



History, Culture and Ideology in South African Cinema

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In this study, I track the history of South African cinema by focusing in particular on the cultural and ideological implications that characterised its development. Building on an analysis of the country's political and historical background, and its symbiotic relationship with cultural history, I move on to investigate the mutual influence exerted by all these factors and their role in reflecting, challenging and bringing about momentous ideological changes.

Politics and rule of an oppressive and racist white minority have been the main obstacles to the development of a national cinema tradition. Since the beginnings of film culture in South Africa, state censorship prevented the public from watching international masterpieces which could have questioned hegemonic notions regarding gender, race, politics and aesthetics, or reflecting social and racial conflicts.

Cinema for black audiences played a dual role during the first years of the twentieth century; on the one hand, as it is the case with the New African Movement, it was considered a tool for instruction and modernization. On the other hand, the American Mission Board, for one, saw it as a means of moral control, enmeshed in the



larger social project of moralizing and disciplining the leisure time of urban Africans and mineworkers.

From the very beginning of film industry, a massive production of recruitment movies, aimed at recruiting African workforce for the gold mines, showed the propaganda potential of film genres. During the same period, South African cinema for white audiences focused instead on a nation building agenda, in an attempt to consolidate Afrikaner identity.

A new trend was introduced in the 1950s, when a cluster of six long feature films that prioritized black experience were produced for the first time in South Africa. However, after the release of these relatively high-quality films, which had been often carried out in collaboration with Sophiatown African intellectuals, state control over cinema increased. At about this period the apartheid state embarked upon new forms of ideological control which had an enormous influence in shaping cinema through the introduction of a state subsidy scheme. For this reason, in the time of Grand Apartheid, movies intended for both white and black audiences became privileged conduits for dominant ideological messages in support of the apartheid system.

The subsidy system, introduced at first for white cinema and then for black movies too, became an invaluable tool, along with state censorship and distribution control, in helping the South African state to check and channel film production. In this way the government limited its support only to the production of films in line with the official ideologies of separate development and defence from the dual threat of black and communist peril.

The Information Scandal of the 1970s revealed how deeply South African cinema was involved in the general project of national and international political propaganda. These low-quality films, which were greatly inferior to the standards of the 1950s movies, were often produced on very low budgets only in order to get money from state funds, and represented one more obstacle to the development of a truly national cinema, as they consolidated sharp racial and class divisions between the different audiences they were intended to reach.

For all these reasons, it is apparent that the quality cinema of post-apartheid South Africa has been drawing on a unique tradition, as it derives mostly from the anti-apartheid documentary film movement and from the alternative cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. The latter, in particular, was developed through the work of dissident filmmakers and protest groups and was characterised by a strong vein of social realism.

For nearly 90 years South African cinema was forced to project a misguided and misleading national image, but the transition to democracy brought to the forefront the need for and desire of giving freedom of expression to previously marginalised voices, among which the voice of the African population plays a major role.

The democratic government of new South Africa committed itself to support the film industry by promoting diversification in issues portrayed in movies and



encouraging a variety of voices to express their point of view, so as to restore agency to those categories which had been silenced under apartheid. After the end of apartheid, moreover, many gifted South African filmmakers, such as Ramadam Suleman and Zola Maseko, chose to come back to their homeland after years of exile, contributing to boost a new, fecund season in the development of South African film industry.

Over the last 15 years relevant social issues, such as AIDS/HIV, violence, criminality and poverty, have played a major role in South African cinema, this trend being in line with a renewed interest in social realism. Also the TRC hearings and the reconciliation process have been overriding concerns of post-apartheid cinema. Many recent films, indeed, narrativize South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, prioritizing the themes of forgiveness and the search for new, inclusive articulations of national identity and progressive imaginaries.

Thanks to this new political and cultural climate, as well as to state support and international agreements, the South African film industry is now experiencing a strong revival after years of censorship and repression. South African cinema is achieving an ever increasing status also at an international level and its prominent role leads to massive participation in national and international film festivals resulting in prizes and awards, among which the most important is the Oscar for Best Foreign Film won by Gavin Hood's *Tsotsi* in 2006.

Today, South African cinema must face a new challenge: in order to prevent current economic strictures from replacing the ideological fetters of the past as major influences on new films contents, the South African government must commit itself to support diversified cultural productions. At the same time, producers and filmmakers have to resist both the dictates of social and cultural policies and the pressures of the market, cherishing their independence from industry and the state and finding a balance between the attractive poles of cinema as art and cinema as industry.

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