neo-missionaries in their community centres, have helped them overcome a life of crime. In the same regard, the insinuation is that since Short is under the custody of Sweet, he is an asset to society, much in the same way as the aforementioned black males.

Even though we are aware that Short is streetwise, and proceeds to teach Sweet a few "street-tricks", he is still subdued by the narrative so that he does not threaten the dominant social order. This is done by his humor which in many ways domesticates him. As a domesticated buddy to Sweet, he falls into his custody. This custody is predicated against the template of Short recognizing Sweet as his father figure. In the scene where he insists on following Sweet home, there is a sense of him as longing for the family structure or at least the values that it promises.

The narrative insinuates that Short has no family which is awkward because the first time we see Short, he is in the company of an uncle figure. In the scene where he visits Sweet at the hospital, he is dropped off by the same uncle. Dalamba writes, "As far as mainstream cinema is concerned, blacks are not ambitious, concerned or committed to their families…" (2000:16).

This character is so desperate to belong to this family that he decides to sleep in the garage when he finds the gates locked. At this point, the narrative is positing two notions. That is, Short has deterrotorialised himself from a black milieu so that he could fit into the world of the white man. Short's excitement is fed by the prospect of belonging into this world whereas Sweet's affirmation of self is consolidated by the fact that he will never belong, regardless of how hard he tries.

When Short alienates himself from other black characters, he becomes as Bhabha puts it, "not self and Other, but the Otherness of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity" (Bhabha in Read, 1996: 17).

NEO-MINSTRELSY

In many ways, *Sweet and Short* invokes the tradition of the minstrel impulse. The film was made in 1993, a year before the rule of black majority. Minstrels are/were a white imitation of black culture. Kenneth Lynn describes them as "a white imitation of a black imitation of a contented slave" (1992:132). In the same text, Pieterse explains the role that this form of art was supposed to serve. He documents that these kinds of shows became very popular in the period when slavery was being exposed to mounting abolitionist criticism and to slave resistance in North America.

Their purpose then was to ridicule the thought of abolishing slavery and consequently, the freeing of blacks from their servile positions. It would seem that blackness could not be imagined as being efficient in any complex role outside of the paradigm of slavery. Such simplistic reasoning was captured in songs like "*The Bonja Song*" whose lyrics read:

> Me sing all day, me sleep all night
> Me have no care, me sleep is light
> Me tink, no what tomorrow bring
> Me happy, so me sing (1992:133).

There are parallels between the uneasiness felt by the whites of North America at the thought of freeing blacks from slavery, and the anxiety that white South Africans felt at the prospect of being ruled by a black majority. *Sweet and Short* chronicles briefly, the transfer of power from a white rule to a black one. The looming chaos that would follow the advent of a black government in *Sweet and Short* is typified by the reversal of social roles.

That is, all servile roles that were once associated with blackness were now being executed by whiteness. A non- critical spectator would be tempted to view this reversal as a reconciliatory offer from whiteness, in an effort to compensate for the past years of discrimination. However there is nothing reconciliatory about this impulse as it only serves two notions.

For, when white characters play taxi drivers or delivery boys, they are so detached from the psychology of these social roles that their representation of them becomes a parody. Just like Lynn's white imitation of the contented slave, so are these characters, presenting servile roles as if they are liberatory. Moreover, as the camera pans from one vignette to the other in the city centre, we are introduced to chaos. This chaos, the narrative suggests, is the result of the "dis-ease" felt by whiteness when playing black social roles. In making this subtle point, the narrative suggests that the converse also holds true. In the same way whiteness is not adept at playing black social roles, blackness would also be inefficient in roles traditionally performed by whiteness.

In addition to that, the reversal of roles also suggests that blackness would be so drunk with power, that it would literally shift the social tables overnight. In this way, the mental capacity of blackness is simplified, not unlike that of a child who understands that wrong must be returned with a wrong.

Secondly, this exercise only serves to re-iterate the power that the white race wields. The black people in this “new country” read the national news in impeccable English whilst white readers pretend to be speaking in Isizulu. Moreover, in recent times the South African national broadcaster aired an advert, which also reversed the socio-economic roles between black and white. In this “new” world, white people are re-imagined as a “community” living in a township whilst blacks are figured as “residents” living in suburbs.

This advert went on to win accolades in the media industry. The problem with the concept of reversing roles is that it window dresses real issues. When black people speak in the master’s language, it is not an extra-ordinary feat. In other words it is expected of him, whereas when a white person speaks a black language, it does not matter if he is articulate or not. He will be credited with making attempts at speaking in a foreign language since he has his own culture and history to contend with, unlike the native.

When Schuster’s characters speak in Isizulu, it is not because they are making attempts to redress past inequalities. In actual fact, what this act denotes is a show of power since the native will marvel that master has taken a walk in his shoes, and he will wonder what he

did to deserve this act of kindness. This dream world should not be lauded as “it draws attention to precisely what it is designed to hide, the real world of the dreamer” (Davis, 1996: 67).

Moreover, the way *Sweet and Short* imagines what blackness would do once it is in power, is drawn heavily from the canon of the likes of *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Die Voortrekkers(*1916). For Isabel Hofmeyer, these texts deal with what she calls “the cultural fabrication of nationalisms” (1988, 522). In reference to *Die Voortrekkers*, Edwin Hees comments that the premise of this film emerged from the writings of Gustav Preller, an author whose interest in building the Boer nation resulted in the fabrication of historical facts (2003:56).

For Ernest Renan, the significance of misrepresenting history is crucial because “it is an essential factor in the formation of a nation” (1994:56). In accomplishing this feat, the author conflated the English and Afrikaners into one nation so that collectively, they faced the dangers of the “Dark Continent”. It was Dingaan and his “barbarous” nation of Zulus who personified these dangers (2003:53-54). On the other hand, the premise of *The Birth of a Nation* was that a civilized, orderly nation can be born only once dark forces (blackness) have been vanquished. Diawara elaborates on the anxiety that blackness brings in the narrative of the aforementioned texts thus:

> Senator Stoneman, one of the leading Nothern liberals, sends Silas Lynch, his mulatto protégé, to run for the seat of Lieutenant Governor in a Southern State. Silas conspires with "carperbaggers" to deny Whites the right to vote and wins the election by means of the new Black vote. Soon, the new leaders of the South lift the ban on interracial marriages and the Whites, in response, form the Ku Klux Klan to protect themselves from what they call the new tyrants (1993:323)

In the narrative of *Die Vooetrekkers,* the black problem is resolved through the religious indoctrination of Sobuza, while in *Birth*, the blacks are sent back to Africa. In *Sweet and Short*, this chaotic world is mediated by the fact that Sweet was only dreaming when he had imagined that blackness had come into power and demanded that there be a shift in social roles.

In many ways the idea of blackness as the white man's burden emerges from this literature that caricatures him as vermin. However, as vermin, he only becomes "massa's" problem when the latter fails to contain him. The failure to contain the black man registers as a threat to the stability of a nation. This will be through his potential or "inane nature" to steal and rape, while displacing the authority or its fear thereof, which the white male believes has instilled in society. This fear or anxiety is totalised by the rendering of the black male as the brutal brute.

The idea of the brutal brute is present in the narrative of *Sweet and Short* (1993), although it is in a mutated form. The character that personifies elements of this stereotype is that of the new president. When he greets the rugby team, he is clad in a military outfit that is bedecked with laurels and other militant regalia. The idea of him in such a resplendent and self- indulgent suit speaks back to the new black leaders of *Birth*. In the latter, they are depicted as arrogant as they sit in parliamentary sessions, eating chicken thighs and placing their legs on tables.

The history of Africa is such that leaders in military suits become an index of a government that was won through the use of force. In this way, it is not as sustainable as the one that was won through the ballot, and because of this, a military government denotes a nervous condition as those in charge of it can easily become rebels. As a result of this, its stability cannot be guaranteed. A common mythical line that is often heard spoken by these militant new rulers of Africa is: “Are we still in charge?”

In *Birth,* this anxiety is depicted through Gus, a renegade black slave who wants to rape the daughter of the Cameron family. His physical depiction is that of a near deformed man, with scary eyes and big-bodied, not unlike a barbarian. In *Die Voortrekkers,* Dingaan is represented as a savage, in the same way that Gus was imagined. In one scene, he orders that a baby be taken away to be eaten by the birds, making him barbaric in the eyes of the missionaries for the act of infanticide is ungodly.

Even though it would seem like such simplistic and demeaning characterization has been discontinued by the dominant media systems of the 21st century, Dalamba posits that not much has changed, even from globally supported institutions like Hollywood. In making this point, she describes the opening scene of *Amistad* thus:

> The film opens with a close-up of the blue-black face of a man. His face is contorted and the camera is so close that this face literally fills the entire screen, appearing beastly. His breath is short and quick and the closeness of the microphone makes it sound heavy and threatening. The stereo sound of this black man's tense and anxious breathing, the thunder, the rocking of what sounds like a boat, his picking at the metal object and what seems to be the sound of heavy chains all conspire to create an eerie mysterious and foreboding sensation (2000:27).

Young and Pajaczkowska write: "Slavery represented the perfect mechanism through which personal space was tamed, controlled and drained of emotional investment and meaning" (Young and Pajaczkowska in Donald and Rattansi, 1992:216). In many ways this is what containment does, for it places the subject matter in a position where its own subjectivity is compromised. One can dare say that this strategy is a form of mental slavery, and definitely a tradition whose ethos are located within the colonial discourse. The language of economics should not as one Barry Ronge insists, be used to forgive Schuster's texts in the name of laughter.

CHAPTER THREE:

ZOOLUOLOGY IN *MR BONES* **AND** *SWEET AND SHORT*.

I have thus far located the representation values of Schuster against the desire to laugh at Darkest Africa. In further dismissing this imperialistic subjectivity, I will now engage with the notion of zooluology and how it limits the agency of blackness in Schuster's projects.

Davis defines zooluology as:

> The white myth of the Zulu: the equation of the Zulus with the wild animals Of Africa; the domestication of these creatures; the Zulu as the prototypical 'African tribe'; the political uses of the Zulu image (1996:124).

For the purpose of this chapter, I want to add to Davis definition the "simplifying" of the black male's intellect in relation to the white protagonist. The reason mooted for this "principle" is the failure to recognize the black male as a candidate that can be a repository of authority, whose mental capacity can be trusted to execute intellectually sound decisions. If Davis definition is concerned with the imaging of the black body against the "butch" character of the African locale, my understanding situates the black

male as feminised and thus, to use Toni Cade Bambara's term, "invisibilized" (Bambara in Diawara, 1993:118).

As a feminised "subject", he exists then to serve the desires of the white world. In addition to that, the reason the narrative has to dictate that the white male be centered, as in, having a family structure for instance, is so that he could be better poised to fix the problems of the world. However, the black male cannot be fully centered as Short testifies. He has two homes, one in the city and the other based in the rural area. In this regard, his nomadic tendencies hardly differentiate him from migratory animals.

The insinuation of the nomadic nature of black people refers to their animal-likeness. Moreover, dominant institutions of representation want to pre-suppose that this nature of blackness is best served by rural locations as opposed to urban ones, a point articulated by *The Condemned Are Happy*.

Mr. Bones echoes this impulse in the way the sangoma struggles to comprehend urban inventions like a flushing toilet, casino slot machines, television sets and lifts. Even though the sangoma is white, the fact that he grew up within a black community, arguably validates his lived experience as being black. In this way, the narrative makes reference to the community that raised the sangoma. This reference pits blackness as being out of depth within a white world.

The idea that blackness cannot cope within a white locale is further affirmed by the character of Leleti in *Mr. Bones*. Her relationship with a white man is imaged as troublesome and built on shaky ground. However, the voice of concern is not raised by Leleti, but by the white husband. After one of what seems like to be their routine arguments, she mutters to herself, wondering why she is still with this partner. Her partner retorts back, letting her know that if it was not for him, she would still be in the bush, beating her drum.

In this sense, Leleti is being reminded of her otherness. Dalamba (2000:87) refers to Ngugi's ideas of double consciousness as looking at the world through the "inside-outside gaze" and vice versa in relation to the ways that African people are perceived by Euro-Americans (1981: 37). Leleti's being is shaped by what she thinks of herself, in this case as a black woman with a white partner, whereas her partner, articulates her worth as a black woman trying to be westernized, but cannot be because her origins are in the bush, whence lies her fate. Furthermore, that Leleti's partner is reminding her of what she once was, serves to affirm Ngugi's words that within the paradigm of double consciousness, one self will either be positive or negative, not exclusively because the world on which the outside-inside gaze is based is full of contempt and pity for that very colour (1981: 37).

I will now further engage with how the narrative of *Sweet and Short,* and *Mr. Bones,* simplifies the presence of blackness by limiting it within the paradigm of zooluogy.

Even though I am aware that Schuster simplifies white figures as well, I will argue that they are self- directed. As a result of this, they serve no lasting harm as they can be read as a critique unto themselves. On the other hand, it is hard to read black stereotypes as speaking back to themselves, especially if they are being directed by a white filmmaker.

THE FEMINISATION OF "SHORT" AND THE "CHIEF" OF THE KUVUKI

Patterson writes:

> The idea of freedom is born, not in the consciousness of the master, but in the reality of the slave's condition. Freedom can mean nothing positive to the master; only control is meaningful. for the slave, freedom begins with the consciousness that real life comes with the negation of his social death (Patterson in Guerrero, 1993: 9).

This quote is important when deconstructing the role of Short and that of the chief. Both of these characters disown their lives for the sake of the white protagonist. Short does this when he suspends his life to help Sweet recover from hospital. Moreover, he becomes his accomplice as he helps Sweet to avenge for the loss of his millions, from his rival colleague.

On the other hand, the chief places his life in the hands of the white sangoma, Mr.Bones. He tasks him with finding his lost son, and declares that if he is not found he will kill himself. Both of these characters it would seem have no control over their lives. They have given up the rights to be in charge of their lives and in so doing become ignorant of their condition of "slavery". For the reason that they are unaware of their "condition", it means that they will not understand their freedom or even seek to attain it because they are not aware of their imprisonment. Hence, for Patterson, they will not be able to negate their social death.

This is evident at the end of both texts. In *Mr.Bones,* the chief is rendered impotent by the revelation that one of his wives has a son with the white sangoma of the village. In the beginning of the text, we are told how the wives of the chief cannot bear any male progeny. In this sense, we conclude that the wives are "impotent". However, the revelation that it is the king who is lacking, signals his incompetence in this role and thus his social death.

In *Sweet and Short*, the conclusion is two-pronged although problematic nonetheless. The first one is that Sweet wakes up, signaling that the narrative has been a dream thus far. In this instance, Short, as a black character gets the raw deal for the democratic South Africa was only a mirage. His proposed freedom is denied, and his status as enslaved to the desires of the white world becomes consolidated by the second ending. This ending sees Sweet telling Short about how his newly found wealth will look after the both of them.

Short's freedom is denied twice, for the insinuation is made that he is to be adopted into this white family.

Blackness is denied closure in these texts, as it is only whiteness that is afforded resolution. However, this denial is made to be the fault of blackness. In *Sweet and Short*, the idea of freedom seems meaningless to the character it's supposed to be pivotal to. If Short is free, why is it that he does not seek to be his own agent? Why is it that he continues to sacrifice his life for a white male, a common practice perhaps during the years of oppression, but one that can be discarded/negated in the new dispensation? The other possibility is that this freedom is false, that is to say, it is merely a carrot stick dangled to hoodwink/placate blackness from staging a war, thus avoiding anxiety in a white controlled world.

In the same way, the closure for the chief of the Kuvuki is also problematic. Apart from being rendered impotent/punished, he has an heir who speaks a different cultural language. The heir grew up in the United States and as an incumbent is thus burdened with alienation, the question is, how will he be able to continue the traditions and customs of the Kuvuki tribe?

At the end, these characters are feminised/simplified by their inability to lead, to be in charge of their own lives and to expect someone else to seek stability on their behalf. The question that arises from the representation of black males in this way is, where does it leave the black females within the narrative?

BLACK WOMEN AS VICTIMS IN *MR BONES* AND *SWEET AND SHORT.*

The configuration of black women in the abovementioned texts does not fit archetypal stereotypes of the oversexed female form. Their presence is made visible by their absence. In this way, they fit into James Snead's idea of omission. He writes:

> Omission and exclusion are perhaps the most widespread tactics of racial stereotyping but are also the most difficult to prove because their manifestation is precisely absence itself (1994: 28).

In *Sweet and Short*, we are only introduced to black women that are in obscure roles in direct comparison to the female figures of whiteness. In the scenes that we see them, their characters are turned into caricatures. Robert Corrigan writing in *Notes on the Comic* observes thus:

> A caricature of a face admits that its owner has had a past, but denies that he has a future. He has created his features up to a certain point, but now they have taken charge of him so that he can never change (1965:70).

Corrigan restricts the value of caricatures to the present tense, denying them the agency to exist beyond "what they have to offer at this very moment". As a result of this element, the nature of their being becomes completely totalised so that they can only be read as essentialist in the various capacities that they serve.

Chief among the women who symbolizes this nature is the character of Mabel whom we understand to be Sweet's domestic servant. In the brief moments that we see her, she seems to be burdened with work on two different levels. The first burden is the actual house, which she has to clean and tidy up and secondly, the taking care of Sweet as if he is a baby. This she does by persistently waking up Sweet for work, unlike a little boy who does not want to go to school. Mabel is marked as an archetypal long suffering servant. Her pink maid's uniform is used to complete the optical insistence. The marking of her in this way denotes her static social position.

For Valerie Smith, the purpose of marking serves to "re-inforce eternal codes of the black figure as one wrought with ineptitude and shiftlessness" (1995: 27). This notion links with that of Corrigan, for the likes of Mabel are metamorphosed into indexes that were first shaped by the likes of Ethel Waters, a mammy character that offered master a shoulder to cry on in films like *The Member of the Wedding* (1952).

There are parallels between the character of Mabel as the long suffering servant, and that of the wives of the chief of the Kuvuki. Particularly I want to draw attention to Palesa,

the wife played by actress Sonia Mbhele. I want to locate and critique her decision to sleep with the white sangoma, Mr. Bones.

This act can be read as means and not necessarily the end to, self empowerment. In this way, she is making attempts to speak back to the way that the chief's wives are mistreated. This treatment is made clear by the manner in which they are spoken at, as opposed to. The women are to bear the brunt for the fact that the tribe faces a bleak future.

The empowerment discourse of Palesa is marred by the fact that she sleeps with a white man. This character is thus victimizing herself as an object of a white and a black domination. As a result of this, her revolution is thus undermined. I want to problematise the interracial relationship between Mr. Bones and Palesa. Kande writes:

> Interracial relations only yield a hybridity that castrates the African spirit of rebellion, and that the least possibility of contact between black and white, be it conflictual or ambiguous, is excluded. The victory of One means the elimination of the other from the conquered space… (Kande in Dalamba, 2000:97).

The point that Kande alerts us to is that the affirmation of one's worth should not come from an outside source. If Palesa did not feel fulfilled in her capacity as one of the many

wives, were there no other ways of going about, trying to start a revolution of self? Her narrative arc, which insinuates that it was her choice to have a baby with a white male, suggests her longing to identify herself with "the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries/d truth to savages" (Fanon, 1986:147).

The Omitted Plots:

I will look at the omitted plots in the aforementioned texts in order to critique the way the narrative denies the black subjects opportunities to negate their status as victims or as shiftless. The most pivotal negation happens in the narration of black freedom in *Sweet and Short.* In the beginning we are introduced to Mabel, Sweet's domestic worker. The narrative suggests that she has been working for Sweet for a long time, hence their "intimate" relationship. This is evident when she drags him out of bed, when he is only wearing his boxer shorts. Her position as a servant is an archetypal index of a black person's job under the rule of apartheid.

However, when the narrative suggests that the apartheid dispensation is over, and that there is a black government in charge, we are denied the opportunity to see how this impacts on Mabel. We do see how it affects the other insignificant characters, but it means nothing to critical spectators. This is because we did not see them before the new rule of democracy. In a passing vignette, we see a group of women. They are from different racial backgrounds, and the black one amongst them, declares that, she is going

to start shopping in London. She throws this line in an English accent that is desperately trying hard to sound western.

At this level, the narrative privileges the ideas of a young black woman trying to be white in the new South Africa, whilst ignoring the trajectory of an older woman whom it would appear has known strife all her life. When the narrative omits her story it pardons the type of work that she does. This device of denying negative stereotypes like Mabel varying dimensions to their characters, relates to what Snead terms mythification.

He describes it as the realization that filmic codes describe an interrelationship between images. He further observes that films do not merely feature this or that debased black image or this and that glorified white hero in isolation, but they correlate these images in a larger scheme of semiotic valuation (Snead in Valerie Smith, 1995: 28). Snead is referring to the way images need to be kept in their place so that audiences can readily relate to the tailor made possibilities that they offer. Earlier on I mentioned how black stereotypes facilitate the presence of white heroism. If the narrative of *Sweet and Short* afforded Mabel an opportunity to critique her position as a servant, it would have made Sweet to be less authoritative.

The day to day codes that filmic narratives borrow from, “define perception in limited and predictable ways” (Snead in Valerie Smith, 1995: 26) so that the dominant I, will always have the coded other to function.

Another character that is imaged along the lines of Mabel is that of Short's uncle. In the instances that we see him, he appears to be frustrated. The first time we see him, he is involved in an argument with Short. His frustrations with his weak stream of luck at the slot machines are relayed by him snapping at Short. The next scene that we see him, he is about to drop Short off at the hospital, driving in a jalopy that had seen better days, and in the last scene, he is in the rural areas, entertaining himself at an arcade. As with Mabel, his story is not told.

When Sweet decides that he misses/remembers his home, he leaves Short behind. This is regardless of the fact that up until now, Short has been Sweet's sole helper. It is up to Short to make a plan to follow Sweet home. The narrative suggests that Short is hurt by Sweet's abrupt departure.

However, in an effort to ease his pain, he follows Sweet home and when he finds the house locked; he decides to sleep on the floor of the garage. It is hard to understand why Short does not use the opportunity to confide in his uncle, and to ask him for his advice. In this way, the audience will see two black figures applying their minds and trying to solve a problem. Moreover, it will ground the uncle figure as playing a parental role, thus enhancing his character with a different dimension beyond his already established one of being passive, comical and irritable.

However, amongst other readings, we can dare say that the narrative privileges the experience of whiteness in the new dispensation. This it does by using Sweet and the

character of the racist farmer. When Sweet wakes up from the hospital, he is disorientated and relies on Short to guide him through the changes. Moreover, spectators are guided to understand the motivation of the racist farmer.

The anger of this farmer is informed by the act of black taxi passengers stealing oranges on his farm. The point the narrative makes is that the racist diatribe that these passengers are at the receiving end of, is the result of their own behavior. This point is elaborated by the fact that there is a warning sign at the entrance of the town, which is modeled alongside a town like Orania, where racial misgenation is forbidden.

In other words, the passengers deserved their punishment because they were on forbidden ground. Although it is part of the new South Africa, its inhabitants have decided to reject the reality of majority rule. The problem is not that the farmer is angry at the passengers for stealing his oranges, his real anger lies at the new South Africa. The theft of his oranges affords him an opportunity to attack the new dispensation.

In the same breath, the disorientation that Sweet suffers from is only a symptom. The real problem is the acknowledgement that South Africa is being ruled by a black government. Rather, it is the failure to accept this acknowledgement that is at the root of his disorientation. Either way, the narrative affords these characters the opportunities to express their dissatisfaction. The omission then of the impact of an idea as pivotal as black freedom towards black characters and the failure of the narrative to justify the

presence/ absence of its black characters only serves to maintain the hegemony of white supremacy.

CHAPTER FOUR:

WHAT IS THE ALTERNATIVE?

hooks writes:

> For some time now the critical challenge for black folks has been to expand the discussion of race and representation beyond debates about good and bad imagery. Often what is thought to be good is merely a reaction against representations created by white people that were blatantly stereotypical. Currently, however, we are bombarded by black folks creating and marketing similar stereotypical images…(1992:7).

The idea that hooks is alluding to is the appropriation of negative images of blackness by black image makers. In this way, she is suggesting that the rubric of black representation needs to be expanded in order to imagine how negative stereotypes can be countered. More importantly she is suggesting that negative images cannot just be replaced with positive ones. This notion would suggest that the black community is denying its own varying lived experiences, for surely negative stereotypes can be used combatively. In this way, the argument is not simply reduced to what should be done about black stereotypes. Rather, it becomes what should be done about black stereotypes that are perpetuated by another group.

This idea is critical for the thesis I attempted to present in this paper because it begins to denote notions of de-essentialising. Part of the project of reading a text without resorting to essentialism will be engaging with the idea of Freire's *conscientizacao.* He describes the latter as "the process of learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (1996: 17).

Black scholars tend to fail as far as taking action against these "oppressive elements" of reality. This is because they tend to invest their subjectivities more than anything else into readings of black texts by white filmmakers or even black texts by black filmmakers; consequently, the line of objective film criticism becomes blurred. This is problematic because the text at hand is deprived of other readings which might be equally progressive.

A good example of this instance would be the dominant reading of a blaxploitation text like *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song*. The film released by Melvin Van Peebles in 1971, tells the story of a young boy named Sweetback who is raised and adopted by a group of black prostitutes. He grows up to become a sexual athlete. After he witnesses the killing of a black revolutionary by white cops, he goes on the rampage by killing them, and so begins his run from the white law.

The film, which became "the paradigmatic text for the 1970's blaxploitation films" (Diawara, 1993:9) has been blindly celebrated. Yearwood notes that Nelson George

observed that “Sweetback defied the positive-image canon of Sidney Poitier, dealing openly with black sexuality…while its refusal to compromise still sparks black artists from Ice Cube to Mary Rich”, while the leader of the Black Panther group declared the movie as an important political film (2000:186). While the text offered the black male as heroic figure who was not afraid of tackling “The Man”, and responding to the canon of blaxploitation films of the day, it nonetheless re-iterated the same stereotypes that it was challenging.

A lot has been said about how the text defied the dominant cinematic language of the day and how it proposed revolutionary ideas to the black consciousness, however, not much has been said about the fact that the agency of the black community is through the “pussy”. hooks quotes Sander Gilman thus: “By the eighteenth century, the sexuality of the black, male and female, became an icon for deviant sexuality” (1992:62). *Sweetback* then, re-inscribes black sexuality against the template of how the Western world has always sought to define it. The motivation of this process can be read against the impulse of drawing elements of black people against the mythical Dark Africa, which we explained earlier on, serves to caricature and thus deny the humanity of the subject in question.

Therefore, the celebration of “*Sweetback*” becomes problematic because its protagonist is a character type that accepts and normalizes black sexuality as sub-human, resurrecting the myth of the feral Gus. On the other hand, the deliberate use of the oversexed black male can be read as undermining respective notions of itself as a harmful character type.

For the reason that this character type was constructed by the dominant media, *Sweetback*, it can be suggested, is using it as a weapon of combat. This is because in dominant white narratives, this type is an index of anxiety, whereas in this particular black narrative, it signals "utopian pleasure". The weakness of this trope of signification is that it fails to move beyond referencing itself against a white history.

So far, this paper has been concerned with interrogating debasing images of blackness that are constructed by Schuster. My pre-occupation with the representation of black stereotypes as opposed to that of white stereotypes, is informed by the notion of the formerly colonized as bearing the mark of allegory.

For Shohat and Stam, "the representation discourse of the subaltern performer is always seen as synecdochically summing up a vast but putatively homogenous community" (1994:183). As a result of this, one corrupt black male stands for every black male. However, white stereotypes are not overcharged with this "surplus symbolic value" (Rogin in Shohat and Stam, 1994: 183), consequently one corrupt white male is merely seen as an aberration. This deduction of logic is the result of who owns the means of production, and thus who determines how people are imagined.

Given the histories of the world, where ethos of white patriarchal supremacy has sought through hegemony to dominate other "non-white" societies, it is unsurprising that those with economic clout would like to control images of other nations. White supremacy as an ideology needs to be able to articulate its dominion in order to exert its power. The

project of domination gives allowance to those who would like to control how others see themselves, the means of redemption. When the other is figured as servile, he performs his consent by accepting his lowly status and in this process redeems the creator of the image. For his consent implies that he pardons the worldview of those that see him as nothing but a slave.

This factor accounts for the power or lack thereof that stereotypes exercise in the world. The pivot for Shohat and Stam lies in this factor. They write:

> Stereotypes of some communities merely make the target group uncomfortable, but the community has the social power to combat and resist them: stereotypes of other communities participate in a continuum of prejudicial social policy…against disempowered people (1994:183).

Teddy Mattera's *Max and Mona* (2004) can be read against the template of an oppositional reading of blackness. I will now posit a discussion that grounds the view that *Max and Mona* attempts to offer an alternative view to the dominant representations of blackness. I will argue that in order for the text to be read as progressive, it needs to be problematised in relation to the hegemonic presentations of blackness. As a text directed by a black filmmaker, it can also be contested that it employs self –directed stereotypes as

one of the tools of countering hegemony. I will also argue however, that the oppositional worldview it offers is not always progressive in the way the narrative imagines blackness.

Max and Mona.

The text of *Max and Mona* is on one level a regurgitation of homogenous images of blackness, yet also concerned with how the same images can be used as means to countering the damaging social power they have. In grounding this point, I will discuss how Mattera attempts to use self-directed stereotypes in this project.

Margolis defines self-directed stereotypes as "the deployment of stereotypes by the people being stereotyped in order to undermine those stereotypes by exposing their ridiculous –underpinnings" (1999:53). This deployment is not about a black image maker regurgitating old types in the hope of combating "hegemonic representations or countering objectifying discourses of patriarchy and colonialism…" (Shohat and Stam, 1994:180).The deployment strategy ought to facilitate the process of destroying rather than enhancing the stereotypes, a point that *Sweetback* missed.

Max and Mona tells the story of a village boy, Max Bua who has an extra-ordinary talent of mourning. He comes to Johannesburg in the hope of furthering his studies, however he ends up using his mourning skills to help his criminal uncle, Norman, to pay off his debt to his gangster nemesis, Razor. The film depicts three different social and geographical

landscapes. It is within these landscapes, that Mattera challenges hegemonic representations of black people, although not always successfully.

The first landscape is that of the rural area. The geography of this space is marked in such a way that it affirms its inhabitants. The landscape is romanticized by wide shots of blue skies and rolling hills, yet it is not presented as an enigma, waiting to be discovered by Western explorers. Unlike in *Mr. Bones* where a white male is in charge of the geo-political dynamic, *Max and Mona* makes no such offerings. When whiteness is privileged within this rural landscape, for instance as in the white van driver, no overture is made by the text to acknowledge his presence.

In stark comparison to *Mr. Bones*, and *Sweet and Short*, texts which also depicted black people living in a rural area, the inhabitants of Mattera's world are empowered by being afforded an agency. This agency manifests itself in language. The villagers in Schuster's world speak in an incomprehensible vernacular, not unlike the "Indians in classic Hollywood westerns or even films from North Africa where an indigenous language like Arabic is an indecipherable mutter" (Shohat and Stam, 1994:192).

The villagers in *Max and Mona* speak in an uncluttered Setswana. In many ways, Mattera's use of an indigenous language in his project can be seen as a response, although a filmic one, to the call made by Ngugi wa Thiongo to African writers that they must write in African rather than European languages. In the other two landscapes within the diegesis, namely, the township and suburban, black characters either speak in tsotsi-

taal or Sesotho. I want to link the use of indigenous language with the possibility of the recuperative motif. Shohat and Stam declare that “language forms the site where political struggles are engaged both collectively and intimately” (1994:193). Consequently, these sites of struggle are entered into by “socially constituted subjects” (1994:193). The acknowledgement of these subjects through the exchange of language implies a reciprocity that was disavowed by colonial relations.

Since the villagers in Mattera’s text are afforded an indigenous language, they are then recuperated from the margins of the cinematic frame into the centre. When white spectators watch *Max and Mona*, it would be on the terms predicated by a black subjectivity. The weakness of this confrontational aspect, that is, of trying to draw the marginal into the centre, is two-pronged. The first weakness is affirming the centre as sacrosanct by seeking to dismantle the margins. The second weakness is seeking to be in the centre without questioning the credentials of the centre.

This would entail raising questions relating to who determines what the centre should be and whose subjectivity becomes privileged. As part of the strategy of recuperation, the centre needs to be re-imagined so as to include the subjectivity of the sub-altern.

Moreover, the principle of using an indigenous language within the dominant cinema, as part of responding to the crisis of under or misrepresentation, is likely to achieve the opposite. This is because when white spectators engage with a black text that privileges a

black lived experience, the project may not necessarily transform into a liberatory metaphor.

Henry Louis Gates quotes Bakhtin thus:

> The word in language is half someone else's.
> It becomes one's own only when the speaker
> populates it with his own intention, his own
> accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting
> it to his own semantic and expressive intention
> (1986:Introduction).

The paradigms of dominant cinema accepted and normalized the consumption of a dominant language like English. Therefore when an alternative language is privileged within the same paradigm, it risks being turned into a curio. In this regard, it is not owned by the creator of the image, for the intentions of the recuperative strategy become subverted. The interpretation of what is being said is often lost because of the existence of the "remove" element. This is the notion that dilutes the meaning of language through mis/interpretation.

In the narrative, we are told that Max wants to become a medical doctor. However, the translation implies that he wants to become "ngaka ya sekgowa" which literally means a "white doctor". In addition to that, when the family realizes that he had been given the

wrong goat, the translation captures it as being given “the goat of the ancestors”. The first idea seems to be a celebration of whiteness and its “discoveries” (medicine), whereas the second one marks blackness as elemental through beliefs of “godly” goats, an index of essentialist rites.

The use of an indigenous language in mainstream cinema further draws attention to the speakers in a marked form. This form authors itself through labels such as ethnicity. For Hall, ethnicity merely acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity (Hall in Barker, 1999:63). I argue that his affirmation of the term is narrow. For it discounts the fact that even though white English people do form ethnic groups, the concept is only used descriptive terms.

However, when it is applied to black people, it does not merely describe, but assumes the timbre of an exclusive as opposed to an inclusive nationality/tribe. The battles that were fought in the early nineties in South Africa attest to this point. These were battles that the dominant media reported as “ethnic violence between the Zulus and Xhosa’s” for instance. This lies in stark contrast to the reporting of the Middle East conflict. In the latter, the sense implicated is that the violence is more geographically based, as opposed to it being demographically driven.

We have established that non-black races will be watching *Max and Mona* as “eavesdroppers”, the very ironic reason that they are bound to misinterpret the ideas the narrative offers. Even though those that might understand the language will contest that

these are not the notions being implied, it does not detract from the fact that they are insinuated. Perhaps it could be argued that misinterpretation does not dilute the "real". If this be the case, then why bother on the process of confronting hegemony if its outcome can be read as ambiguous?

The imaginary corollary of this regime should suggest that the stereotypes Mattera uses become three-dimensional and thus recuperative. However, I want to problematise this notion through the exploration of how the narrative attempts to, but does not succeed in re-imagining stereotypes of blackness.

Non-Progressive Narrative

The narrative of *Max and Mona* makes an attempt to offer a site of blackness that opposes conventional ways of situating black stories. In telling the story of a black male being abused by his uncle, it offers nothing new. In making overtures that figure the black community within a comical diegesis that is filled with clichéd stereotypes, it co-opts mechanisms perfected by white led institutions such as Hollywood. The locale of the humor is borrowed from the conventional trajectory that has been normalized by hegemonic presentations of blackness. This is the arc that places the black subject out of time with real time. Max for instance, is figured as the country bumpkin who is confused by the pace and sights of city life, not unlike the character of Mr. Bones.

The narrative denies the lived experience of the rural area that Max comes from. In marking Max as dwarfed by the pace of the city, the narrative accepts platitudes about blackness as belonging in the bush, where they are in touch with nature, as opposed to the sophisticated pace of the city. This motif is further given credence when Max walks with a goat to the university that he is supposed to be registered at. The naivety shown by Max in this regard can be read alongside Short's failure to comprehend the genie as a mere mythical creation.

More importantly, it speaks back to white ideas about black males as being "like little children". This platitude is expressed when Max bumps into a girl holding a wedding cake. The cake falls, and as the lady in question screeches in anger, Max picks up the cake and proceeds to eat it.

The uncle figure in *Sweet and Short* is marked as absent by his lack of physical presence and his limited speech. In *Max and Mona*, this figure is located within a world of crime and tasked with looking after his nephew. However, the narrative suggests that this figure only agreed to look after his nephew after he found out that he could use his skills of mourning to help him repay his debts.

In many ways the relationship between Max and his uncle is turned into a commercial venture. Norman formalizes the commercial aspect of the relationship by striking a deal with a white undertaker. The deal is that Max will be used as a chief mourner at funerals, as to enable those that attend to feel for the deceased, notwithstanding his notoriety. The

commercial motif of this relationship discounts space for emotions, rendering Norman to be unfeeling and callous. When a business deal goes awry and Max is forced to be on the run, Norman does not hesitate to offer capture of his nephew. This elaborates the fact that a relationship between two black males is structured in such a way that it fails to critique dominant representations of blackness.

The narrative completes its failure to successfully re-imagine conventional use of black stereotypes by figuring black males as drunkards. The central characters of the text are always figured with bottles of alcohol. The question that the make-up of the narrative raises is the burden of a text that is directed by a black filmmaker. Jim Hillier writes: "Whatever black filmmakers have in common, there are considerable tensions between some of them over what kinds of work should be done by black filmmakers" (Hillier in Margolis, 1999:50).

Black scholars often cry out that there needs to be authentic or realistic portrayal of blackness. The question that never seems to be answered is, compared to what, should these representations be realistic? Compared to the black thugs that I know, the black drunkards that I see from the townships, the incorruptible black leaders or the responsible fathers that I know?

The representations of blackness within Mattera's text merely raise questions and not as could be claimed, provide answers as to how a community can be imagined. Mattera's characters are imbued with contradictions that render his characters ambiguous.

In discussing these ambiguities, Hall notes that black people are required to be failures/success, good/bad, civilized/primitive (1999:81).

In the way that Mattera uses black stereotypes, he fails to deploy them as an alternative or at least positioned as being self-reflexive. The relationship between Max and his uncle is an index of the narrow pool of positive black males in parental positions. In the same vein, the abuse of alcohol within the narrative posits the black male as socially disempowered while the depiction of black thugs, alerts one to the need of the black body to be policed.

It is tempting then to conclude that one is calling for images that show black people to be "really as good as or really as human as white people in the context of the circulation of negative stereotypes and assimilationist expectations" (West in Barker, 1999:83). This would be problematic for it would discount varying notions of difference. Moreover, it would invite the pretense of there being a real experience of black people, neglecting the fact that nothing is real, but it is merely a representation of something else.

The reason Mattera's text is non-progressive is not so much that it does not provide good images of blackness. The text fails not so much that it fails to be liberatory, but that it promises to critique social binary relations, but never does. Hence, his deployment of self-directed stereotypes cannot be read as confronting past stereotypes in order to undermine them. They way Mattera sets up his stereotypes, fails to be different from the

way white cinema has learned to normalize images of blackness. This is not to dismiss the text in its entirety.

The narrative resolution that he provides for Max needs to be read as positive. In the end, he manages to go to university to study towards his medical degree. This is made possible through the repentance of his uncle, Norman. There are two problems concerning this redemption. The first one is that the narrative structures it in such a way that it seems incredible within the diegesis. This is because Norman is set up as one-dimensional as opposed to being psychologically rounded, hence his damascene resolution seems hard to believe, let alone buy into. Secondly, the proposed redemption of the criminal uncle, only serves the fears and anxiety of the white world in that it assures them that the figure that has the potential to harm them, has been tamed.

In this chapter, I sought to confront the way Mattera imagines aspects of blackness in *Max and Mona*. In many ways, I concluded that his decision to use negative stereotypes of blackness in uncritical ways, to be problematic. I noted that the text began promisingly, that its premise purported to be a celebration of blackness through owning the black subjectivity.

However, it is not to suggest that the text fails comprehensively. Within the paradigms that I set up, that is, within my expectations of what a black filmmaker should produce, it registers itself to be non-progressive. In this regard, I am aware that it is my position, informed by my specific theoretical discourses, that I dismiss the text to be a mere

regurgitation of white reconstructions of blackness. In this manner, I render my position to be a weakness.

CONCLUSION?

At the moment (2006:February), the Muslim community is up in arms over cartoons published in a Danish newspaper about the prophet Muhammad. At the centre of the controversy, is the comic depiction of a godly figure. In the same way, when Schuster depicts a prophet figure like the sangoma as comical, one would expect that the black community would also be up in arms. I want to suppose that the reason this is not so, is because the black audience hardly engages with critical spectatorship. Critical spectatorship insists that spectators must resist images that do not affirm the black lived experience such as those that Hollywood and the likes of Schuster recreate.

In Diawara's words, " from the specificity and limitations of my own position as a Black male spectator, the aim is to consider what insights this particular formation of spectatorship can bring to the analysis of Hollywood films" (1992: 212). The author encourages us to not separate what constitutes "ourselves", be it our gender or race, when analysing representations. This is vital as it aims to re-claim blackness and hold accountable those who continue to misrepresent it as the "other" or the colonized. hooks suggests that when we encounter images that do not affirm the black lived experience, that is to say, that seek to entrench the values of white supremacy, we must oppose the authenticity of their worldview (hooks in Wallace, 1992:50).

What hooks alludes to is the notion of speaking out/against. This is to engage in critical dialogue with negative representations and rupture the boundaries that they seek to

impose. These are the boundaries that would like to suggest, “I is an other” (Rimbauds in Pieterse, 1992:7). However, as much as black people are encouraged to be critical spectators, they should be weary of attempting to create an ideology that seems to suggest that there is an ideal, fundamental and authentic black lived experience.

Departing from the premise of seeking to re-assess issues of black representation, the likes of Mattera are arguably developing a bold film language. It is beside the point if this language succeeds in being “liberatory” or not. The point is that they are making attempts to privilege aspects of blackness that are overlooked by dominant institutions and ideologically biased tropes of seeing. We have documented the informing practices of Schuster, and elaborated how they reflect attitudes that deny the lived experiences of blackness.

In many ways, even though the cinema language of Mattera might be limited in the way it reconfigures blackness, it still needs to be lauded for the advances that it struggles to make. The choice of celebrating indigenous languages within the mainstream cinema might not achieve what it intends to, but at least it makes movement towards Haile Gerima’s idea of what a critical director should be like. This should not, by any means be read as totalizing the training values of black directors. Gerima writes that a filmmaker should not be without any sense of accountability, but should always be striving to engage in a meaningful relationship with his community (Gerima in Dalamba, 2000:24).

When Mattera's primary character, Norman, undergoes a damascene rite of passage from being totally bad to being totally good, there is an element of trying to be radical in as far as rupturing mainstream representations of black males. However, the challenge is not effective because it fails to divest from traditional cinema. The challenges that face black image makers are not divorced from those that haunt black film reviewers, black audiences and those that would have an interest in financially backing black films. For Dalamba, filmmakers must:

> Engage in purposeful research and be sensitive as to identify and address the needs of those communities who are most socio-economically and politically marginalized within broader society (2000:128).

Dalamba's notion, however noteworthy, is not practical. Her ideas of trying to combat black misrepresentations through the process of evaluating communities' needs sounds more like what a politician should be doing, as opposed to what an artist should be engaging with. The practicalities of such a venture are most absurd. If every black filmmaker posits black characters that are radical and revolutionaries, it would further ostracize the community as opposed to advancing their cause. Dalamba should refer to the duties that Gerima prescribes for a filmmaker. Amongst these, he notes that he must "explore the vital elements and innovatively synthesizes social relationships" (Gerima in Smith, 1995: 183).

Gerima offers a better template for he suggests moving away from the idea of a community, and focusing on the individual, in innovative ways within social relationships. Gerima's challenge can also be read as critiquing the way a nation has normalized how others perceive it. For Freire, the oppressed are encouraged to see themselves as marginal persons who have deviated from the general configuration of a good, organized and just society (1996: 55). W.E.B. Du Bois affirms this notion when he describes how the dominant other forces the other to think about himself. He writes:

> Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter around it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately and then,…How does it feel to be a problem? (1989:1)

However, Freire suggests that ill-truths such as these need to be ruptured. He notes: "the truth is, however, that the oppressed are not "marginals", are not people living "outside" society. They have always been "inside"- inside the structure which made them "beings for others" (1996: 55). The urgency of reclaiming one's being starts with denouncing representations that disavow the core of this being.

Tankiso Komane, a film reviewer of the *Sowetan*, a popular Daily tabloid, redeems Schuster's latest project thus: "Like a well-matured wine, this musician and author gets

better with each movie he releases" (Dec 02: 2005). If a black film critic like Komane fails to interrogate Schuster's debasing images of blackness, or even to develop a critical consciousness that allows her to ask, "What can I do to challenge mainstream representations of blackness in ways that are affirming?" (2000: 129), then, film audiences are in trouble.

By failing to ask the right questions and instead indulging in sycophantic noises, thus pardoning Schuster, Komane fails in her task as a supposedly critical film reviewer. Her failure is passed down to the majority that read her views; as a result, Schuster's projects become a financial success. Matthew Krouse notes that *Mr.Bones* was South Africa's biggest grossing film. He further documents that Schuster was awarded a lifetime award for his contribution to the South African film industry (*Mail and Guardian,* Nov 18, 2005). These indicators suggest that the general public fails to grasp the gravity of Schuster's negative representations.

It might be unjust to suggest that this is the consequence of uncritical opinions of mainstream film critics. Part of the reason that Schuster's projects become financially viable is because not enough prominent critics interrogate the work of this filmmaker. The reason for this might be that these critics are unaware of the language of semiotics, and how signs are manipulated to denote specific meanings. As a result of the fact that their film language is limited, their critique is thus hampered by what they can see, but fail to read. One of the ways of enhancing the struggle against biased representations of

black people is through the mass education of aesthetics and how they work. Glissant writes:

> It is nothing new to declare that for us music, dance, are forms of communication just as important as the gift of speech. This is how we first managed to emerge from the plantation: aesthetic form in our cultures must be shaped from these oral structures (Glissant in Paul Gilroy, 1993: 75).

During the days of the struggle against apartheid, protest music was used as means to politically mobilize the oppressed and of encouraging them to not give up fighting, a point Gillian Slovo affirms thus: “Mandela did his part, but song saved South Africa” (*Guardian Unlimited*, Dec14, 2003). In the same way the black populace used the aesthetic of song to combat the enemy of apartheid, I am suggesting that the same principle, although a filmic one can be applied in engaging with demeaning representations.

It would take another essay to outline how this could be achieved. This particular report is merely based on interrogating the signifying practices of Schuster as to raise awareness and perchance hope that other black critical thinkers will join in the dialogue. In engaging with Schuster, it has been clear that racist ideologies such as that of white supremacy are alive and well.

As a result there is a need for critical dialogue as to how these issues should be engaged with. I have mentioned my possibilities and I am aware that they are not necessarily powerful on their own. hooks states:

> Rather than become accomplices in the perpetuation of racial domination, black scholars who value academic freedom must continually work to establish spheres of learning in institutions where intellectual practice is not informed by white supremacy. If such a space does not exist, we betray the radical traditions that enabled us to enter these institutions and act in a manner that will uphold and support our exclusion in the future. It is our collective responsibility both to ourselves as black people and to the academic communities in which we participate and to which we belong, to assume a primary role in establishing and maintaining academic and social spaces wherein the principles of education as the practice of freedom are promoted (1988: 65).

Bibliography

Asante, M. K. 1999. *The Painful Demise of Eurocentrism*. Eritrea: Africa World Press.

Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso

Barker, C. 1999. *Television, globalization and cultural identities.* Buckingham: Open University Press

Balseire I, with Masilela N, eds. 2003. *To Change Reel: Film and Film Culture In South Africa*: Wayne State University

Crow, B, with Banfield, C. 1996. *An introduction to post-colonial theatre*. Cambridge: University Press

Corrigan,R. ed. 1965. *Comedy, Meaning and Form*. USA: Chandler Publishing Co

Du Bois, W.E.B. 1989. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Bantam Books

Diawara, M. 1992. *African Cinema: Politics and Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Diawara, M.1993. *Black American Cinema*. New York: Routledge

Donald, J, and Rattansi, A. 1992. *Race, Culture and Difference*. London and the US: Sage Publishers and United Kingdom: The Open University

Dalamba,Y. 2000. Unplublished Thesis: *Confronting Representations of Race and Gender in Sankofa*. Wits University

Davis, P. 1996. *In Darkest Hollywood*. Randburg: Ravan Press

Dinesen, I. 1937. *Out of Africa*. London: Century Publishers

Ernst, R. 1891. *The Future of Science*. Boston: Roberts Roberts.

Fanon, F. 1986. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press

Ferguson R, Cornel,W et al.1990. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures.* London: MIT Press

Freire, P. 1996. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. England: Penguin

Gates, H, L. 1986. *Race, Writing and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago

Gould, S, J. 1981. *The mismeasure of man*. New York: Penguin

Gallman, K. 1991. *I dreamed of Africa*. England: Viking Press

Gitlin,T. 1994. *The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment*. New York: University Press.

Guerrero,E. 1993. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press

Gilroy, P. 1993. *The Black Atlantic*. London: Verso Plublishers

Gladstone, Y. 1983. Wide Angle: *The Hero in Black Film.* Vol.5, No.2

Gladstone, Y.2000. *Black Film as a Signifying Practice*. Africa World Press

Hall, S. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage Publishers Ltd

hooks, b. 1992. *BLACK LOOKS: Race and Representation*. Toronto: Between the lines Publishers

Wallace, M. 1992. *Black Popular Culture*. USA: Molloy

White, H.1978. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays on Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press

Metz, C. 1982. *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana Press

Morley, D and Chen, K.H. 1996. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies. New York and London:* Routledge

Miller, J.1987. *From Sweetback to Celie*: Blacks on Film into the 80's. London: Verso

Margolis, H. 1999. *Cinema Journal 38*, No.3, Spring.

Read, A. 1996. *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*. Seattle: Big Press

Thiong'o, WA, N. 1981. *Writers in Politics*. London: Heinemann

Shohat, E and Stam, R. 1994. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism, and the Media*. New York and London: Routledge

Shohat, E and Stam, R. 2003. *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality and Transnational Media*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press

Said, E. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto and Windus

Snead, J.1994. *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*. New York: Routledge

Pieterse, N. 1992. *White on Black.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press

Pines and Willemen. 1989. *Questions of Third Cinema*. London: British Film Institute

Vaughan. 1960. African Treasury. New York: Crown Publishers

Valerie,S. 1995. *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press

Ronge, B. *Sunday Times*, 04 April 2004

Komane, T. *Sowetan,* 02 December 2005

Matsitela. *Mail and Guardian*, 17 December 2004

Matthews, K. *Mail and Guardian*, 16November 2005

Accone, D. *Mail and Guardian*, 23 April 2004

Slovo,G. *Guardian Unlimited*, 14 December 2003

The Star, 18 June 1965 (incomplete reference)

Filmography

Dingaka (1964)

Production company: Embassy

Producer: Jamie Uys

Director: Jamie Uys

The Condemned Are Happy (1950)

Production company: Jamie Uys Productions

Producer: Jamie Uys

Director: Jamie Uys

The Gods Must Be Crazy (1980)

Producer: Boet Troksie

Director: Jamie Uys

Mr.Bones (2001)

Producer: Gray Hofmeyer

Screenplay: Leon Schuster

Sweet 'N Short (1992)

Producer: Gray Hofmeyer

Screenplay: Leon Schuster

Max and Mona (2005)

Producer: DV8

Screenplay: Teddy Mattera

The Birth of a Nation (1915)

Producer: Griffiths, D.W

Screenplay: Griffiths, D.W

Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song (1971)

Producer: The Black Community

Screenplay: Melvin Van Pebbles

Die Voortrekker (1916)

Incomplete Reference