

IS THERE A SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL CINEMA?

by

Ntongela Masilel

In a remarkable and exemplary essay on the theoretical complexities of the history of form in contemporary Conceptual art, Thomas Crow writes the following sentences: "Almost every work of serious contemporary art recapitulates, on some explicit or implicit level, the historical sequence of objects to which it belongs. Consciousness of precedent has become very nearly the condition and definition of major artistic ambition." South African cultural history since 1994 in large part is confronted with the historical meaning of this formulation. The hegemonic cinema in South Africa until recent times, in contrast to the idea of the South African national cinema which in all likelihood still does not yet exist, has been largely in the service of white oppression, white supremacy, and white nationalism. This is an undeniable historical fact which is possibly at the center of the tragedy of film form in South Africa. The tragedy resides on two levels: in almost a hundred years of cinema in South Africa, the country has yet to produce a single masterpiece or great film; the tragic consequences may still not be over of this conjoining on the imaginative plane of a pernicious ideology and film form.

Perhaps the reasons for the refusal of Thelma Gutsche, our great cultural historian of film, in **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures In South Africa 1895-1940** to engage the history of films made by white South Africans (the majority of whom saw themselves as Europeans in Africa, not as Africans) was a refusal to countenance to colonization of film form on the imaginary plane by white nationalist ideology. She may have intuitively felt that it would prove fatal, as it seems to have been the case for decades and decades. In her reading of film history in South Africa, what she perceived to be American sensationalism was partly responsible for this untenable situation. To her perhaps there was not much of a historical and ideological distance between *The Birth of a Nation* (1914?) and *De Voortrekkers* (1916). Given that to her film practice was one of the quintessential forms of modernity, she wanted film culture or cultural practice in this domain to proximate closer to European classicism. Thelma Gutsche unquestionably believed that the cultural practice of making films should be in the service of democratic traditions. On the other hand, the other epistemological reason, in contrast to the mentioned directly political-cultural reason, for the seeming refusal of the engagement with films made in South Africa in their autonomous representative form, was that for Thelma Gutsche film history should be written from the perspective of cultural history, because film history is inseparable from cultural. The impermanent conditions of

historical possibilities for countries in a state of the incompleteness of modernity compels this conjoining. Whatever historical and/or philosophical postulates one may set forth for this disengagement, the fact of the matter is that the founding text of the history of film studies in Africa does not engage films made in South Africa as autonomous aesthetic objects configuring their own differential complexity.

In totally unambiguous terms, Thelma Gutsche's book develops the thesis that there can no such a thing as the South African cinema under the modernist conditions then prevailing. The historical logic of this insightful thesis has continued at least to the periodizing date of 1994. Here it is necessary to interpose a thesis developed by Lewis Nkosi, a member of the Sophiatown Renaissance of the 1950s and simultaneously belonging to the last intellectual generation of the New African Movement, a decade ago: "In any case, a serious examination of South African culture must at some time come to terms with a fact that may be uncongenial to both black and white progressives, given our prior commitment to a non-racial democratic future, and that fact is the near total hegemony, within the various cultural practices of South African society, of an unrepresentative white minority, consisting not only of diehard upholders of the apartheid system but also of white liberals and progressives as well, in their roles as academics, as critics, as anthologists, as impresarios, as gallery owners and publishers and as consultants of those who own virtually all the means of cultural production". This is one of the fundamental issues that bedevils the making of the South African cinema, let alone the creation and making of a national cinema in South Africa. The unrepresentativeness of the cultural domination of white South Africans in film culture will perpetually render these two historical projects unrealizable. This hegemony must be broken. Eventually its breakage will occur. Only then will the historical possibility of realizing these projects occur. There is no way of escaping this necessary historical eventuation.

It is necessary here to revert to the ideas formulated by Thomas Crow. Simultaneous with the necessary breakage of white supremacy in film production, the Africans in South Africa will need to re-acquire the "consciousness of precedent" of the intellectual and cultural heritage of the New African Movement. This acquisition is made all the more necessary by the recent calls of the former President Nelson Mandela and the present President Thabo Mbeki for the creation and forging of an "African Renaissance". In actual fact, the African Renaissance is the rebirth and renewal of the intellectual and cultural legacy of the New African Movement which never completed the construction of modernity in South Africa because of its defeat by white supremacy. The African Renaissance is a call for completion of the modernist project of the New African Movement. The New African Movement covers the whole expansive historical space from the Sesotho novels of Thomas Mofolo through the Xhosa poetry of S.

E. K. Mqhayi to the political practice of Bram Fischer and pedagogics of Harold Cressy. Indeed, a convoluted cultural field. This is the mirror of the future of the South African national cinema. How can this necessary but monumental project be possible? At a significant moment in the process of the Russian Revolution Vladimir Lenin asked: What is to be done? Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dziga-Vertov, Dovzhenko, Medvedkin and others gave an eloquent response. A comparable response was given in the context of the Cuban Revolution by Sara Gomez, Tomas Gutierrez Alea, Santiago Alvarez, Julio Garcia Espinosa, Humberto Solas and others when Fidel Castro postulated that the duty of the revolutionary is to make a revolution. To argue that Russia and Cuba were in the midst of a socialist revolution and South Africa is not, hence the applicability of their historical lessons is not valid, is not a real argument, or at least is not complete, since what is central here is the possibility of a correct reading of a particular historical experience by intellectuals and artists facilitating the complete opening of the imagination. Gomez, Pudovkin and others dared to be completely imaginative and original. Paradoxically, to be original and imaginative is to be historical. And to be historical is to possess a “consciousness of precedent”.

For film practice as well as for intellectual endeavor in the sphere of film culture in South Africa today to be completely original and imaginative is to be conscious of the precedent of the New African Movement. South African film practice and its scholarship “belongs to the historical sequence of objects” that should be in synchrony with the intellectual achievements and expressive forms attained by the New African Movement. It is not accidental that Thelma Gutsche in the early part of the twentieth-century was vitally interested in the New African intellectual Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, an outstanding scholar, poet and novelist. In as much as the New African Movement set about the establishing of a national culture in the context of modernity and modernism, film practice and film scholarship today is confronted by the necessity of establishing a national cinema in the context of postmodernity and postmodernism. The failure of the New African Movement in constructing a national culture was due its political defeat by the reactionary forces of white nationalism and white supremacy. Though defeated politically, it was never defeated intellectually and culturally. The testament to its triumph in these two domains is evident in the great poetic practice of Mazisi Kunene. In our context, although 1994 represents a political triumph, it is very much questionable whether it has been accompanied by commensurate intellectual and cultural achievements. Our present is the reverse mirror of the past of the New African Movement. All the more necessary for the African Renaissance to establish the dialectical connection between the past and the present.

Particular debates and practices within and across the New African Movement have essential relevance for film practice and film scholarship today: the

extraordinary debate between Benedict Wallet Vilakazi and H. I. E. Dhlomo on the relationship between language and culture in representation, as well their duelling on the dramatic forms of the theatre, still seems exemplary; the different structures of portrayal of Shaka in history by Thomas Mofolo and Mazisi Kunene across generic forms and in the context of nationalism and modernity, has not lost its relevance; the nature of pedagogics advocated by Harold Cressy, Abdullah Abdurahman, Charles Dube and others, still has many lessons to impart; the discussion and dialogue between Solomon T. Plaatje, H. I. E. Dhlomo, R. V. Selope Thema, H. Selby Msimang, Lewis Nkosi about the construction of the idea of the New African, concerning national identity and cultural identity, still seems very much inexhaustible; the lessons facilitated by Charlotte Manye Maxeke and James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey in making possible the connection between the New Negro modernity and New African modernity, the umbilical cord between Africa and the African diaspora, have not lost their fascination; the discourse on the relationship between Marxism and modernity within the context of the Trotskyism of Ben Kies and I. B. Tabata and the Stalinism of Michael Harmel and Albert Nzula and Yusuf Mohammed Dadoo, is still spell-binding; the visual poetics of the photography of Peter Magubane, Jurgen Schadeberg, Bob Gosani, G. R. Naidoo, Lionel Oostendorp, Gopal Naransamy, and that of the paintings of Selby Mvusi and Gerald Sekoto, still impart the images necessary to represent the present; the feminist political practices of Helen Joseph, Lilian Ngoyi, Phyllis Ntantala and others, still possess their imaginative originality; the music of the Jazz Epistles, the Skylarks, the Jazz Maniacs and others, still has much to say to the present; and so on.

In other words, the intellectual achievements and the cultural attainments New African Movement is the past that has much meaning for the present in order to move towards the future. Although knowledge of the past heritages is fundamental in constituting film practice and film scholarship in the present, the salutary warning of Georg Lukacs in 1913 is still relevant: "We seem to be in a perpetual state of shifting terms and concepts. Something new and beautiful has arisen in our time, but instead of accepting it for what it is we try by whatever means we can to slot it into old and inappropriate categories, and to divest it of its true meaning and value. The 'cinema' is currently seen either as the instrument of a graphic education, or as a new and cheap competitor for the theatre; i.e. either from a pedagogic or economic perspective. But the fact that a new form of beauty is precisely beauty, and that it is the role of aesthetics to describe and evaluate it, is something that occurs to very few people at present." Ultimately, film form and cinema have to be evaluated and judged on their own terms in accordance with the force with which they poetically graph on the cultural plane of history.

A South African national cinema can come into being in the context in which

“the cultural means of production” revert back to or are expropriated by the majority of the African people. Its construction involves both ethical, cultural and intellectual undertakings. One principal task in the making of a national cinema is to situate South African film practice and film scholarship into African film history, where they naturally and historically belong, not in European film history or Hollywood film history, as white nationalism and white supremacy had attempted to impose them. In this context African film history holds many lessons for South African film history. Among the most primary of those lessons is that the aesthetics and narrative form of African film should be modelled on African oral narrative traditions. With slight modification, given the forceful and violent entrance of European modernity into South African history which has no parallels in Africa, this is also applicable to the context that concerns us here. Until this lesson is taken to heart, white aesthetics will prevail over African aesthetics in South African film history. There is no such thing as a “raceless cinema”, as some liberal ideologues are deluding themselves. What South Africa needs are films of the prototype of Souleymane Cisse's *Yeelen* (1987). To argue that such a political aesthetics is inapplicable in the context of South Africa, is to exhibit an unfamiliarity with the African poetics of S. E. K. Mqhayi, Mazisi Kunene, J. J. J. Jolobe, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, D. L. P. Yali-Manisi and others in the African languages. It is not even necessary here to mention the great lineage of *Izibongo* (their attendant mythological structures) in all the African languages in South Africa .

Another primary principle of African film aesthetics is that African films should be made in the African languages. A whole spectrum of films from Ousmane Sembene's *Xala* (1974) through Gaston Kabore's *Wend Kuuni* (1982) to Idrissa Ouedraogo's *Tilai* (1990), are exemplary. Again here to argue against this edict, is to exhibit an unfamiliarity with the Zulu novels of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (**Noma Nini** [1935], **Udingiswayo Kajobe** [1939], **Nje-Nempela** [1944]), or with Thomas Mofolo's Sotho novel (**Moeti oa Bochabela** , 1907 [**The Traveller of the East**]), or the greatest anthology ever assembled in South Africa, Walter B. Rubusana's **Zemk'inkomo Magwalandini** (1906), or the Zulu essays of E. H. A. Madope's **Indlalifa yase Harrisdale** (1940). Many others could be mentioned. The third cardinal principle of African film aesthetics is a call for films to reflect the process of national integration. Haile Gerima's *Harvest: 3000 Years* (1976) and Cisse's *Baara* (1978) carry forth this historical quest. Pixley ka Isaka Seme's manifesto, “The Regeneration of Africa” (1903), the founding text of the New African Movement, the brilliant columns of Jordan Kush Ngubane in the newspaper he edited in the 1940s *Inkundla ya Bantu* , and H. I. E. Dhlomo's great essays in the *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper in the 1940s and in the 1950s, were all a call for the national unity and national integration of the African people. For all three, the African National Congress (ANC) was this modernizing instrument. The New African Movement, again in this instance, is an exemplary

precedent for many of the things that would have to be undertaken in order not only to establish a national cinema, but also to integrate the South African cinema into the African cinema.

Given the deep historical affinities throughout the twentieth-century between Africans in South Africa and African Americans, it is unavoidable that the film practice of the latter would be exemplary to the former. It was the New African intellectuals of the New African Movement such as John Dube with the essay "Are Negroes better off in Africa ? Conditions and Opportunities of Negroes in America and Africa compared" (1904), Allan Kirkland Soga with "Call The Black Man to Conference" (1903-4) and Solomon T. Plaatje with "Negro Question" (1904) who forged the Black Atlantic connection between New Negro modernity and New African modernity. These intellectuals were preoccupied with the historical meaning of modernity for Africans. For them it was inseparable from a pan-Africanist perspective. The portion of the African American history that would seem to have the most relevant to the national cinema in South Africa is the Los Angeles School . The Los Angeles School being a component of the African American independent film movement, its prestige can only be more enhanced. The major films of the Los Angeles School have focused on the historical meaning of modernity for African Americans: Charles Burnett's *To Sleep With Anger* (1990) and *The Wedding* (1998); Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1992); and Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993). The visual images of these films are extraordinary. *To Sleep With Anger* examines the contradiction between the Old History of the South and the New History of the North, while *Daughters of the Dust* meditates on how the Africanness (past) of the African American people inform their Americanness (present), and *Sankofa* reflects on the historical meaning of the Black Atlantic between Africa and the African diaspora. All three films traverse the conceptual field of double-consciousness articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois so vividly in **The Souls of Black Folk** (1903). It was this book, as well as Booker T. Washington's **Up From Slavery** (1901), that was influential in the formation of the modern consciousness of many of the New African intellectuals within the New African Movement. Given the call for an African Renaissance in order to complete the modernist project of the New African Movement, it is apropos that the construction of a national cinema in South Africa would most likely look to the African American film history that has the greatest affinity with Du Bois.

Is there then presently a national cinema in South Africa ? An unequivocal answer is No. Until the historical and intellectual forces and tendencies tentatively mapped here converge towards a synthesis, there can not be any possibility of a national cinema. The contribution of film practice and film scholarship to the African Renaissance would be in realizing such a historical possibility, an objective so central to what the New African Movement stood for.

Thomas Crow, "unwritten histories of conceptual art", in **conceptual art: a critical anthology** , (eds.) alexander alberro and blake stimson, the MIT press, cambridge , 1999, p. 564.

Lewis Nkosi, "Introduction" (1990), to **Blame Me on History** by Bloke Modisane, Penguin Books, London , 1990 (1963). The Introduction also appeared as "Bloke Modisane: Blame Me on History", *Southern African Review of Books*, Double Issue 13 & 14, 1990. That Lewis Nkosi was also preoccupied with the historical ideas of the 'New African' as was the case with earlier generations of New African intellectuals within the New African Movement as R. V. Selope Thema, H. I. E. Dhlomo, H. Selby Msimang and others see the fascinating pages of his superb book: **Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature** (1981).

The relinquishing of the domination of white South Africans of others will privilege them to be considered Africans. This argument is similar to that postulated by Nadine Gordimer in her most recent seminal book: **Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century** (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999).

Georg Lukacs, "Thoughts on an Aesthetic for the Cinema", *Framework: A Film Journal* , no. 14, 1981. Originally appeared in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* , September 10, 1913. Cf., Ntongela Masilela, " *Presence Africaine* and the Emergence of African Film Criticism", *Communicare* , vol. 15 no. 1, Winter 1996.

Respectively in *The Missionary Review of the World* , August 1904; in *The Colored American Magazine* , December 1903, January, February, March, April 1904; and in *Koranta ea Becoana* , Loetse [September] 7, 1904.