

A Link with Africa: Oral Storytelling in post-apartheid cinema



Cosmic Africa

Abstract

The focus of this article is the documentaries, short films and some features of several post-apartheid directors and in particular their bold experimentation with oral storytelling. A brief historical overview of developments in South African filmmaking from the late 1970s till the 21st century contextualises some of the important thematic concerns in the work of these filmmakers. The directors are among very few post-apartheid South African filmmakers, who use the African traditions of oral storytelling in their work.

Key words

Oral storytelling, *griots*, African cinema, shorts, documentary, features.

Historical and theoretical contextualisation

My first exposure to the African cinema theories and critical courses occurred at the South African Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) during the 1980s. Apartheid led to an

isolation of South African filmmakers and academics from their colleagues elsewhere on the African continent.

Since the 1920s in Egypt, and especially after independence in sub-Saharan Africa, several hundreds of full-length films were made by African film directors (Armes 2008; Botha 1994; Convents 2003). The advent of sub-Saharan African cinemas coincided with the independence of many African countries after years of colonial subordination. The African filmmakers were deeply concerned with the issue of culture and national identity (Bakari & Cham 1996; Botha 1994). In both documents of the 1975 Algiers Charter on African Cinema and the Niamey Manifesto of 1982, the need was stressed to express the cultural legacy of the African peoples through films as well as the need to use films in the development of African nations.

Since independence feature and short films have been produced in Africa with a voice, content and aesthetic, which are rich, histor-

ical and creatively responsive to African social reality. The films also used oral storytelling traditions, and where the films reached their audiences, they were immensely popular (Botha 1994). Since the 1960s certain African countries have produced world-famous film directors: Ousmane Sembene and Djibril Diop Mambety from Senegal, Youssef Chahine from Egypt, Med Hondo from Mauritania, Idrissa Ouedraogo and Gaston Kabore from Burkina Faso, Souleymane Cisse from Mali and Abderrahmane Sissako from Mauritania,

Prize was awarded for *Yaaba*, and in 1990 the second highest Cannes award, the Grand Prix du Jury, went to *Tilai*. In 1992 Sembene's *Guelwaar* and Djibril Diop Mambety's *Hye-nas* were entered for the main competition at Cannes, which further underscores the prominence of countries such as Senegal and Burkina Faso at this film festival. Burkina Faso is a relatively poor African country but is one of the undisputed leaders in African film art, not South Africa (Botha 1994).

Since the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembene produced his first film, *Borom Sarret*, in



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Already in 1973 African films were prominent at the Cannes Film Festival when the Senegalese film of Djibril Diop Mambety, *Touki Bouki*, was screened in the *Quinzaine des Realisateurs* section. In 1975 *Chronicle of the Burning Years*, a 3-hour epic directed by the Algerian film director Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina, won the much sought after Golden Palm Award at the Cannes Film Festival. In 1986, the Tunisian film *Man of Ashes* was screened in the official selection round for the Cannes Film Festival. With the upsurge of film art in especially western Africa, Cisse's *Yeelen* won the Jury Prize at Cannes in 1987.

Thereafter Ouedraogo had two consecutive successes at Cannes: In 1989 the FIPRESCI

1964, a series of films followed (such as *Xala* and *Camp de Thiaroye*) which were very well received across the world. Since 1960 countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Ghana, Burkina Faso, DRC (Zaire), Zimbabwe, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Mali produced films that caught attention worldwide. Apart from awards at Cannes, film auteurs such as Sissako, Cisse, Hondo and Sembene won awards for their work at film festivals in Paris, Rome and Moscow. Nigeria is currently one of the largest video industries in the world with an annual video production of more than 800 titles.

In his comprehensive and historical approach, Manthia Diawara (1992) considers African

film within the framework of the history of film production and narrative typologies. Importantly he acknowledges the dominance of Francophone film over Anglophone film in sub-Saharan Africa, a situation that; one could argue is hopefully now changing.

In spite of thematic diversity, Diawara (1992) distinguishes three narrative typologies in African film art, namely the film which portrays pre-industrial and pre-colonial Africa in which the Westerner as outsider has not yet entered; films in which colonialism is questioned and sharply criticised; and social-realistic films in which modernity and tradition are dealt with.

The first typology, also known as the “return-to-the-sources” typology (Diawara 1992), forms the core of the rest of this article. The unique visual communication, which emerges from films in this typology, is discussed in more detail. (For an excellent discussion of pictorial communication in various African films read Malkmus & Armes 1992 and Pfaff 1990).

The other two typologies that Diawara (1992) discusses in detail, is only dealt with very cursorily here. The social-realistic tendency in African film art is based on contemporary experiences that oppose tradition to modernity, oral to written, agrarian to customary, communities to urban and industrialized systems; and subsistence economies to highly productive economies. The filmmakers often use a traditional position to criticise and link certain forms of modernity to neocolonialism and cultural imperialism. From a modernist point of view, they also debunk the attempt to romanticize traditional values as pure and original. The heroes are women, children, and other marginalised groups that are pushed into the shadows of the elites of tradition and modernity (Diawara 1992:141).

Melodrama, satire and comedy are primarily used to communicate with African audiences. Popular cultural forms such as singing and dancing, the oral tradition (particularly literary)

and popular theatre such as the Yoruba theatre in Nigeria are interlinked with the pictorial communication of these films. Even popular music stars, such as Salif Keita, Papa Wemba and Alpha Blondy, act in these films. Especially Ousmane Sembene’s films, such as *Xala*, are typical of these African films. The films with their populist themes are very popular among the African working class and unemployed. The liberation of African women is also addressed. Men are being criticised because in certain respects they accepted the progress of modernity, but continued to oppress women. Sometimes, social comedies portray men who are involved with more women than they can satisfy sexually (for example *Xala*).

The films that portray conflicts between Africans and colonialism are also very popular in Africa. Med Hondo’s *Sarraounia* and Sembene’s *Camp de Thiaroye* position the film viewer in order to identify with the resistance of African peoples against European colonialism and imperialism. The narratives deal with colonial incidents and often pose African heroes against European villains.

They are conditioned by the desire to show African heroism where European history only mentioned the actions of the conquerors, resistance where the colonial version of history silenced oppositional voices, and the role of women in the armed struggle. For the filmmaker, such historical narratives are justified by the need to bring out of the shadows the role played by the African people in shaping their own history (Diawara 1992:152).

With reference to the “return-to-the-sources” typology, the best example is Souleymane Cisse’s *Yeelen*. Three factors contributed to the development of this type of African film art:

1. In some African states, the filmmakers experienced censorship problems when their portrayals of their own contemporary situations were critical of their respective governments (Mampaey 1993). Consequently, they decided to

concentrate on more covert political messages.

2. Directors explored pre-colonial African traditions in these films visually in order to make a contribution to the solution of current problems.

3. Attempts were made to explore and develop a new film language (Diawara 1992).

An underlying motivation for making this type of film is the affirmation of a dynamic African history and culture prior to the colonial era. The style of all these films is determined by the exploration of antique African traditions, way of life and magic power.

In contrast to the anticolonial films which are conventional in terms of their pictorial communication, these films are characterised by the way the director looks at tradition: "It is a look that is intent on positing religion where anthropologists only see idolatry, history where they see primitivism, and humanism where they see savage acts" (Diawara 1992:160).

The pictorial communication of the films is characterised by long shots with natural sounds. In contrast to conventional design in certain Western films in which close shots are used in order to increase the dramatic and emotional effect of a particular moment in the narrative, close shots are used in these African films in order to visualise the virtue of the characters and their traditions. It is film art with "... perfect images, perfect sound, and perfect editing" (Diawara 1992:160). The films were however criticised in certain quarters as a result of their nostalgic portrayal of bygone Africa. A unique example of this typology is Souleymane Cisse's *Yeelen*.

Yeelen portrays the classic conflict between the old and the new order in the struggle between Soma Diarra and his son Ninankoro. Soma Diarra is a member of a dreaded Bambara group, the so-called Komo, which is cloaked in secrecy. Ninankoro has to use the wing of the Kore (a secret bar which represents multiple knowledge levels for the Bambara) in order to destroy

the Komo (Diawara 1992).

Structurally the film was evidently influenced by the oral tradition of the Mande people of West Africa who include the Bambara. Just as the classic narratives of the Mande culture, *Yeelen* portrays the Komo cult as a repressive and rigid system. Because this system is unacceptable, the film advocates a new order. Heroes in these narratives commonly gain the knowledge necessary for social change by embarking on an exploring trip. In the film the son, Ninankoro, learns in a foreign country how to fight and also finds himself a wife who gives him a son, the symbol of the future. However, Ninankoro himself only symbolises the present, because he dies in the final fight with his father.

According to Malkmus and Armes (1992), the film is a reflection of the linear structure of oral narrative. The opening sequence explains some of the elements of the underlying myth, the Komo, which symbolises knowledge, as well as the wing of the Kore, the sacred eagle, war, wisdom and death. The film has many binary oppositions: milk versus water, father versus son, life versus death. These binary oppositions portray the dialectics in the Bambara culture (Diawara 1992).

Diawara (1992:161) summarises the pictorial communication of the film as follows:

Cisse's camera, used more in an attempt to describe the "right image" than to reveal a psychological point of view, recasts the fundamental narrative issues of show and tell. What brings emotional feeling to the spectator in *Yeelen* is the way in which the film transforms Western cinema's stereotypes into human and complex subjects. It valorises and humanises Africans and their past systems. In other words, it elevates the Komo, which is just another barbaric ritual in anthropological films, to the level of science (Diawara 1992:161).

By making use of beautiful images, Cisse creates alternatives to the stereotypical conceptions of Africa that Hollywood, Western histo-

ry and Western news reports have constructed. The film "... defines its own language by deemphasising the psychological based shot/reverse shot and close-ups of Western cinema, and by valorising long shots and long takes, which through their 'natural' feel are destined to describe the characters' relationships to each other and to time and space" (Diawara 1992:165). African realities are interpreted by African eyes (Malkmus & Armes 1992). In contrast, Western films make scant use of space and time to define their characters. "The long views that the return-to-source films use enable them to reveal the rituals under the Boabab tree, the secret spaces in the rooms, man and woman's relation to time, land, water, and sky" (Diawara 1992:165). In most Western films these holistic perspectives disappear and are replaced by mere establishing shots and close-ups which follow one another in close order, in order to construct a narrative.

Chirol (1999) discussed oral aesthetics in *Wend Kuuni*, another important example for our understanding of oral storytelling. Gaston Kabore's *Wend Kuuni* has a complex relationship between its subject matter and narrative structure. The linear, three-act narrative structure is the most familiar cinematic story-telling technique for commercial Hollywood films, deriving from the Aristotelian idea that a plot has a beginning, a middle and end. Each act is usually separated by a dramatic reversal and film reached a climax in the third act, followed by a brief resolution. *Wend Kuuni* has a markedly different plot structure, one that can be described as cyclical and divided into two acts. The film begins with a prologue scene, where a mother sits in a hut crying and pondering the fate of her long-missing husband, as well as the fate of her son and herself, a presumed widow in a society that expects women to remain married. Her dilemma invites the sympathy of the audience and encourages identification with her. She vows to run away from the village with her son, but before this is carried out, the

narrative shifts to a completely different space. A travelling merchant finds a boy lying in the bush alone. He questions the child, but receives no answers, as the boy, soon to be named *Wend Kuuni*, appears to be mute. The viewer may assume or believe that the child is the son mentioned in the previous scene, as the connection of these first two scenes suggests this to the spectator, yet this assumption cannot be confirmed, as the boy is clearly found alone and cannot communicate. *Wend Kuuni* is adopted into a village and through a series of scenes depicting the daily life of the village and its characters, two years pass by. The climax approaches by means of a seemingly irrelevant event in the village. A woman tries to leave her husband Bila, because he is old and impotent, provoking a major conflict in the village. The conflict is apparently resolved, but Bila commits suicide by hanging himself from a tree.

If one considers Teshome Gabriel's argument (Tomaselli & Prinsloo, 1992: 338), that a quality of African oral narratives is the use of themes to link scenes within a story, the relevance of the scene of marital discord becomes clearer. The breakdown in the marriage relationship between Bila and his wife echoes the end of the relationship between *Wend Kuuni*'s parents, although the stimulus for the end of the relationship in *Wend Kuuni*'s case is assumed very different. His father, a hunter, disappeared 13 months before the initial scene of the film, whereas Bila's wife rejects him, because he is an unsatisfactory husband. On the day of their fight, *Wend Kuuni* wakes with a sense of 'foreboding' that is vindicated when he comes upon Bila's hanging from the tree. Again, a thematic link is established when a shot of *Wend Kuuni*'s mother, lying dead on the ground, precedes a shot of *Wend Kuuni* crying "Mother", followed by a shot of the dead Bila. The shot of his mother is clearly a flashback, as it begins unfocused, before becoming clear, like an image arising out of memory. This interpretation is strengthened by a later shot, when *Wend Kuuni* tells

his story to Pognèré. In the flashback scene, he awakes to find his mother lying next to him, and the action of him looking at his dead mother is repeated, 'objectively' confirmed by the distanced camera angle. Thus, the sight of the dead man completes the cycle of isolation and muted grieving initiated by the sight of his dead mother.

Wend Kuuni discovers the corpse and this shocks him into speaking once more, finally allowing him to explain his past in the resolution phase that marks the second act. According to Chirol (1999: 116), Wend Kuuni requires this missing narrative to be told to conclude the film. He tells his story of their exile from their village to his foster-sister Pognèré. His tale is visualised through a flashback sequence, returning to the first scene with his mother in the hut and ending with his mother's death. As he recounts his discovery by the merchant, Pognèré completes his sentence 'And then the traveller found you', signifying the closure of the narrative loop. The mystery of who Wend Kuuni is and perhaps more importantly, where he comes from, is the means by which the film maintains audience interest, rather than a dramatic struggle between opposing characters, as in many conventional Hollywood films. Most of the first 40 minutes is almost devoid of dramatic conflict and there is little sense of rising tension throughout this major section of the film. The initial scene depicts a conflict between a woman who longs for her missing husband to return home and her father who urges her to remarry. The remainder of those first 40 minutes, Wend Kuuni's life with his foster family, is depicted in a series of small episodes that illustrate their daily existence: household chores, herding, the market place, weaving cloth, cooking food and more. The conflicts that do occur reflect the small dramas of a relatively peaceful rural family. Pognèré is occasionally disobedient and provokes the anger of Timpoko, her mother. A fellow goatherd loses a ram in the wilderness and asks Wend Kuuni if he knows its location.

Repeated visual motifs, such as extended takes of herders taking their goats through the long grass, emphasise the slow rhythmic nature of the story and the characters' lives, illustrating another of Gabriel's tendencies (Tomaselli & Prinsloo, 1992: 338) of oral art forms: to create cyclically progressing narratives. These shots also encourage the viewer to consider the landscapes and the characters' connection to their environment, both social and natural. The final shot is Wend Kuuni walking alone into the bush, suggesting his integration into the communal landscape once his connection to his past has been re-established by sharing his life story with his community. At times, these vignettes resemble autonomous mini-documentaries, rather than components of a larger fictional narrative.

According to Chirol (1999: 117), films such as *Wend Kuuni* can use traditional narrative structures and still be critical of traditional values. The form and the content do not necessarily reinforce one another. Wend Kuuni has a clearly different plot structure to conventional Western films and this structure reflects the oral culture that inspired the story. Unlike Hollywood, where one film can illustrate conventions applicable to other films, it is not clear that *Wend Kuuni's* two-act structure is necessarily emblematic of oral narrative films and seems unlikely, given the flexible and improvisational nature of oral communication. In contrast to Hollywood's tendency towards chronologically linear films with rising dramatic tension, *Wend Kuuni* is cyclical and uses dramatic tension in a non-linear way. The episodic oral narrative structure is not used only to provide African audiences with a familiar form of entertainment transferred to the screen; it also works to educate viewers about their cultural heritage and history. It does not present a political neutral representation of the past either. *Wend Kuuni* takes an anti-colonial stance on Burkina Faso's history, but also subjects traditional African values to critical interrogation.

South Africa's isolation from the rest of Africa

As a result of apartheid and the international cultural boycott during the 1980s, South African academics and film-makers were excluded from the major African film festivals and congresses, such as the Pan African Film and Television Festival (*Festival Panafricain du Cinema et de la Television de Ouagadougou*, i.e. FESPACO) and the Carthage Film Festival (*Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage*) (Botha 1994). The Pan African Film and Television Festival is held in Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, and in 1993, for example, nearly a million people participated in the programme which comprised 120 films shown at 13 venues. The Carthage Film Festival is held in Tunisia and is regarded as the display window of African cinemas.



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As a result of international isolation, South Africans during the 1980s were seldom exposed to these films as well as the debates on film aesthetics, distribution and other important issues on the African continent.

Academics such as Botha (1986) and Van Zyl (1985) argued during the mid-1980s for a closer link between the South African film industry and film industries elsewhere on the continent. In 1988 a watershed was experienced in South Africa when the Film and Allied Workers' Organisation (FAWO) was founded. It

was initiated by the Culture in Another South Africa (CASA) congress and festival, which were held in Amsterdam the year before. At the congress, the role of film-makers in the cultural struggle in South Africa was debated. Definite similarities were pointed out between South African initiatives and initiatives in other developing countries, particularly in Africa, with regard to the establishment of an 'indigenous' film culture.

A further development led to contact between local and other African film-makers. In July 1990, the Zabalaza Film Workshop and Film Festival were held in London. South African directors, such as Elaine Proctor, and veteran African film-makers, such as Med Hondo and Gaston Kabore, were panel members during the panel discussion. For the first time, South African cinema was discussed and debated within the historical context of African films. A book on the link between South African and African cinema, titled *Images of South Africa: The Rise of the Alternative Film* by Botha and Van Aswegen was completed and published in 1992. The theories by Teshome Gabriel (1989) were used to make sense of South African cinema during the 1980s.

FAWO also started important initiatives: the training of potential young black filmmakers in a so-called Community Video School (which evolved into the Newtown Film school); the distribution of films, including African films, in the townships by means of the Video Suitcase Project (which became the Film Resource Unit); and research on new structures for the local film industry which lacked a central statutory body responsible for securing continued government support for the industry. Voluntary researchers such as Danie Pieterse, Johan Blignaut, Martin Botha, Clive Metz and others studied the structure of various foreign film industries with a view of possible application of their findings in the South African context (Botha 1991; 1997b; Metz 1991; Moni 1991). Eventually the French structures, amongst others the *Centre National de la Cinématog-*

raphie (CNC), which was also successfully implemented in Burkina Faso, emerged as a viable model for South Africa (Pieterse 1991).

At the congress of the ANC's Department for Arts and Culture in April 1993, the French structures and their success in establishing a true national film industry in France and Burkina Faso were illustrated and discussed.

Since the unbanning of the African National Congress, Pan African Congress and South African Communist Party and the concomitant political changes in South Africa, individuals in the local film and television industries worked closer together with their colleagues in Africa. At the 1993 Pan African Film and Television Festival in Burkina Faso three South African films, namely *Sarafina!* (1992), Jean Delbeke's *The Schoolmaster* (about racism in a small South African town) and Jürgen Schadeberg's *Have You Seen Drum recently?* a documentary on Sophiatown culture that was wiped out by apartheid in the 1950s, were included in the festival programme for the first time. In the sphere of television, Africa's United Radio and Television Network Association (Urtna), in collaboration with the pay channel M-Net, broadcast the award ceremony, which was held in Nairobi, Kenya, as a television programme live across Africa. In order to stimulate the production of local films, M-Net also invited other southern African countries, such as Botswana, Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Namibia, to enter their work for M-Net's annual film competition. The competition was open to the whole African continent. In 1992 Gaston Kabore of Burkina Faso visited South Africa as guest of the Weekly Mail, and three of his films were screened at the newspaper's annual film festival, the Weekly Mail Film Festival (Botha 1994).

Since 1994 there has been progressively closer contact and co-operation between the film and television industries of South Africa and other African countries. Martin Botha incorporated African cinemas as part of the film studies modules at the University of South Africa in

1996 and between 2000 and 2005 at the City-Varsity School of Media and Creative Arts. During 2007 Botha started a third-year course in African Cinemas in the Centre for Film and Media Studies at the University of Cape Town that introduces students to the work of directors such as Djibril Diop Mambety, Youssef Chahine, Gaston Kabore, Ousmane Sembene and Gillo Pontecorvo. The course also examines contemporary issues in African cinemas, including cinema in South Africa during and after apartheid. During 2008 an African Cinema Unit was established by Botha at the same university.

The Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) and the NFVF of South Africa, in association with the Pan African Federation of Film-Makers (FEPACI), hosted the first African Film Summit as well as the General Congress of the Pan Federation of African Film-Makers in Johannesburg from 3 to 6 April 2006.⁵ Over 150 delegates, including some of the most prolific film practitioners from the continent and the Diaspora, representatives of national and regional film associations, guilds and unions, continental and national government institutions and other key stakeholders, converged in Johannesburg to engage with each other and continued dialogue towards the streamlining of policies, strategies and activities aimed at developing the African audio-visual industry. Discussions towards the hosting of the summit initiated at the 2003 edition of FESPACO between the DAC, NFVF and FEPACI were on the basis of the recommendations of the African Union Commission's appeal for the participation of the African Union, the RECs (Regional Economic Communities), African governments, the private sector and the civil society to take appropriate steps, in conjunction with FEPACI, Urtna, FESPACO and all stakeholders, to hold consultations and conduct preliminary studies with a view to establish an African Commission on the Audiovisual and Cinema Industries as well as a fund to promote the cinema industry and television programmes in Africa (Decisions of the As-

sembly of the AU, Second Ordinary Session, 10–12 July 2003, Maputo, Mozambique). South Africa was requested by FEPACI to host the first African Film Summit.

Through the various initiatives of FEPACI, which include the film festivals in Ouagadougou and Tunisia as well as inter-African co-operation in respect of co-production and interdependent distribution networks, South Africans have been progressively exposed to film debates and films that are released elsewhere in Africa and to which we have been denied access for many years. This contact was an enriching influence on South African film culture, especially with regard to the use of oral storytelling by a new generation of post-apartheid film-makers.



Great Dance

Developments in South African documentaries from the 1970s till the 21st century

It was not until the late 1970s that several key events came together to create the conditions for an independent documentary film industry to develop. The introduction of television in 1976 necessitated a lifting of the ban on video technology, thereby making more affordable small-format video cameras available to South African film-makers and broadening the national skills base. While news programming on the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC1) was tightly controlled, pro-

ducers of drama series and other programmes were afforded a surprising bit of leeway with regard to making social statements that challenged the state (e.g. the work by Manie Van Rensburg, which is discussed in Botha 2012).

In 1982, the introduction of SABC2 and SABC3, two new networks aimed at black audiences, further opened the door. In some cases, the national broadcaster even unwittingly provided tools and training that would be used to produce anti-apartheid films (Pichaske 2009).

Around the same time, a few South African universities began teaching film and video studies, which facilitated the emergence of a new generation of critical viewers and liberal film-makers. Less restricted than their professional counterparts, South African university students began to explore documentary topics that were critical of the state and/or exposed some of the hardships endured by black South Africans at the time (Steenveld 1992).

Since the late 1970s and 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 1996).

Some of these films were shown at local film festivals such as the Durban and Cape Town International Film Festivals and, from 1987 to 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 1996; Botha & Van Aswegen 1992).

The films had small budgets and were financed by the producers themselves; by progressive organisations such as the International Defence and Aid Fund for South Africa (IDAF) which strived for a united, democratic,

non-racial South Africa, the National Union of South African Students (as in the case of *Wits Protest* [1970–74]), the South African Council of Churches; private investors such as the Maggie Magaba Trust; as well as European and British television stations (Botha 1996; 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 1996). Together with numerous documentaries, community videos and full-length films such as *Mapantsula* (1988), as well as short films, these productions marked the beginning of a new, critical South African cinema.

The 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 1996). 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 1996).

Isitwalandwe: The Story of the South African Freedom Charter was made by Feinberg in 1980 on video and 16mm and made it clear that as a people's blueprint for democracy the Freedom Charter remained relevant for political change in South Africa (Botha 1996).

The major audiences for IDAF productions, however, were the international antiapartheid 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 spokespersons speak for themselves. These productions unambiguously presented an ANC viewpoint (Botha 1996).

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 1996).

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 on the horrors of apartheid (Botha 2006b). 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 film-makers. Some of the most seminal political documentaries of the 1980s came from Video News Services (VNS), which included film-makers such as Brian Tilley, Laurence Dworkin, Nyana Molete, Seipati Bulane Hopa and Tony Bensusan (Botha 2006b). 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* (1991), 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 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 filmmakers 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 1996). At first VNS made television documentaries for international television companies but later started to make the 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 pro-

ductions 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 film-makers have also made important work on political issues during the apartheid regime, including the following themes (Botha 2006b; Pichaske 2009; Steenveld 1992):

- 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* (1983) 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: Out of Despair* (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* (1984), *Witness to Apartheid* (1986) and *The Two Rivers* (1985)
- The role of the church in the anti-apartheid struggle: *The Cry of Reason* (1987)
- The destruction of indigenous cultures: *The People of the Great Sandface* (1985) and *Have You Seen Drum Recently?* (1988)

With the unbanning of political organisation such as the ANC and the release of political prisoners in 1990, the immediate direct

goal of anti-apartheid films had begun to be achieved (Botha 2006b). Political filmmakers, however, continued to focus on the process of transition itself, to which a large number of films on CODESA (the negotiation process leading up to the 1994 democratic elections) and on the TRC attest. One significant film from the time is Liz Fish's *The Long Journey of Clement Zulu* (1992), which follows three political activists after their release from imprisonment on Robben Island and subsequent attempts to rebuild their lives as free men. The film is plot driven and foregrounds its characters' individual perspectives. The film vividly provides a truly intimate portrayal of the characters over the course of nearly a year (Pichaske 2009). The extended length of the narrative and the intimacy of content enable the audience to gain a true affinity for each character, empathy for Clement Zulu's views, and a desire to know what will happen in his life. The means by which Fish – an outsider with regard to race, class and personal experience – was able to create such an intimate and personal portrait are worthy of further examination. Of utmost importance, her racial outsider status was tempered by her status as a political insider. A long-time struggle activist and director of the Community Video Education Trust (CVET), she had close ties to black communities and had done considerable work with other Robben Island prisoners. She knew the cultures of her characters, and she knew their issues. In addition, Fish developed a personal relationship with her subjects that far exceeded the standards of apartheid-era film-making (Pichaske 2009), an aspect that is also important in the discussion of the work by Craig and Damon Foster in this article.

This personal relationship served not only to deepen understanding between filmmaker and subject but also paved the way towards a more collaborative approach to filmmaking. *The Long Journey of Clement Zulu* lets its subjects speak for themselves. Each of the three characters interrogates 'the struggle' on his own terms and through his own experi-

ence of being released back into a democratic South Africa only to wonder what has been gained. The message is subtle; the answers open ended and the views subjective and varied (Pichaske 2009).

Unprecedented freedom of access also allowed new forms of purely observational filmmaking: Harriet Gavshon and Cliff Bestall's series *Ordinary People* (1993), a ground-breaking product in terms of South African television at the time, followed ordinary South Africans as they dealt with newfound freedom and in the process documents the transitions in South African society. The *Ordinary People* series was shot in a *vérité style* and was entirely character and plot driven – creative choices that were entirely new for the SABC. By examining events from a variety of perspectives, the series actively challenged the very notion of fixed truths, encouraging the viewer to understand and respect multiple perspectives on the same issue (Pichaske 2009). This was a perfect message for a newly democratic South Africa and a positive sign of the new SABC fulfilling its social service mandate. For the field of documentary, it represented a critical first step away from the old conventions of presenting fixed, unified (pro- or anti-apartheid) arguments and binary (black/white, good/evil) representations, in favour of open-ended narratives, multiple viewpoints and hybrid identities.

Filmmakers were also now finally allowed to probe and reveal what actually happened under apartheid, with the result that many films were now concerned with the past. Various films about the TRC process were made, including Lindy Wilson's *The Gugulethu Seven* (2000), which depicts the uncovering by TRC investigators of security police duplicity in the murder of seven Cape Town activists. Many of the older generation of political film-makers have felt the weight of responsibility for making sense of a hitherto-concealed and painful past. Documentary filmmaking during the 1980s was based on audio-visual materi-

al that reflected the realities of the black majority of South Africa in their aspirations and struggle for a democratic society, but since the beginning of the 1990s other marginalised voices were added to these documentaries and short films, for example, those of women, the LGBTQ community, and even the homeless. The work by Craig and Damon Foster about the San in their visual poem *The Great Dance* (2000) forms an important aspect of the post-apartheid cinema's concerns with characters or subjects at the margin of society.

Most of the South African documentaries between the 1980s and early 21st century can be described as progressive film texts in the sense that the majority of them are consciously critical of racism, sexism or oppression (Botha 1996; 2006b). They dealt with the lives and struggle of the people in a developing country and were mostly allied with the liberation movements for a non-racial, non-sexist South Africa. Some of these documentaries also dealt with events which were conveniently left out in official South African history books or in a contemporary context in actuality programmes on national television under control of the Nationalist regime (Botha 1996; 2006b).

Therefore, they became guardians of popular memory within the socio-political process in South Africa. Examples are *Between Joyce and Remembrance* (2003), *The Gugulethu Seven* (2000), *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* (1998), *Ulibambe Lingashoni: Hold Up the Sun* (1993), *What Happened to Mbuyisa?* (1998) and *The Cradock Four* (2010).

Some of the documentaries are characterised by their oral narrative structures.

The documentaries of Craig and Damon Foster

Brothers Craig and Damon Foster grew up in a wooden bungalow on the Atlantic Ocean, near the tip of Africa. They have travelled extensively, living and working in remote villages and wilderness areas in 10 African countries.

They have more than 20 plus years of filming experience in Africa. Their primary intent lies in telling stories with the voice of Africa herself and in creating film experiences that enable the viewer to gain an intense and deep insight into the natural and cultural dynamics of this ancient continent (Foster et al. 2005). They are among very few South African filmmakers, which use the African tradition of oral storytelling in their documentaries.

They explore the timeless and universal themes of the relationship between man and animal, and the relationship between them and the environments that they share. The result is a portrayal of a reality that is rarely represented. Together they have over 40 international awards for film-making in the areas of photography, editing, writing, directing and human/animal interaction.

Manthia Diawara (1996) underlines the fundamental difference between oral literature and cinema. The language of the film (for example camera movement, shots and shot/reverse shots) is not the same as those used by the *griot*, the storyteller in African context.¹ The *griot* depends on spoken language as well as music to actualise the story. The film director uses the means of mechanical reproduction to give shape to the story. Diawara argues that whereas oral literature speaks of life, films reproduce an impression of life. Theories about oral storytelling in African cinema have been discussed in detail elsewhere (Bakari & Cham 1996; Botha 2012; Botha & Van Aswegen 1992; Chirol 1999; Gabriel 1989; Tomaselli & Prinsloo 1992).

The Great Dance: A Hunter's Story (2000) is characterised by stunning visuals, which act as some form of equivalent to the aesthetics of oral storytelling. The film is the winner of more than 35 international awards. The production took three years and is based on sub-

¹ For an excellent discussion on griots see Hopkins, Nicholas S. "Memories of Griots." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 17 (1997): 43-72.

stantial research. It is a visual poem on the San hunters, who sustain a small band of nomads in the Kalahari Desert. Strictly speaking not, a conventional documentary the film-makers have intercut documentary footage with highly original and semi-abstract material so the hard core of fact is surrounded with lyrical evocations of San legends, creating an intriguing visual texture. Black and white footage has been combined with richly coloured images, giving the film a poetic dimension rarely seen in documentaries (Van Vuuren 2007).



Ibali

In their book *Africa: Speaking with Earth and Sky* (2005) the Foster Brothers rejoice about the vast expanses of earth and sky in remote rural African regions. They applaud the incredible generosity and spirit of its people, as well as their knowledge and wisdom, but feel that yet very little of this is written down. Instead it travels like water on the tongues of the elders. In particular the indigenous healers appeal to them due to their ability to mediate between the world of nature and spirit in a manner that allows for the co-evolution of all life forms.

As an example of oral storytelling the screenwriter Jeremy Evans constructed the narrative out of the words of one of the main characters in the film !Nqate Xqamxebe. The nar-

rative structure is based on the original field recordings of !Nqate. The story is about three hunters and their personalities, their love for and belief in their traditional hunting practises, their passion for the land they live on, their extraordinarily sophisticated knowledge of the environment and ecology of the Kalahari, their cultural mythologies and ritual practices, their trouble with government and the prohibitions on their hunting, their sadness at the disappearance of their cultural practises in the face of sweeping change brought on by

modernity, and their religious beliefs. All of these elements of the three hunters' stories are related back to the central thread of narrative that brings the film together – that of the hunt, particularly the hunt-by-running (Van Vuuren 2007). /XAA is the word for dance in the !Xo language of the Kalahari. It also means revere or to show oneness. This holistic approach to the close connection of the San with their natural world, and the celebration of it, is the core of the film. In a poetic way one of the protagonists describes tracking as dancing – like dancing with God. In the opening sequence the directors already establish the connection of the characters with nature, with animals and insects, and the earth and sky. It is a brilliant montage inspired by the early artists, the rock painters. Landscapes are captured

in wide shots and their vastness by means of pans. The time lapse shots highlight the beauty of the landscapes. The tracking ability of the hunters is also accentuated.

Closely shadowing each sequence of hunting and tracking in the film is the telling of stories by means of the oral tradition. The three hunters read the signs left around the carcass of a pregnant steenbok, which has been killed by a leopard. They retell the story for the camera, often acting out the actions of the animals. Their stories are illustrated by a variety of stylised sequences created by the film-makers, usually in black and white that identify the images as 'flashbacks'. Here the Foster brothers' technical innovations with digital cameras produce unique camera angles, shooting from the bodies of animals, so that the viewer has a strong idea of the movement of the animals. Dramatic sequences are created that reconstruct the movement of animals as they hunt, the eating of their prey or the fevered chaos of vultures gobbling the remains of a carcass (Van Vuuren 2007).

The hunters also narrate to the camera, sitting around a fire. During these sequences they discuss their god, and their religious beliefs as well as their holistic, tradition-bound approach to hunting. Their words are not fed through the narration of !Nqate but are translated on screen in subtitles. These fireside oral narrations are important because they provide an opportunity for the other two hunters, Karoha and Xlhoase, to speak. They also allow for an intimate, 'real-time' connectedness with the hunters (Van Vuuren 2007). Their perspective on the world in a totally holistic way is being celebrated, although the filmmakers admit that the knowledge of the San is too nuanced to be presented on film. *The Great Dance* is just some attempt, almost a mere introduction (Foster et al. 2005). The San *griots* have been represented as master storytellers in the oral tradition.

By sharing rough cuts of the film to the main characters the Foster Brothers created a par-

ticipatory filmmaking process and as a result the three hunters disclosed more in-depth accounts about the lives and worldview with the directors (Foster et al. 2005). The directors also consulted with the main characters what should be in the film and what not.

At the end of the film !Nqate asks what will become of their traditions, now that everything is changing. Close-ups of his children's faces illustrate the point. They are filmed ghost like in the flickering light of the fire. The film closes with a mosaic of stylised images: slow-motion dancing, lightening in the sky, a man framed against a vast horizon, clouds and fire, and finally a single ember from the fire that is picked up and flung out into the night. The glowing coal lands on the ground and is filmed in close-up as its heat slowly fades away (Van Vuuren 2007). *The Great Dance* seems to be an attempt to show value in a culture at a time when that value is being rapidly eroded by poverty and dispossession. It is not intended to represent the entire San community, only three characters and their families.

Ten years after the moving closing sequence in *The Great Dance* the Foster Brothers premièred their documentary *My Hunter's Heart* (2010). The film, shot over 3.5 years, explores the world's most ancient shamanic culture and how it is now on the brink of extinction. It tracks the Khomani San of the Central Kalahari, the oldest living indigenous tribe in the world and who are genetically linked to every human being on planet earth. In modern times, their traditional nomadic way of life has changed, and westernisation has severed their link to the land and the animals. The film follows younger members of the clan as they embark on an epic journey to try to recapture some of the knowledge and skills of their ancestors. The children feel there is no future and the elders are faced with haunting reminders of their past. Again the stories of the three main characters Sanna Witbooi, Abijol Kuiper and Anna Swarts form the core of the narrative. Although the plot includes a

hunt to celebrate the past of the subjects, the film is almost a requiem for this community. They have been forced off their ancestral land due to the construction of national wildlife reserves. In fact, they live on the margin of these parks in houses, which they described as cages, while the animals are running free in the parks. The film is a sad portrait of marginal characters, somewhere stuck between memories of a rich past and modernisation.

Again the Foster Brothers create visual equivalents to the stories by the main protagonists, but the film turns into a painful reflection on dispossession and poverty. Alcoholism as an escape from daily hardship is a reality. The journey of the three characters involves a visit to a museum, which has an exhibition of the genocide of San. It also turns the protagonists into almost tourists of heritage sites such as rock paintings, a past reminder of a rich culture, now reduced to artefacts on stones. Again the time lapse cinematography creates a wonderful sense of landscape, earth and sky, a reminder of the reference at the beginning of *The Great Dance* to notions of revere or to show oneness – the awesome interconnectedness of man and nature. The music is composed by multi-award winner Trevor Jones

Oral aesthetics are also at the core of the narrative structure of *Cosmic Africa* (2003), based on the personal odyssey of African astronomer Thebe Medupe. Based on his words the film chronicles his journey into the African continent's astronomical past and in the process unveiling the deep connection Africans have with the cosmos. Thebe is an astrophysicist and during his journey he gathers the earlier cosmologies of our ancestors (Foster et al. 2005). The film is not only about Medupe's journey of exploration from boyhood to adulthood, but also about the journey to remote rural areas in Africa. Shot on High Definition this visual masterpiece explores and sheds light on traditional African astronomy and the stories by several *griots*. Using these oral storytelling aesthetics, the film vividly captures

the remarkable personal journey of Medupe through the ancestral land of Namibia's hunter-gatherers, the Dogon country of Mali and the landscapes of the Egyptian Sahara Desert (Botha 2006b). Grant McLachlan's powerful musical score enhances the poetry of the film.

The Foster Brothers' other explorations include further celebrations of landscapes, nature in all its glory and African knowledge systems. *Iceman: The Lewis Gordon Pugh Story* (2008) serves as a visual experience of Lewis Gordon Pugh's attempts to draw attention to the oceans and raise awareness about climate change. The film documents the extraordinary physiological and psychological journey of Lewis's long-distance swims in the freezing waters of both the South and the North Pole. Lewis Pugh has 10 seconds before he plunges into the freezing Arctic Ocean, where he swims a kilometre across Antarctica, wearing nothing but a Speedo and a swim cap, a feat never thought possible. 'Ordinary' humans would probably die within minutes in this icy water. The film raises questions such as how can his naked body cope with these conditions for so long and why on earth would anyone want to do such a thing. With the support of cutting-edge science and an incredible ability to believe in himself he hopes to unify the potential of mind and body. Pugh has gone where no one has gone before and achieved a new understanding of the human body.

The Nature of Life (2009) is an epic documentary feature film that tries to provide solutions to humanity's greatest challenge yet – Global Climate Change. So far all we have heard is that climate change is the biggest ever environmental crisis and that it has been caused by our unsustainable approach to living. *The Nature of Life*, however, sets out as a great inspired clarion call to humanity, telling us that there is hope and that there are ways to adapt to and overcome this crisis. The documentary encapsulates a vision of hope that stems from the heart of Africa and expands globally, highlighting ground-breaking examples of

sustainable development all over the world, inspired by the examples of Africa and the natural world. The microcosm of the 'cradle of civilization', Africa, will spill into the entire world, introducing the audience to a group of extraordinary humans and companies who are challenging past models of sustainability and creating a new legacy of elegant design, technology and rediscovered indigenous wisdom.

Oral storytelling in short films and some features

Oral storytelling in post-apartheid short-film-making has reached an aesthetic peak in Teboho Mahlatsi's *Sekalli Le Meokgo/Meokgo and the Stickfighter* (2007). Visually ravishing this innovative short tells the story of Kgotso, a reclusive, concertina-playing stickfighter, who encounters the spirit of a beguiling woman, Meokgo, and rescues her from an evil horseman. Kgotso lives a solitary life high up in the Maluti Mountains of Lesotho. Whilst tending sheep and playing his concertina, he sees a beautiful and mysterious woman staring at him dreamily from the water. Whilst tending sheep and playing his concertina, he sees a beautiful and mysterious woman staring at him dreamily from the water. His story of unrequited love and sacrifice captures both the cruelty and the beauty of African magical beliefs. The film is in fact a fable that draws equally on Mozart's opera 'The Magic Flute' and the living power of magic in traditional African cultures. Mahlatsi brilliantly uses bold, iconic images to build an elemental conflict worthy of a Sergio Leone western.

At the 25th Stone Awards Evening in 2003 of the NTVA Harold Holscher's short *iBali* not only picked up a Stone Award for overall excellence but also garnered craft awards for directing, acting, cinematography and animation. The film is a magnificent blending of magic realism and African mythology, with touches of the urban alienation of Michelangelo Antonioni (Holscher is an admirer of *Zabriskie Point*), the surrealism of

Djibril Diop Mambety and the beautiful compositions of Stanley Kubrick. Holscher states that *iBali* 'came from an idea of living one's heritage, one's culture' (Botha 2005). He is fascinated by myths and fables, especially in the cinema of Mambety and Kusturica. The plot of *iBali* conveys how African heritage is passed from generation to generation through the art of storytelling. It is a mythical tale about a boy discovering the essence of water. The film is one of the first from a local film school which actually explores the possibilities of orality in South African film narrative. It aims at an indigenous mode of aesthetics, and judged by the national and international recognition, seems to succeed. *Ibali* was selected for the 14th African Film Festival in Milan and formed part of the best of the shorts compilation. It was also selected for the Commonwealth Film Festival in Manchester and also toured the United Kingdom as part of the best of the festival. It was invited to the 7th Genoa Film Festival as well as the 2004 Cape Town World Cinema Festival (Botha 2005). Holscher graduated from the CityVarsity School of Media and Creative Arts with a list of awards that testify to his talent.

In 2002 his experimental musical narrative *In Progress* won awards for directing and the overall production. In the same year he received awards for '*n Sprokie*, another 'fairytale like *iBali*', characterised by exquisite visuals (another craft award), shot on 16mm. Adapted from an Afrikaans story it tells the sad tale of a woman waiting for her son to return from the war in Angola, but he will never return and the war has been lost (Botha 2005). In December 2003 Holscher had the opportunity to do the storyboards for *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* in Cape Town.

His latest short film *The First Time* (2010) also uses oral storytelling. He does not consider himself to be a very good writer: 'The ideas are in my head. I just can't put it down on paper. I have to paint them, visually.' It is the visual quality which makes his shorts

so special. After graduating from film school Holscher still found a very fond interest in the myths and mysticism of Africa. He started reading the works of Credo Mutwa, the last African *sanusi* (*sangoma* or traditional healer) and keeper of the Zulu secrets. In his readings Holscher found this ancient dark mysterious world so many people do not know of and got more and more fascinated with Africa. He met a producer named Renier Ridgeway who also shared this common interest. They started talking about making a film and pretty soon started exploring the stories and heritage of one of the most ancient cultures on earth,

a small family living on the southern tip of this continent. It was going to be a difficult task getting hold of authentic members of the community, seeing that so few are left in Africa. Then one day Holscher's brother phoned and said he found the bushman. His name is !Gubi and he is 98 years old. A scientist did a study on his blood and came to the conclusion that his bloodline stems from one of the oldest families of the San people. He and his son Johannes came along for the journey. The location of Elands Bay holds significant value and was picked not only for its sheer beauty but also for its rich cultural history. It was a



The First Time

the Khoi-san. It became apparent after meeting with all the parties involved that this was not going to be an easy task since there are many schools of thought surrounding this fascinating tribe, their culture and their history. They met with the local community in Upington and told them their story. Approval was given and the script was written. The film *The First Time* explores the ancient art of compassion and the beauty and complexities of first-time experiences. It is a tale told around the campfire trying to capture the essence of

holy place where the mountain meets the sea (Baboon Point) and where there was abundant fresh water for families to live in complete commune with each other. The ancient rock paintings in the caves tell of a land rich with food and game (like the eland) where many families lived, a very appropriate location. Cinematically it was important to let the Bushmen and the location guide the film to keep it as authentic as possible. Shot on 4:2:1 ratio with old Cook lenses it gives that epic feel of an old American western but with an African twist.

In my latest book *South African cinema 1896 - 2010* I highlighted the work by Holscher. I had the opportunity to see his visually stunning folkloric horror feature film *8* (2019) and it confirms his talent as one of the most exciting voices in post-apartheid cinema. With *8* Holscher confirmed the bold, innovative approach to folklore and myths in his short films. It deals with a family as they settle into a farmhouse haunted by dark deeds. All the auteurist concerns of his shorts are on display: Beautiful, although dark moments of magical realism, legends and folklore, elegant framing (especially thanks to David Pienaar's cinematography), oral storytelling and a fascinating exploration of the meeting point between the physical world and the one beyond. Due to Holscher's authorship the film transcends the horror genre. It is part of a very exciting body of work by a visual artist.

Garth Meyer is a world-renowned photographer specialising in large format photography. His work over the past 20 plus years has been predominantly dedicated to exposing the majestic essence of the African continent and in so doing ensuring a legacy for himself in the visual halls of history. By means of stunning visuals and an evocative sound design Meyer tells the story of a young boy, who loses a loved one to an unknown disease in *Killer October* (2004). The film hints at AIDS, which currently ravages Zimbabwe and could be the 'killer' of the title. The boy embarks on a mythical journey to find a resting place for the ashes of his parent. Documentary and African myth are impressively integrated in this short, which had its South African premiere at the Apollo Film Festival in Victoria West, where it won Best South African Short Film, and its African première at the Zanzibar International Film festival in 2005. Meyer's *Bitter Water/Marah* (2006) is even more impressive than *Killer October*. The 37-minutes short explores the link between old beliefs in supernatural forces and modern social deterioration as a result of failing morals in a rural community. The approach is magical realism and

oral storytelling. Two parallel plots involve a boy's story of revenging his sister's death and the more subliminal story of the inyan-ga's power to 'make' a child for himself by using his powers. Oral storytelling is vividly explored and a documentary and dramatic approach to the subject matter is seamlessly integrated. The editor and sound designer Douw Jordaan's contribution to the film is impressive. The film won two awards at the 2007 KKNK Film Festival, one for Best South African Short and a second for Meyer as Best Young Artist. Meyer was the stills photographer on the set of Katinka Heyns's *Feast of the Uninvited* (2008).

One of the most substantial features in post-apartheid cinema is Ntshaveni Wa Luruli's *Elelwani* (2014). The use of oral storytelling and folklore is remarkable. Based on the novel by Dr. Titus Maumela, the film tells the story of Elelwani and her boyfriend who are madly in love and plan to spend the rest of their lives happily together. They are both armed with university education and live urban lives with aspirations to travel around the globe. After graduating, Elelwani returns to her family in the countryside to introduce her boyfriend and announce their plans. However, they are faced with a major challenge, as her father wants her to be the wife of the local king. The film, which explores the Tshivenda culture in detail stars Florence Masebe, Vusi Kunene and Ashifashaba Muleya. *Elelwani* first premiered at the Durban International Film Festival; thereafter it was in the official selection at the 63rd Berlin International Film Festival, the Pan African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou and the Luxor International Film Festival in 2013. The film also won the best actress in a leading role (Florence Masebe) and best production design at the African Movie Academy Awards.

Conclusion

The outstanding aspect of the Foster Brothers' documentaries, as well as the young filmmakers 'shorts and features, is their celebrations of

the oral tradition in African storytelling. The directors are however mindful of the marginal status of their real-life characters (for example the San people in the oeuvre of the Foster Brothers) and the factors, which threaten their heritage, lifestyle and future. In many ways the documentaries combine the social concerns of the progressive political documentaries of the 1980s with the oral aesthetics of film cultures elsewhere on this continent.

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Stills:

THE FIRST TIME (courtesy of Harold Holscher)

iBali (courtesy of Harold Holscher)

COSMIC AFRICA / THE GREAT DANCE (courtesy of the Foster Brothers)

A poster of Elelwani

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