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Subverting the colonial gaze? Reflections on repurposing colonial archive footage in documentary films

In working with archive footage produced in South Africa's colonial and apartheid eras, filmmakers working on historical topics are confronted with raw materials (archive footage) that are highly dubious politically, and in some cases seemingly irredeemable 'colonial' . Little exists in the way of accessible 'amateur' or private archive footage – consequently, most documentary filmmakers are obliged to work with the official visual narratives preserved in the state-run public archives if they want to literally 'show' the South African past. Are there ways to productively work with the South African public colonial archive that propped up the system of oppression? Or should it just be jettisoned?

I'm going to argue that the colonial image archive is important – firstly, because it offers us insights into people, places and activities we might not otherwise simply be able to see in action; and, secondly, because it can get us to reflect on the whole warped system, and the performed 'artifice' of colonial power.

As an initial question, it might be worth asking why we, whether the makers or viewers of films, might be drawn to obviously 'corrupt' colonial representations in archive footage? I think this is partly because of the scarcity of 'real' film recordings of the time and a general curiosity around the lived past. We live in an age of image overload - Instagram photographs, Youtube snippets, Snapchat mutations circulate endlessly in the networked society, a communicational state in which even the poor of the global south have cellphones and produce images. But just a few decades ago the means of image production for the masses, particularly moving-image production, was owned and controlled by the few.

Some years ago I made a documentary – *Legends of the Casbah* (2012) - with Riason Naidoo on cosmopolitan Durban Indians in the 1950s. In trawling the catalogues of South Africa's decades-long newsreel, *African Mirror*, I found only a handful of inserts on the local Indian community, one of apartheid's four big 'population groups'. 'Non-whites', as people were called, hardly featured in the newsreels, which were largely concerned with celebrating or representing the white project. Film production, the means of re-presentation, was an expensive process requiring expensive equipment – as such it was thus largely limited to white-owned companies or white-run government organizations. When documentary

newsreel inserts deigned to feature 'non-white' stories, these were narratives made by and for whites. In other words, the films were partly designed to normalise an oppressive society in which 'non-white' peoples usually seem accepting of their lot. Of course there were occasionally images of non-compliant 'non-Europeans', such as miners' strikes, etc., at least in the earlier decades before state censorship polices had developed to curtail this kind of edgy representation. Across the world, "Newsreel was made for a profit" (Sandon 2013, 666) and *African Mirror's* commercial imperatives necessitated a delicate balance between entertainment and propaganda - the trope of the 'angry native' or 'mob' probably provided an occasional element of danger.

But even though we know that when they are represented these 'non-whites' are going to be framed, to a greater or lesser extent, in a *denigratingly subjugated* way, these colonial representations paradoxically offer us most of the few 'moving-image' glimpses we might be able to access of how colonised 'non-white' people looked, dressed, interacted or performed themselves. In documentary footage there is a kind of tension between the **staged** (fictional) and the **spontaneous** (real) that promises little nuggets of 'truth' – perhaps even just in a look, or a gesture we might see something the colonial gaze did not intend us to see. We hope that at some level or some point we can see through the ideological framing, read through the lines, and access something real – that actually speaks to an existential or experiential truth of some kind. This, I believe, is one of the pulls of this 'tainted archive'. Looking back, we are interested in that which escapes the colonial gaze, but we are also fascinated by the system of oppression and the representational systems that legitimate it. We enjoy decoding the narratives.

I've been talking about a general desire for and fascination with real images of history that speak to the enigma of past lives and social experience. But one can also add ethnic identity to the mix. For some African, Indian or 'coloured' people in South Africa, particularly amongst the older generations that directly felt the deprivations of apartheid, there is also a pleasure/fascination/satisfaction in seeing **images of *their* people from the past** - figures in their likeness that were not properly or sufficiently recorded on film at the time. These images of people (jn colonial or apartheid era archive footage) restoratively stand in for the generations that were quite literally under-represented in the visual archive – and it seems that many previously oppressed South African watchers today are keen to see even

mundane moving images of their past life-worlds, whether they be mediated via the colonial apparatus or not. So this is another reason why this material might beckon some of us.

As I began developing the documentary idea for South African Indians of the 50s with Riason, my filmmaking collaborator on the project, I noticed in his proposal writing this idea of 'repressed histories' needing to be resurfaced and disseminated to the South African public. At first I didn't quite buy this notion – surely, no-one had actively repressed the history-making process around the Indian community? But the making of the documentary and my subsequent research on South African Indian culture substantiated the importance of specifically visual-public histories, and crystalised a cruel paradox: as 'non-white' South African audiences, particularly Indians, increasingly frequented cinemas as a leisure-time activity in the post-war era, they were by default watching these white-focused South African newsreels before their Hollywood or Indian features. In this watching they were witnessing themselves erased (or least largely marginalised) from the national project. This was the public imagination of South African history in the making and they were not part of it.

Even scholarly empirically-minded historians are now engaging with the importance of visual narratives in 'producing' history in contemporary society.[1] Rosenstone (2001) maintains traditional historians, embedded in the academic discipline of history, have long been deeply suspicious of cinema's ability to do justice to a sense of historical 'truth'. This reaction about losing 'control' of history to visual forms of representation: "Film shows we [historians] do not own the past" (2001, 50). Makers of history films are a new breed of popular historians with their own "rules of engagement with the stuff of the past" (R. A. Rosenstone 2006, 8).

Praxis

How do we relate this colonial 'backstory' to our filmmaking decisions today? In taking you through some of my own work, I would like to take a more reflective stance rather than

[1] Since *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1967) several cultural theorists (Jameson 1991; Baudrillard 1995), particularly in the Marxist vein, have been preoccupied with how film and television have radically shifted the way people view and feel social reality and history.

start off with a rigid theoretical position; as a filmmaker/artist I believe one doesn't necessarily always have coherent or conscious strategy or position, and I wouldn't want to persuade you that all my uses of archive exemplify a consistent progressive anti-colonial or decolonial method. I certainly didn't have a crystal-clear idea of what I was doing 20 years ago, when I worked on my first documentary, *Waiting for Justice* (1999), an investigation of apartheid-legacy structural problems in South Africa's criminal justice system. But it does seem that we managed in some instances to use the colonial footage 'ironically' – to make the pompous reportage look silly, anachronistic, to get it to show itself up as bigoted, blinkered and decidedly dodgy. I've used the opportunity here to reflect on my various usages of archive material, specifically representations of apartheid-era South Africa, in two historical documentaries I have made. I wanted to try to ascertain to what extent one might subvert the meanings of the original ideological meanings through the processes of editing and incorporation, by recontexualising extracts and creating disjunctions in recycling the constructs. But first, some further contextualision of the institutional and quite simply logistical challenges we South African filmmakers are faced with today.

National Film Archives

South Africa's National Film, Video and Sound Archives (rather poorly curated by the Department of Arts and Culture) contains a rich but tainted repository of film footage of South African history. The big question historical documentary filmmakers face is, how to use it. The creative part of this question has to do with the representational politics of imagery that was fundamentally interested in 'ideological stability' - presenting a picture of the Union (and then the 'Republic') of South Africa as a stable, 'settled' land, in both senses of the word. The logistical part of the question has to do with how to access and use footage from archival system in a seemingly slow but steady decline. Let's start with this latter challenge, as it contextualizes the representational one.

I will describe three stages of functioning of the South Africa's National Film Archives. 20 years ago, when we were researching *Waiting for Justice(1999)*, one could visit the archives, scrutinize their catalogues, identify potentially interesting reels, and review the stored negatives on their Steenbeck flatbed machines. Suitable content could be noted, and the relevant reels would be sent to a postproduction facility to be transferred in a telecine suite to video. Clearing the rights with the rightsholder, the SABC (South African Broadcast

Corporation, was tricky and slow. 13 years later I again approached the National Film Archives to look for images of South Africa's Indian community during the 1950s and 60s for the documentary that would become *Legends of the Casbah* (2012). We were told that the viewing machines at the Film Archives were not operational (with no clarity around when they would be fixed or replaced), so we could not preview any reels. One had to bet on relevance via the very brief references to inserts on the newsreels catalogue, and then get all those potentially useable reels sent to and transferred at a postproduction house. This turned out to be an expensive process – but one which we undertook. The third and current stage: the main postproduction facilities house trusted with digitally transferring the Archives negatives on their high-end telecine machine, *The Refinery*, shut down at the end of 2018. Some smaller operations are still able and allowed to make digital transfers, but according to one Archives curator, sound can no longer be transferred, only visuals. This same curator claims to have paid for the restoration of one of the 16mm viewing machines out of his own purse, but one still cannot preview 35mm footage. With seemingly limited accessibility, perhaps at some level our colonial film archive has already been relegated to the dustbin of history…

But let's assume it will be recovered. What does this archive house? The National Film Archives were established in 1964, yet contains reels that date back to the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, and spans formative periods in our relatively young country. One of the most fascinating collections is the *African Mirror* newsreel series – these newsreels produced commercially by Schlesinger's African Film Productions (AFP) for over 70 years from 1913 until 1984 were screened weekly in South African cinemas (as well as sold abroad), and were highly influential in shaping a sense of a white national identity that transcended the divide between Brit and Boer (Sandon 2013). Comprising a series of news inserts dealing with 'public events' presumably deemed of interest to white citizens, they also occasionally offer glimpses of 'non-European' life.

Even though in the post-war decades, Indians, coloureds and African audiences had access to them in segregated cinemas, the films specifically address the white South African[2]. They do this in an obviously propagandistic way. The basic 'actuality' form is essentially the work of legitimation, establishing colonial order: everything is going just fine at regional and national levels, but look here, South Africa is also an accepted member of a global community of nation-states. In this regard, we can see *African Mirror* as managing an unconscious fear of many white South Africans: being admonished for their bad treatment of 'non-whites' by other 'civilised states', of becoming a 'rogue state', which it eventually did. International visits, functions and tourism are often featured, reassuring local white audiences that South Africa's status continues to be seen as 'legitimate' internationally, and that the Union, or the Republic as it was to become in 1961, has not been disconnected or cast out from the civilised world.

Another recurring theme, as Sandon (2013, 677) points out, was speed and technology (for example in vehicle racing inserts in the ever-popular sports slot) as a metonym for modernization and industrial – South Africa was continually shown to be at the forefront of industrial and scientific progress. One could argue that this bolstered the legitimating idea that white coloniality and exploitation of darker peoples was warranted in lifting the country and all its people out of the backwaters of economic stagnation.

But how did these news films exclude 'non-whites'? During the World War II, only white serviceman were featured in the inserts, while voiceovers and presenters were always white. Sport, political rituals, cultural events, catastrophe, industrial developments featured mainly white people. Sandon claims that in the important and extensively covered topic of sport, *African Mirror* hardly featured any 'non-white' sporting events - and when it did it treated these as some kind enfeebled form:

> There appears to be little coverage of African, 'coloured' or Indian professional sport in the newsreel. There is one listing in 1928, 'The real All Blacks. The Rugby Cup Final between colour teams at East London'.[122] African boxing on the Rand, Indian boxing in Durban and 'coloured' boxing in Cape Town do not feature in African Mirror in spite of their importance, with the exception of a Cape Corps Union Defence Force amateur championship.[123] Mainly

[2] This is most immediately and apparent in the tone and register of the usually disembodied white, male voice-over, who literally addresses and positions the audience member as a fellow citizen, invariably in the Queen's English.

> schools, works or charity events are filmed, an example being a charity Indian soccer match in Johannesburg in 1921.[124] The newsreel often adopted a disparaging comic tone for these matches, suggesting a lack of professional behavior (Sandon 2013, 676).

As a filmmaker having worked on two documentary films just over a decade apart, I like to think I have had productive engagements with finding and repurposing footage from this archive. I would like to briefly review and analyse just two segments from these different projects. The idea is to look at how some of these colonial representations were recycled to subvert their original ideological functions. Editing techniques can introduce an ironic tone to the deployment of the excerpts.

***Waiting for Justice* (1999)**

Waiting for Justice was an in-depth look at historically-created problems and blockages in South Africa's criminal justice system in the post-'94 era. I want to focus on the use of archive here in the introductory section of the film, including the credit sequence. I think it is important as it successively establishes the tone of the film by juxtaposing past (apartheid-era), simplistic notions of crime as the product of the criminal, with a current, more complex socio-historical understanding of crime, and one which is also concerned with the rights and experiences of the incarcerated. This I believe is achieved in the intercutting between a black and white *African Mirror* insert on crime from the 1940s with current documentary footage of awaiting trial prisoners languishing in overpopulated jails. Against the 'real' footage, the reenacted *Mirror* chase sequence of cops closing in on robbers is foregrounded as a fiction in more ways than one, with the suggestion that this whole colonial approach to just 'containing' crime was faulty. At the same time the intercutting/juxtaposition of imagery alludes to the current crime problem being a product of history, the outcome of this blinkered approach to denying the social roots of crime. We decided to add a melancholic *maskandi* track by Philemon Zulu to the intro sequence – *maskandi* is the urban-traditional Zulu music of the mining compounds of Johannesburg, themselves long their own kind of prison. The genre generally speaks to the alienation and precarity of migrant black labourers toiling in the city. This I think further enables audience identification with the downtrodden in the story, the prisoners and their plight behind bars.

Legends of the Casbah (2012/2016)

This film was a look at a cosmopolitan South African Indian culture that flourished in Druban in the 1950s. Much of the photographic images used came from the *Drum* magazine archive, BAHA – this was the only magazine of its time to focus on 'non-whites'. We were lucky enough in this project to have found a reel of amateur 16mm footage from the 1950s and 60s to not have to rely too heavily on *African Mirro*r in the colonial archive – this was just as well, because, as mentioned, the South African Indian community hardly featured in *African Mirro*r's reflection of the nation. The amateur footage, mostly of soccer and related social functions, such as dances and beauty contests, was recorded by the late 'socialite' Sam Naidoo, one of the community's few members to have owned film equipment and recorded cultural events.[3] Additional private footage was given to us by the family of the political activist, Monty Naicker. These private reels gives the documentary some unique perspectives from the inside, which contrasts with the colonial footage that 'looks down' on the Indians.

One instance in which we see these two forms colliding is the section on life-saving. We start with a 1950s *African Mirror* insert on Indian's descending on the beaches for 'their' social activities at Easter. The condescending British-accented voice-over frames what are clearly selected as 'intriguing' rituals (to a white audience). Women in saris competing in a tug of war, long-haired girls racing on the beach, etc. These activities are framed as contrived, foreign, exotic. It's almost as if Indians don't really belong on the beach – they only need to be there once in a while, and the segregation laws preventing Indians from using white beaches are somehow justified. They don't do what we do. To contrast with this 'white' perspective, we cut images from the amateur Indian archive we show a more relaxed, everyday and 'normal' use of the beach – fishermen, youngsters cavorting in the sea, etc. This is layered against a contemporary, experimental jazz track, a languid, somewhat nostalgic tune, composed by South African Indian jazz maestro, Kesivan Naidoo . In this contrasting or juxtaposing context the colonial newsreel feels completely ridiculous and absurdly pompous in tone.

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[3] A magazine article 'Mr Lucky' paints a fascinating portrait of Sam Naidoo, who we were to meet half a century later (*Drum* 1964).

In conclusion, I've made an argument for the continued use of the colonial and apartheid-era visual archive. One can put it to use against its original use or purpose. It can reveal insights into the lives and experiences of people from marginalized communities, it can restoratively show/represent people who were largely not seen as part of the nation or were absent from 'the archive', and it can expose the very systems of exclusion it sought to legitimate. Depending on how you reframe the framing, it is possible to deconstruct colonial visual narrative and enlighten the audience as to how powerful colonial and even contemporary "representational regimes" can be.