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Author

Milstein, Emily

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Nation-Building through Film in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Emily Milstein

After decades of oppressive rule, South Africa's apartheid government finally collapsed in the early 1990s and South Africa began its transition towards democracy and multiracialism. Apartheid tore South Africa apart socially, economically, and politically. When apartheid ended, South Africa needed to heal and rebuild itself in order to successfully transition out of apartheid and become a cohesive national unit. Institutions like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) helped South Africa formally acknowledge and reconcile with its past.

South Africa's film industry mirrors the character of post-apartheid South Africa. As South African filmmakers make films that reflect the principles of multiracialism and democratization, they provide a platform on which to critique many of the problems that continue to exist in South Africa. Since the end of apartheid, the country still faces a myriad of problems including poverty, crime, unemployment, and economic and racial inequality, and many South Africans remain critical as to the success of nation's transition out of apartheid.

In post-apartheid South Africa, film has been a nation-building tool that simultaneously articulates a prospect of unity for the "new" South Africa and critiques the extent to which the nation really has evolved past apartheid. While there are of course limits to the ability of film to create social change and not all films contribute equally to South Africa's post-apartheid nation-building project, film is still an important tool for those seeking to use art and culture to redefine South African society after apartheid. In her essay "The Race for Representation: New Viewsites for Change in South African Cinema," Lucia Saks discusses what she calls the "crucial role of cinema in envisioning the new [South African] nation through a progressive/continuous state of vision and critique."¹ Films that deal with and raise questions about issues like diversity, the weight of history, crime, HIV/AIDS, education, and poverty become tools of social criticism. These films

represent an opportunity for filmmakers to provide commentary on social issues in post-apartheid South Africa. In this way, films have been one tool to help South Africans actively reimagine their country as a multiracial nation by providing a platform on which to air and address the grievances of South Africans in a democratic fashion.

Historical and Analytical Framework

In the 1990s, South Africa transitioned from apartheid into the current period of post-apartheid democracy. The development of South Africa's film industry mirrored this shift, as films were produced that reflected the social and political nature of this progression in South African history. Film eased South Africa's transition out of apartheid because it was a tool that the nation used to remake itself as it attempted to shed its history of segregation and racism and become a multiracial democracy.

While segregation and notions of white supremacy existed in South Africa prior to 1948, that year marked a turning point in South Africa's history, when the National Party rose to power in South Africa on a platform of racism, segregation, and Afrikaner nationalism. The National Party pursued a policy of apartheid, passing various pieces of legislation that enshrined within South African law the separation of South Africans along racial lines. The ultimate purpose of apartheid was to transform South Africa into a white nation in which all South Africans who were not white would exist in the country only as laborers. Apartheid relegated any South African who was not white to a life of degradation, poverty, and oppression.

Understandably, the harsh, deprecating nature of apartheid sowed discontent among many South Africans. Significant segments of South Africa society rose up in protest. According to Clark and Worger, "The sheer arrogance and brutality of apartheid made clear to all blacks that under this system they had no worth and no hope, and this left them with two choices: submit or rebel."² Antiapartheid forces in South Africa mounted a long line of demonstrations, protests, and acts of sabotage against the South African state. The Soweto Uprising in 1976–77, for example, was a period of "country-wide mass resistance"³ by South African students dissatisfied and angry about the conditions in which

they lived. Organizations like the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the African National Congress (ANC) developed military wings in an effort to escalate the struggle and use force against the apartheid government to end apartheid.

Antiapartheid action grew throughout the 1970s and 1980s in what the apartheid government perceived as a “total onslaught.”⁴ According a Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, the ANC and its military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), allied with the South African Communist Party (SACP), “envisaged a strategy involving the escalation of armed attacks combined with the building of mass organizations.”⁵ These actions, combined with increasing grassroots action, made South Africa virtually ungovernable during the later part of the apartheid period.

In response to mounting popular unrest, the apartheid government launched what it called “total strategy.”⁶ According to the TRC’s reports, “‘total strategy’ was based on the premise that South Africa was the object of a total onslaught . . . the objective of this onslaught was to overthrow the government of South Africa.”⁷ The government’s total strategy manifested itself through the suppression of all internal dissent with a heavy hand, using extreme force and violence against the various factions of the antiapartheid movement. According to testimony submitted to the TRC by the South African National Defense Force, the South African government believed that “the resolution of conflict in the times in which we live now demands interdepartmental and coordinated actions in all fields—military, psychological, economic, political, sociological, technological, diplomatic, ideological, and cultural, etc.”⁸ In this way, the South African government sought to control every aspect of South Africans’ lives in order to achieve “the maintenance of state security at all costs.”⁹

During the apartheid era, the South African film industry mirrored the undemocratic, white supremacist nature of South Africa. Parallel film industries existed in South Africa, one for white South Africans and one for black South Africans. The films produced for black South Africans reinforced the racist premise upon which apartheid was built and the notion that blacks were inferior and fit only for labor and servitude.¹⁰ Meanwhile, a separate film industry existed to produce films that catered solely to white South Africans. Films were produced during the apartheid period that espoused apartheid ideology and the government’s

policies of separate development for South Africans of different races. Films like Jans Rautenbach's *Katrina* perpetuated the myth that a person was better off among people of his or her own race and that separate development was thus the best path for South Africa.¹¹

Film was also an important tool of the antiapartheid movement and its efforts to protest apartheid. Before the 1990s, the apartheid government had a strict censorship policy with regards to the South African film industry. Beginning in the 1970s, however, antiapartheid filmmakers produced a small number of films that evaded government censors. These antiapartheid films provided a powerful, creative outlet for the grievances of those frustrated by apartheid's harsh policies. Films like *Come Back, Africa*, *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, and *Mapantsula* provided a strong challenge to official, government-approved narratives about South African society by exposing the brutality and harshness of everyday life under apartheid for nonwhite South Africans.

While films made during the apartheid era both challenged and propagandized in favor of apartheid, film would also play an important role in post-apartheid South Africa as the nation sought to rebuild itself. The apartheid government's attempts to achieve total control over all aspects of South African society and the antiapartheid movement's determination to overthrow the apartheid regime divided the nation socially, politically, and economically. In the mid-1990s, after supporters of apartheid and various facets of the antiapartheid movement had successfully negotiated an end to apartheid and the country's transition to democratic rule, the country embarked on a process of rebuilding and reconciliation.

South Africa, however, required more than institutional changes to fully rebuild itself, particularly to the point where South Africans who were formerly at odds with each other could coexist peacefully. The TRC played a fundamental role in exposing many of the crimes committed during apartheid, and the commission helped heal some of the country's wounds, having a cathartic effect on many South Africans. According to Desmond Tutu, the TRC was based on the principle that "the pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all South African citizens and peace require reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society."¹²

While the TRC helped South Africa reconcile itself to some extent, animosity remained in many quarters. The country had been divided for so long that true reconciliation required a shift in the country's national consciousness, one in which South Africans came to truly believe and buy into the notion of their country as a "rainbow nation." An essential element of any national rebuilding project is the creation of a new, shared, cultural narrative that is inclusive of all citizens. Such a psychological shift could aid South Africa's efforts to become a multiracial, democratic nation not only in principle, but also in practice. The end of apartheid marked a dramatic change in the character of South Africa's film industry. As the country democratized, so did its film industry, as steps were taken in the early 1990s to liberalize and diversify the South African film industry along with the rest of the country.

As South Africa transformed itself in the early 1990s, its leaders recognized that film could provide a powerful tool for nation-building. In 1996, the country's Department of Arts and Culture published a *White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage*, which stated that culture, including film, was "integral to the success of the democratic project."¹³ South Africa's leaders made a conscious effort to promote and fund films that projected a positive image of post-apartheid South African society.¹⁴ The country realized the importance of film in democratizing and integrating the nation, recognizing that it needed to create a cultural narrative representative of the "new" South Africa.

In his book, *Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict*, Mark Ross states that after a period of strife and conflict, two opposing sides must (re)create new, inclusive narratives and cultural symbols that can be used to create a "common, national identity."¹⁵ While many fields, including art, literature, and music, helped post-apartheid South Africa achieve this shift in consciousness, in this paper I will apply Ross's theory to South Africa's post-apartheid film industry. Film served as a platform upon which South Africa's new, multiracial identity could be built. Films were produced that reflected the multiracial, democratic character of South Africa and visualized the nation as a place in which all South Africans had the right to express themselves and their identities. In this sense, film facilitated the "transformation of an exclusive public, symbolic landscape into a more inclusive one in the post-apartheid period."¹⁶

Creative endeavors, such as film, are ideal tools for reinforcing the idea of the “new” South Africa in people’s minds because film has the ability to reach large audiences and effect emotional change. Films often raise complex, difficult issues and thus have the power to bring tough issues to the forefront of peoples’ minds. Films can instigate discussion and lead to the recognition and realization of people’s deeply held fears, prejudices, and beliefs. By dealing with complicated issues like racial and economic inequality, films provide commentary on South Africa’s social problems, commentary that needs to be heard and taken into account for the country to truly grow and move past apartheid. Films have the power to evoke and appeal to people’s emotions, which is important for a country seeking to create an emotional shift in its citizens, a shift from division and conflict to reconciliation and reconstruction.

Film as a Tool for Multiracialism and Democracy

Multiracialism is a core principle upon which post-apartheid South African society is based. Films that dealt with issues of integration and diversity allowed South Africans to visualize a “rainbow” South Africa and gave South Africans an opportunity to process and tap into their feelings about South Africa’s transition to multiracialism. Many films made in the post-apartheid period, including *White Wedding*, *A Walk in the Night*, *Isidingo*, and *Gangster’s Paradise: Jerusalema*, raise issues of multiracial diversity and reconciliation in South Africa.

White Wedding, by Jann Turner, is a film about two friends, Elvis and Tumi, and their road trip across South Africa. The pair travel to Cape Town, where Elvis will be married to a woman, Ayanda. On the trip, the two men encounter a white woman named Rose who is an English tourist. Rose hitches a ride to Cape Town with them. The film deals with issues of integration, and the weight of apartheid’s legacy that remains in South Africa.

One scene in particular addresses South Africa’s apartheid past. Elvis, Tumi, and Rose enter a bar that caters to a white, Afrikaans-speaking clientele and, upon entering, Elvis and Tumi, who are black, immediately stand out as “others.” After they are greeted with discriminatory remarks by the bar’s other patrons, Rose says “But I thought that stuff was in the past.” Elvis

responds, "Welcome to South Africa." The bar also displays prominent symbols of apartheid, including South Africa's apartheid-era flag, which is hanging on the wall. Rose and Tumi comment on the flag's presence, stating that the flag is a reminder of the brutality and racism of apartheid.

In addition to the flag, the bar's bathroom has a sign on the door that says "White Males, Blanke Mans." Tumi sees the sign but enters the restroom anyway. The flag and the sign both serve as reminders that vestiges of apartheid still exist in South Africa despite the fact that apartheid is officially over. Seeing these pieces of history forces South Africans to question the progress that has been made during South Africa's transition out of apartheid. By explicitly showing that racism and discrimination remain in South Africa, Turner is arguing that further work is needed to allow South Africa to fully move beyond its past. The film acts as a challenge to South Africans to reconcile. Recognizing and moving beyond apartheid is a necessary step for reconciliation, as illustrated by the TRC, and films like Turner's provide the cultural impetus to facilitate a dialogue and recognition of the necessity of that transition.

The scene in the bar ends with Elvis making friends with one of the Afrikaner customers and the two of them singing a song together in Afrikaans. While the two characters at first appear to be at odds with one another, their divisive identities fall away as they become friends. This scene articulates a vision of a multiracial, common, national identity for South Africa, one that is inclusive of people of different races. While this scene may not reflect reality, the film's projection of an image of inclusivity suggests that reconciliation is possible.

Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalema, by Ralph Ziman, also deals with the issues of multiracialism, integration, and the weight of apartheid that still lurks in South Africa. The film is about a black Johannesburg gangster named Lucky Kunene. At one point during the film, Kunene is violently antagonized by a white cop named Blakkie Swart. Kunene accuses Swart of assault and threatens to press charges against him, which Swart dismisses as ludicrous. Kunene then questions whether apartheid policies that gave white police license to use violence against black South Africans are still in place. He says that it is his democratic right to press charges against

the cop for assault and asks, "You think just because I am a black civilian and you are a white cop you have a right to assault me?"

These scenes demonstrate that anger towards South Africa's security personnel persists despite the integration of the country's police force. This interaction between Swart and Kunene suggests that some in South Africa continue to view the country's security forces as unfairly targeting black South Africans. Swart is eventually convicted of assault, which shows that even if the country's police do continue to treat black South Africans unjustly, those South Africans now have legal recourse against oppressive institutions, an important element of the "new" South Africa.

Issues of race also arise when Kunene enters into a romantic relationship with a white woman, Leah Friedlander. Such a relationship would have been illegal under apartheid, when multiracial sexual relations were banned. The *Immorality Act*, passed in 1950, outlawed sexual relations between non-white and white South Africans.¹⁷ The film articulates a vision of a South Africa that is actively moving forward, past a time when Kunene and Friedlander's relationship would have been illegal. Despite the fact that Friedlander and Kunene break up near the end, the film ends with Kunene reflecting positively on their relationship and the possibility of rekindling their romance. Ziman produces a space in which interracial romantic relationships can be successful. The film thus provides an emotional argument for the possibility of integration that is available in the post-apartheid period, helping create an inclusive national narrative for the country.

These films have aided South Africa's transition because they show that while the country is making progress towards integration, elements of apartheid remain and need to be addressed. Bringing these issues to light can help South Africa acknowledge reality while providing an optimistic view of the small steps, such as interracial romances, being taken towards integration.

In addition to addressing issues of multiracialism and diversity, post-apartheid films also deal with democracy. A key feature of post-apartheid South African film is the use of film as a platform from which to communicate one's grievances, beliefs, and political views. While some films deal explicitly with democracy and its accompanying challenges, such as the television show *90 Plein Street*, others deal with democracy in a more implicit manner. Film in post-apartheid South Africa has often served as a

critique of the government's policies towards issues like the delivery of social services, the economy, and politics. The use of film as a tool for critique reflects the democratic nature of post-apartheid South Africa and the country's significant move towards political liberalization that occurred in the 1990s.

During the apartheid period, the South African government severely restricted free speech and censored films produced in the country. Part of South Africa's transition to democracy and multiracialism included the implementation of laws that significantly liberalized the country's free speech policies. This shift is reflected in film, as filmmakers have embraced their freedom to express their views and openly critique post-apartheid South African society and politics.

Gangster's Paradise criticizes the South African government's failure to provide adequate housing and social services to impoverished, black South Africans. Kunene's main project in the film is a scheme called the "Hillbrow People's Housing Trust." Kunene and his associates use the Trust to take control of white-owned apartment buildings in Hillbrow, a neighborhood of Johannesburg. Taking control of the apartment buildings allows Kunene to collect rents normally owed to building owners, hence the money-making potential of the scheme. The Trust is premised on the fact that many of the apartment buildings inhabited by poor, black South Africans in Hillbrow are in poor condition and not properly maintained by the white landlords who own the buildings. For Kunene, the Trust is not only a way of making money, it is also a form of activism in which black South Africans advocate for their right to live in decent housing and to protest their impoverished living conditions. Not surprisingly, the white policemen and landlords hold a different view of the Trust, seeing it as simply a way for Kunene to steal rent money legally owed to landlords.

The activism in the film serves as a call to South Africans to mobilize, actively challenge their living conditions, and exercise their democratic right to self-expression. In identifying and seeking to improve the living conditions of poor, urban blacks, the film taps into a grievance shared by many South Africans, who resent the country's persistent economic and social inequality. The film juxtaposes images of leafy white suburbs with urban housing tenements, offering an emotional appeal for the need to reduce South Africa's inequality. Kunene's Trust suggests that

self-reliance and a populist approach are needed to create any real change in peoples' lives. Even though the Trust is partly a criminal operation, it is legitimate in the eyes of the people the organization seeks to help. In this way, the film argues that South African government policies have failed to improve the living standards of impoverished South Africans; thus South Africans should voice their grievances and organize on their own behalf.

Gangster's Paradise embraces democracy in post-apartheid South Africa, endorsing grassroots organizing and the legal recourse black South Africans have to challenge white oppression in court. The fact that the film openly criticizes the housing policies of South Africa's government reflects the country's democratic transition; such criticism would have been illegal during the apartheid era.

In a sense, Kunene, the white landowners, and the police are all right about the Trust. While Kunene is using the Trust to steal money, he is also giving the residents a voice through which to protest their poor living standards. The disparity of views regarding the Trust is evident to the film's viewers, who can understand and empathize with both points of view. The Trust calls attention to the fact that a psychological divide still exists in the minds of black and white South Africans, attention that is needed to get South Africans to address the lingering legacy of apartheid.

Through the Trust and Kunene's character, *Gangster's Paradise* also explicitly challenges stereotypes about African criminality. As a boy, Kunene dreams of attending college and is accepted by Johannesburg Tech. Kunene, however, is poor, and the school offers him no scholarship. Frustrated and disappointed, he gets a "job" hijacking cars for a well-known gangster. This point marks the start of Kunene's own long, successful, career as a gangster. He says he will become a gangster in order to amass the money he needs to attend school. This scene offers a layered perspective on crime in South Africa by suggesting that poverty and a lack of economic options drive people towards crime. Ziman offers social criticism and an argument for making education, particularly higher education, more accessible to all South Africans. The film uses an emotional appeal to force South Africans to rethink their views on crime, which is necessary to overcome the apartheid-era notion that black South Africans are inherently suspicious.

Tsotsi, a film by Gavin Hood, also deals with issues of crime and African criminality. The film's protagonist, Tsotsi, hijacks a car only to find that there is a baby in the back seat. Over the course of the film, Tsotsi comes to care for the child. Tsotsi's relationship with the baby reveals the humanity underneath the character's hard, criminal exterior. The baby's presence in Tsotsi's life helps Tsotsi heal the scars left by the violence of his impoverished childhood and the traumas that pushed him to crime; the viewer sees Tsotsi regain his dignity through his relationship with the baby. This forces the viewer to consider the consequences that years of violence have had on South Africans, an important step in the country's national effort to heal the wounds of its past. The film makes a poignant appeal for South Africans to recognize the humanity and dignity of all South Africans. This is needed to achieve a psychological shift in the minds of South Africans and create a nation in which South Africans view one another as equals.

In addition to issues of humanity and crime, film also deals with South Africa's linguistic diversity, which is representative of the nation's ethnic and racial diversity. Modern South Africa is a multilingual nation, with eleven official languages. Many films made in post-apartheid South Africa reflect this fact and feature characters who speak multiple languages throughout the films. Films and television series such as *7de Laan*, *Drum*, *Yizo Yizo*, *Beat the Drum*, *Tsotsi*, *White Wedding*, and *Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalem* all have multilingual scripts and can appeal to viewers from multiple linguistic backgrounds.¹⁸ These films mirror South Africa's transition away from apartheid, when, according to Saks, the South African film industry "did little else than prop up Afrikaans as *the* language of 'South African' cinema."¹⁹ The fact that South African films are now multilingual reinforces the idea that South Africa is a diverse country in which all South Africans have the right to express themselves in their native tongue. Afrikaans was inherently linked to the Afrikaner nationalism of apartheid. The apartheid government attempted to force Afrikaans on all South Africans, which was a major point of contention during the apartheid era.

Multilingual films aid the psychological shift needed to make integration and democracy successful because such films force South Africans to consider and recognize their country's diversity.

Films allow South Africans to face the reality that their country is a diverse, multi-ethnic nation with multiple native languages that are all of equal standing. This affects South Africa's transition to democracy by suggesting that all of South Africa's languages can have an equal place in public life. Multilingual films also help South Africa create the common national identity that Ross talks about because they allow for multiple identities within the context of a broader South African identity.

Conclusion

The fact that South African filmmakers are now able to produce films that reflect their views of life in South Africa is evidence of South Africa's attempts to reshape itself after apartheid. Films are a tool of the country's rebuilding project, and by calling attention to the hardships that many South Africans continue to face, serve as a forum for social protest. The TRC was meant to show how people had suffered and to act as a catharsis that would help the nation reconcile itself. Like the TRC, film is a means of communicating and exposing suffering. Film has helped post-apartheid South Africa rebuild itself by forcing the nation to recognize its weaknesses, which is an important step in the path to overcoming those weaknesses.

Films also rearticulate South Africa's national narrative as a diverse, multiracial, multiethnic nation. This helps create the common national narrative the country needs as it rebuilds itself after apartheid. Films that feature multiple languages and interracial friendships and relationships offer a view of possibility for the country, the possibility of inclusion and reconciliation. While film is only one facet of South Africa's attempt to create the common cultural narrative and the psychological shift that Ross articulates, it is an important tool because films can simultaneously deal with the present and the past as well as incorporate elements of music, art, and writing.

Endnotes

- ¹ Saks, *To Change Reels*, 152.
- ² Clark and Worger, 82.
- ³ Truth and Reconciliation Committee Report, 20.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 27-8.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ⁸ SANDF TRC submission, "Total National Strategy" <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/submit/sadf.htm>
- ⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Committee, 27.
- ¹⁰ Botha.
- ¹¹ Saks, *Cinema*.
- ¹² Tutu, 45.
- ¹³ Ngubane.
- ¹⁴ Saks, *Cinema*.
- ¹⁵ Ross, 279.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.
- ¹⁷ Worger and Clark.
- ¹⁸ Saks, *Cinema*.
- ¹⁹ Saks, *Cinema*, 34-5.

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