

Article

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The Preservation and Restoration of South African Cinema: A Personal Perspective



Introduction

This article is ONE of the results of more than three decades of in-depth research regarding the history of South African cinema, from my post-graduate studies to professional research at the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa and film projects at the University of Cape Town (UCT).

This article is also a product of my teaching work at the UCT, as well as my involvement in the BRICS Film Festival at the Fluminense Federal University (UFF) in Niterio, Brazil, during 2019. Several scholars were firstly invited to do an intense series of lectures about the film histories of the BRICS countries. I represented South Africa. . The contact time with students was 20 hours of lectures within the first week of my visit to Brazil. The second phase of the event at UFF involves a conference on film preservation in BRICS countries. I presented a paper on film preservation in South Africa. I have also been selected as a South African scholar on the BRICS Film Preservation Working Committee.

The focus of my article is on the preservation and restoration of South African cinema and the challenges involved.



Since 1988 I have been involved in the South African film industry in a multiplicity of roles. From 1990 until 1992 I was part of extensive research for the Film and Allied Workers' Organisation (FAWO) regarding the restructuring of the South African film industry. For this project I studied the film industries of Canada, New Zealand, West Africa, Iceland, Australia, Germany and Italy. From 1993 until 1995 further studies were conducted into the film

industries of China, France, Great Britain, Argentina, Mexico, Brazil and Cuba. I worked closely with the Film and Television Federation on the establishment of a South African Film Foundation for the administration and funding of the local film industry. During April and May 1995, I was co-opted onto the Film Subcommittee of the new democratic government's Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology's Task Group regarding post-apartheid film policy. At the end of July 1995, I was seconded to the Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology to co-write the white paper for a future South African film industry. The draft was completed at the beginning of 1996.

I had also the opportunity to serve as a council member of the National Film and Video Foundation of South Africa (between 1999 and 2007), a sub-committee member of the NFVF regarding the establishment of a National Film School, and a director (representing the NFVF and formal training institutions) of the Cape Film Commission (1999-2003). I was also a board member of the Community Video Education Trust in Cape Town, a community-based training institution. These roles provided me with an **insider's perspective** on the film industry of South Africa. This article has also been enhanced by personal diaries with entries on more than 10 000 films, including many South African films, which I wrote between 1975 and 2025.

South Africa's 130-year film history has been captured in several books. Developments in early South African cinema (1895–1940) have been chronicled in Thelma Gutsche's *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa: 1895–1940* (1946/72). Other significant studies include Keyan Tomaselli's *The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South Africa* (1989), Johan Blignaut and Martin Botha's *Movies Moguls Mavericks: South African Cinema 1979–1991* (1992), Martin Botha's edited volume, *Marginal Lives and Painful Pasts: South African Cinema After Apartheid* (2007), Jacqueline Maingard's *South African National Cinema* (2007), André le Roux and Lilla Fourie's *Filmverlede: Geskiedenis*

van die Suid-Afrikaanse speelfilm (1982), Peter Davis's *In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the Jungles of Cinema's South Africa* (1996), Martin Botha and Adri Van Aswegen's *Images of South Africa: The Rise of the Alternative film* (1992), Tomaselli's compilation of revised and reworked papers and chapters published elsewhere, *Encountering Modernity: Twentieth Century South African Cinemas* (2006), Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela's edited volume, *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa* (2003), Martin Botha's *South African Cinema 1896 – 2010* (2012), Lucia Saks's *Cinema in a Democratic South Africa: The Race for Representation* (2010), Litheko Modisani's *South Africa's Renegade Reels: The Making and Public Lives of Black-Centered Films* (2013), Cara Moyer-Duncan's *Projecting nation: South African cinema after apartheid* (2020), Martin Botha's history of South African Queer Cinema (2024), as well as Leon van Nierop's *Daar doer in die fliek* (2016).

In the 130-year history of South African cinema four academic books have been devoted to South African film directors: Martin Botha and Hubert Dethier's *Kronieken van Zuid-Afrika: de films van Manie van Rensburg* (1997), Martin Botha's *Jans Rautenbach: Dromer, Baanbreker en Auteur* (2006), Keyan Tomaselli's book about Richard Green (2023) and Chris Vorster's *Franz Marx: Uit die Perd se Bek* (2022).

In general, the artistic achievements of film directors received little scholarly attention. Attempts to rework the history of South African cinema such as Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela's edited volume, *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa* (2003) as well as Jacqueline Maingard's *South African National Cinema* (2007)



devoted entire chapters to the ideological analysis of films such as *De Voortrekkers* (1916), *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1951) and *Come Back, Africa* (1959), but in the process they ignored the significant oeuvres of directors such as Jans Rautenbach, Ross Devenish, Manie van Rensburg, Katinka Heyns, Darrell Roodt as well as many of the directors of the 1980s and 1990s. Surprisingly Heyns and Roodt, and other significant (and internationally acclaimed) post-apartheid directors such as Gavin Hood, Mark Dornford-May, Rehad Desai, Francois Verster, Ramadan Suleman, Madoda Ncayiyana, Craig Matthew, Craig and Damon Foster, Jack Lewis, Liz Fish and Ntshaveni Wa Luruli, are absent from the list of 25 film-makers and cultural leaders whom the American scholar Audrey Thomas McCluskey interviewed for her publication on post-apartheid cinema titled *The Devil You Dance With: Film Culture in the New South Africa* (2009).

Contextualisation

Even after 130 years South African cinema is still characterised by a fragmented film industry. The reason for this fragmentation and lack of identity is multifaceted, each facet interacting to produce a complicated set of associations and relationships. In a nutshell, the apartheid policy and ineffective state-subsidised film structures contributed to the severe fragmentation of the South African film industry (Botha 2012). Since 1956 and the introduction of a regulated subsidy system, government and big businesses have collaborated to manipulate cinema in South Africa. Ideology and capital came together to create a national cinema that would reflect South Africa during Hendrik Verwoerd's regime. However, it was initially a cinema for whites only, and predominantly Afrikaans. Of the 60 films made between 1956 and 1962, 43 were in Afrikaans, 4 were bilingual, and 13 were in English. The subsidy system rewarded box-office success. Once a film had earned a specific amount of money at the box-office, it qualified for the subsidy, which paid back a percentage of costs. This percentage was initially higher for Afrikaans films than for English productions. It is therefore evident that the government of that time realised the potential influence this Afrikaner-dominated industry would have on the growth and spread of the Afrikaans language. In 1962, Afrikaner capital became a significant factor in the industry when the insurance company SANLAM acquired a major interest in Sterfilms, a distribution company with the explicit intention of providing cinema predominantly for Afrikaner patrons (Botha 2012).

By 1969, Satbel (the Suid-Afrikaanse Teaterbelange Beperk) was formed, and the financing, production, and distribution of films in South Africa were essentially in the hands of one large company (except for a few cinemas owned by CIC-Warner). The white Afrikaans audience for the local cinema was relatively large and stable, guaranteeing nearly every Afrikaans film a long enough run to break even as long as it provided light entertainment and dealt with Afrikaner beliefs. With several significant exceptions, many Afrikaans language films were aesthetically unremarkable, a flaw that some critics attribute to the conservative attitude of the Afrikaners. Afrikaners wanted their ideals visualised in these films. This conservatism was characterised by an attachment to the past, ideals of linguistic and racial purity, and religious and moral norms. The films had to subscribe to these conservative norms in order to be successful. The films seldom attempted to explore a national cultural psyche. As such, they were a closed form, made by Afrikaners for Afrikaners, with little or no attention to their potential to say something important about their society to an international audience. The type of realism that could have analysed Afrikaner culture in a critical manner was avoided; instead they made use of folk stereotypes that showed the Afrikaner in chatty, heart-warming, and lovable comedy situations, or as beset by emotional problems that had little to do with society, but much to do with the mainsprings of Western melodrama about mismatched couples overcoming obstacles on the path to true love (Botha 2012). Most of the Afrikaans features

before 1990 have no English subtitles, thus making them thus inaccessible to researchers and viewers, who can't speak Afrikaans.

Afrikaans-language films of the 1970s ignored the socio-political turmoil, as well as the realities experienced by black South Africans under apartheid. Most Afrikaans films communicated by means of obsolete symbols that had little multicultural communication value. They painted a one-sided and stereotypical portrait of the Afrikaner, leading to misconceptions about what and who the Afrikaner really is. Furthermore, the portrayal of blacks as a servant class in these films is a symbol of apartheid ideology (Botha 2012).

The films by Jans Rautenbach and Emil Nofal, *Die Kandidaat* (1968), *Katrina* (1969), and *Jannie Totsiens* (1970), were successful alternatives to the Afrikaans escapism fare of the 1960s and early 1970s. After the introduction of South African television in 1976, some Afrikaans filmmakers, such as Manie van Rensburg, made brilliant dramas and series for local television. In fact, Van Rensburg became a chronicler of the Afrikaner psyche in revisionist dramas such as *Verspeelde Lente* (1982) and *Die Perdesmous* (1983).

The Afrikaans film, **with a few exceptions** such as Rautenbach's *Broer Matie* (1983), Johan Blignaut's *Mamza* (1985), and Katinka Heyns's *Fiela se Kind* (1987), *Die Storie van Klara Viljee* (1991), and *Paljas* (1997), including television dramas and series like *Veldslag* (1990), stagnated during the 1980s and even almost disappeared in the 1990s.

The current revival in Afrikaans cinema is mainly based on escapism and nostalgia and in many ways resembles the cinema of the 1970s. In his PhD study about contemporary Afrikaans cinema Chris Broodryk (2015) focuses on Afrikaans film as a cinema of political impotence. With a very few exceptions Afrikaans cinema does not reflect processes of political engagement and interrogation as other, ostensibly similar post-conflict cinemas do. While German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films made reference to German's "monstrous" political pasts and presents, Afrikaans cinema seems oblivious to its own 'indebtedness' to a specific identifiable historical "monstrosity". It is not that Afrikaans cinema attempts to "represent the unrepresentable", but that there is no acknowledgement of anything unrepresentable (history, exploitation, political killings, effects of migrant labour and so forth) to engage with (Broodryk 2015). Since 1994, Afrikaans cinema has abandoned its occasional sense of political urgency in its near totality in favour of what can broadly be described as safe, sanitised non-political narratives, films that fail to transcend their genre trappings and seem to reify stereotypes of Afrikaans speaking South Africans in especially comedies, to not even mention the conspicuous absence of blackness in these films.

In his study Broodryk (2015) presents a detailed examination of the claim that Afrikaans cinema has indeed shifted from occasional political potency by directors such as Rautenbach

to near complete political impotence. Broodryk was personally drawn to the issue of cinematic impotence by a growing realisation that Afrikaans cinema is a cinema that fails to come to grips with South African history and politics in general, a cinema that finds a critical engagement with the multicultural South African present equally problematic.



B Scheme films

Another contributor to the fragmentation of the South African film industry was the creation of the so-called Bantu film industry during the 1970s (Botha 2012). This boost to “black” films resulted in the making of large number films in ethnic languages that were screened in churches, schools, community centres, and beer halls. It was against government policy to allow black cinemas in the urban white areas, as this would concede the citizenship of urban blacks. The urbanisation of blacks was portrayed as uniformly negative and homeland life as more fitting (Botha 2012). At this stage, black and white audiences were treated differently. The audiences were separated, each with its own set of rules and operations, films, and cinemas. Any film that managed to be made that in any way reflected the South African society in turmoil, was banned by the state, or received no distribution and thus did not qualify for any subsidy. A true national film industry did not develop through the Bantu film industry, only a few inferior paternalistic films for blacks were made, chiefly by whites (Botha 2012).

The history of film distribution and exhibition in South Africa has been one of racism and segregation. It was only in 1985 that the distributors managed to desegregate some cinemas, and acknowledge, for the first time, the existence of the majority of South African non-whites, who had been prevented from being part of a cinema-going public (Botha 2012).

Armes (2008) estimated that approximately 250 films were made under the B Subsidy Scheme from 1974 till 1990. Originally a maximum of R70 000 rand was payable, based on the number of tickets sold for 18 cents or less. The majority of these films were made by white directors with black actors. They were shot in Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho and other South African languages. Armes (2008) lists 206 films, which were shot in Zulu and/or Xhosa and 35 in Sotho. The

reality is that no complete list exists about the number of films. Since 2013 Gravel Road Entertainment has restored some of these films and added English subtitles.

On the political front the Soweto uprising of June 1976 claimed the lives of almost 700 people and provoked responses worldwide. Enforced removals of black South Africans continued as part of apartheid policy. Any film that managed to be made which in any way reflected the South African society in turmoil was banned by the state, such as *How Long* (1976) by Gibsen Kente or Nana Mahomo's *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, (1974), or received no distribution whatsoever, and thus did not qualify for any film subsidy. In 1976, for example, more than half of the total 698 films examined by the Directorate of Publications for screening in South Africa were either partly censored by means of cuts or banned outright (Friedberg 1978). Only 249 films were approved unconditionally, 341 were cut and 61 were totally banned. *The Omen* was so brutalised by the censors' scissors – the final sequence in the film having been completely eliminated – that some newspaper critics refused to review it (Friedberg 1978).

Directors such as Simon Sabela (*U-Deliwe*) (1975), tried to make more meaningful work within this system, but they were severely constrained by censorship and white dominance in the film industry. Sabela played a role in Ashley Lazarus's *e'Lollipop* (1975), one of the few films made during apartheid, which imagined some type of friendship between blacks and whites. The setting, however, is not apartheid South Africa, but a Catholic mission in Lesotho. A white boy (Norman Knox) and a black boy (Muntu Ben Louis Ndebele) spent their childhood in the idealised pastoral beauty of the mountains. The film didn't challenge apartheid ideology and thus enjoyed a general theatrical release in South Africa.

Sabela's own work as director included *Isivumelwano* (1978) and *Ngaka* (1978). Produced by Heyns Productions the first title is based on a radio serial and tells the story of a dedicated clergyman, whose wife cannot reconcile with having to give up the bright lights of her modelling career for a life of austerity. She runs away with a charming gangster. Leading parts are played by Congress Majola and Cynthia Shange. *Ngaka* is a comedy about the clash between Western and tribal medicine. Significantly both films' crew members included several black technicians. Thematically, however, these films avoided addressing the socio-political realities of the seventies.

One of the seminal documentaries of the 1970s on the horrors of apartheid is Nana Mahomo's *Last Grave at Dimbaza* (1974). It gives an insight into the lives of people living under apartheid during the 1970s. So powerful was the indictment provided by *Last Grave at Dimbaza* that the South African government produced a film during the 1970s to counter its effects, entitled *To Act A Lie* (1978). The South African Embassy in London tried to stop Mahomo's film being broadcast on the BBC and in the controversy that followed, the BBC allowed the South African government to screen their own film alongside *Last Grave at*

Dimbaza. This film led to an international media war over South Africa's image (Unwin & Belton 1992). *Last Grave at Dimbaza* won the Grand Prix at the Melbourne Film Festival, the Interfilm Award at the Mannheim-Heidelberg International Film Festival, as well as the Fipresci Prize at the Grenoble International Film Festival. When Mahomo made *Last Grave at Dimbaza* in 1974 he was a member of the Pan Africanist Congress and wanted to use the film medium to educate people about the horrors of apartheid and the conditions in South Africa. His films are characterised by a direct and simple approach to shooting (much of the camera is hand-held and shots are repeated) and are edited with the intention of maximising understanding. Unfortunately Mahomo was forced to live a large part of his life outside South Africa, for example in Botswana. He and Simon Sabela were among the few black film directors in South Africa during the 1970s. Their work needs to be preserved for future generations.

The Film Movement of the 1980s

One of the significant positive changes that occurred in South Africa between the late 1970s and the early 1980s was when a group of film and video producers who were not affiliated with the established film companies in the mainstream industry made films about the realities of the majority of South Africans. Most of the films were shown at film festivals, universities, church halls, trade union offices, and private homes. Most of the films experienced censorship problems during the State of Emergency. The films had small budgets and were either financed by the producers themselves, by progressive organisations, or with the assistance of the tax-benefit system of the 1980s (Botha 2012).

The films were chiefly the product of two groups that emerged jointly: a group of white university students opposed to apartheid, and black workers who yearned for film using indigenous imagery that would portray reality in South Africa and that would give them a voice and space in the local films settings. This remarkable process also culminated in a movement of workers, students, and members of youth, sport, and church organisations uniting against apartheid. The production of audio-visual material, forms of communication that required specialised production skills and money not necessarily found in the black worker class, was unique. This process contributed to the formation of Film and Allied Workers' Organisation (FAWO) in September 1988. One of the aims of FAWO was to unite all filmmakers in South Africa to establish a democratic society (Botha 2012).

Together with numerous documentaries, community videos, and the rise of short fiction and animation filmmaking, full-length films such as *Mapantsula* (1988) marked the beginning of a new, critical South African cinema that might as well be termed the alternative film movement of the 1980s. This new cinema is based on audio-visual material that reflects the realities of the black majority. **It is from these films that the symbols and iconography of a**

national film industry can be drawn, rather than from the diversions produced by the Afrikaans cinema and the Bantu film industry (Botha 2014).

In many respects, the early 1980s signified an opening up for South Africa, socially as well as politically (Gevisser & Cameron 1994). At the beginning of the decade, President P.W. Botha began instituting a ‘reform’ programme (which was balanced with heightened repression) and, in the aftermath of the Soweto upheavals in 1976, a massive upsurge of black liberationist activity swept through the townships. For the very first time since the Nationalist Party came to power in 1948, there was a tangible sense that the decades of white Afrikaner Calvinist rule were coming to an end and that the strict apartheid packaging off of people would give way to a more liberated and integrated society. Those years, despite two states of emergencies, saw the beginnings of deracialisation and the establishment of anti-apartheid counter-cultures, which vociferously questioned the religious and political restrictions of the previous 40 years.

The years 1959 to 1980 had been characterised by an artistic revival in filmmaking throughout the world, ranging from exciting political films in Africa and Latin America to examples of great art cinema in Europe and Asia. Unfortunately, due to moral and political censorship, a lack of audience development and inadequate film distribution South Africans and thus local filmmakers were not exposed to these remarkable developments in world cinema (Botha 2012).

Severe state censorship during the 1970s, for example, also prevented South African audiences to experience developments in world cinema. Many of the films by directors such as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Bertolucci and Fellini (for example, *Fellini Satyricon* and *Fellini's Casanova*) were banned. Cuts to remove violence, nudity, sex and/or “foul” language in films such as *Midnight Express*, *Coming Home*, *The Omen*, *The Deer Hunter* and *Taxi Driver* left audiences with mutilated texts. The word “fuck” was allowed for the first time uncut in 1979 in *And Justice for All*, but the 1980s and early 1990s were still characterised by moral and political censorship.

During 1992, a mere two years before the final collapse of the apartheid state, censorship was still a significant reality: of the 1 312 feature films were submitted to our censors and 83 were banned as “undesirable” (Botha 2012).

In the late 1970s international film festivals in South Africa became crucial to break the sense of isolation felt by South African audiences. In some cases the censors of the 1980s were more lenient with regarding to film festival screenings and allowed some nudity and sex in films. The Weekly Mail Film Festival, hosted under the umbrella of the independent newspaper The Weekly Mail (later Mail & Guardian), offered an invaluable festival of independent, oppositional filmmaking in South Africa from 1987 till the early 1990s. Festival director Liza

Key also included milestones from other African countries to break the isolation between South African filmmakers and their colleagues elsewhere on the continent. At the Weekly Mail Film Festival of 1990, for example, co-hosted by The Weekly Mail newspaper and the Film and Allied Workers' Organisation (FAWO), a collection of rare films on South Africa found in archives around the world, examples of resistance cinema never seen publicly in this country, as well as 20 films by independent South African filmmakers and over 20 short films in a short film competition were screened.

Since the late 1980s the annual Weekly Mail Film Festival became an important forum for the screening of short films (Botha 2012). A short film competition also encouraged new and young film makers to present their work at this festival. In the early 1990s short films about socio-political changes in South Africa and how people relate to them have become thematically dominant at this festival. In the 1980s the contours of South Africa's political landscape were transformed by massive black popular protest and government promises of a 'new' South Africa. Between black political mobilisation and a state attempting to manage a disintegrating economy existed another reality — an embattled white working class struggling to defend a way of life in the face of loss of privilege based on race.

In November 1993, in the waning days of Nationalist Party rule, representatives of 20 South African political parties, including the ANC, approved a draft constitution for a post-apartheid South Africa. The new constitution featured a Bill of Rights outlawing discrimination on the basis of a number of personal characteristics, ranging from race and gender to age and physical disability. It also included sexual orientation: South African gays and lesbians were at last considered as a part of this country. With countries like the United States of America still far from enacting gay civil rights protection, in just a few short years South Africa was leading the world with the most progressive constitution regarding gay and lesbian equality. It is still a long way to create total equality, since homophobia is still rife in rural South Africa and townships, and the vast majority of the population still lives in dire poverty. The country will still struggle for many years to come to address the imbalances left by apartheid, also within the film industry, which is still predominantly white (Botha 2003; 2012; 2024).

Under apartheid many voices were thus silenced and marginalised in the film and television industries: blacks, women, gays and lesbians (Botha 2012; 2024). An important milestone in post-apartheid cinema is Jack Lewis's *Proteus* (2003), the beginning of a visible gay/lesbian cinema in South Africa. The film is a collaborative effort between Lewis and John Greyson, building on the oral histories background of Lewis and the subversion of the period drama in previous Greyson films such as *Lilies* (1996), which is an adaptation by Michel Marc Bouchard and Linda Gaboriau of Bouchard's own play *Les feluettes*. It depicts a play being performed in a prison by the inmates. It covers a wide historical span (1912 to 1952) as the group of men

in prison confront a bishop with his brutal response to their awakening homosexuality many years before.

Notions that homosexuality is un-African, an import of the western society, are brilliantly challenged in *Proteus*. Based on a true story, it is a period film, that raises issues still of enormous relevance today. Historian and film-maker Jack Lewis was fascinated by a court record in the Cape Archives, dated 18 August 1735, giving judgement in the case of two Robben Island prisoners. Dutch sailor Rijkhaart Jacobsz and Claas Blank, a Khoe tribesman convict, received extreme sentences for what the court called ‘the abominable and unnatural crime of Sodomy’.

Hees (2007) points out that, while based on extant court records, *Proteus* can hardly be read as a realistic account of the social construction of gender in the eighteenth century. The tension in the film between the attempt to depict the (historical) narrative of the prisoners as reflected in the court records of the time and the desire to explain their story with reference to a now suspect taxonomy is what generates and sustains its particular version of ‘realism’. *Proteus* intends to generate a discourse on history, sexuality and identity construction. The way *Proteus* uses anachronism, for example, insistently draws attention to the film as a constructed historical discourse.

According to Hees (2007) the film departs radically from the norms governing the use of filmic space and time, and it does so precisely as a way of interrogating ‘the relationship of past to present’. The film is based on court records of the time. The opening credits state it is ‘based on a true story’, but it quickly becomes evident that historical authenticity is not what the film is striving for. *Proteus* opens by first signalling that past very clearly, then it almost immediately disrupts our sense of the historical period very deliberately – the key juxtaposition that we have to make sense of at the beginning of the film is South Africa in 1735 and court stenographers in 1964. Greyson and Lewis indicated that they specifically referenced 1964 because that was the year that Mandela was incarcerated, but indicators such as the sixties court stenographers complete with cat-eye glasses and beehives also evoke this period when South Africa was drifting towards becoming a police state. In fact, Sergeant Willer’s khaki uniform is that of the early apartheid period (as opposed to the later blue uniform). He is a key figure in the torture and incarceration of Claas Blank and Rijkhaart Jacobsz; at the start of the film we see him looming over Claas in the water-cell – the image is a chilling fusion of real and imaginary fear and anxiety, as will become clear – but for a South African viewer, at any rate, the khaki uniform is a powerful signifier of the growing state oppression (Hees 2007). The figure standing with Sergeant Willer, however, is dressed in an eighteenth-century military uniform.

The opening sequence indicates that the narrative is located in the decade between 1725 and 1735. The opening images on screen are of protea flowers intercut with images of the 1735 court records and of the sixties stenographers struggling to find a way to translate the Dutch term for sodomy. Worden (2007) argues this is already an indication that the court records are themselves a mediated construction, but one could go even further and note that language itself is a highly unstable set of signifiers. *Proteus* suggests that language is an instrument to impose power, to torture, to deceive, to disguise and to generate panic. It is an extremely moving experience owing to the performances by Rouxnet Brown and Neil Sandilands and forms part of a very small number of South African productions on male homosexuality.

A film such as *Proteus* brilliantly deals with events that were conveniently left out in previous South African/pan-African official history books, or in contemporary social and cultural discourses. Like the pioneering African film practices of older films, these emerging gay/lesbian film practices offer a unique insight into the continent's diverse cultures and experiences as discourses that might be understood as guardians of popular memory (Botha 2014; 2024).

The term marginality will be used in this article to describe the poor, economic and social conditions of individuals within a society, social classes within a nation, or nations within the larger world community. Here it also refers to poverty-stricken groups left behind in the modernisation process. They are not integrated into the socio-economic system and their relative poverty increases.

A gallery of marginal lives is seen in a variety of post-apartheid features, documentaries and shorts¹:

Homelessness and poverty – *Angel, The Wooden Camera, The Flyer, Under the Rainbow, Boy Called Twist, Stompie and the Red Tide, Pavement Aristocrats: The Bergies of Cape Town, Malunde, Hillbrow Kids, Faith's Corner, Tsotsi, Boesman and Lena, Tracks, Azure, Life is Hard, Zimbabwe, Meisie, My Secret Sky.*

Aids orphans – *Shouting Silent, The Sky in her Eyes, A Child is a Child, Lucky, Zimbabwe, Life, Above All.*

Aids victims – *Yesterday, It's My Life, Beat the Drum, Considerately Killing Me, Nkosi, Themba.*

Gays and lesbians – *Proteus, Property of the State: Gay Men in the Apartheid Military, The Man Who Drove With Mandela, Skilpoppe, Apostles of Civilised Vice, The World Unseen, Love Poem.*

“Cultures under threat” – *Ochre and Water, The Great Dance.*

¹ See Botha (2007) for a comprehensive discussion on marginality and post-apartheid cinema.

Foreigners in South Africa and xenophobia: *The Foreigner, Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon, A Shadow of Hope, The Burning Man, District 9.*

Victims of institutionalised violence during apartheid: *Zulu Love Letter, Ubuntu's Wounds, Forgiveness, Red Dust, The Guguletu Seven, What happened to Mbuyisa?, Between Joyce and Remembrance, Betrayal, Drum, Skin, The Cradock Four.*

Victims of colonial racism: *The Life and Times of Sarah Baartman.*

Victims of child rape: *And There in the Dust.*

Intellectually challenged youths and the community's discrimination: *Ouma se Slim Kind.*

Victims of drug addiction: *Ongeriewe, My Black Little Heart.*

For the first time South African audiences are exposed to certain marginalised communities, such as the homeless in Francois Verster's remarkable documentary *Pavement Aristocrats: The Bergies of Cape Town* (1998), the Himbas of Kaokoland in Craig Matthew's *Ochre and Water: Himba Chronicles from the Land of Kaoko* (2001), Aids victims in *Shouting Silent* (2001), the gay subcultures of the fifties and sixties in *The Man Who Drove With Mandela* (1998), street children in *Hillbrow Kids* (1999), prison inmates in Cliff Bestall's *Cage of Dreams* (2000) and the San in the Foster Brothers' visual poem *The Great Dance* (1999). The latter has already won more than 35 international and national awards, the most for a single film in the history of South African cinema Wynand Dreyer's trilogy of documentaries about ordinary lives on the Cape Flats, *Ravensmead, A Piece of Life, A Piece of Death* and *Steel upon Steel*, is a lyrical and moving document.

Marginalised communities finally have a voice in our post-apartheid cinema. Botha's comprehensive discussion of a cinema of marginality in his 2007 book is available for further reading. Many of the abovementioned work should be added to archives in South Africa for future preservation.

Soon after it took power, South Africa's first black-majority government determined that film had the potential to fortify the new multiracial democracy by promoting social cohesion, stimulating economic development, and creating jobs (Moyer-Duncan 2020). In 1999, it created the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) and charged the agency with fostering a national cinema, raising hope for the emergence of a vibrant, socially engaged, and self-sufficient film industry with the potential to invigorate filmmaking not just in South Africa but in other parts of Africa. The government and some private entities provided significant support, but South African cinema has so far failed to fulfil the role envisioned for it in 1994.

South African films do not yet accurately reflect the nation's multiplicity of racial identities, tell local stories rich in local nuance, or contribute to social cohesion. They seldom succeed financially, and the racial makeup of the filmmaking industry does not yet reflect that of the country (Botha 2024; Moyer-Duncan 2020)

Cara Moyer-Duncan's excellent book (2020), basically a follow-up on the work by Botha (2012), identifies the internal and transnational forces that have affected South African cinema since 1994. It considers how the various legacies of colonialism and apartheid, the cultural and economic effects of globalisation and neoliberal policies, specific practices related to production, distribution, and exhibition, as well as audience and critical reception have affected how South African feature-length narrative fiction films imagine both race and nation. It considers how a focus on job creation and economic growth has affected the social and artistic potential of cinema as the government endeavored to create a national cinema. And it examines how continued poverty and inequality determine who has access to the nation's films and the way those films are accessed.

A film industry or in more ambitious terms, a national cinema, is ultimately dependent on the number of people who are willing to pay for it. Without a paying audience, whether it is cinema, television, video or new media exhibition, there can be no industry to speak of. In the future audience development will become more and more crucial to build audiences for the post-apartheid cinema. South Africa's film industry has been held to ransom for decades by the developed markets' funding and exhibition models, content and distribution strengths, and worldwide dominance of the Hollywood studios (Botha 2004). Other challenges facing the industry are the inaccessible film exhibition sites that are outside the reach of the majority of South Africans, the limited concentration of theatres in metropolitan areas and the general lack of culturally specific, community based film exhibition points and product. According to research by the NFVF, audience attendance at South African cinemas is decreasing at an alarming rate to the extent that exhibitors have had to close down cinemas, especially in townships. Some independent cinemas in townships have been converted to churches. Various factors contributing to this decline, including the increase in the range of entertainment media, especially a wider range of television content, door price increases, unemployment, crime, and a lack of effective marketing strategies (Botha 2004). The harsh lockdown measures to deal with COVID led the closure of cinemas for more than a year and in 2021 Ster-Kinekor had to apply for business rescue.

It is a fragile industry, especially in the face of globalisation (Botha 2004; 2012; 2024).

Challenges for film preservation and restoration

In her study of the preservation of Afrikaans cinema between 1916 and 2014 Christa Steyn (2015) did a thorough analysis of the privileged status of Afrikaans cinema, Her thesis includes a comprehensive list of features, which have been preserved, also thanks to kykNET and M-Net. Armes (2008) estimates that between 1930 and 2008 as many as 275 Afrikaans language features were made and that the majority of these films were shot in the 1960s and 1970s

thanks to the so-called A Subsidy Scheme. (See also Leon van Nierop 2016). Steyn argued for an exclusive archive devoted to Afrikaans cinema. For me personally such an initiative will further create fragmentation. **Ideally all South African features, documentaries and shorts should be available to researchers and the public under one roof. It is crucial to create a list of all the work, which was produced in the South African film industry. It will enhance a more comprehensive history of our cinema since 1896.**



Steyn (2015) focused on a few European film archives. I would like to add great initiatives such as Mosfilm Cinema Concern, L'Immagine Retrovata in Bologna, the BFI Archive, the Korean Film Archives and many more.

The National Film, Video and Sound Archives (NFVSA) have been an invaluable source for my own publications and for retrospectives at international film

festivals. One of the highlights at the Ischia Global Film and Music Fest was an exhibition on the then 113-year history of South African cinema. This unique collection of film stills, posters and DVD clips had been the result of collaboration between the director of the Cape Winelands Film Festival, Leon van der Merwe, and Trevor Moses from the South African National Film Archives. The exhibition on South Africa's film heritage demonstrated to an international film audience that among the decades of film escapism, racist films and government propaganda, South African cinema produced cinematic jewels. During preparations for this retrospectives and others such as a focus on *10 years of South African Democracy* at the 2004 Festival del Cinema Africano, d'Asia e America Latina (FESCAAL) I became aware of films, which urgently need to be restored. I would like to highlight these films and their directors for their cultural, historic and aesthetic importance. I have already mentioned landmarks such as *Proteus* and, *Last Grave at Dimbaza*.

Manie van Rensburg

Most Afrikaans language films of the 1960s and 1970s ignored the socio-political realities of apartheid, especially the realities experienced by black South Africans (Botha 2012). The majority of Afrikaans language films communicated by means of obsolete symbols that had little multicultural communication value (Botha 2012). They painted a one-sided and stereotypical portrait of the Afrikaner, leading to a misconception about who and what the Afrikaner was. Furthermore, the negative portrayal of blacks as a servant class in these films is a visual symbol of the deep-seated apartheid ideology (Botha 2012). The exceptions were very few in the 1970s. Director Manie van Rensburg entered the field of Afrikaner culture through political satire and became one of the leading filmmakers in South African cinema.

Ironically, the first retrospective of Van Rensburg's oeuvre was held in Brussels in 1996, not South Africa, where he still needs to be fully acknowledged by many academics with the exception of Botha (2012), Broodryk (2015), Tomaselli (2006; 2023) and Van Nierop (2016). The retrospective formed part of a launch of a book on Van Rensburg co-authored by Martin Botha and Prof. Hubert Dethier (1997) from the Free University of Brussels.

Manie van Rensburg's chronicles of Afrikanerdom are noted for their humane treatment of the characters, including outcasts and the political right wing. These films and television dramas are more than mere profiles of the politics of the time. Most of his work addresses communication problems between people in a universe that is characterised by distrust, paranoia and eventually betrayal (Botha & Dethier 1997). Even comedies such as *Die Square* and *Taxi to Soweto* address the issue of mistrust between humans. Van Rensburg's work as a whole gives a portrait of the strange, complex and divided creature who is the Afrikaner. This portrait is an important alternative to the oversimplified images of Afrikaners as mere racist villains usually depicted in anti-apartheid images of this society.

Van Rensburg placed himself within the Afrikaans lager and, with films such as *Die Square* and *Verspeelde Lente*, managed to upset the establishment. *Die Square* caused a stir by depicting Afrikaners as hypocrites. *Verspeelde Lente* upset Afrikanerdom with its images of poor, lower class Afrikaners. Being Afrikaans was a source of tension, but also creativity in his work. He wasn't interested in portraying Afrikaner history, but in exploring Afrikaners against the larger history of the country. Later, examinations of racism and anti-Semitism became important themes in his work such as *The Native Who Caused All The Trouble*, *Heroes* and especially *The Fourth Reich*. The latter examined the destruction caused by power, racism and anti-Semitism.

If his work has a common theme, it is the conflict between the outsider and communal acceptance, an aspect he experienced in real life. His trip to Dakar during the repressive days of State President P.W. Botha got wide, somewhat hysterical publicity in Afrikaans newspapers, and meant an effective end to his career in the local mainstream film industry and unofficial blacklisting by the SABC.

He divided his career into his pre- and post-Dakar periods. Before Dakar he had work. After Dakar he found himself out of business. He was suddenly a filmmaker in search of a spiritual home; after being a sought-after, popular director, he struggled to make films. And the Left also held pitfalls. One remembers an interview with him where he stated his dissatisfaction with FAWO. Someone there phoned him and asked why he hadn't yet submitted his script on *Taxi to Soweto* for approval. His answer was unprintable. He didn't need anyone's seal of approval, from the Right or the Left. He was too honest to take an approved political point of

view, and too independent to leave artistic and political judgment to others. At the time of his suicide on 3 December 1993, he was only 48 years old (Botha 2012).

Jans Rautenbach

A few pioneers in the Afrikaans film industry of the sixties produced a number of films that could be labelled 'involved films'. The theme of these films was an examination of the cracks in apartheid ideology. They included Emil Nofal-Jans Rautenbach's films like *Die Kandidaat/The Candidate* (1968) and *Katrina* (1968).

Several film historians regard Jans Rautenbach as the pioneer of modern, bold and South African film-making in the 1960s and 1970s. Together with producer Emil Nofal he made ground-breaking films during a time when South African cinema hardly reflected the socio-political realities of the country. **Rautenbach's features need English subtitles.**

Ross Devenish

Apart from Jans Rautenbach and Manie van Rensburg another outstanding South African filmmaker of the 1970s was Ross Devenish. In the 1970s Devenish and playwright Athol Fugard created three highly acclaimed films, *Boesman and Lena*, *The Guest* and *Marigolds in August*. *Boesman and Lena* (1973), based on Fugard's play, was the first local feature to portray the poverty and enforced removals of South Africans classified as "black" under apartheid. The film won a gold and silver medal at the 6th Atlanta Film Festival in the USA. In *The Guest* (1976) director Ross Devenish examines Afrikaner intellectual, poet, writer and opium addict, Eugene Marais's fight against drug dependence during an incident at the end of his life. In stark contrast to several Afrikaans language films of the sixties and seventies with their idealised depiction of white Afrikaners, Devenish provided a critical portrait of this part of South African society.

The third of director Ross Devenish's collaborations with playwright Athol Fugard is *Marigolds in August* (1979). The film was one of the few local features in the 1970s, which examined the conditions of blacks in South Africa. While most of local filmmaking created an idealised South Africa in which blacks didn't exist in the 1970s Devenish confronted the dilemma of black unemployment in a universe where whites are only seen behind glass, in their houses or cars, separated from the socio-political realities of apartheid South Africa. It is shot in the style of Italian neorealism and the **fifties' work by Satyajit Ray**, and the film consists mostly of exteriors, shot in natural light.

The film, shunned by South African audience during its release in 1980, became an international award winner at various film festivals, including the Berlin International Film

Festival, where it won two awards, including the Silver Bear. Despite the international acclaim Devenish found it impossible to work under apartheid and went into exile. *Marigolds in August* was his last South African feature.

Anti-apartheid documentaries

Since the late 1970s and the early 1980s a group of film and video producers and directors who were not affiliated to the established film companies in the mainstream film industry, made films and videos about the socio-political realities of the majority of South Africans (Botha 2012). Some of these films were shown at local film festivals such as the Durban and Cape Town International Film Festivals, and from 1987 until 1994, the Weekly Mail Film Festival. Other venues included universities, church halls, trade union offices and the private homes of interested parties. Most of the films experienced censorship problems during the State of Emergency during the 1980s, and many were banned (Botha & Van Aswegen 1992). The films had small budgets and were either financed by the producers themselves, by progressive organisations such as the International Defence and Aid Fund for South Africa (IDAF) for a united, democratic, non-racial South Africa, the National Union of South African Students (as in the case of *Wits Protest* [1970-1974]), the South African Council of Churches, private investors such as the Maggie Magaba Trust, as well as European and British television stations (Botha & Van Aswegen 1992). These films were chiefly the product of two groups that emerged jointly: a group of white university students opposed to apartheid, and black workers who yearned for a film or video form using indigenous imagery that would portray their reality in South Africa and would give them a voice and space in local films (Botha 2012). Together with numerous documentaries, community videos and full-length films such as *Mapantsula*, as well as short films, these productions marked the beginning of a new, critical South African cinema.

The International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa (IDAF) was founded in the early 1950s by the chairman of Christian Action, Canon John Collins of St Paul's Cathedral, Britain, when money was collected to support the families of those charged and imprisoned in South Africa for their opposition to apartheid, and to provide legal defence for those accused in political trials (Botha 2012). The fund ran a comprehensive information service on affairs in South Africa over the past decades, which included visual documentation. It also produced films on all aspects of repression and resistance against apartheid in South Africa. The best-known films included those by director Barry Feinberg, for example a film about the life and work of Archbishop Trevor Huddleston and his continuing commitment to the destruction of apartheid. The film *Makhalipile - The Dauntless One* (1989) includes interviews with Oliver Tambo, Desmond Tutu and Helen Joseph. The suffering of children under apartheid was examined in Feinberg's *Any Child is my Child* (1988).

Song of the Spear (1986) portrayed the role of culture in the struggle for national liberation. By intercutting performances of the Amandla Cultural Ensemble while on tour in Britain, with mass singing of resistance songs on the streets of South Africa, this 16mm film dramatically depicted the emerging culture of liberation, which respects the humanity of all people without regard to race while reflecting the diversity of the South African population (Botha 2012).

Isitwalandwe: The Story of the South African Freedom Charter was made by Feinberg in 1980 on video and 16 mm, and made it clear that as a people's blueprint for democracy the Freedom Charter remained relevant for political change in South Africa (Botha 2012).

The major audiences for IDAF productions, however, were the international anti-apartheid movements. The work was intended to play a campaigning role for the liberation movement in South Africa and unfortunately offered an uncritical account of its policies. IDAF productions keep to cinéma vérité techniques by avoiding voice-over commentary and by using live sound and letting political spokesmen speak for themselves. These productions unambiguously presented an African National Congress (ANC) viewpoint (Botha 2012).

IDAF was instrumental in establishing an alternative news distribution office in London, namely Afravision, by providing financial and logistical assistance. Barry Feinberg's concern for the preservation of South Africa's anti-apartheid films resulted in the largest single collection of material at IDAF. With the changing political dispensation IDAF has placed this film archive at the University of the Western Cape (Botha 2012).

Many South African documentaries were made with an international audience in mind in order to get support for the anti-apartheid movement and to educate an international audience in the horrors of apartheid (Botha 2012). Notable earlier work included Anthony Thomas's *The South African Experience* (1977), Peter Davis's *White Laager* (1977) and Chris Austin's *Rhythms of Resistance* (1979). In 1980 two major productions on the history of the South African liberation struggle against apartheid were released internationally: Peter Davis's *Generations of Resistance* (1979) and Barry Feinberg's *Isitwalandwe* for IDAF. The latter was the first in a long line of films and videos in the 1980s to keep the conscience of the world alive to the issues at stake in South Africa under apartheid. IDAF was instrumental in establishing an alternative news distribution office in London by providing financial and logistical assistance to anti-apartheid documentary filmmakers.

Some of the most seminal political documentaries of the 1980s came from Video News Services (VNS), which included filmmakers such as Brian Tilley, Laurence Dworkin, Nyana Molete, Seipati Bulane Hopa and Tony Bensusan (Botha 2012). Collective film work by Tilley, Dworkin, Molete, Bensusan and Elaine Proctor led to the 25-minute anti-apartheid film, *Forward to a People's Republic*, which was completed with assistance from IDAF. This film

portrayed the dynamics of the conflict in the country in the early 1980s by juxtaposing the people's militancy with white militarisation.

In April 1985 Video News Service (VNS) was formed with the assistance of the liberation movement and overseas financial support. VNS became the trade union COSATU's unofficial film unit. The film makers saw themselves first and foremost as political activists. For VNS to achieve this aim and avoid being shut down under the state of emergency, Afravision was established in London to interface with international anti-apartheid movements, and locally VNS crews made themselves indistinguishable from the foreign news media operating in South Africa (Botha 2012).

At first VNS made television documentaries for international television companies, but later started to make so-called video pamphlets to distribute news about a wide range of issues from township to township. These videos were a type of news network and were aimed at South Africans. Most of the videos were 15- to 30-minute productions and ranged from vigilante killings to the white election process in 1988. The VNS Collective made various compelling short documentaries: *Tribute to David Webster* (1989), about the human rights activist, and *Fruits of Defiance* (1990), which portrayed resistance to apartheid in September 1989 in Cape Town.

Apart from VNS other documentary filmmakers have also made important work on political issues during the apartheid regime, including the following themes (Botha 2012):

- The forced removal of people from urban and rural communities under the Group Areas Acts and the Homelands policy: *Crossroads* (1976), *Mayfair* (1984), *Last Supper at Horstley Street* (1985) and *Katriver: End of Hope* (1984);
- Labour problems and organisation: *Passing the Message* (1981) and *Freedom Square and Back of the Moon* (1987);
- Different forms of community struggle such as the development of literacy and health projects in rural and urban communities: *Ithuseng* (1987) and *Robben Island: Our university* (1988);
- The role of women in the anti-apartheid struggle: *You Have Struck A Rock* (1981) and *The Ribbon* (1986);
- General political situation: *No Middle Road to Freedom* (1984), *The Struggle from Within* (1983), *Witness to Apartheid* (1986) and *The Two Rivers* (1985)
- The role of the church in the anti-apartheid struggle: *A Cry of Reason* (1987);
- The destruction of indigenous cultures: *The People of the Great Sandface* (1985) and *Have You Seen Drum Recently?* 1986).

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with an event, which was a very sad day for film preservation in South Africa. On Sunday 18 April 2021 a large-scale wildfire destroyed several historical buildings on UCT's upper campus. The fire is believed to have started on the slopes of Devil's Peak on Sunday. It quickly spread to Rhodes Memorial before rapidly reaching UCT's upper campus in Rondebosch. One of the buildings gutted by the runaway fire was the Jagger Reading Room, which forms part of the UCT Libraries' Special Collections.

UCT's Special Collections consist of printed and audiovisual material on African studies and a wide array of other specialised subjects, as well as more than 1 300 sub-collections of unique manuscripts and personal papers. The collection of books and pamphlets exceeds 85 000 items on African studies alone, and the collection on African film was among the most extensive in the world, with over 3 000 films available for viewing and research.

The Jagger Reading Room (previously the JW Jagger Library) was constructed in the 1930s and was named after one of UCT Libraries' main benefactors. Initially, the building served as the university's main library, and later as a short-loans centre, before officially becoming the African Studies Library's reading room.

The collection of African film was among the most extensive in the world, with over 3 000 films available for viewing and research. I have used these films for my research and lectures. A later assessment found that a vast majority of the African Studies Published Print Collection (about 70,000 items) and the entirety of the African Studies Film Collection DVDs (about 3,500 items) had been destroyed, along with documents relating to the university itself as well as any manuscripts or archives being kept in the Reading Room for digitisation or after being digitised.

By 2024 several initiatives were underway to address the devastating loss. In normalising recovery, the major outsourced recovery projects involving digitisation of paper and audiovisual materials were completed, the restoration of antiquarian books is almost completed, and the major collection of deep-frozen materials will be addressed. During the late 2010s I donated 17 boxes of South African film material to the UCT archives. Fortunately this donation survived the fire. An important step was stock taking and rehousing of more than half of the Manuscript collections / archives that were salvaged, approximately 120 collections, over 3000 box files replaced and relabelled. These collections are now stored in Special Collections Oppenheimer storeroom and available to researchers. More than 1000 Rare Books were also restored.

On 8 and 9 October 2023, UCT Libraries in partnership with the National Library of South Africa (NLSA), the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library and the National University of Lesotho hosted a round table on Preservation and Conservation of Documentary Heritage: A Strategic Imperative. The 2021 Jagger Fire, the destruction of documentary heritage due to political strife and climate change have served as impetus for this conversation. Limited to fifty participants, it was a gathering of professionals from Cameroon, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mali, Namibia, South Africa, United Kingdom, United States of America and Zambia, representing national libraries, university libraries, government agencies responsible for arts and culture, archives, museums, galleries and vendors. **The outcome of this 2-day dialogue is a policy framework that could be adapted for different contexts on the continent.**

The 2013-2015 4K restoration of Satyajit Ray's *The Apu Trilogy* by The Criterion Collection and L'Immagine Ritrovata salvaged the films from heavily damaged, burnt negatives rescued from a 1993 London fire. Using painstaking rehydration and, in some cases, 35mm fine-grain masters, the team painstakingly reconstructed the films to create a definitive viewing experience. It is an inspiration for efforts here to salvage of what is left of the Jagger fire tragedy. The restoration of Ray's masterpieces should also be a lesson for individuals involved in the preservation and restoration of our film heritage.

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