Soft Power and South African Film: Negotiating Mutually Incompatible Agendas?

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Abstract

This article offers the first analysis of the role of film as a soft power asset In South Africa. It examines ways in which the policy priorities of the South African government have, until recently, seemed to work against the nation's strategic aim to use film as a tool to leverage soft power in order to gain political influence across Africa, as well as to maximise the economic potential of globalisation. The South African film economy is booming. Cape Town, in particular, has become a key production centre globally. International productions are attracted to the country by the versatility of its locations, its weather and its low cost, high quality, facilities. This has provided great employment opportunities for local production staff. However, it has done very little to support the development of local creative talent. Thus, unlike, for example, Nollywood, which supports the entire 'value chain' of production and which is allowing creative and technical expertise to develop in tandem, the success of the South African production infrastructure is to the detriment of its South African filmmakers. In this article I investigate the extent to which the government's economic imperative to develop the industry is working against its soft power aim to project South African stories both locally and internationally, and with it, the national 'strategic narrative', considered to be one of the country's prime soft power assets. I then go on to suggest that the landscape would currently seem to be changing as a new generation of South African filmmakers are starting to gain ground.

Key words: soft power, South Africa, film, Nollywood, runaway productions, BRICS

Despite the fact that Nigeria now has the largest economy on the continent; despite the continual allegations of corruption raised against the country's President Jacob Zuma and the disquiet of the so-called 'Born-Free' generation at the post-Apartheid transition settlement worked out by their parents — manifest in the widely-reported #RhodesMustFall, and its successor #FeesMustFall, campaigns; despite the country's failure to deal adequately with its HIV/Aids epidemic, or the xenophobic attacks of recent years against the country's migrant population, South Africa continues to enjoy a position of unrivalled international influence and authority in Africa. As numerous commentators have noted (Sidiropoulos 2014; Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike 2015; Ogunnubi and Isike 2015), this is due in no small part to the country's ability effectively to marshal its 'soft-power' potential (Nye 2004: ix). As Sidiropoulos puts it:

> On the continent, setting aside external actors, South Africa is probably the country with the best claim to the exercise of soft power, as defined by Nye […]. Nigeria may have Nollywood (cultural reach through its film industry), and its economy may have overtaken South Africa's as the largest in Africa, after the April 2014 rebasing of its gross domestic product calculations; however, Nigeria still has some way to go in rivalling the South African story. (Sidiropoulos 2014: 197)

The attractiveness of a country's 'story', or as Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin term it in their recent re-evaluation of soft power discourses a nation's 'strategic narrative', is central to understanding the value of 'soft power' as a

tool of international influence. So much of the recent discussion of soft power, Roselle et al. argue, has moved a long way from Nye's original formulation. For Nye soft power is a descriptive term, used to capture what he identified as a shift in international relations in the 1990s towards the instrumentalisation of 'attraction rather than coercion or payment' (Nye 2004: x), his analysis focusing on the ways in which questions of 'culture' and 'values' were playing an ever-greater role in foreign policy (Nye 2004: 11). Roselle et al point to how the term has been taken up by political elites, in particular, far more normatively. Here it is frequently conceptualized as something that governments can themselves proactively manufacture. In the process, the discussion of soft power is increasingly focussed on identifying and exploiting potential soft power 'assets', be it Nollywood in Nigeria, Bollywood in India or China's ability to use its economic might to buy a piece of Hollywood's global influence. However, it is the story behind such 'assets', and the values that the story communicates, that is key to their success or failure: 'Strategic narrative is soft power in the 21st century' (Roselle et. al 2013: 71, emphasis in original), or as John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt put it, international standing and influence is fundamentally shaped by 'whose story wins' (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001: 328).

And South Africa's story is hard to beat: that of a country which swiftly transformed itself from apartheid pariah into a democratic, outward-looking state that has one of the world's most progressive constitutions, defined by strong institutions which embrace the nation's diversity. It was the first country ever to unilaterally give up its nuclear arsenal and has, since 1994, sought to represent on the global stage not only its own interests but also those of Africa as a whole, a position that was shaped by the foundational post-Apartheid leadership of Nelson Mandela, an unimpeachable

moral authority of global significance. This, in turn, led to a period of economic stability and prosperity, culminating in the country's invitation to join the BRICS grouping in 2011 (Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike 2015: 23-4).

Of course, as can be seen from my opening description, there are other ways of evaluating the post-apartheid development of the country, and how long South Africa can maintain the strength of its current strategic narrative is debatable. Nonetheless, one need only look to the country's latest National Development Plan (NDP) — which sets out the government's goals for 2030 — to see that the soft power potential of this narrative remains central at least to the country's own plans for its international relations (NDP 2012: 241). Indeed, as the country's economic power falters, the soft power of its strategic narrative, as well as the concomitant set of values this communicates to the world, becomes all the more important. Miller Matola, CEO of 'Brand South Africa' — the national agency tasked with presenting a coherent image of the nation abroad in order to maximize its soft power — speaks for many state representatives: 'we are proud of our history and diversity. [These are] our greatest strengths' (Brand South Africa 2013), a position further underlined in a survey carried out by this organization in 2016, which found the country's story of democratic transition, along with its strong institutions, to be central to the continuing strength of the national 'brand' (Brand South Africa 2016).

Moreover, the role of soft power and nation branding is often not only about generating international influence. Michael Barr, in his analysis of China, notes that here the use of 'soft power is not only limited to international image building. Rather its deployment is as critical at home within the country as it is abroad.' 'Nation branding', in the Chinese case, is inextricably interconnected with 'nation building' (Barr 2011: 81). A similar dynamic can be found in South Africa. Chapter 15 of the

NDP focusses entirely on 'nation building and social cohesion', setting out a strategy for spreading awareness of the values at the centre of 'Brand South Africa' across society, in order to establish 'a united, prosperous, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa' (NDP 2012: 65): the 'Rainbow Nation', as propagated by Mandela, which, the NDP hopes, might be 'refracted in each one of us at home, in the community, in the city, and across the land, in an abundance of colour' (NDP 2012: 12).

Remaining for the moment with the NDP, the cultural and creative industries are considered to be pivotal for the delivery of both the internal and external dimensions of the country's soft-power. At home, arts and culture generally, and film and media in particular, are seen as crucial to the project of nation building, of helping to unite society by embedding the types of values outlined in the NDP in the general population, on the one hand, while also supporting economic growth and national prosperity on the other (NDP 2012: 36). Abroad, the NDP suggests, the nation's culture needs to be utilized as a tool for 'South Africa to promote its presence and leadership on strategic issues as part of its "soft power"' (NDP 2012: 241). For the NDP 'The country's rich cultural legacy and the creativity of its people mean that South Africa can offer unique stories, voices and products to the world' (NDP 2012: 35). And as the Government's White Paper on Arts, Culture & Heritage— which emerged from the NDP — makes clear, film has a particular role to play in this regard (Department of Arts and Culture 2013), a position emphasised by Paul Mashatile, the then Minister of Arts and Culture:

> Film now occupies the centre stage in on-going efforts to foster social cohesion and nation building as well as the economic empowerment of the people of South Africa […]. It is, among others, through film that we can open powerful

spaces for debate about where we are, as a society and where we are headed. Film is also one of the mediums through which we can tell our unique and compelling stories to the world. We have seen on many occasions that the world is hungry to hear the South African story; a story of a people that have overcome adversity and are now working together towards a shared and prosperous future. (Mashatile 2013)

This is a policy position that continues with the present incumbent, Nathi Mthethwa, who similarly insisted at the launch of the youth dance film Hear Me Move (Scottnes L. Smith, 2015) upon the power of film to allow, in this case 'the young of South Africa to tell their own stories and write our history'. For Mthethwa, film can act as 'a cultural ambassador who will give South African artistic genres exposure to world audiences. [It] will put South Africa on a global map and also increase the contribution of the South African film industry to the Gross Domestic Product', the latter being equally as important as the former. The Department of Arts and Culture, she insists, is 'serious about the business of the arts', wishing to 'develop South African films to be globally competitive' (Mthethwa 2015).

For the government, then, its support for the film industry has several competing goals. On the one hand, film is seen as an important tool in the country's soft power arsenal, not in the way that other nations, not least some of the BRICS, seek to use film — namely as a cultural product with global reach that can be instrumentalised to increase the nation's attractiveness to the rest of the world (see, for example the Chinese case) — but as a way of better communicating to the rest of the world the essential value of the South African strategic narrative of democratic transition. This, in turn, is viewed as a means to support the government's internal

nation-building endeavours. On the other hand, it is viewed as an important part of the culture and creative industries that can support economic growth, contributing, according to the latest available figures, approximately R3.5 billion annually to South Africa's GDP, and generating over 25 175 FTE jobs (NFVF 2013: 6).

As Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike note, in the literature on soft power there has, until recently, been little discussion of South Africa (Ogunnubi and Okeke-Uzodike 2015: 154). Within this literature there has, however, been some exploration of the regional influence of the South African broadcast media as a soft power tool. Stacy Hardy, for example, examines the significant role played by MultiChoice Africa across the continent in this regard. MultiChoice Africa is a satellite and internet television company owned by the South African company Naspers. Its digital satellite services help to spread South African cultural products across the continent, and with them South Africa's cultural values, be it via the local versions of western reality shows such as Big Brother Africa (2003-) or through popular 'Soapies' such as Generations (1994-2014) or Egoli: Place of Gold (1992-2010) (Hardy 2015). At the same time, DStv, MultiChoice Africa's digital satellite platform, also carries a whole host of competing messages, be they broadcast via Nollywood on its 'Africa Magic' set of channels, the BBC World Service, Russia Today or China's CCTV. It can hardly be considered solely as a vehicle for the communication of the ANC's version of the South African story (for more detailed discussion see Milton and Fourie 2015).

Studies on post-apartheid South African Cinema, specifically, have not explored the relationship of the film industry to soft-power discourses. That said, scholars have paid a good deal of attention to the role of film as part of the nation-building project. Lindiwe Dovey, for example, her study quotes Lionel Ngakane, 'Father of Black South African Cinema', who argues that the nation 'needs to recognize that at this

stage of our history cinema is perhaps the most powerful instrument to foster a stable, democratic and united South Africa through feature films and documentary films about ourselves', noting the extent to which 'contemporary South African filmmakers are playing an important role in narrating the new South African nation into being', for all their heterogeneity (Dovey 2009: 50-2). Martin Botha and Lucia Saks also draw out the role of film as a tool of nation-building, while simultaneously highlighting the difficulty of this endeavour, given the diversity of potential narratives available to the post-Apartheid nation. Botha, who was a key figure in the development of the 1996 White Paper on film that led to the creation of the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF), points to the burgeoning diversity of contemporary South African film production, while also lamenting what he sees as the inability of the institution he helped to create to foster and sustain this diversity (Botha 2012: 203; 250). Saks also points to the difficulties faced by the national film infrastructure in delivering on what she sees as the 'incompatible aims' of the country's film policy. On the one hand, she too notes the government's goal to create a 'national cinema […] which reflects the nation's own culture', while also positing what, in her view, is the impossibility of forming a coherent sense of national cinema at a time when there is such a strong need to protect the polyvocality of the national strategic narrative. On the other, she highlights how this is made more complex still due to the government's aim to build an industry which can 'create jobs at home, generate economic spin-offs in local economics, earn foreign revenue by touting locations and production expertise, generate revenue from co-productions and sales abroad, and encourage tourism' (Saks 2010: 6-7).

    And this is made yet more difficult if one considers the role the government sees for film as an agent of international influence. Laks points to the desire,

particularly under the Mbeke government, to use film as part of his drive to foster a pan-continental 'African Renaissance' (Saks 2010: 7) and as we can see from the statements made by Mashatile and Mthethwa quoted above, this remains important. Indeed, it would seem that the state's ambition in this regard has, if anything, grown, Mthethwa, for example wishing to see a greater presence for South African culture not only across but also beyond the continent. In the rest of this article, I wish to discuss further the tensions evident in the government's approach to film, focussing in particular on how the incompatibilities identified by Laks impact upon the way film can be utilised explicitly as a national soft power asset. Concentrating predominantly on developments since 2010, I build on a number of excellent recent studies on the first two decades of post-Apartheid film by the like of Botha, Dovey, Saks and others (for example Balseiero and Masila 2003; Maingard 2007; Botha 2007), exploring, in particular the manner in which the economic structure of the industry in South Africa seems to work against the development of films that can help to communicate the diversity of the national strategic narrative internationally — a far less discussed aspect of contemporary South African film culture, but one which is currently growing in significance both culturally and economically.

'Cape Town takes on Tinseltown': the Place of South Africa in the Global Cinema Infrastructure

As a driver of economic growth, the South African film industry clearly has a very good story to tell. 'Cape Town takes on Tinseltown' write Robyn Curnow and Teo Kermeliotis, highlighting the ability of the city to attract major Hollywood film productions such as Lord of War (Andrew Niccol, 2005), Blood Diamond (Edward

Zwick, 2006) or Invictus (Clint Eastwood, 2009). South Africa has become a favoured destination for so-called Hollywood 'runaway' productions for a number of reasons. In terms of filming locations, it is hugely versatile. Michael Auret, managing director of South Africa's Spier Films, suggests:

> You can shoot the Mediterranean climate around Cape Town and you can shoot the tropical climate in Johannesburg — it's desert, as well as jungles, as well as beaches, it's urban centres […] So there are very few films that can't be made here — other than possibly a film shot completely in snow, in the Arctic or something (Quoted in Curnow and Kermeliotis 2012).

Cape Town has about the same amount of sunshine as LA. It also has a state-of –the-art production facility (Cape Town Film Studios). However, most importantly it is around 30-40% cheaper to shoot here than in the US or Europe (Olsberg 2008). This is further aided by the current weakness of the Rand, as well as various national funding initiatives and tax breaks, including 'The Foreign Film and Television Production and Post-Production Incentive' and 'The South African Film and Television Production and Co-Production Incentive', developed by the Department of Trade and Industry, as well as support from the state-sponsored Industrial Development Corporation. These work alongside a number of international co-production treaties as well as a series of regional tax incentives designed to stimulate local production and bring in international investment to specific cities (for further discussion see Treffry-Goatley 2010; Booyens, Molotja, and Phiri 2013; Visser2013). Nico Dekker, chief executive of Cape Town Film Studios sees his facility, supported by public and private financing, in particular, as having brought about a step-change in the South African film industry: 'You can now shoot stuff [here] that we [could]

only dream of'. The studio is thriving, with an impressive roster of productions which, he suggests, provide a great opportunity for the local industry: 'We need to grow and to understand that the world out there is waiting for us. We've got everything now — we've got great crews, good stories, we've got a great studio' (Quoted in Curnow and Kermeliotis 2012). This would also seem to be confirmed in some of the films that the studio has produced, which appear intent upon communicating the national strategic narrative of democratic transition, such as Invictus, the story of how Mandela worked with the captain of the national rugby union team to help bring the country together during the sport's World Cup finals in 1995, or the story of Mandela's time in prison, Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom (Justin Chadwick 2014). Crucially, however, such stories are the exception rather than the rule. Cape Town Studios is without doubt benefiting the local and national economy. Garreth Bloor, Cape Town's mayoral committee member for tourism, events and economic development, suggests that the studio has generated around R5 Billion over the last 3 years for the city's coffers (Phakathi 2016). However, if one considers the studio's projected roster of productions, including the US pirate adventure series Black Sails (2014-) and a film adaptation of Stephen King's novel series The Dark Tower (1982-), there is currently no space for local productions, or for local stories.

Furthermore, there is in practice very little opportunity for South African talent to play a major role in these kinds of productions. Although the South African actress Chloe Hirschman featured in The Odyssey (*L'odyssée*, 2016), Jérôme Salle's Cape-town-shot film about the life of deep-sea diver Jacques Cousteau, such opportunities are rare. Mandela, for example, was played by Morgan Freeman (US) in Invictus, and Idris Elba (UK) in Long Walk to Freedom. This is an issue which, Helena Barnard

and Krista Tuomi note, is symptomatic of a wider structural problem in the industry. Comparing South Africa with Nigeria, they argue that 'in Nigeria there is virtually no gap between the expectations of different parties in the film industry (e.g. customers, producers and distributors), resulting in a robust but low-quality industry' (Barnard and Tuomi 2008: 665). In Nollywood, all elements in the industry's value chain are developing at similar speeds. The technical competency of crews is growing alongside the professionalism of script-writers, producers and directors, alongside the audience for their product. This differs noticeably from South Africa where, they suggest:

> familiarity with a high-quality foreign offering creates a substantial gap between the actual and desired capabilities of the emerging industry. This gap may create the motivation for learning, but it is hard to close the gap —that is, integrate the weaker local with the stronger foreign capabilities —across all segments of the value chain (Barnard and Tuomi 2008: 665).

Thus, the industry's huge success in attracting international investment and productions, one of the key aims of the government's film policy, would seem to be actively undermining its other aim of supporting South Africa to tell local stories. While the success of Cape Town Studios is clearly aiding the wider Cape Town economy, and might well also be having a positive effect on skills development amongst those in technical or ancillary roles in the industry, it would seem to be crowding out those people looking to develop their creative skills.

Soft Power at Home: Authentic Stories and Building an Audience

The difficulty of finding funding to tell 'authentic' South African stories (however 'authenticity' might be defined) is a frequent complaint amongst those working in the

local industry. For example, the screenwriter and director Ntshaveni Wa Luruli argues that 'The South African industry is basically a service industry', a state of affairs that has, he feels, inhibited his own development as 'an indigenous filmmaker' (McCluskey 2009: 77). This has led, such critics suggest, to a dearth of high quality South African stories. Indeed for some, the structural issues around how the industry has evolved underline, or are even exasperated by, a more disturbing form of implicit censorship. As actor and director Sechaba Morojele puts it: 'The bigger picture is if you talk politics, race, or racism, people go "Sh-shh." White people still have a strong hold over our society […] You [have] never really seen a black South African make a true black political film about the past' (Mc Cluskey 2009: 40). This appears curious, given the role the past ostensibly plays in the national strategic narrative. However, it would seem, to some in the industry at least, that funding bodies only want a very specific version of the past. A similar claim is made by the filmmaker Angus Gibson. He recounts his attempt to get a screenplay taken up which painted a bleak picture of contemporary society: 'Everybody was very kind of saying, "There's not space for this kind of narrative in South Africa right now." They thought it doesn't represent the kind of rainbow nation that is painted' (Mc Cluskey 2009: 55).

Such comments might well be dismissed as sour grapes from artists unable to find the resources to realise their projects. However, what is less open to debate is the relative lack of public funding in South Africa for local film production compared to other countries. Astrid Treffry-Goatley points out that the budget available to the NFVF (currently around R120 million) is far less than that typically available to flourishing national film industries elsewhere, 'such as that of France' (Treffry-Goatley 2010: 42). France spent €74.8 million (R1.2 billion) of public funding on film in 2015 (CNC 2016: 82). As the NFVF's CEO, Zama Mkosi, is at pains to point out,

the demand for funding 'currently exceeds the budget by 116% each quarter' (Quoted in Wagner 2016). It is unrealistic to expect a developing country like South Africa to be able to fund the industry to the same level as France, even if, according to the NFVF's 2013 Film Industry Economic Baseline Study, 'for every R1 spent in the industry, another R1.89 was generated within the South African economy (NFVF 2013: 6). Despite this claim, it is widely acknowledged that with regard to the creation of local content there is a problem.

At the root of this problem, commentators frequently acknowledge, is the issue of audience development. The majority of the population does not go to the cinema and so the cinema audience for domestic South African films telling South African stories is limited. A report commissioned by the NFVF in 2015 found that, while there was a large appetite for South African content amongst the population as a whole, very few people would consider watching such films in a cinema. If they did watch films, wherever the films were from they tended to be on (frequently pirated) DVDs or on free-to-air television. Part of this is due to the lack of a tradition of going to cinemas in rural areas or in townships, a legacy of the apartheid era. Visiting cinemas is largely an urban activity and is considered to be out of the price range of the majority of the population (NFVF 2015: 20-39).

It is interesting to note in this regard that a far greater proportion of the Afrikaner community go to the cinema than other communities, an audience that is, in fact, supporting an overall growth in the cinema sector. South Africa's box office hit a record high in 2015 of R1.2 billion, up 36% on the previous year. Only 6% of this came from local films, however, and the only one of these films to make it into the top 25 films was the comedian Leon Schuster's latest 'Candid Camera' movie Shucks! Pay Back The Money (2015) (Odek 2016). That said, the market for local

productions does seem to be on the rise, predominantly, given the audience, for Afrikaans film. The NFVF box-office report for the first half of 2016 saw ticket sales for local films grow by 55% to R43.9 million compared to the same period in 2015 (R28.2 million). This was primarily due to the success of Vir Altyd (Jaco Smit, 2016) an Afrikaans romantic adventure. Afrikaans films are invariably the most popular local films with cinema audiences, accounting for 77% of releases in 2016 (NFVF 2016: 6-8).

Given the asymmetrical growth of the South African cinema market, the increasing success (however limited) for South African films at home would not seem to be supporting the culture of national inclusivity and cohesion that the government's film policy ostensibly wishes to develop. This is why the NFVF's audience analysis puts such an emphasis in its recommendations on audience development and film education:

> Film education can assist in growing the audiences of today and tomorrow, ensuring that more people have an improved understanding and appreciation of the value of different kinds of film. The young generation can be encouraged to learn through and about film, providing them with a wide range of activities to encourage watching, understanding and making films (NFVF 2015: 39).

Here we see the report following the direction of travel of similar studies commissioned by national film institutions around the world, such as the UK Film Policy Review of 2012, which also concluded that the future of British film 'begins with the audience' (Smith 2012). Furthermore, it chimes with local initiatives designed to raise awareness of South African films beyond the cities, such as the 'New Spaces for African Cinema' project, which took place as part of the 2013

Durban International Film Festival (Govindasamy 2013). Or one might mention 'Kasi Movie Nights', a mobile cinema unit which seeks to bring cinema to the townships, building an audience for South African stories in order 'to empower local communities and to share the industry with regular South Africans', an initiative that, like the NFVF audience report, sees teaching filmmaking skills as an important means of growing an audience for local product (Mokoena 2014), an idea that is also set to shape the NFVF's approach to audience development in the future. Terrence Khumalo, its manager of film certification, notes that the NFVF is seeking to create a series of regional film 'hubs' that would bring both exhibition spaces and production facilities to more rural areas (Khumalo 2016).

It is too early to say what effect these initiatives might have on the long-term sustainability of the industry and how far they will be successful in building a broader audience for South African films at home. One outcome may, of course, be the overcoming of the gap between producers and consumers, pointed to by Barnard and Tuomi. Might this lead to the growth of a more sustainable low-tech film industry such as we see in Nigeria as well as other parts of the continent (Dovey 2009: 22-24)? There have been some attempts to develop this kind of model in South Africa, be it 'Sollywood' Productions in Kwa-Zulu Natal or 'Vendawood' in the country's northernmost province, both of which have attempted to ape the low-budget, quick-turn around production and distribution ethos of Nigeria. However, if the mainstream industry faces the challenge of its audience being very familiar with, and thus the industry being unable to compete with, Hollywood, any Nollywood-type industry in South Africa is always going to have to compete with the ready availability of cheap Nollywood product at home — 'the real thing' as it were — the market for which is growing across the continent (Onishi 2016). One further problem amongst these

fledgling industries has been their ostensible focus on positive images of South Africa. Reporting on a screening of the Sollywood film Ingxoxo: The Negotiation (Tiro Venter, 2010), Guardian journalist David Smith noted how the film producers saw their role to 'make films that present South Africa in a positive way, much as Hollywood presents America and prove that many of the world's negative stereotypes are wrong'. Smith goes on:

> Certainly, there are plenty of Hollywood films that end up waving the Stars and Stripes, more or less subtly. But my favourites, such as Citizen Kane, The Godfather and Taxi Driver, are rather more subversive […] I suspect most films that self-consciously set out to promote a country, or any other product, are ultimately doomed to obscurity (Smith 2010).

Thus we return to the question of soft power, the national strategic narrative and the reality of life in South Africa, which would seem to challenge this narrative. Using film to generate soft power either domestically or internationally is not simply a question of propaganda. Here we might be reminded of Mashatile's call for South African cinema 'to open powerful spaces for debate about where we are, as a society and where we are headed' (Mashatile 2013). It is interesting to see that, particularly internationally, the version of the South African story that seems to fit most straightforwardly with the image of 'Brand South Africa', while being attractive to international production companies, does not necessarily do that well with international audiences. The most obvious example of this is the UK-South African co-production Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom. Although this did very well at home, it flopped abroad, despite the universally praised performance of Elba as the lead (Cunningham 2014). Far more successful, as I shall now discuss, and ultimately far

better for the nation's international soft power profile, are those films that highlight many of the challenges faced by the post-apartheid nation.

Watching South Africa on International Screens

South African film has not tended to have a large presence on international screens. The story of Mandela and the democratic transition has regularly been the subject of international — particularly western-made — films, as well as those made through international coproduction with South Africa. I have already mentioned Invictus, and Long Walk to Freedom, to which one could add several others including the Truth and Reconciliation Committee drama Red Dust (Tom Hooper, UK South Africa 2004), Catch a Fire (Phillip Noyce, United Kingdom, United States/France/South Africa, 2006), a thriller about the anti-apartheid resistance, Goodbye Bafana (Bille August, Germany/France/Belgium/Italy/South Africa, 2007], the story of Mandela's friendship with one of his jailers, or the biopic Winnie Mandela (Darrell Roodt, South Africa/Canada, 2011). And recently announced plans for a new film based on the memoir of Zelda la Grange, Mandela's personal assistant, Good Morning, Mr Mandela (2015), shows that for the international industry South Africa's strategic narrative continues to be considered a bankable commodity (Child 2016).

As already discussed, however, these films are often not particularly successful at the international box office. Far more successful in recent years has been South Africa's small but growing animation industry. The two feature length animations produced by Triggerfish Animation Studios, Zambezia (Wayne Thornley, 2012) and Khumba (Anthony Silverston, 2014) both had wide international releases, being distributed to over 150 countries in 27 languages and generating grosses in excess of R900 Million. Both films are amongst the top five highest-grossing South

African films of all time. The way in which Jean-Michel Koenig, chief financial officer (CFO) at Triggerfish, sees the value of the company's work would seem to be particularly well aligned to both the government's 'internal' and 'external' soft power objectives. On the one hand, Koenig sees his films as being able to bring 'African animation to global audiences', thus helping to protect the continent's 'unique culture' nuancing a view of Africa as propagated, for example, by Disney's The Lion King (Roger Allers, Rob Minkoff, 1994) — a company, it might, however, be noted that Triggerfish now works in partnership with. On the other, the company also sees its animation as a tool for education across the continent, helping to support wider government literacy and numeracy initiatives (Mulligan 2016).

However, the South African films that circulate internationally most frequently have tended to be those that present the social challenges the country has faced since the end of apartheid. The two nominations the country has received for Best Foreign Language Film Oscar highlight this particularly well. Darrell Roodt's Yesterday (2004), the first ever international commercial feature made entirely in Zulu, is typical of many internationally-successful contemporary films, telling the story of a woman infected with the AIDS virus by her husband who is desperate to see her child go to school before she dies. The following year Gavin Hood's Tsotsi (2005) gained huge international acclaim when it was awarded the Oscar for its depiction of gang violence in Alexandra, a poor township in the Gauteng province of South Africa, its narrative focussed on the story of a troubled young man who has grown up on the streets as he attempts to look after a baby he finds in the back of a car he has hijacked. As Dovey notes, the representation of social violence has been a particularly important part of contemporary South African cinema since the end of apartheid (Dovey 2009: 90). While both these film highlight key issues that would

seem to challenge the national strategic narrative, it is noticeable that they also play to western narrative conventions. Georg Seeßlen, for example, argues that in order to win the Foreign Language Oscar, 'the film has to be "foreign enough," but must also not flout the aesthetic codes of the dream factory too flagrantly' (Seeßlen 2007). Tsotsi, in particular, can be seen as part of a wider penchant amongst the members of the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, specifically, and western audiences more generally for 'poverty porn', a term coined by Alice Miles to describe Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning story set in the slums of Mumbai, Slumdog Millionaire (2009) (Miles 2009), but that has also been applied to other Oscar films, including Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund's depiction of the Brazilian favelas Cidade de Deus (City of God, 2002) (Wilson 2010). Such films tend to present the precarious, and specifically violent, nature of life amongst some of the world's most marginalised communities for ready consumption by the western gaze. This is the dominant view of South Africa on western screens. The 2000s saw a spate of films depicting the prevalence of extreme violence in both the country's townships and its urban centres, including Jerusalema (Ralph Ziman 2008), a fictionalized account of how organized criminals 'hijacked' apartment blocks in the Johannesburg suburb of Hillbrow in the 1990s, the revenge tragedy State of Violence (Khalo Matabane, 2010) and Four Corners (2013), Ian Gabriel's crime drama set amongst the criminal underworld of the notorious Cape Flats 'Numbers Gangs'. Here one might also mention Neill Blomkamp's internationally successful dystopian Science Fiction films set in Johannesburg, District 9 (2009) and Chappie (2015), both of which address questions of social inequality and the rise in xenophobia that this inequality has led to. While such films might seem to play to Miles' definition of 'poverty porn', they also reflect the experience of large parts of the population, for whom violence, exacerbated

by the huge disparity between the richest and poorest members of society, is an everyday reality. Consequently, although these films might appear to challenge the dominance of the national strategic narrative abroad, questioning the success of the post-apartheid transition, they are also in a position to support a public debate on the state of the nation and thus can themselves also be seen a part of the nation-building project, further highlighting the role of film as a key platform for public debate, as defined by Mashatile above.

Rather than challenging the country's soft power strategic narrative, such films might be viewed as pointing to a greater national maturity, highlighting to the world the nation's faith in the strength of the country's underlying democratic values, and thereby ultimately helping to strengthen the power of its strategic narrative. This is a dimension of South African film production that is becoming increasingly important and as it does, it is interesting to see that South African films are becoming increasingly visible on the international stage. That said, in terms of whose voices are being represented in such films, the majority of the filmmakers mentioned above are white, highlighting the fact that this part of the community remains disproportionally represented in the industry (NFVF 2013: 15-6). There are, however, signs that this too is beginning to change. South African films are a growing presence on the international festival circuit representing an ever-wider cross section of society. In 2012 Craig Freimond's story about an Indian stand-up comedian, Material, was shown at Montreal, London and Busan. In 2015 The Endless River, Oliver Hermanus' beautifully shot exploration of how violence continues to define South African society became the country's first film to be nominated for the Golden Lion at Venice. Necktie Youth (Sibs Shongwe-La Mer, 2015), which presents the world of well-off young people living in Johannesburg, was screened in Berlin. The noir story of a

ruthless debt collector For Love and Broken Bones (Tebogo Malope) won best film at the Portland festival. The NFVF now has a regular presence at Cannes, as do South African films, the young Cape-Town filmmaker Dan Mace winning awards in 2016 for his short documentaries (Mine Sniffing Rats and Gift, 2016). And so the list goes on. It is also worth noting in the context of this volume that the BRICS group is also supporting the presence of South African films internationally, most noticeably at the film festival in New Delhi in 2016 timed to coincide with that year's BRICS summit (ANI 2016), but also at the Sao Paulo film festival that same year, which ran a special strand on BRICS films, during which South African films had a large presence.

This growing presence ties in with a shift not only in the ethnicity but also the age demographic of these filmmakers. As Ian-Malcolm Rijsdijk points out, these are the filmmakers of the 'Born Frees', the generation that has come of age in the post-apartheid era. It is a generation that, Rijsdijk argues, is currently questioning the limits of freedom in post-apartheid South Africa. 'Are they truly born free, or are they growing up with the burden of expectation born of the fact of political liberation?' (Rijsdijk 2017), the expression of which is also manifest in a wider 'post-nationalist shift' amongst filmmakers where, drawing on the work on contemporary African Cinema of Alexie Tcheuyap, 'nation building has become a less prominent, if not absent, motivation in filmmaking' (Tcheuyap 2011:1). Here we see the growth of critical voices on international screens. To the films already mentioned could be added Brett Michael Innes Sink (2016), which challenges the frequently cosy view of society presented in mainstream Afrikaans cinema. Sink tells the traumatic story of a Mozambican domestic worker whose daughter dies while under the supervision of her Afrikaner employer. Limited by her immigration status, the woman is compelled to remain in the employ of this woman or lose her livelihood, a state of affairs that has

profound psychological consequences for all members of the household. Sink was viewed as a breakthrough for South African film, described by the critic Leon van Nierop as one of the most important Afrikaans films of all time, setting 'the tone and chart[ing] a course from which we cannot divert.' (Quoted in Screen Africa 2016). However, this new growth in critical voices has also highlighted the limits of the government's willingness to embrace film as a forum for critical debate.
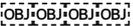
In 2013, the Durban International Film Festival (DIFF) selected as its opening film Jahmil X.T. Qubeka's stylish noir thriller Of Good Report. Reworking the core motif of Nabokov's Lolita (1955), Of Good Report traces the journey into sexual obsession of rural school teacher Parker Sithole (Mothusi Magano) with his teenage pupil Nolitha (Petronella Tshuma). The film received wide-spread critical acclaim, being screened at international festivals and winning numerous awards, including the Africa Movie Academy Award for Best Picture. However, just before it was originally to be screened at the 2013 DIFF it was banned by the Films and Productions Board for being 'child pornography'. As Stuart Muller notes, the film is clearly not pornographic. It is, rather, a critique of a society in which predatory behaviour of older men towards teenage girls is common place, where '28% of South Africa's school girls are infected with HIV, versus just 4% of boys', and where 77 000 girls received abortions in 2011. 'Misogynism and sexual predation, especially on young girls, are national afflictions that flagrantly contradict the exemplar South Africa proudly embodies as the manifestation of Nelson Mandela's principles'. This led, Muller suggests, to the 'hypersensitivity' of the board towards this film (Muller 2014).

The film clearly did not suffer in the long run from the publicity generated by its banning. Its subsequent international critical success has done much to support the

continued growing reputation of the nation's films. In so doing, while one must be careful not to overstate the present success of the industry, there are grounds for optimism for the industry's future. The growing sophistication of locally produced films, telling South African stories and featuring South African talent, would seem to be beginning to fulfil the aims for the industry set out by the likes of Mashatile and Mthethwa. The film economy is growing and, be it because of, or despite of, this, more South African stories are also beginning to be told on screen. In the process, film has a growing potential to generate soft power for the nation internationally, not through any straightforward affirmation of a national strategic narrative that celebrates the Rainbow Nation, but through films that can intelligently debate, or even dismiss, any sense of a 'national project', thereby highlighting the robustness of the nation's underlying values.

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