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MAKING SENSE OF FILM: HOW TO READ FILMS ABOUT SOUTHERN AFRICA¹

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Many film guides and catalogues exist on films/videos about Southern Africa, though few of these are available in South Africa itself. Apart from David Wiley and his colleagues' Africa on Film and Videotape, 1960-1981 (1982), few guides go beyond a description of the films and a listing of the awards they might have won. A recent exception is the University of Illinois Film Center's Film and Video Resources About Africa (1985:1-5), which offers an excellent set of general guidelines about how to evaluate and use films when teaching about Africa.

Film and Video Resources About Africa examines 'Subject Matter', which includes discussion on accuracy, integrity, bias in narration, over-generalization, historical completeness, and whether African perspectives are offered. It also discusses 'Technical Matters' and offers some questions that should be asked on the credentials of the producers, and how to use the films in various learning contexts. In a similar vein, but with reference to specific films on Southern Africa, this Working Paper discusses ways through which teachers can use films in the classroom.

Most of the documentary films available for teaching purposes in the United States were made prior to President FW de Klerk's dramatic reforms begun in February 1990. This month marked the unbanning of all liberation movements, both internal and exiled, including the Communist Party. The films refer to apartheid in the present tense, and often encode the despair of ever being able to defeat this iniquitous system.

The Evaluators

The films discussed below were evaluated by a team consisting of African (especially Southern African) specialists with expertise in a variety of disciplines: media, film, television, cultural studies, politics, language studies, speech, anthropology, history, education, literature, sociology, development, health and agriculture. The team included a number of Africans, Southern Africans, and Americans². Many had US high school teaching experience, and some had interacted with teachers in Michigan through the African Studies Center's Outreach Program.

The methodology used was a modification of Wiley et al (1982), an excellent Compendium of content

descriptions and reviews of over 700 films on Africa used by American colleagues. Where Wiley mainly used empirical descriptive criteria in critiquing various films, the present study concentrated on providing theoretically coherent critiques of individual films in terms of the theories of film and society developed in this Working Paper, and available in the longer Report³. In other words, this project not only responded to issues of accuracy and content, but examined these in relation to film style, form, questions of ideology, and the political positions adopted by the film makers concerned.

Historical Accuracy

The world is constantly changing. The years 1989, 1990 and 1991 broke the idea of stasis in even the most authoritarian of societies. Many films are made in particular historical 'moments'. These are periods during which major changes are occurring, or during which stasis seems unending, and which need to be recorded for posterity. Any film is a product of an historical moment - films do not exist parallel to, or divorced from, concrete processes - economic, social, psychological, political, historical, and ideological. Examination of films and videos should thus always examine the films/texts studied in relation to their contexts.

Films on the Namibian independence process during 1989 are one example of a brief historical moment: see the United Nations (UN) trilogy on *Namibia* (1990) made during the UN supervised elections. Some might argue that now that Namibia is independent that these films (including *Namibia: Africa's Last Colony*, 1984) are 'out-of-date'. This judgement, however, would only be correct if the world is seen ahistorically.

Most films lack a sense of history as a process. This is because films relate their messages and fix their images in the perceptual present. Even historical documentaries have this temporal quality. The three films made by the United Nations of the Namibian elections, for example, are characterized. They played up diplomatic discourses and rhetorically suppressed any images or information which may have offended the various parties, especially South Africa, so as not to endanger the independence process. In the case of *No Easy Walk: Zimbabwe* (1988), an excellent historical documentary of the pre-independence era, the film fails when it portrays the period after independence in 1980. The makers of this film would have found it much more difficult getting the cooperation of the contemporary authorities in making a critically political film in a country where some control of the media was fairly tight (Zaffiro 1990). It was important to examine films as much as for what they do as for what they leave out.

There are constraints of making documentaries about contemporary processes and living people, such films that are usually made by capture crucial periods of history. They are understood in terms of the appropriate period and processes -- historical, political, and economic -- that emerged and unfolded during the moments or periods they were being made. These moments may span a decade or merely a few weeks.

I also examine common sense ways of looking at history. Louis Marshall's *The Hunters* (1958), on the subject of apartheid, was probably the most influential documentary on Africa in American universities until the release of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1983). *The Hunters* (as are the two other films), is reflective of a particular view of 'stone-age man' prevalent in biological departments at the time it was made. The film is out-of-date, as it was made in the mid-1970s by different theories of evolution which questioned the then social evolutionary relativity. The film is also out-of-date in the light of this realization, as it is based on the state of anthropology and its relation to the Kalahari in the '50s, and the 'Bushmen' themselves.

As much as, if not more, about the way they do of their subjects. This is in regard to Paul Myburgh's *People of the Bush* (1985), about the 'last' group of people in Botswana. This film elicited

extremely negative and hostile comment from North American anthropologists (Gordon 1990; Wilmsen 1991). These critics evaluated *Sanface* through the principles of ethnography. But if one rather examines the film as auto-biography, then a different interpretation emerges (see Tomaselli et al 1992). Similarly, I argue in contravention of received anthropological wisdom, that Jamie Uys's *The Gods Must Be Crazy* films (1983, 1989) are more about Afrikaner social myths than about 'Bushmen'. In the light of this argument it becomes more difficult to accuse Uys of overt racism, except of an introspective kind (see Tomaselli 1992).

John Marshall went on to make *!Nai: Story of a !Kung Woman* (1980), which implicitly critiques his earlier film, *The Hunters*. Overlaid on the original intention of the film makers, however, are further considerations, such as the objectives of sponsors. *The !Kung San: Traditional Life* (1988), for example, edited from Marshall's original Kalahari footage taken in the 1950s, rehabilitates the myth of the 'Bushmen' questioned by Marshall himself in *!Nai* and immortalized in *The Gods Must Be Crazy* films. This was the image the Massachusetts Schools Social Science Program, which commissioned this video, had of the Ju/wasi San⁴ in their 'original state'.

Later, the romantic image of the San seen in *Traditional Life* was bluntly replaced in another film commissioned by the Massachusetts Program. *The !Kung San: Resettlement* (1988) documented the ravages of apartheid perpetrated during the 1980s on the !Kung. From 'happy natives' wearing skins in the '50s, they are now a dispossessed people wearing tatty clothes, being destroyed by the South African government and military. The abrupt transition from the 'past' to the 'present' between the two films edited in the same year, 1988, is implied as a clean break that occurred overnight. *Resettlement* also misleadingly suggests that apartheid was the only destructive impulse in the history of San social disorganization. The problem here was that the same raw material (film shots) was re-edited to achieve differing objectives set by different sponsors.

'Tribe' and 'Tribalism':

Misunderstanding African Societies

Films and videos that use the term 'tribe' unconditionally should be critically examined rather than its categories merely accepted. Whose definition is assumed? What are the reasons for using the word?

Whose interests are served in perpetuating the Western idea of 'tribes' and 'tribalism'.

Tribe is a concept that has endeared itself to Western scholars and journalists for over a century. Sociologist David Wiley (1981) argues that the category is primarily a means to reduce the complexity of non-Western societies for readers. It is no accident that the contemporary uses of the term were developed during the 19th Century. The rise of evolutionary and racist theories denigrated alien non-white peoples as inferior or less civilized, who had not yet evolved from a simpler, primal state. Wiley observes that the uses of the term 'tribe' in the sociological and anthropological literature are varied and conflicting - some authors mean common language, others common culture, some ancestral lineages, and others common government of rulers. Michael Glen notes, "The term *tribe* has never satisfied anthropologists, because of its many uses and connotations. Societies that are classified as tribal seem to be very diverse in their organization, having little in common". Kenyan author and TV director, Ali Mazrui (1986), doesn't even mention the word in his seminal book and TV series, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*.

Misnaming African ethnicity as tribalism has long bedeviled United States foreign policy in Africa, leading to miscalculations and errors in judgement, sometimes with socially disastrous consequences for Africa. When Westerners respond to political movements as only tribal realities, they misjudge their strength, its potential organization, and the basis of its appeal. Conflicts then become a matter of inter-tribal rivalry and are seen to be something that only happens in Africa. These often minor conflicts are played up in the Western media as the acts of barbaric savages engaged in endemic tribal warfare, so often suggested in the *Tarzan* movies of the 1940s and '50s, and others such as *Sanders of the River* (1935) and *Africa Addio*, amongst many others.

At the same time, hundreds of millions killed by the war machines of the First World countries over the past centuries are sanitized under different terms. 'Glory', 'King and country', 'bravery', 'doing one's duty' and 'civilizing barbarians' were euphemisms for the misery brought Africa by the marauding American, British, European and Asian colonists and slave traders of the 17th and 18th Centuries. What these countries did to each other on the soil of America, Europe and the Middle East over the centuries is imaged in anything but 'tribal' terms. These intermecine conflicts were

ultimately more destructive, and killed more people, than any war that ever occurred between Africans.

The success of the term 'tribe' in shaping American perceptions of African societies is visible in the widespread use of the term by African journalists and scholars. Because English, French, Portuguese, and occasionally Afrikaans were the languages of the school and the city, tribe, *tribu*, and the other cognates defined the language of urban and political interaction. They also defined the categories into which rural and urban societies were forcibly allocated during the colonial period. Now, prominent African leaders use the term in appealing for "an end to tribalism", referring to the utilization of ethnic and language ties as a means to aggregate power and authority in national struggles for power. This kind of political mobilization through ethnicity is the strategy used by the Zulu Inkatha freedom movement, a strategy which is now embroiled in civil war which spread from Natal across the country after 1986. Tens of thousands of both Zulus and black non-Zulus have been killed in this conflict (see *The Struggle for South Africa*, 1990).

Finally, 'tribe' is a source of misunderstanding the great diversity of rural Africa by labelling small hunting and gathering groups of less than 50 persons, like the Namibian San, as a tribe, while simplistically including under this rubric a far-flung, multinational Fulani trading group of millions. The term had little validity in the pre-colonial period. It has less legitimacy now (Wiley 1981).

Race War or Class War or Both

One of the problems facing American audiences and film makers is their lack of understanding of the nature of the conflict in South Africa. Most of the films discussed in this study see it as a race war - white against black. Yet, from the mid-1970s on at least, the non-racial democratic movements within the country like the United Democratic Front (UDF), developed a class analysis in which the enemy was seen as capitalism, rather than whites or specifically Afrikaners. Capital was argued to be the source of the oppression. Apartheid was considered to be a particular form or distortion of capitalism. This distortion resulted in a much more brutal form of economic and class oppression than found in the First World capitalist states. These states which benefitted financially from apartheid, however, were implicated in the perpetuation of this system.

ferences of analysis did exist within the left-wing democratic movements as to the domestic and international imperatives of what came to be called racial capitalism (Saul and Gelb 1980). Black Consciousness (BC) theory espoused by the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) and Azanian Peoples Association (AZAPO) argued that race was the determining form of oppression in South Africa. In terms of this racial analysis, international capital and Western imperialism were the dominant sources of oppression.

Conversely, the UDF Charterist analysis held that while racial oppression was dominant, class was the determining factor. In other words, the workings of capital, both local and international, imposed a form of racial capitalism which shifted in response to both international pressure on the apartheid regime, and in terms of internal dissent. The objective of capital was to reform apartheid to facilitate the continued extraction of profits in the context of a maturing economy on the one hand, and the demands for worker and political rights on the other. The cross-racial alliances that resulted from this analysis are often hidden by anti-apartheid films which prefer to image the conflict in ahistorical localised black vs white terms. In *Children of Apartheid* (1987), however, American newscaster Walter Cronkite's liberal analysis is tempered by the film's evidence of white children opposing apartheid. After starting out in black vs white terms, Cronkite accepts that apartheid means cheap labor for big business. However, he left it to the white school children interviewed at a private institution to make this connection. Other films which break with this dangerous racial reductionism include *The Ribbon* (1986), *Mapantsula* (1987), *Dark City* (1990), *Cry Freedom* (1987) and *Biko* (1988), *A Dry White Season* (1989), and *Come Back Africa* (1959), and so on.

Whether working from the racial or class or interacting scenarios, much of the blame for apartheid is located with the Western world's global economic system working in conjunction with South African capital and the white-dominated state. While this is a greatly simplified and probably crude explanation, it is the dominant left-wing analysis. Few British or American-made anti-apartheid films admit to this implication of their own societies' culpability in the perpetuation of apartheid.

Acronyms

To understand the various forces, organizations, affiliations and groupings in South Africa, it is necessary to discuss the problem of acronyms. These are often used without explanation in films on Southern Africa. The emergence of acronyms in countries at war with themselves is a reflection of the nature of the kinds of struggles that develop. In Southern Africa, most black grassroots political activity is conducted through *organizations* rather than individuals. Each and every anti-apartheid activist was first and foremost an organizational creature, affiliated to one or more of hundreds of groupings that emerged during the 1980s. To therefore suggest, as most films do, that individuals alone were at the forefront of change and resistance in South Africa during the decade of the '80s, is to lose the complexity of the situation.

The great number of acronyms is an indication of the level of activity, and the complex linkages or differences between these organizations which interconnect with local, regional and national bodies like the African National Congress (ANC), the Azanian Peoples Organisation (AZAPO, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).⁵

Political Intertexts

Like *The !Kung San: Resettlement* (1988), *Biko: Breaking the Silence* (1987) is another documentary that mobilizes the media of film and television for a political objective other than the topic would have suggested. It conveys sympathy with a non-racial ideology even though it deals with Steve Biko, a theorist of black exclusivism. Had *Biko* been made in the '70s instead of the late '80s, its political position might have been very different and much closer to the postulates of Black Consciousness (BC), which were dominant amongst black activists in the 1970s. Following the Soweto uprising on June 16, 1976, a non-racial mass-participatory ideology of resistance emerged which, while building on the political groundwork laid by BC, redefined it in terms of the Freedom Charter's concept of 'national culture', rather than an exclusively 'black culture.' Similarly, the significance of BC is also reconstituted in *Cry Freedom* (1987), a docu-drama on the death of Biko at the hands of the Security Police, and a white liberal newspaper editor's efforts to publicize Biko's political ideas.

Biko reconstitutes Steve Biko's BC philosophy in terms of the UDF's Charterist, culturally and racially inclusive (non-racial) principles. *Cry Freedom*, however, reconstitutes Biko's BC philosophy differently, in terms of the liberal-humanist perspectives of British director, Richard Attenborough. This rearticulation of political philosophy from BC to Charterist to liberal is also due to Attenborough's prime scripting source. This was the then exiled South African Donald Woods, on whose books *Cry Freedom* was based. The two films interweave their philosophies intersecting at the same time and the same place in Zimbabwe. *Biko*, for example, frames its extracts of the making of *Cry Freedom*, and interviews with its makers, in terms of Charterism.

It is important to understand how meanings are made and remade, shifted, reinterpreted and revised, as occurred with *Biko* and *Cry Freedom*, in relation to Biko's actual philosophy. Signs, pictures, words etc, do not have fixed, immutable meanings. Different interpretations and uses of the same images and words can, and do, occur. The differences are partly through divergent cultural uses of the signs and their meanings. Different historical experiences out of which the same images or messages have emerged, account for differences in use. Linguistic and class-based experiences redefine meanings. For example, Christianity has been appropriated by ideologues from all shades of political opinion, from the far right to the far left. American Donald McAlvany's video, *Revolution and Betrayal* (1986), for example, is chillingly reactionary, racist, proto-fascist, nationalist, militarist and unreservedly pro-capitalist - yet claims God as an ally.

Conversely, the Rev Beyers Naude in *Cry of Reason* (1988) invokes the scriptures to argue the opposite to McAlvany, explaining how his Christianity helped move him from his previous pro-apartheid position to which he had unreservedly subscribed as a young Dutch Reformed Church minister. This appropriation of religion for anti-apartheid purposes also guided the life and work of Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, founder of the Anti-apartheid Movement in Britain (see *Makhalipile - the Dauntless One*, 1989), as it did Allan Boesak (see *Allan Boesak: Choosing for Justice*, 1984).

The phenomenon whereby the ideas, religions and language of one constituency is appropriated by a second constituency to serve an entirely different set of imperatives, is known as *articulation*.

In McAlvany's video,

Rev Alan Boesak's position is articulated with grim images of apartheid (necklaced⁶) by fire, and Boesak's non-violent, non-revolutionary context by *re-articulating* what he means. By this means McAlvany articulates that is, that Boesak supports white lawlessness.

This process of disarticulation and rearticulation, occurred with regard to the content of the video and films about Biko. To take another example, in the United States, the various signs of the struggle in Africa enter a totally different ideological arena, in which the two terms of the debate, 'new' and 'old' 'democracy', exist within very different articulations. Considering 'race' in America, we have to consider the history of discourses - social concepts and language about race and racism. The fallout of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, '60s and '70s, was that race was articulated within the hegemonic white American liberal discourse, in which access to various civil rights was the outer limit to demands for social justice by blacks. This, for the most part, left American civil rights discourse disconnected from any idea of possibility of radical or socialist working class politics.

In contrast, the historical discourses of 'race' in South Africa have to be understood as more than struggles over access to civil rights. Until 1990 blacks under National Party rule had few civil rights, just as white Afrikaners under British rule before 1910 were discriminated against, but beyond a desire for social justice was the UDF's Man of a radical class transformation of South African society as a whole. This leftward articulation was also connected with the idea of 'democracy', defined in such contrast to the term the term was articulated in the light of Americanism following Reagan's victory in 1980, to the contrary, a rightward inflection of 'democracy' made it very difficult to link demands for more justice with more general economic and social justice. Reaganite articulation of 'democracy' was very anti-socialist, imperialist and white supremacist, giving meaning here little substance to the struggles when one speaks of 'democracy'. The struggles in Third World countries, which were resonated positively with the anti-apartheid struggles of the republics of the former colonies, were disintegration early in the

...ent discursive values given to everyday terms like 'race', and 'democracy' in America and Africa, mean that watching and discussing them American perspectives will generate very different interpretations to analysis of the same films from African and Southern African perspectives. This was evident in the early discussions held by students, with Africans often interpreting the films differently from very different perspectives to the white evaluators. Over a period of six months, however, a consensus emerged on assessment of over 20 films, with the two exceptions of the film *Two Rivers* (1985) and *People of the Great Sandface* (1985). American anthropologist, David Bloch, and an African drama scholar Maureen Eke, found an interesting performance anti-apartheid coherence in the story told by the black poet in *The Two Rivers*. This analysis was fundamentally rejected by the more literally bound white American evaluators who saw the film as supporting apartheid. The critique³ of this film explains how both these interpretations came about, and why the film's style and content often to be at variance with the story being told by the black poet (see also Maingard 1986).

Evaluation Criteria

The MSU evaluators worked according to a set of criteria which guided their assessment on which differences would best benefit from the viewing of particular films. They identified the main concepts illustrated by the film under review and ascertained the factual accuracy of the information presented. *South Africa: the Wasted Land* (1990), which deals with environmental degradation specifically affecting blacks, for example, simplistically blames 'apartheid' for all the problems in South Africa. Destruction of the environment and lack of concern for people's health is presented in all countries, not just South Africa. Removal of apartheid will not automatically result in an environmental utopia. In fact, very often it is the multinational-owned First World companies that treat the Third World as their dumping grounds for toxic waste. Films which conveniently blame all the ills of Southern Africa on South Africa alone need critical examination in terms of broader, international perspectives, which impact South Africa as well as her neighbours.

When some films were found to be highly factually accurate, many of those judged to be accurate, nevertheless exhibited serious omissions. What is learned from a film is often as important as what is not said, and provides clues to the director's or producer's political and ideological positions. These

omissions are sometimes discussed in detail in the critiques of the longer Report, especially if they have a significant impact on the meaning of the film. Besides, facts do not exist outside ideological considerations and historical contexts - what is fact for the goose, can also be fact for the gander. A self-serving film made by a Dutch company called *The Dutch in South Africa*, for example, while clearly an apologia for Dutch colonialism, is not 'inaccurate' as the facts are mobilized in terms of current conceptions of Dutch colonial ideology - they are correct and 'true' in terms of this perspective.

Jamie Uys similarly perpetuates astonishing inaccuracies - perhaps even lies - about the 'Bushmen' in the two fictional films, *The Gods Must be Crazy* (1983, 1989). Nowhere is this more evident than in his press releases where he claims that 'Bushmen' in the 1980s lived in static social groupings of nomadic primitive affluence - the way they always have in terms of the anthropological myth of the San as a neolithic people frozen in time. Elsewhere I explore the history of this myth and why it is that Uys cannot see beyond his Afrikaner Nationalist ideology. I also show how the discipline of anthropology contributed to this myth so successfully exploited by Uys (Tomasselli 1992).

How to Engage Student Viewers

Teachers need to know the points of reference of a films' intended audiences. What is their and their students' knowledge of South Africa? For non-African students, the question might be: who do they associate most clearly with the country - Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, Johnny Clegg, Gary Player? A video like *Free Mandela* (1988), for example, has very little content or explanation, but its use of well known musicians can act as a hook to get the attention of their fans in the classroom. Similar arguments can be made for *Sun City* (1985), *Asibonanga* (1989) and *Viva Mandela* (1990).

Sun City marshals an impressive array of American performers including Little Steven, Stevie Wonder and others. *Asibonanga* features South Africans Johnny Clegg and Savuka, and *Viva Mandela* offers a greater array of mainly African musicians. As Nelson Mandela told well known musicians at the Wembley II Festival in 1990 which celebrated his release:

Over the years in prison I have tried to follow the developments in progressive music. Your contribution has given us tremendous inspiration ...

Your message can reach quarters not necessarily interested in politics, so that the message can go further than we politicians can push it (Schechter 1990:66).

The role of musicians in politicizing pop music is discussed in some detail in Part III of the longer report on videos about Mandela. The relation of these musical videos to other films on apartheid is drawn out.

The Problem of Stereotyping

One particular film, *Classified People*, raised a tremendous amount of discussion, particularly with regard to which audience it would be of most value. Anthropologist David Bloch argued that everyone 'classifies' everyone else through stereotypes. He felt that people who did not have a thorough understanding of South African laws on race classification would have difficulty in understanding the different realities lived by 'coloureds', 'blacks' and 'Indians' in South Africa. He argued that extensive supplementary material to help contextualise and introduce the film would be required in any teaching situation, especially in the United States.

Bloch feared that American viewers would lack an ability to connect what they saw and heard in *Classified People* to their own experiences. He felt that films like *Girls Apart* (1987) and *Children of Apartheid* (1987) are much more effective in showing how legal classification played up the differences that separated people into parallel worlds that rarely interconnected. Where most films emphasize the black/white conflict and highlight blacks being chased and shot at by police, *Classified People* gets beyond these surface media images. The film explores the subtle and often difficult to detect intricacies and contradictions of racial classification. It reveals how this method of human categorization affected people on the margins of racial categories. The film humanizes and gives personality to people normally depicted as unidimensional victims of structural violence caused by repressive legislation. However, as far as race classification in South Africa was concerned up to 1990, use of a single multi-racial and multi-ethnic family to do this introduces an extraordinary complexity for unknowledgeable viewers.

Most American high school pupils know something about apartheid, if even only about Mandela through popular music videos like *Sun City*. The basic and possibly inaccurate knowledge of apartheid amongst American students provides a hook onto which to hang

greater interest and more accurate explanation through the appropriate use of sensitive and subtle films like *Classified People*, or *Girls Apart*. Another evaluator argued that films are understood in relation to situations and events within viewers' own communities and families. For American students, then, analogies need to be made between events happening in the US and the country on which the film focuses. In *Girls Apart*, for example, the two characters, black and white 16 year olds, speak at the level of high school children on issues immediately translatable to the US situation. Parallels to America relate to the 'separate but equal' issue, which offer an opportunity to discuss similarities between racial attitudes and ethnically distinct living spaces in South Africa, with prejudices and segregation found in the US.

Supportive Material

Interviews with teachers who use films in the classroom emphasized the point that supportive material is nearly always needed as background for films. Though documentary films are usually made to stand on their own, in fact, few rarely accomplish such self-sufficiency. Gaps, omissions, the foregrounding of description over explanation, stylistic considerations, the difficulty of cinematically representing history and other invisible factors, make every documentary vulnerable to criticism of one sort or another. Films used for education, then, should always be conceptually integrated into the curriculum with discussion following the screening. The screenings themselves should be contextualized through extensive pre-screening preparation. Ideally, films should be seen twice, and then in segments, followed again by discussion and the reading of different reviews of the film.

It was also argued that films in which people speak for themselves, either through direct address where they are interviewed, as occurs in most films, or through indirect address and observational techniques where the camera encourages conversations and interactions to develop organically, are more effective than conventional documentaries using direct address in which a concealed narrator imposes a single interpretation. *Last Grave at Dimbaza* (1976) was cited by Kenyan political scientist, Vincent Khapoya, as an example of a film where the dispossessed bantuian victims of apartheid dumped into undeveloped rural spaces demarcated as their 'homelands', tell their own stories without narrator mediation. For him, this film makes particular aspects of apartheid immediately clear even to elementary American school audiences. Another example would be *Makhalipile* (1989) in which Archbishop Trevor

Huddleston tells his life-story, with additional information being provided by his friends and colleagues (also see *Cry of Reason*).

Form, Coding and Style

Most films follow, or more innovatively develop, an internal logic and style, which propose their own specific forms of interpretation or 'readings'. Audience research, however, demonstrates that different audiences, and even individuals from the same class, ethnic, cultural, language and national groups, often bring their own idiosyncratic readings to bear on the same films. They create their own mental texts of meaning through which they make sense from the film in relation to their perception of the world. In other words, depending on the mental frameworks that viewers bring to the screening experience, different readings or interpretations may occur. These may even contradict each other as cultures in particular see the world differently from the perspectives of their unique social and cultural practices. A film made to oppose racism, in fact, may be interpreted by racists as supporting their position.

Even within the academic enterprise, differences of interpretation occur. Some audiences of *The Two Rivers* (1985), for example, interpreted this film as 'racist', notwithstanding the intention of its makers (see also *People of the Great Sandface*.) How to deal with such apparently contradictory interpretations may become problematic for the teacher, especially as I have argued above, where different national cultural experiences and histories distinguish between broadly American and broadly African interpretations.

An anthropologist is unlikely to read 'Nai: *Story of a Kung Woman* in the same way that it might be interpreted by a student of literature or film, for example. The anthropologist will be much more concerned with accuracy, verifiability, and ethnographic detail, while film or literary critics are more likely to respond to film form and narrative structure. Press reviewers and the public, for example, responded enthusiastically to *The Gods Must be Crazy*, which by 1985 had become the highest grossing foreign film ever distributed in the United States. At the same time, however, anthropologists and anti-apartheid activists had implicated it in the apartheid grand scheme.

One way of dealing with multiple interpretations of the same film by students is to ask them to explain how and

why they came to the interpretations that they did. All the interpretative possibilities of a film should be drawn out in discussion and the reasons examined and explained.

How Real is Realism?

Documentaries should not be thought as offering 'windows to the world,' or as 'real life,' as American network TV reporter, Jane Pauley naively puts it. They are media constructions which encode particular views - those of their makers, funders and target audiences. Sometimes, the ideological perspective is partially acknowledged by the film makers, as in *Classified People* (1988), or more explicitly and self-reflexively, as in *I am Clifford Abrahams, This is Grahamstown* (1984) (see Steenveld, nd). Often, however, the director presents a seamless narrative which provides an illusion of 'objectivity'. Many documentarists pre-plan their shots and consciously direct the statements and actions of their subjects to elicit comments which confirm their pre-conceived ideas and authorial ideology.

The subjects are thus caught in a stylistic web which speaks them in terms of the director's authorial ideology and subjectivity. The cinematic paradox is that most viewers are thus positioned by the film's style into believing that the subjects, in fact, are responding spontaneously. Whole sequences in *Maids and Madams*, for example, appear to have been contrived. In one scene, the camera mercilessly strips a white 'madam' interviewing a prospective maid of any morality. This 'acting' is silted and the reverse angle shots and seamless editing create a spurious sense of continuity, resulting in a believable impression of reality. No matter the intentions of the madam, no matter how sincere she may really be, no matter the situation itself, she is condemned by the film's style. This scene elicited intense discussion amongst the evaluators. Two Africans, whose parents had been domestic workers in Nigeria and Kenya respectively, reacted negatively to the techniques used in this and similar scenes, despite their discomforting closeness to the film's topic.

Maids and Madams also implies the erroneous assumption that domestic servants are found uniquely under apartheid. This form of work is found all over Africa where maids are just as exploited, perhaps even more so, since unfair employment practices are not restrained by international scrutiny or even rudimentary domestic workers unions or legislation (with the exception of Zimbabwe).

Maids and Madams is but one example of the contradictory liberal discourse of 'objectivity', 'balance' and 'fairness' in reporting, a concept which legitimizes one world view over others. A number of films use what I call the Frontline Mode of Television Address. This form offers in-depth descriptions of events balanced by interviews from all sides, usually from a war-torn environment. Information is presented as if it were a mere record of the 'facts'. That the information provided has been interpreted, ideologically packaged, and re-coded into a pre-conceived news-frame is concealed. *The Ribbon* (1987), for example, is clearly anti-apartheid, but it presents those whites in South Africa who would have been considered left-wing extremists by the dominant apartheid ideology, as ordinary middle-of-the-road people. The director does this by manipulating the codes by which the documentary's form is constructed. By eliminating the other (official) side of the story, *The Ribbon* empowers the anti-apartheid perspective of the women represented. The ideological underpinning imposed by the director comes across as 'objective', and therefore probably more acceptable to conservative viewers. This may have been a deliberate strategy on the part of the film makers, but it may also reflect the director's bias in terms of the way she imagined the mainstream opinion should have been located.

Questions of style are important. Some film theorists argue that films can only be understood through an understanding of their styles (Youngblood 1970). While this argument has much to recommend it, it cannot account for 'aberrant' interpretations by viewers who lack an explicit knowledge of film or television. Certain of the films viewed - eg. *Mama, I'm Crying*, *The Ribbon*, *Two Rivers*, *Classified People* and *Sun City* - did evidence inconsistencies in style, often causing problems of interpretation. However, the visual nature of film or video ensures that even with these contradictions, people still make sensible inferences from what might be confused encoding in film theory terms. These inferences should be discussed in relation to questions of style. (See also the Critiques of *The Two Rivers*, *Girls Apart*, and *The Gods Must be Crazy*.)

It should also be pointed out that no film can ever offer a complete view of a situation. Different films on similar topics build up a mosaic of interpretations and descriptions which complement and even contradict each other. Students will question the point of showing a film that 'lies'. This question misunderstands the nature of both film, and, indeed, the academic enterprise itself. I have already argued that films are

not transparent windows to the world. They do not project a raw reality and ultimate truth onto the screen.

Films are technologically constructed and manipulated by textual codes - ways of photographing and joining pictures and scenes - and are thus merely *interpretations* of situations already pre-determined by the film makers' own ideological positions. These, in turn, are shaped by their societies of origin.

Similarly, academic work is constantly shifting the boundaries of analysis and explanation, hoping to uncover aspects of the empirical world missed, or excluded, by other researchers. The acrimonious debates on the way film makers have imaged the San, for instance, is a result of new and less paternalistic or racist ways of photographing them, where they and other groups similarly under siege can take control over of way they are imaged. The classroom situation should itself thus never take a film or even a critique of it for granted.

In making sense of films, additional information may be required. This is connected to what the film says or does not say. *Robben Island Our University* (1988), for example, largely lacks contextual information - why the choice of the three speakers? What do they stand for? What are their relations to the central subject? What were their relations to each other? And, why they were chosen to be in the film? *Robben Island* is superficially understandable at the level of appearance, but a fuller appreciation of the significance of the film's theme requires more knowledge than is available from the film itself. Such information is also provided to clarify references or statements where pertinent information is omitted (this also concerns the videos on Mandela).

Critiques of films, then, need to move beyond mere textual analysis, and integrate questions of form, content, and context. Another example relates to *Mapantsula*, whose story is located at a particular moment of black township struggle (see Tomaselli 1991). *Dark City*, a BBC production, *World Apart* (1988) and *Cry Freedom* (1987), *A Dry White Season* (1989) and so on, should also be contextually read against the historical moments within which these narratives are located.

Forms of Violence Caused by Apartheid

One of the recurring themes of films on South Africa is violence. This takes numerous forms depending on which level of society is being imaged. Most films deal

targeted against individuals by the SA Defence Force, the SA Police, and the Security Police. This successfully image the nature of apartheid, though this is implied in a number of films. *The Struggle for South Africa*, *Clifford Abrahams*, *This is My City* and *Cry Freedom*.

Violence is perpetrated by individuals and groups. Examples would include the arbitrary violence in controlling townships seen in, for example, *Mapantsula* (assault or undue force during arrest; rape) and *Witness to Apartheid*, *Witness to a Dry White Season* (suspicious deaths), *Cry Freedom*; *A Dry White Season* (murders and assassinations against community workers who work on their behalf).

Violence shifts culpability from individual to state. It goes beyond the first category in that it is state violence, and gives it a legal form: 'orders' are 'just carrying out orders'. The state of emergencies and the legislation by which they are implemented are prime examples. The state has an institutionalized form of violence. Extra-legal regulations were enacted in the democratic process. The elimination of the prohibition of international media and the violence made it impossible to report on the actions of the forces or publish the names of those arrested. Under this legislation, security forces were shielded from scrutiny by the media and granted impunity. It is with regard to this violence that the term 'structural' violence

is used. At this level, then, state violence can be seen in terms of the means upon which the socio-political system is organized - *apartheid*. While the influx of labor, reservation laws were abolished in the 1980s, the conditions of migrant labor, the loss of family life, its single-sex hostels, and the conditions were still very much in evidence

since 1979 may have claimed that it was not crime, but the forced relocations, poor housing, endemic rural under-nutrition, child malnutrition remained on a daily basis. These and other inequities were away at the fabric of black social

structures, leaving disrupted and impoverished communities in their wake. This level of state engineered violence, because it is so pervasive, becomes difficult to encapsulate as a news event. Yet for the 30 million black South Africans living under these conditions, structural violence is the crux of apartheid (Tomasselli 1990:26). Again, it is mainly narrative films that are best able to convey depictions of structural violence: *Mapantsula*, *Dark City*, *Cry Freedom* and so on.

The above forms of state-induced violence elicited a variety of forms of counter-violence from the oppressed classes. These included the gruesome 'necklacing' of alleged collaborators (shown in graphic detail in *Revolution and Betrayal*) to the seemingly random killings captured in *The Struggle for South Africa*. Some argue that the systematic killings on trains, shootings at buses, and targeted attacks on ANC leaders that emerged in the second half of 1990, is due to a shadowy 'Third Force', said to include renegade elements of the Police and SA Defence Force (SADF) (Tomasselli 1990; HRC 1990; Lawrence 1990). Given the complicity of the SADF in the destabilization of Mozambique as seen in films on that country, viewers may well be persuaded that such a clean cut conspiracy exists. However, Frontline Specials like *The Struggle for South Africa* do give some hints at the complexity of the conflicts and the dangers of conspiratorially attributing blame to some antagonists and not others.

Images of War and Destruction

No adequate film made about politics in the South Africa of the late 1970s or '80s can be complete without reference to the war South Africa conducted against its neighbors. These were known as the Frontline States between 1976 and 1990: Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and in Namibia prior to the latter country's independence in 1990.

In viewing the films on the war, evaluators were constantly exposed to the devastating consequences of the South African military's destabilization of these States. This was especially so with Angola and Mozambique, which bore the brunt of South African insurgency and terrorism by proxy. Here, SADF and Police Forces, in cahoots with Western-backed surrogate forces, wreaked havoc and genocide on local populations. Film after film documents the pain and horror experienced by the children, the orphaned, the maimed, the psychologically wrecked, the abducted and abused, and the mute - they are cinematic victimologies.

Equally, these films tell of inadequate resources available in these countries to respond systematically to these traumas and resulting deprivations. Where resources did exist, they were very often destroyed by the South African military or their surrogates, particularly RENAMO (Mozambique) and UNITA (Angola). The images seen on even the most bloody television US news reports do not begin to match the horror of what is shown in films like *Destructive Engagement* (1987), *Chain of Tears* (1988), *The Struggle for South Africa* (1990), *Killing a Dream* (1986), and *Children of Apartheid* (1987).

The atrocities experienced by Mozambicans, for example, is chillingly exemplified in recurring phrases uttered by respondents across a range of films, for example:

"children now think life means waiting for death."

"The world opposes fascism in Europe but not in Africa."

"Armies should attack other armies: in Southern Africa, they attack civilians."

The revolting traumas visited upon children, in particular, led to comments like:

"little boys look like old men".

Some of these films deal with the difficulties of adequately communicating the nature and extent of RENAMO atrocities to the world. These partly arose out of military censorship internal to South Africa. More disturbingly, however, the Western world's stereotypes of Africa and Africans ('blacks-as-savages,' etc) often ensured that blacks were themselves blamed for the savagery perpetrated by Western-backed regimes who manipulated surrogate black forces, passing it off as 'black-on-black violence.' This point is made by a Mozambican government spokesman in *Destructive Engagement*. He thus questions the usefulness of films which play up the horrors which feed into the Western stereotypes of Africans and Africa.

In assessing films on the effects of war, evaluators were guided by their emotions, and traumatized by their viewing experiences. They sometimes suggested that such films should not be shown to children. While films emphasizing victimology often deal with only single moments in history, they are living testaments against war, brutality, torture, and conflict. If they are read only on this general level, they will have achieved a purpose as far as mature audiences are concerned. But these audiences (eg. American, British etc) should not

for a moment think that their own armies are not capable of the kinds of atrocities depicted.

Other films like *The Struggle for South Africa* (1990) show black faction fighting and even assassinations and murders occurring in front of the camera. Watching these films, and those mentioned above, often requires an act of political will, and an ability to withstand the intensely depressing images and effects of apparently random violence and institutionalized viciousness. These films often play up the stereotype of Africans as helpless victims, unable to resist the aggression and might of the South African Security Forces or opposing political (often referred to as 'tribal') groupings. Audiences are left in despair, feeling helpless as these films offer no explanation or suggestions as to how they can make a difference.

In another category, films like *Witness to Apartheid* (1987), *Chain of Tears*, *Destructive Engagement* (1987), *Namibia: South Africa's Last Colony* (1984) and *Killing a Dream* (1986), and so on appeal to the Western individual's sense of humanity and guilt for help. These victimologies, though much softer than the war documentaries, also work within a discourse of 'charity'. This discourse may, in appropriate circumstances, mobilize people's checkbooks. But it does not necessarily influence the internationally-driven structural processes which themselves need to be challenged and changed before the brutality of war conditions, and their causes, will subside. In Southern Africa, this only occurred after South Africa's military withdrawal from Angola and Namibia after 1989, but the RENAMO bandits continued to destroy Mozambique into the 1990s as aid from sources in America, Portugal and South Africa hostile to peace continued to call the tune.

One should be aware of the effects on whites who perpetrated the violence. The international stereotype of the sour faced 'dour Boer' who tortures and kills for the sake of it is another uni-dimensional stereotype. All South Africans - black, white and other - suffered psychologically under apartheid. The security policeman in *Mapantsula*, is close to cracking. The white soldiers in *The Stick* (1987) are ultimately fighting a war internal to themselves, while the society as a whole only began to start rebuilding the fractured social, cultural and political roots through the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) in 1991. These new synergetic dynamics, still buffeted by neo-fascist maneuverings by the extreme right-wing, found a ready cinema market in inter-ethnic comedies

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... Khapoya (Kenya), and Ruth E Tomaselli, and
... (South Africans), all of the African Studies
... Class.

... MSU contributors included James Aling, a South
... student in Agricultural Economics, Janet
... who had lived in Namibia. Dr Jacob Fisseha,
... Director, ASC, originally from Ethiopia. Dr
... Harrow, Department of English, MSU, has written
... on African literature, Third World cinema
... in Senegal. Verna Hildebrand of Family
... Ecology, has taught in Kenya and South
... Dr John Hinnant, Dr Bill Derman and Scott
... Department of Anthropology. Patricia
... ASC/Telecommunications. Stanley
... a South African studying Speech and Therapy.
... Dr David Wiley, ASC Director and Professor of
... Science.

3. ... Africa on Film and Videotape, 1981-1990.
... by the Centre for Cultural and Media Studies,
... of Natal, Durban 4001, South Africa, in
... with the African Studies Center, Michigan
... University, East Lansing, 1992. 320pp.

4. ... arises from inconsistent 'naming' of
... groups (Marshall calls them 'bands') in the
... Desert. Marshall used 'Bushmen', a term
... Westerners, in his early films. Hence, he
... short fragmented ethnographic topics, made
... in the 1950s. The San, Bushmen, !Kung Bushmen
... However, as anthropologists began to question
... 'Bushman' naming as a Western-imposed racism, the
... 'San' or more generally, 'Khoisan', received
... But the validity of these terms have also been
... and Marshall now uses the names by which
... 'bands' refer to themselves. Hence, The San,
... Bushmen. 'Kung Bushmen Series has been retitled as
... The San (Ju/wasi) Film Series. Another band to which
... occasionally refers is the /Gwi. !Kung,
... is a linguistic grouping which incorporates
... dialects spoken by the San in Namibia:

*Ju/wasi speak the central of three dialects of
... the Northern Bushman language. In many
... books and textbooks, articles and films, Ju/wasi are
... called !Kung although they are hard put to it to
... understand the northern and southern dialects of
... their language. Anthropologists use !Kung to stress
... the similarities once imposed on the societies of the
... !Kung by hunting and gathering in a dry
... environment. Ju/wasi, who know they are called
... 'Bushman', never defined themselves as hunters or
... gatherers - by the way they made their living or by a
... sense of race ... They recognize a remote
... kinship affinity with other !Kung speakers but do
... not identify with them, or with other people
... called as Bushmen in Namibia" (Marshall and
... 1984:2).*

When Marshall refers to !Nai in the film *!Nai: Story of a !Kung Woman*, he is locating her linguistically within the "northern Bushman language". Though !Nai speaks a !Kung dialect, she considers herself to be part of the Ju/wasi people. "Ju" means 'person', "/wa" means 'true' or 'proper' and "si" is a plural suffix. Ju/wasi therefore means 'the True People'.

We have retained the film maker's original use where appropriate. Though aware of the problems of 'San' - now argued also to be an imposed word meaning 'robber' (Gordon 1990) - we use San as the currently politically acceptable term. In terms of this meaning, the San is a general population group found in Namibia, Botswana and Angola, but who speak different languages, have different customs and may not identify each other as part of the same linguistic, racial, social or cultural grouping. We use !Kung, in the linguistic sense defined by Marshall, and Ju/wasi and /Gwi as specific groups of people who identify themselves thus.

Paul Myburgh uses the overarching term 'Bushman' when he refers to the Gwikwe (Bushpeople), the Xo, the Hei Om and the Tgaickwe (people who walk on stones) in Botswana. The more usual general term for Botswana 'Bushman', however is 'Barsawa', which only came into usage after the 1960s (see Wilmsen 1990:30).

5. The history, nature, policies and practices of most of the organizations dealt within the films can be found in two excellent guides: *The Struggle for South Africa: A Reference Guide to Movement, Organizations and Institutions, Vols 1 and 2*, by Rob Davies, Dan O'Meara and Sipho Dlamini (Zed Press, London) 1988.

6. 'Necklacing' is a gruesome form of execution used against alleged collaborators of the apartheid regime during the late 1980s. A tyre is placed around the neck of the victim, filled with petrol, and set alight.

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