Film and Trauma: Africa Speaks to Itself through Truth and Reconciliation Films

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Black Camera, Volume 1, Number 1, Winter 2009 (The New Series), pp. 30-50 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press

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Abstract
Films made by Africans on wars, gender oppression, slavery, and trauma project not only confrontations between individual filmmakers and their subjects, but they also reveal the confrontations between individuals and groups and the collective structures which shape, control, and direct their lives. How these collective structures become a story's foreground is an important aspect of the cinematic signification process. The resulting film's place and role in trauma mediation cannot be taken lightly nor can it be generalized. Following Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang's book Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations (2004, p. 9), we observe regional films' roles as cure, shock treatment, very minimally as voyeurism, and of course as witnessing. These films become “facilitating agents for the mobilization of ‘non-conventional resources’ such as social awareness, solidarity, dedication, commitment,” to serve a historical sense of duty. This paper will examine the relations between the individual, his/her community, and society in general. A cognate concern is with how African films reveal formal signs conditioned by structures of social organization, cultural affinity, and immediate conditions of interaction. We also consider cinema's relationship to historical referents and memory while figuring out the specific modes of address, all of which contribute to the growing cinematic expressions in Africa.

The term Cinema of Difficult Dialogues has been recently proposed to reflect on films and filmmakers who deal with significant issues of social-racial concern.¹ The common use of the term mainly aims at promoting pluralism and academic freedom on university campuses. It can also be used, however, to bring to the foreground the confrontational nature of the subject in film. “Cinema” as used in this article refers to a broad significatory terrain within which individual productions made on video (or celluloid) explore particular themes. Simultaneously, we use “cinema” to

encompass the spread of stories through film. Film then becomes the physical product: a textual representation of ideas in the film medium. We use video and film interchangeably; here, video is both a recording as well as a diffusion medium, while film essentially remains a recording mode that is distributed through cinemas.

Films made by Africans on wars, gender oppression, slavery, and trauma project not only confrontations between individual filmmakers and their subjects, but they also reveal the confrontations between individuals and groups and the collective structures which shape, control, and direct their lives. How these collective structures become a story’s foreground is an important aspect of the cinematic signification process. This essay will examine the relations between the individual, his/her community, and society in general. A cognate concern is with how African films reveal formal signs conditioned by structures of social organization, cultural affinity, and immediate conditions of interaction. We also consider cinema’s relationship to historical referents and memory while contemplating the specific modes of address, all of which contribute to the growing cinematic expressions in Africa.

The power of the specific African films discussed below lies in the recreation of the traumatic harshness of contemporary Africa. They also have a capacity to draw out of this historical environment a reading of the history of trauma as depicted by generations of filmmakers from the region as a whole. We identify in these films the capacity to create out of images, sounds, geography, and history the narrative of human suffering, reflection, and healing.

Reflections on the traumatic experiences of contemporary Africa can be found in literature and other discursive platforms such as social psychology, history, and ethnography. This article aims to identify similar reflections in film and video. Filmmakers who rise to the challenge of making cinema do so fueled by their personal responses to the social inheritance of their environment.

Words, like images, reconnoiter the landscape of complicity and denial, recognition and estrangement, crime and punishment, memorialization and recollection. Film enables the viewing public to feel that they have participated in the past event. This experience permits audiences to undertake a mourning of sorts, and to imbue the filmic narrative with a sociopsychological status. Film and video generate interpretation in the minds of viewers, interpretation that can create a phenomenological sense of “being there,” or “having been there.” These are experiences of encountering the “real” though semiotic work that orders memory through the logic of fiction, documentary, or other cinematic forms.2

The field of difficult dialogues is replete with so many African films
that categorization is necessary. Films falling in this category include those that deal with colonially imposed conflicts such as the World Wars. *Camp De Thiaroye* (1987) is a key example, as are *Sarrouinnia* (Mauritania, 1986) and *Guimba* (1994).

Films about slavery are few, not only because it is a subject that has almost been relegated to the level of taboo, but also because of the inaccessibility of the mode of expression (film) to many Africans. However, Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa* (1993) and *West Indies* (1979), and Francois Woukoache’s *Asientos* (1995) or Sembene’s *Ceddo* (1972) are in a league of their own in confronting the subject of slavery.

Apart from *The Hero* (2005), and the more recent *All About Darfur* (2006) by Taghreed Elsanhouri, and *Ezra* (2007), few examples on civil war and national reconciliation exist. The exception is in South Africa, where fine documentaries exist on these topics, given the global gaze and increased capacity for film production in that country. The subjects of genocide and the traumatic experiences of nations like Rwanda have also begun to be tackled in such films as *100 Days* (2004), *Keepers of Memories* (2004), *Forgiveness* (2007), *Lumumba* (2000), *Addangaman* (1999), and *Black Goddess* (1978).

We do not intend to restrict ourselves to a generalist discussion that could easily come to rest at definitions and their politics. Instead, we elevate the discussion to a critical analysis of a specific series of films. We will use this as an illustration to reveal the multilayered issues with which the cinema of difficult dialogues needs to contend. With this analysis we wish to suggest that the signification processes of these dialogues need individual study.

*Landscape of Memory* (1999), a documentary series about truth and reconciliation in Southern Africa, deals with the need for people around the region to reconcile themselves to the violent past from which four Southern African states have recently emerged.\(^3\)

Films on this topic have been well documented, identified primarily for their focus on collective victimization. A study of films made during and after apartheid was conducted by the African Media Program at Michigan State University, and found overwhelmingly that Southern Africans were depicted as victims. Those films in which African directors shook off this category and represented Africans as individuals with agency, who cope in one way or another under the most trying of circumstances, were labelled as “affirmative films.”\(^4\) Later films such as the ones discussed below follow the affirmative category, but take their subjects and viewers into the less clear terrain of reconciliation, disappointment, exclusion, and, in some instances, the failure of liberation. These are films of memory which recall the conditions, processes, and experiences of the past. Their directors and
subjects offer a reflexive reading of how they are negotiating the indeterminate present, having survived the past. They are not concerned with contesting European depictions and blaming colonialism for all of Africa’s ills. Rather, they search within; they expose contradictions and failure while exploring solutions. The four countries involved in the affirmative *Landscape of Memory* are Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa. The series itself is made up of the following films:

- *From the Ashes*, Mozambique, directed by Joao Ribeiro
- *The Unfolding of Sky*, South Africa, directed by Antje Krog and Ronelle Loots
- *Soul in Torment*, Zimbabwe, directed by Prudence Uriri
- *I Have Seen* (*Nda mona*), Namibia, directed by Richard Pakleppa

In analyzing these four films, we aim to expose the history and function of the cinematic terrain as experienced by the directors and subjects of the four titles. We also aim to reveal the terrain’s disturbing conditions, environment, and effects on the people depicted.

Most importantly, we hope to propose a process of signification vastly different from those established by other African cinema studies, so as to merit a cinema of its own. This is a cinema of its own because of a number of factors:

- The location from which the cinematic experience is located—the region.
- The function of the cinematic experience—why make and screen the films?
- The styles revealed in the cinematic descriptions.

To start, we need to redefine the corporeal practices of memory outside the media. This is necessary as we reflect on the environment with which the filmmakers engage. If we are to ground this discussion on semiotics, we would propose to set it within the myth-creation properties of deconstruction as held by Roland Barthes, but temper that by foregrounding the myth, noting where specific narratives take on an already-thereness, Right Reason, etc.5 Thus, it is proper that we revisit Joshua Hirsch’s valuable addition to the analysis of realist narration as regards visual representations. He writes:

> Realist narration—mastery over time and point of view, and unselfconscious voice—renders a highly secondarized representation of the past, one which is masterable in the way that French psychiatrist Pierre Janet argued in 1889 that normal narrative memories as opposed to post-traumatic (then called hysterical) ones, are masterable. 6

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Although narrated at the national level, these films are first and foremost regionally oriented, and, as with the example of recent films from Latin America, the films tend to “defy rather than reinforce national category.”7 In the past 100 years, alongside the growth of national cinemas, activities of collective remembrance (memorialization) have proliferated, taking form as permanent sites such as memorials, museums, art works, transcripts, literature, or as performance happenings such as ceremonies and street theater. “As a frequent social act and an embodiment of the cultural act of memory and remembering, memorialization has, thus, become a subject of particular interest for historians, sociologists and anthropologists.”8 Memorialization can be understood as the practice whereby individuals, communities, and societies interact at sites of symbolically represented “memory,” deriving from and impressing on an item or act “narratives about specific times, places, persons and events laden with affective meaning.”9

Memorialization therefore becomes a rite of passage “wherein trauma is expressed, processed and integrated. In this sense, memorialization is a therapeutic practice, wherein trauma is worked through, thus acting as a rite of passage, specifically for survivors.”10 Mostly this trauma is reflected through the victim’s inability to integrate his/her experience, as well as to communicate the full catastrophic experience and knowledge coming from it to others. Indeed, as Steele observes, “survivors are caught between the compulsion to bear witness and the impossibility of doing so.”11

Therefore, we view memorialization as a search for meaning through the performance of community rituals of mourning. Within this context there abounds a certain explosion of religious symbolism from the many African traditional practices (such as spirit possession) that are indeed fundamental aspects of “sites of memory” encapsulating notions of catharsis, loss, absence, and remembering.

What is necessary and important and indeed required by the victims is a facility whereby they can reconstruct the trauma in a form through which they can negotiate the various meanings derived from the catastrophe, and to be able to express it and convey meanings from and about it. However, in the contemporary global context, memorialization has taken the form of construction of public spaces with the intention of engaging and involving individuals with both the site and each other.

Different formal sites of memory exist. The “composed site” consists of museums, art works, monuments, or a commemorative event. The “preserved site” is where a location or some key materials are preserved in the state they were at the end of a traumatic event. A “site of memory” therefore can be seen as “an active practice of remembering which takes an inquiring attitude toward the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory . . . undercut[ting] assumptions about the transparency or the au-
thenticity of what is remembered.” Alongside these memorial sites are other informal memorializations through the media that are more important to our project. The song, the book, the poem, the dance, the recitation, the tale, the mythical, and the legendary are all core components of the other informal structures of memorialization that work to engage the individual and community separately and mutually in a process of dialogue.

This dialogue can take the form of social engagement with the aim of consoling and provoking, maintaining and rupturing, or to afford “violation and desanctification and not to accept graciously the burden of memory.” Such sites of memory are always dynamic. A film like Flame (2000) tackled a seriously political vein in the Zimbabwean edifice. Some of the criticism offered by the victorious political elite over the film was based on the refusal of the ruling class to accept that the traumatic experiences of the war of liberation also include painful experiences of the struggle’s failures. The film’s makers rejected the myths around liberation and questioned the elite’s taken-for-granted narratives.

However, a key aspect of this dialogue is found in the process of selection. Forgetting is often part of the memorialization project, “not simply because the project is often undertaken in opposition to forgetting, but also because in selecting what and how to represent, narrative itself ‘forgets.’” The purpose here is not simply to acknowledge a deed but more importantly to generate what Steele calls a “useable past.” If we again use the example of the Zimbabwean elite’s reaction to Flame described above, they would rather forget the past instead of mobilizing through it to achieve a democratically organized future. For that reason, memorialization projects have often been taken up by the state—it then assumes the initiative in composing and perpetuating myths, and formalizing them in both language and monuments to shape common interpretation. The law is a key prognosis toward the reasoning and structure of social memory in contradiction to the affectations of memory as an aesthetic social practice related to communal and individual emotion and expression. Landscape of Memory attempts to puncture prevailing myths, to reactivate memory as a way of negotiating the present, in many ways as much of a failure as was the past, however it is remembered.

The Media as a Site of Memory

The media is used to construct memory and regenerate historical consciousness, offering evidence through the many productions of documentary and fiction films (video). The purpose of recording here is not necessarily to conserve history for posterity, but essentially “to tell their stories to the public, to be listened to, and to be acknowledged.”
Narratives mediate historical worlds through the dynamic use of characters, situations, images and metaphors, historical investigations, and ethicopolitical judgments, through which a historiographical discourse is maintained. These, it is acknowledged, are highly subjective viewing positions and most of the time the projects offer alternative narratives to the official ones. These are often seen as deferred effects of later knowledge and in some way reflect, even if peripherally, the Freudian concept of nachtraglichkeit, defined as the “irreconcilability between psychoanalysis and theories and methods grounded in historical time, narrative and causation.” Nicola King contends, “the idea that events might have turned out differently might still be capable of changing the subject’s understanding of her life and her self.” The indirect address which characterizes the four documentaries permits its subjects to contemplate what might have been.

The films referred to here more often than not present themselves as counterfeit historical documents, encouraging the viewer to experience them as a cultural or “prosthetic” memory. This memory is often a reflection of a political project of sorts and the filmmaker presents the film as a parasocial event that fictionalizes discourse with the intention of extending the political community of audiences. This is done through the stylistic and narrative modes of address. The narratives often use the documentary mode of engagement, as a cue to both informed viewers who are able “to recognize the verisimilitude of its mise-en-scène and the historical accuracy of the narrative—and uninformed viewers—for whom certain stylistic devices signpost the re-enactment of a historical reality.”

Film is viewed as being important for the creation of historical awareness and for sustaining the sense of society as moral community. This aspect has taken on massive proportions as film has attempted to be a narrative medium of the Holocaust. Indeed, “the Holocaust has become universalized as the master symbol of human atrocities, and in view of its consequences, there is no way that cinematic representations could do adequate justice to the historical veracity of the event itself.” However, while this type of representation is intended to ensure that the same will not happen elsewhere, filmmakers who deal with genocide and other difficult dialogues in Africa are more preoccupied with the identification and creation of the causal narrative that returns the filmmaker’s agency and identity—the nachtraglichkeit.

Factors of a New Cinema

The Location

The region itself contains a myriad of cultural and environmental landscapes. Through the use of certain descriptive terms such as “settler,”
“tribal,” “development,” “front-line,” “liberation,” “Bantu,” “Black farmer,” “White farmer,” “Townships,” “Reserves” etc., the imaginal topography of Southern Africa is consciously and unconsciously endorsed as a cinematic space. The “educational and development” film ethic is a good example of a new rejoinder to this cinematic landscape. *Landscape of Memory* is therefore an apt term reflecting the cinema coming out of the region. In the region, many “difficult dialogues” can be found, ranging from:

- Wars of liberation
- The racial tensions between “the indigenous and the settlers”
- The interstate wars (e.g. Uganda and Tanzania)
- The slavery and slave trade experiences
- The genocide in Rwanda
- HIV/AIDS and female genital mutilation
- Civil wars (in Mozambique, Angola, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi)
- Xenophobia

All of these are subjects which individuals and countries find difficult to deal with on a daily basis. These are confrontations of the mind that confound sociologists, but these are the same issues that filmmakers have also confronted within their creative minds.

**The Function**

In expressing development issues, questions of culture, and the contexts of their production, African film texts often transact meanings across the local and the national landscape, across gender, race, and class, indicating a community discourse. If we define culture as active, collective, and historical human interaction, cultural expression can only be historical and dynamic. The East and Southern African cinema landscape assails the contradictions of nation as territory, and nation as a temporal-cultural space.

The cultural expression found in the films is what is important here. It is not the fact that the acts of violation (or reconciliation) happened or needed to happen in one or the other of the Southern African countries. Rather the location of the happening could easily have been anywhere in the region and the same insights would be engaged. The implications of nationality are minimal in recognizing the extent and context of this cultural imagination.

**The Style**

In many of the films made in the region we notice the desire to tackle the subjects in a “documentary” style. The documentary has always been imbued with the authority of reality and truth and therefore it lends itself to that type of imagination.

Further, the “bantu” ethics and ethnic language basis to which most
of the people in the region adhere also support their creative impetus and closer understanding of the texts by regional audiences. The nature of rituals, symbols, the language structures, and the historical frameworks that these narratives imbed can be easily deciphered by audiences. This makes the cinematic language a deeply cultural one reflecting the region’s history and cultures. The strong cultural import and the “dialogues” themselves also help the filmmakers review how they would like to access and discuss these “dialogues.”

Finally, before embarking on a critical study of the four texts, we need to stress that the cultural expression found in the films is what is important here. Again it is not the fact that the acts of violation and reconciliation happened in one Southern African country or another. Rather, the location of the happening could easily have been anywhere in the region and the same insights would pertain.

This paper will therefore limit itself to a critical review of the four films in the series and reflect on how the individual filmmakers speak at a personal level but ultimately signify a social intent and a cinematic approach that defines elements of geographical (regional) specificity in expressing the traumatic event.

Film Analysis

I Have Seen (Nda Mona)
Directed by Richard Pakhelepa (Namibia)

*I Have Seen* tells the story of the Namibians who survived and those who disappeared while in detention under SWAPO (the South West African Peoples’ Organization), the main liberation force against South African occupation of Namibia. Following the story of Elizabeth Natanga, we are told of the painful memories and experiences of suspected South African spies and their inhuman treatment by SWAPO militants. This film poses a number of elements that characterize a sociological disorder.

The story is told with a religious tinge underlining its message of reconciliation. It is also marked by its languid pace, its pretty cinematography, and religious music. The story’s harsh realities are often told through the black-and-white drawings of torture and are contrasted with beautiful images of the landscape at sunset and sunrise, which evoke the nostalgic and reverential commitment to the land. The film is characterized by repeated images either of beauty or pain, as if underlining the violent history of the land and the people.

The film is confrontational and is politically explicit in the accusations
that the protagonists levy at the Namibian government. The narrative essentially follows the historical violence of apartheid and reveals how that has transformed life in Namibia. This is the collective story of Southern Africa: no one has escaped the violence, and violence stands as the enduring motif of every serious narrative coming out of the region. Amy Novak argues that,

“National or collective traumas are often historicized according to a narrative model employed for recounting individual trauma. The general outline of this plot is that the individual subject, with the assistance of the therapist, steps into the role of active, narrating agent by creating a story of the event that brings the truth of the past forward and places it into its appropriate position in a linear, causal narrative that returns the subject’s agency and identity. In the case of a communal or national trauma, we conventionally assume that healing comes as the group or national mythmaking forces seek to shore up collective identity and the history and ideals on which it is grounded.”

While *Landscape of Memory* is about individual memories, it is also about recognizing oneself as a detail in the landscape that was and continues to be permanently subjected to violence, the impact of which the region will continue to engage with for decades. The narrating agent was largely absent in earlier documentaries of war in Southern Africa. Victims and perpetrators abounded, but closure was required before national and community traumas could be reflected on within discourses of healing and democracy. Toward this context one can see the film *Nda Mona* as a quest for rapprochement. It questions SWAPO’s program for this rapprochement, arguing that individual memory is just as important to the nation as national heroes.

Throughout the film, the visual motifs of time and land, present and past, are used repeatedly to contrast and parallel the fact of reconciliation. It is the war of opposites. The bitter accusations in the film are a distancing factor that inhibits a viewer’s total immersion into the subject. Although the narrative is emotionally involving, it leaves one dissatisfied with the split-screen rigidity of the conflicting positions of the antagonists. The accusers ask for the reopening of the issues that have remained closed to them and to the nation. The government responds by saying there is a need to keep the lid on “these shameful times” on both sides because opening them up would mean that not only the Namibians who abetted apartheid, but also white landowners and their masters, would be asked to come forth and confess. This, the government argues, would be going against the grain of the blanket amnesty offered to all parties.

*Nda Mona* brings the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa into focus as a possible format for the healing process. The example
of South Africa is indeed appropriate in this case. The African National Congress (ANC) and Pan African Congress (PAC) have both been faced with questions of their own activities similar to the dungeons that SWAPO maintained during the liberation war. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission unfolded a morass of inhuman activities carried out by the opposing parties. In the case of ANC an effort to own up to those mistakes was made, culminating in many confessions during the Commission’s tenure. In many ways these issues and experiences have even helped that country form the basis of a cultural renaissance revealed through art.26

The images of the dungeons in Angola and the continuous reminder of the violence of apartheid in the film certainly do not “guarantee that this would not happen in the future,” says Henry Boonzaaier, victim of the SWAPO violence.

Elizabeth Natanga, the narrator of the film and the principal protagonist, tells the up-in-your-face story of her experience with the SWAPO raiders. However, she does not merely stop at accusing the government but also emphasizes the role of the apartheid regime when she notes that the regime “roasted children under the exhaust of cars.” The total effect of the film is the revelation of the extent of the trauma that the people of this region will continue to bear for an extended period. The deconstructive meanings here propose to uncover the myth of government “reconciliation” outside that of the individual detail in this landscape.

Finally, we also need to deal with the use of film for trauma “counseling” or as Joshua Hirsch calls it, vicarious trauma.27 In many ways there can never be a neutral impact on a receiver of any audiovisual description of trauma. The purpose of the description ensures that the receiver will have a reaction—whether positive or negative—to the mediation. We know that after watching visual representations of trauma one often displays symptoms of stress through the vicarious reliving of the traumatic experience.28 Worse still, those who relive many times such experiences of vicarious or “analogue” trauma face a high potential to develop post-traumatic stress.29 Indeed the people of the region still relive over and over the histories of the stresses of national traumas, revealing in the process the collapse of time where a traumatic experience has been endured. These examples support the view that through these films the whole region is involved in a Foucauldian trauma discourse. The traumatic experiences are too recent for people to even create numbness toward such stress. Indeed, even the shock value experienced by those viewing the experiences from afar carries with it an added edge to the victims, witnesses, perpetrators, and erstwhile beneficiaries. The region is believed to be populated by spirits (of the living and the dead) meeting in the darkened cinema or night under the spell of a film/video projector. In their effort at communicating
commonalities of a discourse embedded in their traumatic experiences, the filmmakers of the region are responding to systematic and identifiable signifying factors of a social discourse. The formal narrative structures of the films are core signifiers of this experience. Indeed, there is evidence inside the films, and outside of them in communities as revealed at film screenings, that a conscious and unconscious psychiatric discourse is at work. Even nominal analyses of the films soon reveal that the films sometimes work as actors of trauma, as in Nda Mona, or they help viewers to work through trauma, as in The Unfolding of Sky.

From The Ashes, Directed by Joao Ribeiro (Mozambique)

From the Ashes deals with the fratricidal war that engulfed Mozambique for the best part of the first twenty-five years of its independence. It opens with images of a cleansing ritual for a returning combatant who is rejoining his community. He finds the ritual necessary to re-establish himself in the eyes of the community. Ritual plays the all-important role of spawning community well-being. The film centers on life in villages, where people have come back together after the civil war in which over one million people were killed. As the narrative states, there are many bad spirits hovering around the land. People contaminated with bad spirits need to be cleansed before they can rejoin society. What is important to the people of these villages is the desire and need, as they say, to “regain human dignity.”

Viewers are introduced to “the Bishop,” the Bishop’s son, Pedro, and Pedro’s young brother Da Costa. Da Costa was abducted when he was eight. He survived the war but was badly traumatized by his experience. What is more important to him and the family is that he needs to re-integrate himself with the community. It is only through undertaking a reconciliation process that Da Costa will be welcomed. This is the concept that enhances the well-being of the community—the need for a wholesome return to normalcy for the whole village.

The opening ritual finds resonance in many Bantu cultures. The symbolism of the forked road brings myriad interpretations to societies of the region. One only needs to understand the meaning and purpose behind narratives to understand the strength that lies behind rituals, which are forever couched in symbolic terms. Indeed, symbols in Bantu cultures are based on the concept of causality.

As Aschwanden observes,

Symbols [like rituals] define and express how known forces work, or the direction (according to what is wanted) they should take. Symbols help fulfill the potential, or influence favorably the direction of a still variable course of
events, whereby a wish comes true in the identification . . . or an inexplicable occurrence is explained.\textsuperscript{30}

Rituals embody varied paths in this journey to reconciliation. While in \textit{I Have Seen} there is the clamor for truth to be spoken andouted, in this film truth is taken for granted. The myth in truth is the operating third symbolic/ideological order of this signification. Truth is the disguised signified.

What truth there is in the reconciliation process still hurts in many different ways. Some people might never find the strength to forgive, but the film suggests that there are ways of rejoining society through acceptance, after performing the deed that signifies to many an expression of remorse and sorrow. As Deborah Matchoba says in the \textit{Unfolding of Sky} (the South African film of this series) at times, in order to forgive, one cannot do more than satisfy the filial duties to the deceased for the wrongs that were perpetrated upon them in the name of their ancestors.

To many, religious ceremony implies a process through which to attain healing; recovery does not occur merely through an applied cure. In the film the cleansing is done on a continual basis, day-after-day until the patient starts to feel better. Hence time and intention come together in a process that signifies purpose and direction. The community participates in forgiving Da Costa, shaking his hand, touching his head. Ritual is key.

Amelia, the healer in Ilha Josina, performs the ritual on the husband who had become violent upon returning home. All in all it is upon the one who asks for forgiveness on the one hand, and the giver of it on the other, to come together in this ritual. This process can take some time, but time is the essential ingredient for reconciliation. The form is unassuming of the end result.

During the healing process there is nothing new being undertaken, but the physical healing is directly related to a psychological function. This is the function to which the film also accedes—cinema as a function of the healing process in the region.

\textbf{Soul in Torment, \textit{Directed by Prudence Uriri (Zimbabwe)}}

\textit{Soul in Torment} is the third film in the series \textit{Landscapes of Memory}. The film is directed by Prudence Uriri, herself one of the most valiant women ex-combatants of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, going under the nom de guerre, Freedom. It is the story of the Fifth Brigade, a notorious Zimbabwean army battalion that wreaked havoc in Matabeleland in the early 1980s.

The story is told in the form of Uriri’s journey back to the land of the massacres that have tarnished Robert Mugabe’s regime in the eyes of fel-
low combatants for freedom. Much as the central action of this documentary is the return to the scene of the crime, the defining theme of the film is the desire for reconciliation by the confessed perpetrators of the crimes. This film, like the above two, refuses to indict the wrongdoers without giving them a chance to redeem themselves. All events of the past are seen as forgivable, and what is even more interesting and heart-warming is the fact that those who seek forgiveness come out to plead with their victims for forgiveness. The story of the man who goes to the family of the victim he had killed to ask for forgiveness, but is not pardoned, is a sad one. However, one learns that the wronged family needs the plea to come from those who gave the orders rather than from the immediate perpetrators of the crimes. The three films (*I Have Seen*, *Soul in Torment*, and *From the Ashes*) explore the dynamics of individual acknowledgement of past abuse as they describe the pain of loss felt not only by the victims and their families but by the perpetrators as well.

However in Prudence Uriri we find not merely a recorder but an effective and involved interpreter of the traumatic experiences. For that reason she gives the film an added edge, effectively playing the role of the interpreter of the cases *as if* they were to be brought to a Truth and Reconciliation Commission as in South Africa. With the plea of the perpetrator who wants forgiveness, Uriri gives an interpretation different from that of a victim’s testimony.

In her paper, “Trauma, Testimony, and Nation Building in the ‘New’ South Africa,” Sarah Lincoln describes an interpreter’s testimony thus:

> At Tzaneen, a young Tswana interpreter is interviewed. The man holds on [to] the table-top, his other hand moves relentlessly in his lap. It is difficult to interpret victim hearings he says, because you use the first person all the time. I sit in front of the mortuary . . . on a low wall . . . I have to identify my child . . . while I wait I see a liquid . . . slowly coming from under the door . . . down to a drain in the corner of the building . . . I see it is red . . . I just walk . . . I think they didn’t find me for a long time . . . I have no distance when say I . . . it runs through me with I . . . After the first three months of hearings, my wife and our baby left me because of my violent outbursts. The Truth Commission provided counseling and I was advised to stop. But I don’t want to. *This is my history*, and I want to be part of it—until the end.31

A film in this instance becomes like the body, which is often the focus for a number of different social and cultural rituals or practices. These rituals work on the existing body at the very time they constitute the very conditions of its existence. One is reminded of the scarification undertaken by the Makonde of Southern Tanzania and Northern Mozambique during the
slave trade period. The markings, utilized for their aesthetic reasons, became the saviors of their wearers, because to the slave traders these were markings of damaged goods.

The Unfolding of Sky
Directed by Ronelle Loots and Antjie Krog (South Africa)

Writing about the author-turned-filmmaker Antjie Krog who collaborated with Ronelle Loots to make this film, Fiona Ross asks, “Given the slowness of change, the apparent entrenching of attitudes, is reconciliation possible? Is it desirable? How can it be achieved?” These are principal issues that are discussed by the fourth film, The Unfolding of Sky. The film is a follow-up on one of the stories that the author Antjie Krog covered as a reporter of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, which was set up in 1996.

... [It] was established by an Act of Parliament in 1995 to investigate and record the gross violations of human rights committed in South Africa and beyond its borders between 1960 and 1994. The Commission is an experiment in nation building. Its overall task is to generate reconciliation in a country deeply divided by the racial inequalities that were entrenched in law during the apartheid years.

Antjie Krog presents herself as the film’s storyteller and it is through her contemplative perspective that we view the unfolding story, which at the end is more hers than that of Deborah Matshoba, the principal interviewee. The film’s beginning takes us straight to the heart of the story with the first question, when Antjie asks Deborah if she could trust whites. To which Deborah replies in typical oral story narrative, “As a group... being Deborah, no! Being Deborah Matshoba born and bred in...” This sets up the tone of the film since it is truth that is being interrogated, and if at the very beginning the film seemed to set up some form of political correctness, it would have lost its power.

The opening statement is followed by long walks and rides through the streets as we see people who for all we know could be going through the same traumatic histories as the one that we are about to hear. This presents the country as the nation of the traumatized, which it is in many senses. This becomes patently clear as we listen to the reverberating statement “No one knows how shattered we are inside.”

Antjie tells the story following a well-tried structure. It is both dramatic as well as deconstructive. As she places the story within the historical roots of resistance of the individual and of society, we are immediately
made aware of the purpose for which she has taken up Deborah’s story: it is to be an explication of her experiential process of coming to terms with the process of reconciliation. The process itself is instructive.

First, she tackles the issue of violence and places it in a historical context by showing how the grab for land initiated the earliest encounter of resistance that the Matshoba family had to undergo. The stories of the prophet Noah and the people of Ntabelanga are reflective of the later stories of eviction and land grabbing that gave birth to the many townships (Soweto and the like), and thereafter to the youth resistances after 1976.

Using this experience of resistance she describes the pain felt by the victims of apartheid, and then uses the religious theme to drive home the message of reconciliation almost as a belief system.

The film is dotted with interesting methods of meaning creation and signification.

We examine a few here.

► The use of pregnant pauses when speaking of land and the experiences of Ntabelanga. For these people, land and its ownership determines the unfolding structure of social relations in the region’s countries.

► The attention that the filmmaker pays to women as we follow Deborah on her journeys on foot, in the bus, through the streets. We notice people looking at each other with suspicion, underlining the deeply embedded sense of distrust within the population.

► At the beginning of the film, the relation between Antjie and Deborah is shown as being distant. But slowly we see them getting closer and closer until we see Antjie in as big a close-up as Deborah. The story has moved from being an insight into Deborah’s revelations to being Antjie’s story.

► In order to reveal life on the other side, the white side, of which she is also representative, Antjie uses the Afrikaans woman’s story about relations between blacks and whites as a tool to bring her side of the story into deeper focus. In that way, she explores the dynamics of public acknowledgement of past abuse to reveal the desire to come to terms with a terrible past. As Fiona Ross says of Antjie, “the words of witnesses become the motivations for her own writing.”

► Through the narration and poetry we see how Antjie brings herself into the story in a way that is very personal, and which also reveals the torment that she herself is going through.

All these are stylistic forms that Antjie utilizes to bring herself forward into the narrative. True to form, the film becomes a personal statement and an
indictment that is best described by her dedication to the book *Country of My Skull*,

To every victim who had an Afrikaner surname on her lips, which Fiona Ross says is a “tacit acknowledgement of the complicity of cultural identity with abuses of the past.”

Antjie sees whites as being doubly bound. First they say “It is impossible to forgive the unforgivable,” when they talk about the Second World War, but they immediately change tack and accuse blacks of heartlessness as they ask, “What’s wrong with these people that they cannot forgive?”

In the end the most damning statement of the film is when Deborah says, “It was not necessary,” referring to all that whites had done to blacks in the past. The end is emotive, and it is the definition of the combination of Ubuntu and reconciliation that makes the film have an everlasting impact. Deborah defines reconciliation in the following manner:

When a man has done wrong and he asks for pardon he has to be pardoned; and he has to show that he deserves the pardon and needs the pardon; and the other one has to show the ability and the capability to pardon the one.

**A Cinematic Landscape**

How do the four films further evidence a common cinematic culture beyond the sharing of similar thematic concerns, and beyond reflections of the desire and need for reconciliation? And, how do they reveal a culture beyond structural readings that reveal conditions like the racial classifications or processes that have forged the living experiences of the region?

Structurally, documentary, with its episodic construction, has great influence in the construction of spatial and temporal structures in film, and even the perfection of many editing devices. While the development of film language is unquestionably influenced by melodrama, it is, however, a mistake to assume that film owes nothing to the inherited dramatic techniques of rituals and even passion plays. In the above described films there is an effort at harnessing the camera to translate the emotional and spiritual experience, or conflict between minds and moral codes, through the use of symbolism, metaphor, and recurring imagery, not only for their cinematic and aesthetic values but also for their nonverbal communicative value.

Though the films deal with contemporary themes and characters, their constructivist methodology is heavily symbolic. The psychological complexity of the characters reveals ideas and feelings. These are made known
not through dialogue, but through the visuals of spatial metaphors and environments. The commonly adduced cinematic metaphors, used endlessly as a paradigm for a character’s interior state, are an integral part of screen technique yet pale in significance in the face of environmental and social symbolisms, illustrative action, parallel and contrasting situations, and dramatic irony. The locations provide a metaphoric environment while the landscapes become spatial metaphors.

The descriptions of how the heroes deal with ideals of freedom, individuality, and truth and how they experience the sense of journey, either figuratively or literally, symbolize a journey through the landscape of the conscious mind as well as the unconscious. Indeed, the open spaces become metaphors for the mind freeing itself from subjectivism and opening up to wider social truths.

Through this analysis we argue that there are many thematic and structural parallels between cinematic methods leaning heavily on the use of landscape, setting, the place and role of characters in space, for their metaphoric values, and values which are in fact highly visual and which have made a strong impact on film language like melodrama. These non-verbal figurative techniques are essential to documentary to express thoughts and ideas that are complex and ambiguous, thus expanding the possibilities of the image as a conveyor of abstract ideas.

Beyond those structural affectations are cultural readings that pay attention to the way the films speak and represent the similarities of narratives. Textual operations at work include the religious processes, through which the individual story attains the level of the group. Further, the repertoire of cultural features and codes of expressions also assist in reading the text. These readings are able to reveal cultural values due to the dominant memory that is inflected through the liberationist ideology. Any cultural reading of Landscape of Memory would have to take into account the place of history, language, and kinship as determinants of regional cinema culture.

It is this critical model of signification that the cinema of difficult dialogues acknowledges. The series Landscape of Memory is an apt representation of the dominant cultural memory in this region. In expressing development issues, questions of culture and the contexts of their production, African film texts often transact meaning across the local and the national landscapes, across gender, race, and class, indicating a community discourse. If we define culture as active, collective, and historical human interaction, cultural expression can only be historical and dynamic. The Southern African cinema landscape assails the contradictions of nation as territory, and nation as a temporal-cultural space.
Conclusion

The discussion above underlines the contention that the way in which a group emphasizes specific elements of life as being the way they should be is in fact born of a process by which it also defines what is important to that group.

The place and role of film in trauma mediation cannot be taken lightly, nor can it be generalized. Following Kaplan and Wang’s trauma cinema strategies, we observe the regional films’ role as cure, as shock treatment, very minimally as voyeurism, and of course as witnessing. However, to the populations in the region, film becomes not simply a witness or recorder but an interpreter, which transmits the acknowledged painful process of traumatization. This painful process is as necessary for film viewers as for the witnesses themselves. There is a need to actively engage and confront the horrors of these many historical settings in order for each viewer to move on. However, movement beyond the traumatic experiences has implications toward the divergent survivors, perpetrators, and beneficiaries of these environments. These find themselves at various points of a healing timeline. Like the terminally ill, they individually and collectively have, at one time or another and sometimes at every moment of reminder, the healing timeline experiences of denial, rage, negotiation, depression, and eventually acceptance. These films become “facilitating agents for the mobilization of non-conventional resources such as social awareness, solidarity, dedication, [and] commitment” to a historical sense of duty.

When Raymond Williams writes of culture as “the signifying system through which . . . social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored,” we read in this statement the realization that cultures are also processes of inquiry into the power relations in knowledge mediation. This accentuation of the histogeographical environment in cinema has always had a central place in cinema studies, although when it came to African cinema, it was often easier to lump all things African into one basket—African cinema. The variability and specificity of social experiences that are later supplanted by individuated expression of styles in African cinematic narrations propose to be a significant part of the effort at understanding, prioritizing, and addressing directions and trends in African cinemas. This positions the expression of experience as being more important in reading cinematic representations, than the historically defined geographic “cinematic” space.
Notes


3. The series is produced by SACOD (Southern Africa Communications Development). SACOD is a coalition of Southern Africa filmmakers and organizations in related services whose primary focus is the production and distribution of social responsibility films and videos. It was founded in 1987 by independent institutions from Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique, and Canada to support the growth of independent video movement, and to support the process of democratization in Southern Africa via the audio-visual medium. SACOD now has members in eight SADC countries: South Africa (Regional Office), Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Angola, Lesotho, Zambia, Mozambique, and Namibia with its regional co-operation office in Johannesburg. See Keyan G. Tomaselli, Encountering Modernity: 20th Century South African Cinemas (Amsterdam: Rozenberg, 2007), for an analysis of its work and development communication approaches taken by participating video makers.


10. Steele, “Memorialization and the Land of the Eternal Spring.”

11. Ibid.


16. Ibid. Blaney’s definition is appropriate to this context as well. Her definition takes into account a film's relationship to its historical referent, as well as its memorial activity at the moment of production.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
22. See, for example, Tomaselli, Encountering Modernity, who independently argues that the idea of national cinema is a misnomer.
27. Sigmund Freud’s theory of repetition compulsion following traumatic experiences applies here. Freud discusses this notion in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920).
29. Ibid.
31. Sarah L. Lincoln, “This is my History: Trauma, Testimony, and Nation-building in the ‘New’ South Africa,” in Trauma and Cinema, ed. Kaplan and Wang, 34.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Kaplan and Wang, eds., Trauma and Cinema.
37. Lincoln, “This is my History.”