

## Levels of Intervention in Films made for African Audiences in South Africa

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Nearly five years have passed since the disclosures into the Department of Information began; the 'outrage' has lapsed, and no doubt, the last vestiges of information have been shelved. Although we have a general idea of the South African Government's attempt to control, if not "establish" a "Bantu Film Industry"<sup>1</sup>, we still do not know many details of the procedure; nor do we know to what extent those structures which were established have been dismantled.

Yet it is not entirely necessary to have copies of documents proving the state's intervention or funding of the industry to know that there is / has been an intervention; at our most generous, we can assume that the state would not tolerate this strategic means of information if it did not serve its interests. What we have learnt from the "Information Scandal" however, is that this means of communication was regarded as a useful, if not essential acquisition for increasing its hegemony in a specific area.

The hegemony of the present rule in South Africa will of course always be incomplete; apartheid has never nor will ever be able to incorporate the majority of South Africans into its ideological framework; hence the battery of laws and apparatuses of control which are needed to maintain its existence. Although it is obviously common knowledge by now, both to the state and to the populace, that apartheid can only be maintained by increasingly repressive mechanisms, this has never stopped it from trying to create some sort of ideological consensus to its rule. To an extent it has been successful. Amongst the white population certainly, we can assume a degree of ideological homogeneity.

Although the evidences regarding the "Information Scandal" and what we can call (for want of a better title) the *black film industry* have been useful in furthering our understanding of the attempt of the state to harness the control of cultural production, it should not be seen as an isolated or extraordinary situation. We will see that in this sector of the South African film industry making films for African audiences, a routine series of interventions, or gate-keeping procedures are common practice. These apparatuses, often under the semblance of bureaucracy, serve to ensure a relative consistency in the content of the films.

Moreover, the structure of commercial film production in any country provides its own mediating matrix governed by the laws of production and consumption. As we will see however, because such a high percentage of the profits are generated by the state's subsidy of this industry, a certain unity has been achieved between the intentions of the state, and the profit motives of the industry. Given these factors, combined with the notion that the films are made by white directors expressing those particular ideas and values of their class position, it is not surprising that the films share a number of common attributes and characteristics.<sup>2</sup>

By tracing the process of film making in the industry, from production to consumption, we will see the unique articulation of these three elements; the indirect intervention of the state; the mediation of the profit motive; and the relative ideological unity of those who produce the films. The direct intervention of the state, through the Department of Information for example, seems almost a redundancy.

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Cinema for African audiences in South Africa was introduced as early as 1920. Through the initiative of the Reverend Ray Phillips of the American Board of Missions, a service of severely censored film shows in mine compounds was established. Noting their success, the Chamber of Mines and the Municipal Native Affairs Department began to take an active interest as they realized the value of cinema in "sublimating criminal tendencies".<sup>3</sup>

I think the general effect is beneficial to both the native and the compound, as it makes the occupants of the compounds more contented and gives them something wholesome to think about.<sup>4</sup>

The use of cinema, both for instruction and 'entertainment' has always been important in the mining industry. The commercial production of films specifically aimed at African audiences however, was not exploited until the early seventies. By 1981 it was estimated that the black film industry was generating yearly turnovers of between R2 - 3 million and over thirty films had been made. The reason for the sudden momentum, no doubt, was the changes in the structure of the state subsidy scheme. Prior to 1972, there was no differentiated policy operating for films made in anything other than the two official languages. In 1972, a clause was included allowing for a maximum of R45 000 subsidy return for films made in an African language. The first feature of this kind, although in English was only made in 1972. Joe Bulet had an all black cast and was never meant for anything other than release to an African audience.<sup>5</sup> It was only in 1974, that the same director, Tonie van der Merwe, made the first feature in an African language.<sup>6</sup> The separate subsidy was surely not established to fill a need on behalf of the industry. It is more likely that it was established to fill a particular vacuum that existed in the cultural apparatuses of the state. For in 1977, when the maximum subsidy return was raised from R45 000 to R70 000, it was at the suggestion of Connie Mulder, then Minister of Information.<sup>7</sup>

Although R70 000 does not seem to be that much of an incentive given the cost of making a film, this amount is over and above the profits received from ticket sales. Also, we are dealing with an 'industry' on the periphery of the established industry, operating almost as

independent film makers in their methods. Most of the companies operate as one man bands, with little other than one scriptwriter/producer/director and sometimes even cameraman/editor. It is rare that a film costs more than R50 000 to make, and the average cost is closer to R20 000. Often the films are shot on reversal stock; shooting lasts a few weeks, and often a few days, and many are shot in sequence. One producer regards Roger Corman as his mentor!

Most of the films are shot in Zulu as it is the most widely understood language. Often, there are no dialogue scripts but merely synopses; and when there are, they are generally written in English. Obviously, extensive use of interpreters on set is common practice, but one wonders about the editing process!

That many of the what Tomaselli calls 'back to the homelands' films are made so carelessly is in itself a racism; in the same way as the films made for the "platteland" drive-in circuit so often take advantage of the lack of sophistication of the audiences, and their lack of exposure to comparative products. Because no central distribution network exists, however, the producers do not have the restraint of having to sell their films to anyone other than an audience with very few opportunities to see films. The films are mostly distributed in rural areas, though the later and better made 'fantasy' or 'conditional urban' films are shown mainly in the urban areas.

Most of the producers initiate their own distribution, although there are also small privately owned hiring companies. Because of the lack of cinema facilities<sup>9</sup>, they are shown in church and school halls. Also, most producers own their own mobile units equipped with generators; (like the agit-trains of the early Soviet cinema). The films are also hired by black entrepreneurs, Administration Boards, mining companies and organisations such as Inkatha. Because of the venues, a large proportion of the audience are children who would be more vulnerable to the contents of the films.

In urban areas, it is not uncommon that the films are subject to scrutiny by the Administration Boards before being shown. Although there is nothing in the Publications Act which requires this, because most of the halls are state owned and administered by the boards, they have the right of censorship. Moreover, because one has to get a permit to film in a township, the scripts are often scrutinised before shooting. Often they are submitted voluntarily as a routine procedure.

Censorship of films shown to African audiences is traditionally more stringent than of films shown to whites. Before the 1974 amendment of the Publications Control Act of 1963<sup>10</sup>, differential censorship was specifically expressed as such. When challenged on the issue, the Minister of the Interior replied:

We know what sort of film it should be to show to a race that has not yet reached the level of civilization that we have reached ... there are some films which can be exhibited more safely to a white child than to an adult Bantu ...<sup>11</sup>

Although the specific clause allowing for differential censorship was removed in the 1974 amendment, a safety clause stating that

"persons in a specific category ... or at a specified place ... may not be permitted to attend the entertainment in question", was retained.<sup>12</sup> Differential censorship in effect is still practised, albeit with more subtlety.

The fact that mechanisms for censorship exist at all can be seen as an expression of the failure of the state to achieve an ideological homogeneity. In the case of the 'black' film industry, although having to go through the motions of being passed by the Directorate of Publications, this apparatus seems almost obsolete. In the ten years of the industry's existence, not one film has been banned and very few cuts have been ordered. A closer examination of why this should be so gives us an idea of the convergence of those elements of mediation. In the parallel 'white' film industry, the censorship machinery is used frequently. It is certainly an issue that faces both English and Afrikaans film makers even if it operates only on the level of the degree of nudity that should be allowed.

In the case of the black film industry, it is certain that self-censorship is an issue from the beginning of the process. There must be an awareness of the responsibility they carry, and the very special place they occupy within the process of cultural and ideological production. There is undoubtedly an appreciation of political sensitivity as is manifested in the almost paranoid avoidance of reference to politics or race in the content of the films. Moreover, because of the relationship of the industry to the subsidy system, it is doubtful that any chances would be taken to place the subsidy in jeopardy in any way. The films are financed by private capital; often small-scale entrepreneurial capital, which is not the sort to take risks. Besides, how far can your risk extend if the scripts are subject to scrutiny before one can film in a black area; that is, before shooting even starts? Also, as a part of the ruling classes, the producers as such not only reproduce those ideas that are necessary for the reproduction of those classes, but are an expression of its cohesion. Thus in the reproduction of those ideas, given that ideology is a "lived relation" between men and their world<sup>13</sup>, there is not necessarily a conflict of interests, or of ideas.

Given the interaction of these elements therefore, it is not surprising that one finds so many correspondences and similarities in the content of the films. Yet their degree of specificity spans the gamut of being merely an expression of dominant ideological images, myths and values to those dealing explicitly (in a narrative form) with issues fundamental to the present relations of production and specifically, apartheid or racial capitalism.

Even with films in which one marvels at the wonders of an imagination which can conceive of something so far removed from South African reality; that is, those films one tends to dismiss as pure escapism, there is a certain representation of reality which, couched in different narratives is repeated over and over again. This, by virtue of the fact that so many issues are avoided, points to significant areas of ideological tension, not only within the consciousness of the producers, but as characterising the entire social formation. These gaps, or *structuring absences* are a means whereby we can consider a text no matter how far removed it might seem to be from its historical context.<sup>14</sup>

The most astounding aspect of films aimed at black audiences is an absence of any whites; either as characters or extras. Even street scenes, for example, hardly ever show any white pedestrians. One can see why this has to be so, given the construction of a narrative where events occur which exist only within the frame of a narrative discourse, and which are logical only to that manufactured world. The mere image of whites would have the result of drawing correspondences between that fabricated world and the historical reality of the spectator, and corrode the illusion of the logicity of the narrative. Given that a dominant image in these films (and indeed most films in commercial cinema) operates on the supposition of the freedom of the individual to negotiate the conditions of his/her own existence, the presence of whites would evoke wider questions regarding structural boundaries. In every way there is an attempt to create a "normal" world, in which the aspirations of the characters are met, as in any "normal" social formation, and it is important that any images are avoided that would suggest South Africa as an aberration.

Similarly there is a total absence of political issues so that individual crises are formed by vital plot devices or by the stupidity/laziness/evilness of the individual. Many films are constructed within a moral fairy tale such as 'crime don't pay', or hard work means wealth and getting the 'girl'. Also, although so many of the films are structured around the central motif of social mobility, there is a marked absence of poverty. All the films are located within idealized middle class settings, even though, for the purpose of representing the process of social mobility, there has to be a representation of contrast. So, in *Gotso*<sup>15</sup> for example, Luki is a dustman who at the end of the day pushes his cart home to his pretty little house, almost as if he were taking the company car home! He goes on to become a famous disco dancer! Although no work relations are represented, it is important that Luki is a dustman, so as to make his rise in the world romantic and dramatic.

Where the images become more cogent however is in films which deal with 'real' situations. In Tonie van der Merwe's *Maloyi*<sup>16</sup> the conflict between traditional rural values and urban existence is represented through the story of an evil witchdoctor's curse. *Maloyi* not only reflects, represents or 'makes natural' the dominant ideology *vis-a-vis* the 'homelands' but, being unapologetically reductionist, it crusades it.

Van der Merwe sets up a very tangible tension between urban life as represented through his two protagonists, and their rural traditional background. So although Dennis Mankela is a sophisticated urban businessman, he refers to the place in the 'homeland' where his family lives, as 'home'. Without going into the technical improbability of the situation (*vis-a-vis* Section 10 rights, which delineate who may live and work where, for example), the notion of the African worker, no matter how established he is in a city, belonging somewhere else, in a 'homeland', is a fundamental premise on which apartheid is built. The film suggest that Dennis Mankela left home in order to seek wealth and success in the 'big city'. Moreover, he found it. Although we know that there is no legal free-flow influx into the cities in South Africa, van der Merwe reduces the influx to a voluntary action, and annuls therefore the responsibility of the state, both for the conditions of the homelands and the living conditions in the city.

Again, although the dictatorship of the narrative means that Dennis Mankela has to represent a different class from his parents' in order to show that process of social mobility, the physical representation of "home" is not poor, but in a way, 'classless'. "Home" is two huts in the middle of nowhere; there are no people, no form of subsistence<sup>17</sup>; nothing to suggest that van der Merwe has any sense of the life of a people who have no existence for him outside of work relations. Moreover, there is nothing to suggest why anyone would have to leave that existence, except to search for the 'bright lights' of the city.

However, even van der Merwe cannot mask the many contradictions in the ideology of the ruling class. His representation of traditionalism and the conflict between traditional and rural values is fraught with the same confusion one finds in the state's present attitude towards those distinctions; and the problems of courting an urban black middle class without losing ground in either direction. The crisis in ideology at times becomes patently clear. Early in the film, Dennis reassures his wife about meeting his mother for the first time:

My mother will accept you for what you are, Miriam, a clever, well-educated, sophisticated woman who fits in well with her son's new position. Where I used to herd cattle, now her son herds salesmen, each of whom earns more in a month than my father earns in a whole year. She is the one who will feel shy and awkward in front of you.

On one hand, the aspirations of the protagonists are plain; Western values are both superior, and attainable. Yet there is a tension in the acquisition of those values and van der Merwe's handling of them. Throughout the film, there is a distinct discrediting of traditional values. When Dennis' younger brother Jacob asks him if he paid lobola for his wife, he replies:

No, thank goodness in the townships lobola is becoming a thing of the past; many of the old customs are finished, the people live more like whites.

Yet even though Dennis and Miriam are depicted with all the trappings of urban sophistication, van der Merwe cannot resolve the conflict of where they actually belong; in the city, or in a 'bantustan'. This is most evident in the representation of the witchdoctor, and Dennis' relationship to him. At one point, Jacob tells his mother what Dennis says about believing in witchdoctors: "Dennis says these things have no power over you, and he knows what he's talking about. Don't you know that he's a boss of a big firm in town?"

Yet despite this, the narrative dictates otherwise. The witchdoctor does wield a power, despite his representation as an anti-social force in the community; malevolent, lecherous and entirely irrational. The western doctor, despite his favourable representation, cannot cure the father, because he has been put under a curse. What is more, even Miriam, who has been brought up in the city and does not believe in witchdoctors either, is subject to his influence. In a way, van der Merwe is saying that despite the wealth, sophistication and education of the Mankelas, they cannot escape their essentially primitive past. The implication is that this is true of all urban Africans.

The overall result is two-fold. On the one hand it expresses and reveals the very tangible contradiction in a society in which Africans are neither allowed to subsist off the land, nor are they allowed to break their ties with the land and settle in a city permanently. On the other hand, the film reproduces the belief that ultimately (if we recall the Minister of the Interior's remark) blacks have 'not reached the level of civilization' that whites have reached; the ideology that rationalizes and makes natural the system of exploitation on which the social formation of South Africa is built.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is not entirely necessary to have an Orwellian Ministry of Truth in the form of a Department of Information to ensure the reproduction of those values which are both an expression of, and are essential to the cohesion of the ruling classes in the present social formation. For although the producers of films for black audiences in South Africa are in the specific position of reproducing those values, they too have been formed by them. Yet this homogeneity of vision that characterizes the films has to be located within the film production process of this particular industry, whereby certain interventions are made at various levels, operating on those levels simultaneously, and taking many forms. With this understanding, one can see how one can change a policy towards censorship, or even remove a whole Department of Information, and not make as much as a ripple in the practice as a whole.

- \*\* This paper is based on research conducted in 1980. Figures and circumstances may have changed since then but if anything, the advent of the African language channels of SABC-TV will have made the situation more persuasive. I have freely made generalizations regarding production circumstances, based on interviews with producers. I am greatly indebted to the published and unpublished research made available to me by Keyan Tomaselli. See, eg. *The S.A. Film Industry*, African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 1981; and his lecture given at the 1979 International Cape Town Film Festival, entitled "Black Films in South Africa."

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> See *Rand Daily Mail* 13 December 1978, 26 December 1978; *Sunday Times* 8.10.78, 12.11.78 and *Sunday Express* 10.6.79
- <sup>2</sup> See previous issues of *Critical Arts* for a greater explanation on the issue, specifically Tomaselli, K.G. 1980: "Class and Ideology: Reflections in South African Cinema", *Critical Arts* Vol 1 No 1, pp 1 - 13
- <sup>3</sup> Gutsche, T : *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895 - 1940*, p 371
- <sup>4</sup> Minutes of 419th meeting of Johannesburg City Council, July 1922

- 5 Several films with African actors, dealing with South African experiences were made prior to this but aimed largely at white audiences. Donald Swanson's *Jim Comes to Joburg* (1949) and *The Magic Garden* (1960) are examples
- 6 The film was called *Ngomopho*
- 7 Supplementary report of the Commission of Inquiry into alleged irregularities in the former Department of Information
- 8 Discussed in interview with Ronnie Isaacs of *Aim Film Productions*
- 9 Soweto with over 1 million inhabitants, for example, has only one cinema
- 10 Publications Control Act No 42 of 1974
- 11 *Hansard* 14 February 1963, 1341
- 12 Publications Control Act, *op cit*, Clause 5
- 13 Althusser, L : *For Marx*, Allan Lane, London, p 223
- 14 I am entirely indebted to the *Cahiers du Cinema* text, "John Ford's Young Mr Lincoln", translated in *Screen Reader I*, for this methodology
- 15 *Botsofso* was an *Igoli-Intercity* Production, produced by Johan van Rooyen and written by Ronnie Isaacs
- 16 Synopsis of *Maloyi (Witchdoctor)*

Dennis Mankela is a sales manager in the African Marketing Division of a large company. One day, after an appointment with one of the salesmen under him, he receives a letter from his brother Jacob telling him that his father is ill at "home". He decides to go home and see him but is reluctant to let his young wife come with him because it is "very primitive up there". She persuades him to let her accompany him because she has never met his parents. They set off the next day by car to find the father in a semi-coma with a fever. Jacob suggests that it is possibly a result of a curse, as they have tried medicines and nothing seems to help.

Dennis does not believe it could be, so takes his father to a doctor. He mentions the witchdoctor to him and he tells Dennis that there have been a number of similar incidents, and that the police are investigating. Nevertheless, he gives the father medicine.

The next day, Dennis and Miriam are driving when their car gets stuck. While Dennis is looking for help, the witchdoctor abducts Miriam, steals her locket and leaves her in a coma in the bush, where Dennis finds her. He takes her to a doctor who is again puzzled at her condition.

At home again Miriam, still unconscious, tries to attack Dennis with a knife. He overpowers her, slaps her and she

wakes up, not knowing what has come over her. We cut to the witchdoctor's hut, and we see him handling Miriam's locket. He tears up the photograph of Dennis.

Later Jacob goes to the witchdoctor's house and whilst he is creeping around outside, the witchdoctor finds him and ties him up.

We cut back to Dennis' house and Miriam now attempts to attack her mother-in-law but is stopped just in time by Dennis. Dennis then goes to the witchdoctor's hut and finds him just about to give Jacob the same muti (potion) that put his father in a coma. They overcome the witchdoctor and make him tell them what muti will cure Miriam and the father. They both recover.

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The inside of these round huts are square in the film; an ill-disguised studio set. The film has many instances of this sort of carelessness which, as has been said before, is not ideology-free. In one scene of the film Miriam dances bare-breasted which is not practice amongst married women.

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