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0604798W

Lil_ith

A love story for South Africa's queer, misfit youth.

PDF visual presentation available:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-hviXsbTebM1qq_T2RSvRmatYgITDgmR?usp=share_link

Film and appendixes via link:
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Film title- Lil_ith
Duration- 22 min
Mirrorball Productions
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ARA00 MA OF ARTS:FILM AND TELIVISION

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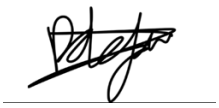

Dedicated to all the queer misfits of the world.
Without you, life would be beige.

Many thanks to my supervisor Christopher Wessels for your guidance and mentorship.

A further thank you to the cast, crew and post facilitators of the film *Lil_ith*.
Your collaborative spirits, tremendous talents and passion for film are what made this project possible.

Table of content

Abstract

This project takes the form of an explorative filmic investigation into and reflection on the archetype of the queer misfit in South African cinema. The film and research take the standpoint of the South African misfit archetype being a post-queer-theory subject in relation to the country's historical, socio-economic, sexual, traditional and technological landscape.

I will compare the appearance of the queer misfit through the arrival of the neon and caustic characters of the New Queer Cinema movement of the 1990s to South Africa's contemporary emergence of this archetype, positioning Queer Theory and the New Queer Cinema movement of the early as the primary emergence of a 'true' queer voice. I will engage with the influence of socio-economic, political and technological stimuli as well as the emergence of post-Queer Theory in the West and South Africa and its contribution to the evolution of the queer and misfit in post-colonial South African cinema.

Through a practice-led, autoethnographic approach I combined these findings with core theoretical frameworks on post-modern sexuality by Queen and Schimel to inform and fuel the development of the film *Lil_ith*. The film stands as a creative execution expanding on the South African Misfit archetype in relation to the global history of Queer Misfit representation as well as its relationship with South Africa as a nation in the process of de-colonialisation within a digitised and globalised world.

Act 1 Introspection

Introduction

Lil_ith as a film was researched and conceived as part of my Master's submission in Film and Television, but more so as a love letter within a love letter to the queers, the misfits and the queer misfits of the world. With a particularly testing period of self-growth in my late twenties combined with a research/working manner that has always stemmed from personal experience, it revealed very early in my research that any topic for a research project would have to be something of personal significance. This exploration had an objective, more than just an academic journey, but a goal where life, art and industry intersect.

The primary intention was to develop a project which contributes to the South African film discourse, engaging with and building on the canon. This contribution would function as an informed, progressive and contemporary exploration of the queer misfit archetype's existence in present-day South African cinema. The second was to create an object, a piece of cinema which, through the use of considered narrative structure, mise-en-scene, character performance, editing, audio, as well as multiple other technical and conceptual executions, would weave all together to form a film which attempts to push the boundaries of South African cinema regarding its contemporary representation of gender, queer culture and economy. The final objective, while remaining true to the prior goals, is to create a piece which above all still functions as an accessible film for a mainstream audience. This final objective is of utmost importance as *Lil_ith* is not only a story to entertain, but one where certain under-represented South African audiences can see themselves.

Before these objectives could be met, a process of looking inwards had to begin.

Queer life choices

I was often in trouble in my teens. A headstrong and curious juvenile with a rebellious streak. The clarity I gained in my thirties, with the hindsight of reflection, revealed that many of my life's experiences and people within my community were of some sect of marginalised groups, misfits within society. Spanning the whole spectrum from sex workers to dominatrixes, drug addicts to

dealers, partners living with HIV and others with psychological conditions, having worked (although not actively) in the sex industry, these were the people I'd been surrounded with, a part of the 'underbelly' of Johannesburg that was much a part of my narrative, my history. This, combined with a particularly tricky but epiphanic sexual-identity revelation saw these two themes, the misfit and the queer, begin to stand out as well and merge as points of significance not only in my identity but in the global consciousness.

It is the New Queer Cinema movement of the 1990s that shouted out as a period of cinema history where the misfit and the queer were not only represented apart and together, but also celebrated. From the HIV-positive, gunslinging, tragic, gay lovers of Gregg Araki's *The Living End (1992)* to the narrative triptych of science fiction deviant exploration that is *Poison (1991),* queer story tellers, in what I will argue as the first time in Western cinematic history, were representing themselves and writing, producing and acting in films which embraced marginalised facets of society while still acknowledging the economic, cultural and political influences of the time. This discovery began a voyage of exploration as to where the queer and the misfit exist in the South African film oeuvre as individual and archetype[1].

The ethics of representation

Through the process and the experience of this project I have seen a constant change of my own perspectives and viewpoints on sexuality and gender theory in relation to my existence in contemporary South Africa. South Africa is a modern melting pot where colonial, post-apartheid and macro-environmental factors as well as cultural histories are all essential inputs for the construction of my view of the South African landscape, although my point of departure for reflection while completing this project came again from my own experience.

Being a middle-class queer white male in my mid-thirties born in the North West province and raised in Johannesburg, I represent a nugatory 7% of the population[2]. The grouping of queer and misfit in the country connects with and is representative across all cultures, race, histories and age. The angst around the ethics of representation had become an element embedded in the project where, as I

[1] The term archetype for use in this project refers to a character type in film which is built on a set of traits that are identifiable and specific. Much like the hero or the explorer, the misfit forms a common character archetype in cinematic history.

[2] This figure is a numerical value of population percentage and not an indication of influence, wealth or power.

would step constantly between research and practice, reflecting between theory and creative execution, I would have to constantly assess the lens from which I was executing the project, acknowledging my point of view as a subjective element that does not exist within a void.

Existing in what I describe as a trifactor of experiences, my current position traverses between an active filmmaker, a white collar creative and the third point still settled in this marginalised faction of society. Although this troika has been the pulling force through my personal and professional experience, they are in a way, conflicting and contradictory lifestyles. How can one relate to or be a true misfit but also have a successful directing career and function in a commercial environment? It may be a decade since I worked alongside rent boys and was surrounded by a social group that was made up of those in vice, I still hold deep connections to this group, as it is still a part of who I am, a part of my identity. The misfit transcends race, age and nationality, it's something that comes from a journey and experiences rather than something dictated by a demographic or statistic.

One of the biggest responsibilities of being a creative and film maker is to have the curiosity, the gumption and the initiative to take the exemption we receive for society to move between and exist in different sections that make up humanity. My position is one of conduit, entertainer and scholar. Rather than coming in as an outsider, I have been part of this group, I am queer, and I am a misfit, and I will champion these people through the stories I tell. With this standpoint, I approached my methodologies.

Methodological conundrums

Ken Plummer in his paper entitled *Critical Humanism and Queer Theory* opens with the line, "Research - like life - is a contradictory, messy affair."(Denzin and Lincoln 2017, 494) I found this to ring true when navigating the subjectivities of research as it was clear from the outset of this project that the methodological approach and structure, although qualitative by nature, would have to be carefully tailored to best facilitate its practice-based nature.

Although based within traditional research, theories and the critical analysis of texts, the project's origin and relevance stem from personal autoethnographic explorations and end in the creation of a film which is subjective in its creative choices and executions. Margot Duncan in her text *Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography*, pays heed to scholars conducting autoethnographic research to remain conscious and avoid emotional writing while being honest about what is

motivating their research (Duncan 2004). This approach makes for constant self-reflection and questioning of the legitimacy of one's own thoughts and the subsequent research. Furthermore, the word autoethnography, just as in the above chapter *The ethics of representation,* became a point of personal contention as the fear of creating an under-referenced, irrelevant, self-serving journal loomed over the beginnings of research. Desmond Bell in his text, *Creative Film and media practice as research (2006)*, expresses that academia has experienced a struggle in agreeing on an appropriate research model based in art practice because the artist himself leads the process of research, becoming both subject and object of the investigative process. (Bell 2006, 99) Although challenging to navigate as a modern methodology, it's in these new research approaches, in the facing of oneself, that the fuel is found to push the boundaries into new strategies and fields (Denzin and Lincoln 2017, 360).

To best responsibly accommodate the autoethnographic element of the project, I have employed a hybrid methodological approach to structure the research, using traditional research techniques as the base for all subjective creative processes while challenging myself to remain self-reflective in theory and text as well as critical through the process of creation.

ACT 2_Extrospection - Expanding The New Queer Cinema movement

Much of the New Queer Cinema movement emergence was in relation to the then new Queer Theory and was deeply entrenched within contemporary LGBTQ+[3] rights. Although, as a society, we have come a long way in the past 30 years in our acceptance of the LQBTQ+ individuals' rights and lifestyles, I must begin by noting that there is still major cultural, religious and societal prejudice against the community throughout the globe. The African continent is in no way excluded from these troubles with certain countries still enforcing imprisonment or the death penalty (Swiebel and Van der Veur 2009, 506–16).

[3] The term LGBTQ+ in this text refers collectively to sexual and gender identities which fall outside of Heteronormativity. Although Post-Modern sexuality theory rejects this type of societal labelling, for ease-of-use LGBTQ+ will be used as a descriptor of this group.

Queer Theory and the misfit

Queer Theory has informed much of my theoretical lens for my research but, rather than functioning as the sole framework, it functions as a base to build further theory on.

The movement was spearheaded by many theorists but most notably the influence of Judith Butler, building much of her thinking on feminist theory. In her book *Gender Trouble (1990)* Butler puts forward that society and its view on 'normal' is informed by social binaries that are informed by the 'naturalness of gender'(Bloodworth 2000, 487), setting its base on the acknowledgment that a group exists outside of a set normativity. The term 'queer', although originating heavily in political activism (Sullivan 2003, 22), is based in the recognition of problematic structures that exclude members from society due to their not adhering to a set of norms dictated by a heteronormative framework. Although Queer Theory is broad in its applications and facets, it is this definition of what makes one queer, where individuals experience othering or exclusion due to their identity not relating to a heterosexual and binary-based society, on which I will focus my research.

Comparably, the word 'misfit', originally used as a description of a 'garment or suit of clothes which does not fit the person for whom it was intended' and later applied to 'person(s) who does not fit his environment' (Tulloch 1993, 973), holds the same meanings of exclusion of a group because of their divergence from a fixed normative environment.

The link between the queer and the misfit is seen in their positioning as being outsiders in heteronormative society. Queer theories aim to expose the marginalisation of queer individuals in relation to a heteronormative society and mirrors the primary trait forming the profile of what the misfit character is: marginalised, stigmatised and excluded from society due to lifestyle choices.

The misfit archetype in the New Queer Cinema movement and the queer audience

As noted by film critic and social researcher Emanuel Levy in his book *Cinema of Outsiders (1994),* queer film makers of the New Queer Cinema movement of the '90s pulled the curtain back and revealed the underbelly of society that was before kept in the shadows by heteronormative capitalism, bringing to light significant LGBTQ+ topics such as HIV, mental health, homophobia and social exclusion.

Originating in the United States and forged out of a combination of elements, primarily the AIDS crisis and the sadness and angst it caused, as well as the emergence of Queer Theory and its exposure of problematic political bigotry within societal constructs, the New Queer Cinema movement thrust the LGBTQI+ agenda into the media spotlight (Levy 1999, 462). These factors and their influence in the film world combined to form a familiar character type, the anti-hero, but as never seen before, one whose sole intention was to combat the harmful effects of heteronormativity and homophobia (Hart 2012, 97), while further exposing a new range of sexual orientations and ways of living.

These characters took on, owned and emphasised the deviant views and labels put on them by the heteronormative, living on the cusps of society, partaking in crime, vice and behaviour that was seen as aberrant. One would think that being offered the opportunity to represent their own community, queer filmmakers of the movement would have created characters to appease the mainstream, allowing for a quick and polite harmonising of greater society and queer culture's moral and ethical compass, but the reality was far more explosive. This can be seen in characters such as Scott Favor in Gus van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho (1991)*, the rebellious son of the mayor who by choice fully steps away from his privilege to become a street hustler. Similarly, this rebellion is seen in the leads of Gregg Arakis' *The Doom Generation (1995),* the trio of bisexual lovers who make their way across small-town America, fuelled by sex and murder for nothing more than the thrill. We cannot deny the potent and relatable allure of the idea of a misfit. Queer audiences connected with the claim to individualism, uniqueness, or perhaps it became an anthemic coping mechanism to justify a lifestyle positioned as less ideal.

Although in relation to her personal story, writer and academic Lidia Yuknavitch's TED Talk *The beauty of being a misfit,* puts into context how the label of the misfit holds a romantic power that links to the experiences of life.

*"You can be a drunk. You can be a survivor of abuse. You can be an ex-con. You can be a homeless person. You can lose all your money or your job or a husband or a wife, or the worst thing imaginable, a child. You can lose your marbles. You can be standing inside your own failure, a small sad stone in your throat, and still you are beautiful, your story is worth hearing, because you--you rare and phenomenal misfit--are the only one in the world who can tell the story the way that only you can."(*Yuknavitch 2017, 104)

The concept of a misfit can be poetic and alluring but it is understandable that the moment queer creators were given the chance to represent themselves in relation to larger societal shifts (Queen and Schimel 1997, 100–106) they, just as LGBTQ+ individuals began reclaiming the delegatory term Queer (Ruffolo 2009, pg 2), chose characters that would adopt the heteropatriarchal societal labels they were branded with in a form of revolt, ownership and reappropriation, creating a base for the queer misfit archetype that still exists today.

The Queer as misfit in South Africa

For many Queer South Africans the abolition of the oppressive apartheid government combined with the implementation of our ground-breaking new constitution, including the addition of the *equality clause* (Oswin 2007, 96), brought on a new era of hope to the country. This ground-breaking subsection legally forbids the discrimination of individuals based on their race, gender or sexuality (Müller 2019, 5), thus left many eagerly anticipating an inclusive, democratic future in the country. Although, in 1995 African political and religious figures began to comment on queer lifestyles going against the Christian moral foundation of the country and furthermore to be an 'un-African' concept imported and adopted from the West. (Stobie 2009, 322).

These claims brought to light that, outside of apartheid and its indoctrinated Christianity, the oppressed African cultures under the regime had themselves pre-existing stigmas towards queer identities. The lack of records and evidence as to how South Africa and its African counterparts viewed queerness pre-colonialization makes it difficult to decipher what is an imposed construct and what is not, as there seems to be a disjunction across the continent in views on the subject (Hall 1989, 222). This raises the question, Can one apply Queer Theory in a post-colonial South Africa?

South African filmmaker and historian Jack Lewis expresses how Queer Theory cannot be used directly, but needs to evolve from the 'very complex issues in terms of social formations and understandings of same-sex relations and practices in South Africa' (Peach 2005, 40). Coincidentally, Jack Lewis is also the filmmaker who co-directed and co-wrote what I would consider to be the first South African major-release queer film which offers a racially inclusive narrative exploring multidimensional themes of sexuality, class and race. It took nearly 10 years for a film to emerge within the new democracy of South Africa that was relevant in themes and representations, had a strong queer voice but also acknowledged historical as well as contemporary views towards queer

culture (Schoonover and Galt 2016, 262). This milestone endeavour took the form of the historical epic *Proteus* (2003), a film that will be discussed and referenced in the following chapters.

I would argue that because of South Africa's colonial past and the beliefs of its indigenous cultures and collective, the queer misfit archetype is placed not only in relation to queer theories problematic heteronormative societal constructs, but also in relation to South Africa's unique history. The apartheid regime's political hangover, African perspectives on queer identities and the cultural experience of unification after segregation are all essential contributors to the forming of our South African identities, a collective process that is in continuous production. The following chapter looks further into the struggles Queer Theory faces when applied to the South African landscape and what alternative ways of thinking have arisen.

After The New Queer Cinema movement and Post-Modern Sexuality

It cannot be denied that scholars of Queer Theory were ground-breaking in their disruption of the idea of 'normal' and their exploring the possibilities of identity formations that are outside of the patriarchal, capitalist and heteronormative frameworks. Their endeavours set up a new way for the world to view identity but, with hindsight, not long after the New Queer Cinema movement with its caustic heroes began bashing through the celluloid, did broader criticisms of the theory begin.

The use of language, the power of a word and more importantly what it means in relation to its context, is a highly contested topic that stands at the centre of Queer Theory (Ruffolo 2009, 2), and no more so than the signification and politics related to the word *queer* itself (Kornak 2015, 59–60). When looking at *queer* and who it includes in relation to the use of the LGBTQ+ categorisation, it seems we can continue to add letters to the alphabet soup of abbreviation until we have happily included everyone. The problem with this is that the word *queer* has an undeniable link to gay and lesbian, negating all of the other individuals outside of the heteronormative practice (Spargo 1995, pg 38). This system of classification has been seen to further muddy and blur sexual orientation and gender identity labels by perpetuating a 'continual preoccupation with definitions' (Haggerty 2000, 1113), creating further othering and segregation of individuals within the queer community. Furthermore, in South Africa we have a history of using language to exclude those who are 'others', while the terms LGBTQ+ and queer in themselves create an internal struggle as both are English-

based language that penetrated the continent through colonialism and oppression (Matebeni and Msibi 2015, 4).

It seems that as we hold Queer Theory and the New Queer Cinema movement up to the light of representation, especially in a South African context, their holes begin to be revealed. Although, rather than throwing the baby out with the bath water, certain theorists have looked at building on Queer Theory to present a more inclusive model, offering a new lens in the defining of identities.

Just as Postmodernism could not have existed without it being built on the foundations of Modernism (Ruffolo 2009, 56), there has been a surge of an idea of Post-Modern Sexuality as an extension of Queer theory, building on the base set in the world of Butler and other leading queer theorists. Although Queer Theory may be part of post-modern discourse, the concept of post-modern sexuality was introduced by Lawrence Schimel and Carol Queen in their publication *Challenging Assumptions About Gender and Sexuality* as an extension of the concept. The framework of post-modern sexuality, or PoMoSexuality, within social theory embraces the 'demise of grand narratives' (Morland and Willox 2005, 8), and an emphasis on the post-modern view of the existence of 'multiple subjectivities' in the world, and that there is no objective reality but rather our realities are experienced solely and subjectively (Queen and Schimel 1997, 26).

If one had to imagine Queer Theory as a prism and the visible (or white) light that enters it to be the heteronormative framework of identity, the spectrum that exits the prism in its vast array of colours would be the multitude of identity categories that would be defined as queer (although not all can possibly be represented). What post-modern sexuality offers is another prism, one which is placed to capture the confusing, categorised, multitude of identities and to refocus them into a single beam again.

The deepest layer - Queer Blackwomxn- The 'misfits' within queer misfits

In the exploration of the coming together of the queer and the misfit in a post-modern sexuality framework, I began to research who falls into this category in South Africa. Although many are included, and I in no way intend to gloss over their struggles, it is the experience of being black, queer and a womxn[4] and its interwoven mesh of marginalisation where all three labels relate and

[4] Womxn acts as an alternative to heteronormative binary in relation to men or man, acting as a more inclusive title for nonbinary as well as trans women

influence each other, creating a unique experience that a non-black, non-queer or non-woman would not be privy to. In South African history this group has been subjected to violence, hate crimes and further subjugated to victim status through the media's use of offensive and misleading terms such as "corrective rape" (Mailula 2020, 5).

The overall mistreatment of this group stems from multiple inputs, the primary one being their very existence as the most potent opposition to Western and African heteropatriarchy. In much of South Africa any attempt to disrupt heteropatriarchal society is violently opposed and individuals who do make such an attempt are seen as un-African colonial residue (Ewing et al. 2020, 4).

This group, the misfits within the misfits, comprises our country's left-behinds, forced to fight and fend for themselves. The fear of violence against being oneself has forced many to exist in a nomadic lifestyle, as staying in one community too long draws dangerous attention. Simply walking down the street threatens the heteropatriarchy that stills engulfs South African society (Mailula 2020, 4).

In the realms of authority vs agency and speaking for/collaborating with the queer blackwomxn community, I am in no way positioning this group as powerless or unable to articulate or navigate their own struggles and successes. The community is highly active in their own advocacy and storytelling, with artists and authors such as Zanele Muholi and Prof Zethu Matebeni, giving voice to and championing their cause. Moreover, focusing on this minority titled the queer blackwomxn brings into question the forgotten 'black', primarily in the Coloured and Indian queer community, who suffered the same experience. Principal to this discourse is the topic of and definition of 'blackness'. Not only does it acknowledge the exclusionary nature of the language, a running theme in this paper, but also my own whiteness, privilege, agency and authority.

ACT 3_ Reflection

In the above chapter titled *After The New Queer Cinema movement and Post-Modern Sexuality*, I used the dual-prism light metaphor in demonstrating how a post-modern view on sexuality reimagines classification and labels in the queer community. Besides providing a fitting and continued rainbow motif to this queer exploration, it again offers a powerful analogy to assist me, as well as you the reader, in the application of multiple methodologies to my practice-based research.

The first beam of uniform light, before it enters the prism, represents the necessary content analysis. This responsible, although more antiquated approach, explores the landscape, the pre-existing history through the use of critical content analysis models. These content analyses consist of the examining of the current standpoint of the contemporary South African queer misfit by looking at existing film releases. These examples will be regarded in relation to Western gender theory, the New Queer Cinema movement as well as South Africa's socio-political and economic framework. I will call this beam, this section, *A Critical Light.*

The second application in my methodology is built on and in relation to the first. This section, named the *Prism of Practice*, is my metaphorical prism which, when placed in the stream of the light, causes a dispersion of the single beam into a visible spectrum of light, a rainbow. This stage reflects the creative experience of writing the script, pre-production as well as the application of production techniques such as mise-en-scene, editing and audio in relation to the research findings found in the *A Critical Light* chapter and through the lens of post-modern sexuality.

The concluding section comes in the form of the second prism applied to the rainbow spectrum of practice which again forms a single beam of light. This, which I call *The Re-reflection,* acts as a meditation on the final film as research object, the production process and the future of the film as it enters the South African film spectrum.

A Critical Light

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it
-George Santayana

This often-misquoted George Santayana statement from his book *The Life of Reason (1905)* has remained a constant reminder to the world that in order to move forward successfully, we need to first look back. In the South African context it echoes the consequential influence our complex pasts have in the forming of our identities as a process of continuous production "which is never completed, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation."(Hall 1989, 222)

In order to add to the South African body of work, to create a film which is in relation, reflection and reaction to the queer misfit in contemporary South Africa, we need to look at the existing footprint both in the film world as well as the current socio-economic climate of the South African nation in the context of the queer and the misfit .

The Film-scape

Masculine offerings

In a previous chapter I have referenced Jack Lewis and John Greyson's epic period piece *Proteus* (2003) as the first piece of South African mainstream cinema, outside of apartheid, which explored queer identities while championing a strong queer voice. This voice speaks for the oppression of groups of both black and white individuals marginalised for their sexual preference. Although the two protagonists are of different racial and cultural backgrounds, viz. the coloniser and the colonised, the film unfolds from the point of view of Rijkhaart, a white male.

Judith/Jack Halberstam in their article *Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies coming into fruition*, stated that 'the future of queer studies depends absolutely on moving away from white gay male identity politics and learning from the radical critiques offered by a younger generation of queer scholars who draw their intellectual inspiration from feminism and ethnic studies rather than white queer studies' (Halberstam 2005, 3–24).

Although looking at Proteus as a positive starting point, our post-apartheid reality still sees us grappling with the politics of the past in our exploration of the queer and the misfit in contemporary South African cinema. In the last ten years of South African cinema, two titles stand out as international releases which deal principally with the narrative of a queer misfit protagonist: John

Trengove's *Inxeba | The Wound (2017)* and Oliver Hermanus's *Moffie (2019)*. Before looking at these two examples I must recognise Catherine Stewart's 2005 release *While You Weren't Looking (2005),* which explores the experience of queer and lesbian relationships in contemporary South Africa. The film, and more specifically the vignette which compares the experiences of suburban and township lesbians, is something which I will address in a later chapter.

Inxeba (2017) and *Moffie (2019)* stand as two pieces of contemporary queer cinema that look at heteronormativity and masculinity in South Africa from opposing masculine identities. *Inxeba* (2017) follows the hidden love affair between two young black men set against the backdrop of a Xhosa initiation ritual while *Moffie (2019)* explores the struggles of a young Afrikaner white man to keep his sexual identity hidden as he navigates his way through the compulsory and brutally racist conscription of the early '80s.

Although these are obviously queer films, I would argue that the narrative point of view, as well as the themes of marginalisation, presents the protagonists as misfits, both leads grappling with their queer identities in relation to heteronormative rituals made to enforce masculinity and further instil a compulsory heterosexuality onto the characters (Khumalo, 2020, 22). Scenes play out in spaces of hyper-masculine enforcement and by the nature of the spaces and machismo environments the performances lack any prolific female representation and femininity. Any actions that do not fit into the heteropatriarchy are done surreptitiously and are severely punished if discovered.

There lies a congruency between these South African contemporary queer films and those of the New Queer Cinema movement where hyper-masculine narratives reject the presence of any female leads or femininity. The New Queer Cinema movement, as previously mentioned, was highly fuelled by the onset of the AIDS crisis and its politicisation, a tragic pandemic which at the time in the West affected mainly queer white males (Wahlert 2013, 115). This saw many of the themes of the movement being positioned in relation to the medical, due to the AIDS pandemic, and the political because of the politicisation of the crisis through the media. The South African paradigm and the themes we are exploring in our post-colonial queer film movement also explore two primary themes. Firstly, much like in the New Queer Cinema movement's reaction to the politicisation of the AIDS crisis, *Moffie (2019)*, as it is situated in the heart of the regimented masculinities of the apartheid state's military, deals directly with South African politics and its effect on the queer individual. Secondly, in *Inxeba (2017)* the traditional is seen, as in the struggles of the protagonist going through the hyper-masculine Xhosa male rite-of-passage experience. The issues that are at the

forefront of queer films in South Africa are linked to the political post-colonial history of the country, as well as the struggles of African identity in post-colonial frameworks, mainly in 'traditionalism' and its rejection of other gender and sexual identities.

In conclusion of this chapter, from the cross-section of South Africa's current queer film landscape, it can be seen that the oeuvre favours male-driven narratives and identities as they grapple and struggle to comply with cultural and politically instilled heteromasculinity and patriarchy. Furthermore, the presence of womxn and femininity is not only never visualised, but the very presence of a feminine or feminine queer energy, or even mere suspicion thereof, is met with violence or ends in death.

The Nation-scape

The queer films of contemporary South Africa cinema and their treatment of representation of femininity with violence echo a larger crisis currently overshadowing the nation. From the proposal stage of this project, it became very apparent that when investigating the queer misfit in South Africa, the group which was most marginalised and victimised was the queer blackwomxn but, as the following chapter reveals, it is not only queer blackwomxn that this dark climate surrounds, but all womxn of the country.

An economy of violence

The presence of queer female voices in South African media is on the slight side to non-existent with the majority of activism and representation seen in the visual arts (Lewin 2019, 42). Artists like Zanele Muholi have worked endlessly in their representation of the queer female in South Africa with a strong focus on themes of love, loss, identity and especially violence (Khumalo 2020, 53). Since 2020, and with a spike in numbers of gender-based-violence incidents due to the covid 19 pandemic, the reality of the extent of violence our country experiences towards woman of all sexual and gender identities has made international headlines. The World Health Organisation has released that South Africa's femicide rates are 5 times worse than the global average (Head 2019). Apart from the appalling gender-based violence perpetrated by heterosexual men, another, equally

consequential storm is brewing throughout South Africa. With a 66% youth unemployment rate in the country at the end of 2021, a record-breaking statistic (Galal 2022), South Africa, like a few of its neighbours in Sub-Saharan Africa, finds itself in the midst of a 'youth crisis' (Smith 2011, 97).

Stephan W Smith, in his eye-opening article titled *Youth in Africa: Rebels without a Cause but not without Effect,* speaks of a generation trapped by the expectations set by their predecessors, where a lack of opportunity in the economy has reared them unable to reach the milestone of material and symbolic adulthood set by generations past, leaving a frustrated and liminal generation of aspiring adults. This 'youth crisis' is (partly) "the result of a globalised youth discourse which standardises a worldwide age bracket that makes sense in developed countries but does not match the social realities elsewhere" (Smith 2011, 98–110).

Hope through adversity

With an epidemic of violence towards women, an economy that is failing its youth and all within a country which is still held captive by its past, how could one suggest a narrative that is based in an idealistic post-modern sexuality space where politicised gender and sexual labels are looked past? If this research didn't address any of the many negative issues we experience as a country, the hardships of the past or the violence of the present heteromasculinity, would it not be an irrelevant, flippant and irresponsible use of resources and time?

As South Africans we are in the process of constructing our identities, navigating our path forward, a continuous process during trying times. Although difficult to admit, these struggles are a part of our identities, a part of us (Steyn 2001, 21). Lindiwe Dovey in her article titled *Mixing It Up: New Audiovisual Cultures in South Africa*, a text which re-aligned my view on responsible creation, states that we as South Africa should not deny violence, but should and can channel that violence, that heavy heart, into something beautiful. (Lindiwe Dovey 2018, 179). Furthermore, in her interview for Black Camera with South African female filmmaker Sarah Ping Nie Jones, Jones offers her an insight that puts hope back in what seems to be a hopeless, politicised, cultural web South Africa is trapped in.

"I think filmmaking in South Africa is at a pivotal moment, a very exciting point. After nearly two decades of freedom, which has been dominated by telling stories from the past, understandably, and copying the Hollywood model (less understandably), the moment has now come for fresh, free

and unique voices to emerge that aren't subscribing to any specific South African narrative, but are free to be themselves and not have to tick any boxes."(Lindiwe Dovey 2018, 191)

South African filmmakers have reached a chapter, a threshold where they have the freedom to experiment within the medium and channel their own as well other underrepresented identities, creating stories based on the realities of contemporary South African life. Through an exploration of the current landscape of South African film as well as the socio-economic and cultural reality, I used these findings as my point of departure for developing a script, a creative practice with the intention of reflection on and the distillation of my research findings.

This is how *Lil_ith* came to fruition.

The Prism of Practice

Through the process of research and investigation I began simultaneously writing the script (Appendix A) for the cinematic outcome of this artistic research project. Armed with a script-writing education via studying other filmmakers' screen plays and works, I danced between academic research and creative writing. As the script become more refined, I found what was being researched, written and scripted too began to dance and evolve together, revealing its own path.

Lil_ith, (Appendix B) is a love story with teeth, one which unfolds on a warm summer's evening in a seedy Johannesburg 'rent by the week' living quarters. Our protagonist, Lilith, a cam girl[5] and dancer, relays her first memories of love to Adam, an ominous and sinister late-night visitor with seemingly menacing intentions. The narrative jumps between the present and reflective memories of her most powerful recollection of love, with Jen. Her reminiscence unfolds from their first moment of connection, through courtship and the throes of committed love, ending finally in a botched shoplifting incident, where these misfit characters intended to officiate their bond and status through this act of crime. As the film comes to a close, we realise in a suspenseful crescendo that not Adam alone has devious intents but Lilith as well as her partner Jen, who is revealed to be hiding in the bathroom, have intentions of their own.

[5] Cam girl - A webcam model and online performer who live-streams erotic acts such as stripping, dancing or sexual acts in exchange for money.

The film relies on narrative techniques and considered filmic devices, such as character, plot, location, sound and mise-en-scene combined with an experimental openness to create an informed piece that, while exploring the queer misfit archetype, also embraces the value of entertainment. My attempt at a piece that does not just achieve succès d'estime, but develops and promotes the South African queer film canon for both local and international audiences.

The misfit and love

Political/critical theorist and public intellectual figure Achille Mbembe in his article *The State of South African Political Life* points out that within our popular culture 'narratives of self-hood and identity are saturated by the tropes of pain and suffering' (Mbembe 2015). African sexuality is often associated with mourning and death, suffering and pain, while in the West it is associated with desire and pleasure and to a degree liberation (Macharia 2015, 141). This reflects in our queer narratives, as both *Inxeba (2017)* and *Moffie (2019)* follow protagonists' journeys peppered with tragic scenes and situations painted in vivid personal pain, loneliness and suffering. This character distress is created in relation to another theme that stands second to heartache, but is often the cause of it: love. Both films grapple with their protagonists' love either being traditionally or politically unrecognised (Mbao 2020, 5), forming the base for the protagonist's drive in each case, the base of the narrative. This representation leaves queer audiences with the sobering reality that in contemporary South Africa there is no plan or positive outlook for betterment in our future.

Although these characters' stories are vital in the representation of the painful experiences of many South Africans, I sought to create a narrative where the unacceptance of love between two queer individuals by the heteropatriarchal does not form the protagonists' character motivation in the film. Alternately, Lilith and Jen are represented as misfits based on their lifestyles outside of their sexuality. This portrayal frames the queer experience of love and community as positive and healthy although existing in a world in which society at large sees it as deviant.

Films from the New Queer Cinema movement shared similarities in their removal of the personal queer conflict from the characters' arc but also in their use of the 'queering' of genres (Khumalo 2020, 70). Where a love story would usually have a happy ending, *Lil_ith* crosses and mixes genres, ending in a cliff-hanger reminiscent of a thriller. This topic of 'queering', as discussed in the following chapter, became a paramount extension of the misfit queer exploration in the film through its application in the film's structural, temporal and other filmic applications.

Queering time and space in a post-colonial narrative

Literary critic and social theorist Michael Warner describes the act of queering as 'among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal... 'queer' gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual' (Warner 1993, 26)

This application of the term to the film *Lil_ith* allows the societal misfit's vice to take preference over the character's gender and sexual identity. Although our protagonist takes part in binge drinking, drug use, sex work and petty crime, her experience of love is represented as healthy, romantic and pure, thus queering her projected misfit status to be in relation to 'normal' as opposed to 'heterosexual'. Anachronism and the queering of temporal timelines are used in abundance in John Lewis's *Proteus (2005),* with fellow Canadian filmmaker Brenda Longfellow framing that this 'movement out of chronological narrative time, the eschewing of time as progress, allows for an opening, a new sense of time where alternate futures and new possibilities might transpire' (Longfellow 2013, 49). Similarity, a similar temporal narrative and stylistic device, was used in Gus van Sant's 1991 New Queer Cinema mainstream cross-over piece *My Own Private Idaho (1991).* Van Sant's loose retelling of *Shakespeare's Henry IV*, through the experience of a young narcoleptic hustler, queers the historically heteropatriarchal narrative into a contemptuous, queer account.

Lilith, in the act of relaying her memories, even though chronological, dips between present and past creating two narratives revealing to the audience two sides of her character. The storyline based in the present, her conversation with Adam in the bedroom, are framed within her societal misfit status as a sex worker and impending threat of violence felt towards her in that time and space. The Lilith we see here is a performance, a mask that she puts on, her character within a character. The parallel time frame plays out in the past and contains her memories of love and community where the audience is introduced to Lilith's true character. These recollections are happy moments, the flourishing of her relationship with Jen folded in with wholesome times with friends, delivered to the audience as a series of light-hearted vignettes. It's not until the end of her final memory recall that the two temporal narratives and sides of Lilith merge. In the cafe's confrontation scene, the happy recollections of Lilith and Jen peak as the situation turns quickly from a happy memory into one of violence and the threat of danger. At this point the two temporal spaces, the tense present and the happy memories, join

allowing for a coming together of the two facets of Lilith, the past and present, the misfit and the queer.

The notion of queering further spreads into the treatment of space in the film. Previously cited academic and acclaimed researcher on women, gender and sexuality Judith/Jack Halberstam suggests that our understanding and treatment of time has further connections on how we fathom the concept of space (Halberstam 2005, 4). While they[6] use the example of domestic spaces to regulate the actions of the human body, e.g. 'family time' is regulated to the living room while 'reproductive time' is allocated to the bedroom (Katz 2010, 77), the spaces occupied in *Lil_ith* by Lilith and her contemporaries queer the boundaries of domestic, private, public and transient. This is experienced by the audience from the opening scenes of the film where we see Lilith visiting numerous pages of other fellow adult cammers where private spaces such as bedrooms and bathrooms become public as they transform into liminal spaces, stages for sexual performances.

As discussed in the previous chapter, *An economy of violence*, the South African queer youth find themselves in liminal domains as they remain suspended in a stagnant adolescence. Furthermore black queer woman are often forced into nomadic and liminal lifestyle due to the fear of having their sexual identities discovered and possibly ending in violence (Mailula 2020, 4). This liminality comes together and became the backbone for the character of Lilith's life where, besides her online persona, her lodging takes the form of a single rented room and bathroom, a temporary space where the production design choices such as emergency fire escape signs, clothes in plastic bags and a grubby single-serving kettle led to hints of a liminal and impermanent habitation.

This liminal motif extends into her life outside of the bedroom and in her memory sequences. Forgotten rooftops, cars, parks and cheap rented accommodation create the arena for Lilith and Jen's story where antiquated spaces set in the sprawling metropolis of Johannesburg echo South Africa's colonial history. Mbembe and Nuttall in their text *Afropolis: From Johannesburg* speak of how the city is studded and scared with reminders of the past, from the mine dumps as the debris of the gold rush, to the very streets, pavements and neighbourhoods retaining the residue of segregation (Nuttall and Mbembe 2007, 281–82). This constant residue, these historically loaded, forgotten spaces of grandeurs create the backdrop of the film, a forgotten hotel from the '70s in its

[6] Judith/Jack Halberstam has chosen the queer position of gender-neutral pronouns and uses the pronoun "they" as a signifier.

distressed opulence, an old sports centre reminiscent of the colonial sporting past of the country, a typical corner café. These loaded relics of South Africa's past became the backdrop against which this modern narrative of a digital generation unfolds, creating another layer of temporal queering where the present is projected and performed atop, reclaiming the city while merging the past and present through time and space.

Mixing and merging for a new generation of queer South Africans

The mixing of the temporal in storytelling allows for another development in South Africa's collective identity formation where, rather than looking back to build ourselves, we look at ways to 'retell the past' by not only merging and adjusting the chronology of time and space but also embracing the act of mixing that was denied from our identities, our histories for such a critical period of our nation's global cinematic maturation (Hall 1989, 224).

Steve Biko, activist, student leader and considered to be the father of the South African Black Consciousness movement, believed firmly that, in order for us to navigate and overcome the injustices of our past and achieve 'true integration', we need to come to a place of 'mutual respect' for each other and complete freedom of self-determination (Biko 1978, 21). The very act of mixing is an action and concept that breaks away from the restraints and fibre of our political history.

Congruently, Carol Queen and Lawrence Schimel in their book, *Pomosexuals: Challenging Assumptions About Gender and Sexuality*, pose post-modern sexuality as not just a theoretical application that by removing labels denies the politicisation of sexual and gender identity but also that it "lives in the space in which all other nonbinary forms of sexual and gender identity reside - a boundary-free zone in which fences are crossed for the fun of it, or simply because some of us can't be fenced in." (Queen and Schimel 1997, 30)

We see this application in the narrative and dialogue of *Lil_ith* through what is said, where, unlike the protagonists of *Inxeba (2017)* and *Moffie (2019)*, Lilith and Jen do not experience internal conflicts with their sexual identities. Their sexual identity is intentionally not mentioned or made a point of focus in the film. The story is not one of conflict around their sexual identities but rather one where the rebuttal of labels and lack of focus on categorisation present a post-modern sexual narrative. Unlike in *Proteus (2003),* where the interracial nature of the protagonists' relationship along with their

sexual identities forms the main theme of the film, the interracial nature of Lilith and Jen's relationship never becomes a point of contention so far as it is never mentioned or made a topic through the story.

A story for the digital age

Although South African youth may have many economic and societal structures working against them, there is a new wave of opportunity for the youth that has arisen. From the global technological advances that come with the digital age and as fresh and modern ways of life flood the continent, the one advantage that today's youth have, regardless of the limitations they experience, is the technological advancements via the internet, smartphones, satellite television and social media. The youth now have the ability to 'travel' a more globalised world from the palm of their hand, offering them new opportunities in the form of digital privilege (Smith 2011, 102).

Social media and the internet also perform a major role in queer youths' lives as a place to research and seek out other like-minded individuals. Technology has created a space where "Groups marginalized owing to their income, physical condition, gender, race, age or sexual orientation, use the Internet in unique ways to overcome limitations imposed upon them as a result of their marginalizing situations." (Mehra, Merkel, and Bishop 2004, 780–802) This digital footprint spans throughout the film with a constant acknowledgement of digital media as well as how it challenges the way in which audiences interact, view and ingest films and media (Nightingale 2011). The intertextual use of cell phone footage, online platform interfaces, digital media forms as well as the characters' references to apps and social media encase the filmic world in an aesthetic which leans into the digital reality of today. This is even used in the film's title, where the underscore in *Lil_ith* refers to Lilith's anonymous online camming handle 'Lil_Love'.

Digital technology is imbedded in the narrative as it also speaks to an empowerment and giving of a voice to individuals on a personal as well as collective level. The power behind social media can be seen in the freedom and connectivity of groups and individuals. Social media has also played a large part in aiding in contemporary democratic uprising such as #blacklivesmatter and #feesmustfall (Smith 2011, 97). *Lil_ith* as a film uses digital technology, new media and social media as a space of opportunity as well as an unregulated world processing its own type of liminality that forms a part of our protagonist's physical reality.

Gazing at each other through screens: Intimacy and the camming world

The adult camming world has become a space where women can find employment in a vocation that would usually be exploitative and guided by the patriarchy, allowing them to subvert outdated ideas about feminine sexuality, therefore allowing for empowerment (Jones 2016, 228). Camming has become a safe environment for sex workers to practise exotic dancing, acts of masturbation or sex but, most interestingly, it has evolved into a peepshow for the digital age (Richtel 2013, 1). The performance and viewing of individuals through digital screens bring up the timeless power dynamics seen from when we first captured the human figure, namely the oppression and objectification that occupy the topic of the heterosexual male gaze. Lilith's work as an online exotic dancer in the South African space creates a potent dynamism between the gaze and intimacy where she uses her sexuality as well as the male gaze to empower herself financially as well as socially.

In the film *Proteus (2003)* the leads of Claas, Rijkhaart and Virgil Niven adopt the gaze as a replacement for intimacy or the desire for intimacy they are forbidden to show as their every look is policed. From this the very act of looking becomes a form or resistance (Katz 2010, 150). Similarly, in the camming world, the act of looking replaces the act of intimacy, where the male power over the female is limited and controlled by the performer.

The gaze as a replacement for intimacy is used throughout the movie *Lil_ith* as a connector, an indicator and an authenticator of the connection and then bond between Lilith and Jen. The first time Lilith sees Jen, at Cedric's makeshift birthday celebration, she notices her across the room at the bustling party. It's a love-at-first-sight connection, the world begins to fall away in the composed score as Lilith's view hyperfocus's on Jen. During Lilith and Jen's first interaction, as Lilith lounges in the back of Cedric's car after the party, the camera is placed close to the eyeline of both Lilith and Jen, positioning the audience in the interaction as they become part of and are placed into the relationship though gaze. Further stolen glances and intimate moments of gaze are seen throughout the film. On the rooftop, in the montage we see Jen coyly stealing a look at Lilith's hand; she wants to touch her, but is hesitant. The replacement of physical intimacy between the duo where the act of looking becomes an act of empowerment, rebelling against the hardwired heterosexual gaze that so often disempowers same-sex female intimacies and relationships.

Richard Dyer in his book *The Culture of Queers* argues that homosexuality and same-sex relations are most often seen from a heterosexual viewpoint, whereas same-sex or lesbian couples are often

made to appease the male gaze in films (Dyer 2002, 90–113). The previously-mentioned *While you weren't looking (2015)* explores the struggles experienced by same sex female relations from different sectors of South African society, i.e., a wealthy lesbian couple in an affluent suburb of Cape Town versus the experiences had by lesbians in the township. In looking at the representation of both of the couples in the film (Dez and Terri: Asanda and Shado), it is undeniable that the same-sex female scenes have a heightened 'erotic value' to a heterosexual audience. The focus on same-sex acts in South African film has been seen to adjourn and hold back much important African feminist work exploring the politicisation of sexualised and gendered African bodies (Macharia 2015, 114). This observation influenced a paramount choice in the film whereas audience experiences the bond between the couple growing from courtship into love while they are never seen committing the act of physical intimacy. This restraint in the physical intimacy and intercourse retains the power and integrity of Lilith and Jen as characters while denying the eroticisation and objectification of the leads by the heterosexual eye.

Listen closely, camboys and girls

The core concept of mixing to stive towards a 'true integration', an idea previously explored as forming a large portion of the structural, temporal and narrative structure of the film, overlaps into the film's auditory space, as seen/heard in the music and score but most importantly, in language . Jack Lewis's *Proteus (2005)*, arguably one of the most successful films with regard to its commitment in representing a multidimensional viewpoint on sexuality, race and class (Peach 2005, 161), features five languages: English, Afrikaans, Dutch, Nama and Latin (Botha 2004). These languages are used as a realistic representation of the cultural backgrounds of the characters, but also show difference, conflict and segregation between the them.

Lil_ith, takes place in contemporary Johannesburg, a thriving cosmopolitan melting pot where people from all over the country, continent and world convene in a beautiful clash of culture, histories and language. In contrast to *Proteus*, the use of multiple languages in *Lil_ith* champions integration and the intertextuality of the language experience of a cosmopolitan Johannesburg. Although English is spoken between Lilith and Adam in their interactions, Lilith embraces her traditional identities and culture through language with her use of African language and contemporary South African slang mixed into her English. This mixing is seen at its pinnacle in Cedric's party scene, where the friends, regardless of their cultural background or race, speak in a mixed cacophony of English, Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans and slang. These effortless acts of mixing go

against South Africa's history of using language to exclude those who are viewed as other (Matebeni and Msibi 2015, 4) and speak to a globalised city and generation, where language becomes as important a sign of integration as it does a means of communication.

This use of mixing and integration through sound is further seen in the use of music and score in the film as it segues us between the temporal states of memory and present, slipping between score and diegetic sound/soundtrack, all the while painting a contemporary time capsule of South African music culture in the early 2020s. The scored music and lyrics take influence from contemporary South African musicians whose collaborations have been formed in recent years. The opening song *Medusa*, with its Gqom influences as well as its presenting of a tongue-in-cheek warning towards the male gazer (Look at me and you'll turn to stone!) takes inspiration from the sounds of body and sex positivity musician and advocate Moonchild Sanelly. The song *Lotto,* as heard in the afterparty scene, stands as a homage to the sounds of the late South African artists, Riky Rick and AKA, with its trap inspirations and lyrics speaking light-heartedly to the need for money in the country's tough economic climate.

Music and score are used as emotional cues, a vehicle for the building of love and commitment between Lilith and Jen. From the first private moment between the couple in the backseat of the car, we feel a deconstructed version of their love theme creep into the score. This deep and melancholy modern synth score is repeated and used in full force in the montage, accompanied by a nostalgic voice-over speaking of love, sexual grooming as well as the power of money and words. At the end of the film, as the tension peaks in the cliff-hanging crescendo, we leave the audience without closure, but with a feeling of optimism, as the bonding love theme appears a third time, with a tense but hopeful tone. Besides creating a filmic auditory language for the audience, the deconstruction and mixing of the love theme in different genres again brings to the forefront the integration of practical elements into a post-modern narrative.

The Re-reflection

In the beginning of this research experience I quoted Ken Plummer saying "Research - like life - is a contradictory, messy affair." (Denzin and Lincoln 2017, 367) This sentiment was not only sequestered to the methodological approaches, but was echoed in the production, as I've known it to be from professional practice and confirmed by this project: a contradictory and messy affair. From financing to favours, commitment and integrity to marketing strategy, the production process of this film has proven rewarding as well as a series of emotional peaks and compromises, all contributing to a powerful final product.

Before stepping into the re-reflective process of the project as a whole, I have to reiterate, as stated in the opening acknowledgements, my deepest thanks to the production, post-production, audio and animation teams involved in this project as well as the countless passionate and creative souls who provided emotional and professional support throughout the process of making this film.

Not a story to finance

South Africa's film industry and its primary national funder, The National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF), have grappled with an ongoing demand for financing for film productions (Lindiwe Dovey 2018, 186). As we are in the process of creating an appetite, an appreciation for South African cinema at a micro-economic level, (Lucia 2010, 93) we see much of the funding going to projects that would appease the largest audience and to create bankable films and further grow the industry. This, combined with the non-renewal of the Department of Arts (Sports) and Culture (DSAC) special feature film fund in the early 2000s, resulted in the stunting of the formation of any South African New Wave cinema (Botha 2012).

Besides growth in the industry being groomed for a financially rewarding film sector, the DSAC is self-admittedly in the act of nation building in its choice of cultural projects to fund. The very negative and public reaction of the 2009 then-Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana, towards Zanele Muholi's photographic exhibition exploring lesbian love between woman of colour which she called "immoral and offensive" (Lindiwe Dovey 2018, 180) proved to be very revealing. If these departments are in the act of nation building, the question must be asked, 'Who is the nation being built for?' It seems that even within our funding systems, the heteropatriarchal is still the gatekeeper for much of our South Africans cultural output.

With this as a public sector reality, the last ten years have seen a blessing to the South African industry where private streaming platforms such as Netflix, Showmax and Amazon are scrambling to capture subscriber-based audiences across the continent. These platforms have also taken on the task of spurring the development of South Africa's own appetite for content, with Netflix alone investing an estimated R2-billion in the last five years (Nkohla 2021). Although available, many of these budgets are allocated to pre-existing and established production facilities and see, ironically, a lot of back-seat driving and second-guessing of the vision by production executives and studios, resulted in narratives that become diluted and convoluted (Schattauer 2012, 93).

Being aware of these limitations through investigation and prior project funding attempts, over the space of two years I raised a small budget through commercial advertising, brand film and documentary work across South Africa, the continent and abroad. Although helpful, this minimal budget proved not enough alone to execute the film at the level of production and craft that the project required. It took the collective collaboration of like-minded creatives coming together to bring the vision of *Lil_ith* to life.

You know I'm delusional, but I have a favour to ask

Having worked in the South African production, advertising and post-production industry since my departure from Wits University with an undergraduate degree in Fine Arts in 2009, I've been fortunate over the last fifteen years to have fostered relationships and friendships with crew members, agents, post facilitators, audio composers and cast. From this pool the production team for the film was drawn, all with a shared respect for the creative idea as well as thorough craft and execution. This collaborative model overflowed towards the Wits Theatre and Performance department which facilitated casting collaborations with numerous young alumni, who through performance workshops became vital supporting cast in the production.

To arrive at this point had taken an immense amount of consideration, honesty, dedication and agonising, emotions which all seemed to, rather than dissipate, ramp up as pre-production began. Internal doubts on relevance of the project, ability to execute the vision within budget, time restraints, as well as the responsibility I owed to the team, became an Atlasesque weight to bear. Apart from the ongoing support from industry friends and family, there was another realisation that comforted me in this tumultuous mindset. It was the realisation that, in the process of creative

practice and creativity, to take risks in the creative field you need to be, to a degree, delusional. To convince 50+ industry professionals through a script, production treatment and vision, taking 7 months' working sabbatical, to put one's financial savings and reputation into a project with no assured success or reward, one needs to have faith in ones delusions.

Solace is found in delusion being something shared among the current South African filmmaking generation who are seen to be filled with fierce and enormous imagination, individuals taking large risks in order for South Africa's audiences to experience South Africa in a progressive and contemporary light (Lindiwe Dovey 2018, 187).

I found this uncompromising belief in the vision accompanied by this delusional platitude, and a love for not only the story but what it would do in terms of representation for South African audiences, provided fuel that sparked the continuous re-alignment, introspection and drive behind the film.

Integrity and a community of practice

The act of creative collaboration, the coming together of like-minded creative professionals, makes space for the beautiful merging of talents. But, as we are all complex human beings with personal narratives just as complex as *Lil_ith* itself, navigating people and production can prove an uncertain path. *Lil_ith* was not without its growing pains, from the initial cinematographer's withdrawal from the project a month before production to art department woes and tight pre-animation deadlines. The notion of production being a series of calculated compromises stood true to the product.

The most notable obstruction, at first halting then rescheduling the production of the film by a month, would be the lead of Lilith, retracting from the production 24 hours before shooting began at the final dress rehearsal on location, for vague and unclear reasons. Unlike the protocol that would be followed in any commercial project, no contracts had been discussed or signed since personal relationship and good faith had always trumped the legalistic approach on previous film projects. It revealed a personal narrative was unfolding that the project was not privy to and the outcome was out of my hands.

The support from the crew and industry on receiving the news was astonishing, as Jen's character, Cara Roberts, returned to Durban and the producers went on cancelling crew and locations. I took

some time to realign, deprogramming the old Lilith from my mind as the new casting and rebuilding of *Lil_ith* began.

Although perhaps mechanisms to facilitate coping and realignment in stressful times, platitudes and cliches such as *everything happens for a reason*, even though the reason in this case remains ambiguous, are sentiments that have time and time again proven a positive in production. The stepping out of the previous lead allowed the opportunity to revisit the casting and saw the stepping in of a stronger option, a young past collaborator and performance powerhouse, Siphesihle Ndaba. With a vested personal interest, love for the story, and now an allowance for more dedicated rehearsal time, Siphesihle stepped into channelling a new interpretation of the powerful protagonist, the anti-hero Lilith.

This alignment reaffirmed the energy of the production team, allowing for one paramount element to shine through: That this project stood as a collaboration between a group of professionals with a passion and collective hunger, the creation of a community of practice among established practitioners, middle-weights and those taking their first steps into the industry, to create a space for collaboration, innovation as well as opportunity for all involved.

The future - Marketing and distribution

The representation of sexuality in South African films affects all elements of its existence, from production funding through to audience reception and distribution. This is primarily due to the majority of film and television media delivered still being received in relation to a heteropatriarchal society (Khumalo 2020, 40). This can be seen in the minute percentage of queer releases in the country annually, with only a handful of the already sparce 14 and 25 feature-length films released yearly (Andrews 2018, 31). Although the primary intention of this project is to explore the queer misfit archetype in contemporary South African cinema, the visibility of queer individuals created by these characters is also an undeniable objective. Although the primary objective in creating visibility is to create an overall awareness and form a set of balanced and various representations of queer individuals (Khumalo 2020, 67), the characters of this film offer a new look at queer individuals in a palatable offering to a mainstream audience.

In terms of academia, this project, from inception, has differed from traditional academic research in film and image studies as it finalises in a created knowledge object. As opposed to a 'publish or perish' pressure felt in more pedagogic circles of scholarship, the publishing for me has taken on a secondary stage, one where the film will need to perform in other spaces, gathering acclaim and visibility (Bell 2006, 85).

From inception the fact has been acknowledged that further funding is uncertain for this research project which may not favourably appeal to the already-extended academic research funders (Bell 2006, 89–90), but for further research on the topic to occur post-Master's level, a possibility of funding from the private sector has been an element in the strategy, as any commercial success or development grants from the private sector would fuel further research into this topic.

Following a strategy seen in many cross-over arthouse films from the West such as *Brokeback Mountain (Lee, 2005), The Hours (Daldry, 2002), The Kids Are Alright (Cholodenko, 2010), Milk (Van Sant, 2008), Dallas Buyers Club (Vallée, 2013)* (Richards 2016, 218), *Lil_ith* teeters between the experimental and mainstream, in a place where creativity and discovery innovate new ways of filmmaking, as well as containing the markers and structure for wider enjoyment and possible further mainstream success. With a planned festival submission schedule followed by a film market run, the primary intention of the film is growth and reach. The film in its form exists as a proof of concept for further production into the long-form space where the queer misfit archetype and the contemporary economic, social and technological themes of the film could be further explored and elaborated on, cementing the research, the project, the story of Lilith further into the canon of South African queer cinema (Appendix C).

In conclusion

Building on the Queer Theory of Judith Butler and the emergence of the West's New Queer Cinema movement of the early '90s as the first mainstream representation and authorship of queer filmmakers, this pocket of cultural visibility served as a mirror to hold up to the queer archetype and furthermore the queer misfit archetype and their presence in South African contemporary cinema. The collective methodologies of traditional critical analysis of the films of the New Queer Cinema movement and contemporary South African queer film-scape, combined with a surveying of the

socio-economic climate of the queer and misfit in South African society, became the genesis of the film *Lil_ith*.

By surveying and absorbing the landscape of contemporary queer cinema within the country, it became clear that South Africa's heteropatriarchal colonial past and equally positioned traditional cultural views towards queer individuals and women not only formed the prominent themes in theatrical releases but also created a message of queer existence that acknowledges the past rather than looking towards to the future.

In building on queer theory and applying the PoMoSexual views of Lawrence Schimel and Carol Queen to a contemporary South African landscape, the process of production saw a constant grappling of author vs artist, as the concepts of queering and mixing through production and post-production revealed themselves as vital techniques to amplify the intention: to create a film which represents a new narrative for South African queer cinema in the digital age.

Lil_ith acts as an ongoing reflection on today's youth generation, the social and economic struggles of the present all filtered through the experiences of the past, showcasing the possibilities of a new hopeful future through a lesser-seen feminine queer misfit protagonist. The acts of voyeurism, violence, intimacy and identity emerge, re-envisioned through the film as an account and conduit of contemporary South Africa for a new South African audience.

Through the engagement with this project, I must thank you, the reader, for acting as travel companion on this practice-based journey, one of immense introspection and authorship, while a belief of an invisible audience existing in the future gave great drive and motivation to the project.

Although this journey may have reached this close, it is only a waypoint, as *Lil_ith* along with the research it has opened into the queer misfit archetype in South African cinema is far from concluded. The film does not stand alone as the final destination of the queer misfit archetype in South Africa, but rather as the beginning of numerous newly-forged professional relationships as well as the departure point into extensive future research, exploration, collaboration and production of a topic that I am thrilled to continue.

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Appendixes

Appendix A- *Lil_ith* Script

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/115S0tbW8XiayFhvXrI2YdFysSV1Mwx-c?usp=share_link

Appendix B- *Lil_ith* Film

ATT: NOT FOR SHARING OR DISTRIBUTION

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1SIb5o8MRIoltSpHWjm8t6HKSz6dJYvOj?usp=share_link

Appendix C- *Lil_ith* marketing document

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1SIb5o8MRIoltSpHWjm8t6HKSz6dJYvOj?usp=share_link