

REPRESENTATIONS OF CRIME, POWER AND SOCIAL DECAY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN POST-COLONY IN THE FILM *GANGSTER'S PARADISE: JERUSALEMA* (2008)

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ABSTRACT

The film *Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalem*, released on August 29, 2008, decries the proliferation of crime, violence and social decay in the South African post-colony. The aim of this article is to interrogate the banality in the use of violence and power in the South African post-colony. The filmic narratives of *Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalem* reveal that behind the 'rainbow' façade presented by South Africa, one encounters festering poverty in 'non-white' communities, racial acrimony, broken promises, social and class struggles, and tales of betrayal of the majority of black people by the elite black leadership which now sit comfortably in the seats vacated by their former colonisers. An analysis of the narratives of the film *Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalem* permits one to locate apartheid-based economic disparities as still haunting mainly 'nonwhite' local communities, although some whites have not been spared by the

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vicious new normal of poverty and the effects of corruption. This interpretation is further questioned in the film which shows that, after apartheid, the nationalist leadership encouraged a negative culture of entitlement. The irony in the film is that the masses are also tainted in so far as they commit crimes against other ordinary people and refuse to take responsibility or, rather in an escapist way, blame all the woes of the post-colony on apartheid. Thus, the narratives of *Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalema* beg the question: What is going wrong with the dream of democracy for all, irrespective of race, that was the founding principle of the new nation?

Keywords: film; *Jerusalema*; new nation; post-colony; South Africa

INTRODUCTION: *GANGSTER'S PARADISE: JERUSALEMA* AND THE BIRTH OF 'ALTERNATIVE CINEMA' IN POST-INDEPENDENCE SOUTH AFRICA

The new nation of South Africa attained political independence in 1994 after a bloody and protracted struggle against the brutal system of apartheid. Within cultural spheres such as music, film and theatre, South Africans have mobilised their cultural capital to articulate their views about what should be done to consolidate their hardwon independence and forge ahead with development. However, while independence has been celebrated, a plethora of literature has begun to interrogate the social, political and economic status quo in South Africa. Film, in post-independence South Africa, constitutes one of the critical voices that have been deployed to condemn crime, violence, racial inequality, xenophobia and other issues that threaten to derail the country's new-found democracy. The film *Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalema* (Hereafter *Jerusalema*) signals the birth of what Botha and Van Aswegen (1992, 43–133) call 'alternative cinema' in post-independence South Africa, constituting a radical departure from the normative official discourses of the mainstream media which valorise, hero-worship and eulogise the exploits of powerful members of local society. This paradigm shift, engendered through 'alternative cinema', acknowledges that there has been much blind celebration of the concept of the 'rainbow nation', and that it is high time South Africans faced truths 'subsumed under the totalizing discourses and ideologies' (Zegeye and Vambe 2009, 145) of official historiography. The term 'alternative' is not new in South African cultural formations; its use dates from the 1970s and 1980s, when it was used to refer to the work of film and video producers who were not affiliated to the established apartheid film companies that dominated the mainstream media industry (Tomaselli 1989). The concept of 'alternative' cinema was further extended by Botha and Van Aswegen (1992) to refer to the production values and social function South African films were expected to reflect.

While Tomaselli and Botha and Van Aswegen are aware that the duty of 'alternative' cinema is rooted in the social worthiness of its productive values, these authors miss an important dimension, defined through the economic life of South Africans. *Jerusalema* moves away from the euphoric discourses promoted through films such as *Prisoners of Hope* and the escapist narratives engendered through films such as *District 9*. *Jerusalema* presents itself as a force of discontinuity that critiques national reconciliation and the concept of the 'rainbow nation' in a country where the majority of 'non-white' people are still economically marginalised. These ideas may not be making the rounds in the public sphere, but that does not mean they do not exist. In fact, the disparities between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' are an indictment of the spirit of national reconciliation that was grounded on the assumption of equal access to resources by everyone in South Africa. Through its depiction of crime, power and social decay in post-independence South Africa, *Jerusalema* is constitutive of 'alternative' cinema that promotes 'contesting subjectivities' (Wayne 2001, 116) and the multiple identities that presently characterise this country. In other words, an attempt to homogenise post-independence experiences in South Africa by invoking discourses premised on the concepts of the 'rainbow nation' and 'national reconciliation' can be dismissed as 'empty official rhetoric' that does not truly reflect the reality of the social and economic struggles ordinary South Africans face on a daily basis. In addition, the trope that criminalises *Jerusalema* (symbolising South Africa) as a 'gangster's paradise' exemplifies the underground workings of the discourses of colonialism that view Africa as constituted of nations harbouring criminals. It is the moral and intellectual duty of this article to seek the justification in criminalising a whole generation of people who are the subjects of the alternative discourses in *Jerusalema*.

JERUSALEMA AND THE PARADOX OF SOUTH AFRICA AS A 'GANGSTER'S PARADISE'

Jerusalema is a South African crime film written and directed in 2008 by Ralph Ziman. The film's story centralises the character of Lucky Lucky, an uncompromising underworld figure who in the 1990s takes over a real estate business in the neighbourhood of Hillbrow in Johannesburg, South Africa. Commenting on the abrasive nature of its storyline, Ziman (2008) states:

I wanted *Jerusalema* to take a harsh but realistic look at Johannesburg, but I also wanted to reflect the hopes and aspirations of its citizens. When you look at Hillbrow from a distance, it looks like that shining city on a hill, the new *Jerusalema* that will be our salvation, but when you get onto its streets, you find another story.

In similar vein the producer, Matutu (2008), comments: 'During the research of the script we came across many vets who are living on the very edge of poverty

and who, after fighting for a better life for all, now feel betrayed.' While it was important for the producer to randomly select a group of people who felt betrayed by the leadership, he succeeded only in presenting 'half-truths' about the material condition of the underprivileged in this country. The truth is that the majority of 'non-whites', who were subjected to economic marginalisation during apartheid, continue to face similar conditions post-independence. *Jerusalema* – acting as a force of discontinuity, an 'alternative voice', a fragment of life picked up from the debris of local post-independence experiences – bears testimony to the 'hypocrisy of official discourses' (Nyamnjoh 2006, 16) that seek to give the impression that life is rosy for all people in South Africa. Through its critical discourses and 'grotesque realism', *Jerusalema* aims to turn 'official historiography' upside down, to locate a new kind of popular culture – one that dares challenge the vulgarity and banality of power in the South African post-colony (Mbembe 2001). The spectacle of excessive affluence among the local black elite and black leadership is exposed by Nyamnjoh (2006, 17):

While a small but bustling black elite can wallow in the conspicuous consumption of prized commodities such as fancy houses and cars, televisions, multimedia, internet connectivity, cellphones, jacuzzis, money-laundering partnerships, sumptuous deals and frequentflyer privileges, most ordinary South Africans are still trapped in shacks, shanty towns, joblessness, poverty, uncertainty and the illusion of citizenship, and have to struggle even with black African immigrants for consumer crumbs.

The life of hopelessness experienced by ordinary people in this country, as described by Nyamnjoh (2006), is the same as the lives led by ordinary people in *Jerusalema*. Lucky Lucky, the central character, is sucked into the vortex of crime, violence and the struggle for power in the hostile environment of Hillbrow. The film begins with Lucky lying on a bed, covered in blood. Police officers barge into his room and arrest him for murder. The film cuts to the interrogation room, where Lucky says he will provide his full back-story. The rest of the film is an account of Lucky's life up to the time of his arrest. Lucky and his friend, Zakes, are depicted as teenagers living in the township of Soweto. Lucky learns he has not earned a scholarship to continue his education. In need of money, Lucky and Zakes meet a local Russian crime lord, Nazareth, who gets the teens to carry out several small-time robberies. These crimes escalate to large-scale car-jackings, prompting Lucky to give up his educational aspirations. Lucky's final robbery goes horribly wrong, leaving Nazareth imprisoned and many of his crew dead. Lucky and Zakes narrowly escape. They decide to lie low and move to Johannesburg. Education, often viewed as the gateway to success, is non-existent in the life of the poor such as Lucky, whose chances of a better future are thwarted after he fails to secure a university scholarship. His predicament encapsulates questions of citizenship and 'belongingness' (ibid.). That those who are supposed to enjoy the fruits of independence (such as free access to education) are sidelined by the very conditions they were fighting for, might suggest that there is

something very wrong in post-independence South Africa. For Lucky to have taken up a life of crime is to demonstrate that the 'new' South Africa is a jungle governed by the law of survival of the fittest. Those who cannot create alternative means of survival will simply perish.

While the black elite/black leadership in South Africa can be accused of being 'class-centric' and blamed for their overt and excessive consumerism, some unrepentant whites are still largely ethnocentric. Botha and Van Aswegen (1992, 135) state:

For too long many whites, because of their ethnocentric attitude (in which they regard as absolute their values and norms), have ignored the values and norms of others and have not been interested in how other groups live. In this respect the alternative film fulfils a dual function that is meaningful for intercultural communication and for intercultural relations.

Jerusalema provides a much-needed platform for intercultural communication because it opens up debate on the social, political and economic conditions that are likely to sour present-day relations among different races. When *Jerusalema* skips ahead ten years, Lucky and his friend are depicted as proud owners of a taxi business in Hillbrow. However, the cut-throat competition among black taxi-owners causes some to deploy unscrupulous tactics in order to monopolise business. Lucky becomes a victim after he is car-jacked, resulting in the loss of his taxi business. Although in South Africa some blacks have benefited from the government policy of black economic empowerment (BEE) by starting businesses, many have not yet succeeded in establishing large firms in strategic sectors such as mining, manufacturing and agriculture. Seen in this way, it is still possible to maintain that the significance of qualitative information lies in its capacity to stimulate debate about what Bhorat and Kanbur (2006) term 'jobless growth'. It is widely held (in the public sphere and in media debates) that since the end of apartheid, South Africa has shed more jobs than it has created among previously disadvantaged groups. Although the foregoing assertion is contestable, it serves to highlight the need to re-evaluate the economic status of the underprivileged against the backdrop of growing frustration among the poor in this country. For the protagonist, Lucky, life in Hillbrow without a job is anything but rosy. Frustrated with his living conditions and his inability to secure economic mobility, Lucky creates the Hillbrow People's Housing Trust, which allows him to build an empire of apartment buildings in Hillbrow. Having promised residents that he will reduce their rent by half, Lucky collects all the rent, then negotiates aggressively with landlords so that they accept the reduced rent. Lucky becomes a 'Robin Hood' figure, gaining the title 'The Hoodlum of Hillbrow'. As he builds his empire of residential buildings, Detective Blackie Swart builds a case against Lucky. The centralisation in *Jerusalema* of Lucky – an embodiment of the economic predicament facing impoverished groups – is an attempt to move away from the 'homogenizations and sweeping generalizations' (Botha and Van

Aswegen 1992, 136) encapsulated in discourses of the 'rainbow nation', by actually questioning the balance of economic power in the post-colony. The 'politics of voices' (Doane 1999, 372) informing the narratives of *Jerusalema* is rooted in the dialectics of the 'Third Cinema thesis' (Solanas and Getino 1976), in which ordinary people start to question the status quo in this country.

JERUSALEMA, METAPHORS OF HATRED AND FEAR OF FOREIGNERS

Although life seems to be working out well for Lucky, who buys a house in the suburbs and marries a white South African woman, Leah Friedlander, the spectre of gangster life continues to haunt him. Lucky helps rescue Leah's brother, a drug addict, from drug dealers. Lucky's success is marred throughout the second half of the film by a Nigerian drug dealer named Tony Ngu. Lucky wants Ngu to leave so that he can expand his empire without interference from drug lords. Nazareth, a member of Lucky's housing trust, becomes involved with Ngu and is eventually arrested on drug-related charges. Lucky describes the drug bust as 'exactly the excuse Swart needed' to begin making arrests and demolish Lucky's buildings. In one memorable scene, Lucky is overcome with rage directed at Ngu, and urges his gang members to deal decisively with 'foreigners' or *makwerekwere* because they are a 'pestilence' that is making life difficult for 'locals' by grabbing their jobs and robbing South Africans of their women. The xenophobic attitude towards black migrant workers which is underscored in *Jerusalema* is also noted by Bhengu (in Nyamnjoh 2006, 41), who argues that despite its rhetoric of equality in the past,

COSATU presented memoranda demanding the government to 'be more strict on foreigners coming into our border', taking away 'our jobs' and hampering our economy. They called on the minister of home affairs to 'repatriate all foreigners'.

According to Zegeye (2012), Nyamnjoh is baffled by the politics of amnesia practised by South Africa's black leadership during the xenophobic attacks of 2008:

How odd it is that the Africans who currently face exclusionary rhetoric hail from the same nations that harbored and nurtured the liberation struggle by providing sanctuary, education and substance to the fleeing comrades and cadres of the ANC who are today's gatekeepers. (Nyamnjoh 2006, 56)

It is unfortunate that black immigrants whose countries suffered the destabilising activities of apartheid in an attempt to hunt down ANC (African National Congress) cadres who had taken sanctuary there, have been turned into objects of derision, hatred, violence and exclusionary politics in post-independence South Africa. This could prompt the question: What went wrong inside the 'rainbow' of the 'rainbow nation'? What is clear from the narratives of *Jerusalema* is that the 'rainbow nation'

is not a 'paradise', but an ambivalent and contradictory space marked by intense struggles to own material resources and create a sense of 'belongingness'. The alternative discourses of *Jerusalema* indicate that the presence of crime, power struggles, xenophobic attitudes and social decay is symptomatic of post-colonial aberrations whose roots lie in the history of apartheid and the failure of the present government to deal with issues of present-day economic inequality. It is a valid point of concern that the film may have missed an opportunity to exhaustively dramatise the masses' complicit behaviour in the 2008 xenophobic attacks on foreigners, carried out by so-called ordinary people, and on the watch of government officials and police. This ugly reality left 63 people dead, most of them foreigners from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Nigeria and Zambia. Although the theme of black-on-black violence may not have been what the director wanted to emphasise, any film ought to respond to the context within which it is created and circulated. However, it would be unfair to expect the film to deal with every theme, as a tabloid can. In other words, criticism that *Jerusalema* does not depict Nkandla-gate or the Marikana Massacre is stretching film's capacity to foretell all historical events that might happen during a person's life.

It does, however, remain true that the 'hatred-of-self syndrome', typical of the Fanonian 'black inferiority complex' (Fanon 1967, 85), is deeply embedded in South Africa, such that whenever the question is asked who should be considered a 'foreigner', the answer is black immigrants from neighbouring countries, not whites and Indians who have emigrated from their countries in order to make South Africa their sanctuary. *Jerusalema* replays the classical template in which Nigerians are stereotypically labelled as 'drug dealers', despite the fact that some Nigerians contribute meaningfully to the local economy as doctors, entrepreneurs and business owners. Such positive discourses about foreigners are occluded in the film by focalising on the negative activities of so-called foreigners.

In the narrative, the violent encounter between Lucky and Ngu is symbolic of the violence that erupted in South Africa in 2008 between 'locals' and 'foreigners'. Instead of merely folding his arms, Ngu is determined to fight back against Lucky's attempts to force him out of Hillbrow by enticing Leah's brother with drugs which ultimately kill him. Together with Zakes, a troubled Lucky contemplates killing Ngu. Soon afterward, Ngu and his gang are involved in a shoot-out during which Zakes is murdered. Lucky gathers his crew and storms a strip club where Ngu is spending the night. A furious gunfight ensues. Lucky murders Nazareth, but sustains serious injuries. Lucky chases Ngu onto the roof of the club, where Ngu pleads with Lucky, promising him he will do anything if his life is spared. Lucky responds: 'Can you bring Zakes back?' He shoots Ngu and pushes him off the roof. At this point, the back-story has caught up to the opening scene of the film. Lucky, bloodied and lying in bed, is arrested for murder. In prison, Lucky quickly orchestrates his escape. Feigning illness, he is transported from prison to the hospital, where security

is not as strictly enforced. With the help of his remaining friends, he escapes. From 'gangster's paradise', Hillbrow metaphorically degenerates into 'gangster's hell', peopled by gun-toting gang members who hunt and kill one another as a way of demonstrating their power and venting their frustration with the status quo in the South African post-colony.

AUDIENCE RESPONSES TO *JERUSALEMA*

There have been varying reactions to the release of the film, with some branding it a true reflection of the challenges of post-independence South Africa. However, the Umkhonto weSizwe Military Veterans' Association criticised the film for its negative portrayal of veterans. According to Barry (2008), the national chairperson of Umkhonto, Kebby Maphatsoe, slammed the film for not giving South Africans and their children the opportunity to learn the truth about their history. The film about gun-wielding gangsters who hunt and kill one another ruthlessly, creates the impression that the 'new' South Africa is a hopeless nation where crime, violence and social decay are the order of the day. The film's failure to clearly locate the causes of social and moral decay in the economic disparities between whites and 'non-whites' might suggest that its discourses were manipulated to give the impression that blacks cannot prosper in the 'new' South Africa because they are naturally violent. *Jerusalem* also received harsh criticism in church circles. According to Nkosana (2008), the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa criticised the film for being 'blasphemous', by having as its title the name of the holy city of *Jerusalem*, and then locating its plot in a criminal underworld. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa criticised the film for using the biblical name of Nazareth for one of its characters, a gangster. The range of responses shows that audiences are invested with the critical freedom to read film messages however they deem fit, depending on what they find morally and culturally acceptable. However, despite its imperfections, the 'alternative' discourses in *Jerusalem* encourage us to ponder the question: What should be the way to go in post-independence South Africa?

WHITHER POST-INDEPENDENCE SOUTH AFRICA?

There has been growing concern among social critics, academics, filmmakers and media practitioners that South Africa is a ticking time bomb that will explode unless economic disparities are attended to as a matter of urgency. Although *Jerusalem* provides a glimpse into the difficulties facing the underprivileged in South Africa, the film does not truly reflect on the source of the problem. Academics such as Mamdani (1996, 4) raise critical questions about the much-touted policy of truth and reconciliation, arguing that 'it exemplifies the dilemma involved in the pursuit of reconciliation without justice'. The justice which Mamdani refers to, is not confined

to the legal sphere – it also embraces the broader question of economic disparity, in which the majority of ‘non-whites’ in post-independence South Africa are unjustly treated because they still eke out a precarious existence, while the impression given through ‘official rhetoric’ is that life for all South Africans is rosy. The ‘alternative’ discourses in *Jerusalema* expose the cracks and fissures of racial acrimony, xenophobic attitudes, violence, crime, tales of betrayal and social decay found inside the world of the ‘rainbow nation’. These questions beg to be taken seriously if South Africa is to successfully forge ahead with its new-found democracy. According to Botha and Van Aswegen (1992, 137), the development of intercultural communication in this country can only occur ‘when people become aware of other people as well as their own cultural values in order to manifest a better understanding and to move closer to one another’. In South Africa, it should be appreciated that in the sphere of culture, there is a great deal more tolerance and unity among different peoples from various cultural backgrounds. But there is quite a lot that the leadership needs to do in the economic sphere in order to avoid the events that took place in Zimbabwe, in which black people were forced to grab land and resort to other means of economic production because of poverty, and the arrogance of the British and their ‘kith and kin’. *Jerusalema* has given us no more than a glimpse of what could happen if the leadership rests on its laurels, without addressing fundamental questions of equality in terms of owning the means of economic production.

CONCLUSION

Like any other creative art, film is a cultural construct and those who produce and direct it have specific stories to tell. That is the nature of any discourse whose presence is predicated on the suppression (consciously or unwittingly) of other potential stories. It is the argument of this article that *Jerusalema* deliberately chose to focus on narratives which depict the proliferation of crime, violence, xenophobia, racial acrimony, and moral and social decay in post-independence South Africa. The burden of these negative politics can be laid at the door of the African leadership which took over the reins of power, before abusing that very power. Even the ordinary people – in whose name revolutionary or alternative films are often made – are not exempt from criticism in the film. But it would be to bury one’s head in the sand to pretend that apartheid has not shaped most of the pathologies which have been passed on to the next generation. Implicit in the ‘alternative’ discourses of *Jerusalema* is the message that it is high time people told the truth about social, political and economic conditions in this country, without hiding behind catch-phrases such as ‘rainbow nation’ and ‘national reconciliation’. There is, in particular, a need to explore the ontology of peace and democracy in South Africa, with a view to addressing their fundamental fault lines, which have manifested in the form of crime and violence as depicted in this film. Cultural productions such as film, theatre and music should

continue to engender a new form of consciousness in South Africa, so that the truth is told without fear or favour. One such truth is that unless the government addresses economic disparities in this country, the idea of genuine national reconciliation can be ruled out. The recent spate of accusations and counter-accusations of racism in the social media, exchanged between black and white in high office, is an index that discourses of national reconciliation have not died down, but have either slowly taken root or completely failed to take root. *Jerusalema* must be applauded for asking questions about the 'death' of the grand project of democracy, which respected personalities such as former Archbishop Desmond Tutu believed could be realised in the context of the rainbow nation.

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