

THELMA GUTSCHE: A GREAT SOUTH AFRICAN FILM SCHOLAR

by

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I would like to apologize for beginning this presentation on a personal note. *
The personal is unavoidable in my reflections on Thelma Gutsche's remarkable book, **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940** (1972). 1 While I was doing my post-doctoral studies in communication systems at Berlin Technical University in West Berlin in the late 1980s, it was a marvelous joy to have discovered this book at Staatsbibliothek (State Library), a great library located in the magnificent building by Hans Scharoun, a building located close to the Berlin Wall, then dividing East and West. Those of you who have seen Wim Winder's *Wings of Desire* (1987) know how breathtaking the sense of space is like inside the building, since a long sequence of the film takes place therein when the two Angels hold a discourse with the Old Man about German history. I had the book on my desk for a year just flipping through it, totally unable to read it through systematically. The liberation struggle which was traumatizing and unfolding at home just made it impossible for some of us to read any kind of books at that transitional moment in our history. While I was doing in my imagination a ritual dance around this book, totally transfixed, I received a copy of *SAFTTA Journal* (published by South African Film and Television Technicians Association) in 1987 or 1988 which had a short obituary notice about Thelma Gutsche. I do not why, but I was profoundly shaken that the obituary was so short and did not say much, given the mythic proportions she had taken in my imagination. I had thought and wished that the Journal would later do a special tribute by practically devoting a whole issue on Thelma Gutsche. This was not to be.

I think part of the significance of the book for me is that I associate it with the incredible joy and pain of the end of apartheid era. In my imagination I associate **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940** with a certain kind of sacredness. I'm mystified by this for I consider myself to an atheist embracing the rationalism of the European Enlightenment. It may be that my putting an aura around this book, disqualifies me from commeting on it since I might be incapable of reading it critically. I have waited for nearly a decade for someone in South Africa with greater authority since her archives are located there to write an appreciation of the book, or even, as is fashionable to say today, a deconstruction of it. As far as I'm aware none has been written as yet.

I was gratified recently while doing research on the New African intellectuals and modernity, that the English translator of the 1973 edition in her Forward to

Benedict Wallet Vilakazi's **Zulu Horizons** , this great book of poems was originally published in 1945 in the original as **Amal'ezulu** , thanks Thelma Gutsche for her unfailing support of the project. [2](#) I have been thinking lately of the relationship that must have transpired between these two South African intellectual giants, a great poet and outstanding scholar who died approximately fifty years ago in 1947, and a great archivist and possibly great historian who died a decade ago. Again my sincere apologies for this personal note, which is unavoidable since Thelma Gutsche has shaken me in totally unexpected ways. To move on to the real matters at hand.

The thing that really impresses one immediately upon encountering **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940** is the extraordinary amount of archival work that went into its construction. This really impresses and should be an unforgettable lessons for all South African scholars of film culture: the lesson that one constructs a theoretical and conceptual edifice or an architectural structure based on archival material and/or on concrete facts. This is a lesson worth re-learning in our postmodern times. The mosaic she makes from this material is dazzling. It is as though Thelma Gutsche wanted to write a total history of the South African cinema from the moment of its inception, interweaving the endogenous and exogenous elements of its making. Thelma Gutsche's preoccupation with these factors seems to have compelled her to develop a very peculiar thesis in the book: for her South African cinema is not constituted by the totality of films made by South Africans on aspects of their South Africanness, rather, in the early decades of its inception, it is constituted by the impingement of foreign films on the imagination of South Africans as well as the cultural and social institutions that made this possible. In other words Thelma Gutsche approaches the making of the South African cinema as a historian of social and cultural institutions, rather than necessarily a film historian of artistic processes or a concern with the aesthetics of form. To fully appreciate what Thelma Gutsche was attempting to do in this book, or did achieve in it, it has to be seen in the context of her other writings.

Thelma Gutsche achieved the astonishing feat of publishing six books within a six year period from 1966 to 1972: **No Ordinary Woman: The Life and Times of Florence Phillips** (1966); **Old Gold: The History of the Wanderers Club** (1966); **The Microcosm** (1968); **The Bishop's Lady** (1970); **A Very Smart Medal: The Story of the Witwatersrand Agricultural Society** (1970). The seventh book a biography was published much later: **There Was A Man: The Life and Times of Sir Arnold Theiler K.C.M.G.** (1979). [3](#) All of these are huge books; all the more amazing that their publishing sequence clusters them together. Gutsche's book on the South African cinema was the last one to be published within this series, yet it was the first one to be conceptualized and written. Although the book was completed as a dissertation in 1946, it was

actually began approximately in 1936. As far as I'm aware the book was first published in 1972. Even though it is of later publication than the other texts in the series, the methodological approach and conceptual thesis of **The History and Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940** underpins the epistemological framework of the other books.

I'm not sure what really accounts for this quarter of a century delay in publication. I would suggest that it perhaps has to do with the peculiarity of the thesis formulated, rather in its scholarship, which as far as I can tell in my humble way, it is absolutely impeccable. I would suggest also that its lack of impact on later generations of South African scholars is because of its thesis: perhaps it is too revolutionary for our present day conceptions. For a concrete instance of this lack of appreciation of the achievement of Thelma Gutsche, in a huge and imposing book of over 500 pages, **Movies-Moguls-Mavericks: South African Cinema 1979-1991**, she is very conspicuous by her absence. ⁴ This anthology has contributions from practically a stellar list of South African scholars of South African cinema. Perhaps the argument of the contributors to this book would be that since it was about a later period 1979 to 1991, there was no necessity to make reference to Thelma Gutsche. The anthology bristles with chapters like "Retrieving History". The real ironic question here is can South African film scholarship really go forward without retrieving the archival mastery and the intellectual architectonic skills of Thelma Gutsche, let alone her scholarly thoroughness, or her revolutionary conception of cinema which is perhaps unhinging to many South African film scholars of later generations.

Since all of the books of Thelma Gutsche are interrelated to each other as part of a comparative system within her historical project, I would like to cite a relatively long quotation from one of them. In her last published book of 1979, **There Was A Man: The Life and Times of Sir Arnold Theiler K. C. M. G.**, she writes: "Adaptation of living organisms to their environment and problems of survival remain the basic facts of existence. The vaunted 'balance of Nature' of the past and the ecological dilemmas of the future perennially preoccupy Mankind. Since first consciousness, man has presumed to control his environment by reason and not by instinct only. . . . When navigators found routes to new areas, the quest accelerated and travellers, hunters, traders and mere adventures joined the dedicated botanists, zoologists and biologists in investigating the feral world. They reported many things (notably the failure of man and beast to control natural forces) and many strange and inexplicable occurrences like the mass suicide of whales and lemmings, the huge areas of land uninhabited by humans or animals because of flies, sudden pestilences and rampaging plagues, mass migrations of men and animals destroying all before them, and other 'wonders' that had no reason. Man had his place in the feral world. He might be a pastoral itinerant, moving his flocks or herds or troops of horses or yaks to better grazing

when he had denuded an area or droughts or floods had done it for him. . . In gradually-evolving societies, there was often nowhere to move and it became imperative to control natural forces--to engage in communal action and concerted works. Uncontrolled exploitation at all times leads to disaster. The 'balance of Nature' fails to assert itself since Man himself seems no part of it. Deserts and desolations ensue on his negligence." In this book on the prevention and control of diseases, which intersects medical history and natural history, Gutsche re-articulates a theme that unifies all her written work, including the book that is at the center of our inquiry here: this important theme is the taming, control and ordering of chaos.

In this book of medical history, Gutsche inquires as to how medical practice through prevention and curation establishes order in the chaotic space of diseases. One can extrapolate from this major theme of her work why she had an inclination or predisposition for writing historical texts: she had a passion for making and constructing an orderly and rational process of chaotic archival material. The book **There Was A Man: The Life and Times of Sir Arnold Theiler K. C. M. G.** is about classifying and ordering of Nature, the formation of medical institutions with the aim of making and creating space for European cultural forms in Africa: in other words, the bringing of European civilization into Africa. In parentheses: I wish to observe that the book has several pages celebrating the Tiyo Soga family, especially one of his sons. Gutsche writes: "Jotello Festiri Soga M. R. C. V. S. was the first South African to qualify as a veterinary surgeon and the first man of colour. He was more of European than Xhosa cast of countenance but had the 'kroeshaar' (crinkled hair) betokening mixed blood. Good-looking and with the noble bearing of his people, he never aped the white man." [5](#) I leave this book without further comment.

With this book on medical history in mind, it is clear what **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa** is about: it is a monumental project of ordering the cultural space of the cinema: the ordering of chaotic forms into a rational order and other cohesive structures. To indicate how deep rooted this theme was in Thelma Gutsche's historical imagination, I like to refer to some of her other texts on history, before inquiring in detail into the book on the South African cinema, a book that poses the question that alludes to Andre Bazin: What is South African Cinema?

Another book, **Old Gold: The History of the Wanderer's Club**, about the formation of the Wanderers Club, a rugby organization, in Johannesburg, is also about the creation of institutions in order to harness or hold at bay chaos. Here intersecting cultural history and social history, Thelma Gutsche examines how English culture, actually English imperialism, introduced the notion of sport and physical exercise as a class preoccupation into South Africa: the cultural

consciousness of the importance of sports. In this book she elaborated further on the conceptual framework she had originally sketched in the text on the South African cinema: the importance of cities as cultural and social spaces for the realization of certain happenings of modernity. So, one of the central ideas that preoccupied Gutsche in **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940** was importance of cities in shaping the cultural imagination of modernity through films. This partly explains the fascinating point that it did not matter much to her whether it was actually South African films doing the shaping or foreign films. I think she was more favourable to American and European films constructing this imaginative structure than what she called 'amateurish' South African films. Our films, at this time, just got on her nerves. A point to indicate here, is that given her Anglophilia at this time, she had no patience with any form of cultural nationalism about our then incipient film culture and industry.

Old Gold: The History of the Wander's Club reconfigures another of her central themes resonating in the book on the South African cinema: the importance of Johannesburg as the hub of inventiveness and the making of the new. She was fascinated by the new things of modernity that were being invented in Johannesburg or were coming from overseas through our great city. Chapter Three of **Old Gold: The History of the Wanderers' Club** is about the making or the coming into being of this city. Thelma Gutsche was so much intrigued by Johannesburg as the emblem or icon of new things that she wrote a short but exhilarating essay on the city. In delineating sports as the necessity of modernity, she interweaves in her narrative the complex system of social and cultural institutions: Musical Societies, Town Band, Glee Singers, Choral Societies, Debating Societies, Associations for Rugby, Soccer and Cricket, Newspapers, Brothels, Bars, Railways, and so on. All of these were part of the institutionalization of leisure life in our country.

The point of all this is to indicate the complex cultural web into which the cultural formation of film took root in South Africa. Her book on the cinema interweaves all of these complex cultural intercrossings into her narrative. Part on the fascination of this book on the cinema is in the interweaving, as well as in the density of its archival material. The underlying subtext of her book, **Old Gold: The History of the Wanderers' Club**, is that the formation of the Wanderers Cricket Club and the Wanderers Rugby Football in a mining town of Johannesburg was a way of institutionalizing of order and the imposing of order in the chaotic space of modernity. Can one doubt that for Thelma Gutsche one of the missions of film culture in South Africa had been the institutionalization of visual order in our emergent modernity ! In a strange way, she had tremendous fear of the political and social chaos brought into being by the cultural dominant of modernity. For her film was serious business, in the cultural sense, and not in

the monetary sense as has too often been. Let me add that her preoccupation with the process of consolidation of sports in this book was prefigured in her investigation of the consolidation of film companies in the other book on the South African cinema.

As the title of her book **Old Gold: The History of the Wanderers' Club** implies, Thelma Gutsche was well aware that what she perceived as the Manichaeian struggle between chaos and order within South African modernity had been unleashed by the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley in 1867 and gold in Johannesburg in 1886. I would like to circumscribe in brackets that that this contestation between chaos and order in modernity was so deep rooted in her imagination, that her one novel, or appropriately her fiction form that could be taken as a historical novel, **The Microcosm**, is about the outbreak of the chaos of European history on the tranquil natural sphere of the Karoo. Her indictment of the San and Khoi Khoi people, whom she unfortunately refers to as Bushmen and Hottentots, which I find very astonishing and intriguing, is that these great people who have suffered so much at our hands, had no communal organization and a social ethic or lacked the institutionalized forms of life experience which would have enabled them to hold at bay the chaos that was brought into their sphere by the Others. In her estimation they lacked the social and cultural principles of ordering life that would have enabled them to survive the chaos of modernity. Thelma Gutsche's indictment of the San and the Khoi Khoi people should not gainsay about her deep empathy for them, for she was merely applying to their sphere her objectivist principles of history.

All her historical texts are circumscribed by the mining revolution as a seminal event in our national history. It is this event or process which unleashed the chaos associated with modernity on the plain of South African history across the twentieth century. I think she understood her historical texts as attempts to reorder in a cohesive form in the different spheres of cultural expression the chaos that had been unleashed by the mineral revolution. Thelma Gutsche was not necessarily hostile to the chaotic noises, events and elements of modernity. I would like to cite two quotations from different texts about her consciousness of this seminal event in our history. In **Old Gold: The History of the Wanderers' Club** she writes: "The discovery of diamonds in West Griqualand in 1867 merely served to consolidate the pattern by which boredom was combatted. New towns like Kimberley arose and the older centres such as Bloemfontein, Potchefstrom, Pietermaritzburg and Graham's Town and particularly those at the coast such as Port Elizabeth and Durban, prospered by the general influx." [6](#) The first page of **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa** carries the following sentences: "The nineteenth century culminated in a wealth of scientific inventiveness which resulted in a complete and fundamental change in the social life within the

following fifty years. The more widespread use of telegraphy, the expansion of the telephone service, the increased application of electricity and the invention of the motor car, the sudden appearance and phenomenal development of the cinema, and finally the invention and speedy public utilisation of the aeroplane and the wireless have combined to obliterate (except in trivial instances such as its 'naughtiness') appreciation of the atmosphere of the period in which motion pictures first appeared. . . The discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886 gave further impetus to this demand [for music halls, theatre, good music, commercial development] and where previously only the country's sea port towns (Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban) could be considered as possible fields for professional entertainment, there now existed two developing towns (Kimberley and Johannesburg) in the interior whose demand for amusement was only too apparent." [7](#) Note how the former book on sports published in 1966 echoes the later book which was conceived in 1936, completed in 1946, and only published in 1972: one nearly cannibalizes the other on the interconnection between the city and modernity. These quotations point to several issues: the mining revolution unleashed modernity; the interconnection of the city and modernity, as already mentioned; the demographic upheaval unleashed by modernity; the technological revolution of modernity; the necessity of instituting leisure spaces within modernity; the interconnection between the city and film; and that film culture is the central part of the inventiveness of the cultural forms of modernity and as such, should not be subsumed by the other technological innovations and breakthroughs.

Even in a book one would not have expected Thelma Gutsche to have written, given her seemingly evident cultural inclinations, **A Very Smart Medal: The Story of the Witwatersrand Agricultural Society**, gives importance to issue of the mining revolution. My initial attitude toward this book is that Thelma Gutsche only wrote it to challenge herself about her capability of achieving a fantastic ordering of chaotic form of archival material in a domain she was totally unfamiliar with, agriculture. More seriously, however, this book is the obverse of her other books, in that whereas it is about tradition, the other ones are primarily concerned with modernity. What so interesting about this book is its implication that establishing of European agricultural societies was the insertion and continuation of European traditions in South Africa. Since the book in effect is a narration of the establishing of agricultural societies throughout South Africa, it articulates the continuation of European traditions, customs and forms in the new history of South Africa.

Clearly then, in a way Thelma Gutsche posits the landscape of South Africa history as a dramatic clash between European modernity and European tradition. I need not mention here that by unintentionally displacing Africans from this historical drama, Thelma Gutsche by implication defined them because their

absence in her narration as the passive agents or subjects of European history. Given the racial divide in our country then, she could not have been aware that in the 1920s and 1930s there was a spectacular construction of South African modernity by a group of brilliant African intellectuals in the *Umteteli wa Bantu* newspaper: R. V. Selope Thema, H. I. E. Dhlomo, H. Selby Msimang, Solomon T. Plaatje, Allan Kirklang Soga and others. Had she reached towards H. I. E. Dhlomo rather to Benedict W. Vilakazi she may have been made aware of this astounding construction of South African modernity. But then it is not accidental that she reached towards Vilakazi for he in many ways was more concerned with utilizing the institutional forms of tradition to channel in cohesive order the chaotic maelstrom of modernity. In contrast to Vilakazi, Dhlomo was more about this celebration of the maelstrom of modernity. I'm here to celebrate and pay homage Thelma Gutsche who has unfortunately not been allowed to inform our cultural imagination in South Africa. Criticism is more appropriate for something that has been sufficiently imbibed or absorbed.

The need to celebrate Thelma Gutsche is evident when one reads her classic text, **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940**. From the moment of writing this text she was clear as to the nature of her future projects in the coming decades would be, for in the Avant-Propos of 1946 she theorized the necessity of writing any aspects of South African cultural history from a comparative perspective. It was clear to her that a history of film would not be fully realizable, let alone fully understood, without being articulated adjacent to the history of theatrical entertainment, the history of radio, and history of musicals. Ofcourse one could argue that these particularizations were relevant only at the moment of the emergence of film form or film culture. The main point here is that for Thelma Gutsche the history of cultural forms had to be comparative in approach and perspective. It is in this sense of comparativity that all her historical works have to be seen in relation to each other, particularly since she saw them in this prelogomenon of 1946 as upon their realization that they would establish a history of South African Manners and Customs. Collectively, all her written work went a long towards achieving this ambitious goal of theorizing the Manners and Customs of white South Africans as a particular form of cultural history. Given the wish to establish the history of South African Manners and Customs, it is not surprising that her work was centrally concerned with institutional forms that would give a sense of cohesiveness or ordering to reality. Even her biography of Sophia Wharton Myddleton called **The Bishop's Lady** is characterized by sense of ordering, finding regularities, patterns and forms in chaotic processes: the taming of chaos through cultural orders. Thelma Gutsche narrated this biographical cultural history in the manner of a historical novel. Perhaps much more important is that this biography makes evident one other principal theme of Gutsche's historical vision: the intrusion and integration of Europe into Africa. Her cultural vision

was entranced by the past yet beckoned by the future.

In a real sense the theme of the book on the South African cinema is about the intrusion of United States and Europe into Africa. This may be the rational for her not analyzing any films made by South Africans in South Africa. For instance *De Voortrekkers* (*Winning a Continent* , 1916) which looms so large in the history of South African cinema, and has recently been of particular concern to some historians of our cinema, is give a minor mention in one of the later chapters of the book in a section on African Film Productions Ltd which made the film. [8](#) Being centrally about the institutions that made the ordering of South African visual culture on a massive scale possible, **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa** does not examine films as artistic objects whose expressive form articulate a particular aesthetics, but rather, as cultural forms for the institutionalization of life. Thelma Gutsche perspective on South African cinema is that of a cultural historian rather than of a film historian as mentioned earlier, consequently films for her are objects whose fundamental effect is a civilizing one, processes of acculturation into modernity. Nowhere in the whole expansive terrain of her inquiry are films ever scrutinized as film texts, as cultural forms possessing their own singular grammar and syntax. Instead of encountering aesthetics of film in the book, one is more likely to stumble repeatedly on the effects of film in the making of the cultural fabric of South Africa. Perhaps this is because Thelma Gutsche seems more likely to have been influenced in the writing of this book by the nineteenth century double decker novels of George Eliot, Charles Dickens and others, rather than for instance, by Sergei Eisenstein's theory of film montage or Bela Belazs theory of film, whereby film progresses in its development by intensely differentiating itself aesthetically from theater and other expressive forms preceding it.

Thelma Gutsche's book is not really about South African cinema, which is really totally absent in her book, but more about the entrance of European modernity into South Africa through film culture. There is a deep shock of realization that until one encounters her dismissive contempt of the first South African film made in 1911, *The Great Kimberley Diamond Robbery / The Star on the South* , on page 125 of this densely detailed book, what one had been reading with deep fascination was not a captivating prelude leading to the great moment of the making of our first film, but rather how offensive to her that such an outcome could possibly even be contemplated. Again it is only on page 218 that what one becomes aware that what one had been suspecting comes to a realization, that for her the South African cinema was constituted by the social and cultural institutions that made showing of foreign films possible, not actually the films themselves made by South Africans in South Africa. This moment in the book was intriguing because for the first time in the book Thelma Gutsche is talking about films of real quality which were shown in South Africa in 1928:

Pudovkin's *Mother* , Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* , Robert Weine's *The Student of Prague* , William Wellman's *Wings* , Raoul Walsh's *The Last Command* . Interestingly she did not mention the names of these outstanding directors. Perhaps this is because she did not want aesthetics to intrude in her study of effects. Both moments bespeak to the comprehensiveness and the great narrative drive of this paradoxical book, in that although it is dismissive through its silence about actually existing South African films, it is the best book written on South African film: it is an archival retrieval of the most extraordinary kind. Consequently a relatively detailed appraisal of the structure of **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940** is in order.

Having established that the mining revolution and the subsequent industrial revolution gave new dynamism to the cultural formations of the late nineteenth century, Thelma Gutsche maps out the social and cultural history and structure of pre-cinematic entertainment forms in major South African cities. She analyzes the complex web of the variety of entertainment forms adjacent to each other: theater, concerts, music halls, vaudeville, and so on. Gutsche argues that these theatrical and musical entertainment forms could only have taken root in the new emergent cities: Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Grahamstown, and later Johannesburg and Kimberley. Many of these cultural forms were given impetus by visiting European and American artists. She argues that the zeitgeist of this period was the invention of the new. The invention of electricity was one of the factors which gave tremendous impulse to the construction of cinematic culture: the invention of Panoramas, Cosmoramas, Magic Lanterns etc. Decrepit musical halls were being transformed into 'Graphophone Parlours' and 'Phonograph Concerts'. All of these inventions were slowly shaping the public imagination.

The invention of Edison's Kinetoscope made possible the coming on a massive scale a visual culture associated with modernity into South Africa. Thelma Gutsche proceeds to give a remarkably detailed account of the first appearance of motion pictures in various parts of South Africa. I would like to quote the following statement to show that for her the making of visual culture in our country was inconceivable without the constant and continual importation of European modernist cultural expressive forms to refurbish that vision: "Both kinetoscope and kinetophone were undoubtedly the mechanical wonders of the day and became known to a sizeable proportion of the public of the big towns where they were exhibited; but like all mechanical novelties, their attraction steadily faded and they were soon regarded as nothing more than transiently fascinating toys. . . Of far greater social importance were the variety turns and dramatic companies imported from overseas which continuously brought an air of novelty to South Africa." [9](#) From this observation of the early stages in the formation of our visual culture, Thelma was to believe unswervingly that these imported modernist forms were to constitute the very foundations and fiber of

South African visual culture. Given the role of foreigners in the 'making' of South African cinema in the first half of the twentieth century, Carl Hertz, who consolidated the South African motion picture audience through Zenomettascope, Edgar Hyman, who made searing documentary notes of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, W. Wolfram, who organized 'bioscopes' as professional entertainment through constructing permanent cinema houses, Charles Urban, who built a comprehensive film distribution system through his Warwick Trading Company, I. W. Schlesinger, who formed in 1913 the African Theatres Trust Ltd to save the South African cinema from bankruptcy, Harold Shaw, the American film director of *De Voortrekkers* (1916), Lionel Rogosin, the director of *Come Back Africa* (1959) and so on, Thelma Gutsche's conviction and thesis may not be far fetched as one may suppose. I would like to emphasize again that the book is very impressive and exemplary in its synthesis of diverse and complex material.

I would like to cite one more instance in which Thelma Gutsche develops her thesis of the importance of European cinematic practices in shaping our visual culture in modernity, to indicate that her thesis was not based merely on discovered dry archival material but based on knowledge which comes from having viewed thousands and thousands of films that shaped our imagination. This probably explains why it took her a whole decade to complete the book and also the liveliness, lucidity and suppleness of her prose could only come from someone who had a deep intimacy with the subject matter of world cinema, if not of the plasticity of film form: "A bewildering heterogeneity followed on the widespread popularity of the fiction film and the products of every European and American producer were shown in South Africa. American production continued to be typified by the 'West Wild', heavily-moral drama and sensational melodrama. The subjects for English production were frequently stage successes of every kind from Shakespeare to melodrama. French films continued to be largely historical and many dealt with Dicken's stories. Italian films dealt increasingly with scenes of historic debauchery produced with zest and extravagance, classical history being ransacked for suitable incidents. A few Swedish and German films completed many programmes." [10](#) These films drew South Africans into the complex visual culture of modernity.

A large portion of the book is about the construction and placement of social, economic and cultural institutions which facilitated the formation of our modernist visual sensibility. The public capacity for wonderment which had been nourished by Panoramas and Cosmoramas, was to be deepened by subsequent inventions such as Vitagraphs, Mutoscopes and Zenomettascope. Each of these mechanical forms of visual projection eventually necessitated special film houses. Many companies emerged and collapsed participating in this capitalist enterprise. Thelma Gutsche writes of the two companies, the Warwick Trading

Company and the Biograph Company, which endured the longest in this this enterprise of building the foundations of South African cinema: "Both enterprises not only popularised the cinema in South Africa at this time but also succeeded in making considerable profits." [11](#) This was the beginning of serious organization of professional visual entertainment in South Africa. The conjunction of History and Cinema through the filming of the newsreels of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, ensured the immediacy of wonderment to one's lived existential experience.

It is interesting that the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 coincided with the first forms of South African cinema as an industry which took configuration in 1909-10. The coincidence goes much further, even if in a contrastive way, for if in the formation of the Union England was relinquishing political power, the coming into being of the 'industrialization' of moving pictures intensified English imperial cultural domination for it was the English who exploited the popularity of films in South Africa by establishing hegemonic structures of film distribution and built and owned the most viable cinema houses. In both spheres Africans were excluded from participating: the Union disenfranchised Africans, Coloureds and other nations, while film houses were constructed on racial lines, with cinemas for 'Whites Only' and those for 'Coloured People Only'. W. Wolfram's empire of permanent cinemas were able to endure and have longevity because of the good quality films, predominantly English, he obtained through the Warwick Trading Company would repeatedly be shown in the cinemas. One of the companies which collapsed during this era of high competition, was the was the Electric Theatres Company because it obtained poor quality films for rapid turnovers. Thelma Gutsche emphasizes three factors which laid the foundations of South African cinema industry: construction of permanent cinemas in major cities such as Cape Town, Johannesburg and others; the formation of indigenous film companies, i.e., Union Bioscope Comany; continuous performance of films on an hourly basis. [12](#) Thelma Gutsche states that 'bioscope fever' thoroughly gripped South Africa.

The realization of the institution of permanent cinemas made possible the organization of the South African cinema on a rational basis. This brought to an end the itinerant showmen showing films in many corners of our country. With this rationalization process, cinema was given a sense of permanency and the audience could watch motion pictures on regular basis. Thelma Gutsche traces the emergence, the making and possession of film culture by the audience. Their appreciation is indicated by their beginning to make demands on kinds of motion pictures they would like to see, wishing for films not only preoccupied with amusement but rendering instructive entertainment: films demanding respectability and freedom not vulgarity and sensationalism as Thelma Gutsche so wonderfully puts it. [13](#) Since practically all the films shown in permanent cinemas had continuous musical accompaniment, usually a pianist, it is clear that

the construction of visual culture went hand in hand with the refining of musical sensibility. Influence by the audience and cinema in reciprocity wishing to retain the audience, four features began coalescing: the length of motion pictures increases; the diversity of films enables the audience to exercise its discrimination and cultivate taste through preferences; the audience becomes aware of 'stars' and also partakes in their making through again exercising its choices; and lastly, newreel begin to precede the actual feature presentation. The rationalization of the South African cinema had effect on newspapers, in that new columns were added reporting on new theatres, and subsequently film reviews were added.

The development of the cinema in South Africa was not to be uniformly linear, for in the years 1910-1913 it suffered a crisis and reversal of sorts which nearly resulted in its bankruptcy. On its emergence from the crisis in these particular years, it effected its self-reorganization in these five areas: the lengthening of fiction films; the publicising of stars; the construction of larger cinema houses; the making of the public space in the cinemas into respectable family amusement areas; and the infusion of greater "sound effects" in the films. [14](#) In all of these endeavors, the films made in South Africa were attempting to emulate the popularity of American films which were being shown on a larger scale. Thelma Gutsche states that French and Italian films which were largely based on literary and historical subjects were unable to compete with the American films since the latter were mainly predicated on sensationalism and melodrama. In other words, the shaping of South African modernist sensibility through film was effected through European classicism and American sensationalism. It was at the moment of this contestatory context that a film supposedly "the first South African film" was made in 1911. The film, as I mentioned earlier, was *The Great Kimberley Diamond Robbery* or *The Star of the South*. An extraordinary thing happens in book. Only a single sentence is devoted to this momentous occasion by Thelma Gutsche. The great historical moment of the birth of the South African cinema holds absolutely no importance to her. Here is Thelma Gutsche's sentence: "The first South African film apparently taken locally and entitled either *The Great Kimberley Diamond Robbery* or *The Star of the South* was also shown but inauspiciously ." [15](#) I have underlined two words, apparently and inauspiciously, to pause for a moment concerning Thelma Gutsche's astonishingly Europeanist or absolutely Anglophilic critical sensibility. Her word apparently indicates to me that for her the very idea of a South African film or South African cinema was just not inconceivable, if not totally laughable. Consequently she is not bothered to consider the constituent historical, cultural, political factors that occasioned the making of the first South African film at this particular historical conjuncture, a year after the founding of the Union of South Africa. Was this merely a coincidence or significantly connected to this important event. This word "apparently" resonates in my ears with the word whatever. Given her impeccable

archival credentials and her serious beliefs in its protocols, it seems she announces this occurrence for historical purposes rather than for the significance it holds for South African intellectual and cultural history, or for that matter for commercial purposes, as an attempt to launch a blitzkrieg against the economic hegemony of American and European films. The need to write this sentence for historical purposes seems to have annoyed this extraordinary woman who was a major South African intellectual.

The other word I have underlined, "inauspicious", is contemptuous in this context coming from her for it seems to say: what else could have been expected. The film was a failure commercially, and to her much more importantly, culturally, for as she writes in the footnote to this sentence, the film was "conceived in the spirit of the current cinema", which I take to mean she damns the film for having aligned itself in her thinking with American sensationalism against European classicism. To Thelma Gutsche, these were the two greatest forces struggling against each other in the shaping South African modernist cultural sensibility. I would like to quote the whole sentence in the footnote also on page 125: "Conceived in the spirit of the current cinema, the film does not appear to have made much impression, possibly through amateurish production." This sentence is revelatory and fascinating for two reasons. I'm puzzled when she writes, "the film does not appear to have made much impression", because given her astounding research skills, Thelma Gutsche, better than anyone since or after, was in a position to say definitively whether film made an impression or not. Thelma Gutsche writing, "does not appear", I take to be a subtextual way of saying: who cares whether the first South African film made an impression or not; I'm (that is Gutsche) not going to waste my invaluable research time trying to establish this definitively. As for the other segment of the sentence, "possibly through amateurish production", clearly means: I (meaning Gutsche again) have not seen *The Great Kimberley Diamond Robbery* to determine its artistic merits, nor do I intend to because it cannot possibly deserve serious attention from me. Thelma Gutsche does not seem to have seen the film. This is confirmed by this long footnote which consists of two summations of the plot of the film: one from the advertising of the film by its makers, the Springbok Film Company; and the other from a review of the film in the newspaper *The Star*. That there is no evaluation or analysis or summary of the film therefore is not accidental. From these observations a singular conclusion is inescapable concerning **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940**: the book is largely a product of archival work, rather than familiarity through actual visually viewing of the films whose social history is appraised.

The mentioning of *The Great Kimberley Diamond Robbery* in the book as the moment of the emergence of South African cinema has paradoxically a disruptive effect on the real theme preoccupying Thelma Gutsche in this section

of the narrative text: the struggle between European classicism and American sensationalism as to which one will eventually imprint itself on the cultural sensibility of South Africans. The very fact that she disparages our first film because she perceives it, through archival material and not through having seen it with her own eyes as I would wish to emphasize, to have emulated Americanism rather than Europeanism, is clear as to what has been the end result. I read Thelma Gutsche at this narrative moment to be lamenting that South African cinema had been still-born, if I may say so, by American sensationalism. [16](#) For her the struggle between these two forms of filmic representation concerned matters of vital importance: ethics, behaviour, manners, social etiquette, national identity, cultural continuity, historical formation, etc. Interesting, Gutsche examines the relationship between European classicism and American sensationalism, partly in the context of the relationship between documentary films (she calls them actuality films) and fiction films. [17](#) At this moment (1910-13) in the history of the cinema in South Africa, fictional films were beginning to exceed documentary films in popularity. She attributes the triumph of fiction films to the appeal of the baseness of American sensationalism to a certain class of film goers, not to the intrinsic poetic form of this mode. Thelma Gutsche was analyzing the historical conjuncture of film history pre- *Birth Of A Nation* (1916), the fiction film which established the grammar, syntax and aesthetic style of world cinema. These associations and condemnations reveal two issues about the critical sensibility of Thelma Gutsche: the aristocratism of her artistic taste and the profound moralism of its nature. In a not fully articulated connection, she attributes the defeat of European classicism and documentary films as directly related to the triumph of American sensationalism and fiction form.

Thelma Gutsche's hostility to American sensationalism was not due solely to its supposed amorality in her estimation, but also to the fact that it precipitated the first attempts of censorship in South African film history. Commenting on this period, Gutsche writes: "During 1912, American sensationalism expressed in grotesquely exaggerated acting began to characterise moving pictures as a whole and to neutralise the values of other types of films. . . Apart from the gross improbabilities of plot which began to irritate even the least susceptible members of audiences, some of the scenes which the 'bioscope' portrayed could no longer be ignored. 'Night Life' and 'the Underworld' provided the excuse for exhibitions which surpassed vulgarity to the point of lechery and letters to the Press began to multiply until they became an almost daily occurrence throughout South Africa. So far from improving, the quality of films deteriorated more and more until every type of person implored the authorities to take action. The 'bioscope' was now the recognised amusement of the young but its evil effects were even more extensive. . . The odium which increasingly surrounded the bioscope from 1911 onwards and which in 1913, compelled legislative action, was not founded only in the objectionable type of film which then characterised its programmes. It was

founded too in the buildings themselves and in the conditions under which bioscope exhibitions were given. . . women were molested in the best bioscopes and in the more impoverished districts, women themselves brought their babies and attended to their comfort under most unhygienic circumstances.

Unaccompanied children screamed, quarrelled and fought, running about as they pleased and coloured people frequently mingled with white. In an unventilated hall frequently packed with vociferous humanity, the fetid atmosphere was often almost unbearable." [18](#) The call from various organizations in civil society for the regulation of what was actually portrayed on the screen, and the policing of the consumption of popular culture in the public sphere did not result in the immediate legislation of prohibitive or curtailing acts. The licensing for the exhibition of films in the public sphere was made stricter. In the meanwhile, the First World War intervened.

Continuing with her perspective as a cultural historian of South African modernity rather than as a film historian per se, the latter since Andre Bazin mainly preoccupied with film texts, Thelma Gutsche, in considering the years 1914-18 which she designates as "The Great War Period", is mainly preoccupied with the foreign artistic forms of representation on South African poetic imagination. She writes practically nothing on the evolutionary structure of South African cinema, its development, problematics, etc. The only thing she can barely bring herself to consider are the beautiful cinema houses which were being constructed at this time in major cities, particularly in Johannesburg. Without being totally cynical, I would venture to say that perhaps she marvels at the beautiful decor and the architecture of the cinema houses because presumably they were financed by foreign capital. The only context in which she mentions *De Voortrekkers / Winning a Continent* made in 1916 is in her celebration of the film "stars" who were popular in South Africa during this period. The only reason she mentions the film is because a relatively well known English actress, Edna Flugarth, had starred in it. Here we have a paradoxical situation that arguably the most important scholar of South African film culture was not really concerned with the films, however incompetent in her estimation, made by South Africans. To me this is the central fascination of the Thelma Gutsche enigma. This section of the book is slightly tinged with a melancholic tone as she becomes aware and recognizes that the beginning popularity of American films meant that American populist realism would eventually supersede European classicism. Paradoxically, the most effective instrument of this process was a British born actor acting in the popular and beloved American films: Charlie Chaplin. It was this great artist who made American films popular in South Africa. Gutsche posits the beginning hegemonic importance of the American films in South Africa to the greatness of David W. Griffith, the American who established the grammar of film. She emphasizes the popularity of Griffiths' *Intolerance* together with *Caribia*, the Italian epic which inspired Griffith to

make his own film, with the South African film public. [19](#) Concerning the American cinema's hegemony, Thelma Gutsche was torn between reconciling her admiration for Chaplin and Griffith, and her unwavering hostility to American spy and thriller films which she found to be the epitome of American sensationalism. Given the convincing analysis of Sergei Eisenstein in showing the profound influence of Charles Dickens on Griffith, it would not be far fetched in postulating that Thelma Gutsche's real reason for her passion toward these incomparable artists was her belief that they were constructing, though in different ways, different forms of European classicism inside American modernity. It is this American modernity, mediated by European cultural forms and European aesthetic principles, which was tolerable to her.

When she does now and then pull back from her "Europeanism" to reflect on "purely" South African film matters, it is interesting to note she shifts from aesthetic and artistic matters to economic matters. To Thelma Gutsche the crucial matter concerning South African cinema in and of itself was its economic integration and rationalization. But even in this sphere external forces were strong. Within this context of rationalization, she observes that the programming of films was institutionalized: the "institution of feature film" and "support programme" were set in place. This was to be generally a world wide form of experiencing film. With this observation of the paradigmatic forms of the institutionalization of film culture, one is made aware of the profound feel for the historicity of forms Gutsche had, be they social, cultural, economic, etc. Even though Thelma Gutsche may be criticized as not having been truly a historian of the South African cinema, at the most perhaps of its receptive forms, perhaps one of her greatest contributions to South African culture was an enrichment of our sensibility through the feel for the historicity of forms.

This deep awareness of the historicity of forms is especially evident in the 1920s when the silent cinema was coming to its end and national entertainment industry was emerging. At this high noon time in the making of modernity as a world experience, the era of the perpetual new and novelty, film had to vie with jazz for recognition with the cultural space of South Africa. Much like the New African intellectuals as I have indicated elsewhere, the cultural organs of the white ruling establishment were violently hostile to the entrance of jazz into South Africa: "Jazz in South Africa was regarded with suspicion by the more serious-minded and thoughtful articles under heading such as, dancing degradation, ballroom buffoonery, the 'jazz' epidemic, appeared in the daily papers. They were often characterised by puritanic invective against its sensual nature and its inevitable effect on war-weary soldiers; but there was no gainsaying its foundation in contemporary circumstances and its worldwide popularity. Originally an 'escapist' medium, jazz became a universal institution which has developed through various stages of 'syncopation', 'crooning', 'swing', 'boogie-woogie', 'jive',

etc." [20](#) A great form such jazz, like film one of the most durable artistic representations of modernity, could not be eliminated through the ideological prejudices of the ruling classes. The African working class appropriated jazz as an artistic form that enabled them not only to make sense of their historical location, but also as a healing process enabling them to hold at bay the alienation of the proletarianization experience. The New African masses defeated its own New African intelligentsia as well as the white ruling class on this matter.

Thelma Gutsche not only makes film and jazz vie with each other, but also she theorizes the cinema within a complex structure of modernity: "In general therefore, the post-war period was characterised by the public's recovery from severe depression and the incorporation into the social structure of the advances of mechanical science. The cinema, the motor-car, the radio and the aeroplane had become integrated with the fabric of ordinary life and a little later, the cinema was further to entrench its position with the improvement of sound. Inasmuch as the public accepted mechanical methods of transport and communication and later the thorough mechanisation of utilities (such as the traffic robot, the automatic telephone, the automatic lift, the frigidaire, the electric stove, the electric radiator, etc.), the tempo of life in general steadily increased and concomitantly accentuated the demand for 'escapist' recreation." [21](#) At this juncture she launches into a brilliant and detailed analysis American films which embodied the sensationalism she so profoundly despised. She inveighs endlessly against this cinema. But again these are foreign films and not South African films per se. In her defense, one could say she was politically correct (in the old non-American sense) in analyzing American films because they were hegemonic, they were shaping the cultural sensibility of the South African imagination.

When Thelma Gutsche writes of the distinguishing features of the South African cinema at this particular historical moment of the 1920s, these are not unique characteristics of our 'national' culture finding expressive articulation in film form as one would expect, but rather, they are markers of standardization and formatization of visual film culture which was happening in many other 'national cinemas' that were under American hegemony: a phenomenon having more to do with the maximization of profit than with the development of aesthetics. Being located at the periphery of the cinema as a world system, Gutsche mentions that outstanding films were shown in South Africa months or even years later after having been shown overseas. A second characteristic was that films were much shorter than the time they were advertised for; a program would speak of 2 hours of entertainment, whereas the viewing of films themselves would not be more than an hour. And the third feature, the beginning predominance of "trailers" and advertising for forthcoming films. And lastly, the process of "block" or "blind" booking which forced exhibitors to buy massive quantities for showing

regardless of their quality. Given these structural features for the visual experiencing of sensational American films, Thelma Gutsche implies that the hegemony of American cinema in South Africa was to be expected. This hegemony was blanketing the commonwealth countries. Britain, failing to challenge the hegemony of American cinema while imitating its sensationalism, called upon and in fact attempted to force commonwealth countries to impose quotas on Hollywood films. In support of Europeanism classicism, this gives Thelma Gutsche an opportunity to castigate Britain for imitating Americans, while renewing her hostility to American popular film culture. In this context, she speaks of the physical, physiological and psychological detrimental effects of American films on children. [22](#) Here again, to her what was crucial were effects of films rather than actually analyzing and showing the supposed poor aesthetic quality of these films. A question beyond this presentation emerges: to what extent has Thelma Gutsche unwavering preoccupation with the social history of film devoid of their aesthetic merit detrimental to the subsequent emergence of film aesthetics in our country! Given her greatness as a film scholar, she we not put at her door the mediocrity of our cinema. Blaming apartheid for this disaster is insufficient, for that concerns only political matters, that should not necessarily affect our artistic sensibility.

With the coming of the sound and talking films in the 1927-31 period, Thelma Gutsche traces the institutional forms, practices and transformations which enabled the breaking of the American hegemony in South African cinema. This chapter, "Kinemas Break The 'Monopoly' And Introduce 'Talkies' Formation Of African Consolidated Theatres And Films Ltd 1927-1931", reinforces one's admiration for her command of the relevant material, and the dazzling interweaving of its multifarious forms in constructing dense textural patterns of interpretation. The footnotes are an astonishing marvel. Even though I did not begin this presentation with the intent of celebrating Thelma Gutsche, but rather with the intent of appreciating her, some of her passages beckon one to surrender unconditionally. Here I quote at liberty: "The continued success of this enterprise which already held leases and options on a large number of theatres, made it clear that the film 'monopoly' operated by African Theatres and African Films for nearly fourteen years had at length been broken. Kinemas continued their policy of expansion apparently without limit and both organisations now entered on a phase of competitive development which was to provide South Africa with some of the best cinema entertainment ever presented. During the four years that the struggle lasted, the South African cinema developed most of its distinguishing characteristics---notably the subtle change from 'bioscope' to 'cinema'. The outstanding feature of this fierce competition was the countering of one company of every development announced by the other. Simultaneous with the publication of the share prospectus of Kinemas Ltd came the announcement of extensive building plans on the part of African Theatres which manifested great activity and

prosperity. . . Every move on each side was watched and combatted and the public soon sensed the tenseness of the situation. . . The unqualified rivalry between African Theatres and Kinemas was constant with these unhappy circumstances. On the one hand, Kinemas had persuaded themselves and gave the public the impression that they were waging a kind of altruistic crusade to break a pernicious monopoly for the benefit of the public; on the other hand, African Theatres and its associated companies fought to save an industry which they alone had founded, consolidated and brought to prosperity. the issue therefore came to be fought without quarter, many disreputable incidents characterising its development." [23](#) A sense of mischievousness did not escape her woodwinking: "During these activities, competitive action continued along standardised lines. For instance, when Kinemas showed *The Rat* with Ivor Novello at the Astoria in Johannesburg in June 1928, African Theatres showed *The Bat* at the Palladium." [24](#) I could no resist the literary verve of these passages; written so effortlessly, but based on painstaking research and enormous accumulated facts. As a cultural historian, Thelma Gutsche is the best we have had. And arguably, the most premier of our historians.

This competition between these two institutions eventually became impracticable for several reasons: the overseas production and distribution companies (firms) knowing that they were bidding against each other, exploited and took advantage of both of them; the building of endless cinema houses was financially exhausting to both companies; cinemas were opened in cities whose populations could not support them; their financial situation was becoming worse and worse. This economically unsound competition eventually led to a merger of the two companies forming two new companies dealing with exhibition and distribution, African Consolidated Theatres Ltd and African Consolidated Films Ltd: "The amalgamation was at first regarded with real regret by the general public. Competition had provided cinema entertainment of an unprecedentedly high order as well as innovations and variety which were previously impossible. Some considered that the bonds of 'monopoly' would clamp film entertainment within rigid limits and that the public would become passive victims of dictatorial caprice while others felt that the combining of resources would ensure progressive development." [25](#) In a central way, our visual sensibility was also structured by this competition of long ago.

One of the interesting theses that Thelma Gutsche develops in this section of the book concerning the emergence of sound film is that while on the one hand it widened the aspect of social life it represented, on the other hand it homogenized the nature of film form: the extension of the social horizons of film were at the expense of its poetic lyricism. This belief seems to have been taken as self evident by many pioneering film scholars from Bela Balazs through Siegfried Kracauer to Andre Bazin. Thelma Gutsche was in many ways articulating a

consensus view of the 1930s and 1940s among outstanding film scholars who had intimate knowledge of both the silent era and that of the advent of sound. To them the Eisenstein of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) was more lyrical and had a deeper and complex emotive structure than *Alexander Nevsky* (1937). Can one agree that the poetics of film form of Carl Dreyer have a greater resonance than those Andrei Tarkovsky!

As a consequence of the hegemony of American films on our national sensibility in the 1930s, Thelma Gutsche has two chapter headings that would seem more relevant to the history of American cinema than to the national history of our cinema: Chapter XII---"Advent of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer And Union Theatres Ltd Impregnation Of The Cinema In The Social Structure"; and Chapter XIII---"Advent Of Twentieth Century-Fox And United Artists The Film In Every Phase Of National Life". It would seem that the history of South African cultural sensibility in this decade was more wedded to American entertainment and popular history than to its own nationalistic history. There is a passage that would seem to indicate that she did not find this odd or a tragic situation. Indeed, Thelma Gutsche seems to have welcomed it with absolute serenity. I extrapolate from this passage, even though it is ostensibly about the representation of English Royal matters, that although Thelma Gutsche constantly and continuously inveighed against American sensationalism in film culture, this never blinded her to the fact that American cinema was a carrier of what could be called cosmopolitanism, however compromised and problematic it was, which to her was preferable than the fundamentalist Afrikaner nationalism which in her evaluation compromised the few films made by white South Africans, or under their auspices . Here is a passage which I think has deep pregnant meaning: "Towards the end of 1938, British newsreel were much occupied with publicising the activities of the new King of England (especially apropos the royal visits to France and the United States), a preponderance which considerably irritated Afrikaner and other elements and though it was frequently pointed out that 'cinema exits are always open', irritation continued. Resentment against publicity of the British royal house was accentuated during the voortrekker Centenary Celebrations when a wave of intense nationalism swept the country." [26](#) Clearly then, the reason why Thelma Gutsche in **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940** is contemptuous of South African films made by whites on whites for whites is that she sees it as a project of resentment intended to feed Afrikaner nationalism endlessly howling about the defeat of 1899-1902. Another remarkable thing about this extraordinary woman is that like Frantz Fanon she does not confuse nationalism with national consciousness, as Andre Brink has sadly done in **Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege** . [27](#) The fundamental lesson imparted to us South Africans by our greatest film scholar is now an obvious: film form and nationalism are simply incompatible with each other. This is one of the reasons earlier on for decrying

the silence about Thelma Gutsche in **Movies-Moguls-Mavericks: South African Cinema 1979-1991**. This lesson was never heeded from 1948: is it surprising that 'our', or more appropriately I should say, 'their' apartheid cinema has been one catastrophe after another of mediocrity.

Wishing to bring this presentation to a conclusion, I will pass over in silence concerning Chapter XIV---"The History of Film Censorship in South Africa", even though in itself it imparts many invaluable lessons, this theme has been nearly exhaustingly considered by South African film scholars of later generations, who followed on her considerations, that it would be superfluous to try to say anything more. A real fascination to me is Chapter XV---"The History of Film Production in South Africa", where I expect the matriarch of African Film Studies to say something more about South African films than she had in the rest of the book. [28](#) Here I would like to begin with a rather long quotation because her voice is the most authoritative about the nature of our origins in the realm of film culture: "The history of commercial film production in South Africa may be said to have begun in May 1896 when Edgar Hyman, manager of the Empire Palace of Varieties in Johannesburg, first saw the 'cinematographe' used by Carl Hertz and, fascinated by its possibilities, obtained from Charles Urban, managing director of the Warwick Trading Company of London, a cinecamera and supplies of unexposed film. Hyman continuously took films in South Africa as agent for the company and it would appear that, prior to the outbreak of the Boer War, Urban also sent one of his cameramen (possibly Joseph Rosenthal) to film scenes in South Africa on two separate occasions. The Warwick Trading Company's Film catalogue from 1899 onwards itemised a large number of South African films many of which were shown at the Johannesburg Empire from 1898 onwards and some to President Kruger (whom Hyman also filmed) early in 1899. It is evident that from 1896 to 1899, both Edgar Hyman and other cinecameramen were active in South Africa and that their films, distributed through the Warwick Trading Company, were shown throughout the world. The Boer war was systematically documented by three enterprises; but subsequently film production seems to have ceased in South Africa for some years except for the filming of Cecil Rhodes' funeral in April 1902 by J. T. Blake, the 'bioscope operator' attached to Fillis' Circus, then in Cape Town." [29](#) The historical significance of this complex passage can not be overestimated, and in a way lends authority or justification or credence to the perspective from which Thelma Gutsche wrote her classic book.

Although within six months of the invention of cinematography in France South Africa imprinted itself on this visual medium of modernity, Thelma Gutsche makes it explicit clear, without seeming to be aware of the political implications, that in this momentous encounter South Africa was an object of imperial gaze rather than self defining itself at the moment of entrance into a new

age: Gutsche speaks of film production in South Africa, instead of South Africa film production. From the moment of its inception in our 'national' territory cinematography was an instrument of imperial domination or the object for the other. South African film scholars have been lax in their historical responsibility in determining whether this petrifying imperial gaze was partly responsible for the subsequently debilitating gesture of making nationalism, precisely white nationalism, the undefined but 'naturally' articulated ideology of the pre-1994 South African cinema. [30](#) The second critical point indicated by Thelma Gutsche is that the extensive film documentation of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 brought to the consciousness of the world the profound importance of the intersection of film and history. Although writing respectfully on the surface of the worthy efforts in the making of **De Voortrekkers** and **Symbol of Sacrifice** (1918), the lack of extended consideration on her part of these ostensibly historically important films, would seem to indicate that she was weary of them for they were largely historical myths. As already indicated the South African cinema of the Segregationst Era and the Apartheid Era went on this tragic path. The annual showing of **De Voortrekker** on December 16 ("Dingaan's Day") was a means of recharging nationalist passions by means of the invocation of historical myths. This could not but have the effect of narrowing the possibilities and options of our cinematic national imagination.

The extraordinary importance of Thelma Gutsche's classic book lies not in its unrivaled archaeological reconstruction of our visual imagination, but in enumerating from our past the dangers that will surely be debilitating in constituting a national cinema we have never had: nationalist passions and historical myths. We do not want Zulu nationalist representations of the historical myths of the greatness of Shaka. Afrikaner nationalistic destruction of our cinematic visual imagination, with the connivance of English-speaking white South Africans, has made us pay a heavy price: in the almost a century of the encounter between the South African visual imagination and cinematography not even a single film masterpiece has emerged from us. Where is our Round-Up (1965)! Where is our Memories of Underdevelopment (1967)! Where is our Daughters of the Dust (1991)!

A Bibliography of the Work of Thelma Gutsche Mentioned in the Essay .

- 1) Thelma Gutsche, **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa, 1895-1940** , Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1972 (1946, Ph. D. Thesis: University of Cape Town).

2) -----, **No Ordinary Woman: The Life and Times of Florence**

Phillips , Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1966.

3) -----, **Old Gold: The History of the Wanderers Club** ,
Howard

Timmins, Cape Town, 1966.

4) -----, **The Microcosm** , Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1968.

5) -----, **A Very Smart Medal: The Story of the Witwatersrand**

Agricultural Society , Howard Timmins, Cape Town,

1970.

6) -----, **The Bishop's Lady** , Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1970.

7) -----, **There Was a Man: The Life And Times of Sir Arnold**

Theiler, K. C. M. G., of Ondestepoort , Howard Timmins,

Cape Town, 1979.

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1 Howard Timmins, Cape Town.

2 Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, **Zulu Horizons** , rendered into English verse by Florence Louie Friedman, from the literal translations of D. McK. Malcolm and J. Mandlenkosi Sikakana, Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1973, p.xi.

3 All these books were published by Howard Timmins, Cape Town.

[4](#) Johan Blignaut and Martin Botha (eds.), **Movies-Moguls-Mavericks: South African Cinema 1979-1991** , Showdata, Cape Town, 1992.

[5](#) **There Was A Man** , p. 24. The book has its own prejudices against Africans and the Khoisan. For instance in **No Ordinary Woman** writes of 'resentful and the pillaging Basuto and the belligerent Matebele in context of the Great Trek, as though Africans should not be resentful having been displaced from their land by the Afrikaners. On the following page (p.6), she could write this complicated sentence: "Their [Europeans] to non-whites and especially to the thieving Hottentots and Bushmen who as late as the seventies, were shot down as 'pests' by specially-organised commandos, was indefensible."

[6](#) **Old Gold** , p.3.

[7](#) **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940** , p.1-2.

[8](#) Elizabeth Strebel, " The Voortrekkers : A Cinematographic Reflection of Rising Afrikaner Nationalism", *Film and History* , vol.9 no.2, 1979; K. G. Tomaselli, "Capital and Culture in South African Cinema: Jingoism, Nationalism and the Historical Epic", *Wide Angle* , vol.8 no.2, 1986. Keyan Tomaselli, arguably the foremost historian of the South African cinema, states in his book that the years 1916-1919, the era in which this film was made, was the golden era of the South African cinema (**The Cinema of Apartheid** , Smyrna/Lake View Press, New York, 1988, p.32). If this is so, Thelma Gutsche's monumental study does not register this fact at all.

[9](#) **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940** , p.10.

[10](#) *ibid.*, p.105.

[11](#) *ibid.*, p.54.

[12](#) *ibid.*, p.98-99.

[13](#) *ibid.*, p.102

[14](#) *ibid.*, p.121-22.

[15](#) *ibid.*, p.125, my italics.

[16](#) What I mean by this is that Thelma Gutsche may never have actually seen the first film establishing our cinema historically, but much more important, even if she actually saw it, she incapacitated herself in reading it by viewing it within the over-deterministic Manichaeism she was conceptually struggling with at this juncture in South African cultural history. What is interesting about this studied indifference is that *The Great Kimberley Diamond Robbery*, as the title specifically alludes, deals with the fundamental issue which precipitated the making of modern South Africa, a theme resonating in Gutsche's own work: the discovery of the abundance of minerals in the late nineteenth-century. Within the context of this discovery, the intensification of the frontier clashes between Europeans and Africans. And thirdly, the "necessity" of the State to police the lives in order to assure the triumph of white nationalism over black nationalism. I deduce these thematic patterns of the film from the summaries supplied by Thelma Gutsche and mentioned above. To another related subject. Although this film historically demarcated the beginnings of South African cinema, it was *De Voortrekkers / Winning a Continent*, made five years later, which gave ideological and artistic perspective to our cinema. In other words, the film structuring the ideological perspective of our cinema was implicated in fanatical white nationalism, bordering on proto-fascism. The mediocrity of the South African cinema from its inception to the present is its failure to deal with this issue. The fatal mistake within the context of post-apartheid cinema in the process of being forged at the present, would be for upcoming African filmmakers to think that these are skeletons of concern only to white South African filmmakers. Paraphrasing Marx one can only say: , if they are not on guard against African nationalism. It will be necessary elsewhere to examine the colossal ideological wreckage of white South African cinema which pretended to be South African cinema, a historical impossibility, given that it was a cinema of ethnic and racial. To pretend otherwise, would be like confusing the Nazi cinema with the German cinema, represented in its early phase by the expressionism of Fritz Lang (does it matter that he was Austrian), and in its later phase by the romanticism of Werner Herzog or the realism of Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

[17](#) It does not follow that for Thelma Gutsche all European films embodied the classicism that was central to her critical imagination, as made clear by her condemnation of French crime 'drama' which she characterized as immersed in 'American' sensationalism and sordidness. Her strenuous objection to these films was she that believed they glorified felony and made criminality triumph over law (p.126). It follows, ofcourse, that she did not view all American films as carriers of sensationalism. What she objected to was an ideological morality which inhered in certain particular mode of films.

[18](#) Thelma Gutsche, **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940** , op. cit., p.126-31.

[19](#) *ibid.*, p. 141.

[20](#) *ibid.*, p.166. I make a similar observation in my essay, "The TransAtlantic Connections of the New African Movement", in **United States and South Africa: The Historical Field of Social and Cultural Interaction** , (ed.) Ntongela Masilela, forthcoming, 1998.

[21](#) *ibid.*, p.171.

[22](#) *ibid.*, p.178-181.

[23](#) *ibid.*, p.201-202.

[24](#) *ibid.*, p.206.

[25](#) *ibid.*, p.215.

[26](#) *ibid.*, p.271.

[27](#) I still endorse my critique of Andre Brink of a decade ago: "The Moments of 'Voorslag' and 'Sestigers' in our Literary History", in **South African Literature: From Popular Culture to the Written Artefact** , (eds.) Wolfgang Schafer and Robert Kriger, Evangelische Akademie Bad Boll, Germany, 1988, pp. 93-102.

[28](#) In an essay of 1994 and published two years later we attempted to trace the genealogical structure of African Film Studies: " *Presence Africaine* and the Emergence of African Film Criticism", *Communicare* , vol. 15 no. 1, 1996, pp.1-44. Elsewhere it will be necessary to attempt to integrate South African Film Studies with (or into) African Film Studies which for obvious historical reasons until 1994 were geared into mutually conflictive epistemological and ideological systems.

[29](#) Thelma Gutsche, **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940** , op. cit., p.307.

[30](#) This will be criticised as a meaningless over generalization, ill informed of the specificities of the South African cinema. I content myself with this statement by

Keyan Tomaselli: "Conventional sources of investment, both domestic and international, continue to produce bland, and often racist, feature films, films which legitimate current political processes or show American, colonial and white myths about Africa and Africans." (**The Cinema of Apartheid** , Lake View Press Book, New York, 1988, p.11).