Safundi
The Journal of South African and American Comparative Studies

Issue 3
October 2000

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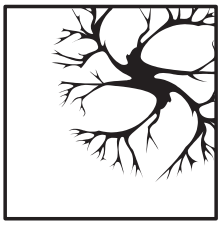

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SOUTHERN AFRICA ON FILM IN THE UNITED STATES

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Many documentary films available for teaching purposes in the United States were made prior to President F. W. de Klerk's dramatic political reforms begun in February 1990. This month marked the unbanning of all liberation movements, both internal and exiled, including the Communist Party. The films made prior to 1990, then, refer to apartheid in the present tense, and often encode the despair of ever being able to defeat this iniquitous system. However, films made after 1990 begin to reveal the difficulties, but also the possibilities that emerged as South Africans of all constituencies negotiated their way towards a democratic future.

In this study I review films made up to 1990, largely 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 Americans.[1]

1. The project in 1990/1991 was coordinated by Keyan G. Tomaselli, Visiting Research Scholar, and Maureen Eke (Nigeria), Coordinator, African Outreach Center, under the auspices of the African Media Center, a division of the African Studies Center (ASC), Michigan State University (MSU), East Lansing between August 1990 and January 1992. For further information see the African Media Project, www.und.ac.za\und\ccms. Major Contributors during 1990: David Bloch, Amarelle Crossley, Dr. John Metzler (Americans), Prof. Vincent Khapoya (a Professor of Politics from Kenya, working at Oakland University, MI), and Ruth E. Teer-Tomaselli, and Bob Vassen (South Africans), all of the African Studies Center. Other MSU Contributors (1990/1991) included James Aling, a South African student in Agricultural Economics, MSU; Janet Beilstein, who had lived in Namibia. Dr. Jacob Fisseha, Assistant Director, ASC, originally from Ethiopia. Dr. Ken Harrow, Department of English, MSU, has written extensively on African literature, African cinema, and worked in Senegal. Verna Hildebrand of Family and Child Ecology, MSU, has taught in Kenya and South Africa. Dr. John Hinnant, Dr. Bill

Many had U.S. 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 seven hundred films on Africa used by American colleagues. Where Wiley mainly used empirical descriptive criteria in critiquing various films, the present reviews concentrated on providing critiques of individual films in terms of the theories of film and society developed in this overview, and in the variety of journals in which some longer versions were finally published. In other words, the southern African section of the 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 filmmakers concerned.

Interviews with Michigan-based 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.

My own experience in talking to primary school children at two schools in Indiana, Pennsylvania, in March 1996, bears out the need for prior preparation. One class of ten- to eleven-year-olds had formed their impression of Africa with the help of films like *Congo*, *Outbreak*, and *Jumanji*. Their image of Africa was a jungle inhabited by diseased gorillas and monkeys whose illnesses threatened world health! Once they had succeeded in obtaining an admission from me that monkeys visit my garden in Durban, no explanations which contradicted their stereotypes could repair the damage done. (I explained that monkeys looked for food in my three-quarter acre garden because Durban is sub-tropical, and my panhandle in steep valley has wild bananas and other fruit, and because monkeys were being displaced by massive urbanization—no one looks out for monkey's rights!) At the second school, a well prepared younger class asked me questions directly related to their prepared work and documentaries they had seen. Their image of Africa had not been corrupted by the kinds of Hollywood films they start watching once they mature into the PG category. One of the aims of the Africa Media Project is to identify materials which can help build positive views of Africa. Now that one theory on the origin of AIDS is sourced to transmission between chimpanzees and humans, Africa once again becomes associated in the United States with incurable pandemics.

Derman, David Bloch, and Scott Frietzen, Department of Anthropology; Patricia McCormick, ASC/Telecommunications; Stanley Mpofu, Education, from Zimbabwe; Salelenna Phaladi, Anthropology, from Botswana; Yvette Myrie, ASC; Anne Schneller; Yacob Semela, a South African studying Speech Therapy; and Dr. David Wiley, ASC Director/Sociology.

This experience also showed that films in which people speak for themselves 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 a Kenyan political scientist, Vincent Khapoya, as an example of a film where the dispossessed Bantustan 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*). However, where films lack descriptive structure, interviewees can become boring and the information they offer inadequately contextualized in terms of broader, unseen historical, economic, and social processes (e.g., *The Color of Gold*).

In this paper, I will concentrate on the films about South Africa only. These will include Namibia until the moment of its elections, as this territory was administered by South Africa until 1990. Also, I sometimes use films on other countries in southern Africa to make a theoretical point. I also will refer to films made by South Africans on other countries in southern Africa.

SOUTH AFRICA: IMAGES IN AND OF HISTORY?

Most films lack a sense of history as a process. This is because, in the experience of exhibition, 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 ahistorical if history is understood as a process. They played up diplomatic discourses and consciously suppressed any images or information which may have offended the various parties, especially South Africa, so as not to endanger the independence process. As such, these films offer a specific interpretation at a precise historical moment from a particular set of assumptions and received historical conditions. As a record of this moment they can be read as providing a particular historical fix at one moment *in* time, but not necessarily *through* time.

The world is constantly changing. The years 1989-1991 broke the idea of stasis in even the most authoritarian of societies. Many films are made in particular historical "moments": 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 where possible examine the films/texts studied in relation to their contexts. Despite the constraints of making documentaries about contemporary processes and living people, such films visually and aurally capture crucial periods of history or in time. They should be understood in terms of the appropriate periods and the 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.

One of the problems facing American audiences—and film makers as a result of this—is their lack of understanding of the nature of the conflict in South Africa as it had occurred under apartheid. Most of the films discussed in this study see it as a race war—white against black. Yet, from the early 1980s 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 even specifically Afrikaners. Capital was argued to be the source of the oppression. Apartheid was argued to be a particular form or distortion of capitalism. This distortion was understood to have resulted in a much more brutal form of economic and class oppression than found in the First World states. These states which benefited financially from apartheid, however, were implicated in the perpetuation of this system.

Differences 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) espoused by the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) and Azanian Peoples Organisation (AZAPO) argued that race was the determining form of oppression in South Africa. Even in terms of this racial analysis, however, international capital and Western imperialism were identified as the dominant sources of oppression.

Conversely, the UDF Charterist (after the *Freedom Charter*, 1955) 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 whose directors preferred to image the conflict in ahistorical localized black versus white terms.

Films made after 1990 are much more sophisticated in their analyses of the post-apartheid economic structure. Freed from the imperatives of having to "take sides," PBS Frontline Specials and even the World Bank offered highly textured analyses of the transition between 1990 and 1994, via frames of analysis which resonated closely with explanations developed by South African commentators themselves (e.g., *South Africa: After the Miracle*).

Despite their sometimes antagonistic relationship, theorists within both the racial or class (or interacting) scenarios lay much of the blame for apartheid 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 was 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. The immediately visible black-white division of privilege was by far the most readily cinegenic way of presenting images of South Africa to other societies.

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 severely discriminated against. But beyond a desire for social justice was the UDF's idea 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 stark contrast to the way the term was articulated to the right in America following Reagan's victory in 1980. In that country, the right-ward inflection of "democracy" made it very difficult to link demands for racial justice to calls for more general economic and social justice. The Reaganite articulation of democracy was profoundly anti-socialist, imperialist and racist. This new right-wing meaning bore little similarity to the meanings it carried when one speaks of popular democratic struggles in Third World countries. It may, though, have resonated positively with the emergent meanings in the republics of the former Soviet Union, after its disintegration early in 1992.

Despite all this, most American high school pupils know something about apartheid, if 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*. One of the evaluators 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 United States and the country on which the film focuses. In *Girls Apart*, for example, the two characters, black and white sixteen-year-olds, speak at the level of high school children on issues immediately translatable to the U.S. situation. Parallels to America relate to the "separate but equal" issue. This offers an opportunity to discuss similarities between racial attitudes and ethnically distinct living spaces in South Africa, with prejudices and segregation found in the United States.

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), *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. In the following section, I will discuss various ways in which the experience of viewing films about South Africa serves to illustrate ways in which these issues came to the fore in a range of practical teaching situations.

DOCUMENTARY AND THE CLASH OF COMMON SENSES

For all that these historical factors can influence film reception, films also exemplify common sense ways of looking at the world. John Marshall's *The Hunters* (1958), on the Namibian Juhoansi, for example, was probably the most frequently viewed "documentary" on Africa and hunter-gatherer societies in American colleges and universities until the US release of *The Gods Must be Crazy* in 1983. A more recent

production is the Discovery Channel's *Hunters of the Kalahari* which embellishes myths about the "Bushmen," and which moreover is culturally inaccurate. These films are indicative of a particular romantic perspective of "stone-age man" prevalent in Western anthropological departments at the time they were made. The analytical framework within which *The Hunters* depicted "Bushmen" is out-of-date, as it was superseded in the mid-1970s by different theories of a-literate societies. These new theories questioned the then dominant idea of social evolutionary relativity. *The Hunters* should be viewed in the light of this realization, as it tells us more about the state of anthropology and Marshall's personal relation to the Kalahari in the 1950s, than it does about the "Bushmen" themselves. Marshall has himself repudiated this film (Marshall 1993).

John Marshall went on to make *N!ai: Story of a !Kung Woman* (1980), which implicitly critiques his earlier film, *The Hunters* and *The Gods Must be Crazy*. 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 *N!ai* and immortalized in *The Gods Must Be Crazy* films. This was the image that the Massachusetts Schools Social Science Program, which commissioned this video, had of the Ju/'hoansi San 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 1950s, 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 perhaps 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.

The different styles and contexts of presenting these images illustrates the different discursive values given to everyday terms like "tribe," "race," and "democracy" in America and Southern Africa. Watching and discussing films from American perspectives generated very different interpretations to analysis of the same films from African and Southern African perspectives. This diversity was evident in the early discussions held by the evaluators, with Africans often interpreting the films under scrutiny from very different perspectives to the American evaluators. Over a period of six months, however, a consensus emerged on assessment of over 50 films, with the two exceptions of the films *The Two Rivers* (1985) and *People of the Great Sandface* (Paul Myburgh, 1985).

Films thus tell viewers as much, if not more, about the film makers and their home societies than they do of their subjects. This is particularly so with regard to *People of the Great Sandface*, about the "last" group of "wild" Gwikwe San in Botswana. This film elicited extremely negative comment from North American anthropologists (Gordon 1990; Wilmsen 1991). These critics evaluated *Sandface* 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' *The Gods Must be Crazy* films (1983,

1989) are more about Afrikaner social myths than about "Bushmen." The Bushmen are in this explanation merely the metaphorical vehicles through which Uys is able to reconstruct a vision of Afrikanerdom before the Fall (in Eden). In the light of this argument it becomes more difficult to accuse Uys of overt racism, except of an introspective kind (see Tomaselli 1992; see also Davis 1996).

American anthropologist, David Bloch, and Nigerian drama, film and literature scholar Maureen Eke, found an oral/performance anti-apartheid coherence in the story told by the black poet in *The Two Rivers*. Other American evaluators of *The Two Rivers* (1985), on the other hand, interpreted the film as "racist," notwithstanding the intention of its makers (see Tomaselli and Eke 1995). A similar opinion emerged about *People of the Great Sandface*. Another film often subjected to this kind of criticism is *Cry Freedom*. 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. In South Africa, *Cry Freedom* was lauded by the Azanian People's Organization, the group which claimed the mantle of Steve Biko, as an accurate and empathetic interpretation, and one which popularized their political leader on a scale they could never have otherwise achieved (Tomaselli 1993).

Most films claim to follow, or more innovatively develop, an internal logic and style, which propose their own specific forms of interpretation or "readings." Yet the above experience supports wider audience research, which 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 meaning-making practices. A film made to oppose racism, in fact, may be interpreted by racists as supporting their position.

Professional experience and training can also influence interpretation. An anthropologist is unlikely to "read" *N!ai: 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, narrative structure and representation of individual characters. 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, American anthropologists and anti-apartheid activists had conspiratorially implicated it in the apartheid grand propaganda scheme.

One way of dealing with students' multiple interpretations of the same film 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. Documentaries should not be thought as offering "windows to the world." 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). 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 stilted 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). Indeed, since the installation of the post-Reagan Democratic administration, there was a nasty bit of political fall-out concerning one of the new appointees' relations with her (hispanic) domestic workers right in the heartland of U.S. politics, Washington D.C.!

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.

Similarly, in American newscaster Walter Cronkite's *Children of Apartheid* (1987), for example, the liberal analysis is tempered by the film's evidence of white children criticizing apartheid. After starting out in black versus white terms, Cronkite accepts that apartheid means cheap labor for big business. However, he perhaps wisely left it to the white school children interviewed at a private institution to make this connection. Other films which break with this racial reductionism include *Mapantsula* (1987), *Dark City* (1990), *Cry Freedom* (1987) and *Biko: Breaking the Silence* (1988), *A Dry White Season* (1989), and *Come Back Africa* (1959), *The Color of Gold* (1991) and so on.

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. They are somebody's statements about the world.

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. 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 instance, is chillingly reactionary, racist, fascist, nationalist, and militarist—yet claims God as an ally.

Conversely, the Reverend Beyers Naudé in *Cry of Reason* (1988) invokes Scripture 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 Huddlestone, 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, for example, the intercuts of the Reverend Alan Boesak's public speech at a protest meeting with grim images of a black women being executed ("necklaced" by fire *disarticulates* the content of Boesak's non-violent, humanist, religious meaning and context by *re-articulating* what he is actually saying. By this means McAlvany substituted another meaning—that is, that Boesak supports violence, brutality and lawlessness.

This process of disarticulation and rearticulation also occurred with regard to the content of writing and films about Steve Biko. 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. 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 i*s 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 (See Tomaselli, Eke and Davidson 1997). Such information is also provided to clarify references or statements where pertinent information is omitted.

THE IMAGE AS GENERAL TERM IN THE FILM'S REPRESENTATION

Generally speaking, the preceding discussion has shown that there is a tension between the *image* and the *representation* in understanding how audiences view films. In this section of the paper, then, I want to clarify this tension by "rearticulating" the conceptions of "image" and of "representation" not as the horns of a dilemma, but as parts of a logical *continuity* in which representation is presupposed by image. To do this I will draw on C. S. Peirce's conception of iconicity, in quite technical terms, as the characteristic way that signs in general (as elements of logic) *map onto* their objects. I will argue that once the image is analyzed in its iconicity, then the representation that one forms in the viewing of a film, as a whole, is a species of argument in which audiences' interpretations "represent" something in much the same way as a lawyer represents a client or an elected politician represents a constituency (see Nichols 1993).

Iconicity as an element of semiotic, the latter seen as "logic in the broad sense of the word" (Peirce, L75), is a quality or character of the sign in the way that it *maps onto* an object. Generally, the sign as icon refers to its object in the sense that the sign *shares* some aspect of signification with the object itself. Now Peirce was very consistent, over more than half a century, in defining the term "sign." I give three versions, one from early in his career, and two from the beginning of the twentieth century. All were definitions that Peirce made public in some way, the first in an academic publication, the second in a formal funding application, and the third as a dictionary definition:

> 1) …every comparison requires, besides the related thing, the ground, and the correlate, also a (mediating representation which) (represents the relate to be a representation of the same correlate) (which this mediating representation itself represents). Such a mediating representation may be termed an (interpretant), who says that a foreigner says the same thing which he himself says. (from *On a New List of Categories*, 1867, CP 1.554)
>
> 2) "*Sign*." Anything which determines something else (its interpretant) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its object) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on an infinitum. No doubt, intelligent consciousness must enter into the series. If the series of successive interpretants comes to an end, the sign is thereby rendered imperfect, at least. If, an interpretant idea having been determined in an individual consciousness it

> determines no outward sign, but that consciousness becomes annihilated, or otherwise loses all memory or other significant effect of the sign, it becomes absolutely undiscoverable that there ever was such an idea in that consciousness; and in that case it is difficult to see how it could have any meaning to say that that consciousness ever had the idea, since the saying so would be an interpretant of that idea. (Dictionary entry in *Baldwin's Dictionary*, 1902, CP 2.303)
>
> 3) A definition of a sign will be given which not more refers to human thought than does the definition of a line as the place with a particle occupies, part by part, during a lapse of time. Namely, a sign is something, A, which brings something, B, its interpretant sign determined or created by it, into the same sort of correspondence with something, C, its object, as that in which itself stand to C. It is from this definition, together with a definition of "formal," that I deduce mathematically the principles of logic. (From the application to the Carnegie Institution, 1902, L75. Included in *New Elements of Mathematics*, Eisele, 20-22)

In general, as these three definitions suggest, signs have a mediating role in the sense that they are positioned between an object, which can be anything from some material thing, through printed patterns, to dreams or hallucinations, and some effect in a mind called an interpretant. Now the actual nature of the interpretant is not important here, but it is necessary to clear up the way Peirce speaks of "mind." An interpretant is not a thought or a stimulus or an "idea" in any psychological sense. In the general logical context within which Peirce elaborated semiotic, introducing psychological entities would have begged the question; consequently, and consistently from an early stage (CP 5.358-5.387) of the evolution of his thinking, he treated as "mind" any real part of the universe that could take on new habits. In turn, "habit" is nothing but the common-sense notion that something tends to act in a certain way. In human terms, Peirce defined habit as meaning only that the person or thing that has the habit, would behave (or usually behave) in a certain way whenever a certain occasion should arise (CP 8.380).

Now for something to "behave a certain way whenever a certain occasion should arise" is to ascribe to that person or thing a *continuity* of conduct or action. For a sign, therefore, to operate to produce an interpretant that is familiar to a mind and not likely to challenge or disprove any habit, it must map onto some element in the object that exhibits some element of continuity with the interpretant. Such a quality in a sign is its *iconicity*. The latter is therefore some quality of continuity between sign and object such that there is no given habit in a universal sense, but only in the context of interpretation. Iconically speaking, a sign is basically what it is independently of anything else that might arise from the sign relation. It is only once the elements of *indexicality* and *symbolism* come into the picture that we can begin to make some sense of the notion that "meaning" is fluid, or subject to change, in the sense that a film, as a relatively constant artifact, can elicit the ranges of interpretation exhibited during the research described above.

A most striking illustration of this quality of film is the way that radically different meanings arise from two different ways of assembling (mostly) the same *images* or shots in different *sequences* of John Marshall's work. As noted above, the films The *!Kung San: Traditional Life* and *The !Kung San: Resettlement* were edited from the same shots into two quite divergent representations about the same people. What is important here is this: the

images that made up the shots were the same, but the sequences of images in the two films pointed to different conclusions reached by two different editors employed by Marshall's company, Documentary Educational Resources in Watertown, Massachusetts. In effect, it is precisely the editing sequences, as was especially evident in McAlvany's *Revolution and Betrayal*, that impose the limits on what potential interpretations may develop in an audience. This limit is effectively the way that the continuous iconic potential of images or shots become indexes, signs that *point towards* some aspect of their object, but have no direct coincidence with it. In films like *Revolution and Betrayal* and *Maids and Madams*, then, this indexical action of editorial imposition tends to be obvious, even to the point of outright crudity.

Thus the point at which an audience actually comes to viewing a film as having a "meaning" begins *after* the making of the shots and their being edited into sequences. The audiences' film experiences necessarily end with the sequences of shots (further linked and developed as a result of the iconicity and indexicality of the sound and music tracks) culminating in a form of argument or representation that says something that asserts a *conclusion*. What this conclusion is, however, is not necessarily what the film maker might have intended. The basic property of iconicity is continuity of some quality of both the sign (the image) and its object (the person or place or event fixed in the image. This says absolutely nothing, however, about the continuities of representation that *audiences* brings to the party. Where McAlvany, Marshall, Myburgh or any of the film makers discussed above must stand or fall is in the correctness or otherwise of the assumptions they make about their potential audiences. They must more or less make a bet about what audiences will see as the continuous property that identifies the persons, places or events they are collecting into the film as a representation.

Three of the titles discussed above, two documentaries and one feature, illustrate the extent to which producers and directors can exploit the unexpected potentials inherent in the continuity of the iconic sign. The two Massachusetts Schools Social Science Program *!Kung San* documentaries, *Traditional Life* and *Resettlement*, make the independent guesses that on the one hand, the schools' audiences will habitually identify with representations about the authenticity of pre-modern forms of life. While on the other hand, they also guess that the same audiences will identify habitually with representations about the inherent sanctity of property and/or place of origin as an essential element of identity. This in many ways confirms precisely the point that films about cultures often say more about their makers than their subjects. But more importantly, however, the correctness of these guesses also says many things about the lives and habits of audiences.

This makes the phenomenal success among U.S. viewers of Jamie Uys' *The Gods Must Be Crazy* films much more intelligible. It goes without saying that a *successful* feature film must attract paying audiences in numbers in order to qualify as such. The iconicity of pre-modern authenticity and that of the sanctity of property and place are also features of Uys' films. There is thus much in the coincidence between Uys' home Afrikaner audience's habitual sign-interpretation and that of the millions who coughed up their dollars at box offices in the United States. One could comment, perhaps, on just how shrewd a bit of marketing this represents. On the other hand, however, there are more fundamental issues that these films' production and reception reveal, and the next section

concludes the paper by indicating what these might imply and how they relate to iconicity as a general condition for meaning.

Conclusion: Meaning, Art, and Ethics

Every audience comes to the movies (or switches on the television) neither as a blank slate to be written upon, nor as a seething mass of completely idiosyncratic meaning-making processes. Of course, the analysis of the research in Michigan, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and elsewhere also showed that there are certain relatively constant or habitual patterns of reception that can both confirm and confound expectations. But this plurality of continuity or iconicity does not come from nowhere. People take on habits not just willy-nilly but within a set of communities and relationships between communities that they consider as right and wrong, admirable or not-admirable.

For a habitual relationship to be judged right or wrong entails a judgment, or, more specifically, a criterion for judging whether that which people in one's community habitually do is right or wrong. Habits, as the end-result of representations beginning with iconic signs, *presuppose ethics*. It is not surprising, therefore, in evaluating films and audiences' responses to them, that the most interest emerged among younger audiences. Although adult or experienced intellectuals were more likely to pay close attention to films' images, sequences and narratives from the beginning, schoolchildren and students quickly related what they saw to issues of right or wrong as they encountered them in their home environments. On the other hand, preparation within the school environment showed that similar young audiences quickly developed different sets of criteria for interpreting the same images, sequences and narratives. In any of these cases, the viewers had to have in place some more or less elaborated conception of right and wrong conduct *before* they began to interpret the films.

Yet even this doesn't exhaust the matter, because an audience might make judgments on a film like, say, *N!ai, The Story of a !Kung Woman* that are even more unexpected. Consider, therefore, the difference between watching this film on a public service television broadcast, in a university Anthropology class, and in a seedy porn cinema in some red-light district. A public service television audience conceivably overlaps to a greater or lesser extent with the anthropology class audience, but neither tends to overlap with the red-light audience. Now some researchers have suggested that documentaries using ethnographic images are indistinguishable from pornographic films, because both rely on projections of the naked or partly-naked human body (Hanson et al 1991). This only holds water if the logic of the image, and the ethics of the habits it promotes, precedes the audience's sense of what is or is not admirable in itself.

Now this proposition actually suggests that for a film about one kind of people to have some meaning as a story or narrative that makes sense to an audience made up of other kinds of people, the audience will only make its ethical and aesthetic decisions after interpreting the film. Yet if this were indeed the case, then all the various audiences ought to come to the same interpretive decisions because they will have been watching the same iconic images sequenced in the same indexical order. Put differently, to say that

ethnographic film and pornography are indistinguishable is to say that people of all audiences only obtain their conceptions of value and of the admirable by "injection" of these values in visual representations. This clearly was not what the experience of evaluation found.

Films therefore only begin to make sense within already existing frames of continuity with which audiences, film makers and film distributors and film exhibitors and film critics are familiar. These frames of continuity are rooted in what all these elementary components of the film community already consider more or less to be right conduct. In turn, what they all consider to be right conduct rests on prior frames of continuity rooted in what the people who make up these communities consider to be admirable in its own right. Clearly, audiences and producers and makers of films about other peoples or places interpret these films on the basis of whatever continuities the films exhibit with those continuous or iconic habits the films *share* with the communities of the audiences, producers, makers and critics.

What this means, in closing, is that the question of how "real" is realism must be looked at again. John Marshall (1993) developed the conception of the "slot" in order to explain how a film maker chooses images in the shooting and editing of films. These slots tend to overlap, in that the ways a film maker judges what to shoot, and what to include in the final cut, must have some elements in common with what his other intended audience expects. Now the problem that theorists had with Marshall's explanation was that for the slot to operate, assumes that there is a reality outside the cinematic experience (Tomaselli 1999). Most contemporary film theory, on the other hand, challenges the autonomy of reality, instead teaching that the film *constructs reality*. This in many ways continues the long tradition of nominalism in philosophy, which underpins the doctrines of constructivism, and rational and cultural relativism (Bloor 1983; Winch 1958; Berger and Luckmann 1971).

However, if one looks at the slot as a function of the continuity of the iconic sign across time and place, then whatever the film maker chooses to shoot must represent an object that *independently* operates as a familiar interpretant. But in the nature of the sign relation, however, the same iconic continuity must all the while map onto an object that independently and habitually has been carrying on and continues to carry on in its own way. This is to say, then, that in the making of an image, something *real* exists before and after the shoot; after all, as Marshall (1993) put it, the people being filmed must pick up the pieces and carry on when the film crew goes back to wherever they came from.

What leads to the so-called social constrction of a film's meaning, then, is not something in the film image itself, but something about the continuities that the whole sequenced narrative of film images evokes with habitual iconic continuities that audiences share with film makers. The experience of the Michigan evaluation project shows, however, that a structured and systematic approach to viewing films' subjects in their own terms can challenge, and even change, the aesthetic and ethical conceptions that underlie audiences' first interpretations. Indeed, if an interpretation can change at all, surely this confirms that the images in films must record something independent of the film maker's and audience's reality.

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