

A TALE OF TWO NATIONS: SOUTH AFRICA, *DE VOORTREKKERS* AND *COME SEE THE BIOSCOPE*

Lucia Saks

University of Cape Town/University of Michigan

Abstract:

This paper examines two films, *De Voortrekkers* (1916) and *Come See the Bioscope* (1997), made at two moments of national crisis in South African history, the first at the beginning and the second at the end of the twentieth century. Both films speak to the historical moment of their production and offer very different visions of the nation and the necessity for reconciliation.

Keywords: cinema, South Africa, national identity, post apartheid, reconciliation.

(M)y knowledge of movies, pictures, or the idea of movie-making, was strongly linked to the identity of a nation. That's why there is no French television, or Italian, or British, or American television. There can be only one television because its not related to nation. It's related to finance or commerce. Movie making at the beginning was related to the identity of the nation and there have been very few 'national'

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 61	p. 137- 187	jul/dez 2011
------------------	---------------	-------	-------------	--------------

cinemas. In my opinion there is no Swedish cinema but there are Swedish moviemakers – some very good ones, such as Stiller and Bergman. There have only been a handful of cinemas: Italian, German, American and Russian. This is because when countries were inventing and using motion pictures, they needed an image of themselves. The Russian cinema arrived at a time they needed a new image.

Jean-Luc Godard in conversation with Colin McCabe¹

In this paper I turn to two films made at two very distinct and traumatic historical moments, when, in the words of Godard the South African nation desperately “needed a new image.” The first is *De Voortrekkers* (Harold Shaw, 1916), an extraordinarily ambitious epic of Griffith-like proportion produced in Afrikaans just six years after the creation of the Union of South Africa.² It was in the words of film historian Thelma Gutsche “a national film documenting a climactic point in South African history.” And as she continues, it was “totally out of proportion to the reputation of the nascent film industry . . . evidence of the courage, confidence and optimism which attended its launching.”³ The second film is *Come See the Bioscope* (Lance Gewer, 1997), a short film produced by M-Net’s New Directions’ initiative, three years after the first democratic elections in South Africa’s history, which brought an end to legislative apartheid. While the film may be less ambitious in length, it is far more ambitious in its conception of cinema as a powerful tool in creating conditions for modern, political organization, especially among a conquered people.

My point in examining these two films made at different ends of the twentieth century is to consider the terms of reconciliation each invoke in their conceptualization of nation, citizen, and cinema. These terms tell a great deal about the historical events being represented, but they speak even more loudly to the historical moment of their production, illustrating that there is no one role for cinema to play in the national project. The production date of *De Voortrekkers* shows that the race to a cinematic representation that would produce national reconciliation goes back to the very formation of the South African nation state in 1910.

The film takes as its broad subject what is known in South African history as the Great Trek—that self-imposed exodus in 1838 of groups of Afrikaans farming communities from the Cape in search of self-rule into the hinterland. This period of Afrikaner expansionism was a long and drawn out process lasting almost twenty years (1836–1854). *De Voortrekkers* concentrates on the first few years of that period, which contains events that have become iconic in the pantheon of Afrikaans ethno-nationalism. In the film they are broadened to provide a national fable: the uprooting and departure of the farming communities, the betrayal and murder of *trekboer* leader Piet Retief and his party by the Zulu under King Dingane, and the “Battle of Blood River,” which forms the great epic “moment” of the narrative.⁴ All that history is the subject of the film, but in 1916 when it was made, its objective was to satisfy or at least address the two most pressing present needs of the South African colony from the point of view of the settler groups: reconciliation and nation-building between the English (which included the broader linguistic category of “English speakers”) and the Afrikaners. Here then is one evident role for the cinema to play in the new nation: to endorse the newly formed state that had emerged six years earlier from the Union of South Africa

in 1910. The state was a white minority-rule state out of the political union between two former enemies, the Boers and the British, in the interests of white power. The homogeneously conceived racism, which would become imported with modifications into the later thinking of the Apartheid State, is already there in this film.

Come See the Bioscope chronicles the story of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje and his traveling bioscope. Born on a farm in the Orange Free State, in 1876, Plaatje was part of the educated African elite that founded the African National Congress, Sub-Saharan Africa's first liberation movement, in 1912⁵. He was also one of the early pioneers in South African film exhibition, known for his traveling bioscope, as well as being a linguist, politician, journalist, translator, interpreter, newspaper editor and Secretary General of the newly formed African National Congress⁶. The early black nationalists believed in English liberalism and its doctrine of universality. They believed that Africans were part of that universal human family and should be included in the new state as citizens. Writing about the founders of African nationalism, Pallo Jordan elaborates on their belief in the values, traditions and principles of modern liberal thought.

Though racially excluded from its institutions, they sought the legitimacy of the white state. Their political tactics sought to affirm that blacks too were British subjects, entitled to the same rights as other British subjects, the whites. Their deeply held liberal convictions led them to believe that moral persuasion was a sound strategy. . . . Thus in 1925, when the ANC adopted the African Bill of Rights, it demanded 'the franchise for all civilized men.'⁷

Plaatje was one of those "civilized men" who saw the cinema as machine of civilization, which he equated with modernity and the film articulates his vision as a past moment or promise retrospectively

imagined for this moment of post-apartheid South Africa in which a new kind of cinema and spectatorship can develop.⁸ Plaatje was one of those “civilized men” who saw the cinema as a technology for transformation, a way into modernity and thus a way out of poverty and exclusion. Tracing Plaatje’s role in the development of film culture in South Africa, Ntongela Masilela reveals how Plaatje’s pedagogic approach to film exhibition emerged out of his involvement in the New African Movement, which emerged after the end of the Boer War at the turn of the century. For Masilela, the Movement heralded the beginnings of an African modernity that would later find further expression in the Sophiatown Renaissance of the 1950s. Yet, as he notes, this earlier moment of modern thought and practice has been eclipsed by the 1950s, which has assumed an iconic status in South African cultural history. Masilela’s historical work on the period is invaluable, not only because it re-invigorates the archive, but because it complicates the story of modernity and cinema in South Africa, a story that is often focused through the lens of postcolonial cultural theory. Thus Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have argued that the beginnings of cinema coincided with the height of imperialism and that the leading film producing countries were also the leading imperialists. As a result,

European cinema, in its infancy, inherited the racist and colonialist discourse whose historical contours we have outlined here. Cinema, itself the product of ‘Western scientific discoveries,’ made palpable to audiences the master-narrative of the ‘progress of Western civilization,’ often through biographical narratives about explorers, inventors, and scientists ... Cinema thus became the epistemological mediator between the cultural space of the Western spectator and that of the cultures represented on the screen, linking separate spaces and figurally separate temporalities in a single moment of exposure.⁹ (92-93)

I do not seek to dispute their argument. *De Voortrekkers* is evidence of its rightness. But Plaatje's view and use of the cinema in the rural areas of South Africa complicates the stories told of cinema's complicity in colonial thought and practice. In a manner that reminds us of Ousmane Sembene's view of African cinema as 'night school', Plaatje, as Ntongela puts it, "introduced film form to the New Africans as a pedagogical instrument compatible with a Christian civilizational interpretation of modernity."¹⁰ Plaatje's view of the cinema as a tool for uplift and education may now appear to us as typical of progressive Victorianism, which would fit his historical period. But that is not the way cinema is positioned in *Come See the Bioscope*. Instead the film articulates his vision as a past moment or promise retrospectively imagined for contemporary South Africa, a non-racial South Africa in which a new kind of cinema and a new kind of spectator can develop. Both films are, in the words of Siegfried Kracauer, "surface level expressions," that "provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things," that substance being the ideological role of cinema in history, two words that have been bound up with each other since the beginning of the cinema.¹¹ *Cabiria* (Pastrone, 1914), *Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925), *Napoleon* (Gance, 1927) and *Birth of a Nation* (Griffiths, 1915) are all examples of film that take a fundamental national "moment" as the subject of their representational force, thus enhancing the status of the cinema as an artistic form.

The development of classical codes that fore-grounded transparency and narrative linearity encouraged the viewer to interpret such films as historical documents that showed events as they had "actually occurred," producing, what Miriam Hansen calls, a cinema of "referential realism."¹² These exploited the medium's capacity to reproduce the real without the heavy hand of the artist

intervening in the process thus satisfying that which Andre Bazin intuited as our compulsion or need to represent the world *as it is* (italics are mine). Since this need was a psychological rather than an aesthetic one, Bazin argued that the camera satisfied it better than any other visual art form, such as painting, precisely because it *was* a machine and not an artist that made the transference of the image possible. “Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer. The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it.”¹³ This gives it the appearance of truth: the truth of how things were independent of anyone’s perspective, turning historical myth into the stuff of natural history, and human aspirations towards a reconfiguration of how things should be into the stuff of historical inevitability. What Eric Hobsbawm called the “invention of tradition” is here an invention of past prescience. Past prescience proves that the aspirations of the historical present are trans-historical, shared by the then as by the now, and hence the stuff of absolute destiny. The Hollywood Western, conceived at the very moment the American Wild West ceased to exist, recapitulated its raucous and violent past in the form of a six-gun will towards civility. Indian and outlaw had to be vanquished so that with their brave bones in the ground, America could be as we, the viewers of the present, know it. The Wild West, recapitulated as the route to statehood and national power, became the symphonic symbol of both. The unstated message: we continue the drive to claim terrain in the America of the twentieth century; the world and the west are the same. This message takes the past and through it, motivates the future as the next place in the same river of destiny. History films motivate the future by casting the present in their inevitable flow.

Historical films may also seek a bridge between present and past that allows the present to complete a mission aborted by a side turn in the history of things, which is now, finally, able to be overcome. The goal is to reach into the past and retrieve the kernel of its spirit, showing that new times are the fulfillment of that spirit in spite of the side tracking of intervening history. Here the goal is caught up with an act of mourning: mourning for the abortion of spirit which kept the prescient actor in his place. And the goal is to return the flow of history to his name, causing him to live a second life in our imaginations. This retrieval of spiritual paternity or maternity is also a way of setting the nation on its course, confirming the dignity of that course, demonstrating that it carries the imprimatur of the father. The historical film is hardly confined to these two modalities, but they prove central at moments of disruption, since both aim for the restoration of continuity, a continuity in which the concerns of the present are clarified and shown to carry the inevitability of power or spirit, depending.

The two films illustrate these two modes.¹⁴ Both are ways in which home or homeland are shown to be *always already* in place as Althusser would put it helps to explain the deep attachment people have to their nation, and why nations often exist in people's affections and identifications long before they become realized as nation-states. Homeland is people, the origin of ourselves, and our origin can only be grasped through the image of this place, not another. Hence the other way in which photography is called upon to present homeland as destiny. In it, the narrative of history gives pride of place, the photograph being a medium that naturalizes location, seeks its physiognomy and renders that expressive.

As has been shown in the case of the Basques, the Palestinians, and countless others, a group's idea of themselves as a nation rests

more on the idea of themselves as a people with a common ancestry than it does on the instantiation of a nation-state. Which is why, as Tony Judt remarked, the standard Marxist account of national sentiment as an illusion induced by manipulation resulting in a nation of duped citizens, lost ground in the nationalist debate to the more constructionist view of the nation as the modern creation of intellectuals and teachers supported by invented traditions and customs, symbols and spectacles expressive of nationalist sentiment.¹⁵ These identificatory mechanisms, it is argued, work to obscure the role of chance and opportunity in nation making. They continue to promote the myth that a nation's origin is not the work of nationalist intellectuals seizing an historical opportunity (Judt points to the chaos and disruption that follows the breakup of empires as the most common kind of such an opportunity) but resides, as Eric Hobsbawm has phrased it, in the mists of antiquity. In this sense nations have no beginnings or endings, like individuals—"I am born" reads the first chapter heading of Dickens's masterpiece, *David Copperfield*—but "travel up" as opposed to descending down through time,¹⁶ all of which sounds like the perfect storm for cinematic representation.

Facts and Fiction

The bare historical facts of the film *De Voortrekkers* are these: Seeking to escape the constraints of British colonial rule of the Cape in general, and motivated, in particular, by the end of slavery and the introduction of more liberal labor laws by the colonial authorities, acts which deeply offended many Afrikaans farmers' notions of self-determination and the "natural order" of White racial superiority, small bands known as *Trekboers* began to leave the Eastern Cape in 1836. According to Piet Retief, one of the prominent *trekboer* leaders who wished to expand the great Afrikaner trek into the interior of

what is now KwaZulu-Natal and was then the Zulu Kingdom, the *trekkers* were resolved to form permanent settlements wherein they could govern themselves without British interference. While rejecting slavery, they sought to “maintain such regulations as may suppress crime, and preserve proper relations between master and servant.”¹⁷ Later, in recalling the emancipation of the Cape slaves, Retief’s niece Anna Steenkamp, would write the following in her memoirs:

It is not so much their freedom that drove us to such lengths, as their being placed on an equal footing with Christians, contrary to the laws of God and the natural distinction of race and religion, so that it was intolerable for any decent Christian to bow down beneath such a yoke: wherefore we rather withdrew in order thus to preserve our doctrines in purity.¹⁸

Both statements are important for us today, for they precisely describe the constellations of relationships about self and other, purity and contamination, master and slave, cultural preservation and desecration that would later find codification in apartheid ideology. These binary oppositions would also become the primary target of anti-apartheid films—especially those that appeared in the eighties, thus showing how indelible—and as many have argued, deforming—their influence has been on both the apartheid imagination and its counterpart, those modes of imagination associated with the South African critical project.¹⁹ This is not to say that behind *trekker* writing lies the whole shape of what South Africa would become in the next century, a century that begins with the Anglo-Boer War and ends with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that such attitudes prepared the ground for the successive waves of attacks on all those “others” who would break the “natural” law, challenge the master/slave relationship in the century to come, and finally, require reconciliation, (not to mention reparation.)

In ox wagons, with their families, servants, livestock, former slaves, and all other possessions, the *Voortrekkers* (literally in Afrikaans those who came “before” (*voor*)—in this case, before the nation) trekked into territories already ravaged by internecine wars and ruled by independent African societies. Natal’s abundant rainfall and the presence of a harbor made it the most attractive destination for the majority of *trekkers*. Piet Retief (a trekboer leader) was sent to ask for a land treaty from the Zulu regnant of the region, King Dingane, which he first secured and then lost, along with his life, when the King reneged on the contract in a particularly brutal fashion. Retief and his party were clubbed to death at the Royal Kraal while attending a beer festival to celebrate the compact, while the rest of the settlement were murdered in their encampment by Dingane’s *impis* (warriors). Within the diegesis of the film, which runs for over two hours, these events occupy roughly the first half. The second part of the film is an allegory of revenge and resurrection. The murder of Retief and his party is avenged at the “Battle of Blood River,” where, on the banks of the Ncome River deep in the heart of Zululand, a commando of approximately 500 men led by Andries Pretorius turned to face down an army of almost 10,000 men and won against overwhelming manpower with overwhelming gunpowder.²⁰ At the end of the battle, the bloodiest in South African history even today, the river ran red with the blood of 3,000 dead Zulu, with no loss of life on the part of the Afrikaners. This devastating defeat split the Zulu kingdom in half. Dingane’s brother Mpande subsequently joined forces with the *Boers* and chased Dingane to the north where he was killed by the Swazis, leaving Mpande in control of the former kingdom.

In the following years, the *trekkers* spread out over the area around the Tugela River, in the mountainous interior of the region, appointed

a *Volksraad* (people's council) as a governing body and declared what was, in effect, a mini Republic. Needless to say, citizenship was limited to Afrikaners who had trekked from the Cape and did not include the Zulu. Indeed, other Whites were mistrusted and had to prove their loyalty to the community. Here then are the beginnings of what would become the apartheid blueprint—a White minority trying to exclude, through the mechanisms of statehood (be it a full blown nation-state or a people's republic), a black majority in the name of autonomy, self-determination, manifest destiny, language, religion and race, while marginalizing other White “tribes” in the process.²¹ Significantly, the film does not include these events, but ends with the *Boers'* celebration of their victory in church as evidence of a covenant that existed between God (defined in Christian terms) and their people. In 1910, victory day, which was the 16th December, was declared a national public holiday. First named Dingaan's Day and subsequently the Day of the Covenant, it was celebrated as a Sabbath by the Dutch Reformed Church, until it was renamed in 1994, the Day of Goodwill or day of reconciliation. In the naming and renaming of the day lies the structure of the century.²²

Reconciling The White ‘Races’

The Treaty of Vereeniging in 1902 marked the official end of the Anglo-Boer War, the most traumatic war in South Africa's history. In its wake were the remains of what used to be four self governing colonies, two of which had been British, and the now defeated two *Boer* republics, each operating with a greater or lesser degree of autonomy. Something had to be done to bring political stability to the fractured region and the idea of a South African federation was seen as the answer.²³ While the idea fit with British ambitions of empire building, ironically it also appealed to Afrikaner nationalists,

who hoped that unification would resolve divisions among Afrikaans anti-imperialists, and so ultimately, weaken imperial interference. In describing the events leading up to inauguration of Union, Leonard Thompson observes:

Having completed their work in South Africa, the four colonial governments sent delegates to London, since only the imperial parliament had the legal authority to give effect to their decisions. Members of the Western educated Black elite in Southern Africa—clergy, journalists, teachers—and a handful of White sympathizers had also sent a deputation to London to agitate for the removal of color bars from the constitution. They were supported by the *Manchester Guardian* and several prominent individuals. However, though most members of Parliament preferred that the constitution should not contain a color bar, nearly all realized that it was politically impractical to attempt to alter the wishes of the four self-governing colonies. Indeed the crucial decision had been made in 1902. The political color bars in the Transvaal and Orange River Colony constitutions, and the color bars in the draft South African constitution, were natural consequences of Milner's decision to appease the fighting men of the republics at the expense of the Black population.

(...) on May 31, 1910, eight years to the day since he had lain down his arms as leader of the military forces of the Afrikaner republics, Louis Botha became Prime Minister of a British dominion with a population of 4 million Africans, 500,000 Coloureds, 150,000 Indians, and 1,275,000 Whites. That outcome was not what Lord Milner (British High Commissioner of South Africa at the time) had encouraged British South Africans to expect; nor was it what had been expected by the many Black South Africans who had supported the British cause in the war.²⁴

Mapped against this historical background, the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), or, as the Afrikaners pointedly called it, the Second War of Freedom, although the pivotal event in the move towards

unionization, was too divisive and painful a topic to attempt filmic narrativization in the name of a fragile national collective.²⁵ On a broader level the subject of the Anglo-Boer war raised the specter of White on White conquest and domination at a time when the notion of South African citizenry, of who was and who was not part of the new nation, had been constitutionally redefined in Black and White terms. Anxious to rid itself of all traces of British imperialism, the government sought to downplay the history of White on White conflict and give White South Africans a new national identity and geo-political future. This they did by defining a new enemy in racial terms.

Politically and historically, the new enemy was very much the same as the old one, for the history of the area from the beginnings of colonization by Europe in the 1600s was one of conflicts and battles over land fought against various Black societies by both settler communities and the Imperial power.²⁶ The idea of warring with Black social units or “tribes” as the Colonial power and settlers had called them, was not a new one. But the idea of a homogenized “native” population, contained within the borders of the nation and united, despite cultural and “tribal” differences, under the essentialist banner of “Blackness,” (or “nativeness,” to use the term of the day) was. As was its counterpart, a White South Africanism that transcended intra-White cultural and linguistic divisions.²⁷ In short, the film participated in the construction of modern South African racism by participating in the definition of two homogeneous groups: Whites and natives to a national collective which had rather thought of itself in more fluid, amorphous terms, situating itself within more tribalized and localized categories of English, Dutch, Cape Coloured and the like. The film was in this sense a clear product of English racism, which consistently mapped the world in terms of east and west, White and Brown, European and native, upper and lower.

De Voortrekkers has general implications for the symbolic functioning of all self-consciously national narratives, filmic or otherwise. All such narratives attempt to “naturalize” the nation and present its realization as an inevitability, the assertion of a right long overdue and legitimated by fate, God, or History. In *De Voortrekkers* the celebration of the covenant between God and the Afrikaner is founded on an allegory of fulfillment as well as one of collective bravery and courage, or better, on the connection between these. The *trekkers*’ victory at the Battle of Blood River merely realizes the covenant as a primordial given, a point that is made evident in the inter-title anchoring this section of the film which reads: “And in keeping our covenant we shall, on every Sixteenth Day of December, render thanks to Thee, Almighty God, for our safe return and the preservation of our Race and Country.” This covenant required a brave people as well as a religious one, one whose religiosity required bravery and whose singularity is predicated on both.

There is little evidence to suggest that the *trekkers* themselves viewed the events that happened to them as fulfilling some divine ordination. As David Bunn puts it in his essay on monuments in South Africa:

These historical events (the Great Trek) in the life of the *volk* (people) were seen in allegorical terms by later generations. Recent historians have argued that the Great Trek was not a consolidated, self-conscious process, and have shown that *Voortrekker* parties were riven by dissent. While it is clear that the early *trekkers* did identify with biblical narratives such as the exodus from Egypt, at the time there was little overall sense of religious predestination or a defined mission. In the work of later interpreters, however, events were given a strong Calvinistic coloring so that the *trekkers* became a chosen people, through the imagined descent of the word to chosen leaders . . .²⁸

However, national history is not told in multiple terms, which could reveal the contradictions, dissension and differences in how the “original events” were perceived and reconstructed by the various parties concerned. To do so would reveal the contingent, self-fabricated nature of history, and by extension the contingent and self-fabricated fantasy at the basis of national identity. The *trekkers* really did beat the Zulu: that is not fantasy but fact. What exists in the realm of fantasy is the sense of destiny supposedly at the basis of it all, a sense which later history will unpack as “in the cards” like the ace of spades. It is here, with the final trick, that justification of the nation through appeal to destiny and character takes place. The trick can, befitting its card, turn deadly: it is always one which treats historical subjects unequally by “proving,” that is, by narratively establishing, that some are more equal than others, more central to national destiny than others.

To translate such “new thinking” for South Africa into cinematic terms required sketching a linear narrative out of the *trekkers*’ ordeals, their fortitude in the face of the unknown and hence the uncivilized, their presence as bearers of Christian, European civilization, their betrayal by the savage forces of Dingane, their vow to keep a covenant with God should they be victorious against his *impis*, their victory at the Battle of Blood River, and its memorialization with the building of a church. This story had long achieved the status of a foundational narrative for Afrikaans ethno-nationalism. Now it required deracinating the bible from its Afrikaans accent, and turning those thought of as Afrikaners into a more amorphous category called “The White Settler.” With this shift in narration, a space of spectatorial identification opened not only for Afrikaners but also for English speaking viewers, a deliberate move, as Edwin Hees has argued on the part of the historian turned screenwriter,

Gustav Preller. Preller was, as Hees succinctly states, a supporter of the government's policy of reconciliation and thus "any hints of anticolonialism or anti-British sentiment in the book are suppressed in the film. . ." although they were evident in Preller's 1917 historical biography of Piet Retief.²⁹ Hees continues:

The virtual elimination of the British from *De Voortrekkers* is a carefully adapted version of Preller's story of Piet Retief- adapted in order to bring the film more into line not only with the British Imperialist ideology of its financial backers, but also with the accommodating stance of General Louis Botha, who South African Party was eager to promote reconciliation between the English-speaking and the Afrikaans-speaking sections of the population after Union.³⁰

Preller's true political colors can be seen later in his endorsement of National Socialism in the 1930s along with his support for those Afrikaners who agreed with him.³¹ At this stage however, faced with the difficulties of creating White unity, it is clear that he suppressed his ethnic nationalism and in this, he was not alone. We may see his response—a rejection of the particular in favor of the general, a willing of the nation into existence—as exemplary of the the times, an act which brings me back to Goddard's epigraph that a cinema becomes national when its process of self invention conjoins with that of the nation's. The film is in fact antagonistic in its view of the nation to the later Afrikaner nationalist narrative of the *Trek* and poses itself in opposition to the exclusivist rituals that characterized much of its retelling in many Afrikaans communities. It does this in order to reinterpret that moment of history (the birth of the South African union) as a moment for "for the White colony" rather than one that is exclusively Afrikaans in destiny. And yet, paradoxically the film will have a later life as precisely the latter, being translated

in the Afrikaner nationalist's imagination as important only in its representation of the role of Afrikaans people's suffering, deprivation and courage in conquering the Zulu nation and establishing the "true" South African one.

Its next great moment of glory will occur during its exhibition at the 1938 *Voortrekker* Centenary Celebrations, a carefully orchestrated spectacle of ethnic Afrikaans mobilization which involved an actual re-enactment of the original trek with ox wagons and *trekkers* in full historical costume. This second trek aroused an enormous emotional outpouring among the Afrikaners and it is easy to see why. Due to the worldwide depression, the great drought and the increasing capitalization of agriculture by mostly South African English owned corporations, many *plattelanders* (rural Afrikaners) had been forced into the cities where they rapidly found themselves reduced to the status of "poor Whites." Read against the events of the 1930s, the film's evocation of an idealized heroic pastoral order, a time of both courage and an ensuing rustic peace in a God-given land of plenty offered a powerful message of hope to an increasingly desperate people. Certainly, the parallels between the disenfranchisement of the *volk* due to greedy English colonialism then and their current feeling of being dispossessed strangers in their own land now, overwhelmed the film's message of reconciliation between White and White. There is no doubt that the Fusion Government's emphasis on White unity and the presumed equality between the two White groups predisposed them to interpret the problems of the country only in Black and White or "Native" and "European" terms.³² In short, they underestimated or failed to see the immense dissatisfactions that existed among the Afrikaners, particularly among those newly urbanized communities. The homogenizing discourse of "white Unity" failed to take hold in these dislocated communities, a fact

that Afrikaans nationalist intellectuals successfully exploited in their articulation of apartheid.³³ There can be little doubt that ten years later, these communities contributed a great deal to the Jan Smuts's defeat and the victory of the National Party at the general election, which ushered in South Africa's apartheid era.

Narrative Strategies of Reconciliation

There are two self-conscious narrative strategies that *De Voortrekkers* takes up in order to try to achieve its original project of reconciliation.³⁴ In view of the new union, the new enemy, the funding from England, and the desire on the part of the producers to market the film in England for profit as well as produce a reconciliation between English and *Boer* in South Africa, no longer could the story of the Great Trek be told in terms of a colonial encounter between a settler society (the *Boers*) and a colonial bully (the English).³⁵ Nor, of course, could it be told as a story of Afrikaans settler invasion and conquest. Therefore, the film had to displace the sources of conflict onto other parties, fall guys or scapegoats if you will, outsiders (even if inside) who could be assigned hatred and blame, thus rewriting history in a way that could allow English and *Boer* to believe that they were never, after all, really that far apart.

As a remark about theory, it has often been said that the enunciation of unity within a group or nation typically requires the remaking of lines of division and conflict in ways that bring those who need to be brought into togetherness through the exclusion of the relevant others. Rene Girard calls this the reconstruction of sacrifice. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe speak in a more structuralist vein, arguing that both differences (the syntagmatic) and samenesses or equivalencies (the paradigmatic) are used in creating a vision (that is, re-vision) of social reality.³⁶ Again, it is Foucault who makes the point that the

games of rejection, division and negation that society plays and the way it institutes systems of inclusion and exclusion in its drive to unify people are internal to its reconstruction of the relationships of power: or practices that attempt to do this anyway. Now given the need to displace hatred, blame and guilt onto some sacrificial persons or groups, the film in question chooses two: King Dingane and the Zulu on the one hand; and two fictional characters: a pair of scheming Portuguese traders on the other. Each of these displacements is required. The first functions to displace the blame for the killing of the Afrikaners in the Boer War and the taking of their land onto the Zulu. One conflict (the murder of Piet Retief and his settlement by Dingane) is substituted for another (the English assaults on the two Afrikaner republics in order to gain control of their newly discovered gold and diamond deposits). This is a natural substitution, since *both* the Afrikaners and the English had fought the Zulu nation as enemies, and this experience would have been fresh in the minds of the contemporary settlers on both sides of the English/Afrikaans divide. Moreover, displacement of perpetration and blame onto Blackness was a natural extension of the racist/colonizing act of power, which the larger colonial and settler picture demanded: a picture of White colonization in fact impeded by English/Afrikaans divisions. Thus, the film begins with the Great Trek without any investigation of the events leading up to it. The trek is presented as a foreordained act of national righteousness, a way of establishing a New Jerusalem in the African *veld* of which the Union of South Africa will be the logical outcome.

The second displacement, onto two fictional Portuguese traders, functions to remove the Afrikaans *trekkers* as the usurpers of Zulu land and goods, replacing them by the Portuguese. In the film, there is no hint of intended exploitation of the “natives,” by the *trekkers*. The intertitles title simply states: “Being a God-fearing people, we

shall trade fairly with the natives, and thereby gain their assistance in establishing a Model Republic for our posterity.” This message or manifesto is delivered to a group of *trekkers* including women and children, who are about to join Retief in the “national movement” to the North. The setting is biblical: the chosen grouped around a patriarch with a long White beard, an Afrikaans Moses who may not, given his age, make it to the promised land. The poignancy of the scene is deepened by the audience’s pre-knowledge that these people are unwittingly going to their deaths. They are not invaders and usurpers of other people’s land, but sacrificial lambs for the coming republic. It is the Portuguese traders, who on hearing the news of the intended trek northwards, fear that the honesty of the *Boers*’ dealings will, as the title puts it, “teach the natives trade valuations and ruin our business.” As a counter-strategy, they decide to poison the Zulu King against the *trekkers* by telling him that they intend to steal his lands and cattle. (Ironically, of course, this is exactly what did happen.) They are, in effect, positioned as the figure of the Jew or the Levantine in the European imagination: crafty, duplicitous, cosmopolitan, corrupted to the point of caring about nothing beyond usury and self-interest. Their Semitic coding is overt in their lush, orientalist city garments which make them immediately suspect as cosmopolites, their hook noses, their dark features, oily hair and creepy, unctuous behavior. They spy from behind bushes and make overt sexual advances to the blonde daughter of the *Voortrekker* patriarch. Making a fortune from their trading on Zulu goods, it is they who decide to sell arms to the Zulu, who, in a related fit of stereotyping, are chaotic, savage, violent and gullible: too simple minded to get the real picture. Only because the Portuguese have poisoned the Zulu against the Afrikaner does, in the causal terms of this film, the Afrikaner/English conflict take place. It is a mere effect, as it were, of this poison injected into South

Africa by these true agents of harm. These two agents of harm, the Zulu and the Portuguese/Orientalist, allow the film to reconstruct the English/Afrikaans battle (the Boer War) as an effect of race. For the Portuguese traders are coded as borderline Whites, marginal European subjects whose signs of hybridity are mulatto and whose characters are appropriately degenerate. Since the cause of White/White, that is, English/Afrikaans conflict, is now in its coded way understood to be racial in origin—the effect of an alliance between degenerate racial types—the English and Afrikaans, that is the true European Whites, are now free to revise their views of each other. They were each the dupes of degeneracy rather than blameworthy, self-interested and prejudiced parties to the conflict. What they share are the trappings of civility, which derive from their true Europeanness: their White skins. They can now *know* themselves and each other in these terms: “We are the ones whom those of inferior races have brought harm to. We are alike in this. We are one.” Thus are the terms of reconciliation rewritten in the cultural imagination as those dependent on racialist (read: racist) ways of knowing.

Rewriting *Birth of a Nation*

It is hardly fortuitous that the most popular silent film in South Africa at the time when *De Voortrekkers* was being made was D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*.³⁷ For that film rewrites history in a similar way. Recall that *Birth of a Nation* opens with the statement that the seeds of conflict in America began with the bringing of the Negro there. This theme becomes the central explanatory determinant of the civil war, which is portrayed as a hopeless and terrible waste in which White people are fighting White people (brother fighting brother). The film's two main families, one from the north, the other from the south, play out a series of embroilments, “caused” by a cast

of mulattos, Blacks and degenerate carpetbaggers. Reducing its plot to the extreme, what the film shows is that once these bad seeds are removed (valiantly by the Klu Klux Klan, whose actions are shown with the excitement of cowboy films), these two White families are free to become one. The final moment is a double marriage between them (brother marrying sister, sister marrying brother), in which the foursome, ecstatically filmed as part of glorious American nature, meditate on their foundational role in the creation of a better, purer, American subject: clearly a racist one, a White one. The reconciliation between north and south therefore requires the recognition that it is the shared property of Whiteness, which is the unifying link. Substitute English and Afrikaans for north and south and you have the connection between the birth of the American nation and the birth of the South African one.

The reconstruction of South African history and identity in terms of a reconciliation that follows from the recognition of unity through Whiteness is of course Christianized, as also happened in America. And a series of racial subtypes follow from its Christianization. Thus, there is in both cases the Black with a soul of gold, the good Black or Christian Black, which in both cases becomes the angelic transposition or transubstantiation of humanity from White to Black. That the good Black is always portrayed as a White lover, or White sympathizer, in short, as White in spirit, allows humanity to be coded as paradigmatically White in character; hence the character of Sobuza, one of Dingane's chiefs who converts to Christianity under the influence of the Reverend Owen. By being blessed as White by the missionary Reverend Owen, he becomes, in essence, so. He is first shown accepting communion in the *veld* from the Reverend while the intertitle reads: "Honour thy father and they mother that thy days may be long in the land which the Lord they God giveth thee." Clearly

the land is only God's to give and one's acceptance in it is predicated upon one's acceptance of the gospel. This is Owen's point of view and it becomes ours too, just as it narratively becomes Sobuza's through his conversion. There is an immediate cut from the missionary preaching love and nonviolence to a scene in which Dingane is sentencing a child and his nurse to death. It turns out that the child is Dingane's son and must die in order to prevent him conspiring in later life against his father. With this juxtaposition, the two discourses of Christian civilization and tribal barbarity are once again re-evoked in this juxtaposition, which as the accompanying intertitle emphasizes is "Dingane's Way," in contrast to the way of the missionary.

The film's rhetorical schema relies on the inter-titles to anchor the visual images as representations of historical accuracy and truth (what really happened), and to limit, as far as it is possible to do so, the polysemy of the text. Like Lacanian *points de caption*, they work to wrest meaning from the film's unstable field of signifiers. As Slavoj Žižek explains Lacan's concept, "the multitude of floating signifiers is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain nodal point . . . which quilts them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning."³⁷ Later, when Sobuza, having become a Christian refuses to obey Dingane's orders to kill the child he is accused of having a "White heart within the body of a Zulu warrior." Sobuza's conversion to Christianity opens up a new ordering principle in the construction of the nation, namely the idea of series of acceptable natives and "others" versus those aliens and people who cannot be assimilated. Later this list will come to include Roman Catholics, Communists, 'Coloureds,' Indians, Chinese, Jews, all of whom must be excluded.³⁸ Christianity does not resolve the racist problematic in South Africa, but it does secure a zone of acceptance for Christian Blacks within the nation's frontiers. The importance of the Christian element in

the reconstruction of South African history is as crucial here as it is in *Birth of a Nation*, where woman is given a cinematic innocence and grace worthy of the Christian miracles. In Griffith's camera this is miraculous, but always white, blonde, quiet, soft. Softness, the alternative to barbarity, is always a property of the good Black, who is in effect raised from barbarity through a natural womanliness: becoming like Christ. Thus, the gendered character of the good Christian—hard, male, uncompromising, just on the one hand, soft, feminine, and capable of grace on the other. In the final frame of the film, Sobuza sits outside the church, newly built to commemorate the victory at Blood River, while the *Boer* community goes inside to pray. Inside the church, the daughter of the old patriarch holds her new baby, symbolizing the (re-)birth of the Afrikaans nation in a state of reconciliation with the English and, outside, the Christianized Black.

And the Portuguese? They are Griffith's colored people, unnatural in birth, less than white and more than black, because of this morally depraved and intellectually conniving, motivated by the desire to possess what they are not (or not enough): whiteness, and through envy, to destroy it. If there is a Satan in this story it is this group. Ironically the Portuguese were restored to whiteness by the Apartheid state, a whiteness they had in the beginning, when on the ships of Bernal Diaz and Magellan, they first made contact with the Khoi and the San. Races are historically remade each and every time the state formation changes: the race to representation is also the race to rewrite the terms of race.

Alternative Constructions of Race

The fact that a White heart can beat in a black body—the body of Sobuza—means that there are alternative constructions of race at work in this film, as there are in the history of nineteenth-century

European racism in general. Biology will tend to assign inferiority as a direct concomitant of skin color and body type, which, if one follows through on this line of reasoning, would make it well nigh impossible for a black body to possess a Christian soul. Taken to extremes, biological racism leads to the Nazi vision of the Jew: a virus, which must be eliminated without exception. That Sobuza is not only imaginatively possible, but central to the final ending of the film as the one who is outside but also inside, shows that colonialism could exclude the that there is a place for the good native subject in its social constructions.

The natives are here to stay, a majority, crucial for capitalism, the mines, commerce, the enrichment of the European. English liberalism will depend on this, in the mines for example, where it will be crucial for the “Randlords” (mining magnates) to believe that the black worker is capable of consensual agreement with work and policy, while also requiring the greatest possible monitoring and control. Only when apartheid enters the scene in 1948 will the Christian ideal give way to a legalized concept of racial otherness: then the black will not be outside the church, nodding and smiling his acceptance of his outsider/insider status but in his appointed Bantustan where his own identity can be given free reign to express its own terms of existence.

Tracing meanings

In 1916, *De Voortrekkers* translated the dispersed events of the Great Trek in terms of White unity and the state institutionalized discourse of segregation. In the thirties, the failure of the Fusion government to provide satisfactory modes of identification for the Afrikaners who remained at the bottom of the White economic scale resulted in a rejection of that particular translation. This meant

a rejection of the project of reconciliation and the terms of “White settler” reference, for one that engaged the historical narrative of the Great Trek and the great battle as a moment of glory solely for the Afrikaner people.³⁹ In 1998, another act of transmission reinvented the battle in response to post-apartheid South Africa. On the Day of Reconciliation (formerly the Day of the Covenant), busloads of Zulu people in full traditional attire and singing *amahubo* (traditional songs) journeyed to the banks of the Ncome River (the Zulu name for Blood River) to remember the proud and brave warriors who died in their thousands defending their homeland against colonial invaders. Led by King Zwelithini ka Cyprian ka Bhekuzulu, the crowd paid tribute to their dead, and mourned the moment as one which preceded their long period of suffering and humiliation at the hands of the Whites. “This is where our forefathers died. This is where the battle which preceded our suffering started,” stated the king passionately, adding that in their appropriation of the historical events, not only the bodies but the very soul of Zulu culture had been debased. “They,” he added, “even called it ‘Dingane’s Day’ and did not call him king, as if he were a mere man.”⁴⁰ But, as in *De Voortrekkers*, reconciliation was in the air. Speaker after speaker called for a coming together of the new South African nation over the event by a joint commemoration of the battle. The mingling of the blood of both sides became the symbolic trope of the day, as did the waters of the river which washed the blood away. Again in biblical rhetoric, Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi, the Minister of Home intoned, “(O) ne could not distinguish then, as one cannot distinguish now, the blood of the Afrikaner from the blood from the blood of the Zulu...”⁴¹

Yet not everyone, particularly on the Afrikaner side, seemed to be in accord with this mingling. Two signposts, one saying “Ncome Monument” and the other “Blood River Monument,” marked out

the two very different commemorative spaces, ironically each on different sides of the river. At the Afrikaans site, seventy ox wagons were drawn up into a *laager* or circle to encase the *volk*, but somehow, a number of Zulu had made their way into the *laager* and were interestedly looking around. Perhaps the two most telling moments were on the one hand, the comment by the Zulu King who asked, “What happened to the so-called reconciliation?” and on the other, a photo flashed across the television that night of a young Zulu girl in the *laager* bending down to smell the flowers placed at the steel plaque engraved with the vow the Afrikaners had made to their God 170 years ago. Reconciliation alone is not enough. What is required is a politics of recognition, the recognition by others of one’s own particular history and its meaning for one’s own group identity. It is around these images of particular histories—histories that took place at the same place but under different “names” (terms of reference)—that the stakes of reconciliation are formed.

Solomon Tshesiko Plaatje’s and *Come See the Bioscope, Then and Now*

In discussing the relationship between nation and history, Prasanjit Duara notes that far from being a site of unity and cohesiveness, nationalism “marks the site where different representations of the nation contest and negotiate with each other. Most of these representations are chronically subdued by the ascendant power, which claims the power, the glory, and the terms of distribution and citizenship as its own. But this means that they are always also on the scene of history, always also present to disturb the cards. Everyone is special and everyone is not, everyone adds something to history and everyone does not, and to single out a specific segment of the population on the grounds of character and

role as essential to national destiny (to the exclusion of all others) and make it stick, there must be a continual telling and retelling of the story, the myth, the invention of tradition which justifies this specialness – hence the special place of the story of Piet Retief and King Dingane. Hence, the historical importance of such films as *De Voortrekkers* for the present.

From *De Voortrekkers* in 1916 we arrive at the pre-history of Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s, which culminates in the apartheid state a decade later. This story never succeeds in erasing liberal, Marxist, Pan-Africanist, and other competing narratives of the nation, not to mention stories which deal with other groups' different roles, such as the role of English capitalism in the historical story or the work of the early black nationalists, forerunners of the current ruling party. It is this work and their vision, a vision that was crushed and ground into the red dust of South Africa first during the era of segregation and second, by the apartheid state, that finds representation in *Come See the Bioscope* (1997). This countervision to the one in the *De Voortrekkers* was the vision and hope of Solomon Plaatje, who is the subject of the film, and his party, the ANC, and it had its genesis at almost precisely the same time as the production of *De Voortrekkers*. Just two years separate the trip Plaatje made to England in 1914 as one of the ANC delegates sent to argue for the repeal of the Native Land Act in the name of British justice and fair play, from the 1916 production of *De Voortrekkers*. *De Voortrekkers* may be considered an early example of South African film production while the story of *Come See the Bioscope* is one story of early South African film culture. It is the story of Solomon Plaatje's efforts to build a film culture among rural black people who had been dispossessed, forced off the land into servitude, driven into the cities to live in single sex mining compounds leaving broken families behind them. Tragically Plaatje's story of an inclusive national modernity was

repressed, untold until eighty some years later when under a new dispensation and a new directive, it found cinematic representation.

Cinema Moves From City To Country

Awakening on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself not actually a slave but a pariah in the land of his birth.

Plaatje wrote the words above to describe the drastic effects of the 1913 Native Land Act on the native populations of South Africa—an act which dispossessed black farmers of their property, forcing them and their families into overcrowded “native” reserves that in total comprised a mere thirteen percent of South African territory, or into the cities to work as cheap laborers for the mines. In Gewer’s film, we see Plaatje writing them in his notebook by the first light of day. The film begins with the shimmering image of car driving through the dust and intense sun of the western Transvaal towards a small village of black tenant farmers and white landowners. The landscape is dry, filled with rock and stunted bush, grey and khaki in color. The year is 1923. The car stops and a well tailored Black man in a three piece suit and hat, his eyes as intense as the sun, gets out and stretches. Barefoot children in rags giggle at the sight of the automobile, a rarity in that dusty patch of *veld*, and at the even more unusual sight of a Black man getting out of a car. A single child approaches him, timidly. The man greets the child and asks what his name is. “I am Musi, and what is your name?” is the reply. “My name is Solomon Plaatje. Can you tell me if there is a church in this town?” The pair climbs into the car and proceeds to the white gabled, Cape Dutch church where Plaatje approaches the minister, asking if he can use a White wall for a bioscope show that night. Clearly nervous, although impressed by his visitor

whom he greets by name, the minister prevaricates, telling Plaatje that he will have to ask the authorities for permission. In the next scene the image of the cleric is replaced by that of Mr. Mahommed, an Indian man in Moslem dress sitting on the *stoep* (veranda) of his country store filled with the minimal necessities needed to sustain rural Black life—bags of cornmeal and beans, needles, bales of material, tin cups and plates, and drums of paraffin used for cooking and heating. In contrast to the cleric, the storekeeper immediately agrees to let Plaatje use the white wall behind his store for the show with the words, “a bioscope show, how delightful.” We cut to Plaatje having supper in the simple hut of Musi’s grandmother, who tells him that Musi’s father is in Johannesburg working on the mines and can only come home to visit once a year, while his mother has left to find work in the city. Only she and Musi, the old and the young, are the remnants of what used to be a family unit. And they too have been displaced many times after having been evicted from their original holding. Plaatje takes notes as she talks, transforming her story into the graphic emotive vignettes that form the substance of his book *Native Life in South Africa*.⁴²

The next morning the children with Musi as leader, hand out advertisements for the bioscope show and a series of odds and ends of furniture are arranged facing the wall behind Mr. Mohammed’s store for the evening’s show. Plaatje sets up the equipment explaining to the children what a bioscope is, how it works, how it speeds things up, and then “demonstrates” the action they will see by waddling like Charlie Chaplin towards the wall where the film will be broadcast and back. By now, a small crowd of villagers has gathered. Plaatje begins by explaining that he has recently been to Europe and America and wants to show them something of his travels, of what he saw there. “Let the show begin,” he dramatically announces placing a recording of *Nkosi Sikelele Africa* (the theme song of the African National

Congress, which will become part of post apartheid South Africa's official anthem seventy years later) sung by its composer Enoch Sontonga on the wind up gramophone.

The first reel of "film" is a travelogue of the most famous sites and events in Britain: the Houses of Parliament, opening day at Ascot, The King and Queen driving in carriages through London and the like. Other short "actualities" are screened, each little visual slices of life in England for which Platte serves as commentator and guide. The group is surprised to see white miners and ask, "Is such a thing possible?" The banality of the images is offset by Plaatje's commentary on his trip to the English parliament to present the case the South African Native National Congress (now the ANC) had marshaled against the Land Act. "Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, said he would look into it," says Plaatje, but "We are still waiting." The crowd nods their heads understandingly, indicating that they too are well acquainted with the condition of waiting. Plaatje then shows a short film he received from the Tuskegee Institute on the activities of the students there. The audience receives this with immense enthusiasm, an enthusiasm that is suddenly cut short as the flickering light stops, and the images disappear. The police have arrived and stopped the show. In belligerent tones they demand to know what Plaatje is doing. "Having a bioscope show," is Plaatje's simple response, adding that no law has been broken in the process. But that is of no matter, for the police here are the law, and Plaatje is, to use his own words, "a pariah in his own land," as vulnerable a subject as the people he has been researching. Musi asks him if he will go. "I have to," he replies, tensely and sadly. The bioscope is packed up and put away but not before he has cut a small piece from the film stock in the projector and placed it in his pocket. Before leaving for the next village and the next bioscope show, he gives Musi the piece of film stock to keep, to help him remember his first contact with the bioscope.

We may think of that piece of film as *Come See the Bioscope* itself, which finally takes its promise, the promise of remembering between a man and his young friend or even “son”, and makes good on that promise. It is the promise to honor by remembering, to complete by making. The intervening years of history, evoked without being mentioned by the brutality of the white police, will keep that piece of film from becoming something whole. Only now, with the African National Congress in power, is Plaatje’s political goal capable of being completed, and with it, his cinematic goal of making a rural people part of things, giving them access to the wider world and its riches. They are, the film suggests, already moral, already dignified. What they need is information, and equity. The film is Plaatje’s return to live among us.

A Man For New Times

In June 2000, a special ceremony was held in Pretoria to celebrate the renaming of the Department of Education building as the Solomon Plaatje building. With this act, Plaatje’s legacy as a novelist (*Mhudi* was the first South African novel published in English by a black man), a political leader, a journalist, a man in the forefront of South African black public affairs, was resurrected and memorialized.⁴³ This is not to say that he was unrecognized in his own times. The memorial tombstone unveiled in 1935, three years after his death, by G. A. Simpson, fellow journalist and editor of the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* reads, “No mere words of mine can adequately pay tribute to his memory—the memory of one who was an outstanding figure in the life of the people of South Africa.” But in the fifty years since his death, the years which saw the beginning and entrenchment of apartheid in South Africa, the story of a man like Solomon Plaatje was deliberately obscured and buried, as deep as

the victims unearthed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Only now can it be recovered, not only so that it might enter South African historical memory, but also so that it might become part of the present and help shape a future vision for the nation. For despite being born on a farm in the Orange Free State in 1876, Plaatje was a man of immense cosmopolitanism, a modern man at the time when South African black people were not meant to be the subjects of modernity but merely its objects, its raw material to be used in much the same way as the gold and diamonds buried in the South African soil were used to build a modern state for Whites only. Plaatje was hardly a drawer of water and a hewer of wood. He spoke eight African languages. He loved Shakespeare, and saw no reason why his plays should not be accessible to literate Black South Africans as it was to Whites. He duly translated *A Comedy of Errors* into Setswana, as part of his efforts to preserve the language, history and cultural traditions of the Tswana people by feeding it with new material from other cultures. He was the publisher and editor of two bilingual newspapers, in English and Setswana, whose content consisted of a wide variety of stories of both local and international interest, since he had negotiated exchange agreements with sixty-one international newspapers. He was the founder of the South African Native Press Association in 1934, and Secretary-General of the African National Congress formed in 1912 to combat the increasing oppression of the South African black population, an oppression, which ran counter to the belief held by many black intellectuals that the unionization of South Africa would mean a greater degree of freedom for its black people. In sketching African responses in the years immediately following Union, Tom Lodge comments:

Among many members of the African elite hopes raised initially by the defeat of the republics in the Anglo-Boer war

had been swiftly disappointed. Despite African expressions of imperial loyalty intermingled with politely phrased reproach at the prevalent discrimination against Black men of ‘training, character and ability,’ the British government made it clear that its paramount concern was the question of White unity in South Africa.⁴⁴

Along with his colleagues, John Dube and Pixley Seme, Plaatje saw the Union of South Africa as that system of racial estates which would finally lift up black people, bring them into citizenship and into the domain of formal and substantive rights which would make making their rural lives and urban existences more bearable and fruitful. After all, they had played a large role in the war in support of the British. And Plaatje, a court interpreter for the British during the siege of Mafeking, and the product of English missionary education believed firmly in the fairness of British liberalism.

It seemed almost unbelievable to Plaatje that this would be state of affairs; that after the Boer War, the British would turn against their black allies in favor of their white enemies. “The Gods are cruel,” he wrote in his journals, “and one of their cruelest acts of omission was that of giving us no hint.” No hint that the Land Act would not be rescinded but instead would be followed by a further series of disempowering laws against the Black population enacted under the Union’s segregationist policy, like the Native Affairs Act of 1920 and the Urban Areas Act of 1923 which organized and institutionalized influx control and segregation of urban residential areas. No hint that under the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924, “natives” would be excluded from the title of “employee,” thus refusing them the right to strike. No hint that job reservation for Whites would be ensured under first the Mines and Works Act of 1911, and then deepened under the Native Taxation and Development Act of 1925.⁴⁵ And, of course, no hint of the apartheid state which would be brought into

power after his death in the 1948 elections. Hence, Musi without his father and mother. Hence, these villagers as tenant farmers. Hence, the refusal of the church to let him put on his bioscope show. Hence, the power of the village police to close down the show and expel Plaatje from the village. Hence, Plaatje's pessimistic question in his journal of 1923, "How are we going to build a future?" Hence his deep commitment to the bioscope's ability to "educate" these throwaway people, to pass onto them what he had been exposed to overseas and give hope where there was only despair.

Getting A Bigger Picture

It is not insignificant that the portable movie projector used by Plaatje was a gift from the Reverend J. A. Johnston, head of the AME church in Philadelphia, or that some of the films came from the Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington's place of higher learning. These facts are evidence of the cultural connections between Africa and America, connections that are often lost in cinema theory by the creation of typologies such as mainstream/Hollywood cinema, oppositional/ alternative cinema or even national cinemas. While useful pedagogically and historically in film scholarship, as for example, the typology offered in Teshome Gabriel's critical theory of Third World Films, they have also tended to become dogmatic and frozen, obscuring the deep connections that exist in the history of the cinematic institution and the global connections which cinema history, as part of broader history *per se*, must seek to acknowledge even as it also acknowledges the differences at work. The connection between American popular culture, especially American black culture, will be so central to the story of South African Black culture that the rise of its black urban spaces like Sophia Town or District 6 will be predicated on the importation, transposition, imitation,

translation, and remaking of American culture there. In the thirties, the films of Fred Astaire will influence African dance performance. In the fifties, Jazz bands like The Manhattan Brothers, the Woody Woodpeckers, and the Harlem Swingsters will be integral to the creation of Sophiatown's urban Black culture, while *Drum Magazine* will feature a Philip Marlowe character, and a style of presentation almost indistinguishable from *Life* and *Look* Magazines. The Pan-Africanist discourses of the Black Consciousness Movement (Steve Biko, most famously) will be predicated on the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois about Africa as the site of a racialistic unity defined by lines of cultural descent, a legacy to the present which will make Black consciousness and the consciousness of nationalism the same. Indeed, it is because of the complex forms of dependency and identification, of cultural circulation and communication between South Africa and the USA that cinema history, as well as history in general, must be written as taking place betwixt and between these sites.

Charles Taylor's idea of "alternative modernities," is useful in understanding how modernity gets both decomposed and recomposed in its journey between places. The very term highlights the fact that modernity is not a singular, finished process but a plural, fungible one embedded over years in the exchanges, practices, arrangements and encounters that mark its diffusion throughout the world. While the effects of its presence are much the same world-wide—that is, industrialization, bureaucratization, secularization of thought and belief, forms of popular government—they take on different shapes which reflect the particularities of place and culture, especially when those structures of meaning are still strong and extant. Thus, "a successful transition involves a people finding resources in their traditional culture, which modified and transposed, will enable them to take on the new practices."⁴⁶ Neither is it an either/

or case: blind imitation engulfing more indigenous ways or complete innovation in the name of authenticity. The changes wrought by modernity are profound and inevitably bring about a repertory of new institutions, social relations, value systems, cultural forms and subjectivities that contain both convergences with and divergences from Western modernity.

For Dilip Gaonkar, alternative modernities are best understood as an attitude or way of questioning the dilemmas of the present. Thus:

The questioning of the present whether in the vernacular or in cosmopolitan idioms, which is taking place at every national and cultural site today cannot escape the legacy of Western discourse on modernity. Whoever elects to think in terms of alternative modernities (irrespective of one's location) must think with and also think against the tradition of reflection that stretches from Marx and Weber through Baudelaire and Benjamin to Habermas, Foucault, and many other Western (born or trained) thinkers.⁴⁷

This exposure to other traditions of thought and life is exactly Plaatje's mission in *Come See The Bioscope*. Plaatje had been deeply impressed during his travels in the USA and Canada by the achievements of the African-American middle class and largely attributed its success to education, a process in which the bioscope had its place. He was not travelling from village to village to foment resistance or violence, but to show his bioscope to those whose horizons were restricted in the hope of broadening them. In this sense his mission was didactic and educational, about the politics of citizenship, about readying a class of rural subjects for a role he staked himself on believing would eventually open up for them: that of citizens in a modern state (in modernity). The language of

“improvement” and “cultivation” may seem archaic to us today, a remnant of Victorianism that smacks of a colonial subjectivity. But in the South Africa of 1923, it was still possible, indeed reasonable and noble, to stake oneself on this mission of the cultivation of modernity in people who have been systematically denied access to its possibilities.⁴⁸ Of course the widening of horizons is not distinguishable from the pointing out of problems, “the questioning of the present,” as Gaonkar puts it, but both were meant to bring rural black people into modernity, a modernity of which urban Blacks in the cities had far more awareness, the city being the site of proximity to capital, consumerism, mobility, the system of power and the way things are in the “bigger picture.” The connections between the cultural history of modernity and the city have, since the time of Baudelaire, been tightly entwined. The city has been figured as the source of modernity, the experiential site for all those vast changes in social and economic life that are grouped under the label of the modern.

“Modernity cannot be conceived outside the context of the city,” state Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz in their introduction to a recent anthology on the subject.⁴⁹ And neither, it would appear, can the cinema, which along with other technological innovations of the nineteenth century such as photography, the telegraph, the railways, and architecture, is seen as one of the modes by which modern culture can best be grasped and understood. But with his traveling show, known as “Plaatje’s bioscope,” Plaatje challenged the site of modernity by taking one its favored talismans, the cinema, to the country, to rural people who had never seen a city, and were unfamiliar with its representations, its forms of entertainment and leisure activity, its distractions and sensations. He was not alone in this transposition of cinema from city to country, but he was the first to address his mobile bioscope to African audiences. White country audiences

had been exposed to the cinema since its beginning by traveling exhibitors working the country routes. Small time entrepreneurs would take to the road with a projector and material obtained from large distribution companies, which they would show in a variety of settings ranging from storefronts to churches. This practice did not diminish with the establishment of permanent cinemas from 1910 onwards, but continued and was aided by the improvement in roads and access to motorcars. According to Thelma Gutsche, there was an unquenchable desire for these mobile or traveling cinemas despite the fact that parts of the program, like the newsreels were often out of date.⁵⁰ Talkies of course required greater technological investment, but that too appeared after a hiatus, during which silent films continued to be shown, with the use of vans equipped with sound technology.

These practices were applicable only to the white, mostly Afrikaans rural population. In the urban areas, the cinemas were segregated and Africans could attend if they sat in specifically designated areas. Under the auspices of the American Mission Board, in the early 1920s the Reverend Ray Phillips initiated a project for exhibiting films to African miners in the mine compounds. These would have been rural Africans serving out their contracts under the rules of the Chamber of Mines. Nevertheless they were now within the ambit of the city, and so this cannot be considered as a diffusion of cinema into the rural. Nor, in fact, was the motivation behind the project in anyway similar to that of *Plaatje's* bioscope. Reverend Phillips used the cinema as an anodyne, a healthful diversion or what he called “an antidote to the degrading influences of the slumyards and liquor dens...” of the city.⁵¹ Playing on the ever-present fear of strikes and violence by the hundreds of thousands of mineworkers in the compounds, Phillips argued that the cinema could even suppress such ‘criminal behavior.’ In contrast,

Plaatje believed that for all Africans, irrespective of their location, to assume their rightful place in any new dispensation of rights, they would have to become modern subjects, more knowledgeable about the ways of modernity, more questioning about its effects, more urbane and able to sustain them within a modern state system. He staked his faith in the young, in the next generation, writing to Robert Moton at Tuskegee: “(w)ith the poverty of the natives it is a profitless job: but when I see the joy, especially of the native kiddies . . . it turns the whole thing into a labour of love.”⁵²

A thousand questions open up around this act of cultural transposition, as these films move through space from one set of cultures to another, from one pair of eyes (the eyes of a Londoner, or a New Yorker) to another pair of eyes (the eyes of Musi, and the villagers) accompanied by different music (the music of *Nkosi Sikelele*) and a different commentary (that of Plaatje’s). It is impossible to know how the audience, adults and children, alike received them. In view of the worsening economic climate for rural Blacks, Plaatje’s message of educational self-liberation (although I think he would have seen it more in the old fashioned terms of self-help or moral improvement) may have been difficult to comprehend, irrelevant even, in a state, which controlled almost every aspect of Black life. But it is clear what the act of transposition meant for Plaatje. For if Plaatje’s parting gift to Musi is a little piece of film stock, so that Musi might remember this man, this film, and this night, and what happened to the wall on which images were projected, then Plaatje’s presentation of the bioscope in the film is also that of a gift, the gift of the modern. It underlines his belief in the link between the cinema and modernity, (a link which is only now being examined in contemporary cultural theory) and in the emancipatory potential of mass culture to bring about a better understanding of the world and help develop critical capacities.

Endings and beginnings

The plot of *Come See The Bioscope*, made in 1997, is also more or less what really happened to black people from the time of Union in 1910 to the passing of the Land Act in 1923. In between these dates, in 1916, *De Voortrekkers* was produced. There is a special *correspondence*, as the French would say, between these moments: 1916 and 1997. Each is a cinematic moment early in one version of “the new South Africa,” each version a system of racial estates and a new nation, each called, by a certain irony of history, “South Africa,” one following the other. These representations begin and end our story, a story of the cinema in South Africa, a story of the cinema *and* South Africa. 1916 is a moment fairly close to the beginning of film history itself, while 1997 is close to where we are now, in the first decade beyond the millennium. This pair of national dispensations, in which the cinema has lived, limped, died and been slowly resuscitated, one in the past, the other in the present, although radically different, are inevitably linked. The first is the Union established after the Boer War in which Plaatje, one of the founders of the African National Congress, believed that black people would be blessed with citizenship by their new British colonial masters. The second, the post-apartheid dispensation in which a film like *Come See the Bioscope* could be made and seen, a dispensation in which cinema has now potentially become the property of everyone. It is only in this second nation, the post-apartheid one, that we can celebrate Plaatje’s dream for the first one, and mourn its failure. It is only in the second one that we can come and see the “bioscope,” and try to understand what role it might play in this new nation. Which is my aim here: To read cinema all the way through to the present, with leaps and bounds, gaps and additions, fragments and continuities,

but in the image of this newly forming nation of which the bioscope of the past is still a part.

Post-apartheid South Africa is now ready to return to its past in a way that is inclusive rather than disenfranchising, and to do so in the name of a new dispensation of rights which is equally inclusive and to do so in order to unlearn the illusions of the past, in the name of redress and reconciliation. Since the project of national reconciliation is that of inclusion, *Come See the Bioscope* can now be made. In 1923, Plaatje's project of enfranchising black people as citizens through cinematic means, that is, experimentally, was desiccated first by the terms of Union, and then much later, after his death, by those of the apartheid state which produced further waves of disenfranchisement and raced to represent reconciliation in terms of race (in racist terms). But now his movement, the African National Congress, is in power, and his ideal of inclusive citizenship is at least constitutionalized. His desire to uplift people through cultural expansion may require reconsideration today, given global postmodernism, what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam call the transnational imaginary the relationship between globalization and substantive rights is hardly straightforward. But at least South Africa can now use cinematic means as part of the attempt to recover its past, to return to what Plaatje did and include it in the national archive. That this act of making a film about a man who brought cinema to Black South Africans in the name of citizenship can *only* now be performed is a historical scandal. That it *can* now be made is a historical blessing, a fulfillment of his legacy. One might say that *Come See the Bioscope* was almost made by Plaatje himself, for its intention is his intention, and he would have recognized himself in it. Thus, does history strive towards the impossible, to reconcile with the dead and bring their spirits to life again. As Plaatje lives on screen,

so he lives in the very intention and substance of this film. Thus, do those who watch become modern subjects, traveling back in time to reclaim what they can now call their roots. The South African experiment in the consolidation of citizenship that is happening now, an experiment in which cinema is seeking to play its part, is an experiment in time travel. Finally as South Africans we can come see, that is, return to, the “bioscope.”

Notes

1. This epigraph is from Duncan Petrie, ed. *Screening Europe: Image and Identity in Contemporary European Cinema* (London: BFI, 1992).
2. *De Voortrekkers* was directed by Harold Shaw, who was bought from England for the task, and written by Gustav Preller, a noted South African historian and champion of the Afrikaans language movement. It was not the first feature film made by AFP. That was *The Kimberley Diamond Robbery* made in 1910.
3. Thelma Gutsche, *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa. 1895-1940*. (313). The English title of the film is *Winning a Continent*. As Jacqueline Maingard notes, the title signifies “much broader colonial aspirations” than does the Afrikaans one. *South African National Cinema*. (New York: Routledge, 2007): 16.
4. The Battle of Blood River is the name used by the Afrikaners. It is no longer politically astute to use the name. The current name is the Ncome River battle.
5. At the time of its founding, the ANC was called the South African Native National Congress. It changed its name to the African National Congress in 1923.
6. Z. Pallo Jordan. “From Colonialism to African Nationalism.” Helen Suzman Foundation, <[http://www.hsfo.org.za/publications/focus/issues-21-30/issue-28/from colonialism-to african-nationalism/](http://www.hsfo.org.za/publications/focus/issues-21-30/issue-28/from%20colonialism-to%20african-nationalism/)>.
7. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1995) : 92-93.

8. See Ntongela Masilela's "The New African Movement and the Beginnings of Film Culture in South Africa." *To Change Reels. Film and Film Culture in South Africa*. Eds. Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela. (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2003): 15-30.
9. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. 92-93.
10. Ntongela Masilela, "Beginnings of Film Culture in South Africa." *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa*. Eds. Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003):15-30.
11. Siegfried, Kracauer. "The Mass Ornament," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press): 75.
12. In comparing Griffith's *Intolerance* to *Birth of a Nation*, Miriam Hansen uses the phrase "referential realism" to describe *Birth* in comparison to the what she calls the metarealism of *Intolerance* which comments on competing modes of representation rather "reality." See Chapter 7 in *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991): 175.
13. Andre Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." *Film Theory and Criticism*, 6th ed. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Los Angeles, Oxford University Press): 169.
14. For Ernest Gellner, nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent (Gellner 1983: 1). Nationalism is an ideology which claims supreme loyalty from individuals for the nation and asserts the right of 'national self-determination. See also Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), Daniele Conversi, Anthony Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1998).
15. Tony Judt, "The Old New Nationalisms," *New York Review of Books*, Vol. XLI, May 26, 1994: 44-51. Both Eric Hobsbawm's and Trevor Ranger's essays in *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge UP, 1983) and Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983) are examples of this approach. So too is Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an "imagined community," *Imagined Communities* (Verso, 1983).

16. See Anderson's remarks on the role of time in the biography of nations in which he draws an analogy between modern nations and modern individuals in terms of constructing their identities and subjecthood. I shall briefly summarize his main points here. Both people and nations are estranged from their pasts and use narratives of identity as the connective medium. Narratives of belonging backed up by "evidence" (family photos, relatives, and mementos) help the individual forge his or her identity to the forgotten past. They provide a biography that, like classical Hollywood cinema's narrative structures, has a beginning, a middle and an end, a set of characters with which one can identify and a number of formal elements (*mise-en scene*, *montage*) which permit such identification. However, there is a difference in the way the usage of narrative plays itself out on the national stage. While individuals have beginnings, as in the Old Testament's reiteration of who begot whom, and then proceed down through time from this point, nations come up in time. The biography of the nation cannot therefore be written in "evangelical terms" but must be fashioned in "up time," *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983): 205. I would argue here that Anderson privileges the role of narrative in remembering the past but ignores its counter-role in forgetting it. Narratives, particularly those that attempt to narrate the self, can be used as distancing mechanisms, as ways of overcoming the past and moving into the present and the future. This use of narrative was, for example, evident in some of the autobiographies told at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. The impetus in some of these personal stories was not to connect the person to the past, but to "free" them from the memory of it, to get rid of its burdens and traumas.
17. G. W. Eybers, *Select Constitutional Documents Illustrating South African History, 1795-1910* (London: 1918): 144-145.
18. Quoted in L. Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (Sandton: Radix Press, 1990): 88.
19. Both Albie Sachs and Njabulo Ndebele have called for an abandonment of apartheid categories in search of a new social imaginary (Ndebele's phrase), or in Sach's words, a new cultural imaginary. As Ndebele puts it in "Redefining Relevance," *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Johannesburg: COSAW, 1999), 58-73) what is needed is freedom from "the epistemological structures of oppression."

20. According to Thompson, drawing on various historical reports on the battle, each commando member had at least one gun and the expedition had two small cannons. The Zulu *impis* had no firepower at all. Ibid.
21. This primitive attempt at state making failed when the British colonial authorities annexed the area in the early 1890s, and the *Trekkers* fled once more back across the Drakensberg Mountains and into the highveld.
22. The event was also memorialized by the building of the *Voortrekker* Monument outside of Pretoria—a huge squat stone building shaped rather like a fat teacup containing a symbolic sarcophagus for the martyred leader and friezes, which depict the major events. The entire building is encircled by carved stone walls representing the *laager* or circle which the *trekkers* had formed by lashing together the wheels of their ox wagons, thus marking in stone the ideas of separate-ness, containment, apartness. The monument does not open itself to casual viewing. Instead a visitor has to enter the *laager* and then the tomb, and in so doing, just as when one enters a great Cathedral such as St Peters, becomes a temporary (if unwilling) convert.
23. It had, as Leonard Thompson points out, been tried and failed as early as 1870 and was central to Britain's imperialist philosophy and aspirations for Southern Africa and beyond. See Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (Sandton: Radix Press, 1990).
24. Leonard Thompson. *A History of South Africa* (Sandton: Radix Press, 1990): 152-153.
25. Even the filming of some of the scenes from *De Voortrekkers* on the Sabbath, a logistical necessity since the thousands of “Zulu” extras needed for the battle scenes were drawn from the mines and could only work on a Sunday, raised vehement complaints from the conservative Dutch Reform Church. Clearly, many in the Afrikaans community were hypersensitive to the smallest issue that might be interpreted as a sign of cultural contempt.
26. The practice of defining national identity in terms of an enemy or an “other” seems to be a well used strategy on the part of Governments particularly after periods of conflict. In *Fassbinder's Germany: History, Identity, Subject*, Thomas Elsaesser describes how West Germany's new national identity was helped by the definition of a new enemy (really

- an old enemy), the Soviet Union and by extension, East Germany (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996).
27. This view of South Africanism gradually broadened beyond the idea of a White race although it took 73 years to do so. In 1983, the Tri-Cameral Parliament clearly indicated that Coloureds and Indians were now included under the rubric of South African Blacks were still excluded until the 1994 elections, which brought apartheid to an end with a transcendent view of the nation, based on democracy. Democracy is seen as the basis for generating a loyalty to the State, which can then form the basis for a nation.
28. David Bunn, *Whited Sepulchres: On the reluctance of monuments.* *Blank – Architecture, apartheid and after.* Eds. Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavic (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 1999). In terms of referencing accuracy, the book was printed as a companion to a travelling exhibition of the same name. The book's format is unusual in that it is arranged as a map with no page numbers.
29. Gustav Preller, *Piet Retief*, Melville: Scripta, Africana, Hans Strydom, 1988 (1917).
30. *Ibid*, p. 54.
31. *Ibid*. 53.1/20/09
32. In 1924 the National Party, under the leadership of Barry Hertzog, the staunch supporter of Afrikaner independence merged with the South African National Party to form a fusion government. Jan Smuts became deputy to Hertzog. This joint government was rejected by certain members of the National Party who formed the Purified National Party and became known as the "*Broederbond*" or brotherhood.
33. Aletta Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse* (London: Verso Press, 1996): 52.
34. Edwin Hees, "The *Voortrekkers* on Film: From Preller to Pornography." Unpublished paper presented at the South African Cultural History Conference, Two Centuries of British Influence in South Africa (1795-1995), Pretoria, 29-30 Jun. 1995. Source: <<http://www.und.ac.za/und/ccms/articles/voortrek.htm>>.

35. The film was funded by British capital since I.W. Schlesinger; the owner of AFP had extensive financial interests in the British entertainment industry. This fact does not automatically translate into the film adopting a pro-English stance, nor of course, does it account for the audience's reception of it, but it is yet another determinant in the film's production history.
36. See Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2001).
37. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso Press 1989): 82.
38. The exclusion of "foreign elements" became a major trend in White politics in the thirties and forties as evidenced by the introduction in 1930 of a Quota Bill by the leader of the newly formed National Party (then called the Purified National Party), D. F. Malan. The bill did not exclude German immigration opening up a loophole for German Jews fleeing Hitler's Third Reich. In response to the growing numbers of the South African Jewish community, a second Aliens Bill was passed. Although specifically avoiding direct reference to Jews, the Bill prohibited the immigration of all those not in command of a "European" language. Under the Bill, Yiddish did not qualify thus permitting the exclusion of Jews in particular from the Eastern European countries. In a virulently anti-Semitic speech, Malan singled out the South African Jews as scapegoats not only for the poverty of the Afrikaners due to their control of commerce, but also for the divided and fragmented condition of the society in which they operated as a "state within a state." Like the Portuguese traders in *De Voortrekkers*, in a speech delivered in Stellenbosch in April 1937, Malan accused the Jews of doing "everything in their power to keep the Afrikaners from uniting, as they feared that South Africans would rise from their lowly and insignificant position to save South Africa for the South Africans." Cited in Aletta Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse* (Verso Press, 1996): 46.
39. An example of such a project is the mammoth docudrama, *Die Bou Van a Nasie/They Built a Nation* (1938), which is a self-conscious act of taking back that which *De Voortrekkers* had offered and rewriting it so that Afrikaners would truly receive the self-representation they had historically "earned" for themselves. Made by AFP in 1938, but funded

by the Publicity and Travel Division of the South African Railways and Harbors (SAR&H) at the height of Afrikaner dissatisfaction with the Fusion government, *Die Bou van 'n Nasie* was intended for publicity purposes abroad in an attempt to encourage trade. Locally it was shown at the Voortrekker Centenary celebrations. The intention of the film was exactly that of *De Voortrekkers*; namely, to project an image of national unity in the country. Once again the myth of the Great Trek was placed in the service of that projection. The film begins historically with Bartholomew Diaz's voyage in 1486 around the coast of South Africa and then moves rapidly to paradisiacal scenes of Van Riebeeck and his men establishing his "garden" at the Cape as was his mandate from the Dutch East India Company in 1652. Happy aboriginals – the so-called Hottentots or San people – who cooperate with him in his cultivation of the Cape, scamper around him on the rocks looking for crayfish. There is much to say about the overtly racist discourse in the film which positions the natives as savages and the whites as civilizers. But the important point for my argument is how quickly the conflict between Dingane and Retief becomes the film's focal point. Once again the nation, through this reenactment of the master narrative of the Great Trek, is able to reproduce itself as white and male. Except that is not quite true. *Die Bou* foregrounds the contribution of the Afrikaner in the construction of the national culture and history. The contribution of the English not to mention that of the Blacks and all others, is elided. The film is an aggressive projection of Afrikaans nationalist politics.

40. *The Sunday Independent*, December 20, 1998.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Solomon T. Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa* (London: University Press, 1916).

43. Solomon T. Plaatje, *Mhudi* (Kimberley: Lovedale Press, 1930).

44. Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983): 1.

45. It is easy to read these political enactments in objective terms, that is, as reactions to particular material conditions of the moment: the pressing problem of Afrikaans "poor Whiteism" which threatened the ideal of White unity; the desire to bridge the economic gap between the English

- and Afrikaners by the Fusion government of Louis Botha and Jan Smuts, and the looming “threat” of a dispossessed, disappointed, increasingly nationalistic urban Black (native) population. Such a reading fails to take into account the larger discourse of segregationism that preceded the Acts, and justified them as natural expressions of White supremacy.
46. Charles Taylor, “Two Theories of Modernity,” *Public Culture*, vol. 11., no. 1 (Winter 1999).
47. Dilip Gaonkar, “On Alternative Modernities,” *Public Culture*, vol. 11, no. 1 (Winter 1999).
48. For thirty years, the African Nationalist Congress worked in alliance with white liberals as an “extra-parliamentary loyal opposition” in the hope of changing South Africa into a non-racial democracy. Only in the 1960s did African nationalists come to the conclusion that Apartheid could not be reformed through acts of parliament but had to be radically destroyed.
49. Leo Channey and Vanessa Schwartz, “Introduction,” *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (eds.) Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995): 3.
50. Gutsche. Loc. Cit. 386.
51. *Phillip’s Newsletter*, 3 Nov. 1925; BSMC 1927 Annual Report, 1.
52. Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1984): 304.

[Received in 18/06/2011. Approved in 20/10/2011]

