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Melancholy freedom: Movement and stasis in Sibs Shongwe-La Mer's *Necktie Youth* (2015)

ABSTRACT

This article examines the 2015 art-film Necktie Youth (Sibs Shongwe-La Mer) with a view to understanding new affective, temporal and genre formations in post-transitional South Africa. A quasi-documentary portrait of ennui and depression among a circle of privileged 'born-free' youth in Johannesburg's wealthy suburbs, the film uses a coming-of-age narrative template to allegorize post-transitional South Africa. Yet this allegory is not a straightforward one of either disillusionment or progressivist maturation. Rather, it has something in common with David Scott's analysis of the 'ruined time' of post-revolution: an endless present haunted by the ghosts of futures past. I use Scott's lens to understand the floating, marooned temporalities of the film, whose deep melancholic undertow is at odds with its performance of youthful post-apartheid self-fashioning. Thus, despite its claims to inhabiting a 'new' historical phase, the film remains haunted by the ghosts of what Scott calls the 'allegory of emancipatory redemption'. I show how the film ultimately produces a sense of 'exile from history' – a mode in which key historical events have already happened and in effect overwhelm the present – and argue that this sensibility is key to understanding the contradictory temporalities of the present.

KEYWORDS

post-apartheid film
temporality
ruined time
Johannesburg
Necktie Youth
Sibs Shongwe-La Mer

INTRODUCTION

In the opening scenes of Sibs Shongwe-La Mer's 2015 art-film *Necktie Youth*, the camera takes us on a tour of an idyllic suburban mansion in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. A gardener blows leaves from the driveway, while another trims shrubs. A pair of domestic workers washes dishes in the kitchen. The camera alights on the accoutrements of comfortable domesticity: family photos, make-up, a half-finished breakfast. A gleaming SUV drives up and parks in the garage. Meanwhile, in the spacious, leafy garden behind the house, a young woman ties a noose to the branch of a tree and hangs herself. As the gardeners desperately cut her down, a news clip of the 1976 Soweto youth uprising plays, unwatched, on a television screen inside.

Amidst the placidity of post-apartheid suburbia, this scene juxtaposes two radically different models of youthful disruption, foregrounding the disparity between a temporal stasis in the present and a historical intensity in the past. On the one hand, in the clips of 1976, action infused with historical mission, filmed by news crews, performed against the horizon of an altered future. On the other hand, in the suicide – live-streamed with a personal camera on the Internet – a present that seems to go nowhere, that has no overarching historical dimension.

This evacuated present is the dominant mode of the film. Its plot is barely existent. Taking up a quasi-documentary mode – the characters are all at various points interviewed for a work-in-progress portentously entitled 'Dying for Freedom' – it makes clear its intentions to anatomize a particular social world: the wealthy suburban milieu of multiracial privileged 'born-frees'. Indifferent to politics, blasé about the history of struggle that has endowed them with the privileges they enjoy, they are post-historical creatures whose primary everyday dramas seem to revolve around desire and consumption. The name of the suicide victim, we soon learn, is Emily, and for the remainder of the film, we follow her circle of hedonistic friends as they brood, lounge in their parents' palatial suburban houses, party, intoxicate themselves, experiment with tentative interracial romances, and blunder through the existential questions raised by their friend's suicide – an event her boyfriend Jabz, the film's narrator, will ultimately replicate in its final scenes. Hence the moody black-and-white cinematography: the film hammers home that this world of privileged 'born frees', in which problems of race play little role and those of poverty are confined the background, is afflicted by an absence of meaning. Asked in an interview about the comparison with the US director Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995) – to which *Necktie Youth* was repeatedly compared upon release – Shongwe-La Mer was astute: 'Kids has a decadent passion of youth. This film is very much about a lostness' (MacDonald 2015: n.pag.).

Of course, a series of complex, ambiguous moods have been birthed by the ambivalent experience of freedom. Many of these have been the subject of significant scholarship: disappointment (van der Vlies 2017; Worby and Ally 2013), melancholia (Hanson 2012; Truscott 2011), nostalgia (Dlamini 2010). These are all affective dispositions containing temporal logics that reach back into apartheid history, that connect the present with some aspect of the past. *Necktie Youth* is different: its primary mood is ennui – boredom aggrandized. Although its characters – in particular the obnoxiously ebullient Sibs, played by the director himself – are occupied with a range of activities, it is a film insistently concerned with a peculiar form of historical stasis. A lack of narrative momentum, endless idle talk that goes nowhere, shots of clocks ticking

down, a repeatedly expressed desire to 'float' or to die – all amounting to the same thing: a *confinement to the present*.

How does one situate this film? Shongwe-La Mer (the 'La Mer' added to his surname after a girlfriend told him his problems were 'as endless as the sea') says the film is about the experience of being African and 'rich'. Ian-Malcolm Rijdsdijk, in a perceptive early article on the film, more insightfully situates it as an expression of South African 'post-democracy': a world in which the post-1994 euphoria of democratic participation and governance has been superseded by the workings of the neo-liberal marketplace. For Rijdsdijk, the film is about the end of South Africa's first 21 years of freedom, the entry into what he calls, quoting Rob Nixon, the 'tunnel at the end of the light'. My concerns here are broadly congruent with Rijdsdijk's: I am interested, like him, in the paradoxical way in which the 'born free' generation enters a world of inequality and blight. Yet, while Rijdsdijk is interested in the way the film reflects political and economic shifts, I am particularly concerned with how the film handles the fissures between temporality and history alluded to in its opening minutes. My sense is that a focus on temporality reveals a more variegated sense of the film's political passions than a simple 'post-democratic' present. While the film's youthful subjects themselves might seem consumed by an evacuated present, the film's complex temporality suggests otherwise.

I am guided here by the anthropologist David Scott's observations of the way that, in the aftermath of great political upheaval, time becomes uniquely legible, appearing to peel off and stand apart from history. In what follows, I use Scott's lens to unpack the strange temporality of what is in effect a genre piece: a youth film about the disaffections of the so-called 'born free' generation – or, rather, of a certain privileged fraction of it. I am interested in what happens to the genre of the youth film as it grapples with the withering of what Scott, writing elsewhere of the Haitian Revolution, calls the 'withering' of the 'allegory of emancipatory redemption' that drove the great anti-colonial projects (2004: 54). Conventional wisdom holds that release from the bonds of political history should yield an emancipatory charge – most especially for a generation of youth unencumbered by the traumas of the past. *Necktie Youth* suggests rather that it might yield loss. It is a film that dispenses with narratives of liberation and latches instead onto transnational models of youth, consumption and a temporal presentism made possible by the boosterism of post-apartheid Johannesburg. Yet, at the same time, the film is impelled by a deep melancholic undertow – the sense of a lost utopia – that in effect equates freedom with loss.

FRACTURED TIME

A number of recent studies have noted an altered national mood in South Africa after the end of the first two decades of political liberation: what has been termed by many scholars the 'post-transitional' period.¹ Leon de Kock (2016: 3) notes the emergence of 'a gradual and deepening sense of "plot loss" among South African writers and intellectuals of all stripes', while Andrew van der Vlies writes of a general affective structure of disappointment characterizing the post-apartheid nation. Both these book-length studies are anticipated by a prescient 2010 article by Thabo Tsehloane. Tsehloane applies Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis to the post-apartheid context, arguing that the ANC has positioned itself as 'the ultimate point of human social development' (2010: 80). This, argues Tsehloane, has led to 'a social and political milieu [...] where the imaginative possibilities of change are seemingly exhausted' (2010: 80).

1. The term 'post-transitional' was first mooted in a special 2010 issue on the topic in *English Studies in Africa* (Frenkel and MacKenzie 2010). Broadly, the term describes the period after the subsiding of the transformative energies of the first decade of democracy – a period in which the revolutionary narrative of emancipation has ceased to play a primary structuring role in the historical imagination.

These analyses all grapple with the receding, after 1994, of capital-H History from the South African present. At the same time, there has occurred, as I will demonstrate in my reading of *Necktie Youth*, an increasing fixation on *temporality* – the lived experience of time – as a sphere separate and distinct from history. I draw this insight about the disaggregation of temporality and history from the writings of David Scott, and it is to him I will turn briefly to elucidate it. But first, since the distinction between ‘temporality’ and ‘history’ will be central to my argument, let me specify here what I mean by these terms. By history, I mean the objective alteration of the social sphere at a fundamental level through human struggle. By temporality, I mean the subjective mode in which the past, present and future are experienced and granted meaning.

While his specific subject is the failed Grenadan Revolution of 1978, and particularly the experience of those living in its aftermath, Scott (2014: 2) is broadly concerned with the emergence of a new time-consciousness in the contemporary era, a consciousness of ‘living on in the wake of past political time, amid the ruins [...] of postsocialist and postcolonial futures past’. When a new future still lies ahead of one, time seems congruent with history: a passage from an oppressed past to a liberated future. But once this future is consigned to history, the linear model no longer functions. In the aftermath of revolution, progressive time, with its horizon of a redemptive future emerging from an oppressive past, becomes ‘ruined time’: an endless present haunted by traces of futures past.

Scott thus sets up as his terrain the ‘end of history’: the closing down of political alternatives under the hegemony of American-style free market capitalism. Approaching this end of history from the lived experience of time, Scott sees it as not a homogeneous empty space, but as a potentially dynamic time traversed by hauntings and disjunctions. His argument is as follows. The organization of modern political time is founded on a paradigm of revolutionary action, a logic that connects ‘dissatisfactions with the past to hopes for alternative futures’ (2014: 3). In the series of failed revolutions that marked the latter twentieth century – of which the Grenadan is exemplary – this revolutionary structuring of time was replaced by a ‘new utopia of liberal democracy’. An entirely different organization of time structures this era, as the ‘once-enduring temporalities of past-present-future’ that animated older ‘ideas about historical change’ no longer obtain. It now becomes impossible to imagine a future that is not merely a repetition of the present – or, as Scott puts it, to ‘imagine the present as though it were merely writing for its own dialectical overcoming’ (2014: 6). For Scott, then, the temporal shift in the aftermath of revolution precipitates a crisis of meaning. If, for modern subjects, meaning is created through one’s ability to summon what Reinhardt Kosselek calls a ‘horizon of expectation’ that transcends the immediate present, it is dependent upon that subject’s ability to project him- or herself into a historical narrative.

Scott’s speculations describe the aftermath of any collapsed structure of expectation, as the possibility of alternative futures gives way to a unitary, endless present. But there is a key difference when one transposes Scott’s model to post-apartheid South Africa. The historical upheaval at play is of course that of 1994: the year of the transition to majority rule that, for all its compromises and disappointments, still looms over the present as South Africa’s revolutionary moment. Yet, unlike the Grenadan, 1994 was an *ambiguous* revolution: not failed, but not fully successful in realizing the revolutionary hopes attached to it. Politically, it installed a new class of black leaders, while economically, it reneged on its socialist commitments and embraced the global

capitalist marketplace, leading the country to levels of economic and social inequality often greater than those of the apartheid period. Thus, while for Scott, the collapse of socialist dreams led to a totalizing new temporal order within which revolution was delegitimized, in the South African case, post-revolutionary temporality is far more splintered and heterogeneous. Scott's 'ruined time', then, does not fully describe the complexity of post-apartheid temporality. The post-revolutionary time of South Africa is comprised instead of multiple slivers, none of which cancel each other out. Pockets of utopian revolutionary time coexist alongside pockets of betrayed or disappointed time; pockets of stasis and anomie nonetheless bear traces of the possibility that history might reignite.

If we are to transpose Scott's model onto the world of *Necktie Youth*, the charge might be levelled that the born-free characters of *Necktie Youth* have no personal experiences of the revolutionary temporality of struggle prior to 1994 and thus cannot experience time as 'ruined'. However, while lacking personal experience of revolutionary struggle, they have nonetheless, as the first generation to come of age in the democratic era, been invested with the 'burden of hope' emerging from 1994: that is, with the sense of belonging to a progressive temporality leading to a bright, reconciled future.

A key date in the creation of this 'fractured time' is 2012: the year of the Marikana massacre, which cast a deep shadow over 1994's dreams of a reconciled rainbow nation. Marikana – a ghost that surreptitiously haunts the film – constitutes, at one level, the ruination of the dreams of 1994. Put simply, Marikana put paid to notions that a fully liberated future had arrived. I follow Andrew van der Vlies (2017: 165) in viewing the massacre as a 'symptom of [South Africa's] integration into a global system of capitalism and poverty'. Indeed, Marikana gave evidence that in freeing itself from one tyranny, post-apartheid South Africa had entered into a new form of subjugation. However, *at the same time* – as Prishani Naidoo has pointed out – Marikana has also become a focal point in a new set of reinvigorated struggles to realize the promises of 1994 (2011: 2). My point here is not that Marikana signals the failure of the project of emancipation. Rather, I am interested in what Marikana means (or fails to mean) in the world of *Necktie Youth*, where it is rendered merely one more item of political background noise in the lives of its elite suburban youths.

Thus, while the *characters* in the film may inhabit what Shongwe-La Mer calls a 'new phase', it is crucial that the film's *own* relationship to history is not simply one of being 'post'. Although the characters in *Necktie Youth* are ostensibly free and unconcerned with the political world, their world is haunted by traces of other times and temporalities: a litter of other, more politicized temporalities intermittently flits across the film's backdrop. Attending to these traces of other temporalities adds an important element to our understanding of the nature of the 'post-transitional' era. *Necktie Youth* marks a paradigm shift *within* post-apartheid temporality. The present has come to be no longer haunted by the apartheid past – as in so much of the literature of the first decade of democracy – but by 1994, the moment of liberation; by the broken promises of a post-apartheid future.²

² For a fine study of the literature of post-apartheid disappointment, see Andrew van der Vlies' *Present Imperfect* (2017). Van der Vlies (2017: viii) notes that disappointment is not simply a mood; it is also a temporal condition that connotes the 'frustration of the expectation of [...] something different'.

STATIC CITY

The key to *Necktie Youth's* temporally desiccated portrayal of Johannesburg is that, in stark contrast to the majority of Johannesburg films, it trains its lens on the

suburbs, rather than the inner city or the townships. In tracking the lives of a circle of well-off suburban youth on the cusp of adulthood, *Necktie Youth* registers, at the most immediate level, its protagonists' immersion in a world with no undergirding narrative of collective struggle or overcoming. It is in this context that we should understand Shongwe-La Mer's characterization of his film as 'existentialist': as about a 'new phase' and a 'new freedom' (Elphick 2015: n.pag.). This can be seen in the interplay between the two main protagonists, Jabz and Sib, who represent two differing attunements to post-revolutionary temporality. Sib (played by the director as a version of himself) is full of plans and energy. An aspirant Afropolitan, he is extroverted and garrulous, his dress and speech fashioned into an idiosyncratic hybrid of American and South African culture that owes little to local histories of oppression or emancipation. Jabz sits at the other pole: depressive, unable to recover from the suicide of his girlfriend, he spirals further and further into melancholy. The friendship between these two, in which Sib continually fails to recognize the extent to which Jabz has spiralled into irreversible melancholia, anchors the film's representation of time. Although Sib is a charismatic, restless, kinetic force hurtling through the film's frames – in the process drawing much of the viewer's attention – the melancholy time-consciousness of the film itself belongs to Jabz, whose flat, disaffected narration gives voice to various disillusionments.

For now, however, I will set aside these focal points of the film – character, dialogue, interpersonal drama – and propose instead that its most telling aspects are what could be considered its backgrounds and margins: its *mise-en-scène*, its cinematography, its times and rhythms. These become acutely visible in the film's depiction of Johannesburg. In a well-known 2004 essay, Sarah Nuttall lauded post-apartheid Johannesburg fiction for granting the 'now' an insurgent quality that gave it a certain agency over the apartheid past (Nuttall 2004a). While Nuttall's focus was literary fiction, her argument applies equally to a number of high-profile post-apartheid Johannesburg films – Gavin Hood's *Tsotsi* (2005), Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009), Ralph Ziman's *Jerusalem* (2008), Akin Omotoso's *Vaya* (2016). These films are all concerned with movement across and between the disparate zones of Johannesburg's fractured urban geography. Their focus is therefore not on discrete zones such as the 'suburb', the 'township' or the 'inner city', but rather on the *interstitial* zones that connects them. In *District 9*, Wikus van der Merwe's mutation sets him on the run from middle-class suburban domesticity to precarious refuge in a makeshift township. *Jerusalem* moves in the other direction, as its protagonist moves 'upward' from township to inner city to wealthy suburb. Regardless of the ultimate trajectory, these are narratives of mobility that perhaps feed a desire to see the city as a space of newness, a repository for the hopes invested in the post-apartheid nation.

This is manifestly not the case in *Necktie Youth*. A resolutely suburban film, it turns its back on the romance of Johannesburg, replacing Nuttall's insurgent newness with a marooned, evacuated present. An extended sequence near the beginning of the film – effectively the urban *mise en scène* – comprises a montage of static shots that establish distinct and separate urban worlds: an impoverished inner city and a plush but sterile suburbia. No dynamic link is established between these zones. Notably, these shots are static evocations of time: leaves blow and cars pass by, but nothing 'happens'. Time passes, but transformative historical movement has ceased. Without any sense of either spatial connection or temporal change, the city disintegrates into a disarray



Figure 1: Jabz in the swimming pool. *Taxi Driver* (Oriahti 2015).



Figure 2: The M1 highway running North–South through Johannesburg. *Taxi Driver* (Oriahti 2015).

of non-synchronous time zones lacking a unifying history. Johannesburg, without any establishing shots of its iconic skyline or of any sense of linkage between its constituent parts, is presented as a mentally unmappable city, a city without a legible image of its totality.

All this is to say that the film produces an urban space bereft of movements and flows that might animate time. The shots of the city linger just long enough to provoke an incipient boredom, to create a sense that something might happen, but never quite does. Dissonant urban worlds remain unconnected, or, more accurately, connected *in the mode of disjuncture*. For example, a shot of Jabz, the film's narrator, prancing balletically in a swimming pool, evokes an aimless, stylized drift. A subsequent cut to the highway shows a world sped up and frantic to the point of meaninglessness (Figures 1 and 2). Slowness and fastness: evocations of two modes of the present equally disconnected from the historical sphere.



Figure 3: Inner city graffiti in the gentrified Maboneng district.

These dissonant parts remain unreconciled in the film's cinematic imagination. It is useful to remember that Fredric Jameson's well-known call for a project of 'cognitive mapping' (2000) – a corrective to his sense that late capitalism produces the inability to map social space – draws for its central argument on a work of urban studies, Kevin Lynch's dated but still relevant *The Image of the City*. Lynch posits a link between what he calls the 'imageability' of the city – its mental mappability – to emotional well-being. Lynch does concede that the human capacity for adaptation to complex environments can be stimulated by complex urban spaces. This is not the case here. Neither characters nor camera exhibit any desire to piece together the city's disparate pieces. When space is traversed, it is via luxury car, and it is with an ease that forecloses any kind of experiential synthesis of space. As Xavier Livermon (2008: 275) notes, 'The mobility rendered possible by the car is paradoxical, if only because the car highlights the very segregated and divided nature of the urban metropolis'.

There is, however, another temporality haunting these street scenes, visible in their littering of political insignia. Stenciled graffiti of AK47s and an injunction to 'Remember Marikana' are the most explicit signs of a political-historical realm from which the film distances its characters (Figure 3). This political image appears almost incidentally, in a passing shot that sketches a scene of inner-city decay, the camera making no attempt to grant it special significance beyond the picturesque. A similar logic is at work in the shots of placid suburbia, where we encounter a different order of political time: it is only on close inspection of the shots of suburban streets that one notices tatty posters left over from the aftermath of the 2014 national elections, still affixed to lampposts but having outlived their historical usefulness. These signifiers of the political are presented as symbolic debris irrelevant to the lives of the film's characters. Rather than enacting movement or injecting the present with historical significance, they merely reproduce political time as an inert symbol. But they are crucial to the film's symbolic structure. By juxtaposing the charged political symbology of Marikana, signifying a reawakening of political time, with the leaden symbology of the 2014 elections – with its exhausted array of political possibilities – the film subtly places itself as a product of the collapse of 1994's reconciled rainbow unity.

THE IMAGE OF LIBERATION

Writing of Euro-American cinema, Gilles Deleuze distinguished between two forms of optical image: the 'time-image' and the 'movement-image'. Pre-war cinema, argued Deleuze, was dominated by a 'movement-image' in which time was produced through montage. In the post-war period, 'such stable centres of movement began to dissipate, and images came to be linked by false continuities' (Mroz 2012: 37). In this context a different kind of optical image comes to the fore: the 'time-image', in which time is 'seen inside the shot' (Do Rosario Lupi Bello 2017: 93). For Deleuze, '[t]his is a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent': the action 'floats in the situation, rather than bringing it to a conclusion or strengthening it' (1989: 2–3).

Deleuze's analysis of the time-image in post-war European cinema is useful in understanding *Necktie Youth's* post-transitional temporality. The urban shots discussed above convert into time-images what would conventionally – in the big 'Johannesburg films' of the past decade – be troped as kinetic movement-images. (I am thinking here of films like *District 9*, *Tsotsi*, *Jerusalema* and *Vaya*, all of which assert the primacy of kinetic movement over the contemplation of time as such, and by extension assert the possibility of a fluid, metamorphic post-apartheid present.) But there is also a second and more significant order of time-image with which *Necktie Youth* has a more fraught relationship. These are images that evoke the culmination of political struggle and the 'rainbow nation' South Africa that was intended to succeed it. In a crucial scene, Jabz's parents lament the fallen state of ANC party politics at the dining room table. Meanwhile, the camera alights on a large oil portrait of Nelson Mandela – the elderly sage rather than the young firebrand – adorning their well-outfitted walls (Figure 4). This is Mandela as time-image. His interleaving within the film is intended not to create political movement but to open up a contemplation on an order of history, producing a sense of temporal afterness in which the struggle past appears complete. It is an image of an image: in its polished sheen, this is Mandela transformed into a sign.

This sense of the congealing of liberation history seeps through to the film's affective core. The film is dedicated to 'the memory of 1991': the year of



Figure 4: Portrait of Mandela.

3. For discussion of the political utility or disutility of nostalgia, see Boym. This is not a critical estrangement in which a longing for the past critically throws into relief the enervation of the present, nor what Boym (2001: xviii) has called 'restorative nostalgia': that which 'attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of a lost home'. Rather, it is what Boym terms 'reflective nostalgia', which 'thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming' (2001: xviii).



Figure 5: *Nostalgified home film (in saturated colour).*

the director's birth, but also a time of national possibility, of the unbanning of the ANC and the imminent release of Nelson Mandela. The film builds upon this nostalgic core by introducing a memory of primordial childhood innocence rendered, in contrast to the monochrome narrative present, in colour (Figure 5). In these clips the mood shifts from ennui to nostalgia, and into its temporality enter hints of Scott's ruined time, time haunted by futures that never came to pass. These memories – which would be located in the late 1990s – have clearly been treated by the filmmakers to resemble home-movie reels from the 1970s. Embedded within a funereal black frame, their distance from the present is heightened, turning them into objects of nostalgia for an idealized sense of plenitude that can never be returned to. (This idealization is not only aesthetic: as my colleague Danai Mupotsa has pointed out, the multi-racial suburban children's party brings with it the painful awareness of being the only black child in a white suburban ritual.)

Of course, this nostalgification of childhood could be the film's sly acknowledgement of its characters' over-idealization of their past. One could debate whether the attachment to an idealized past is disabling or generative of hope.³ Shongwe-La Mer, however, is uninterested in such moralizing: the intent is rather to create a temporal structure in which an evacuated present is shot through with the lost promise of a liberatory dream. It is important, in this regard, to distinguish the '1991' to which the film latches its personal narrative of the 'new' South Africa from the '1994' of the Mandela portrait. '1991' – with the imminent release of Mandela – signifies an open-ended period of possibility, while 1994 signifies the closed, reified end-point of historical struggle. In this way, the film reaches back to moments of a more vital temporal structure perceived to have been lost in the actual machinations of party politics, moments that it associates with the promise of childhood and youth. (It also becomes clear here that the film is not about melancholia proper – in the Freudian sense, the ungrievable attachment to a lost object – but rather about a hazy nostalgia for a sentimentalized idea of rainbowism that perhaps never really existed.)

The film thus casts itself as a national allegory in which the disillusionments of youth stand for the disillusionments of the nation. In her review

of the film, Sarah Dawson attributes its success to its 'transposition of garden-variety adolescent ennui into a metaphor of existential stillbirth in a post-apartheid era of disillusionment, hyper-mediation, and alienation'. As Dawson's comment suggests, the national allegory proposed by *Necktie Youth* is to a large extent plagued by the loss or splintering of an earlier, more robust and future-oriented national allegory: that of the rainbow nation which was intended to succeed the political liberation of 1994. Born on the cusp of South Africa's transition to democracy, these youths' impending accommodation to the adult world comes to stand allegorically for a national situation in which the utopian possibilities of the early democratic years give way to a hard-nosed acceptance of harsh reality. 'When the nation was young and so were we' intones Jabz' voice-over, conjoining the nostalgic temporality of the no-longer adolescent with the temporality of a nation that, at the age of 23, is forced to bid farewell to its youth and take up a compromised maturity. The backdrops to the superficially multicultural, non-racial world of the film make explicit this deep paradox: black domestic servants caring for white children, black drug dealers selling to white buyers, black prostitutes selling their bodies to white men, an omnipresent black urban underclass, and black men ultimately shut out of the private lives of the white women with whom they are intimate. While its characters might want to sever itself from this taint of the past and engage with a new set of 'existential' problems and identities independent of any a priori structure of struggle, their world remains haunted by the incompleteness of this struggle.

MOVEMENT AND STASIS

There is, however, a problem with this allegorical possibility. The new generation cannot ultimately replicate the world of the parents, for the parents lived within history in a way that is no longer available to the children. In leaving behind youth and entering adulthood, they will now take up the role of de facto guardians of a new order rather than that of liberators within the old one. Indeed, we should not forget that, behind its art-film flourishes, *Necktie Youth* is a young-adult genre piece. It is haunted by an incipient maturity: the story of subjects alienated by the world they are on the cusp of entering. (The necktie is a symbol of both conformity and of suicide/death.) Read as a genre film, there is another temporality at play: neither a mourning for a moment of childhood innocence, nor an exile from the history of struggle, but a coercive, looming future of adulthood. In this anticipated moment, these cloistered youth on the cusp of adulthood must abandon their youthful improvisation of new socialities (made possible by the financial support of the parents) and take up their roles in a rapacious world of which they will be the prime beneficiaries.

It is therefore misleading, I think, to take the film's allegory – an allegory of the loss of the youthful rainbow nation – as the film's central temporal structure. While, through its allegory, the film registers the fragmentation of the allegory of liberation, it is at the same time in flight from an incipient new master allegory of resigned maturity. This complex evasion is made possible by counterposing the static quality of these allegories with the endless *movement* of their protagonists. The film sets time-images of stalling and arrest (Mandela as sign; Johannesburg as disjunctive, stalled city; political time as debris) in counterpoint to its young protagonists' incessant *movements*, their cruising and experimenting, talking and drinking, their sexual explorations,

their continual self-fashioning: a kind of restless skittering over the surface of history. The centripetal attachment to a withering national allegory is at war with a centrifugal movement into forms of individuation. With its dominant mood of ennui and cast of privileged consumers indifferent to the contentious party politics of the nation, *Necktie Youth* presents a micro-world that has split off from the longer-standing historical currents of the nation. Its characters are not simply 'black' or 'white'; they are Jewish, Afropolitan, Afrikaans, transvestites, druggies, melancholics, sex addicts. These characters are fully immersed within a globalized present in which, as the film's blurb has it, they 'exchange their realities for hedonistic relief'. Indeed, in their sense of themselves as purely discrete, self-fashioning individuals rather than rights-bearing citizens, they seem to confirm Frenkel and McKenzie's sense that post-transitional South Africa is simply 'rejoining the globalized, increasingly denationalised world'.

One gets a sense of this in the film's youth worlds – particularly in a long scene shot in the downtown 'Zebra Inn', a cultish bar/brothel in a gentrified part of the inner city, used as one of the main promotional images for the film (Figure 6). The scene seems at first glance to demonstrate a reconciled rainbow nation unity. But, crucially, we are made aware that this rainbow is enclaved within a world of fractures. There is surely something liberatory about the radical individuation that these characters. They are products of a centrifugal dispersion away from national allegory into an array of individuals whose identities are uninformed by a unitary national narrative. This centrifugal impetus is heightened by the way the intertwinement of black and white bodies is presented against a bizarre backdrop of mounted animal heads and hides. While this scene, with its collapse of racial boundaries, could fit neatly within a national narrative of transformation, its taxidermic context (ripe with colonial overtones) heightens rather than lessens the novelty of inter-racial intimacy, quite intentionally rendering the couple a specimen.

Indeed, the Johannesburg of *Necktie Youth* is presented as, in Shongwe-La Mer's own words, 'an alien land' (Harding 2015: n.pag.), inhabited by a cast of characters who have splintered off from the normative model of becoming-citizen whose telos is self-realization within the new multicultural nation state.



Figure 6: *The Zebra Inn* (promotional still).

All these elements come together in an extended scene towards the end of the film. In a sudden bout of unexplained restlessness, Sibs and Jabz leave a suburban sleeper in the early hours of the morning. Their long taxi ride home is embedded with multiple splintered temporalities. While the taxi driver embarks on a discourse lambasting Jacob Zuma and the state of the poor in South Africa, Sibs, in the passenger seat, is preoccupied with selecting a soundtrack for the ride home. Jabz, slouched in the back, gazes out the window at the slow parade of tawdry suburban glitz: gleaming lights, car dealerships, and sex workers.

At least three distinct temporalities weave through this scene: the temporality of angry disappointment, the temporality of self-involved neo-liberal consumption, and the temporality of melancholia. Jabz's sighting of a prostitute on the roadside creates a sudden opening of time: the scene switches to colour as Jabz imagines the brief excitement accompanying this episode of illicit transactional sex. A scene of sudden excitement and the opening of possibility that, after the act, immediately crashes back to leaden, everyday black-and-white time. It is a form of experience paradigmatic in this film: isolated from larger historical significance, after its evanescent life it disappears.

EXILE FROM HISTORY

As I have noted throughout, there is clearly a utopian frisson in this radical expansion of the possibilities within post-apartheid identity. Yet, as Sarah Dawson has noted, it is crucial that this diversity signifies not 'progressiveness, but the crystallization of a new elite class'. Marooned between two historical allegories, a receding allegory of liberation and an emergent allegory of disappointed maturity, the film is caught in a temporal limbo. While I have hitherto spoken of the film as being 'haunted' to some extent by historical possibilities that never came to pass, perhaps haunting is not the right term for the way history appears in a hazy suspension. This interstitial zone is I think best described by Michele Magwood's notion of an 'exile from history': the proposition that many young South Africans living in post-apartheid society inhabit a 'fugue state' that can be compared to 'a state of exile from the meaningful or significant moments in the country's history' (Malec 2015: n.pag.). The conventional assumption has been that the post-apartheid sphere has been replete with meaning; that, among young people in particular, freedom from historical exigency has given rise to new practices of meaning-making.⁴ Magwood's phrase suggests that these practices exist in the shadow of an overweening historical past, that they are part of a generational battle in which born-free youth struggle to wrest historical significance for a world that lacks the historical gravitas of that of their parents' and grandparents' generations. In this state, key historical events are perceived to have already happened and to overwhelm the present.

Exile is conventionally a spatial category. But what happens when one is exiled from a sense of belonging in history, less a space than a temporal trajectory, a set of expectations and experiences? Exile, writes Edward Said, is the 'unhealable rift [...] between the self and its true home' (2013: 400). Arguing that 'much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule' (2013: 416), Said describes a set of activities – chess, writing, intellectual life, activism – that provide compensatory forms of spatial belonging. How, though, does one substitute for temporal

4. See for example Nuttall, 'Stylizing the self' (2004b).

5. From Godard, the film borrows bold graphic titles that interrupt the visual flow of the narrative ('Travis', 'Nicky', 'Emily', 'Skin Colour'), a penchant for philosophical interludes, and a black and white romance with the urban. From Clarke, the film takes its hedonistic attunement to the world: the characters are animated, gregarious, slangy and utterly lacking an overarching project.

belonging? The film provides several general answers. First is simply the act of representation: an act that places the film's suburban post-political world within a lineage of the exhaustively documented and historically legitimated struggles of earlier generations. Second is the film's allegorical structure: in making its characters participants in a national allegory, the film endows this exiled generation – perhaps with a degree of narcissism – with a historical meaning and places it centrally within a new national imaginary. The film's allegorical structure, by making its characters seemingly aimless lives stand for a national predicament, provides a form of historical belonging otherwise unavailable to them. A final answer is the film's preoccupation with kinetic movement: cruising, talking, sexual encounters, intoxication: an array of practices that try to outwit the congealing of history. These forms of perpetual to-and-fro physical movement – alternately frantic, aimless, fast, slow – betray an unspoken desire to recathect to the source of historical meaning.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that *Necktie Youth*, in its fixation on the time-image and its recourse to a national-allegorical mode, displays not a simple indifference to history, but a complex, antagonistic and ultimately *exilic* relationship to the congealing of struggle history into a regime of signs. How then does one situate this film and its concerns within contemporaneous South African cultural production? This is a surprisingly difficult question to answer. In interviews, Shongwe-La Mer is at pains to distance his work from any recognizable history of South African or African film. (From an interview: 'I don't watch South African cinema [...] I didn't want to make a movie about the typical picture of Africa'.) The film's obvious cinematic debts are to two non-African sources: Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995) and the Jean-Luc Godard of the 1960s (*Masculin féminin* is a clear reference point).⁵ Its soundtrack, like its cinematography, resists any stereotypical notion of 'Africanness' or 'local colour', consisting rather of melancholy piano tinkling punctuated by intense bursts of punk rock.

One might want to group the film with a wave of recent romantic comedies that explore the world of the new black middle classes in suburban Johannesburg (Thabang Moleya's *Happiness is a Four Letter Word* [2016], Akin Omotoso's *Tell Me Sweet Something* [2015]). Yet these films, in stark contrast to *Necktie Youth's* apathy, embrace the world of neo-liberal consumption and upward mobility made available post 1994. Could one then perhaps class it with more critically minded literary fiction by young black writers that anatomizes the post-apartheid regime of neo-liberal self-making and consumption: a wave of recent novels – Nthikeng Mohlele's *Small Things* (2013) and Masande Ntshanga's *The Reactive* (2014), to name only two – in which a seemingly liberatory break from struggle history yields not celebration but loss. These can be understood to constitute a body of black existentialism in which meaning is no longer granted through the revolutionary temporality of struggle. *Necktie Youth*, however, lacks the political impetus or bite of these novels: it is interested not in political or social critique, but rather simply in the expression of a world that has more often been the consumer rather than the subject of representation. Moreover, while the film is ambivalent about the world of elite post-apartheid consumption, it does not offer a vocabulary adequate to critically engaging with it.

One must raise the possibility that, despite its pretensions to national-allegorical significance (or indeed because of them), the film might ultimately amount simply to a narcissistic expression of a narcissistic world: that it ultimately tells us not about the state of the nation, but simply the state of its own, insular world. Yet it is important to recognize, as I suggested near the beginning of this article, that *Necktie Youth* is the expression of merely one sliver of the fractured time of post-apartheid. I have been suggesting, throughout this article, that the film at its most profound level is concerned less with the specifics of this particular 'ruined' sliver than it is with the fractured nature of post-apartheid time in general. This concern becomes apparent when one considers the film's genre. In placing itself squarely within the genre of the youth film or the coming-of-age film, *Necktie Youth* alights upon a rich form that engages with the South African nation's own accession to maturity, with all the complex senses of loss, compromise and responsibility that maturity implies.⁶ It is crucial that the characters are too old to be conventionally suitable subjects of a coming-of-age narrative. In their early twenties rather than their teens, they seem specifically designed to garner no sympathy from the viewer. This is of course precisely the point: the characters' refusal to mature – even if it entails the ending their lives – is in effect a protest against the coming-to-maturity of the nation, a maturity that would accept as inevitable the fallen, compromised nature of the post-apartheid sphere. Immaturity thus becomes political, a wilful if unconscious desire to keep open the possibility of movement in a time of historical stasis.

In the final pages of his study of post-apartheid disappointment, *Present Imperfect* (2017), van der Vlies argues that the 'stasis' of the post-apartheid present should perhaps be reconceived instead as an *impasse* within which various potentials lie dormant. Rather than a sign of its evacuation, the disappointment of the present 'index[es] the potential to reinvigorate the political'. Borrowing from Eric Worby and Shireen Ally's analysis of disappointment, van der Vlies reads disappointment in its hyphenated form: to dis-appoint is to fail to fulfil an appointment. For Worby and Ally (2013: 474), this dis-appointment 'is a release from repetition, and in this way, it can be productive of new futures, indeed of new pasts'. The ending of the film – the theatrical suicide of Jabz in his parents' entrance hall, replicating the opening suicide of Emily in her parents' garden – seems, however, to shut down this production of new futures and new pasts. This final gesture strikes me as dramatically flawed: in trying to hammer home a point about the evacuation of futurity from the present, it reduces the temporal complexity of the film. If we imagine the film without this closed ending, it opens up a diverse array of temporalities. At the very least, the apathy that drives the characters away from any form of engagement that would reinscribe them into an emancipatory narrative could be read as a form of resistance to the consumption driven world in which they are expected to take their place – a form of resistance adopted because the characters lack the conceptual vocabulary to formulate any other.⁷

It seems no coincidence, then, that in the same year the film was released, a nationwide wave of student protests was sweeping universities. These were movements of great political theatricality, claiming lineage within the long history of struggle, reanimating iconic anti-apartheid figures (such as Steve Biko and Robert Sobukwe) who had receded from view, and sweeping aside the figure of Nelson Mandela, who represented a

6. My thanks to Nedine Moonsamy for this insight.
7. I take this insight from an interview with Masande Ntshanga on the characters in his novel *The Reactive* (Malec 2015).

compromise settled for rather than a struggle won. Within the space of one year, it became far more difficult to imagine *Necktie Youth* being released as a serious social commentary about the state of South African youth. Yet the world it sketches forms the obverse of Fees Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall: a sense of exile is the precondition for the spectacular return to the political embodied in those movements.

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